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EDITORIAL

Gothic Mutations, Histories, and Returns

It has become commonplace in Gothic scholarship to refer to the Gothic as something both frustratingly and fascinatingly slippery. It is a mode that is easily identifiable through its recognisable tropes of darkness, dissolution, decay and death, but it is also a mode that is constantly changing across time, space and media. The sorts of Gothic narratives that thrilled readers of the 18th century, for example, are very different from the plethora of contemporary television shows featuring vampires and zombies. The Gothic is thus, appropriately, something known and unknown; something familiar to us all that nevertheless remains strange. The inherent uncanniness of the Gothic means that it is always returning to trouble us with those dark secrets that refuse to remain buried. This issue of *Aeternum* is the result of a range of discussions that occurred at the 2017 Gothic Association of New Zealand and Australia conference, which was themed “Gothic Afterlives: Mutations, Histories, and Returns”, and held at Auckland University of Technology on 23-24 January 2017. This multidisciplinary conference was attended by a range of scholars working across diverse fields and the research presented confirmed just how integral to the Gothic are the sins of the past. History, the

Gothic tells us, is never in the past, but is constantly returning to trouble us with its unresolved horrors.

It is within the site of “Gothic afterlives” that this issue of *Aeternum* presents itself and the work of the authors presented here reveals the fascinating way that the Gothic represents a return while also itself returning. Each of the articles published here explore the way that the Gothic in our contemporary moment engages with the past while so often revisioning that past. Geoffrey Miles shows how the Gothic is constantly reviving the past by exploring the interweaving of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* and the story of Pygmalion and his statue in the British television series *Penny Dreadful*. Miles’ essay reveals the way that the Gothic mutates by showing the ways that *Penny Dreadful* misleads the viewer into taking a sentimental and romantic view of the story, only to deconstruct it by revealing the Gothic horror that underlies the fairy-tale romance. Erin Mercer’s essay explores Elizabeth Knox’s recent novel *Wake* and shows how its representation of Gothic horror is inextricably linked to the violence of New Zealand’s colonial past. As Gothic scholars such as David Punter and Gina Wisker observe, postcolonial spaces are always Gothic since they are haunted by the ghosts of indigenous peoples who were oppressed in the colonial past. A colonial past containing bloodshed and control over both land and people which is hidden beneath a veneer of green country side. Mercer’s essay reveals the way that *Wake*’s engagement with a haunting past associated with colonisation positions New Zealand as a land marked by historical violence that is constantly returning.

The mutations associated with the Gothic are particularly apparent in Hannah Hansen and Jennifer Lawn’s essay on female masochism in Laurell K. Hamilton’s Anita Blake series. As Hansen and Lawn point out, Hamilton’s texts integrate the brooding hero of traditional romance with the charismatic vampire of Gothic fiction, creating a combination that lends itself to masochistic tendencies. By revising the schemas of traditional romance, highlighting consent as the basis of sexual ethics, and involving multiple male characters as catalysts for the central character’s evolving sexual awareness, the Anita Blake series positions female masochistic desire in positive terms. Furthermore, the series adheres to the tendency to explicitly negotiate desire prominent in post-2000 popular vampire fiction, thus demonstrating a further departure from the coded sexuality and emphasis on blurred boundaries that has characterised modern Gothic. Holly Randall-Moon continues the exploration of issues associated with gender and desire in her essay on the television show *Pretty Little Liars*, which she argues positions girlhood as a liminal space of Gothic horror. Randall-Moon investigates the way that this show stages a critique of femininity as an essential and natural expression of gender by associating the normative social and sexual expectations of girlhood with death and horror and how this fits with ideas of the monstrous feminine. She also explores the Gothic idea of the uncanny the place where the unfamiliar and hidden dangers lurk beneath the seemingly familiar. She critiques the way in which teen girls are led to believe that their femininity is something that needs to be managed and contained by external forces. As Randall-Moon reveals, *Pretty Little Liars* offers a

critique of normative conceptions of girlhood by casting objectification and male paternalism as horrific and ultimately disruptive to female maturation, but its association of homosexual and transgender characters with monstrosity reveals the limitations of the show's representation of girlhood through the Gothic mode. In similar vein, the final article in this issue, by Margaret McAllister, provides an exploration of the hospital as a Gothic space, as portrayed in the film *Fragile*. The article uncovers how the film proposes the nurse as a profoundly haunted figure, far removed from simple notions of care and medicine. Liminality, is a key feature of Gothic texts and comprises narratives which explore thresholds which are crossed and the possibilities of what lies in between. As horror narratives and liminal histories intersect, McAllister reveals how the hospital becomes the site of deep-seated cultural anxieties about healthcare, life, and death.

As the research in this issue demonstrates, the Gothic is inherently linked to what is capable of eliciting terror, whether that is the sins of the historical past or more psychological interior horrors. What is most frightening about the Gothic is perhaps not the sight of a ghost from the past seeking revenge, or the manifestation of a double representing a fractured identity, but the fact that these monsters are constantly evolving and continually returning. There is, the Gothic tells us, no escape from the things that haunt our darkest recesses.

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My Fair Creature: Frankenstein as Pygmalion in *Penny Dreadful*

ABSTRACT

Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus also draws upon another classical story of the creation of life: that of Pygmalion and his statue, told in Ovid's Metamorphoses, book 10. Since 1818 the Pygmalion and Frankenstein myths have become closely associated, as dream and nightmare versions of the fantasy of creating an artificial person. This essay looks at the interweaving of the two myths in the British television series Penny Dreadful (2014-16), a fantasia on Victorian Gothic themes. The story of how Victor Frankenstein creates a "perfect" female creature, Lily, out of the body of a dead prostitute, Brona, clearly draws on elements of the Pygmalion story, both in its classical Ovidian form and in the modern form of a comedy of class and education associated with Bernard Shaw's play Pygmalion and its musical adaptation My Fair Lady. Focusing mainly on season 2 of Penny Dreadful, I argue that the show misleads us into taking a sentimental and romantic view of the story, only to deconstruct it (from a strongly satirical feminist point of view) by revealing the Gothic horror that underlies the fairy-tale romance. Season 3, however, takes a more conservative approach to the story, showing Brona/Lily renouncing both the rolls of "doll" and "monster" to reclaim her humanity, and ending with a tentative reconciliation between creature and creator.

Keywords: Neo-Victorian Gothic, *Penny Dreadful*, Frankenstein, Pygmalion

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* announces itself in its subtitle as the story of a "Modern Prometheus". But it also draws on another classical story about the creation of life out of inanimate matter: the story of the sculptor Pygmalion and his statue, told by Ovid in book 10 of the *Metamorphoses*. The similarity of the stories was quickly recognised by Shelley's contemporaries, such as the parodist who in 1834 produced "Frankensteinism, or The Modern Pygmalion", in which the aspiring mad scientist manufactures a lady out of a cabin trunk, cork limbs, and a skull filled with calf's brains (Hood 1834). It is now a critical commonplace (e.g. Pollin 1965, 100-102; Joshua 2001, 62-63), memorably summed up by Barbara Anderson in the opening paragraph of *Persons and Things*:

Which of us has not had this dream: an object shaped by our desire and lovingly formed by our fantasy until its inanimate face perfectly reflects our own wishes suddenly shudders, awakens, breathes, and becomes warm. Pygmalion had it, surely, when he fell in love with the work of his own hands and, miraculously, the thing came to life: "The lips he kisses are real indeed, the ivory girl can feel them, and blushes and responds, and the eyes open at once on lover and heaven ..." Yet also, which of us has not had this nightmare: an object crafted with loving attention to resemble life shudders, awakens, breathes, becomes warm – and suddenly what was an object becomes a subject whose gaze turns *us* into an object and who escapes our control. That is the horror Victor Frankenstein feels when the monster whom he has spent months creating finally opens its eyes. (Anderson 2008, 1)

Ovid's tale is a tongue-in-cheek wish-fulfilment fantasy. Pygmalion, a lonely artist disillusioned with women, carves a statue of a perfect woman out of ivory, and falls in love with his own handiwork; he prays to the goddess Venus, who has mercy on her worshipper and brings the ivory girl to life to marry her creator (Ovid 1989, 232-34; 10. 243-97).¹ Shelley's story, while sharing Ovid's central motif, is so precisely opposite in its details as to suggest deliberate mirror-imaging. Shelley's protagonist is not an artist but a scientist (though her reference to him as 'the artist' in her 1831 Preface [Shelley 1996, 179] seems like a nod to Pygmalion); he is driven not by loneliness and romantic yearning but by curiosity and ambition; his creation is not a beautiful female but a huge and hideous male, and it is brought to life not by divine intervention but by a scientific process (though one shrouded in Gothic mystery). The creator reacts to the first sight of his creation not with ardent love but with appalled terror and repulsion—"I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful!—Great God!" (Shelley 1996, 39; vol. 1, ch. 4)—and the story moves towards not marriage and happiness, but hatred, revenge, bloody murder on a wedding night, and the mutual destruction of creator and creature.

Since 1818 the two myths of life-creation – ancient and modern, dream and nightmare – have become closely intertwined. As Sarah Annes Brown notes,

¹ Line references are to the Latin text (Ovid 1916).

Frankenstein's "interrogation of humanity's parameters and powerful presentation of animation exerted a significant influence on many later treatments of the [Pygmalion] myth" (Brown 2005, 139). In the nineteenth century we find its Gothic horror creeping into Thomas Lovell Beddoes' surreal "Pygmalion, or The Cyprian Statuary" (1825) and Robert Buchanan's melodramatic "Pygmalion the Sculptor" (1864); in the twentieth century its darkness infects poems like Robert Graves' "Galatea and Pygmalion", in which the sculptor bitterly regrets the creation of a "woman monster" with "demon blood", or C. Day Lewis's "The Perverse" (1928), where he vainly wishes he could turn his beloved back into stone. Ted Hughes's adaptation of the Ovidian story in *Tales from Ovid* (1997) reimagines the statue as "a spectre, sick of unbeing, / That had taken possession of his body"; Angela Carter's "The Loves of Lady Purple" (1974), set in Transylvania, cross-breeds Pygmalion with elements of both *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, as the protagonist's animated doll vampirises him. Films have focused on the destructive potential of artificially created female life-forms (from *Metropolis* [1927] to *Species* [1995] or *Splice* [2009]), and the unbalanced and creepily exploitative power relationship between male creator and female creation (*The Stepford Wives* [1975]; *Ruby Sparks* [2009]). (All the written texts referred to in this paragraph are included, in whole or in part, in Miles 1999. James 2011 is an excellent study of versions of Pygmalion on screen.) It is hard, now, for any writer or filmmaker to approach the Pygmalion story with Ovidian innocence, without some element of the Gothic uncanniness of *Frankenstein*, or without raising Shelleyan questions about the ethics of the relationship between creator and creature.

This is even true of comic versions of the story deriving from Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* (first performed 1913) and its musical adaptation *My Fair Lady* (by Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe, 1956). In these works the fantasy of the living sculpture is rationalised into a story about the education of a poor, uneducated, lower-class woman into a "lady" and (in the musical, though not in Shaw's determinedly anti-romantic play) a love object for her male teacher-creator. This paradigm of social and educational makeover is what "Pygmalion" now signifies to most people. Nevertheless, such comedies still tend to raise (deliberately or inadvertently) uneasy questions about gender relations, power and responsibility. The unease is made explicit in Willy Russell's play *Educating Rita*, where the male teacher, wondering whether his education of the heroine has in fact irreparably corrupted her, ruefully contemplates "a little Gothic number called *Frankenstein*" (Russell 1981, 48).

It is commonplace, then, for the Pygmalion story to be reread in the light of *Frankenstein*. The focus of this essay is a text which reverses the usual direction of influence by rereading the *Frankenstein* story in the light of Pygmalion (in both its ancient and its modern, Shavian versions). The text is the British television series *Penny Dreadful*, created and largely written by John Logan, which ran for three seasons from 2014 to 2016.² *Penny Dreadful* is a Gothic fantasy series, set in a version of late Victorian

² The three series contain eight, ten, and nine episodes respectively, referred to here by season and episode number (e.g. "2.1").

London, which brings together and interweaves the stories of a number of iconic figures from nineteenth-century Gothic novels and early twentieth-century Hollywood horror films, including Dr Frankenstein and his Creature, Dracula and his enemies, Dorian Gray, Dr Jekyll, and Lawrence Talbot the Wolf Man. The central protagonist is an invented character: Vanessa Ives (Eva Green), childhood friend of *Dracula's* heroine Mina Murray, who, along with Mina's father, the African explorer Sir Malcolm Murray, enlists a team of monster-hunters (and monsters) in a quest to rescue her friend.

In the final pages of her recent *Post-Millennial Gothic: Comedy, Romance and the Rise of Happy Gothic*, Catherine Spooner briefly refers to *Penny Dreadful* among other "fast-and-loose re-imaginings of canonical Victorian Gothic texts" which "eschew readings of Victorian Gothic as expressive of cultural anxiety, and propose instead a revisionary romp through the stock characters and narrative conventions of the day" (Spooner 2017, loc. 3745). While Spooner is sympathetic to such "romps", her summary opens the show up to the kind of critique that Fred Botting makes of contemporary Gothic as evacuated of meaning and menace: "it has a whiff of the delicatessen in its taste for blood, its macabre topics lightly spiced by camp and kitsch" (Botting 2002, 287). There is certainly more than a touch of "camp and kitsch" in *Penny Dreadful*—its title winkingly proclaiming its origins in pulp fiction, its absurd premise recalling 1940s B-movies like *Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man*, its opening titles an over-the-top phantasmagoria of Gothic imagery, including the quintessential Victorian Gothic image of a china teacup filling up with blood.

An alternative approach to *Penny Dreadful*, however, might pursue the arguments of Marie-Luise Kohke and Christine Gutleben in their introduction to *Neo-Victorian Gothic*. Balancing the playful with the serious, they suggest that the popular subgenre's "inevitable resort to and reiteration of well-established, even clichéd motifs and themes is *inherently* self-conscious, regardless of whether these elements are employed imitatively or parodically, conservatively or subversively, for stylistic effect or deconstructive critique" (Kohke and Gutleben 2012, 43). Neo-Victorianism, they argue, is "*quintessentially Gothic*" (their italics) as it "tries to understand the nineteenth century as the contemporary self's uncanny *Doppelgänger*" (Kohke and Gutleben 2012, 4); the Victorian era "assumes the quality of the antiquated and archaic, which Gothic originally assigned to the medieval and Renaissance periods" (Kohke and Gutleben 2012, 10), and "the Victorians often become 'the damned', who we must confront in the underworld of the imagined nineteenth century, a purgatory to burn away their unexpiated sins so as to allow present-day subjects to re-emerge from the text, if not exactly purified of historical guilt and association, at least reconfirmed in our own comparatively more liberal-ethical selfhood" (Kohke and Gutleben 2012, 11).

For all its campy and parodic elements, *Penny Dreadful* (I would suggest) works in the way that Kohke and Gutleben outline, using its Victorian setting and Gothic motifs to mount a surprisingly serious and sophisticated exploration of issues such as gender relationships, patriarchal authority, class, race, colonialism and imperial

adventure, mental illness and psychiatry. This essay will focus on one strand in the show in which its mingling of camp and moral seriousness is most striking: the story of Victor Frankenstein, his male Creature, and his female creation Lily. I will argue that the second season of *Penny Dreadful*, by intertwining the Frankenstein story with elements of the Pygmalion myth, provides a savagely satiric deconstruction of traditional romantic views of the role of women and heterosexual relationships – all the more subversive for incongruously combining Gothic horror with elements of social comedy and romance drawn from Shaw's *Pygmalion* and *My Fair Lady*. The show's third and final season, however, as it largely discards the Pygmalion analogy, also draws back from the radical nature of its critique, offering a more conservative take on the story and an uneasily "happy" ending to Lily's story.

Penny Dreadful's first introduction of Victor Frankenstein (played by Harry Treadaway), at the start of season 1, displays the series' mischievous propensity for misleading its audience and then shockingly pulling the rug from under us.³ We are introduced to the doctor as he awakens a newly created creature, a gentle, handsome youth whom he names Proteus and treats with fatherly affection. We only discover that this is not Victor's first act of creation when the original Creature turns up and announces himself by bloodily disembowelling Proteus. As in Shelley's novel, the Creature (Rory Kinnear) is ugly, vengefully angry and capable of brutal violence, but also sensitive, eloquent, and a lover of Romantic poetry.⁴ His demand, as in Shelley, is that Victor create a female counterpart for him, to relieve his intolerable isolation.

In the novel, Frankenstein reluctantly agrees to this demand, but at the last moment has qualms – the female creature "might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate, and delight, for its own sake, in murder and wretchedness," and her union with the male might produce "a race of devils ... who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror" (Shelley 1996, 128; vol. 3, ch. 3). He destroys the bride before she can be animated, prompting the Creature's final revenge. Later cinematic versions, such as James Whale's classic *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), Terence Fisher's Hammer Horror *Frankenstein Created Woman* (1967), Franc Roddam's *The Bride* (1985), and Kenneth Branagh's (misleadingly titled) *Mary's Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994), allow Frankenstein to go through with the plan and explore its consequences. *Penny Dreadful* follows the same course. In the final episode of season 1, Victor is brought to the bedside of Brona Croft (Billie Piper), a beautiful Irish prostitute who is dying of consumption and terrified about the fate of her soul after death. Victor promises her "a glorious place of everlasting rebirth", then smothers her and takes her body for reanimation (1.8).

³ For the sake of clarity, I use "Frankenstein" to refer to the character in Shelley's novel and subsequent tradition, "Victor" for the character in *Penny Dreadful*.

⁴ In season 1 the Creature is nicknamed "Caliban" (by the old theatre manager who employs him), and in seasons 2 and 3 he takes the name "John Clare" (after the poor-born Romantic poet who died in an insane asylum). But Logan and other programme-makers consistently refer to him in their commentaries simply as "the Creature", and I follow their practice, which suggests his essential namelessness; as Duyfhuizen notes, "the lack of a proper signifier for the Creature" helps to generate the horror associated with him (Duyfhuizen 1995, 479).

Penny Dreadful has made one very significant change to Shelley's original concept. As Chris Baldick notes, "That Victor Frankenstein assembles his monster from parts of corpses collected from charnel-houses and dissecting rooms is one of the most memorable and enduring features of the story" (Baldick 1987, 33); the image of Frankenstein assembling his grisly jigsaw in his "workshop of filthy creation" (Shelley 1996, 38; vol. 1, ch. 3) is essential to the novel's atmosphere of Gothic horror. In *Penny Dreadful*, by contrast, each of Victor's creations—the original Creature, Proteus, and Lily—is the reanimated body of a single person. A question which was irrelevant in the novel thus becomes crucial in the series: how far does the reanimated, undead creature retain the memories or personality or (if you like) "soul" of the human being from which it was created? That question will prove central to the series' characterisation of Brona/Lily.

The reanimation of Brona's dead body in 2.1 echoes iconic moments in the Frankenstein cinematic tradition, both Whale's storm-and-lightning creation scenes and the birth of Branagh's creature from a tank of water. But here the female creature who emerges from the water as if from baptism is not a grotesquely Gothic figure like Whale's electric-shock-haired Bride or Branagh's hideously disfigured Elizabeth. She more strikingly resembles Pygmalion's animated statue: physically perfect (apart from the autopsy scars on her chest), naked, vulnerable, a beautiful blank slate without language or memory, wide-eyed and awestruck in the face of her creator. Pygmalion's statue "shyly raised / Her eyes to his and saw the world and him"; this creation's first word is "Victor".

Having quickly taught her language, Victor tells her that she is his country cousin, suffering from severe amnesia. He calls her "Lily", ostensibly because it is "the flower of resurrection and rebirth", but with obvious connotations of purity and virginity (Ferber 1999, 114-15). He dyes her dark hair blonde, telling her that he always admired fair-haired ladies because they seemed kinder, "like angels"; she laughs, "You're making me into an angel!" Her voice too is transformed: Lily speaks not in Brona's rough Northern Irish accent but in perfect cut-glass Received Pronunciation, and when Victor comments in surprise on this, she replies, "Well, I speak like you" (2.2).

This process of transformation echoes the Pygmalion story on various levels. Ovid's original story sets up a schematic opposition between "whore" and "virgin" — the Propoetides, Cypriot prostitutes, whose immorality disgusts Pygmalion, and the cold chaste ivory statue he creates as an alternative. As the Propoetides, hardened by their mercenary profession, "turned with little change to stones of flint" (Ovid 1989, 232; 10. 242), the statue turns from ivory to flesh. *Penny Dreadful* short-circuits the binary opposition: the prostitute Brona is literally transformed into the angelic Lily. Her name, with its associations of whiteness, echoes the traditional name of the animated statue, Galatea, which means "milk-white", as well as the lilies which Pygmalion brings

it as a gift (Ovid 1986, 233; 10. 262).⁵ The dyeing of her hair blonde may be a visual allusion to Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, a film with strong echoes of the Pygmalion story (James 2011, 36-58), in which the protagonist Scottie sets out to transform dark-haired street girl Judy into a doppelgänger of blonde, ethereal, upper-class Madeleine. (The parallel might suggest to an alert viewer that Brona/Lily, like Judy/Madeleine, is not quite what she appears to be.) Finally, the change in Lily's speech is an obvious echo of the phonetic education, and class transformation, of Eliza in Shaw's play.

In teaching his creation language and social behaviour, cutting and dyeing her hair, dressing her up in fine clothes, Victor is putting her through a kind of Ovidian metamorphosis into a "fair lady". The process echoes the comic sequence in Ovid's story where Pygmalion attempts to woo the unresponsive statue with

gifts
That girls delight in, shells and polished stones,
And little birds and flowers of every hue,
Lilies and coloured balls and beads of amber
He decks her limbs with robes and on her fingers
Sets splendid rings, a necklace round her neck,
Pearls in her ears, a pendant on her breast
(Ovid 1986, 233; 10. 259-66)

It also echoes the educational metamorphosis of Eliza by Professor Henry Higgins in Shaw's *Pygmalion* – a process Higgins proudly describes as "The hardest job I ever tackled ... to take a human being and change her into a quite different human being," but which his mother acerbically refers to as "playing with [his] live doll" (Shaw 2008, 78). The implied image of Lily as doll is underlined in a comic sequence in 2.4 when Victor bumps into a dress shop dummy and makes a flustered apology: "Excuse me – Oh, not a real woman at all. The mannequin, I mean, not my cousin. *She's* a real woman." It is further underlined by the presence of a plethora of images and simulacra in *Penny Dreadful's* second season. The Creature takes a job at a sinister wax museum (and nearly becomes one of the exhibits); the principal antagonist is a witch who operates through voodoo dolls, and Vanessa is forced to debate with the devil speaking through a doll made in her own image (2.10). The uncanny borderline between the living person and the inanimate simulacrum is constantly forced on our attention, inviting us to ponder the uncanniness of Lily's existence.

The image of Victor's "live doll" is most strikingly manifested in a later scene in 2.4, where he gets Lily to dress up in her new clothes: fashionable white dress, high heels, tight corset. He is awestruck and speechless at the beauty of the result – "I can't believe you've ever been this silent in your life," Lily remarks. But Lily is uncomfortable: she feels about to topple off the high heels, and the corset is so tight she

⁵ The statue in Ovid is, like Frankenstein's Creature, nameless; the name Galatea is an eighteenth-century innovation (Reinhold 1971), borrowed from another character in the *Metamorphoses*, the sea nymph who is the centre of a tragic love triangle in book 13.

can barely breathe. "I think that's meant to be the point," Victor says. "Ladies aren't supposed to exert themselves." Lily asks, what would be the danger if they did? "They'd take over the world," says Victor with a condescending laugh. "The only way we men prevent that is by keeping women corseted, in theory and in practice." Quite explicitly, we are being invited to see the creation of Lily, out of the raw material that was Brona, as an example of "womanufacture". The term was coined by the classical critic Alison Sharrock in a seminal essay on Ovid's *Pygmalion* (Sharrock 1991), to refer to the idea of womanhood as a social construction. The literal construction of women by *Pygmalion* and *Frankenstein* is merely a metaphorical extension of how patriarchal society moulds and constrains women into conventionally submissive feminine roles, with the object (as Victor frankly and jokingly confesses) of keeping them under control.

The social comedy of Lily's education continues in scenes that closely parallel Shaw's *Pygmalion* and *My Fair Lady*. Higgins puts the newly trained Eliza through two tests: a preliminary one at his mother's "at home", and the climactic one at an ambassadorial ball. Victor similarly puts Eliza through two tests. The first, in 2.5, is afternoon tea in a tea shop with Victor's friend Vanessa Ives. Like Eliza, Lily is on her best behaviour, carefully articulating "How do you do, Miss Ives" as Eliza similarly addresses Mrs Higgins "with pedantic correctness of pronunciation and great beauty of tone" (Shaw 2008, 70); like Eliza, she makes stilted small talk about the weather, responding to Vanessa's query about her impressions of London with "The weather is challenging, but the excitement is palpable." Unlike Eliza, she gets through the ordeal without embarrassing self-betrayal, and Vanessa is charmed. The second test, in 2.6, is a grand ball at the mansion of Dorian Gray (Reeve Carney), where Lily, like Eliza, creates a sensation with her beauty and grace. Where the Eliza of *My Fair Lady*, Cinderella-like, dances with the Prince of Transylvania, Lily captivates the bored, cynical aesthete Dorian himself; he is fascinated by her "natural grace, unschooled by society", and by the strange coolness of her hands, like "a touch of marble" (a sly hint of *Pygmalion's* statue).

Dorian's interest in Lily complicates what is an already tense sexual entanglement. Mary Shelley's novel, at least in its published texts, never makes explicit any sexual element in *Frankenstein's* relationship with his male or female Creatures. Only a passage in the "Thomas manuscript" (an annotated copy of the 1818 text which Shelley prepared for a friend in 1823) hints at a *Pygmalion*-like erotic excitement as *Frankenstein* works on his first creation: "my voice became broken, my trembling hands almost refused to accomplish their task; I became as timid as a love-sick girl, and alternate tremor and passionate ardour took the place of wholesome sensation and regulated ambition" (Shelley 1996, 201). This passage never found its way into the canonical text. Nevertheless, the novel's sexual subtexts are sufficiently murky and complex that an immense amount of critical argument has circulated around its treatments of gender and sexuality.

In *Penny Dreadful*, the erotic themes come to the forefront. Given the story's extensive cross-contamination with the Pygmalion myth, it is inevitable here that Victor is sexually attracted to Lily. Even before the reanimation we saw him fondling Brona's dead body in its glass tank, in a mixture of tenderness and creepily necrophiliac lust (2.1). The reanimated Lily seems to be drawn equally strongly to her handsome creator, and during a thunderstorm at the end of 2.5 she slips into Victor's bed and makes love to him. On the other hand, meeting the ugly shambling Creature (whom Victor reluctantly introduces to her as her forgotten fiancé), she responds, not with the eldritch shriek of Elsa Lanchester's Bride seeing Boris Karloff's Creature in *Bride of Frankenstein*, but nevertheless with barely concealed fear and repulsion (2.2); she puts off his clumsy romantic advances. The Creature watches in glowering rage as the bride who was manufactured for him displays her preference for other men; he tells Victor, "You made her for *me* I *will* take her!" (2.8).

As audience, we recognise the familiar story-shape of the eternal triangle, and are encouraged, I think, to anticipate a tragic conclusion in which the jealous Creature will murder Lily. As in Shelley's novel, where the Creature's murder of Frankenstein's bride Elizabeth on their wedding night precipitates the crisis, so here (we anticipate) the homosocial rivalry of creator and creature over the innocent woman they both love will precipitate their final mutually destructive struggle. The introduction of Dorian, turning the triangle into a quadrangle, and the jealous reactions of both Victor and the Creature, only serves to make this outcome seem more likely.

The first indication that we have misread the signals comes in the final moments of 2.7. Parting from Dorian after a date, Lily goes into a pub, picks up a middle-aged man at the bar, takes him to a room upstairs, has sex with him—and, at the climax, strangles him. Leaving the room and the dead body, in the opening scene of the next episode (2.8), she casually knocks over a house of cards on the table. It is a not-very-subtle symbol of the way *Penny Dreadful* has just demolished our expectations of the kind of story we are watching.

The climactic sequence that follows begins with the Creature waiting in Victor's laboratory as Lily returns home. It is a classic slasher-movie set-up. The whole mise-en-scène—the cavernous laboratory, the flickering lights, the Creature lurking in the foreground as he spies (and we spy with him) through a rack of shelves on Lily undressing, his menacing silent approach to stand darkly looming over the small blonde woman—everything invites us to anticipate sexual violence and murder. But again the show wrong-foots us. Lily, after first reacting with a flutter of alarm ("Oh Mr Clare, you startled me") and affronted primness ("I don't think it's entirely proper that you should be here without Victor"), abruptly drops her pose and takes charge of the scene. When the Creature presses his claim, telling her that there is nothing that matters but "thee and me," she savagely mocks his Heathcliff-like romanticism. "You pathetic creature. How could you imagine that I could care for you? ... Don't we make a beautiful couple, 'thee and me'? Shall we wander the pastures and recite your fucking

poetry to the fucking cows?" In the verbally repressed Victorian setting, hearing the obscenity in Lily's precise cut-glass enunciation is unexpectedly shocking; it's a moment that restores the transgressive force of Eliza's once-notorious "Not bloody likely" (Shaw 2008, 74).

The shock mounts as Lily, revealing unsuspected physical strength, throws the Creature against a rack of shelves and confronts him with a passionate, eloquently obscene tirade about the wrongs of women:

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 heels and gossip and the slavery of marriage. And our reward for this service? Back there—the face turned to the pillow and the bloody aching cunt as you force us onto your beds to take your fat heaving bodies. You drag us into the alleys, my lad, and cram yourselves into our mouths for two bob, when you're not beating us senseless. When we're not bloody from the eyes and the mouth and the ass and the cunt. Never again will I kneel to any man. Now they shall kneel to me. As you do, monster.

Then, with another hairpin emotional turn, she addresses the dazed and terrified Creature (now lying at her feet) in tenderly seductive terms, inviting him ("my brother, my equal") to join her in murdering Victor and taking over the world:

We were created to rule, my love. And the blood of mankind will water our garden. Us, and our kin, and our children, and our generations. We are conquerors, we are the pure blood, we are steel and sinew both. We are the next thousand years. We are the dead.

This scene, powerfully written and a virtuoso performance by Billie Piper, upends everything we thought we knew about Lily. The innocent blank slate without memories, the perfect passive submissive doll-woman, was merely a clever performance. Lily in fact retains all Bona's memories, and all Bona's accumulated pain and humiliation and resentment and hatred of the men who abused her. The shell of Pygmalion's ivory statue cracks to reveal a vengeful Propoetid inside. And her vengefulness is now fused with the superhuman strength, invulnerability and immortality of an undead creature. She is in fact the fulfillment of Frankenstein's fear in Shelley's novel: that the female creature might turn out to be "ten thousand times more malignant than her mate" and unleash destruction on the human race. Lily's apocalyptic vision is terrifying and repulsive (the Nazi overtones of "pure blood" and "the next thousand years" can hardly be accidental), yet there is also something exhilarating in the transformation of the apparently passive victim into a figure of menacing power. And it is hard not to feel sympathy for her position, just as one does for Shelley's abused Creature; if she is "ten thousand times more malignant", her experience of mistreatment and betrayal is perhaps even more powerful than his was.

By interweaving the story of “the bride of Frankenstein” with elements of the Pygmalion myth, *Penny Dreadful* has very cleverly seduced us into responding to it in a spirit of sentimental romance, only to reveal the true Gothic horror that really underlies it. Moreover, it also invites us to reflect that the Pygmalion story too is really one of Gothic horror. It is not, at its core, a wish-fulfillment fantasy (as it was for Ovid), or a satirical comedy about class and education (as it was for Shaw), but a horror story about mind control and slavery, which appropriately ends with the supposed victim turning the tables to become the vengeful monster.

The Pygmalion motif which is so prominent in the second season of *Penny Dreadful* almost vanishes from sight in the third (and as it turned out final) season, which somewhat reconceives Lily: where season 2 revealed the monster beneath the façade of the “perfect” woman, season 3 reveals the human being beneath the façade of the monster. This is partly because Logan and his collaborators had in a sense painted themselves into a corner at the end of season 2: the apocalyptic scenario of world conquest outlined by Lily was one that the series could hardly deliver on. Season 3 scales back Lily’s ambitions, her power, and the fierceness of her hatred, reducing her from a Fury-like embodiment of female vengeance to a vulnerable woman struggling to preserve her own selfhood. While this approach makes Lily a more sympathetic figure, it also undercuts the radical force of season 2’s satiric critique, moving *Penny Dreadful* some distance (to use Kohke and Gutleben’s terms) from the “subversive” to the “conservative” end of the neo-Victorian Gothic spectrum.

The alliance of Victor’s creations against humanity which Lily proposed in 2.8 does not eventuate. The Creature, appalled at his bride’s transformation, abandons her, and his storyline in season 3, involving a quest to regain his lost human life, does not intersect at all with Lily’s in plot terms (though it does thematically). Instead Lily forms a new alliance with another outsider, Dorian Gray – here reinvented from Oscar Wilde’s original creation as an immortal superbeing who may be centuries old. With his help she begins to recruit an army of prostitutes and “fallen women” to carry out a feminist terror campaign against male society. In a memorably Grand Guignol sequence (3.7), she sends them out to kill abusive men and bring back their severed right hands to pile in a bloody heap on Dorian’s dining table. While bloody, this campaign is less morally problematic than Lily’s earlier plans; we are unlikely to feel much compunction when she dispatches the manager of a torture-porn club which killed young girls for the entertainment of rich patrons (3.3). Dorian, who soon becomes bored with playing second fiddle to a cabal of lesbian feminist revolutionaries, perhaps expresses the audience’s sense of anticlimax when he complains to Lily that “We had the potential for true mastery, a cosmic darkness, and what have you created? An army of depraved whores” (3.7).

A counter-movement, meanwhile, turns Lily from threat to victim. Victor has been working with his old fellow-student Dr Henry Jekyll (Shazad Latif) on an electro-chemical treatment to “tame the beast within” (3.2), by which he hopes to restore Lily to

the “angel” he first created, when “she was perfect” (3.3). In 3.6 his attempt to kidnap her by force from Dorian’s mansion leads not to the expected violent confrontation, with Lily choking her creator to death as she threatened in 2.8, but instead to a curiously quiet, sad encounter as though between the survivors of a failed love affair: “We were happy!” – “No, Victor, *you* were happy.” He pleads with her to let him take away her anger and rage and sadness and “make you what you were”, but she refuses to be “healed”: “My sadness is my own. I would never give it up. ... I have suffered long and hard to be who I am. I want my scars to show.”

In insisting on the importance of her memories in making her the person she is, Lily is voicing a central theme in season 3 of *Penny Dreadful*. The Creature, simultaneously, is recovering memories of his human past and attempting (with tragic results) to reconnect with his old human family. Vanessa Ives is seen in a flashback episode (3.4) imprisoned in a mental hospital and threatened with lobotomy which she says is “meant to make me normal ... Compliant, obedient”, and in fact threatens to make her “no one”. Emphatically contrasted in season 2, the strong “masculine” adventurer versus the submissive “feminine” doll, Vanessa and Lily in season 3 become parallel figures, struggling to retain their selfhood against a society which wishes to “normalise” them.

The climactic scene of the season (3.8), echoing the climactic scene between Lily and the Creature in 2.8, finds Lily, betrayed by Dorian, trapped and bound in Jekyll’s laboratory, and faced with Victor who holds the syringe that will chemically lobotomise her. She tells Victor that he is about to kill her—or (echoing Vanessa’s “no one”) “Worse: I shall be unmade, become a non-person. I would rather die who I am than live as your demure little wife.” In a long monologue of passionate grief, counterbalancing her monologue of passionate rage to the Creature in 2.8, she tells Victor the story of her—Brona’s—baby, who froze to death on a winter night while she was lying unconscious, beaten senseless by one of her Johns. “There are some scars that make us what we are, but without them, we don’t exist. ... Please don’t take her from me! Please!” Moved, Victor drops the syringe and releases her, telling her, “It is too easy being monsters. Let us try to be human.” Where season 2 moved towards a revelation of the essential monstrousness of the Victor/Lily (and Pygmalion/Galatea) relationship, season 3 moves towards an accommodation where both characters can acknowledge their shared, flawed humanity.

The Pygmalion theme has become almost entirely invisible in season 3 of *Penny Dreadful*. Nevertheless, recalling the imagery of season 2, Lily’s passionate refusal to be made “perfect” as Victor’s happy, compliant wife could be read as a refusal to step back onto the pedestal as Pygmalion’s living statue. The motif of Lily as work of art is made explicit in the last episode of the series (3.10), as she pays a final visit to Dorian in his grand salon lined with the hundreds of portraits he has collected. He advises her that an immortal must eventually lose “the appetite for passion” and cultivate indifference, as he has done. Indicating the portraits on the walls, he predicts, “One day you realise

you've become like them: beautiful and dead. You have become a perfect, unchanging portrait of yourself." But Lily rejects the prospect of "an eternity without passion, without affection, caring for nothing". Having resisted Victor's attempt to turn her back into a "perfect" doll, she similarly resists Dorian's lure of a retreat into the "immortal perfection" of life as a work of art. Dorian insists that "You'll be back," but the last we see of Lily is her walking out the door, like Eliza walking out on Higgins at the end of Shaw's *Pygmalion*. The final image is a long shot of Dorian, silhouetted in his vast empty hall surrounded by lifeless portraits. Lily is gone, somewhere offscreen, moving into an unknown future.

It is a low-key ending to the story. The final season of *Penny Dreadful* was strongly criticised by many fans, especially for the way its strong female protagonist, Vanessa Ives, was reduced to passivity and a sacrificial death (see Valentine 2016, and, for a more general roundup of views on the ending, Redmond 2016). A show which had been seen as edgily transgressive had relapsed into a conservative Christian ethos. Certainly, the series' treatment of Lily can be seen as retreating from a radical feminist critique of the treatment of women in Victorian (and modern) society, into a more individualistic focus on one woman's quest to preserve her own selfhood, and a final emphasis on reconciliation rather than revolution. All this said, there is nevertheless something satisfying in the story's ending, as Lily—having successively rejected the roles of vengeful monster, submissive doll, and emotionlessly perfect artwork—walks out the door into a future of unknown potential. *Penny Dreadful*'s fantasia on the themes of Frankenstein and Pygmalion ends on a note that is unexpectedly hopeful.

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“Impossible Horrors in Ordinary Front Yards”: The Uncanny and Elizabeth Knox’s *Wake*

ABSTRACT

*Jane Stafford observes that Elizabeth Knox has consistently “signalled her willingness to diverge from the realist mainstream of New Zealand fiction.” This is particularly evident in Knox’s most recent novel *Wake* (2013), which incorporates zombie-like figures, horrific scenes of violence, psychological trauma, alternate realities and extra-terrestrial lifeforms. While most reviewers of *Wake* associate it with horror and science fiction, its representation of psychological decay, death and a haunting past place it a Gothic tradition, with Knox employing the uncanny as its chief means of exploring the ongoing effects of the past on the present. *Wake* contains all the frights of Gothic horror combined with the insight of psychological realism; a combination that allows it to reflect contemporary anxieties about how a violent traumatic past affects the present. Certainly, there is little explicit discussion in *Wake* about social inequalities between Māori and Pakeha, New Zealand’s woeful domestic abuse rate or ongoing discord over the ownership and use of land, but the novel’s engagement with a haunting past associated with colonisation and its attendant oppressive ideologies suggests it can usefully be considered a postcolonial Gothic that encourages readers to engage with what Gina Wisker describes as “the lived memory of a historical horror.” *Wake* suggests that New Zealand is a land marked by historical violence associated with colonisation and that this violence is never in the past, but is constantly returning.*

The Uncanny, New Zealand Gothic, horror, postcolonial Gothic, Elizabeth Knox

Elizabeth Knox is a writer known for her use of a range of genres. After the ghostly story of a haunted house in *After Z-Hour* (1987), Knox veered into realism with *Glamour and the Sea* (1996), before delving back into the supernatural in *The Vintner's Luck* (1998), which deals primarily with the relationship between a nineteenth century vintner and a fallen angel. As Jane Stafford observes, Knox has “signalled her willingness to diverge from the realist mainstream of New Zealand fiction” (Stafford 2009, 52), which is more than apparent when considering her foray into the Gothic world of vampires in *Daylight* (2003) and the young adult fantasies *Dreamhunter* (2005) and *Dreamquake* (2007). Knox’s engagement with a range of realist and non-realist modes has caused some consternation for literary critics, who frequently struggle to reconcile Knox’s undeniable prowess as a writer with her use of modes commonly associated with popular fiction. A review of *Daylight* in *The Washington Post*, for example, expresses surprise at finding Knox, “a gifted New Zealander whose complex prose has summoned comparisons to Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë, apparently slumming among the gravestones” (Winter 2003, T08). The suggestion that a Gothic setting is incompatible with literary prose says much about the historical mistrust afforded to the popular by elite culture since the turn of the twentieth century, but it is perhaps most interesting in what it suggests about the ability of Knox’s writing to subvert reader expectations. Knox’s carefully structured narratives, with their shimmering prose and probing explorations into the philosophical and the psychological raise expectations related to literary fiction, while their supernatural entities and fantastical worlds suggest a reading experience closer to Stephen King than Austen or Brontë. Knox’s ability to confound expectations is particularly apparent in her most recent novel *Wake* (2013), which explores the psychological effects on a group of people who survive a wave of murderous violence only to be further terrorised by an invisible force that keeps them prisoner in order to feed off death and despair. As a review in the *Guardian* observes,

Knox keeps the monster off stage and examines the psychological consequences of its depredations on the survivors, subverting the norms of the horror genre and thus making the ambiguous finale all the more startling. *Wake* reads like a collaboration between Dean Koontz and John Wyndham, rewritten by Margaret Atwood” (Brown 2015, par. 1).

The *Sydney Morning Herald* similarly highlights the range of genres in *Wake* when it suggests that it “moves from splatterfest to quietly rendered psychological horror”, concluding that “Knox’s *Wake* is literary horror that subverts horror’s hoary clichés to brilliant and chilling effect” (Woodhead 2015, par. 1). *Wake* contains all the frights of horror combined with the insight of psychological realism; a combination that allows it to reflect contemporary anxieties about how a violent traumatic past affects the present. *Wake* suggests that New Zealand is a land marked by historical violence associated with colonisation and that this violence is never in the past, but is constantly returning.

While most reviewers of *Wake* associate it with horror and science fiction, its representation of psychological decay, death and a haunting past place it a Gothic

tradition, with Knox employing the uncanny as its chief means of exploring the ongoing effects of the past on the present. According to Sigmund Freud's seminal 1919 essay on the topic, *das unheimlich* (roughly translated as the "uncanny") is related to the coming to light of something repressed; it is something secret, hidden and unfamiliar that refuses to remain buried, the return of which inspires dread. For Freud, the particular fear inspired by, for example, the suspicion that a doll might, in fact, be animate is related to surmounted childhood or "primitive" beliefs that return to consciousness. It is the unconscious nature of such beliefs that makes them inherently familiar, leading to the definition of the uncanny being something that mingles the familiar and the unfamiliar. The horror inspired by the return of the repressed stems from the way it is both known and unknown, familiar and strange, which Knox makes great use of in the opening chapters of *Wake* that depict the inhabitants of a small town overtaken by madness that causes them to kill each other in horrendous ways. Only a handful of people survive this madness, only to discover that they are kept prisoner in Kahukura by a mysterious force-field that both prevents their escape and their rescue. The novel begins with policewoman Theresa Grey driving away from a house in Motueka where she has had to break some bad news to a teenage girl's mother. Theresa's job is "to hold the woman's hand", which she does "leaning forward, knee to knee, for over an hour" (Knox 2013, 9). The emotional effect of this encounter is potent, but as she drives "the ghostly sensation of that stricken woman's hands" (Knox 2013, 9) eases and Theresa begins to feel better. Nevertheless, the horror associated with trauma and death cannot be completely banished and as Theresa drives she receives a call to check on a helicopter's mayday signal from the nearby town Kahukura. When she enters the small town, she is met with something quite different to a downed helicopter. A woman naked from the waist up runs out in front of Theresa's car, which she does not seem to see, her arms covered with "red notches" (Knox 2013, 11). Theresa cannot see an assailant, but she does spy a couple in a driveway "locked in a passionate kiss, holding each other's heads" (Knox 2013, 11). Things are not as they seem, however, and the suburban street is suddenly filled with "Unaccountable, frightening noises [...] There were thumps, smashes, a squealing noise, and the sound of someone gasping for breath. But there were no screams, no cries for help" (Knox 2013, 12). The uncanny effect of a familiar suburban street rendered strange through unexplained violence and inexplicable noise is further intensified when Theresa looks more closely at the kissing couple and realises that "They weren't kissing. Their lips and noses were in red strings and tatters, and still they kept pushing mouth to mouth, their bared teeth biting" (Knox 2013, 14).

The violence of the mass murder in Kahukura clearly establishes the novel as one designed to frighten, but it is the uncanniness of the events that occur one morning in a small town that proves far more disturbing, both for the reader and the characters. The familiar sight of a kissing couple becomes terrifying when it is revealed that they are actually eating each other's flesh, just as the sight of a postie repeatedly plunging their head through a letterbox is chilling because of its bizarre logic. What is most disturbing about these violent eradications is the way that they occur: as Theresa notes, "*There were*

no cries for help. That was the thing. Theresa had seen injuries, aggression, atrocities, self-mutilation, but had heard nothing from any of the victims or perpetrators. Nothing articulate or expressive. No matter how hard she strained her ears, Theresa couldn't hear anything human" (Knox 2013, 19). Violence is familiar to Theresa, but this is an unfamiliar violence; a violence that is strange. When Holly, who is in Kahukura visiting her mother Kate, witnesses a woman walk into a fire with her child trapped in a stroller, she "waited to see people rushing to help – shopkeepers with fire extinguishers. To see what you would normally expect to see" (Knox 2013, 27). But things are not as normal. Another survivor of the murderous insanity that sweeps Kahukura is Belle, who realises that "Her feeling that there should be something happening that wasn't was almost as disturbing as her feeling that something was happening that shouldn't be" (Knox 2013, 28). Bub, a local fisherman who also survives the carnage, figures his experience in similar terms: "what Bub expected to happen kept refusing to" (Knox 2013, 33).

The murderous madness that overtakes almost the entire population of Kahukura results in an array of "impossible horrors in ordinary front yards" (Knox 2013, 48) that exemplify the uncanniness of the familiar made strange. If, as Fried argues, the uncanny is always the result of the return of repressed material, then the events in Kahukura – madness, mass murder and the subsequent imprisonment of the few survivors - must in some way be linked to something that refuses to remain buried. One of the ways that the uncanny plays out in the novel is through the representation of characters who have experienced a past trauma that returns with the one they experience in Kahukura. William, an American businessman in town for a conference, experiences the trauma of surviving an inexplicable event that kills thousands of Kahukura's inhabitants as a repetition since "he had been here before, very early, waiting for someone more powerful to notice his suffering and take his part" (Knox 2013, 176). He was removed from his mother's care when he was eight years old and eventually placed with his aunts and uncles in a chaotic drunken environment. When William would become frightened of the raucous drunken parties his family would throw, his older sister was in the habit of carrying him outside to sleep in one of the wrecked cars that litter the property. One winter's night he wakes up in the car, although he cannot remember his sister carrying him there. He goes back into the house and discovers the air "thinly misted" (Knox 2013, 177) and dizzying. His uncles are motionless in the living room and when he enters the bedroom he finds his cousins lying in bed, their faces "flushed and pink" (Knox 2013, 178). William drags two of his small cousins outside, before returning inside where he opens up all the windows. It is, however, too late. The previous night William's "inebriated uncles had been feeling the cold, and carried the gas barbecue indoors. Within a couple of hours the adults had succumbed to carbon monoxide poisoning" (Knox 2013, 178). One of the small cousins lives and "the other might have, except it was too cold where William had left him, wearing only his pyjamas on the open porch. No one told William that though – he worked it out later" (Knox 2013, 178).

Cathy Caruth argues that trauma involves “the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*” (Caruth 1996, 7), meaning that William’s trauma is twofold: firstly there is the traumatic experience of his family dying; and secondly, there is the traumatic experience of William surviving. William experiences a horrifying event and survives it and his response to these twin traumas is emotional repression. William’s lesson in life is that “sometimes you just had to wait – and sometimes you had to walk away, never letting your feelings follow you” (Knox 2013, 179). Of course, in Freudian terms what is repressed always returns, and William wonders how many times “in his head, had he gone back into the house to pull a rug off the couch, a quilt off the bed, to cover them? He’d do it over and over whenever he was tired or unhappy – he’d take a minute, go back, and find something to keep them warm” (Knox 2013, 402). William experiences the past as a space in the present where he continues to act out his traumatic experience. Thus, in spite of his attempt to bury his emotions, William is haunted by his past trauma and finds himself immersed in a new iteration of it.

The force-field that is responsible for the madness that sweeps Kahukura and the subsequent imprisonment of its few survivors, which they variously refer to as “the No-Go zone”, “the Wake” and “the monster”, is an entity that is invisible, amorphous and, as William observes, somehow familiar. It is thus no surprise that what ultimately kills the majority of the survivors during the tenure of their imprisonment is what is most familiar to them: their own mental processes. Once the survivors are cordoned off and unable to leave Kahukura, the Wake essentially preys on their psychological vulnerabilities. As Sam explains, “The monster picks at people’s loose threads – their faults” (Knox 2013, 311), which means that Lily, a professional athlete, runs herself to death. Lily’s “loose thread” is her obsession with fitness and physical perfection, which she thinks of as her “first duty” in life (Knox 2013, 200). Her need to “face forward and go” (Knox 2013, 200), results in Lily running “through the pain in her knee [...] past exhaustion and into crisis”, running so much that she is “whittled down” so that the air “scarcely resisted her. She ran through it. She ran through it” (Knox 2013, 201). The repetition of the phrase “she ran through it” is a textual manifestation of Lily’s compulsion to repeat, which renders her more like a machine than a human, a state of being that critics including Ernst Jentsch and Freud have identified as particularly uncanny. The disturbingly mechanistic nature of Lily raises potent psychic uncertainties as to whether an apparently living being is really animate, or whether a lifeless object may actually be alive, and also relates to the way that, according to Hal Foster, the machine has often been seen as somehow demonic. Although the machine represents an obscure threat disruptive of traditional social practice, it is the machine’s relationship to the human that makes it particularly uncanny:

In the premodern instance the machine is thought to mimic the organic movements of the body; in the modern instance, however, the machine becomes the model, and the body is disciplined to its mechanistic specifications. Like the commodity, the machine is uncanny because it assumes our human vitality and because we take on its deathly facticity. Both forms draw out human labor and

will, animation and autonomy, and return them in alien guises; both are other yet not-other, strange yet familiar. (Foster 1991, 51)

The replacement of human labor by machines, which intensified during the Industrial Revolution, created an increasingly mechanistic society in which humanity is supplanted by technology. Lily's transformation from human to running machine thus represents a mechanistic invasion leading to the dissolution of self, suggesting something of the way that the machine's ability to affect not just industry but the private realm impinges "upon the very center of the human psyche" (Giedion 1948, 41).

Knox explains that her interest in writing *Wake* is linked to the fact that narratives designed to inspire fear provide "a place where a reader will encounter stories about death, loss, and the annihilation of self" (Patchett 2014, par. 21). The annihilation of self is both literal, as in the example of Lily who is metaphorically transformed into a machine before running herself to death and the countless residents of Kahukura who are killed in the *Wake*'s initial attack, but it can also occur on a psychological level, as in the case of Sam who coexists with a twin double who returns at certain moments while Sam disappears into another realm. The figure of the double is identified by Freud as an uncanny motif whereby a person may identify themselves with another and so become unsure of their true self, or they may substitute the other's self for their own. Either way, the double points to a profound instability of self and subverts the notion of selfhood as cohesive and stable. Sam's unstable sense of self – sometimes she is the quiet unintelligent retirement home carer, while at others she is a feistier and more intelligent version – results in her fellow survivors diagnosing her with Dissociative Personality Disorder, but as the narrative progresses it becomes clear that there were, in fact, two Sams – identical twins – and that at some point they took on a singular existence. In this case, the often metaphorical burial of an alternative personality in narratives featuring doubles is made actual, and the swapping back and forth between the two young women is a deeply disquieting event. The chief characteristic of the double (which is particularly prevalent in nineteenth century literature, for example Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Double* and Edgar Allen Poe's "William Wilson") is its disruptive effect; as Andrew J. Webber notes, it represents the subject as "pathologically divided between reality and fantasy" (Webber 1996, 1). Sam's divided state represents a profound threat to cohesive identity and, like Lily, she is represented in terms that are mechanistic rather than human: "She paced her room, chafed by its emptiness. She wasn't thinking, only feeling. Her heart had stopped and she was still upright. She was her body and she hadn't known it" (Knox 2013, 220).

Characters such as Sam and Lily represent a horrifying loss of self that raises the question of what constitutes the human individual. *Wake*'s answer is morality. For Knox, horror is an inherently moral genre since "horror stories are about helplessness, and our feeble efforts to make ourselves safe, and about doing the right thing in the face of narrowing choices" (Knox 2013, "How to Respond" par. 3). Knox argues that in "the best horror stories, in the end, the danger for the heroes isn't death, it's doing the wrong

thing by others, by that final companion who makes the experience bearable, and surviving it sustainable" (Knox 2013, "How to Respond" par. 4). The efforts of the survivors in *Wake* to respond morally to the events they experience are registered by Curtis:

He had tried to film the things people really should know, like how the teams had never thought to use the digger to push the bodies into their graves, how, instead, Jacob and Bub would climb into a grave, and Dan and William would hand the wrapped bodies down to them. But people wouldn't want to see that, even if they should. How then could it be told? How could he refrain from horrifying an audience and still show how good, and tender, and civilised, the survivors were, despite the accepted wisdom about mobs, and riots, and the dissolution of the social contract that sets in whenever disaster strikes? (Knox 2013, 167-168)

Knox' novel, unlike, for example, William Goldings' *Lord of the Flies* (1954), is deeply optimistic about human nature. In *Wake*, civilisation is not a thin veneer cast off the moment social structures break down; rather, the desire to care for others and take responsibility is represented as deeply ingrained in human nature. It is, in fact, what makes us human.

Although Knox's narrative offers an optimistic representation of human nature by representing the survivors as inherently good and "civilised", primarily concerned with caring for each other and providing a decent burial for the scores of dead civilians that litter Kahukura's streets, the novel also offers a more disquieting version of humanity. Just as repressed trauma stages a devastating internal return for characters such as William, Lily and Sam, the uncanny also plays out in the external environment. As the protagonists learn more about the invisible force that threatens them, they discover that (as William senses) the event they are experiencing is not unprecedented. Bub explains to Belle that there is a "mystery" (Knox 2013, 187) associated with the nearby pa on Matarau Point, which was abandoned about four hundred years earlier. Bub asks Belle whether she knows anything about the storage pits discovered there by archaeologists in the 1950s and she has "an odd feeling that there was something particular she should know about" them, "something she has skimmed over while reading about something else" (Knox 2013, 188). Bub is able to provide the missing details:

There are five pits on Matarau Point. They were filled in, but the archaeologists could see what they'd been. Besides, there were stories. They had a local, Bill Waiti, helping on the dig. The old fellow said the pits had been used as graves. Back then, in the fifties, they didn't think twice about digging up graves. So they excavated one pit and it turned out that it was true. Altogether, between the five pits, there were over a hundred skeletons – men, women and children. (Knox 2013, 188)

The archaeologists surmise that the pa was attacked and that the survivors chose to bury their dead in the storage pits and abandon their home. This makes Belle think of what she and her fellow survivors are doing, except in their case they are burying their dead in emptied swimming pools. As she thinks this, Belle suddenly remembers the rock drawings in the nearby reserve and urges Bub to accompany her to see them. When the couple view the paintings, they identify a “foreign” (Knox 2013, 191) looking figure that Belle insists is the strange black man who is mysteriously present with them in Kahukura. Also represented in the paintings is the border they cannot cross: “That’s the No-Go,” Belle realises. “Those are the people who buried their dead in holes already dug for them – in their case not swimming pools, but storage pits. Those are survivors. And that’s *him*” (Knox 2013, 191). Belle and Bub thus discover that the invisible force that drove the inhabitants of Kahukura insane and that keeps them prisoner has already visited the same area and is returning.

As Knox points out, “human history – and life – are prone to repeated visitations from monstrosity” (Knox 2013, “How to Respond” par. 1). The uncanny repetition of the past in the present creates a Gothic zone that is further reinforced when the black man (who is an alien creature named Myr entrusted with guarding the Wake) explains that, “When I follow my Wake I always find myself somewhere *like here*, in a place that corresponds to this place. This is where the connection is. This is where there was a weakening – an event, an invitation’” (Knox 2013, 269). New Zealand is particularly vulnerable to visitations from the Wake because it is an “insular nation, remote from other landmasses” and the region near Kahukura is specifically attractive because it contains “these plants, this rain, these mountains hard up against the sea, this large shallow bay, and these birds singing these songs” (Knox 2013, 269). It is the specific nature of New Zealand itself that encourages the Wake to return in order to feed off the chaos that its presence causes, suggesting something fatally amiss in the land of the long white cloud.

The peculiar “invitation” that Myr suggests that Kahukura offers begins to make more sense when the history of the region and the nature of the invisible force that haunts it is taken into account. Firstly, Kahukura is a town in the Tasman Bay region, which is where Abel Tasman and local iwi (Ngāti Tūmatakōkiri) had a first and violent encounter. Arriving in the bay in 1642, Tasman attempted to engage with Māori peacefully, but his overtures were interpreted as threatening. Māori responded by attacking a boat of sailors and killing four. The following day, a Māori man was shot by Tasman’s crew, and the Dutch explorers left the region convinced that the encounter proved that they must “consider the inhabitants of this country as enemies” (Mitchell 2004, 144). Tasman named the bay De Moordenaars Baay (Murderer’s Bay), which highlights the violent history of the region, as well as foregrounding the violent nature of interactions between Māori and Pakeha. Prior to the arrival of Europeans in the Tasman Bay region, it was similarly shaped by violent encounters. As Bub explains to Belle, “Te Rauparaha came over from Kapiti and attacked settlements all around Tasman Bay” (Knox 2013, 187). The area’s attractions have thus seen it become the site

of repeated attacks by those who want to benefit from it, making it a peculiarly potent site of colonisation. The repeated invasions that characterise Kahukura make it a site haunted by the sins of the past and its violent history has potentially caused the “weakening” that allows the Wake to repeatedly enter. Furthermore, if a violent history of oppression characterises the region the Wake revisits, then it is also significant that the Wake is itself a coloniser. As Myr notes, the Wake is an invader and exploiter of the region’s resources: “The Wake comes, it causes madness and terror, and it gorges itself. That’s its sustenance. Then it savours what’s left” (Knox 2013, 275).

Violence begets violence in Knox’s novel, with New Zealand’s history of colonisation being represented as intrinsically linked to the violence in the present. The relationship between the Wake and Kahukura is defined by invasion, exploitation and destruction, which is perhaps an unsurprising theme to find in a novel produced in a postcolonial context. As Gina Wisker observes, postcolonial spaces “are inevitably Gothic, since they, like the geographies of place and of history, are haunted by the ghosts of those who were hidden and silenced in the colonial and imperial past” (Wisker 2007, 402). Hauntings can take many forms, but according to Jerrold Hogle, ghosts, spectres or monsters “that rise from within the antiquated space, or sometimes invade it from alien realms, [...] manifest unresolved crimes or conflicts that can no longer be buried from view” (Hogle 2002, 2). In terms of Knox’s novel, the unresolved crimes or conflicts that are related to haunting are those belonging to a country whose history is marked by a series of violent incursions and oppressions. The Wake is a “vast rapacious thing” (Knox 2013, 269) and exemplifies the kind of parasitic exploitation associated with colonisation. It is Myr’s job to follow the Wake on its journeys through alternate realities since, as he explains, “If the Wake isn’t trapped it will spread everywhere, feeding on human madness, zeal, and ecstasy. If I don’t trap it, it kills everyone” (Knox 2013, 271).

The trope of a haunting devouring invisible monster expresses a range of cultural concerns surrounding past injustices and the effect events of the past might have on the present. David Punter associates the representation of the supernatural as “a symbol of our past rising against us, whether it be the psychological past – the realm of those primitive desires repressed by the demands of closely organized society – or the historical past, the realm of social order characterized by absolute power and servitude” (Punter 1980, 53). The reappearance of the monstrous Wake, which the novel suggests is a sort of entity, is thus a reappearance of the past, so it should come as no surprise that Myr employs a phrase associated with colonial discourse when he explains that in his various attempts to control the Wake’s destruction he has “gone native” (Knox 2013, 275). Myr’s use of a phrase associated with racist ideologies suggests that the past is very much in the present, as does the fact that when Sam asks Myr whether all his people are as dark as he is, he answers with a “disapproving” look: “I have come to see over the years that your different skin colours inspire attitudes that cause social complications” (Knox 2013, 272). Certainly, there is little explicit discussion in *Wake* about social inequalities between Māori and Pakeha, New Zealand’s woeful

domestic abuse rate or ongoing discord over the ownership and use of land, but the novel's engagement with a haunting past associated with colonisation and its attendant oppressive ideologies suggests it can usefully be considered a postcolonial Gothic that encourages readers to engage with "the lived memory of a historical horror" (Wisker 2007, 407). Knox's novel reifies the horrors of the colonial past and inflicts them on the present, suggesting that the damage wrought by European colonisation is ongoing. As Myr observes towards the end of the narrative, "I want to hurry to the next place. This settlement stinks of death" (Knox 2013, 421).

As a colony, New Zealand was once represented as a home away from home for British, an illusion that obscures the fact that the colonising population are not at home at all, but are invaders in a foreign land. Knox's use of the uncanny reveals New Zealand as an unhomely space besieged by violence, which suggests that the postcolonial experience is one of displacement, alienation and threat. The darkness of this vision is suggested by the novel's epigraph, which is taken from Phillip Larkin's poem "Next, Please":

Only one ship is seeking us, a black-
Sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back
A huge and birdless silence. In her wake
No waters breed or break

The menacing ship that inexorably approaches is an uncanny harbinger of inevitable annihilation that Knox's novel suggests can be dealt with ethically in terms of care and responsibility, but it is significant that the only method of vanquishing the Wake that is available to the protagonists is violence. The novel's conclusion sees Sam take advantage of her curious affinity with the Wake to take it with her to the liminal space she inhabits when her sister takes over. Sam has "so captivated the Wake that she'd captured it, or the part of it that was in this world" and "changed places with her sister. She'd gone away and taken the Wake with her" (Knox 2013, 429). Myr attempts to kill the remaining version of Sam but is stabbed by William, but as he lies dying Myr is able to whisper to Theresa "You have to make sure [...] You have to make sure it doesn't come back" (Knox 2013, 431). Theresa then "understood what she had to do. She unclipped her holster, and took out her gun. She stepped back and took aim. She gave a wordless cry that still said, quite clearly, *It was always going to be like this*, and pulled the trigger" (Knox 2013, 431). In an effort to ensure that the other Sam does not return with the Wake, Theresa kills the Sam that remains in their world. She has, she later concludes, "understood what was necessary" (Knox 2013, 441).

The novel's representation of violence as the "necessary" solution to the violence inflicted by the Wake presents the reader with an ethical vision that is far from reassuring. While the reader might understand why it is "deemed necessary" (Knox 2013, 422) for William to poison all the cats in Kahukura in order to protect the kakapo in the reserve (and it is significant that it is an introduced species that is eradicated in

order to protect the native), the necessity of murdering Sam in order to protect others from the Wake's return is bound to provoke unease. Is the survival of the many really a reason to murder the individual? And, perhaps more importantly, who gets to decide? As Theresa points out, "To shoot anyone I'd have had to decide it was absolutely necessary. And – you know – I'm not sure I have that kind of confidence anymore" (Knox 2013, 423). Although she ultimately finds the confidence to make the decision to sacrifice Sam, Theresa is a fallible human being wielding authority vested to her by virtue of the police force and it is debatable whether or not this gives her the right to take a life. The notion that violence might sometimes be the required solution is a complex one demanding a great deal of care around questions such as when violence is necessary and who gets to decide. The novel might end with the containment of the Wake and the rescue of the remaining survivors, with the description of the sun coming out when the survivors are helicoptered out of the region working towards establishing a "happy ending", but Knox's novel ultimately insists on an abiding violence in New Zealand. Reading *Wake* certainly involves all the frights and thrills of a Gothic horror, but far more disturbing is its unvarnished representation of the recurring nature of historical violence and the difficulty of finding solutions to its inevitable eruptions.

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Fangs, Freaks and Feminism: Female Masochism in Laurell K. Hamilton's *Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter Series*

ABSTRACT

Female masochism has undergone a radical transformation in visibility and critical judgement during the twentieth century, becoming more appealing as women have grown more assertive in their expressions of sexual desire. In the 21st century, female masochism has become positive and acceptable material for the sub-genre of paranormal romance, and Laurell K. Hamilton's Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter series has helped to further popularise "by women, for women" erotica. The integration of the powerful, brooding hero of traditional romance with the charisma and bloodlust of the vampire creates a combination that lends itself to masochistic tendencies: as monsters become more ordinary, love becomes more extraordinary. By revising the schemas of traditional romance, foregrounding consent as the basis of sexual ethics, and involving multiple male characters as catalysts for the central character's evolving sexual awareness, the Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter series is producing a rhetoric of positive reclamation of female masochistic desire through the notions of choice and self-discovery. More broadly, the series evidences the reconfiguration of boundaries and tendency toward explicit negotiation of desire that has become more prominent in post-2000 popular vampire fiction, demonstrating a further departure from the coded sexuality and emphasis on blurred ontological boundaries that had characterised modern Gothic.

Key words: Anita Blake, masochism, paranormal romance, feminism, vampire

In *Incubus Dreams*, book 12 of Laurell K. Hamilton's *Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter* series, the central character finally "comes out" as masochistic. The 24-year old zombie raiser, federal marshal, and legal vampire executioner begs her vampire lover Jean-Claude to bite her breast during sex: "It hurt, it did, but it was all mixed up with the sucking and the pulling on my nipple, and that didn't hurt, not really. In fact it felt good, so good" (2010d, 471). In declaring and acting on her masochistic desires, Anita Blake was not alone -- and not just because of her fondness for multi-party sex. As Rita Felski points out in her concise survey of representations of female masochism from the Victorian era onwards, the turn of the 21st century has seen the "mainstreaming" of female masochism in feature films, popular fiction and memoir. In what Felski terms a "striking reversal of judgement," masochism has become more appealing as women have grown more assertive in their expressions of sexual desire (2005, 135). Even further, advocates for female masochism deem it to be positively "good for you, bringing with it self-knowledge, autonomy and the ability to love" (Weatherfield qtd. in Felski 2005, 137).

As Anita Blake's taste for rough sex shows, the genre of paranormal romance has certainly contributed to the popularity of "by women, for women" female masochism. In fact, in its conflation of the powerful, brooding hero of traditional romance with the charisma and bloodlust of the vampire, the genre would seem to be the perfect vehicle to explore the boundaries of pleasure and pain. Here is erotic fantasy multiplied to the power of two, promising exponential pleasures, preternaturally powerful orgasms, hot and surprising erogenous zones, and an endless supply of playmates among the wereanimals, vampires, and other species that populate the paranormal universe. As a sub-category of urban fantasy, paranormal romance depicts a contemporary world in which "the supernatural, rather than being rare, deeply hidden and destructive, is common, widely or universally known, and generally morally neutral rather than tending inherently towards evil and corruption" (Crawford 2014, 108). As monsters become more ordinary, love becomes more extraordinary. Today's vampires are the depiction of "masculine ideals from multiple classes and eras," leading them to offer an "array of characteristics and abilities from which their human girlfriends (or reader proxies) can choose as they grow and develop themselves" (Mukherjea 2011, 12). In this gallery of desire, female masochism becomes an unmarked form of sexual expression, a personal taste to be enjoyed with one's chosen family of like-minded creatures.

The ambiguities of erotic pleasure for women are also multiplied through this intertwining of genres. In romance, the female protagonist says "no" only to defer the pleasure of her eventual yielding; conversely in Gothic horror the victim, under the vampire's thrall, says "yes" only because she doesn't know what, exactly, she is yielding to. Compared to earlier forms of vampire fiction, paranormal romance "makes explicit what had been implicit" (Bosky 1999, 217). In a classic Gothic horror novel such as *Dracula* sexuality is "overcode[d] at the level of performance but undercode[d] at the level of utterance" (Gelder 1994, 66-7). That is, as Bosky paraphrases the case, "the characters never discuss the sexual aspects of the encounters -- leaving it for the critics

to do so" (1999, 217). By contrast, every aspect of Anita Blake's extended sexual awakening to the pleasures of polyamorous masochistic erotica is debated at length in the series, and matters of consent are foregrounded from the early volumes. Thus the libidinal world of the Anita Blake series is not without boundaries. Quite the opposite: as the factors of choice become more complex, questions of consent become more urgent. Not just a BDSM primer, Hamilton's series revises genre on a number of fronts. It codifies the play of dominance and submission that has always been an element of traditional romance, pursues a more overtly feminist agenda than other contemporary examples of paranormal romance, and -- along with the other recent, "sex positive" texts -- helps to further erode a modernist literary paradigm in which male masochism has been lionised while female masochism, where it has been visible at all, could only be seen in a negative light.

Thus, in the Anita Blake series we find a mutuality of interests between erotic romance and contemporary vampire fiction, in which each genre complements and catalyses the other. In the phenomenon that she terms "post-millennial Gothic," Catherine Spooner observes that the vampire (among other species) is no longer a figure of terror, nor a sympathetic outsider, but rather a member of an alternative community. The twenty-first century has seen the appearance of the "assimilative monster," one "who is, or at least attempts to be, one of us" (Spooner 2017, 85). As the otherness of non-human, border-dwelling species becomes less threatening to human society, aspects of sexuality that had been formerly confined to recesses of the self as shameful or politically compromised also come to light, in a world where boundaries of all kinds have to be negotiated and realigned. Women can now claim a masochism of our own, and we argue that this emergence represents, not a retreat from feminist critique of the gendered politics of desire, but an alternative form of engagement in which both sexual and professional ethics are debated within a universe of complex relational spaces.

A masochism of her own: Female masochism, from taboo to reclamation

Masochism became a recognised literary and clinical phenomenon in the late nineteenth century, carving out an area of erotic specialisation from its historical antecedents in the realms of discreet gentlemen's clubs and pornography. As John K. Noyes makes clear, however, "masochism was invented as male masochism" (1997, 9). It was back in 1870 that Leopold von Sacher-Masoch revealed much about his personal desires in the novella *Venus in Furs*, the best-known of a series of literary works that led to Masoch becoming the original type of the psychological disorder that bears his name. Severin, the narrator of the embedded journal "Confessions of a Supersensualist," seeks a woman to "dominate [him] in a serene and fully conscious manner" (qtd. in Deleuze 1989, 162). Through an array of historical and cultural allusions, Severin works hard to present masochism, not as an aberration, but as a form of connection to the deepest and noblest streams of Western civilization. Instead, pain and passion, cruelty and love are

interwoven in the greatest works of art, in the most stirring love stories, and in the passion of the Christian martyrs.

At the conclusion of *Venus in Furs*, Severin's intense experiment in self-humiliation is "cured" by the whip. But that has not stopped numerous cultural commentators from finding in male masochism a total, self-reflexive worldview and an absolute aesthetic. Thus Gilles Deleuze, the most influential reader of Sacher-Masoch, characterises male masochism as pedagogical, mythic and dialectical, in distinction to the institutional and demonstrative nature of sadism. Perhaps counter-intuitively to those who are not "insiders" to masochistic practice, the male submissive is seen as being intrinsically active in his pursuit of humiliation. It is he who prevails upon his mistress to play the role of torturer, educating her into "the shape of a despot" (Deleuze 1989, 21). The contract itself, by which the masochist cedes all rights to his mistress, even control over life and death, has been interpreted as a "complex strategy to protect his world of fantasy and symbols" against incursions of reality (Deleuze 1989, 65). In the light of modernism, the legacy of male masochism came to be seen as a form of radical self-abnegation that transgressed bourgeois norms and laid bare the "destabilizing essence of sexuality" (Felski 2005, 131).

Where is the cultural genealogy for female masochism? For much of the twentieth century, this sphere of experience has been rendered relatively invisible, and not only for lack of a seminal text comparable to *Venus in Furs*. More fundamentally, female masochism has been framed within a clinical paradigm in which desire itself is structurally gendered as masculine. Female masochism has been seen, not as a form of super-sensibility or self-experimentation, but as the essence of feminine subjectivity -- whether by nature, or by social conditioning to a submissive role in the symbolic order. The terms in which male masochism has been understood became reversed: in female masochism, the active, pedagogical thrust of male masochism becomes an inherent passivity; an idiosyncratic striving to escape conformity becomes a generic feminine condition; the masochist's effort to realise his fantasy against an uncomprehending or philistine world becomes, instead, the moment at which "woman" is bound most hopelessly to social convention. Thus "female submissiveness was long seen not as antithetical [to modernity] but as endemic to [it]" (Felski 2005, 131), and under the influence of a conservative (mis)reading of Freud, female masochism was represented as a truth of normative femininity.

Second-wave feminists had to work hard to dispel what Paula J. Caplan influentially called the "myth of women's masochism." One of Caplan's targets is Helene Deutsch, a psychoanalytical patient and later disciple of Freud, who, in Caplan's summation, regarded women as "naturally masochistic, narcissistic, and passive" (Caplan 1987, 18). Deutsch further asserted that female masochism was a "necessary and natural means to prepare women for the pain of defloration and childbirth." Marie Bonaparte, who trained with Freud, not only agreed but took the biological approach further by suggesting that "heterosexual intercourse is a beating and that the ovum

itself -- a single, unconscious cell - is [primordially] masochistic" (Caplan 1987, 19). In these approaches, and Freud's own association of female masochism with a woman's fear of punishment from her mother, the central premise is not that women actively seek pain for pleasure, but that they *expect* pain to come from pleasure. Despite her disagreement with the conservative Freudian paradigm, Caplan also promotes this confusion, to the extent that she eliminates any erotic aspects of masochism from her discussion.

The classic work of literary criticism that attaches female masochism specifically to the genre of female Gothic is Michelle Massé's *In the Name of Love* (1992). Like Caplan, Massé sees female masochism as learned behaviour, linked to social expectations that women will sacrifice their interests to others. Massé starts from what she calls the "commonly accepted" idea that female Gothic is centrally concerned with female suffering, and she allies masochism and the Gothic as "mutually illuminative explications of women's pain" (1992, 2). Characters in the fictional world are not masochistic by preference, but what these characters represent, "whether through repudiation, doubt, or celebration, is the cultural, psychological, and fictional expectation that they *should* be masochistic if they are 'normal' women" (Massé 1992, 2). However, the suppression of the active instincts through masochism limits a woman's ability to recognise her own suffering (Massé 1992, 239). To paraphrase the unnamed narrator in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," "I try not to think about my condition, because it always makes me feel bad" (Gilman 1993, 30). A critical reader of Gothic can, however, escape the ways in which female Gothic "trains" its readers into submission, and instead locate a meaningful exposure of how this process of acculturation works. Female Gothic thus evidences the "*process* by which a woman becomes a masochist and assigns subjectivity to another" (Massé 1992, 3). For Massé, the way out of the masochistic condition was for women to become conscious of its cultural roots and to seek out, and produce, alternative narratives of female subversion. The recipe for change is that the "beater *and* the beaten must change, along with "educational, legal, medical and religious systems" (Massé 1992, 265).

This tendency to see representations of female suffering as a kind of ironising, negative pedagogy which tells of a fundamentally misogynistic social order has become condensed around readings of the one "standout" text of female bondage in the mid twentieth century: Pauline Réage's *Story of O*. Réage's novel describes the journey that a young female photographer takes in order to become a submissive sex slave, at the behest of her lover. O's journey begins at the Château, where she is told the rules of her submission, and is repeatedly chained, whipped and violated by multiple men in order to learn her role and introduce her to a new life of sexual service. The novel might easily be dismissed as pornography, given that Réage wrote it as a private excitement for her lover. Instead, *Story of O* has been elevated, curiously enough, into a modern, Gothic-feminist classic, to be taken seriously precisely because it attempts to "define epistemologically what a woman is" (Dworkin qtd. in Beckman 2010, 100). The novel has thus been accorded the status of a "primary sign" -- a model of desire in its own

right -- rather than a secondary symptom of psychopathology, as Beckman notes in her comparison of *Story of O* alongside the work of Kathy Acker (whom Beckman much prefers in her gender radicalism). In the face of scenes that are trenchantly dismissive of female agency, *Story of O* can only be read in any remotely positive feminist approach by being interpreted ironically, as an allegory of men's psychic vulnerability; or as a revelation of "the ambiguity of femininity in the modern era"; or as a manifestation of the "paucity of choices available to women [...] and the impossibility of mutuality under these circumstances" (Musser 2015, 126-7). Bondage in the novel is in fact a travesty of BDSM fantasy play; so in confusing torture with masochism, readings of the work as an exposure of the structural constraints of femininity risk reversing the decoupling of sadism and masochism as clarified by Deleuze (1989, 37-46), and as understood within the BDSM community.

In the work of Caplan and Massé, and in the readings of *Story of O*, a conservative Freudian discourse that had represented masochism as a natural urge in women was contested by a feminist recasting of submission in political terms as the epitome of women's oppression. Effectively, under Massé's account, and radical feminism more generally, there is no clear line between social subordination, erotic submission, and consent. Nor is there a clear distinction between female masochism and male sadism; whether men or women see it this way or not, society is structured around domination -- in the form of literary genres, as much as in the operations of the classroom, the workplace, and our libidinal lives. Female masochism became equated with a self-defeating, rather than self-actualising, personality.

Through the 1980s, the definition and political impact of female masochism became more closely aligned with BDSM as a subculture and a community of practice. One arena of debate was the definition of masochism in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-III). In the light of legal cases where the idea of an inherent feminine masochism had been used to defend violent male partners, the psychiatry profession moved to base the diagnosis of psychopathology more on a person's subjective understanding of their sexual experiences (Noyes 1997, 15-21). Likewise, the aetiology of the condition became less relevant. To paraphrase Dr Frank-n-Furter from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, in the transition from feminist critique to queer celebration, the goal was no longer to remove the (patriarchal) cause, but rather to enjoy the (painfully pleasurable) symptom.¹ Supporters of this development affirm masochistic play as "an unsettling process whereby cultural identity is parodied, masqueraded, and appropriated in the name of pleasure" (Noyes 1997, 10). More negatively, the case against the sex-positive popularisation of female masochism indicts the "simplistic belief that by proliferating more and varied forms of sexual representation, expression, practices and orgasms, a 'positive' and progressive -- indeed feminist -- agenda is inevitably being served" (Downing qtd. in Musser 2015, 128). By this light, to reclaim

¹ The original quotation is from the song "Sweet Transvestite": "so I'll remove the cause, but not the symptom" (26:30).

masochistic sexual agency would seem trivial, apolitical at best and counter-productive at worst.

The Anita Blake series sits squarely within a rhetoric of choice and self-discovery, precisely by replacing the marriage contract of traditional romance with the masochistic contract: an explicit agreement between sexual partners as to the terms and limits of their encounters. Anita undertakes this libidinal education with, and through, the mutual evolution of the men in her life -- her "furry sweeties," as she calls them in *Kiss the Dead* (2012, 336). In the domestication of the vampire hunter, we are left with a character who is still strong in her agency, assertive in her sexual identity, but not tamed in any manner outside of the bedroom. Anita manages her desire for domination, rather than being defeated or overmastered by it; in a parallel move, her non-human lovers also moderate the more excessive urges of their natures.

Thus the rise of paranormal romance may be considered a watering-down of the fraught anxieties associated with Gothic literature as it developed for much of the twentieth century, leading critics such as Fred Botting to lament the incorporation of the monstrous into the normal (qtd. in Spooner 2017, 7-9). However, in naturalising horror to serve the pleasures of heterosexual coupling(s), paranormal romance does not depart from Gothic tradition so much as return the genre to its eighteenth-century roots, as a form of popular fiction that carries a particular charge for female readers. In Hamilton's hands, the potential conservatism of this return is avoided through revision of the schemas of romance, as we elaborate in the next phase of our discussion.

Anita Blake: Paranormal romance and sexual ethics

In Hamilton's fantasy dimension, shapeshifters exist, the undead walk the earth, and humans can have a whole host of "naturally" gifted psychic abilities. Typical of paranormal romance, this universe sits alongside, rather than underneath or beyond, the bounds of "our" world of consensual reality. Paranormal romance reflects a complex society made up of a mosaic of cultures, without a single, overriding moral standard. Though there is a central legislative authority, the US state, there are also multiple localised forms of legitimacy and mechanisms for regulating social order. Thus where modern Gothic tended to pervert normality, probing at repressed recesses of human psychology, paranormal romance tends to normalise perversion. Hamilton herself de-emphasises the supernatural elements of her universe, stating, "I never thought I wrote vampire novels. I always wrote novels about people who happened to be vampires, or werewolves, or necromancers" (Hamilton and Wilson 2010, 89). However, as the border-dwellers between life and death cease to excite horror, other boundaries between and among species become even more pronounced. As Lorna Piatti-Farnell points out, post-2000 popular vampire fiction tends to impose boundaries as much as "queering" binary distinctions or creating ambiguous border categories (2014, 194). In contrast to the blurring and hybridisation of identity categories that appeared in earlier decades, post-2000 vampires live in structured groups. Master

vampires not only battle for supremacy against equally powerful rivals, but also live side-by-side with territorial wereanimals and zombies as both victims and instruments of terror. As Anita says to a vampire's servant in *Kiss the Dead*, "vampires are all about the food chain, the hierarchy; everyone owes allegiance to someone" (2012, 330).

Included among the boundaries that Anita needs to negotiate are sexual "no-go" zones. Anita herself would never date "things that were never human to begin with" (2010a, 268). Anita has an outlaw sensibility, congruous with her hard-boiled detective persona, which finds expression in her later sexual preferences and her unorthodox living habits with her ménage-a-trois/quatre. But Anita also fights against all kinds of sexual injustice that cross ethical boundaries: snuff movies, paedophile vampires, necrophiliac humans who take advantage of zombies' inability to say no, and sadistic dominants who may exploit a submissive's lack of limits. In *Kiss the Dead*, a grandmother vampire claims that a girl who was victimised "wanted to be one of us" and could not change her mind as "there was no going back." Anita replies, "That's the same thing date rapists say: 'She agreed to the date, so it's too late for her to say no to the sex'" (2012, 40).

In surveying the literature specifically on the *Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter* series, the range of academic discussion is rather limited. Critics such as Carol Siegel (2007) and Carole Veldman-Genz (2011) regard the series as liberating for women, with Siegel paying particular attention to what she identifies as female sexual sadism in the representation of Anita's character. In contrast, Vicky Gilpin (2012) de-emphasises the erotic aspects of the series in order to discuss the relationship between Anita's religious spirituality and her own self-acceptance. Other critics tended to look at how Hamilton was reversing or breaking gender stereotypes (Holland-Toll 2004; Duda 2008), or how Hamilton was able to integrate the vampire 'other' as a member of the community (Holland-Toll 2001). The specifically masochistic turn, and the element of romance more generally, has not drawn close critical attention at this point.

The first six volumes of the Anita Blake series shape up primarily in a genre blend of hard-boiled crime and urban fantasy, but with the seeds of romance couched within the developing storylines. At this point, Anita is determined not to end up as "coffin-bait," but she is vigorously courted by her two main lovers, Richard the werewolf and Jean-Claude the master vampire. Despite raging hormones, the three members of the central erotic triangle initially choose celibacy: "Until you give up your nunnish ways, *ma petite*, I am playing monk," says Jean-Claude in volume six -- aware, as he is, that Anita would drop him if he slept with another woman, "alive or dead" (2010a, 156). However, there are hints of a change in Anita's libidinal patterns from this early stance of chastity. For one thing, she is marked out for pain: attention is repeatedly drawn to her scars. These are initially badges of professional duty; she is a federal marshal and legal vampire executioner. At least one of these scars has an erotic charge, when Anita was bitten by her vampire lover Jean-Claude on the wrist when he drank her blood to prevent her from dying of poison (after Anita is attacked by a nasty lamia).

Anita also bears a cross-shaped burn on her chest, which is mirrored by a similarly positioned mark on Jean-Claude; the scar is both a protection for Anita, and a symbolic binding to the vampire that cannot be eradicated. "The scars were normal for me," she reflects in volume six, "but every once in a while I'd be out enjoying myself and catch someone looking, staring. They'd look hurriedly away, or meet my eyes. It wasn't that the scars were awful to look at. They weren't that bad -- really. But they told a story of pain and something out of the ordinary. They said I'd been places that most people hadn't, and I'd survived" (2010a, 136).

How does Anita come to seek out certain erotic places, and avoid others -- or in other words, how does she develop her sense of sexual ethics? The ultra-long trajectory of character development enabled by the series form produces particularly intricate and varied convolutions of agency between the hero and the heroine. Inwardly, the romance heroine struggles with the intensity of feeling that the hero's charismatic presence fuels in her. Eventually the heroine must yield to a disturbing passion in a way that mingles the agency of the two main characters: she makes a positive choice, but that choice is arrived at through the empowering dominance of the hero. The hero, for his part, must soften his rough edges and acknowledge the integrity of his partner: body, will and spirit. This rapprochement between lovers also acts as a kind of solvent to the monster-human boundary. Anita increasingly co-mingles with the monsters, socially and physically; but what is really being dissolved here, in terms of the development of the Gothic genre from modern to post-millennial mode, is the horror of ambiguity that had earlier provoked debilitation, hysteria or psychosis.

The genre of romance is equally modified through its coupling with the paranormal universe. As Anita multiplies her lovers, the fundamental schemas of traditional romance, based on doubles and triples, come under revision. Typically, the erotic triangle of romance resolves into the unitary couple, through what Musser calls "a festishisation of the we" in which "each person is vulnerable to each other, but not to anyone else" (2015, 132). In the Anita Blake series the triangle instead evolves into more convoluted, shifting polygons of desire, and the quality of loyalty in love becomes clearly differentiated from monogamy or possessiveness. Most importantly for our particular analysis, the shape of masochism also changes. Deleuze characterised male masochism as intrinsically "dialectical," involving as it does elements of "reversal, disguise and reduplication" (1989, 22). By contrast, masochism in the Anita Blake series, and in BDSM practice more generally, appears to be more open-ended and dialogical: it does not work itself through to an inevitable goal (the curing of the masochist's obsession by the whip), nor involve the male masochist's "art of power" in "cajol[ing] and manipul[at]ing his partner into expressing a desire he himself has constructed for her" (Mansfield qtd. in Beckman 2010, 97). Anita recognises mutuality in both her powers and her vulnerabilities: "My power [to control metaphysical ties] was a double-edged sword," she acknowledges in the context of her duties to her younger lover Cynric, "and I could cut someone only as deep as I was willing to be cut" (2012, 200).

As the series progresses, Anita encounters male characters who function as both counter-types, and as catalysts to her own sexual exploration, most notably Phillip, Nathaniel, Richard and Jean-Claude. We first meet Phillip, the “vampire junkie,” on stage at the vampire club Guilty Pleasures, working as a stripper who has managed to exploit his desire for a living. As part of the “act,” Phillip is then bitten by a vampire on stage. Initially, Anita thinks that Phillip’s life is in danger; however she quickly realises that Phillip is not in pain: “he was alive, and he enjoyed it” (2009, 24). For Anita, Phillip is the ultimate warning sign of what can go wrong if you allow yourself to give in to your desires, as well as what happens if you get too close to the “monsters.” Groomed into his addiction by a paedophile vampire at an early age, his fate is to be brutally murdered at the hands of the master vampire Nikolaos.

Given that Phillip is incapable of consent in any real sense, Anita cannot contemplate any form of erotic liaison with him. In the case of the werewolf Richard, the matter of consent is based on a false premise that both parties play along with, given that Richard is in denial of his own animality (and as such is a clear-cut case of internalised were-phobia). Richard passes so well as human that Anita does not initially pick up his true nature. He offers the promise of normality -- such as the prospect of date nights at home working their way through Richard’s collection of Rogers and Hammerstein musicals (2010a, 30-31). The most astute observer of their relationship as a simulacrum of the white picket fence and two-point-something kids is Richard’s rival, Jean-Claude. “[Richard] isn’t human enough for you, *ma petite*,” he says to Anita. “He isn’t human enough for himself,” Anita responds (258). When Richard and Anita first start dating they are both deluded by the concept of their own humanity, something that Anita comes to let go of long before he does. Richard is then a consistent representation of the heteronormative lifestyle, as a character who attempts to contain Anita’s desire and make it fit with his own.

Anita first meets the wereleopard Nathaniel in volume seven, *Burnt Offerings*, when she is called to the hospital by a mutual friend to help protect him. Nathaniel is a sex-worker and a stripper at Guilty Pleasures, and when Anita arrives she learns that Nathaniel had been “pretty much gutted” by a client who took things too far in an SM scene (2010b, 26). Anita defends Nathaniel to the reader, stating “yes, a prostitute can be raped. All it takes is saying no” (26). When asking for Nathaniel’s aid in return for the protection of other wereanimals, Nathaniel states: “I will do anything you want [...] all you have to do is tell me” (313). Anita realises that the phrasing of his response “implied that he didn’t have the right to say no” (313). Someone who does not have the ability to say no, or more adequately to say yes, means that they cannot consent. Nathaniel *wants* to be used by Anita, presenting himself as “food” for the vampire-like hunger that Anita gains through her ties with Jean-Claude: “he wanted me to take him, wanted to belong to me, and I didn’t know what to do about it” (2010d, 11). This confusion is exemplified through a conversation with a mutual friend, Jason, where he states that Anita doesn’t “like passive men” but rather “a little dominance, a little pushiness,” enough that she doesn’t have to be “the one that says, yes, we’ll have sex”

so that the responsibility is taken off her shoulders (55). Anita's recognition of Nathaniel's need for submission is also, therefore, closely aligned with her own awakening: "I thought Nathaniel needed saving once, too, needed me to fix him. What I didn't understand is that he isn't broken, well, not more broken than the rest of us" (684).

Persisting throughout the series is Anita's primary lover, the master vampire Jean-Claude. Jean-Claude is depicted as the classic "I-vampire" (Abbott 2016, 7) mixing old-world romance with modern elements:

Softly curling hair tangled with the high white lace of an antique shirt. Lace spilled over pale, long-fingered hands [...]. Most men couldn't have worn a shirt like that. The vampire made it seem utterly masculine. (Hamilton 2009, 15)

Intrigued by Anita's partial immunity to him, he openly pursues Anita despite her initial rejection of him. Later Anita becomes his human servant, and as the vampire Yasmeen reminds Jean-Claude: "Every servant must be tamed." When Anita queries this point, Jean-Claude concedes: "It is an unfortunate stage in the process" (2002b, 44). Despite marking Anita twice without her consent, Jean-Claude refuses to go any further: "The third mark without your help would be like rape to making love. You would hate me for all eternity if I took you by force" (2002b, 218). Jean-Claude chooses Anita specifically *because* she has the ability to kill him, which Anita realises only after they have been lovers a few years: "I'm your fail-safe. I'm your judge, your jury, and your executioner if things go wrong" (2010c, 484). Being close to the "monsters" is something that Anita repeatedly fights against, with her initial rejection of Jean-Claude also a rejection of the world that he offers: "I had refused to date Jean-Claude because he wasn't human. He was a monster and I didn't date monsters" (2002b, 221). However, the longer Anita spends with Jean-Claude, the harder she finds it to see him as just a monster. By volume four, *The Lunatic Café*, Anita admits: "It was getting harder to tell the humans apart from the monsters. I was even beginning to wonder about myself. There are more roads to monsterdom than most people realise" (2002b, 221).

Clearly, sharing a bed with just the right men, in and with just the right proportions, is pure fantasy. As in the case of masochism, the place of fantasy has also been politically vexed in second-wave feminist critique. For men, the "winning of hegemony" occurs, in part, through the psychological underpinning of their attachment to hyper-masculine fantasy figures (Connell 1987, 184-85). Women's fantasy, by contrast, has been seen as politically compromised, escapist, or liable to be co-opted or derailed by male fantasy. A specific and personal desire is seen as embedded, impotently, within a misogynistic social pattern. Rosalind Coward signalled this fear succinctly when she wrote that there is a relationship between "widespread clichéd sexual fantasies and the way women are actually treated or, more importantly, think of themselves" (qtd. in Noyes 1997, 3). But the *Anita Blake* series alerts readers against such alibis for structural gender violence. There is rarely a risk of being unable to tell the

difference between real and simulated violence, or allowing a violent character to get away with claiming he cannot tell the difference between the two.

The progressiveness of the *Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter* series becomes even more apparent when compared to other paranormal and/or erotic romance. Jean-Claude may be a corpse, but at least he modifies his behaviour in response to Anita's will, unlike -- for example -- Christian's dubious habits outside of the bedroom in E.L. James' novel *Fifty Shades of Grey*: his behaviour includes "extreme stalking" of Anastasia as well as "control of her food intake and enforced contraception," as critic Lisa Downing has pointed out (2013, 96). The male rivals in the love triangle in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series are just as bad. There are self-destructive undertones as Bella almost dies in every novel as a consequence of her relationship, and as she comes to define her identity solely through her interactions with Edward (Taylor 2012, 33). In Charlaine Harris's *Southern Vampire Mysteries*, Sookie is not ultimately in control of her own desires: her first vampire lover is sent to exploit her powers, her second vampire lover is forced to leave her for another, and she ends up picking the shapeshifter from her home town who has loved her all along -- which, in the realm of paranormal romance, amounts to a message that we should stay within our boundaries. And as for Buffy, as film critic Carol Siegel points out: "having sex is always wrong for Buffy" (2007, 84). Given such sexist and derivative overtones, some paranormal romance has certainly taken a dismaying direction, though as Crawford points out, "the same could be said of much traditional Gothic fiction" (2014, 277). What we argue here is that Hamilton's series, through its exploration of female masochism as declaring and assimilating a form of sexual "otherness," has moved on from some of these criticisms of both past and present Gothic.

Ultimately, what Phillip, Richard, Nathaniel, and Jean-Claude help Anita to do is to find just the right balance in her outward and inward embrace of monstrosity. There remains dangerous ground, as Hamilton acknowledges that consent is hardly a clear-cut affair. The early volumes in the series contain some echoes of the advice for good girls that traditional romance foregrounded: don't overlook your own flaws or magnify those of your suitors; don't sell yourself too cheaply --- otherwise you will get bedded, bled, and dumped, as Anita knows only too well (2010a, 255). When Anita accepts a proposal of marriage from Richard, for example, Jean-Claude threatens to kill him unless she agrees to date him also. It was "date him or he'd kill Richard" (2010a, 147). On another occasion, when Anita accuses Jean-Claude of "mind-rape," his reply is both an admission of guilt, and a way of returning the blame to Anita: "Just by being near me you increase my power," he says (2010a, 65). But the larger point is that the reader is alerted to these moments in a general expectation that every character's personal integrity will be acknowledged, as Anita declares, and follows, her personal creed: "No one bullied me. No one. That was one of *my* rules" (2010a, 89).

The *Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter* series thus provides a platform for the exploration of female masochism, using male characters to catalyse the awakenings of

female masochistic desire. As Crawford asserts, it is “no accident that vampire fiction became a predominantly female-authored genre in the same historical moment which saw the rise of the ‘bodice-ripper’ and the erotic romance novel,” given that both genres reflect “the growing freedom and confidence which many female writers felt in articulating their romantic and sexual desires” (2014, 115). This exploration has created a discourse where female masochism has been accepted as a genuine form of identification and a legitimate role to pursue within ethical and lawful boundaries, treating subjects such as bondage and sadomasochism as “issues not to be ignored or denigrated” (Clifton 2010, 202). Through sex, Anita was able to create stronger bonds with the men in her life -- both metaphysically and emotionally -- and strengthen her powerbase overall. These men may serve as an introduction to Anita’s desire, but they can also be a way for their readers to explore their own. By laying out clear guidelines for safe practices of BDSM, including the integration of neoliberal and postfeminist ideals, Hamilton has provided a discourse that speaks to the rhetoric of previous feminist concerns and moves beyond them.

Although very prominent in critical commentary, paranormal romance is just one zone of contemporary Gothic energy, a sexy counterpoint to zombie apocalypse as the other main rival to characterise the post-millennial condition. For those critics who see the decline of horror in paranormal romance as a betrayal of the genre, Spooner offers the rejoinder that we need to stop thinking of the Gothic as a pure, “clearly defined genre which has suffered dilution or decline,” as Gothic has “adapted and changed with the times” (2017, 9-10). In creating a series that integrates female masochism as a form of empowerment and not a perversion, Hamilton has added to the rhetoric of paranormal romance, and in turn contributed to the revision of a genre that was once “devoted to the articulation of that radical threatening Otherness” (Crawford 2014, 276). As Crawford asserts, in a flurry of diurnal metaphors, paranormal romance should not be considered a “twilight for the Gothic,” but rather the “breaking of a new dawn” (277). In the end, though, as the corpses pile up alongside the personal dilemmas, the essence of the Anita Blake series can also be realised as the everyday dilemma of the heterosexual single woman considering her next move given a flawed set of erotic options: “Jean-Claude I loved in spite of himself. Richard I loved because of who he was” -- and “so what if he gets furry once a month. No one’s perfect” (2010c, 435 & 2002a, 329).

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“Act Normal, Bitch”: Girlhood as Gothic Horror in *Pretty Little Liars*

ABSTRACT

This paper critically examines the gothic horror elements of the television show Pretty Little Liars as they pertain to representations of normative girlhood that the show is both expressive of and responding to. In exposing the cruel and macabre underside of female teen relationships and peer groups, I argue that Pretty Little Liars' central themes coalesce around the liminal status of girlhood as gothic horror. The programme's central female characters (the 'Liars') occupy an ambiguous position as neither children nor adults and their manipulation and sexualisation by adult characters is experienced by the girls and portrayed by the show as terrifying. By associating the normative social and sexual expectations of girlhood with death and horror, Pretty Little Liars' stages a critique of femininity as an essential and natural expression of gender. Further, the Liars' powerlessness in their relationships with male authority figures and their assignation as 'liars', 'troublesome', and 'girls' are visually paralleled in their association with dolls. This association enables an interrogation of the objectification and manipulation of girl subjectivities. But while Pretty Little Liars offers a critique of normative conceptions of girlhood by casting objectification and male paternalism as horrific and ultimately disruptive to female maturation, its association of homosexual and transgender characters with gothic monstrosity reveals the limitations of the programme's portrayal of teen girlhood through the gothic mode.

Keywords: *Pretty Little Liars*, girlhood, gothic horror, normative, transgender

Pretty Little Liars (2010-2017) is a North American popular teen drama that has aired for seven seasons on the basic cable network, FREEFORM. The programme is centred around the disappearance and possible murder of Alison DiLaurentis (Sasha Pieterse), a friend of the core group of teenage girls on the show (the 'Liars'). Her absence triggers the emergence of cyber-stalkers called 'A' (for 'Anonymous') who taunt the Liars with personal secrets and goad them into participating in a series of pranks, escalating in danger, under threat of blackmail. In exposing the cruel and macabre underside of female teen relationships and peer groups, this paper argues that *Pretty Little Liars'* (hereafter, *PLL*) central themes coalesce around the liminal status of girlhood as gothic horror. The Liars occupy an ambiguous position as neither children nor adults and their manipulation and sexualisation by adult characters is experienced by the girls and portrayed in the show as terrifying. In the following, I undertake a textual analysis of the gothic horror elements of *PLL* as they pertain to representations of normative girlhood that the show is both expressive of and responding to.

My conceptual understanding of normative is drawn from the work of Michel Foucault who argued that 'norms', what is considered average and standard, have a 'normalizing' social effect by encouraging subjects to discipline and mould themselves according to these standards (2003a, 2003b). Norms serve as the foundation through which subjectivity and our sense of self is produced. In A's directives to "act normal" ("Bite your tongue", 4.17), the maintenance of socially acceptable appearances and relationships are aligned with fear and death. This generic association of normativity with horror, that girlhood is performed (Butler 1990) under duress, is suggestive of a critique of femininity as an essential and natural expression of gender. Further, the programme's use of gothic romance tropes and the Liars' gothic association with dolls visualise the horror of objectification and manipulation involved in girlhood's subjectifying processes. But while *PLL* offers a critique of normative conceptions of girlhood by casting objectification and male paternalism as horrific and ultimately disruptive to female maturation, its association of homosexual and transgender characters with gothic monstrosity reveals the limitations of the programme's portrayal of teen girlhood through the gothic mode.

"My dresses. My Game. My rules": *PLL* and normative girlhood

PLL is based on the popular book series of the same name by Sara Shepard. In this paper, I will focus solely on the television show. The programme's central characters are Aria Montgomery (Lucy Hale), Hanna Marin (Ashley Benson), Emily Fields (Shay Mitchell), and Spencer Hastings (Troian Bellisario). They reside in the fictional middle-class suburb of Rosewood, in Pennsylvania, and when the show begins they are in their sophomore year at Rosewood High. The quartet are referred to as 'Liars' in a rhetorical and social sense because for A, Aria and company present themselves publicly to their friends, school, and family in ways that conceal their secrets. A communicates with the Liars primarily through text message but also letters, in-person through proxy characters, chalk boards, on leg casts, in cereal, coffee cups and lids, carved pumpkins,

and human bones. All sub-headings used in this article contains quotes from A to the Liars. The original A emerges after the Liar's friend Alison is found dead, after being missing for a year, at the end of the first episode ("Pilot", 1.1). Because A knows highly intimate information about each of the Liars, their identity/ies are repeatedly teased by the programme to be someone the Liars know, possibly even Alison herself. The revelation of A is periodically resolved and their identity made known only for the show to reset the torture of the Liars anew with another 'A'.

A's blackmail varies in form from socially embarrassing pranks to violence and murder. The focus on mobile technologies, female friendships and rivalries, body image, sexual maturity, and the maintenance of social and peer acceptance signals *PLL*'s position within 'girl culture' (Driscoll 2012). The programme is both expressive of and critical of this culture. This dual approach to girlhood is exemplified in the opening credits which appear to show a girl getting styled and dressed for an important occasion through isolated close-ups of her nails, make-up, hair, and shoes. A wide-shot at the end of the credits reveals that the girl is a dead body being prepared for a funeral viewing. Although we do not see the girl's face directly, throughout the first three seasons, viewers are led to believe it is Alison. The programme's opening credits then signal a playful awareness of the visual markers of teen girlhood as constructed and applied to a body rather than being a natural expression of femininity. The credits also reveal the superficiality of appearance as masking complexities and secrets, which is used to heighten the programme's gothic horror elements.

"Dead girls can't smile": Teen bullying as a gothic horror fractal

Because *PLL*'s narrative typically focuses on a murder mystery each season, the show contains genre fractals (Flanagan, McKenny and Andy Livingstone 2016) – elements of genres – related to the noir, horror, gothic, and musical with frequent allusions to the films of Old Hollywood in the *mise-en-scène* and styling of characters and locations. Genre fractals of gothic horror typically occur in mini-sequences and scenes designed to visualise the fear experienced by the Liars as the result of the clandestine nature of A. For instance, in the episode from which this paper is named ("Bite your tongue"), Emily is working late at school and becomes increasingly frightened by an unknown assailant banging doors and playing loud music on the public address system. When Emily attempts to flee, she sees A's message in the hallway's digital letter board. As suggested by A's communiqué, this horror is not only affective but also socio-psychological due to its relationship with normativity. A's cyber-stalking is a public one that exposes the Liars to social harm if they are disbelieved. There are numerous times in the show where the girls are accused of 'making things up' when they try to report A to authority figures (for instance, "It's Alive" [2.1] and "I'm a good girl, I am" [5.24]).

In order to endure A then, the Liars must appear normal and impassive while carrying out their bidding, not unlike an adolescent's attempt to conceal painful emotional and bodily changes while remaining outwardly 'normal'. Another scene of A

inflicting socio-psychological horror on the Liars occurs in “Know your frenemies” (1.13), when Hanna is blackmailed into eating an entire box of cup-cakes (decorated with pig faces). Through flashbacks, the audience learns that Hanna used to be ‘TV-overweight’ and was subject to ridicule from Alison and peers who called her “Hefty Hanna”. This bullying led Hanna to develop an eating disorder, suggested by Alison, to counter her weight gain. Apparently now cured of this disorder, being forced to gorge on cupcakes in public is a cruelly humiliating exercise for Hanna.

A’s cyber-stalking forces the Liars to perform girlhood through a gothic mode, or gothic fractals, that exposes them to the grotesque and horrifying underside of teen sociality. A’s communications reiterate a common trope of girl culture by lacing ‘sweetness’ over covert forms of aggression to avoid “detection and punishment” (Rachel Simmons, as cited in Chandler 2016, 118). Messages such as: “Lucky you, Aria! Other girls have to do their homework. You get to do the teacher...” (“Reality bites me”, 1.5) and “Sorry about losing my temper. My bad” (“Moments later”, 1.11) appear friendly if de-contextualised from A’s attempts to out Aria’s relationship with her teacher and run over Hanna with a car. In this way, *PLL* portrays bullying as not simply linked to overt verbal or violent harassment but exercised through and tied to the performative and cultural conventions of gender and sexual presentation within teen peer groups.

“See how easy it is to get my hands around your neck”: Gothic romance in *PLL*

The social and gendered demands of normativity, and the experience of these demands as horrifying and traumatic, are also lent a gothic dimension in relation to the girl’s sexual and romantic development. Gothic aesthetics are used to align “adult male sexuality with perversion” (Och 2016, 135) and evoke “an element of danger enveloping the characters and their physical surroundings” (Guillard 2011, 51). The show’s male characters are framed through twin affects of “attraction and repulsion” which “depicts its male characters as being brooding or scowling but always devilishly handsome” (Guillard 2011, 51). All of the three main male love interests, Toby Cavanaugh (Keegan Allen), Caleb Rivers (Tyler Blackburn), and Ezra Fitz (Ian Harding), are presented within gothic romance tropes as outsiders with secret histories that threaten the Liars’ social standing and ability to pursue a publicly ‘acceptable’ romantic relationship. Toby has spent time in a juvenile detention facility, Caleb is homeless and living in Rosewood High’s air vents, and Ezra is in his early twenties and the Liars’ English teacher. Although the relationship between Aria and Ezra is portrayed as successfully overcoming various social obstacles (not the least of which is statutory rape), his status as an adult and with knowledge and life experience that Aria lacks, frames their relationship in the gothic mode.

In “Free Fall” (4.20), it is revealed that Ezra has been surveilling the Liars to write a book about Alison’s murder and that his apparently spontaneous meeting with Aria in the first episode (“Pilot”) was actually premeditated. Aria discovers Ezra’s deception

by finding the notes for this planned book in a hollowed out copy of the *Carnivore's Delight Guide To Grilling* in his winter cabin. The book's title is suggestive of the visceral danger enveloping Aria. When Ezra arrives at the cabin, Aria escapes to a nearby ski lift, which he serendipitously joins as it takes off. The ski chair then becomes stuck and Aria is visibly terrified and calls for help. The scene is set in winter at night, with a barely audible music score, heightening the diegetic sounds such as the machinery of the lift and squeaking of the chair. These surroundings augment Ezra's presentation as a gothic suitor turned malevolent. Aria experiences an emotional 'grilling', intensified by her physical vulnerability and inability to escape. This portrayal of girlhood through the gothic mode discloses how she is forced to endure sexual and emotional maturation as a developmental horror.

The gothic romantic framing of these relationships is expressive of the liminal status of the Liars as girls and allows the programme to comment on the gender politics of contemporary teen girlhood. Although she doesn't use the term liminal, Catherine Driscoll explains the ambivalence attached to girlhood noting that children or young women can be called 'girls' but the point at which they stop being a girl and become an adult woman is arbitrary (2002, 2). In aligning girlhood with gothic horror, *PLL* is able to highlight the relations of power involved in girlhood as a subjective mode of becoming. In another scene of malevolent male paternalism, the genre fractal of a girl driving alone and being followed along a dark road at night is staged through an encounter between Hanna and Detective Gabriel Holbrook (Sean Faris) ("Oh, What Hard Luck Stories They All Hand Me", 5.18). After a sufficient amount of scenic tension is built up, Holbrook pulls Hanna over and begins to menace her with verbal and physical threats. Similar to the scene discussed previously, the lighting is used to cloak the male character and make it difficult for the female character (and audience) to see him. Holbrook complains of Alison manipulating him and ruining his police career while forcefully caressing Hanna's face. She feigns submission to retrieve his night stick, clock him, and declare, "you don't get to play the victim here. You're the grown up police officer. She's just a girl".

Within the liminal status of girlhood, the Liars are framed as simultaneously innocent but knowing and therefore responsible for their sexual effects on adult men. As Hanna observes, this allows Holbrook to cast himself as a victim of Alison's machinations even though she is just a "girl". The depictions of adult male characters within gothic tropes of male heterosexual paternalism and malevolency highlights how it is the authority figures around the girls that create danger by keeping them in the dark, figuratively and literally. Hanna's forceful rejoinder to Holbrook is a corrective to the framing of teen girlhood as a 'problem' by emphasising the structural role of adults and authority figures in creating limited agency for the Liars.

“The blonde leading the blind”: Girlhood and the “monstrous feminine”

The discursive and visual framing of teen girls as exerting a sexualised force beyond their control is broadly reflective of what Barbara Creed calls the “monstrous feminine” (1993). This trope, typically deployed in horror texts, casts the biological and sexual attributes of women as simultaneously monstrous and scary as well as strangely desirable to men. Both its theoretical conceptualisation and visual deployment have potentially cis-normative implications as discussed below. Materialised in the context of the Liars’ relationships with adult male characters, the trope is expressed in attempts to morally castigate the girls for their sexuality and its disruption to gender and institutional hierarchies. For instance, in the previously discussed scene, Holbrook rhetorically asks, “how does a girl like Alison become a girl like Alison?” He insinuates there is something mysterious about Alison’s girlhood that can transform men and become destructive. Hanna’s response, “she’s had years of practice”, counters this logic by de-mystifying girlhood as a practiced and performed subject position rather than some innate expression of feminine wiliness.

Alison is positioned as an ambiguous figure in *PLL* and has been likened to Laura Palmer from *Twin Peaks* (Och 2016) in that her ostensibly convivial and seemingly normal appearance as an everyday suburban teenage girl masks her participation in socially and sexually dangerous activities. Alison is both innocent and evil, caring and cruel, empowered and vulnerable, and the show’s narrative never wholly resolves these contradictions. Her ability to embody these different personality traits renders her actions and appearances at times, almost supernatural. Indeed her activities on the night of her disappearance are extraordinarily productive to the point of comic absurdity – in addition to sedating the Liars at a sleepover, she meets with Toby, Ian (Ryan Merriman), and Ezra, gets into a heated argument and shovel-fight with Spencer, and then blackmails Aria’s father (Chad Lowe) over his affair with a student. This night is staged as another gothic horror genre fractal, which serves to visually underscore Alison’s uncanny powers of emotional manipulation. For instance, the setting for the girls’ sleepover is a barn accompanied by a lightning storm. The framing of the sleepover through point-of-view shots, as though someone is watching them, is suggestive of something malevolent about to disrupt the girls. As explained above, the darkness alludes to the show’s thematic concern with liminal girlhood where the Liars occupy both the adult worlds of sex and violence alongside childhood innocence.

Initially viewers are led to believe that Alison was murdered on this night and then buried in her own background. Through a convoluted series of plot machinations, it is revealed that another girl who looked like Alison was assaulted on the same night too and mistakenly buried in Alison’s place. Alison’s burial is actually her rebirth as a hidden figure who shadows A (in order to discover their identity) and surreptitiously aid the Liars. Her ‘murder’ and burial, and the repetition and return to these events, as new information continues to cast them in a different light, constitutes what Martin Fradley calls “teen horror’s ritualized *anti-makeover*” (2013, 206). Such scenes are the

inverse of the makeovers that occur in teen comedies, which function to remake a girl into a socially and sexually desirable character. Anti-makeovers effect an undoing of a girl character's sexual and social appeal in teen horror through physical degradation. In *PLL*, Alison's testing of the liminal positions of girl and woman reach a threshold before she is literally expelled from adolescence via 'death'. Whereas the girl in the opening credits (the substitute for Alison) is still compelled into a performance of normative girlhood even though dead, Alison's burial is a kind of gothic becoming that allows her to be made over into a new subject.

"You're my doll, bitch": The uncanny objects of girlhood explained

In framing the unknown as horror, *PLL* draws from a gothic type known as "explained supernatural" (Milbank 2007) wherein seemingly ghostly or magical events are later revealed to have plausible origins. As a mystery melodrama, the show is designed to reward continued engagement with the promise of an explanation for these events. Objects within the diegesis of *PLL* that initially appear to exude a gothic uncanny, are later given the explained supernatural treatment. This occurs frequently with technology such as cellular phones and computers, which appear at times to communicate messages autonomously but upon further investigation, are human instigated and controlled. Fred Botting defines the uncanny as a "manifestation of shifting boundaries" and the "effect of a disturbed present" (2008, 7). In light of *PLL*'s treatment of girlhood as liminal, objects associated with girlhood are particularly potent sources of the uncanny. For instance, lipstick, friendship bracelets, and mirrors often materialise unexpectedly and provoke unsettling emotional responses. A's association of the Liars with dolls, for instance by sending messages to them with dolls rendered in their likeness ("Over my dead body", 2.12), highlights how the girls are objectified and made into 'things' by the commodities that constitute a normative visual manifestation of girlhood (as seen in the opening credits). The use of toys and dolls in gothic horror is suggestive of the capacity for ostensibly powerless things, in this case the accoutrements of girlhood, to wield power over humans and to shift the boundaries between the animate and inanimate worlds.

In applying the explained supernatural trope to uncanny objects, *PLL* is able to stage an ideological critique of the ways in which teen girls are led to believe their femininity is something that needs to be managed and contained by external forces. In disclosing the association of normativity with horror, the programme also suggests that it is the subjectivities applied to, and enforced by, teen girls that are problematic rather than anything innately tied to girlhood. While the framing of heterosexual men through gothic romance serves to reveal the horrors of male paternalism, the use of the explained supernatural to rehabilitate male characters, such as Ezra or Toby, undermines a sustained critique of the latter because their abusive or sexually predatory behaviour is meant to be retroactively explicable and sympathetic.

For instance, Ezra's instigation of a relationship with Alison, and later Aria, while they were underage, as well as his subsequent stalking of the Liars, are framed as his attempts to collect information and evidence about A to initially write a true crime novel and then help the girls, when he realises the danger they are in. Such an explanation is disturbing in light of his initial assertions that he began a relationship with Aria without knowing her age or that she was his student. With respect to Toby, his seeming conspiracy with A and emotional distance and cruelty to Spencer is likewise justified as an effort to find out who A is and assist the girls. But the effect of not knowing their intentions means the Liars are compelled into a liminal status between child and adult because they are denied the agency to make choices about their relationships or how to best protect themselves from either A or their partners. Such narratives also reiterate the chauvinistic trope of the gothic male as monstrous but able to be tamed and civilised by their relationship with women (see Moers 2004, Simkin 2004).

Emily's female love interest Paige (Lindsey Shaw) is framed in a similarly gothic romantic fashion as her male counterparts. She initially bullies Emily with homophobic violence ("If at First You Don't Succeed, Lie, Lie Again", 1.15) but they eventually become a romantic couple with Paige's actions explained as the result of internalised homophobia. "Single Fright Female" (3.11) features flashbacks that take place before Alison has disappeared, depicting Paige's reputation for violent behaviour at school. It is also revealed that Paige has scarring on her legs, for which Alison had given her the nickname "pig skin". As with "Hefty Hanna", Alison's mode of socialising takes on a gothic form in designating what are normal and abnormal forms of embodiment. Jack Halberstam has argued that gothic texts function as technologies of subjectivity which produce monstrous subjectivities so that "the normal, the healthy, the pure can be known" (1995, 2). Paige is able to shift into normativity when she confesses to Emily that the scarring is the result of self-harm effected by a series of callous pranks, orchestrated by Alison to shame Paige for her sexuality and seemingly 'non-feminine' (in TV-terms) appearance (the audience learns later still that Alison's inexplicable cruelty towards Paige is motivated by her own repressed sexual and romantic feelings for Emily).

Paige is then positioned as a sympathetic character once she learns to accept her orientation and come out to her family and friends. Using internalised homophobia to frame queer characters as scary or monstrous is not unproblematic. Applying the explained supernatural to teenage bullying reveals the complex emotional development and trauma that lies behind girls' social behaviour as exacerbated by the demands of normativity. In the context of the show's LGBT content, this trope of explaining apparently strange or sinister behaviour works for the most part, to encourage audiences to accept gender and sexual differences by portraying queer characters such as Paige and Alison as sympathetic due to the fearfulness of the homophobic environment around them. However, Paige's actions towards Emily are just as disturbing and controlling as some of the male heterosexual characters. As with the

latter, without explicitly addressing the problems with implied or actual physical violence against romantic partners and withholding emotional intimacy and personal information, *PLL* reifies, in Diane Long Hoeveler's words, "postures of complaisancy and acquiescence on the part of women" (1998, xvi) in gothic texts.

"Mona played with dolls. I play with body parts. Game on, bitches": Trans subjectivities and gothic girlhood

The limitations of *PLL*'s treatment of girlhood in the gothic mode extends to the trans character Charlotte DiLaurentis (Vanessa Ray) and her relationship to the Radley Sanatorium. This sanatorium serves as both a medical facility to treat mental illness, a respite for chronic illness, and houses criminals convicted with a mental disorder defence. Its aesthetics and design are not at all consistent with what contemporary facilities such as these would look like, which is conspicuous given that *Rosewood* is more or less rendered in verisimilitude to our own world. The sanatorium's architecture reflects the gothic revival style of the early twentieth century, with high iron gates, arches, and narrow windows, giving the building a castle-like appearance. Nurses, employees, and patients wear uniforms that allude to Old Hollywood horror genre aesthetics. Such allusions serve to frame any characters that enter this space as monstrous and dangerous. One of the most controversial plot lines of the show revolves around this institution and Charlotte's history with it.

In Season Six, we learn that the 'A' who has orchestrated the Liars torture is actually Alison's sister Charlotte. Charlotte had appeared on the show before as CeCe Drake, an older friend of Alison's who mentored her cruelty and fashion sense and briefly dated their brother Jason (Drew Van Acker). In an elaborate plot dump, Charlotte reveals she is a trans woman and was born as Charles ("Game over, Charles", 6.10). She was committed to Radley by her father owing to a misinterpretation of an incident with baby Alison that appeared as though Charles was trying to drown her. It is implied that he sent her to Radley due to transphobia and her doctors discouraged her transitioning. Charlotte is in her twenties so for all of this to be plausible, the show reproduces an oddly conservative and ahistoric medical pathologisation of trans children as well as mental illness. Charlotte's internalised transphobia, bought about by this medical and familial treatment, leads her to project rage onto the Liars and Alison due to a misplaced sense of jealousy regarding their ability to live as girls.

Charlotte's anger is realised in "Welcome to the Dollhouse" (5.25) where the Liars are forcibly kidnapped and held captive in an underground bunker. Placed in cells that are uncanny replicas of their bedrooms, the Liars' hairstyles and outfits are retro-fitted (whilst they are sedated) to make them appear as they were before Alison went missing ("Game on, Charles", 6.1). Charlotte/ A even provides them with a model Alison, who the audience learns, in a narrative twist, is Mona (made to look and act like Alison), who was previously thought murdered by A ("Taking this one to the grave", 5.12). As explained above, these episodes are a culmination of previous allusions to the

Liars as dolls based on their proximity to dolls and their manipulation by A. Containing girlhood within a temporal stasis, the bunker/ doll-house is a gothic enterprise that “blurs or even dissolves the boundary between life and death” as well as object and person (Wilt 2003, 41). In objectifying the Liars as dolls, the characters and audience begin to see the uncanniness of the otherwise normal paraphernalia of girlhood as strange and disturbing. The Liars also experience the horror of being forced into an arrested development as they are compelled to re-live and re-perform their younger selves. Despite these actions, and after the Liars escape from the doll-house, the show attempts to position Charlotte as ultimately sympathetic. In “Game over, Charles”, Hanna explains, “You have been such a bitch to us, but we heard your story. We understand”. This rehabilitation of Charlotte is short-lived as a new A later murders her and the Liars try to discover in turn, who killed her.

This plot reveal generated significant media coverage both because it was the resolution to a long-running mystery of the series and because it involved a potentially problematic re-staging of transphobic tropes that convey trans people as deceptive, crazy, and evil (see Bettcher 2007). In particular, the programme’s de-humanising of Charlotte/A based on the uncertainty of her gender, for instance Hanna refers to the former as “him, her, it, bitch” (“Game on, Charles”), reifies a normative association between gender and subjectivity. Without a gendered subjectivity, trans people can be objectified (becoming an ‘it’) and rendered monstrous. Within the argument I’m making about the liminal status of girlhood being portrayed in the gothic horror mode as explaining and equalising the experiences of girls on the show, events which appeared horrific for the Liars may appear sympathetic or at least credible through Charlotte’s transphobic experiences. The doll-house ordeal may, from a different perspective, highlight how the exclusion from superficially ‘girly’ activities was traumatic for Charlotte.

As Driscoll notes, trans subjectivities, specifically female ones, challenge some of the fundamental precepts of girlhood studies and feminist studies more broadly that paint girlhood rites of passage and objects as oppressive and conservative (2016). These same girlhood markers may be claimed by trans girls as empowering. Such re-conceptualisations of girlhood through a trans lens could also help us to rethink the cis-normative (equating biological sex with gender) assumptions underpinning the affective contours of the gothic as it pertains to gender. That is, how might biologically essentialist tropes of the feminine monstrous or menarche (and their counterpart, the femme castratrice) as they are visualised in media and theorised by scholars centralise sex difference as the fundamental instantiation of subjectivity? It should also be noted that normative conceptions of cis-gendered femininity are the rubric typically used to identify and legitimise trans girl subjectivities in medically and ideologically problematic ways that potentially marginalise non-gender binary trans subjectivities (see Johnson 2016). *PLL* gestures towards these complexities in the utility of Charlotte as both villain and redemptive character. Audiences are clued in to her gender identity in a home movie where Charles is wearing conspicuous pink shoelaces as a young boy

("Welcome to the Dollhouse"). This narrative suggests that Charlotte's true gender identity was apparent early on and signalled through a desire to embody traditional feminine colours and clothing. The show therefore both uses Charlotte's relation to normative objects of girlhood to legitimate her true gender identity and critique an obsessive attachment to the same objects as becoming of gothic monstrosity.

In light of the gothic framing and spatial positioning of Charlotte within Radley, her story arc and subsequent death suggest there is a limit to the liminal subject positions girls can take up in the gothic mode in Rosewood. Viewers are reminded of this when they watch the opening credits of subsequent seasons. Now focused on the mystery of who killed Charlotte, the end shot of the opening titles was re-done after the mid-season six finale. Resurrected, Alison stands alongside the other Liars behind the coffin in the final reveal of the sequence. The implication for engaged *PLL* viewers is that the murdered girl being made up for a funeral is now Charlotte. In addition to the new opening credits, the series also 'time-jumps' five years into the future ("Of late I think of Rosewood", 6.11) so that the Liars are now adults in the remainder of the series. Charlotte's death is then a gothic "technology of subjectivity" (Halberstam 1995, 2) that prompts their transition out of girlhood and into adulthood. In the gothic horror fractal contained in the opening credits, Charlotte's movement within, and transformation into, girlhood are contained. While her gender identity is affirmed in each episode in the make over to her corpse, she is now narratively and televisually consigned to a coffin instead of Radley.

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Fragile: An Examination of the Nurse as Gothic Trope and Its Significance in Today's Turbulent World of Health Care

ABSTRACT

*In popular culture, nurses are often represented as a liminal figure. In some ways, this reflects the reality of practice when nurses play a role in between health and wellness and when patients are hovering in states between life and death. In this dimension, modes of operating may be less concrete, more ambiguous and difficult to articulate. Horror narratives explore this state of inbetween-ness thoroughly, and this paper suggests that there is something to be learned about nurses in horror stories that helps to understand the enduring allure of nursing as a subject. The 2005 horror film, *Fragile* contains numerous gothic tropes, including the hospital as inhospitable and unsafe, and the nurse as monstrous or angelic, which taps into deep-seating cultural anxieties about health-care. That is, more than just entertainment, stories of nurses as ghosts, ghouls, or sublime angels mirror a concern that society has about the trustworthiness, or otherwise, of nurses and medicine. Gothic stories set in asylums typically capitalise on the larger-than-life architectural features to conjure an anxious aesthetic, and in this film another function is apparent. The impending demolition of the historical monolith to make way for modernity is riven with suspicion. The film also plays with the notion that nursing embodies an intersection between rational logic and intuitive knowing. Contemporary Gothic theory provides an interpretive lens through which nursing's function in horror narratives can be explored.*

Keywords: Gothic, Horror, Nurse, Postmodern

Nurses, the settings in which they work (Rieger 2016), the suffering they bear witness to (Wasson 2015), the secret knowledge they may be privy to (Bronfen and Neumeier 2014), and the difficult intersubjective relationships they often engage in (Mandal and Waddington 2015) make scintillating characters for gothic narratives. In part, this is related to the real life extreme experiences in which they are involved. In life, nurses work with patients who are facing major life transitions – such as in childbirth, critical illness and disease, and when people are facing death. These life transitions can constitute a liminal space, where taken-for-granted ways of relating may be disrupted, and a state of tentativeness, ambiguity, or unknowing predominates (Jordan Price and Prior 2015) and when emotional extremes, such as panic, horror and fear are experienced. Patients can also experience abjection, where their bodily experiences are so abhorrent as to be psychologically denied. In threats to health, patients may have to deal with blood, disease and bodily changes that go beyond the thinkable or bearable and which leads to identity disturbance and chaos - abjection (Kristeva 1982). By association, nurses are immersed in this anxiety and abjection too (Menzies 1959, Evans 2010). Nurses are also required to summon up strength and courage to contain these processes to be available and supportive of the patients for whom they care.

As a reflection of contemporary society, nurse characters also tend to be powerful and feared (Vid 2014), and there are other similarities between fiction and fact. Nursing remains predominantly female, and continues to be subject to gender stereotyping. Anne Summers' (1975) powerful metaphor of women being *damned whores and God's police* not only remains true for women in the public sphere, but especially for nurses. Summers explains the stereotype by stating that women's (and nurses') function is to civilize society and to be virtuous mothers. If they fail to conform to this expectation they are 'bad girls' who are vilified and rejected (Summers 1975). This same categorization is often evident in nursing narratives. Nurse characters seem to be either metonymic of guardianship and protection [eg. The nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* (1597)] or represent all that is moribund and corrupt in health care and total institutions [eg. Nurse Ratched in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962)]. As liminal figures working in borders between health and illness; ease and unease; life and death – nurses (Lapum Fredericks & Beanlands 2012), and nurse characters, have potential to accompany protagonists safely across dangerous thresholds [see *Chronic* (2016) and *Magnolia* (1999)] or to lure them deeper into chaos [see *Misery* (1987), *Nurse 3D* (2013)].

Within the Spanish-British production of the horror film *Fragile* (Balaguero 2005), Nurse Amy, played by Calista Flockhart, functions in the role of guardian, though there are other nurse characters within the film that embody malevolence. This paper provides a reading of the film to explore the potential significance that Gothic texts have in revealing and interpreting cultural anxieties that prevail about nursing and the world of health care.

Hospitals and the Gothic

Hogle and Smith (2009) explain that the Contemporary Gothic uncovers prevailing cultural anxieties, fears and concerns, that may be conscious and explicit, as well as subconscious and subliminal. Hospitals, particularly large and old institutions, conjure an eerie aesthetic in part because the activities within were/are normally concealed from the public (Waddington 2013) and thus they are common motifs to enrich a gothic story. As Gothic texts, they give voice to the unspeakable and Royle's (2003) notion of the uncanny, where peculiar and surprising associations arise (such as nurses as ghosts, or endowed with supernatural power) can prompt a reader/viewer to re-think taken-for-granted assumptions about the world (Tibbetts 2011). For example, Robson's (1946) film *Bedlam* revealed the squalor and misery that mental patients endured during the early years of the supposedly humane era ushered in by the Welfare System in 19th Century England. Wilkie Collins' (1860) *The Woman in White*, and Carpenter's (2010) *The Ward* show the helplessness of patients who are admitted or have to live in hospital institutions. Berdoe's (1888) *St Bernard's: the romance of a medical student* and Scorsese's (2010) *Shutter Island* expose the uncanny by revealing the cruel and corrupt motives of staff who are usually revered for their expertise and trustworthiness. Finally, stories such as Stevenson's (1884) *Jekyll and Hyde* that explore the dire consequences for humanity when medical and scientific practitioners indulge their research curiosity without the boundaries of ethics and morality, continue to resonate today (Yang and Healey 2016).

A synopsis of *Fragile*

The concept of fragility is played with in several ways in the film, especially in the way it deals with the protagonist, Nurse Amy. She is a smart, lonely and anxious nurse who takes a rather unenviable job working the night shift at a rundown and soon-to-close hospital in a liminal and inaccessible part of England – the isle of Wight in winter, at an undetermined time. Most of the patients in the hospital have already been transferred by helicopter to the mainland, and the only remaining patients are a ward of vulnerable and very ill children. Amy soon learns that the children are spooked about something. She hears them whisper about some of the children who have since died had met a strange ghost that they call "the mechanical girl".

At the same time, disturbing, unexplained events are occurring throughout the hospital – a trusted nurse has disappeared and a long-term staff member has inexplicably fallen to his death out a window. Whilst most of the adults don't believe the children, Amy, who feels a connection to them, goes on a hunt to find out the source of this haunting and to resolve it. As Georgieva (2013) explains, sick, parentless, mysterious children make potent gothic symbols, signifying evidence of social disruption and decay.

Amy and the night doctor, Robert, finally discover that the little girl, Mandy, had suffered from brittle bone disease (which makes her fragile), had to endure painful and constraining steel splints, and was institutionalised and died in the hospital forty years ago. They learn that her nurse, Charlotte, had loved Mandy so much that when the girl had started to improve enough to leave the hospital the nurse began to deliberately break her bones to keep her there. When the nurse was caught and fired she went insane because she did not want to leave the hospital or her vocation. In desperation, she smothered Mandy, removed her braces, screwed them into her own bones and threw herself down the elevator shaft. Through courageous and persistent detective work, Amy figures out that it was the ghost of Nurse Charlotte, not the child, who was haunting and torturing patients and staff, to stop the hospital from being shut down and the children being taken away. Mandy's ghost was similarly trapped but acted to support and guard the ill patients as best she could.

A Gothic reading

The film draws on major tropes of the contemporary Gothic, which serve to unsettle the idea that the world of health care is safe and mundane (Yang and Healey 2016). These include the dark and inhospitable location in an old asylum; vulnerable characters; care that is subverted; secrecy, gruesome and murderous acts; and ghosts with supernatural powers.

The dark, wind- and rain-swept location on the Isle of Wight in Winter develops an aesthetic of tension and unease (Dadejik and Kubalik 2013). The unease continues as the hospital comes into view. It has the appearances of a 19th century asylum – it is monolithic, with long hallways, large windows, and dark basements (McAllister and Brien 2016). The hospital is eponymously known as “Mercy Falls”. It is soon to close, so it is falling into disrepair and is now operating on minimal staffing. Anachronistic medical paraphernalia, like leather restraints and iron leg splints located on the forbidden second floor, appear in stark contrast to, the latest MRI technology. This strange juxtaposition is odd, uncanny, because even though we know the hospital is old, the clinicians would have had no need for instruments that have not been used in decades.

Old hospitals and asylums can be unhomely spaces, being both familiar yet threatening (Bhabha 1997), and this particular hospital is doubly so because, unlike ordinary hospitals, this one has an inaccessible second floor, that staff would rather ignore than confront because the trauma was so unspeakable; and in this hospital more harm than care is currently being provided to patients and staff. Inexplicable events are many, beginning with a child's leg being spontaneously broken; water glasses moving by themselves, ghostly figures appearing under the sheets of an empty bed, and throughout the days and nights of the planned closure, many lives are lost through murder. This is a system in chaos - the very opposite of what one has come to expect of efficient health bureaucracies.

Included in the group of vulnerable characters is the delicate and feminine nurse Amy. Whilst she looks sad and shy, Amy quickly and confidently adapts to her night shift work, quickly befriending the young patients. Amy's vulnerable and marginal status mirrors the characters of other gothic stories, wherein the virginal maiden struggles with oppression and injustice in an inhospitable environment (Hurley 2006). There is also an ambiguity to this character – she is vulnerable, yet strong; competent, but having to accept a rather unenviable temporary job in an inhospitable location; and she is an outsider in her own professional group, yet able to quickly gain the trust of isolated patients. She is highly strung, grieving about a mistake she made in the past and regularly self-medicating. In a Gothic sense, this nurse embodies both the canny and the uncanny (Tibbetts 2011). She is careful, restrained and astute, yet secretive, marginalised and unusual. Amy is a wounded healer (Conti-O'Hare 2002).

The children are also important gothic characters, with whom Amy interacts. Most have life-limiting chronic diseases, and some are institutionalised orphans. As ailing, almost forgotten, motherless children, they are recognisably normal children in some respects, but are also an abject and uncanny community (Kristeva 1982). Without parenting, we fear what they might become. Yet they have no choice but to live in this unhomely place where neither consistency or nurture is reliably available to them. As uncanny beings, the children begin to realise, before the adults, that there is a link between visitations from the mechanical girl and impending deaths. This subversion of who should have superior rationality is another indication of disturbances to identity, system and order. But knowledge is no protection, as one after the other, children and staff are killed.

Unwilling to allow the patients to leave her, the ghost of Nurse Charlotte is continuing the cruelty that she enacted in life. Order, for her at least, is finally being restored. As a female, a ghost and evil surrogate (step) mother, Charlotte embodies Creed's (1993) notion of the monstrous feminine. What she did in life and now in the afterlife is perverse. Within the psychiatric model, however, she may have been attributed the diagnosis of Munchausen by Proxy Syndrome. This is a mental disorder, in which a caregiver deliberately produces or feigns illness in a person under their care so that the proxy will receive medical care that gratifies the caregiver (Burton et al. 2015). According to psychoanalytic theory, such people, who are most commonly women and often health-workers, have not had their own needs for love and care met through their lives and are unconsciously craving attention (Rand and Feldman 2001). It remains the most controversial and polarising diagnosis in psychiatry because the patient's actions are so abhorrent that there are doubts as to whether this is an illness or criminality, and there remains no effective treatment (Roesler 2015).

In contrast to this abject nurse, the trustworthy Nurse Amy shares a special relationship with the children. She too is an orphan and in need of care. Unlike the other health-care staff, Amy has courage and determination, is willing to venture into

forbidden and liminal spaces, and eventually solves the mystery and reveals that the malicious haunting is carried out by the mad and monstrous Charlotte. In life, Nurse Charlotte's suicide was a gruesome mimicry of what she had done to patients. Perhaps the ravages of her frustrated mothering instincts and guilt about her transgressive love have sent her irretrievably mad.

A subtext of the film evident in at least two scenes, is a reworking of the Sleeping Beauty myth. Zipes (2002) explains that this folk tale is about the transformation from oppression to happiness, thanks to the intervention of a magical and powerful ally. The children are watching an animated horror film of "Sleeping Beauty", where the evil step-mother kills the beautiful girl, but is brought back to life by a handsome prince. As Hawley (2015) explains, children's horror films allow the child to play with death and to "negotiate horror's dark territory". This notion is mirrored in *Fragile*, with the remaining children, especially Maggie an orphan dying of cystic fibrosis who has formed a strong attachment to Amy, being able to accept the presence of the ghosts and to understand their needs. Another mirroring of the myth occurs in the film's denouement, when the courageous but lifeless Amy, is revived by a kiss – not from the handsome prince/doctor's medical heroics, but by the ghost of Maggie, who was moments ago killed defending her beloved Amy.

Nursing and cultural anxieties

Fragile is a horror narrative located in a hospital, in which nurses play important characters. To strengthen the horror, unease and tension, the filmmaker draws on embedded cultural anxieties about nurses that continue to shape the public's (mis)understanding of nursing, and perhaps to constrain the strength of identity that nurses hold about. The film continues with the idea that nursing is a feminine profession. While it is true that women continue to outnumber men in nursing, the work is not of a gendered nature even though the public continue to imagine it as such (Summers and Summers 2015). Further, half the doctors in modern health-care services are women, and so a gender-based interaction between male doctors and female nurses is a lingering fantasy.

Another prevailing desire that the filmmaker plays with in the film, is that nurses, to be successful, need to be surrogate mothers (Davis 1992). An unsettled aesthetic is created and developed because Amy is the only nurse willing to adhere to this embedded rule. As such the narrative plays with a feminist/anti-feminist dialectic. It seems that the world may have changed because of feminist thinking, but not always for the better (Davis 2000).

The film also dichotomises the nurses into either good or bad mothers and attributes super-human powers to both. Nurse Charlotte has the ability to throw people out of windows, force cars off roads, and invisibly break bones, such is her malevolent unmet mothering need. Amy, too, has such strong mothering instincts and emotional drive

that it gives her the wit and the ability to overcome every obstacle to save the children. Further, she is a wounded healer, which potentiates her drive (McAllister 2017). Past traumas have assisted her to have more humility and empathy than other clinicians. She actually listens to what the patients need and is prepared to defy the rules to help them.

In this film, as in life, the way nurses care is problematic and dichotomised. Pitted against each other are nurses who express care based on empathy and those whose care is abject and abhorrent. While there are many nurses in the film, only Amy ultimately cares benevolently and effectively. Others are either unable to put the patients first, or attach so closely to them that they have dissolved all boundaries and believe they have the right to possess them eternally. It suggests that for some, the care felt by nurses can easily metamorphose into hate, revenge, sabotage, and chaos – especially when it is disallowed, constrained, or criticised. Nurse Charlotte has become a monster in part because she perceived there was no one else prepared to fight for the wellbeing of the marginalised and forgotten. Perhaps one reason the horror in this film works is because viewers relate to the reality that many nurses are not reliable in their caring and surrogate mother role, and indeed to some people, they may have even lost their caring ‘instinct’ (Wood 2014).

At another level, this depiction of inconsistency in nursing reflects a wider postmodern pessimism, and loss of confidence with health care. No longer are the resources within health-care sufficient to ensure that it is dependable, constant and delivered holistically (Cockerham 2014). The doubt that hospitals are always able to provide effective and compassionate care is raised in many other gothic hospital tales (McAllister & Brien 2015), and this film draws upon similar symbols to evoke the image of dysfunction and decay - empty halls, redundant, disused machinery, a skeleton staff working amid an environment that is in flux, effectively evoke a lost past, dysfunctional present and hopeless future.

Repercussions create instability in health care teams as well. The film depicts tensions within the clinical team – each hold different priorities that conflict with others, and are motivated by personal, rather than professional, issues. The film also transgresses a common taken-for-granted about hospitals – that they are safe places where patients will be effectively cared for and problems resolved. In this subversion of hospitals as safe the gothic concept of the unhomely is created (Harris 2015). Creating a tense aesthetic, by emphasising the unhomely is important to gothic narratives, and in this story the notions of the fractured team and the idea that one cannot trust even the most experienced clinician or service, conjure fears that no one, not even the policy makers and government, have the patient’s interests at heart anymore. There is greater concern for profit and progress than there is for individual welfare – a notion that may continue to haunt the future. Only Amy preserves the trust of patients. To be revived by the kiss of her now dead patient, Maggie, may be a signal that the remedy for

health-care corruption and misdirection is for health-practitioners to rediscover their moral compass by going back to the patient, to the point of care.

Conclusion

An analysis of *Fragile* using the lens of the Contemporary Gothic reveals embedded ideologies about health care that are contributing to a postmodern condition of pessimism and loss of coherence and dependability in health care institutions. Horror tropes of monstrous nurses, or angels pitted against demons, patients as hapless victims in a corrupt and moribund institution are emphasised. As a gothic text, it unsettles the trust that may have been placed on omnipotent institutions such as health care, and upsets any lingering assumptions that nurses could not be infected by this corruption. In *Fragile*, the ghosts resist change and progress for their own reasons, but it may also prompt viewers to reflect on whether changes in models of care for the sake of scientific technology or economic efficiency are rational decisions for society. Ultimately this analysis raises a question about who or where the fragility lies within the system. Is it in vulnerable patients, oppressed or damaged nurses, or is it in the neoliberal policies that pursue progress over humane care?

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