Introduction

Identity and the Fantastic in Penny Dreadful

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Introduction: Identity and the Fantastic in *Penny Dreadful*

“. . . the best characters are the most complicated ones.”

--John Logan (Qtd. Thomas 2014)

In Season Two of television horror-drama, *Penny Dreadful* (Showtime/Sky, 2014-16), Ethan Chandler (Josh Hartnett), American sharpshooter and werewolf, asks Vanessa Ives (Eva Green), a British heiress with supernatural powers and a troubled past, what happens when the monsters inside of them are released? She says: “We’re most who we are. Unrestrained. Ourselves.” Summing up a central concern of the series, she confirms the view of its creator John Logan, that the “greatest horror in *Penny Dreadful* is the horror of people. . . the way we interact with one another.” (Calia 2015) *Penny Dreadful* explores the darkness that exists not only in the physical world but also in the human mind. In it, monstrosity takes the familiar form of witches, werewolves, vampires, the revived and reconfigured undead—Dr. Frankenstein’s monsters—who kill and maim, but the series also routinely explores other, more mundane, forms of cruelty and depravity, while embracing a range of difference. In *Penny Dreadful*, the most human characters are revealed to be the most monstrous.

Logan, as a gay man, says he feels a “deep kinship” with monsters; used in the series to explore gendered difference, they are linked to troubled, troubling, and alternative identities more generally. Accordingly, Vanessa and Ethan, along with friends like the “joyous fop” Ferdinand Lyle (Simon Russell Beale) and foes like the seductive villainess, Madame Kali (Helen McCrory), struggle to come to terms with their deviant natures and problematic desires, those demons within and without which shape their worlds. Over its three season run, characters and storylines are developed in challenging
and unpredictable ways, making this show one of the most appealing of horror television, and of special interest to feminist audiences. Consequently, when the show was—brutally!—cut short at the close of Season Three with Vanessa’s death, concluded with the words “The End,” frustrated fans complained that storylines were unfinished, that characters were not fully developed, that themes of monstrous identities were hastily patched up rather than completed. We, the authors of this Special Issue on *Penny Dreadful*, sharing with other fans the sense that there is more to say and do with these characters, return here to examine, revisit, and reflect on its monstrous nature, its dark inventiveness and perspicacity.

The idea for this Special Issue started with a research collaboration funded by a Griffith University and University of Southern Denmark travel scheme. At an initial meeting in Brisbane, Australia, May 2016, we confirmed our shared research interest in the women of screen horror and fantasy and our particular fascination with *Penny Dreadful*. Our collaborative work started with a themed panel at the *Screen* conference held in Glasgow, June of the same year, whose presentations are the inspiration and core of this Special Issue. *Penny Dreadful* epitomizes our interests in female empowerment, extreme embodiment, and the evocative potentialities of the fantastic. While the women of the series are subject to many of the constraints associated with feminine identity in the Victorian era—restrictions of the medical establishment, domestic ideologies, social mores, fashion—they are wrought with contemporary inflections, striving against these limits for self-possession and autonomy in ways that resonate for contemporary viewers. Ironically, while sharing our research and enthusiasm for the series as a site for exploring feminism and women in the fantastic at the *Screen* conference, the last two episodes of *Penny Dreadful* were broadcast. The series concluded, shockingly, with Vanessa’s burial, creator Logan responding to outraged fans, that ‘the show was always going to achieve
closure with the death of Vanessa’ (Auseillo 2016). But, you can’t keep a good woman
down. While Showtime’s series ended with three seasons, Vanessa and Penny Dreadful
continue, fittingly enough, both as a comic book series and in the writings of its fans on
sites like An Archive of Our Own. This special issue, likewise, is something of a post-
mortem and a revival for a series that highlights the longevity, durability, and
imperishable appeal of popular narrative, especially varieties of gothic horror fiction. We
offer this special issue, pleased that Penny Dreadful continues, multiply transformed,
beyond the death of its cancellation.

Logan conceived and wrote Penny Dreadful as a mash-up of characters from the
classic Gothic novels, among these Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (1818), Robert Louis
Stevenson’s Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1886), Oscar Wilde’s The Picture
of Dorian Gray (1890, 1891), and Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1897), to which he added new
original characters inspired by these texts, like protagonists Vanessa and Ethan. The title
refers to the popular name for cheap serial fiction sold in the 1830s for a penny per
weekly issue. The show cleverly interweaves past and present entertainment industries in
an assemblage that blends story elements multiply-sourced from literature and other
screen fictions with scenes set in the varied amusements of Victorian Britain: the theater,
the wax museum, spiritualist séances, funhouse hall of mirrors, illegal rat-baiting clubs,
and more. Filmed on location in Dublin, and at Bray’s Ardmore studios, it is set in a
Victorian London in 1891, using its setting to evoke a nineteenth century fin de siècle
sentiment and ethos. At once highly stylised, but striving for authenticity, its meticulous
attention to histories of Victorian popular culture ground its atmospheric and lushly
aesthetised fantasy in social realities. The world of Penny Dreadful is at once fantastic
yet recognizable as an historical time and place in which tradition and transformation
wrestled for dominance. At the same time, it pays homage to the emotional uncertainties
of a new millennium. Its exploration of new technologies, its references to mappings and conquests of the physical world, its fascination with monstrous possibilities of science, with genocidal abuses of power, its pervasive mood of doom, and anticipation of apocalypse are only too familiar for its contemporary audiences. This dark and crisis-ridden world is beautifully crafted from elements from the past but speaks to us of ongoing concerns: gender and sexuality, desire and responsibility, power and its abuse; what it means to be human, to be alive, to die, to be transformed.

Attesting to the durable appeal of its source texts, those familiar speculative fictions of early horror and science fiction, *Penny Dreadful* refits their themes and concerns for contemporary audiences. The overarching plot concerns a small group of four – the explorer Sir Malcolm Murray (Timothy Dalton), Vanessa, the doctor Victor Frankenstein (Harry Treadaway) and the sharpshooter Ethan – who battle supernatural forces. In Season One they combat vampires, seeking them in hidden corners of London; in Season Two they struggle against witches who invade their home and dreams; and in Season Three they face Dracula himself and his army of night creatures. The Devil is involved in all three seasons and the mythology developed by the series refers to Egyptian Gods Amunet and Amun-Ra. Around the central group of characters we find Malcolm’s servant Sembene (Dani Sapani), aristocrat Dorian Gray (Reeve Carney), and Frankenstein’s monsters John Clare (Rory Kinnear) and Lily Frankenstein (Billie Piper), as well as witches Evelyn and Joan (Patti LuPone), and the alienist Dr. Seward (also LuPone). Campaigns against evil take place in an in-between world that Vanessa calls the demimonde, where every character, supernatural or not, struggles simultaneously with external violence and inner workings of complex and fractured identities. Some characters are irredeemably evil and ultimately destroyed, but even the central protagonists, a reimagining of Bram Stoker’s ‘Crew of Light’ are torn and tormented
characters striving to combat destruction and control their emotions in a never-ending struggle to overcome doubt, loneliness, inner and outer darkness.

In the way that *Penny Dreadful* uses its multiple texts, drawing on both familiar nineteenth century narratives and their more recent screen iterations, its aesthetic shows the influence of contemporary transmedia storytelling, where the process of world-building encourages an encyclopedic impulse in both readers and writers. We are drawn to master what can be known about a world which always expands beyond our grasp. This is a very different pleasure than we associate with the closure found in most classically constructed narratives, where we expect to leave the theatre knowing everything that is required to make sense of a particular story. (Jenkins 2007)

Following on from Henry Jenkins’s work in transmedia fictions, this Special Issue can be viewed as the effort of aca-fans to make sense of the rich palimpsest of stories and characters that is *Penny Dreadful*, bringing to bear their various expertise and ‘encyclopaedic impulses’, interests and investments. While sharing a broad concern with the self-reflexively gendered focus of the series and feminist in spirit, this collection of articles draws on an interdisciplinary mix of scholarly approaches, from sociology and cinema studies and fan studies, to literary theory and queer theory, to Victorian history and cultural studies.

Amanda Howell and Lucy Baker in ‘Mapping the Demimonde’ provide a broad overview of the series viewed through the lens of familiar Victorian characters—the flâneur, explorer, spiritualist medium, and alienist—whose perspectives frame the stories of *Penny Dreadful*, lending shape to and inflecting the meanings of its narrative spaces.
Anita Nell Bech Albertsen, Toby Locke, and Jordan Phillips offer another sort of overview of the series which is concerned specifically with methods of characterisation. Albertsen and Locke show how the construction of complex characters in *Penny Dreadful* moves beyond any simple or generic definition of monstrosity, to focus on the portrayal of characters such as Vanessa Ives and Ethan Chandler, while Phillips focuses on how the series’ interest in monstrosity effectively queers a range of characters. Rikke Schubart offers a closer look at Vanessa Ives, using the concept of ‘edgework’ from sports sociology to investigate how her character interrogates and reframes gendered scripts such as the medium, the witch, and the hysteric. Stephanie Green, finally, offers a close reading of Lily Frankenstein as a figure of monstrous manufacture, drawing on the show’s re-imagined Victorian cultural context to identify her in terms of Gothic self-definition as the new ‘New Woman’.

Amanda Howell, Stephanie Green, Rikke Schubart and Anita Nell Bech Albertsen.

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