Palimpsest characters in transfictional storytelling: on migrating Penny Dreadful characters from television to comic books

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Abstract
Transmedia characters are fictional figures whose adventures are told in different media platforms, each one adding details to their story, as they are rewritten, altered or extended, varying the degree of continuity with the original. This discussion will focus on the identity of transmedia and trans-sexual female characters in television series Penny Dreadful (Showtime 2014–16) that exist in several gothic literary pretexts to the TV series as well as the series itself, also Titan’s prequel and sequel comic book series published after the series ended. Drawing on cognitive, narrative and transmedia theory, this discussion seeks to determine the essential criteria for establishing the persistence of individual identity of characters across texts and media. A central claim of this article is that the cognitive processes by which we as reader-viewers identify an agent as a character are cross-medial. Yet, there are important differences between media in how they represent a character. Of particular importance to this discussion are the power dynamics of transmedia entertainment, including the conflict and congruency between the way old and new media represent character through verbal and visual narrative devices.

Keywords
Transtextuality; transmedia characters; Genette; mashup; comics; Penny Dreadful

Introduction
In 2016, John Logan’s highly awarded Victorian horror-drama Penny Dreadful (Showtime 2014–2016) came to an abrupt ending after its third season, culminating with the death of its long-suffering, demonically tortured heroine Vanessa Ives (Eva Green) which left fans unsettled. Rich in transtextual references and already an international success with an active fanbase, the TV series has provided endless material for user-generated wikis and discussion forums, encouraging fans to dig deeper to understand the series’ multi-layered narrative and its eclectic, literary character
gallery. It seems perfectly natural, then, for the series’ co-executive producers, Chris King and Krysty Wilson-Cairns, to pursue an idea that originated with Logan reviving and expanding the *Penny Dreadful* universe in comic book format, luring fan-readers already familiar with the televisual narrative to prolong their engagement with its pastiche-like combinations of widely recognized characters of literary origin. Illustrated by graphic artists Louie De Martinis and Jesus Hervas, published by Titan Comics in association with Showtime, the comic series pursues two main tracks that take readers beyond the TV show’s narrative. The first is a five-part miniseries, *Penny Dreadful, Volume 1* (2017), a prequel to the TV series. The second is a sequel to TV series in two volumes, *The Ongoing Series Volume 1* entitled *The Awaking* (2017), alluding to Vanessa’s resurrection, and *The Ongoing Series Volume 2, The Beauteous Evil* (2018), referring to the immortally young and beautiful Dorian Gray and the Talmudic figure Lilith, demon of the night and Adam’s first wife.

In the TV series, culturally prominent figures, such as Frankenstein, Dorian Gray, Dracula, Amun-Ra and the Devil, are brought together within a new crossover storyworld – serving different plot functions than in their originating storyworlds. *In Palimpsest: Literature in Second Degree* ([1982] 1997) Gerard Genette proposed the term transtextuality as a more inclusive term for intertextuality. Like intertextuality, transtextuality concerns reader perception ‘of the relationship between a work and others that have either preceded or followed it’ (2). According to Genette, intertextuality is a presence of one text within another and it corresponds with strategies like plagiarism, quotation, allusion, etc. Intertextuality refers to relationships between texts, whereas transtextuality concerns interaction across texts – i.e. ‘all that sets the text in relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts’ ([1982] 1997, 1). This article explores the identity of transtextual female characters in *Penny Dreadful* – such as Vanessa Ives/Amunet/Lilith – who are adopted from a range of precursor texts, including Egyptian and Jewish mythology and popular gothic fiction, appearing in the TV series, the prequel and sequel comic book series. The main issue to be addressed here is how characters that are extended or rewritten with varying degree of continuity with the pretexts can still be recognized across different media. What is it that makes characters recognizable through different authors’ diverse incarnations in multiple texts? This question will be the fulcrum of the present article, whose main argument is that a minimum consistency between a transmedia character and the essential aspects of the original is needed. Consequently, the process of identity construction across media must depend on hypertextuality, Genette’s notion for the various ways in which a text builds on or contains traces of narrative elements from an earlier text. Of concern here is to determine – in dialogue with Genette – the essential criteria for how character identities persist across texts and media. This article’s theoretical take on the construction of character identity across media draws on a range of literary and transmedia theories: Wolfgang G. Müller’s literature-based theory of ‘interfigurality’ (1991), Brian
Richardson’s work on transtextual characters, Marie-Laure Ryan’s discussions of transfictionality, as well as Ryan’s and Henry Jenkins’s work on transmedia storytelling.

The ontological status of transmedia characters
Characters are central to most kinds of fictional worlds – from bedtime stories and sitcoms, to the most complex works of literature. Encountered every day, they seem so familiar to us that they do not deserve closer investigation. However, the ontological status of fictional characters has been the subject of long-standing debate in narratology. Ambivalent and indeterminant, on the one hand, ‘seamlessly integrated into the work they appear in; on the other hand, they seem to be easily unhinged from their medial context and therefore possess a certain autonomy’ (Heidbrink 2010, 67). This ontological indeterminacy is even more marked for fictional figures whose adventures are told within or across different texts or media platforms, each giving more details on the life, experiences and traits of that character. A recurrent manifestation of transfictionality is, in fact, characters’ emancipation from the original text and/or protoworld (recurring secondary characters, certain situations, occurrences, settings and plotlines). Therefore, transmedia characters concern not only the text/media itself. They are also predetermined by additional cues activating cultural and narrative knowledge derived from certain narrative contexts, apprehended through the sedimented layers of previous interpretations. Thus, transmedia characters are as much cultural as textual. This particularly applies to familiar characters like Dorian Gray, Dracula, the Devil and Frankenstein which appear in Penny Dreadful. These iconic characters of literary origin are contaminated by a history of adaptations in literature, film and television. Expressed through the multiple incarnations of certain fictional characters, well-known transmedia characters cannot be fully comprehended without awareness of their previous narrative contexts.

The comic book medium has a long-standing tradition of drawing its content and gaining appeal from creating new constellations of iconic characters originating from heterogeneous sources – an aesthetic strategy likewise demonstrated in the Penny Dreadful TV series. Specifically, comics allow the adaptation, re-writing and expansion of culturally prominent characters from any other media adding new details and context. As emphasized by Müller (1991), (literary) characters gain depth and resonance through interfigural characterization – i.e. by sharing unique names (the clearest reference), several attributes, prominent traits and complex story elements (such as character constellations, fragments of storyworlds and environments) with characters in other works and media. This, however, implies that interfigurality, the re-use of canonical characters, depends on a cognitive process of connecting characters across different texts and media by responding to interfigural cues through memory. Accordingly, transmedia characters are not just bundles of character traits hold together by the characters’ given names. They are also mental constructions shaped by and perceived through sedimented layers of previous interpretations of them in other
texts and media. This cognitive process is also a cultural one that highlights the power dynamics of transmedia entertainment, especially the conflict and congruency between old and new media.

When adapted for comic books, both televisual and literary characters achieve new (media specific) dimensions. Obviously, there are important differences between how media can represent a character. While characters of literary origin gain visual-physical forms in comics, televisual figures can gain subjectivity through character-focalized comic book pictures along with small snippets of text. All these considerations may have fuelled the television writers’ decision to expand the *Penny Dreadful* universe with a comic book series. To convert this universe into comic book form, Chris King and Krysty Wilson-Cairns turned to the TV series Victorian sources – the penny dreadfuls – themselves for inspiration. Like comics, this Victorian publishing phenomenon was popular serial literature printed at a low cost (and sold at one penny). Much like television, the comic medium also permits development of the backstories of each character, on an issue by issue basis, expanding the mythology that surrounds them.

**The world-centredness of transmedia theory**

Theories of transmediality have been developed mainly around the concept of worldbuilding. As stated by Henry Jenkins, transmedia storytelling ‘has become the art of world building, as artists create compelling environments that cannot be fully explored or exhausted within a single work or even a single medium’ (2006, 214), whereby storyworlds or narrative universes are expanded through different media platforms each one adding detail. Although some of the first theoretical work on transmedia dealt with the importance of character to transmedia franchise success (Jenkins 2003), on the whole, characters have remained a minor issue in studies on transmediality, while narrative worlds have been dealt with in greater depth. The following section of this article will explore how the *Penny Dreadful* comics add depth to well-established mash-up characters migrated from the TV series’ multilayered narrative.

Within transmedia studies, there has been a continuous affirming of an emphasis on expansion over adaptation. According to Jenkin’s definition, the difference between adaptation and expansion lies in the fact that adaptation is ‘simply re-presenting an existing story rather than expanding and annotating the fictional world’ (2009). The adaptation strives to be faithful to the source text as far as the medium will allow. In contrast, transmedia storytelling is a special case of what Saint-Gelais (2011) calls transfictionality, where the migration of fictional elements (such as characters, imaginary locations, or fictional worlds) across different texts and media forms. According to Ryan (2008, 2013), transfictionality corresponds with three kinds of operations that relate a fictional world to other fictional worlds: expansion (prequels and sequels), modification (redesigning the structure of the protoworld and reinventing its story and consequently the fate of characters) and the transposition of plot into a new spatio-temporal setting whereby the design and the main story of the protoworld are preserved. Expansion can, therefore, be ‘conceived as the
natural growth of the same world’ (2008, 389) complementing the protoworld and simultaneously extending it by filling its gaps and constructing a prehistory and posthistory. Correspondingly, the texts or media that perform this expansion should be regarded as the ‘building blocks of the same world’ (2008, 389). In Lubomir Dolezel’s words, expansion is the type of relation between fictional worlds that complement a source text or protoworld and ‘extends the scope of the protoworld by filling its gaps, constructing a prehistory or posthistory’ (1998, 206) while world-changing operations like modification and transposition force reader-viewers to revise their representation of the protoworld and its story.

From this theoretical outset, the present article aims to problematize not only the world-centredness of transmedia theory but also its core idea of a certain ‘solidarity between the character and his/her context’ (Saint-Gelais 2011, 21) – referring to transmedia characters’ symbiosis with their protoworlds. By analyzing transfictional characters in Penny Dreadful – a transmedial product of great narrative complexity – the following section will discuss how transmedial exemplifications of the same character (to varying degree) are consistent with essential aspects of (or bear a certain resemblance with) the original character presentation – even if they are rewritten, expanded, modified or transposed in different texts and media platforms.

**Penny Dreadful: postmodern monster mash-up**

Showtime’s period horror-drama *Penny Dreadful* set in the late Victorian era is best described as a literary mash-up, as it embraces heterogeneous cultural and literary sources by merging the nineteenth-century high and low culture – fine literature as well as gothic and sensation fiction. Through its title and adaptation of popular texts and culture, the TV series references the ‘penny dreadfuls’ of the nineteenth-century popular literature whose storylines were synthesized rewrites from diverse sources. The ‘penny dreadful’ plagiarized plots and repurposed recognizable stock characters. It was designed to shock and awe a mass audience by focusing on the sensational, adventure, horror, crime and the supernatural. These genres similarly merge together into one multi-layered hybrid form in Logan’s TV series, creating a new work that appeals to postmodern audiences through multi-perspectival storytelling and invitation for viewers to empathize with morally ambiguous characters.

The *Penny Dreadful* TV series weaves several mythical literary characters known from the late Victorian era into a fresh narrative patchwork, evolving and mutating material to fit new times. The series does so by transforming elements from classic texts through the employment of postmodern storytelling techniques like genre blending and diverse intertextuality, including the adaptation practice termed ‘contamination’. According to David Greetham’s *The Pleasures of Contamination* (2010), this practice occurs when ‘one mode of discourse [...] leaks into another so that we experience both at the same time’ (1). In the TV series, John Logan demonstrates the practice of intertextual contamination where several recognizable narrative elements (themes, plots,
settings, etc.) and characters are from nineteenth-century novels. Among these are Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde* (1886), James Malcom Rymer’s *Varney the Vampire* (1847) and, not least, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897). These pre-texts are blended together creating new character combinations: literary characters who are brought together and made to interact with each other in a crossover world. Here, Logan not only redesigns the structure of these characters’ protoworlds. He, furthermore, reinvents the stories of the pretexts and consequently the characters’ fates: a process which corresponds with the transfictional operation Ryan describes as modification (2008).

To further complicate this reading of adaptive and intertextual processes, this series draws on multiple literary pre-texts – which are themselves imitations and adaptations of pre-texts – and their screen iterations. Each iteration adds to the complexity of an ever-expanding catalogue created over time by multiple viewers across media. This means, for instance, that Stoker’s *Dracula* cannot be read now except through later representations of vampires – from Anne Rice’s *The Vampire Chronicles* (1976–2018) to *The twilight Saga* and all screen iterations of *Dracula*. In the *Penny Dreadful* episode ‘What Death Can Join Together’ (2014), a reference to Rymer’s *Varney the Vampire* appears, when Abraham Van Helsing gives a copy of the book to Victor Frankenstein, simultaneously mentioning its major influence on Stoker’s *Dracula*. Thus, even in 1897, this novel could not be read without reference to pretexts such as *Varney the Vampire* and Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* (1872).

*Penny Dreadful*’s mash-up aesthetic reminds us that all texts exist within a cobweb of historical and cultural associations. By placing Mina Murray, Abraham Van Helsing, Quincey P. Morris, Dorian Gray, Victor Frankenstein and his creature into a shared ontological field with other figures from popular culture, *Penny Dreadful* extends an existing history of contamination. The TV series makes numerous references to British literature (William Shakespeare, John Clare, William Blake, William Wordsworth among others) and to popular horror culture of the nineteenth century (Putney’s Family Waxworks – a gruesome version of Tussaud’s Wax Museum, Grand Guignol’s naturalistic horror theatre, press sensationalism, Victorian snuff theatre shows, spiritualist séances). In other words, numerous transtextual references are rattling around inside the series’ storylines, and their meaning is shaped by strategies of quotation, plagiarism, pastiche and allusion, all of which creating an interrelationship between texts, adding layers of depth to *Penny Dreadful* and its characters. Without having read these pre-texts and without prior knowledge of this manifold of public amusements of The Victorian London, one could watch and understand *Penny Dreadful*, but – as noted by Stephanie Green – ‘it would be a limited comprehension of only part of The Penny Dreadful universe, which we understand both to reinvent but also to co-exist alongside these originary texts’ (2017). A mosaic of intertextual references is co-present in the TV series, appearing in the form of explicit (quotation) and implicit intertextuality (plagiarism, pastiche and allusion).
creating an interrelationship between texts, adding layers of depth to Penny Dreadful and its characters by drawing on the viewers’ prior cultural knowledge.

As explained by Genette, intertextuality is ‘a relationship of co-presence between two or among several texts’ ([1982] 1997, 1), while any text is a ‘hypertext’, grafting itself onto a ‘hypotext’ – i.e. an earlier work that is imitated or transformed. Through its links with other texts originating from different cultural contexts – Penny Dreadful demonstrates an influence of contemporary transmedia storytelling that ‘encourages an encyclopedic impulse in both readers and writers’ (Jenkins 2007, 3). Consequently, the process of interpretation and comprehension plunge readers into a network of textual relations. Moving between texts in a multi-dimensional space, the reader is – endowed with the power to combine textual threads – tracing textual relations. In the opening credits, the series contains a metaphor for its intertextuality and hybridity represented by an image of a spider spinning its web, echoing how Roland Barthes views the intertext as a textile weaving – a ‘tissue of quotation’ ([1977] 1978, 161). Similarly, such imitation techniques applied in Penny Dreadful transgress the textual and generic boundaries of the series by combining elements and characteristic traits of several text-types into a woven web of signification. Mash-up characters, like those presented in the TV series, share several attributes, prominent traits and large and complex story elements (such as fragments of storyworlds and environments) with diverse characters in other works. The transtextual identity of such characters, therefore, cannot always be defined as unambiguous. It is important, however, that a character can be recognized by the reader-viewer and that recognizability does not seem to be compromised by possible changes in transfictional characterizations.

**Comic book prequel: cross-medial gap-filling**

Titan Comics’ prequel Penny Dreadful, Vol. 1 (2017) forms part of the series’ backstory. By focusing on the action that took place before Logan’s original narrative, this prequel fills in many story gaps from the show’s first season, explaining things that were only hinted or left open to interpretation. As stated by Art Silverblatt, a ‘prequel assumes that the audience is familiar with the original – the audience must rework the narrative so that they can understand how the prequel leads up to the beginning of the original’ (2007, 211). The first four pages – following the comic book’s splash page – seem to have an introductory function facilitating readers’ understanding. These pages form an explicit reference to the TV series via its mimetic retelling of two central scenes from ‘Closer than Sisters’ (S1:E5). First, those who are familiar with the TV series will immediately recognize the scene where Vanessa reunites with her childhood best friend Mina Harker, née Murray (Olivia Llewellyn) on the beach where she learns that Mina has married Jonathan Harker then abducted by ‘The Master’ (Dracula). In the following scene, Vanessa offers her unique psychic services to help Sir Malcolm Murray find his daughter, Mina, perhaps to atone for Vanessa’s sins against her. Despite their introductory function, these scenes presuppose readers’
acquaintance with the events unfolded in ‘Closer than Sisters’ because this flashback episode itself delivers important backstory of how Vanessa and Mina (like their families) become estranged after Vanessa seduces Mina’s fiancé, Captain Branson, the evening before the wedding. Vanessa’s betrayal occurs as part of a chain of dramatic events which result in Mina marrying Harker and eventually falling under Dracula’s spell – omitted in comic book’s storytelling. For Vanessa, Malcolm’s tryst with her mother leads her to seduce Captain Branson, culminating with her mysterious illness caused by grief and shame. This sickness turns out to be a demonic possession, however, sending her to an asylum where she undergoes extreme nineteenth-century medical treatments.

This flashback episode not only deepens Vanessa’s complexity as a character, but it also grounds her psychologically by unveiling how she becomes susceptible to evil in her early adolescence, when she spies on her mother and Malcolm having intercourse in a hedge maze. Far from repulsed by her mother’s adultery, Vanessa enjoys watching her with Malcolm and an evil presence ignites within her – the source of her long-term inner (demonic) struggle. These events partly explain why both Sir Malcolm and Vanessa feel responsible for what happened to Mina. In contrast, comic book storytelling cannot fill in all the blanks of setting or events and characters. Without being acquainted with the story from television and without any knowledge of which prior happenings leading up to the current point of the story where Mina pleads for Vanessa’s help, the reader-viewer of the comics hardly understands the deeper implications of their dialogue as the narration itself leaves out crucial background information:

Mina: ‘I do not blame you. Whatever sin, it has been forgiven in your suffering. So much suffering’.

Vanessa: ‘It is more than I deserve, and myself, I cannot forgive…There is so much to say’.

Mina: ‘…or so little. I am married now. Can you imagine that? […] He doesn’t have the mustache of my gallant Captain, but Mr. Harker’s a good man and he loves me’.

Vanessa: ‘I’m happy for you’.

Mina: ‘And our poor Peter’.

Vanessa: ‘I’m so sorry’.

Mina: ‘If only you had run after him that day on the cliffs, and held him tight, and told him not to go and that you loved him for his weakness’.

Vanessa: ‘How do you know about that?’

Mina: ‘I know many things now, Vanessa. He has taught me much…Things no one should ever know. He has me, Vanessa. The master. He feeds on my blood. Save me’.

(Penny Dreadful, Vol.1 2017, 4–5)
Respecting its source without being a slave to it, this dialogue presupposes and plays on the reader-viewer’s foreknowledge of events and it is, with few exceptions, almost identical with the screen dialogue. In this dialogue, there are many gaps and the kind of esoteric references that only audiences familiar with the TV series would understand – for instance, Vanessa’s failed attempt to seduce Peter (Mina’s brother) in a hedge maze (cliffs). Only reader-viewers already familiar with the TV series can disambiguate and fill in such gaps in the comic’s storytelling, which makes the prequel less usable as an entryway into the whole Penny Dreadful universe. However, for a transmedia (spin-off) production like the Penny Dreadful comic series to be a success, it is important to build such strategic gaps into the narrative to create mystery evoking a hunger for more information in those readers not yet familiar with the show. References to unknown knowledge motivate audiences to travel across media platforms and experience the entire storyworld. Geoffrey Long describes such ‘migratory cues’ as ‘the art of building strategic gaps into a narrative to evoke a delicious sense of uncertainty, mystery, or doubt in the audience’ (2007, 53). Put differently, migratory cues (as the ones present in the dialogue above) create references to places, characters or events, that are not explained, mentioned or only hinted. By creating migratory cues in the comics, audiences are encouraged to look for additional content in the originating TV series.

Besides its sinister grey-bluescale colouring, the reunion scene on the beach is depicted with one significant difference from the screenplay: in the comic book version of Vanessa and Mina’s encounter on the beach, the ominous yet reconciliatory mood is emphasized by their embrace, while Mina’s eyes have turned red – suggesting that she is under the spell of her master and therefore not herself. The sinister colouring and their embrace seem to compensate for the lack of emotional details about the characters in the comic book storytelling medium, where one of its most distinguishing features as the medium is its gutter – i.e. the white margin that separates one panel from the next in the juxtaposed sequences of panels of images. Thus, one crucial challenge in adapting televisual live-action content to the comic book form is translating continuous movement, such as fine changes of facial expressions. Like all narrative fiction, comic books are governed by the principle of relevance. Therefore, the details of Vanessa’s and Mina’s story adapted into comics can never be total, and the storyteller must then select a few significant details, leaving many things from the source text out of the narration. A substantial part of the gutter’s white space projected to us through an interplay of gutter and image is its structure of implication.

One such structure is what phenomenologist Ingarden ([1931] 1972) has coined places of indeterminacy, emerging in the sequential chain of signs (text and images) when information is omitted from narrative. According to Ingarden, this implication structure requires audiences to provide information to disambiguate, to complete missing information in a sequence from minimal textual data and in joint activity of sense-making to mobilize a variety of cognitive abilities in combination with prior encyclopedic, generic, iconographic, cultural and linguistic knowledge.
Indeed, if reader-viewers do not complete missing information in the *Penny Dreadful* comic books as directed by its blueprint – for instance filling in missing information (regarding setting, characters, time, space, etc.) which is available in the *Penny Dreadful* TV series – then a very weak characterization is received. As for the *Penny Dreadful* prequel, this process of gap-filling is both cross-media and intertextual, oscillating between at least three different media platforms (literature, television and comics).

**Transmedial expansion – a backstory of death**

The prequel *Penny Dreadful, Volume I* is broadly faithful to the TV series which is emphasized by its distinctive use of intertextual strategies such as subverted references, allusions and quotations. Louie De Martinis gives an impressionistic capturing of the cast’s likeness and the writing echoes significant discursive elements of the series – for instance, its use of the old English folk song ‘The Unquiet Grave’ as a leitmotif, creating a bridge between events and characters depicted in the comics and Logan’s narrative.

The comic prequel contains an embedded narrative which opens with a flashback narrated by Sembene (Malcolm’s African manservant), showing Malcolm kneeling over Peter’s dehydrated dead body at the shores of Lake Tanganyika. How Peter died has previously been hinted in the television episode ‘Séance’ (S1:E2). Under a séance at a party thrown by Mr. Lyle, Sir Malcolm’s sins and his guilt are voiced through the spirits processing Vanessa’s body revealing how Malcolm was more interested in collecting trophies serving his own ego, than staying at Peter’s side. Instead, he left him alone, dying from dysentery.

The embedded backstory acts as a memory of how and why Malcolm and Sembene formed the lifelong bond we see on the television show, and this backstory is addressed to Vanessa (the narratee of the story) explaining why Malcolm is not unfamiliar with supernatural phenomena and believes in her psychic skills. At the shores of Tanganyika, Sembene warns Malcolm against burying Peter in a foreign country, because ‘the dead must be returned to their ancestors […] You must take your son home’ (Wilson-Cairns, King et al. 2017, 54) – otherwise it will inflict a terrible curse upon him and Sembene’s slaves. Malcolm, not believing in ‘witchcraft or superstition’ does whatever he wishes and buries Peter anyway, which unleashes the curse as a plague of unexplained events – such as animal attacks and the sudden severe illness among Sembene’s slaves.

In a nightmarish scene, Malcolm has an uncanny confrontation with the revengeful ghost of Peter, who intentionally leads him into a lion ambush telling him ‘You are not the hunter, Malcolm…You are the prey’ (Wilson-Cairns, King et al. 2017, 68) – a twisted quotation of Malcolm’s own words from ‘Night Work’ (S1:E1). This quotation exemplifies the transfictional strategy which Ryan refers to as modification because this sequence of events is counterfactual to events and information given in the TV series. However, on a story level, it adds to the
psychological depth of Malcolm’s character. The comic’s adaptation of the story provides him with the experiences to believe in the demons haunting Vanessa.

Like the TV series, the comic prequel is a twisted reflection of Stoker’s *Dracula*. This is obvious if we consider the relationship between literary pre-texts, the TV series, the comic series – and, not least, how content is delivered across media in the *Penny Dreadful* franchise. By redefining the original constellation of minor and main characters from Stoker’s *Dracula*, the TV series subversively shatters the original distribution of roles among Stoker’s original characters. One that plays a minor role than in the originating text – and is only mentioned very briefly in the TV series – is *Dracula* protagonist Jonathan Harker, Mina Murray’s husband. The comic prequel, on the other hand, contains an instance of minor-character elaboration on Jonathan Harker’s televisual appearance, as it converts this originally protagonist (*Dracula*)-turned peripheral character serving literarily no actant function in the TV series, into a more foregrounded character in the comic prequel – more consistent with Stoker’s original incarnation of the character.

In the prequel, we are introduced not only to Harker but also an ensemble of (re-imagined) Stoker characters – including the Texan gunman Quincy P. Morris, Mina’s friend (and fellow victim of Dracula’s bite), Professor Abraham Van Helsing, Lucy Westenra, R. M. Renfield and Dr. John Seward. Many of those appropriated figures are minor-character elaborations serving different actant roles than in the source text. The Westenra-figure, for instance, is left out completely of the televisual narrative, but not in the comics where she appears as a radical revision of her original incarnation. Somewhat the same can be said about Dr. Seward, who is re-gendered as a woman, Dr. Florence Seward, both in the TV series and the comic prequel and sequel, though this character in its female version is consistent with essential aspects of the original presentation.

**Cross-medial characters – a zigzagging experience**

Acknowledging the participatory nature of transtextual recreations of characters, cross-media interpretation tends to be more like a zigzagging process through integral narrative elements ‘dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels’ (Jenkins 2007, 2). Analyzing transmedia characters from a reader-centric meaning-construction perspective points to the importance of familiarity. With reference to Michael Riffaterre’s definition, Genette explains how familiarity is a necessary condition for transtextual interpretation, as inter-text ‘is the perception, by the reader, of the relationship between a work and others that have either preceded or followed it’ (Genette [1982] 1997, 2). In other words, the reader is assumed to be already acquainted with the transfictionalized storyworld and/or character, and also with all distinct parts of a transmedia composition. Otherwise, readers could not interpret the transmedial storyworld as a whole.

Consequently, the comic prequel’s fleshing out aspects of the fictional world and its characters potentially adds more layers to the *Penny Dreadful* universe. Simultaneously, however, it also produces a fundamental ambiguity and a vibration of meaning (points of indeterminacy) when
interpretation takes place in the intersection between different media. This suggests that transmedial interpretation forms as the interpreter’s memorial synthesis contributes to the construction of transmedia characters. For instance, the reader must decide retrospectively whether the curse inflicted upon Malcolm in the comic prequel is the reason behind the misfortunes and deaths that surround him, as depicted in the TV series.

One crucial challenge regarding media extensions of original narratives concerns consistency and the logical relations between those extensions and the source itself. There seem, however, to be very few plot points or information in the tie-in comic that contradict or create conflicts of information with the TV series. The five-part prequel dovetails perfectly into the beginning of the TV series and ‘adds a new piece of information which forces us to revise our understanding of the fiction as a whole’ (Jenkins 2007, 5). However, the prequel also takes us beyond the known narrative, providing more information about peripheral characters than the televisual narrative. By amplifying the gaps within the TV series (hypotext) into a comic prequel (hypertext), in which we have an extended insight into the main characters and their motivations, continuity between all narrative elements deepens the engagement of the audience into The Penny Dreadful universe. Genette’s notion for this process of revising a fictional character’s motivations to correspond with his/her actions is transmotivation ([1982] 1997, 330–335). When hypertexts equip characters with motivations, lacking in the hypotext, this forces us to modify our understanding of them. Accordingly, in the case of this prequel, additive comprehension takes the form of backstory, but it also provides us with other perspectives of characters serving a more peripheral function in the televisual narrative.12

**Penny Dreadful in sequel format – the resurrection of Miss Ives**

Following the abrupt finale of the Penny Dreadful TV series, many television viewers were left heartbroken with the tragic death of Vanessa Ives dying in the arms of Ethan Chandler. However, there was also surprise at the lack of narrative resolution: too many cliffhangers with no resolution and too many strategic gaps evoking uncertainty and mystery, cueing audience to find out more.

After publishing the well-received prequel, Titan Comics returned to the Penny Dreadful universe with an ongoing sequel, continuing storylines and elements of Logan’s original narrative, adopting his major characters and inventing continued adventures for them without fundamentally transforming them. First volume bears the subtitle The Awaking (2017) and is illustrated by Jesús Hervás and written by the TV series co-executive producer, Chris King. Therefore, this should be considered an authorized sequel in terms of characterization as well as narrative and character development consistent with the TV series.

The Awaking is the first volume of the sequel and it explores the aftermath of the events depicted in the final episode of the TV series. It is set six months after Vanessa’s death and opens by considering where all the surviving characters of the TV series are. Ethan now lives at
Malcolm’s house; Catriona Hartdegen serves a more prominent role in the sequel as one of Sir Malcolm’s confidants. Along with Dr. Jekyll (now a Lord), Victor Frankenstein now works at the Bedlam insane asylum, while Lily is losing her recent memories, gaining back her original identity as Brona who has joined a covenant of warrior nuns.

Ethan Chandler is plagued by the death of Vanessa, whom he murdered in the TV series per her own request for a greater good. In his dreams, he is haunted by her accusatory spirit and therefore seeks Dr. Seward for professional help for controlling his beastly gift as ‘lupus dei’ (the wolf of God) via hypnosis. Elsewhere, in Egypt, Professor Ferdinand Lyle (Simon Russell Beale) – who left London to preside at some excavations in the TV series’ third season – discovers a sarcophagus whilst rummaging through a tomb together with the Duke of Kent (a new character). From deciphering hieroglyphics, they uncover another Egyptian mystery, prophesying the awakening of Lucifer’s herald, Belial, containing a (fore)warning of a battle between two forces of evil, with mankind caught in the middle. Here, the comic sequel aligns with Logan’s mash-up mythology – i.e. Catholic eschatology and doctrine synthesized with Egyptian mythology, and the nineteenth-century spiritualism – as a similar prophecy is revealed by Mr. Lyle in second season TV episodes.

Vanessa Ives is perhaps the only major character from the TV series not based directly upon a Victorian pre-text. However, she is obviously inspired by both ‘the challenging female sexualities of Dracula (his hungry, lustful brides)’ (Howell and Baker 2017, 9) and the late-Victorian New Woman. As a character, Vanessa hides endless complexity and ambiguity. On the one hand, she seems smooth on the surface, representing the Victorian ideal of the domestic and socially restricted woman, embodying submissive womanhood as a ward under a male guardian, Sir Malcolm Murray. She also perfects a message of willingness to repress her sexuality through her Victorian clothing, such as her tight-lacing and high-necked dresses. On the other hand, beneath this surface of equanimity, her inner demons lurk. They are released every time she gives in to her true sexual nature liberating herself from social restrictions. Many female Penny Dreadful characters – for instance Lily Frankenstein (Billie Piper), Dr. Florence Seward/Joan Clayton (Patti LuPone), and Catriona Hartdegen (Perdita Weeks) and Miss Ives – can be perceived as distortions of the Victorian ideal of womanhood. They are all challenging the limited scope of female (heteronormative) sexuality and fighting the social restraints imposed upon them by male-dominated society and its institutions of social control over female deviance as manifested by the mental asylum providing moral treatment. Throughout all three seasons of the TV series, the main plotline focuses on Vanessa’s inner battle between faith versus religious despair – literally, as Lucifer (so it appears for two seasons) haunts her and desires her for his bride. In first season episode, ‘Possession’ Vanessa’s recurrent episodes of demonic possession return triggered by her attraction to libertine Dorian Gray, which unleashes her dark side during sex with him. By constantly drawing connections between feminine desire, aberrant feminine behaviour, bodily vulnerability and
abjection of the portrayal of Vanessa as a victim of possession align with many archetypical representations of dual personality horror figures where the boundaries between self and other have been transgressed. The depiction of Vanessa as ‘possessed body’ and its graphic display of a rebellious body through signs of bodily excretion owes a lot to Friedkin’s *The Exorcist* (1973). Accordingly, the complexity of Vanessa’s character is not only caused by characterization but also her merged and interfigural nature. She is intertextually contaminated by different archetypical manifestations of female monstrosity as coined by Barbara Creed in her well-known book *Monstrous-Feminine* (1993) – including the ‘possessed monster’ and ‘the witch’. Besides her gift of being a clairvoyant and a medium, Vanessa is also a powerful witch. As a reincarnation of the Egyptian primordial goddess Amunet (meaning ‘the female hidden one’), the mother of all evil, Vanessa’s character is furthermore woven into a complex cosmology that blends a great deal of mythological source material – Egyptian and Christian mythologies with classical gothic elements. She is the consort of the god Amun-Ra (a.k.a. the Dragon, Dracula and Dr. Alexander Sweet), who, if conjoined together, will plunge the world into eternal darkness.

This mash-up cosmology is further elaborated in the sequel *The Awaking* for instance via an embedded story – a flashback to ancient Egypt in the twelfth dynasty – narrated by Mr. Lyle providing a mythical backstory of Vanessa’s tragic fate in the TV series. From this backstory, we learn how the story of Princess Amunet, daughter to a great pharaoh who is betrothed to Amun-Ra but in love with Belial, parallels with Vanessa’s. Similar to Vanessa, Princess Amunet is caught in the middle of an eternal and bloody war between two evil forces, Set (Lucifer), a demon of spiritual essence and Amun-Ra (Dracula), a demon of the flesh – pursuing her from the inside and outside, respectively, as they would Vanessa centuries later. Amunet and Vanessa’s lives are similar in numerous ways. Both experience states of demonic possession, in which they are capable of levitation. Both surrender eventually to Amun-Ra’s (Dracula) bite and subsequently choose to end their lives, Amunet with the final words ‘I’m a woman of free will’ (King 2017, 64). Thus, they choose death for the same reasons: the survival of mankind and to demonstrate female empowerment. In King’s expanded mythology, Amun-Ra is angered due to Amunet’s love for Belial, who post-mortem and per Lucifer’s request (and with help from the Duke of Kent) returns to late-Victorian London as a necromancer – keen to be reunited with his love, Amunet. Through this narrative paralleling of temporal distant events and characters across different media, King’s narrative adds further layers to the mythology surrounding Vanessa Ives by suggesting that Amunet and her corresponding destinies are shaped by an eternal return of the same mythical drama. Simultaneously, narrative character identity across media iterations is also created. Accordingly, by echoing essential story elements (actantial conflicts, character, themes, etc.) and by adopting already familiar discursive details (e.g. the iconographic metaphors for Lucifer who is depicted as a shadowy snake in ‘A Blade of Grass’), the comic sequel builds in cross-medial references that plays on the reader-viewers’ knowledge of the televisual narrative.
Most of the returning characters appearing in the second volume of the sequel – *The Beauteous Evil* – seem like well-developed character extensions of their televisual counterparts – true to their original character traits, conflicts and developmental potentials. As for Vanessa Ives, her monstrous dimension has taken over completely after her dead body is resurrected by Belial in the opening of the volume and eventually possessed by Lucifer now seeking to give birth to the Anti-Christ and thereby fulfilling her purpose as the mother of all evil. In that sense, she not only aligns with her televisual depiction as possessed monster but also with other female characters of destruction such as Lilith. In *The Beauteous Evil* spiritualist Vanessa Ives is therefore woven into the bigger mythology surrounding Lilith and the Egyptian Goddess Amunet, contributing to build up and expand *Penny Dreadful*’s own fictional world and its complex mythology (an amalgamation of Christian theology, elements from Egyptian mythology and nineteenth spiritualism) by merging it with elements from Jewish folklore. This remixing of ideas reflects postmodernism and the perspective that our traditions and their cultural content can be reimagined by taking material and merging it into new original creations. In that sense, both the TV series and its comic book expansion arise from a playful experiment of layering meaning into a contaminant cobweb of signification.

**Conclusion: reimagined characters – lost identity?**

The mash-up constellation of characters in the *Penny Dreadful* TV series appear slightly twisted, elaborated, reimagined, modified and/or even developed further. Sometimes they play a different role than in their originating storyworlds. However, the degree of alteration varies widely in the comics. When a recognizable character is extricated from an original fictional context and inserted into new ones in different media, this may not simply imply that different adaptations of that character share the same storyworld. Fictional worlds are complex, consisting not only of certain characters, things and places but also of the totality of circumstances, actions, interactions between characters and events unfolding. Therefore, if re-used characters are considered organic parts of their originating storyworlds, the perception of them necessarily changes, when circumstances, events and character constellations are different in their new fictional contexts even though they might still be recognizable to some extent.

Among transmedia scholars (Jenkins, Long, Smith), there has been a continuous affirming of a completely settled distinction between ‘expansion’ and ‘adaptation’. An adaptation is the ‘retelling of a story in a different media type’ (Long 2007, 22), whereas an ‘expansion’ ‘seeks to add something to the existing story as it moves from one medium to another’ (Jenkins 2007, 6). However, the transmedia practice of transferring known characters (as practiced by Logan) to new narrative worlds in other media seems to complicate a clear distinction between storytelling practices like adaptation and expansion due to the reproductive aspect of such migrating characters into new fictional worlds across media. Brian Richardson maintains that ‘Transtextual
exemplifications of the same character must be consistent with essential aspects of the original presentation’ (2010, 539). Therefore, a certain degree of reproduction is at stake if a criterion for continuous character identity across media is consistency and (to some extent) mimetic fidelity. The comic book iterations of *Penny Dreadful* strive for recognition, by having characters drawn to look like the actors who play them in the televisual narrative. On the other hand, adaptations are not simply reproductions. As Jenkins states, they may be deeply transformative as well: offering an approach which allows us ‘to think of adaption and extension as part of a continuum in which both poles are only theoretical possibilities’ (2007, 7).

**Notes**

4. Transmedial storytelling is a special case of transfictionality that operates across many different media (See Ryan 2013, 366).
5. This distinction is an elaboration of Lubomir Dolezel’s *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds* (1998), where he describes a type of relation between fictional worlds and the texts that create them, which he calls “postmodern rewrite” and he distinguishes between three forms of rewrites: Transposition, expansion and displacement. Ryan, however, renames displacement modification.
6. For example, Tod Browning’s *Dracula* (1931), James Sangster’s *Dracula* (1958), and Francis Ford Coppola’s *Dracula* (1992).
7. At this point in the prequel narrative, “the master” is still unnamed, although most television viewers perhaps already know his many aliases: Amun-Ra, The Dragon, Dracula and Dr. Alexander Sweet. Considering that his true identity has already been revealed to television viewers, it is interesting how aligned this prequel is with its pre-text regarding the story’s development.
8. The comic book adaptation of this dialogue sentence from Logan’s narrative ”If only you had run after him that day in the maze” (season 1, episode 5) is almost identical with the original – Except the word maze has been changed to “cliff” in the comic book adaptation.
9. This song is sung or played in several episodes – For instance in “Séance” (season 1, episode 2) by Vanessa Ives (Eva Green), in “Fresh Hell” (season 2, episode 1) by Evelyn Poole (Helen McCrory), and by her daughter Hecate (Sarah Greene) in “And They Were Enemies” (season 2, episode 10).
10. The reference to Malcolm’s lion-hunt story from the TV series is obvious and in Peter’s wording, Malcolm’s original story is modified: “I thought of a particular lion hunt many years ago. You’re moving through the tall grass, getting a glimpse of the prey, the shoulders mostly, the mane. You prepare your
rifle. You’re very quiet. And then there’s a moment. The wind changes, the grass stops swaying. The lion turns, looks at you. The moment you realize you are no longer the hunter, you are the prey” (S1: E1).

11. As elaborated by Genette himself, Michael Riffaterre’s definition of “intertextuality is, in principle, much broader than mine is here, and it seems to extend everything I call transtextuality” (Genette (1982 1997), 2).

12. As stated by Henry Jenkins, most transmedia content adds to our understanding of a story as a whole and serves “one or more of the following functions: offers backstory, maps the world, offers us other character’s perspectives on the action, deepens audience engagement” (Jenkins 2009, 7).

13. Similarly, when Vanessa surrenders to Dracula, she declares “I accept . . . myself” (season 3, episode 7).

References


http://sites.middlebury.edu/mediacp/


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