

Penny Dreadful: dismembering and assembling the Victorian Gothic

Nothing quite spells decadence, darkness, madness and excess than the Victorian Gothic, a literary genre which flourished in the interminable nineteenth century alongside the mental asylum, the sewer system, alienism, forensics, photography, human blood transfusion and the telephone. It would take more than the age of gaslight and the *Origin of Species* however to banish spiritualism, table rapping, parlour magic, mesmerism and belief in the supernatural netherworld, all of which persisted well into the fin-de-siècle. Beyond the illuminating but scant comfort of yellowish pools of light sprawled the beast that was London, with its "midnight streets" (W. Blake) and things that went bump, slash and howl in the night. Perhaps it was the same sources of artificial light, exuding the illusion of civic law and order, which nonetheless also permitted a Victorian demimonde to flit in and out of existence beyond the feeble reaches of their aura.

The word 'demimonde' was used by Dumas in an 1855 comedy to depict a community of people who embraced a flagrant and hedonistic lifestyle, a society that would have made Wilde's *Dorian Gray* its chief exponent and reckless debauchee. The Victorian Gothic scrabbles at the literal roots of the French term, *demi-monde*, or 'half world', to expose its nether worldly and fantastic connotations. It is this same 'half world', a world where the supernatural is in the habit of irrupting into the rational and sensible world, that American show syndicate Showtime bought the premise for.

Penny Dreadful, created by John Logan and airing on Showtime in April 2014, renewed interest in the Victorian Gothic following relatively unsuccessful films and TV series like *I, Frankenstein* (2014), *Dracula* (2013), *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* (2012), *Van Helsing* (2004) and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003). All of these tapped into the Victorian Gothic in diverse ways, either through its literature or remotely, through its lore, yet only *League* came possibly close to achieving what Logan's series has demonstrated capable of doing in its first season run-up of eight episodes. However, Stephen Norrington's *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* did not show the same erudition and complexity that the graphic novel series by Alan Moore possessed, providing Logan with the necessary market and conceptual gap for a new pastiche of the Victorian Gothic eleven years later. It is one that exploits the intertextual stratagems that Moore makes use of in his *League* series of graphic novels, but which were never successfully translated onto the big (or small) screen.

Critics of the *Penny Dreadful* series have pounced on the character and plot line similarities it would appear to share with *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. Both are set in a semi-fictitious and alternative late nineteenth-century London and both involve key characters drawn from literature of the period as they embark on a series of missions which the average citizen is not privy to. Since their life and exploits intersect within a new and continuous narrative frame rather than exist in separate and non-

intersecting literary worlds, the possibilities emerging from encounters between Stoker's Mina Harker, Verne's Captain Nemo, Rider Haggard's Allan Quatermain, Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll, Wells's Invisible Man and other notable early modern characters, are practically limitless. In truth, *Penny Dreadful* only mimics a limited number of motifs and characters that are central to Moore's alternative universe. The *Penny Dreadful* gang may not be run by Mina Harker, as in Moore's serials, but still finds its impetus in the mysterious, brooding and cynical Vanessa Ives, a woman who collaborates with legendary explorer Sir Malcolm Murray to find answers when his daughter, a certain Mina, goes missing. Murray's character might be closely modelled on Haggard's Quatermain (again, a character central to Moore's *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*) yet would seem to bear closer resemblance to history's own David Livingstone, who led several expeditions to the Dark Continent between 1851 and 1873 in an attempt to find the source of the River Nile. (In the pilot episode 'Night Work', what Murray explains to one of his men is particularly telling: "When you see a river you must follow it to its source, no matter the perils, no matter those comrades that fall along the way.") And, while in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, an equally immortal Mina Harker and Allan Quatermain are recruited by Champion Bond, Victorian forerunner of Fleming's Special Agent 007, to serve and protect the British crown, *Penny Dreadful*'s quite mortal Sir Malcolm and Miss Ives are the ones who single-handedly recruit a motley band of men - an American sharpshooter on a travelling sideshow (Ethan Chandler) and an anatomist (Victor Frankenstein) - to engage in some dubious "night work" and assorted clandestine jobs.

Aside from the central concept of a league, or team, assembled to counteract a significant threat to Britain's government or its people, this is where Moore's *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* and Logan's singular *Penny Dreadful* individuals finally part company. Logan's assemblage of literary characters is less concerned with the politics of the material world than what ripples beneath its surface. A threat more significant than Moore's Fu Manchu, Professor Moriarty or even Martian tripods silently docks into London, bringing with it disappearances and a strange pestilence which leaves its victims emaciated, schizophrenic and rabid for human blood. *Penny Dreadful*, then, could be accused of feeding off Bram Stoker rather (or other) than Allan Moore, as its major plot line unapologetically reproduces the master narrative against which the entire corpus of the Victorian Gothic has defined itself.

Dracula's tropes and motifs are forever present in *Penny Dreadful*: the insinuation of a demonic and supernatural force into London society and its unsuspecting populace; the appearance of an exotic epidemic for which there is no known cure; the mysterious appearances of a wraith-like figure and child abductions following a young woman's premature death; the singular abilities of an individual who can pacify a pack of wolves; the manic rantings of a paranoid schizophrenic with a penchant for human blood, and finally, the ongoing hunt for a master vampire who covertly amasses an army of the undead. What redeems *Penny Dreadful* from becoming yet again a rather unimaginative and clumsy romp into the Gothic omniverse that is *Dracula* is the way it reconfigures this master narrative within its heavy pastiche. Allusion is frequent, direct

and often pretentious, but it works, and it becomes even more significant when one is aware of the intertextual and structural possibilities opened up when concepts, creations and characters from late Romanticism, the Victorian Gothic and Victoriana are conflated and brought into fortuitous co-existence. This then, is what makes the eponymous *Penny Dreadful* an example of narrational irony, inasmuch as the narrative discourse luckily transcends its source model.

Taking its inspiration from the mass produced pamphlets that sold for a penny apiece in serial form and which glorified and vilified in equal measure real-life and fictitious villains like Dick Turpin or the cut-throat barber Sweeney Todd, Logan's *Penny Dreadful* is a nod towards the nineteenth-century's consumption of sensationalistic press at a time of escalating criminality, preserving its serial mode of narration by intertwining storylines and backtracking into the characters' past, but cleverly superimposing the more elegant literary Gothic onto its urban grit. In this manner, much needed realism and credibility, narrative qualities Logan made his imperatives from day one of shooting, are achieved in a genre renowned for its escapism.

The content of the nineteenth-century penny dreadfuls was lurid and overdramatic, offering little in literary gravitas if any of their headlines was anything to go by: *Varney, the Vampyre: Or, The Feast of Blood*; *Spring-Heel'D Jack, The Terror of London*; *Sweeney Todd, The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*; *The Whitechapel Murders, Or, The Mysteries of the East End*; *Risen from the Dead; Or, The Medical Student*; *Wagner, the Wehr-Wolf*. Tabloid titles notwithstanding, the under-rated penny dreadful might have created the right climate (while initially not the ideal readership) which foregrounded and secured the Victorian Gothic's key themes and archetypes for centuries to come: the demonic double; the monster within; the monster without; madness; resurrectionism, and blood-drinking, all of which find their way in the *Penny Dreadful* episodes. Excluding Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which was published in 1818 before the advent of the penny dreadful phenomenon, it would be an interesting intertextual exercise in its own right to determine to what extent elements from the penny dreadful inhere in Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*, Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Dickens's *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Leroux's *The Phantom of the Opera* and, finally and more notably, Stoker's *Dracula*. Less laboriously, we could briefly look at Logan's revised Victorian universe and determine which intertextual frames of reference, literary or historical, are probable, and which anachronistic, and explore how seamless the interaction between the two has been in *Penny Dreadful*'s first acclaimed season. For it becomes evident that while Logan's series' title pays homage to the run-of-the mill hack fiction whose literary value is quite dubious, the same cannot be said of the way it effortlessly interpolates several of the Victorian Gothic's key moments in a literary *volte-face* generally not indigenous nor amenable to syndicated television.

Penny Dreadful's pilot episode, 'Night Work' opens with the vicious slaughter of a working-class woman who is plucked through a privy window by an unseen force as she relieves herself. It is assumed that the same fate awaits her daughter when she wakes

up to investigate the commotion. Several scenes later, the London Metropolitan Police capture the massacre on photographic plate before the disemboweled and disembodied remains of the two females are carted out, amidst rumours that "it is the Ripper come back." Any Ripperologist would however be mildly amused, since the notorious killer with a taste for impromptu street surgery and mutilation left the bodies of his first four victims, all East End prostitutes and no children, mostly intact; Mary Kelly, an Irish immigrant whose organs were found scattered all over the room she was renting, was an exception. Ostensibly, Mary Kelly was Jack the Ripper's grand finale, ending a series of inexplicable and brutal murders between August and November 1888. Likewise, the Ripper connection is present in Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show, an American cowboy troupe which arrived in London in 1887 as part of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee celebrations and set sail again in the spring of 1888. It has been suggested that the Ripper was a Sioux Indian warrior who belonged to this troupe, and, perhaps not incidentally, Ethan Chandler, the charming American gunslinger recruited by Vanessa Ives and Sir Malcolm, appears in the first episode as Buffalo Bill Cody, yet Ripperologists would have reasons to scoff again. The *Penny Dreadful* murders occur in September 1891, way outside the American travelling carnival, and while the tantalising possibility of a new cycle of Ripper-style murders is proffered, the perceptive viewer would have noticed the brute force required to expel a woman from a privy window as well as to split her asunder, and reach the conclusion that a more preternatural and inhuman force is at work...

...a force which is hinted at in the final episode 'Grand Guignol' when Ethan Chandler, is revealed to be a lycanthrope who shape-shifts when the moon grows fat. While the werewolf legend is as notorious as the vampire's, curiously this monstrosity seems to have been sidelined in favour of its more anthropomorphic bloodsucking kinsman, who appeared in early British and German Romantic poetry and morphed into the now familiar drawing room seducer and society gent until Stoker drove him back underground, to his folkloric roots. The presence of the werewolf in the Victorian Gothic canon is therefore practically nonexistent, unless one is prepared to accord physical transformation of man into 'beast', with the brute strength and rage that accompanies this change, to Stevenson's Henry Jekyll. (Stoker's Count Dracula too has the ability to shape-shift, and indeed adopts the form of "an immense dog" upon landing at Whitby harbour and later a "great, gaunt grey wolf" when visiting Lucy Westenra). Logan, however, did not have the werewolf-as-metaphor for Jekyll's double in mind (and in fact it would be interesting to see whether an incarnation of this split double will make an appearance in future *Penny Dreadful* episodes; after all, Stevenson in fact published his novella in 1886, well within the *Penny Dreadful* timeline of events). Logan was clearly alluding to an actual werewolf transformation, something akin to the relentless monster present in Wagner, *the Wehr-Wolf*, a penny dreadful penned by George W. M. Reynolds, and who outsold Dickens in his time. This is also evident in the trouble Logan takes to reiterate a haunting line first appearing in an earlier episode, 'Demimonde', when a werewolf act ('The Transformed Beast') is being staged at the Grand Guignol theatre (this edifice would have first opened in Paris in 1897 to stage natural-looking *art grotesque*, thus its presence is anticipated in the series). "For claw will slash and tooth

will rend/There cannot be a happy end", chant the Grand Guignol actors, shortly before a breast is shred and fake blood is prodigiously pumped out ...

... by a facially disfigured and resentful backstage hand haunted by the sins of the father, and now accustomed to living in the shadows like Leroux's Phantom "to protect the heart" that was given to him by one Victor Frankenstein. In a clever revision of Mary Shelley's Gothic masterpiece, Logan significantly dilates literary and historical time frames to allow Frankenstein and his creature to inhabit late nineteenth-century London, becoming an integral part of the *Penny Dreadful* universe, yet also investing them with a nuanced turn-of-phrase that beautifully captures the Romantic period out of which they were originally born. Understandably, the liberties that *Penny Dreadful* takes with the Frankenstein story-line are many, yet never accidental. We forgive Logan his introduction of characters that would have lived in the eighteenth century (Shelley's revised version of her novel appeared in 1831), as well as his inclusion of resurrection men still hard at work supplying medical students with fresh corpses in 1891, a practice outlawed in 1832 by the Anatomy Act and rendered quite defunct by 1844. We are even prepared to forgive Logan the senseless killing of Professor Van Helsing by Frankenstein's first born (in *Penny Dreadful*, Victor perfects the art of resurrection, progressing from animating assembled dead body-parts to a full corpse), the minute we realise that Shelley's creature is both poignantly posthuman and tragically Romantic.

Logan's Frankenstein's creature is avowedly Promethean in his tragic destiny; an unwilling product of modernism, and hence a fitting symbol of Logan's fin-de-siècle Victorian universe. "I am not a creation of the antique pastoral world. I am modernity personified. Did you not know that's what you were creating? The modern age? Did you really imagine that your modern creation would hold to the values of Keats and Wordsworth? We are men of iron and mechanisation now. We are steam engines and turbines. Were you really so naïve to imagine that we'd see eternity in a daffodil?" ('Resurrection'). Yet by the end of the first series of episodes, Logan's own *Modern Prometheus* (Mary Shelley's own subtitle to her novel, *Frankenstein*) questions the remaining vestiges of his humanity, one at odds with the modern industrial age, as he begs Frankenstein to destroy him: "Oh, my creator, why did you not make me steel and stone. Why did you allow me to feel? I would rather be the corpse I was than the man I am" ('Grand Guignol').

In simultaneously celebrating and lamenting the coming – or the curse – of the post-human, Frankenstein's first born lives up to his Shakespearean name, Caliban, the sub-human character from *The Tempest* which Wilde also discusses in his preface to *Dorian Gray*. Caliban's unannounced appearance at the end of the second episode ('Séance') is dramatic in its violation; he cuts his way with his bare hands into the aptly named Proteus, Frankenstein's successful re-animation of a dead whaler, and which we were initially led to assume was Frankenstein's creature. Proteus, born of Shakespearean allusion (*Two Gentlemen of Verona*) and mythological reference to the Greek god of rivers and oceans, is however not Mary Shelley's monster, with yellowish

skin, lustrous black hair and rheumatic eyes; his (re)birth too is uncomplicated and tranquil, and is hardly the stuff of nightmares. Not a montage of body parts and gazing in child-like awe around him as he re-learns language and concepts, Logan's Proteus is innocence and vulnerability personified, and ironically a representation of Victor Frankenstein's perfecting of his toils cut tragically short. Abhorred and abandoned, Caliban however remains Frankenstein's most legitimate son. He is a Faustian reminder of the perils of scientific enquiry when married to reckless amorality, the natural by-product of Frankenstein's *raison d'être*. In embracing Percy Bysshe Shelley's line from *Adonais*, "No more let life divide what death can join together", Frankenstein commits himself and his murderous offspring to the demi-monde.

While Logan's text poaching is not merely restricted to a revisitation of the main myths and themes that shaped the Victorian Gothic – think of Vanessa Ives's possession, which is occasionally presented as sexual hysteria borne out of adolescent guilt and Catholic prudishness, or the adroit inclusion of Egyptology and Egyptian hexes as an alternative to the vampiric blood curse – the taut and elaborate framework that constitutes the manifold *Penny Dreadful* universe is built around the concept of alterity, an innate principle of difference and otherness that sets individuals apart from others. The Victorian Gothic and its monstrous outcasts were born out of the antinomies of scientific discovery and scientific impossibility, the product of evolutionary progression as well as atavism, a fear of degeneration, both moral and social. (Think of Dorian Gray luxuriating in his London apartment while listening to German classical music and the same man who cheers on the most stomach-churning of animal cruelty as a dog tears apart live rats in a gambling den). Likewise, *Penny Dreadful*'s characters are dual in their singularity, and we are reminded of their essential difference in the show's tagline: "There is some thing within us all." There is some "thing", some inexplicable but real essence which runs counter to sanity and progress and which periodically irrupts in the rational universe from within. Evil in Logan's *Penny Dreadful* is not merely 'something'. Gone is the abstraction that renders it undefinable or negligible, to be replaced by an atavism, some thing, that feeds on humanity's most primal emotions – fear, hate lust, anger and hunger.
