The Transformed Beast: *Penny Dreadful*, Adaptation, and the Gothic

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**Abstract**

After only one eight-part season, the television series *Penny Dreadful*, a Showtime/Sky Atlantic co-production, had already become an international success with an active and vocal fanbase. Yet the relationship of the show (which was created and written by John Logan) to the Victorian serial fiction genre, ‘penny dreadfuls’, is an oblique one, and worth unpicking. The first part of this article focuses on the task of teasing out the connections between *Penny Dreadful* and the penny dreadful, arguing that the show’s title performs significant cultural work in positioning itself in relation to Victorian fiction and in relation to modern television. In the second part of the essay, I explore how *Penny Dreadful* works as an adaptation, using Kamilla Elliott’s insights into the contradictory and overlapping concepts of adaptation in *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate*. Finally, the essay considers *Penny Dreadful* as a reflection – and, it is argued, an appropriation – of contemporary media fandom.

**Keywords:** Victorian, penny fiction, gothic, penny dreadful, adaptation, neo-Victorian

**Introduction**

It is 1891. At the Grand Guignol Theatre in London, Wild West show sharpshooter Ethan Chandler is on a night out with the consumptive waif Brona Croft. They are watching a sequence called ‘The Transformed Beast’, featuring a werewolf. Chandler actually is a werewolf, but we don’t know this yet. In the circle, Dorian Gray and Vanessa Ives, ‘the most mysterious thing in London’, are making eyes at each other. Frankenstein’s monster is backstage, operating the theatre machinery and special effects. A taciturn African servant, Sembene, watches from the side aisle of the theatre, which, rather than resembling the Parisian Grand Guignol, looks very like Wilton’s Music Hall in East London. At home, Mina Murray’s father Sir Malcolm and Victor Frankenstein have apparently received a surprise visit from Count Dracula. Back in the theatre, there is some social awkwardness because Brona, unbeknown to Ethan, has already had sex with Dorian; Vanessa wants to have sex with Dorian, but tonight he and Ethan sleep together instead. This is the world, the universe of *Penny Dreadful*, where characters from different stories, from life and death, from history and fiction – and from reimagined versions of that fiction – meet and cross-pollinate.

After only one eight-part series, the series, a Showtime/Sky Atlantic co-production, had become an international success with an active and vocal fanbase. Yet the relationship of the show (which was created and written by John Logan) to the Victorian serial fiction genre, ‘penny dreadfuls’, is an oblique one, and worth unpicking. The first part of this article focuses on the task of teasing out the connections between *Penny Dreadful* and the penny dreadful, arguing that the show’s title performs significant cultural work in positioning itself in relation to Victorian fiction and in relation to modern television. In the second part of the essay, I explore how *Penny Dreadful* works as an adaptation, using Kamilla Elliott’s insights into the contradictory and overlapping concepts of adaptation in *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate.* Finally, *Penny Dreadful* is considered as a reflection – and, it is argued, an appropriation – of contemporary media fandom.

**The semantics of ‘penny dreadful’**

First of all, I want to suggest that *Penny Dreadful* makes capital out of the fact that there is no single, agreed definition for what the Victorian ‘penny dreadful’ was. Consensus seems stronger on the penny dreadful’s predecessor of the 1830s and 1840s, the ‘penny blood’. These were ‘serials sold primarily to an audience locked out of the novel [...] [and were] chiefly on historical and criminal subjects’ (Killeen 46) with ‘thrilling and bloodthirsty narratives’ set ‘within a pseudo-Gothic landscape’ (Mack 139). For their content they drew, naturally enough, on Gothic novels and the ‘Newgate novels’, recounting the deeds of criminals like Jack Sheppard and Dick Turpin, and were distinguished by their simple, repetitive prose style. The name ‘penny blood’ was ‘first used as a term of attack’ (Killeen 46) and the name effectively encapsulates the dual fear of the genre’s opponents: cheap fiction that was excessively violent. The ‘penny dreadful’ is then said to replace the penny blood in the later nineteenth century, but commentators and collectors are not altogether clear on what distinguishes a penny dreadful from a penny blood, apart from the period in which it was published, and this seems to vary from the 1830s to the 1880s. Killeen states that penny dreadfuls ‘emerged out of the bloods, but were aimed specifically at a juvenile audience and were mostly published in the second half of the century’ (46). Michael Anglo phrases the distinction similarly: ‘Indeed, before long no pretence was made that the new penny bloods were specifically for adults … [they] came to be known as ‘penny dreadfuls’, a ‘term that would embrace cheap papers of all descriptions for the next seventy years’ (12). Judith Flanders states simply that ‘“penny-bloods” was the original name for what, in the 1860s, were renamed penny-dreadfuls’ (58), placing the change in terminology decades later than the ‘1830s and ‘40s’ implied by Anglo (Anglo 11). Robert Mack warns that ‘a great many critics still confuse the bloods with the distinctly different literary type that followed them, the “penny dreadful.” The latter term was coined only in the last quarter of the nineteenth century’, he goes on, and the term ‘was intended to designate stories such as those produced by supposedly “reformed” publishers such as Edwin J. Brett, W. L. Emmett and Charles Fox’ (Mack 139). James B. Twitchell, on the other hand, suggests that the collective name for the later ‘reformed’ boys’ serials was ‘penny healthfuls’, citing the 1879 launch of the *Boy’s Own Paper* (170). This, of course, implies the necessary earlier popularity of the term ‘penny dreadful’ upon which ‘penny healthful’ puns.

Little wonder, therefore, that some historians of popular culture avoid the blood/dreadful terminology altogether. James and Smith avoid using either ‘penny dreadful’ or ‘penny blood’ when recounting the history of what they call ‘penny fiction’ and later ‘boys’ fiction’ (James and Smith xi–xiii). Jonathan Rose offers the definition of ‘penny dreadful’ as ‘cheap crime and horror literature for boys’ of the ‘late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries’, thus explaining one generic term by referring us to a more recent one, ‘horror’ (Rose 267). In the show *Penny Dreadful* itself, penny blood and penny dreadful are conflated when Professor Van Helsing plucks an issue of the penny blood, *Varney the Vampyre* (1845–7) from a shelf, referring to ‘a certain kind of literature’, and Victor Frankenstein names it as ‘a penny dreadful’ (1.6).

John Springhall’s article, ‘Pernicious Reading?’ provides a key to the roots of this frequent fudging of the terminology. ‘Penny dreadful’, he argues, was ‘a composite and elastic label’ in the later nineteenth century and became ‘an indiscriminate tag’ used by the middle class to represent popular reading (331). Thus, the term ‘penny dreadful’ was a constructed (Springhall 326) and occasionally contested (Springhall 342) label , which gained currency as part of a moral panic that resurfaced periodically, notably in the 1890s (Springhall 342). The term was therefore picked up by ‘reporters, magistrates, policemen and watch committees’ that ‘preferred to target a convenient cultural scapegoat’ (Springhall 327). Springhall’s interpretation is very useful in helping us understand why the classification is not a settled one. It helps to explain why supposedly ‘reformed’ boys’ papers like Brett’s *Boys of England* could be denounced as a bad influence on the young and yet be remarkably conservative in their contents and outlook (Springhall 340, 346), while, at the same time, it helps to account for the fact that papers of its type could be dismissed by collectors like Barry Ono as ‘goody-goody’ and ‘utterly useless’ (James and Smith xix) for not containing enough violence and gore.

This double quality in the label means that it is hard to pin down in what sense the adjective ‘dreadful’ was being used when it was transformed into a noun for the designation ‘penny dreadful’. The older meaning of ‘dreadful’, ‘inspiring dread or reverence’ is listed in the *OED* as being current from thefourteenth century, and the last entry is in 1833. The ‘weakened sense’, of objects exciting fear or aversion, is first cited in 1700 and the latest in 1897, but in the *OED* this is bound up with the sense of ‘dreadful’ as meaning ‘exceedingly bad, great, long, etc.’. The earlier use would be fitting as a descriptor for the intended atmosphere of the early Gothic-derived penny bloods; the later sense of ‘exciting fear’ might be more fitting for serious critics of the genre who worried about the fiction’s effect on the nerves and sensibilities of the young. The degenerated, pejorative sense of the word could be applied by critics of the genre, who regarded them as ‘exceedingly bad’ in prose style, or ‘exceedingly long’: a dreadful piece of writing, as we might say today. So it becomes very hard to judge, from the historical record alone, the tone in which ‘dreadful’ is applied. There may well be an attitude of knowingness that creeps into the use of ‘penny dreadful’ by the later Victorian period, where the attempts to clean up boys’ fiction were disdained by those assuming blasé poses, as more ‘dreadful’ than the fiction that caused such consternation in the first place.

What this confusion creates for *Penny Dreadful*, however, is a rich, broad semantic and historical range in which to operate. Firstly, calling the show *Penny Dreadful* places it beyond straightforwardly dismissive criticism: if one disparages it as ‘dreadful’, or as the television equivalent of a penny dreadful, then the show’s title in effect has the last laugh. Secondly, as I shall explore, the title foregrounds the series’ mix of elements from folklore, the early-nineteenth century Gothic novel, late-Victorian ‘modern Gothic’ fiction, and cultural history (for example, spiritualism; the Whitechapel murders; imperial adventurers). The name *Penny Dreadful* also gives the show a kind of outlaw, rebellious power: this is the show they don’t want you to watch, this is the show they’ll try to shut down or brand obscene.[[1]](#endnote-1)

**Pulp fiction and television**

The title also plays on a long-standing association between television and lowbrow or pulp entertainment. James Twitchell (96–7) and Brett Martin (22) have noted that moral panics around television emerged only when the medium became available to a mass audience including the young and the working class, a pattern which is also evident in the anxiety around penny fiction in the mid-Victorian period. Changes in technology from the 1820s on, such as the introduction of the Fourdrinier paper-making machine, experiments in making paper from wood pulp rather than rag, the gradual abolition of government duties on newspapers and periodicals, plus the increases in literacy in the population, created the conditions for the mass popularity of the penny bloods (James and Smith xi). In writing penny fiction, authors had a vested interest – being paid by the line – in spinning out tales for as long as they were popular, and for padding out each episode with repetitive phrasing and short, simple sentence structures (Mack 139–40). We can perhaps see the modern descendants of penny fiction in the deliberate structural repetitions and narrative redundancies of such television genres as the soap opera (McCarthy 47) and the situation comedy (Feuer 69-70).

There are certainly similarities, it can be argued, between the harsh realities of the television drama commissioning process and Victorian serial fiction publishing. In both cases, new serials or series are launched with a great fanfare, though they are often transparently based on stories that have recently been popular. So, in late-Victorian serial fiction – and clearly derived from Thomas Hughes’s *Tom Brown’s School Days* – we have *Tom Wildrake’s Schooldays* (1871), *Jack Harkaway’s Schooldays* (c.1880), *Young Tom’s Schooldays* (c.1880), *Hal Harkforward and Tom Tallyho’s Schooldays* (1893), and so on, Likewise, the hugely popular Harkaway serial spawned *Jack Harkaway at Oxford* (c.1880), *Jack Harkaway among the Brigands* (c.1880), *Jack Harkaway in America* (c.1885), among many others (James and Smith 31–46). The whole panoply of sequels, prequels, spin-offs, generic hybrids and imitations that we associate with popular television is arguably already in place in Victorian penny fiction. Similarly, *Penny Dreadful* as a series concept, being broadcast on SkyAtlantic in the UK (where much of HBO’s output is premiered for British audiences), might be understood not only as a repackaging of Victorian fictional characters – and thus seen to be reaching out to fans of films like the Hughes Brothers’ *From Hell* (2001) or Oliver Parker’s *Dorian Gray* (2009) – but also as an attempt to exploit the success of vampires and other folkloric creatures in series like *True Blood* (2008–14) and *Being Human* (which has both North American and UK versions) where vampires, ghosts and werewolves also co-exist.

Indeed, taking the longer view, it can justifiably be claimed that *Penny Dreadful*’s genesis was overdetermined by the conventions of television and film. There are clear similarities, in the unifying concept of a team of Victorian anti-heroes with supernatural powers brought together for a special purpose, with Alan Moore and Kevin O’Neill’s graphic novel series *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999–) and its film adaptation by Stephen Norrington (2003). The core characters of *Penny Dreadful* are a team of heroes with special powers, in Moore and O’Neill’s tradition, but they are also a fractured, unconventional family: Sir Malcolm is the father of Vanessa’s childhood companion, and at times he treats Ethan Chandler and Victor Frankenstein rather like wayward sons. Ferdinand Lyle (played by Simon Russell Beale) can be conceived as an eccentric uncle. Hence, there is a hint, in this semi-domesticated Gothic, of the classic 1960s US situation comedies *The Munsters* and, in particular, *The Addams Family*, with Vanessa Ives as a bewitching Morticia and Sir Malcolm Murray a solemn, angst-ridden Gomez. As Elliott observes, the Gothic triptych of Frankenstein’s monster, Dracula, and Jekyll and Hyde, encountering each other in the same space, has long been a central focus for film parodies (‘Parody’ 223); in the case of *Penny Dreadful*, one changeling figure, Jekyll, is replaced by another, the Wolf Man, in the triptych.

When television series are a ratings hit, more episodes are immediately ordered; similarly, successful penny bloods like *Varney the Vampire* became seemingly interminable sagas, riddled with inconsistencies, as the publisher sought to capitalise on their property. When television series cease to attract sufficient (or the right kind) of audiences, they are unceremoniously cancelled, sometimes mid-season, and the remaining episodes ‘burned off’ in an obscure slot or on an obscure channel (see Siede). When sales of a penny serial dropped, they either disappeared abruptly or were moved to the back of the publication to make way for a new cover star (Anglo 18, 76).

**Penny fiction and ‘classic’ fiction**

Nevertheless, it would be easy to over-play the connections between the television series and the Victorian serial publication. As Christine Geraghty (19–31) has argued in her discussion of the BBC’s *Bleak House* (2005), claims that television scheduling patterns recreate the sense of experiencing Victorian-style part publication must be treated with caution and scepticism.[[2]](#endnote-2) And, as Brett Martin indicates, the ‘new kinds of stories’ that can be told in the post-HBO television landscape – what Martin calls the ‘Third Golden Age’ of television – have shorter seasons, with typically twelve or thirteen episodes compared with twenty-two on network television. This reduction allows for ‘tighter, more focused serial stories’, but also the ‘huge creative freedom’ to be able to ‘develop characters over long stretches of time, to tell stories over the course of fifty hours or more’ (Martin 6).[[3]](#endnote-3) The prologue to Martin’s book on American television, *Difficult Men*, makes explicit the supposed connection between television and the Victorian serialized novel, calling both ‘an explosion of high art in a vulgar pop medium’, presenting as his examples Dickens, Trollope and Eliot, and noting that ‘just like the Victorian writers, TV’s auteurs embraced the irony of critiquing a society overwhelmed by industrial consumerism by using precisely that society’s most industrialized, consumerist media invention. In many ways, this was TV *about* what TV had wrought’ (original emphasis) (7). So a further layer of meaning to the title *Penny Dreadful* is that not only does it anticipate the joke about its own pulp origins, but it also makes an explicit, appropriating gesture towards all of television as being mere penny dreadful fiction. The joke can only work, in that sense, now that television is understood, post-*The* *Sopranos*, post-*The Wire*, post-*Breaking Bad*, as an art form, with identifiable showrunner-auteurs instead of undifferentiated hack writers (Martin 11). The joke only works, that is, because it is palpably no longer true: it bespeaks a new confidence in the medium. Unlike earlier shows in this Golden Age, *Penny Dreadful* had no need for the ‘Trojan horse’ strategy where a show ‘nominally [fulfilled] a network’s … commercial demands’ but ‘sneakily achieve[d] something far richer’ (Martin 28). Instead, *Penny Dreadful* works as a pitch because, to borrow from Justin Wyatt’s exploration of the term – and in common with much modern television drama – it is ‘high concept’. *Penny Dreadful*,at least in its first season, has a ‘striking, easily reducible narrative which also offers a high degree of marketability’ (Wyatt 13) and is out in the open about its ‘play of familiarity and difference’ (Wyatt 12), embodied in its bold, central governing concept of Victorian characters from different works and sources, initially banding together to fight vampires and return Mina to her father.

Nevertheless, *Penny Dreadful*, as a title, might also be taken to reveal a certain anxiety about the medium’s future, underneath the televisual triumphalism. Were not penny serials, like trashy television today, once ubiquitous, and are they not now rare museum items, their large-scale stories reduced and dispersed into fragments for collectors? Where it was advances in printing technology that made penny fiction possible, the cheap paper on which it was printed made it vulnerable to decay and disintegration (Twitchell 170, James and Smith xx). So, while it celebrates the new cultural centrality of televisual storytelling, *Penny Dreadful* also seems to acknowledge in its title the inevitable obsolescence of entertainment technologies, as surely as if it had called itself *Penny Arcade* or *Kinetoscope*. In the same way that penny fiction created new modes of consumption, the new television shows drawn from the HBO template ‘introduced a new form of television viewing’ (Martin 14) where whole seasons could be consumed as DVD box sets, or as ‘virtual’ box sets via Netflix or digital video recorders. But that same superfluity, that embarrassment of riches, also holds out the prospect of being forgotten, of being one of the shows that people never find the time to watch, and of ultimately being lost, wiped, deleted.

***Penny Dreadful* as adaptation**

So far, I have analysed the relationship between *Penny Dreadful* and what we understand by the ‘penny dreadful’ serial, and between *Penny Dreadful* and some of the commercial structures of contemporary television. But in understanding the nature of the beast, it is important to consider *Penny Dreadful*’s relationship to the long tradition of representing the Victorians on television via the classic novel serialisation, and the ways that it is – and is not – a literary adaptation. Elliott’s concepts of adaptation are useful here, even though they are identified in reference to film adaptation, because they highlight the extent to which *Penny Dreadful* still behaves like many other adaptations do. I argue that this is still the case despite the series’ foregrounding of original characters, the crossing over of characters from different fictions, and its open-endedness in comparison to film adaptations. Elliott warns that her concepts overlap, conflict, and ‘are by no means presented […] as ideal, prescriptive, or even empirically “true,” but rather as concepts operative in practice and criticism’ (*Rethinking* 135). It is in the same spirit that I approach the task of identifying *Penny Dreadful*’sadaptation practices: not to sniff out the supposed heresies, but to understand more precisely the nature of its transformation of its precursor texts. Elliott’s work is also suggestive for this purpose because she uses the metaphor of body and soul to explore the tensions between form and content, illustrating each concept with examples from *Wuthering Heights* where ‘Heathcliff tries to connect with Cathy after her death’ (*Rethinking* 136). Given *Penny Dreadful*’s preoccupation with mediumship, corpses and possession, this Gothic framework seems particularly apt. Of the six concepts of adaptation that Elliott introduces – Psychic, Ventriloquist, Genetic, De(Re)Composing, Incarnational and Trumping (*Rethinking* 133–83) – I will propose that *Penny Dreadful* partakes most markedly of the Ventriloquist and De(Re)Composing concepts, with some hints of the Trumping approach. However, it is worth emphasising at the outset that the ‘high concept’ of *Penny Dreadful* immediately problematizes the ‘what’ of adaptation analysis, pushing the ‘how’ and ‘why’, as it were, into the shadows. The series is neither an adaptation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, nor of *Dracula,* nor of *Frankenstein*. As such, the publicity and John Logan’s discussions of the series are refreshingly free of claims to have realised ‘the spirit of the text’ or the author’s real, unstated intentions (Elliott’s Psychic model) (*Rethinking* 138, 142). Put another way, *Penny Dreadful* cannot be ‘true to the spirit’ of its precursor, because it is never clear which is the ‘host’ canon into which characters from other texts have been imported, and therefore from what base notion of an adherence to plot or character development the show might be deviating. Unlike NBC’s series *Dracula* (2013), an adaptation and expansion of the vampire’s story that posited him as leading a double life as an American pioneer of electricity, Alexander Grayson; *Penny Dreadful* refuses to name its precursor text except in generic terms: the penny dreadful, that which is, by its nature, derivative and second-hand. However, by adapting specific characters, and only a few elements of the narratives to which they are normatively attached in screen adaptation, *Penny Dreadful* makes for a particularly bold instance of Ventriloquism, the model whereby the adaptation ‘empties out the novel’s signs’ and replaces it with new content, ‘throwing its voice onto the silent corpse’ (*Rethinking* 143).

The idea of ‘hollowing out’ a precursor text (or texts) has much in common with the governing concept of Harold Bloom’s 1973 work of poetry criticism, *The Anxiety of Influence,* where‘strongpoets’ creatively misread their predecessors ‘so as to clear imaginative space for themselves’ (5). In particular, of the six actions, or ratios, by which according to Bloom, poets achieve this, I would draw particular attention to the third ratio, *kenosis*, which is explained as ‘repetition and discontinuity’ (77), ‘a liberating discontinuity’ (88) and a ‘deliberate, willed loss in continuity’ (90). Bloom elaborates that ‘[i]n strong poets, the *kenosis* is a revisionary act in which an “emptying” or “ebbing” takes place *in relation to the precursor*’ (original emphasis) (90). The ‘liberating discontinuity’ in Season 1 that will spring most readily to mind for viewers of *Penny Dreadful* is the murder of Van Helsing at the hands of Frankenstein’s Creature (1.6).[[4]](#endnote-4) Logan himself has referred to this incident as a ‘provocation’ to demonstrate that he is not in thrall to his precursor texts (Wightman), but without needing to defer to the showrunner on this matter, it is clear that setting Van Helsing (actor David Warner) up as Frankenstein’s (Harry Treadaway) confidant and source of vampire lore, and then killing him after two episodes, destabilises the relationship between vampiric evil and the ‘band of light’ (to borrow Stoker’s term) that has come together to defeat it. If Van Helsing is dead, where does the necessary knowledge come from now? If one of the vampire hunters is himself, at least indirectly, responsible for wanton violence, how much is their mission justified? And, in terms of the emptying out of the precursor text, the murder forces us to re-examine Stoker’s *Dracula* and consider how much of that novel constitutes Van Helsing himself as a ‘magic bullet’, who arrives pre-armed with the knowledge and experience needed to defeat Dracula, and who thus demotes the other would-be hero figures into onlookers and hired hands.

Because of its multiple precursor texts, however, I would suggest that the most productive way to consider *Penny Dreadful* as an adaptation is in terms of De(Re)composing, where precursor texts and television series ‘decompose, merge, and form a new composition at “underground” levels of reading’; such an adaptation would be a composite of televisual and textual signs ‘merging in audience consciousness together with other cultural narratives’ (*Rethinking* 157). Perhaps this process in *Penny Dreadful* is best illustrated by the show’s treatment of time. We should not expect a television series that collapses distinctions between narrative worlds to also preserve chronological distinctions. Here, again, the title *Penny Dreadful* plays its part. The font on the title screen, in a metallic bluish grey, suggests swords or knives have been fashioned into the letters. It certainly does not resemble a ‘heritage Victorian’ font; it is not attempting to play on nostalgic associations or to pastiche the visual repertory of penny serials themselves. And, as implied by my mention earlier of young Doctor Frankenstein handling a copy of *Varney* from thirty years or more after his own narrative supposedly took place, the very notion of ‘period’ is radically destabilised.[[5]](#endnote-5) We are told that the action takes place in 1891, the year after Wilde first published *Dorian Gray*, and the best part of a century after Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* – also, half a century after the emergence of penny dreadfuls themselves, by some reckonings.[[6]](#endnote-6) Imperial history, too, is destabilised: Sir Malcolm talks of leading an expedition to find the source of the Nile, seemingly unaware that John Hanning Speke had discovered it in 1858 (Brendon 158).

Nevertheless, as Elliott notes, in this form of adaptation, ‘if one reads in both directions’, from precursor texts to television series and then from television series to precursor texts, ‘one often finds the alleged infidelities clearly in the text’ (*Rethinking* 157). To insist upon ‘correct’ chronology is to impose a coherence, a temporal realism, that these works of the late-Victorian Gothic do not possess (that, arguably, the Gothic in general does not possess). As Leslie Klinger points out, there is no single dating for *Dracula* that makes sense of all the dates and times given (517–20). And any adaptation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* has to contend with Wilde’s paradoxical time scheme, where the cultural references at the beginning of the novel are to 1890s London, and yet Gray must survive at least twenty years for his story to play out, taking him into a future that is still recognisably 1890s London. As Neil Bartlett, recent adapter of the novel for the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, observes, ‘Wilde implies that his hero lives well into the twentieth century – a century that Wilde himself barely survived into’ (x). Hence, Bartlett’s adaptation, and the screenplay by Toby Finlay for Oliver Parker’s 2009 film adaptation, both take Wilde’s quintessential *fin de siècle* character well past the *fin de siècle* itself, in order to make sense of the passing of time.

If we follow this line of thought still further, the supposed ‘infidelities’ of the adaptation come to look like the uncovering of patterns and connections that were already there. The series forces us to ask what Oscar Wilde’s only novel has in common with penny fiction and, in a sense, to consider how Victor Frankenstein might have behaved if he had come to adulthood as the end of the century upon which he was such an imaginative influence, the century that Eve Kosovksy Sedgwick has called ‘the Age of Frankenstein’ (x).

Such calculatedly anachronistic reflections overlap with the last of Elliott’s models that I want to apply to *Penny Dreadful*, the ‘Trumping’ concept of adaptation. Here, while the adaptation may ‘pursue a hyperfidelity to nineteenth-century material culture’ it rejects and corrects ‘Victorian psychology, ethics, and politics’, setting ‘modern politically correct views against historically correct backdrops’ (*Rethinking* 177). While, as my discussion of time indicates, *Penny Dreadful* first makes and then subverts its claim to the historical verisimilitude of 1891, there is still a slight sense in which *Penny Dreadful* presents itself ‘as revealing what the Victorians “really” thought and felt, against their own representations’ (*Rethinking* 177). The new characters in *Penny Dreadful* (it is perhaps more appropriate, in the context of this discussion, to call them ‘bespoke’ rather than ‘original’), Vanessa Ives, Ethan Chandler, Brona Croft, Sir Malcolm and Sembene, all in their way provide a ‘cultural criticism’ of the nineteenth century from the perspective of the twenty-first. The supernatural proves to be a useful device in ensuring that this commentary is not too blatant. Vanessa, for example, while she is demonically possessed in Season 1, episode 7, is able to articulate a damning critique of Sir Malcolm’s supposedly civilising mission in Africa, and also, with regard to herself, a penetrating summary of a strand of Victorian misogyny: ‘To be beautiful is to be almost dead, isn’t it? The lassitude of the perfect woman, the languid ease, the obeisance…’ (1.7). As a sexually active woman, Vanessa decidedly does not fit into the penny-fiction category of the helpless or hysterical virgin in need of rescue, nor does she perform the role of the ‘fallen woman’. Yet it is interesting that an attempt by Victor Frankenstein to diagnose Vanessa’s possession in proto-Freudian terms, as a ‘psychosexual responsiveness’ tied to ‘guilt’, ‘shame’ and ‘trauma’ (1.7), fails to account for the possibility that the demonic possession is very real. In other words, a classic trumping move, the imposition of ‘twentieth-century analytic master-narratives’ to explain behaviour (*Rethinking* 178) is itself trumped by an insistence on the supernatural. Furthermore, the series has attracted attention for its ‘queering’ of its source materials (one reviewer observed approvingly that in the Ethan/Dorian encounter, the ‘gay subtext […] ended up being extremely text’ [Valentine, ’10 Reasons’]). This might be seen as a trumping adaptation of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; such an interpretation, however, is complicated by the knowledge that the novel’s gay subtext had already been brought to the public’s attention by Edward Carson at Wilde’s trials in 1895 (McKenna 488-90). The Victorians, that is, evidently already knew what Dorian was ‘really’ thinking and feeling. Hence, the trumping is actually taking place in relation to older screen adaptations that heterosexualise Dorian (Albert Lewin’s 1945 film; Oliver Parker’s in 2009), with *Penny Dreadful* reclaiming and making explicit the novel’s subtext.

One final instance of trumping might be identified, however, in the marketing of the show. Unlike the merchandise made available at the time of Tim Burton’s *Sweeney Todd* in 2007, where the penny blood serial *The String of Pearls* was re-issued as ‘The Original Novel’, the items on sale on Showtime’s official *Penny Dreadful* website include tie-in hardback editions of *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, so that viewers can familiarise themselves with the characters’ ‘backstories’ (along with more traditional fan merchandise like *Penny Dreadful* action figures, or a Victor Frankenstein phone cover). Not only does *Dracula*, then, appear to trump penny bloods like *Varney the Vampire* as one of three ur-texts for the series, but Stoker’s novel itself now has a *Penny Dreadful* cover. As Bloom put it, when discussing literary trumping in *The Anxiety of Influence*, the most ‘drastic’ position is ‘the triumph of having so stationed the precursor, in one’s own work, that particular passages […] seem […] to be indebted to one’s own achievement, and even (necessarily) to be lessened by one’s greater splendour’ (141).

**Television and fandom**

*Penny Dreadful* is a highly developed example of a ‘drillable’ text, to use Jason Mittel’s term, where a programme encourages ‘a mode of forensic fandom that spurs viewers to dig deeper, probing beneath the surface to understand the complexity of a story and its telling’. The ‘drillable’ qualities of *Penny Dreadful* stem, as I have shown, from the show’s use of pre-existing characters and its foregrounding of the adaptation process of bringing them together in a crossover story-world. If, for Martin, television shows like *The Sopranos* are television about the society that television has created (7), then, as I have demonstrated, *Penny Dreadful* introduces several further levels of self-referentiality. It is a particularly canny story concept because it taps into so many pre-existing story-worlds and, crucially, those with pre-existing fandoms. Vampires have had a longstanding cult appeal, stretching back at least as far as Anne Rice’s vampire novels from the 1970s on, and reinvented regularly by such works as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The Vampire Diaries*, and, of course, the *Twilight* saga. Victor Frankenstein’s stock has risen in recent years, particularly with the National Theatre’s acclaimed production of Nick Dear’s adaptation of the novel, starring Jonny Lee Miller and Benedict Cumberbatch (associations that also connect Sherlock Holmes fandoms to *Penny Dreadful* fandom). The casting of Royal National Theatre regular Rory Kinnear as Frankenstein’s monster (referred to in the series as ‘Caliban’, and later styling himself ‘John Clare’) might be taken as a nod to the more recent association between the Frankenstein story and the London stage. *Penny Dreadful* is thus a series that rewards the knowledgeable fan with enough reference-points for it to be clear that the subversions of various canons are deliberate. It might even be described as a fandom of fandoms, a fictional space in which various nineteenth-century-derived fandoms can meet and mingle, its very format an homage to the fan-fiction practices of crossover and slash (‘Crossover’).

In addition, the ‘queer’ sexual elements of *Penny Dreadful* provide – as well as a suitable ‘adult’ position in the television marketplace – a further link to the conventions of fandom and fan fiction. If, as Hellekson and Busse suggest, anxieties around fan productions (such as fan art, fan fiction, fan video) have eased in recent years because sexual mores in the West have changed, ‘making both sexually explicit writing and gay themes more acceptable’ (16), then *Penny Dreadful* represents these changing attitudes coming home to roost at the centre of ‘official’, corporate production.[[7]](#endnote-7) Far from the show’s producers being anxious in case fan fiction featuring non-heterosexual encounters might affect perceptions of the show’s brand, in *Penny Dreadful* bisexual characters are already canon. The show’s focus on runaways, outlaws, and spiritually lost and displaced characters functions as a valorisation of outsiderdom (be that sexual, intellectual, social), which again seems tailor-made to appeal to, and to create, dedicated fans. Fan fiction’s seeming preoccupation with ‘ideas of identity and transformation, of monstrosity and otherness’ (Busse 318) is also reflected in *Penny Dreadful*’s series of physical transformations, including Ethan’s lycanthropy. As Busse explains, ‘[a]animals and animal transformations feature in a lot of fan fiction. A lot of media that inspires fan fiction include animal transformations as canon: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Harry Potter, Twilight, and *Teen Wolf*, for example, all feature werewolves’ (318). So, while a ‘trumping adaptation’ interpretation of the sex scenes in *Penny Dreadful* might see them as liberating these Victorian characters from their perceived repression, a fan fiction interpretation might argue that there is nothing distinctive about the Victorians here: that fan fiction, generally, is interested in sex, bodies and carnality, and that *Penny Dreadful* is simply putting those fan fiction derived encounters on screen.

**Limitations of the televised revolution**

Depending on one’s viewpoint, then, *Penny Dreadful* is either a radical opening up of corporate culture to the anarchic *jouissance* of media fan production, or it is corporate culture’s appropriation and recuperation of those media fans, and their free fan labour (Jenkins, Ford and Green 54–66) for cynical ends. The latter argument would note that while *Penny Dreadful* stages a showdown between canonical Gothic works in a simulacra of the radical possibilities of fan fiction, it has made sure to select a period and works which allows it to steer clear of anything protected by copyright legislation. And, presumably, Showtime and Sky Atlantic would quickly step in to secure Logan’s own intellectual property rights against unlicensed usage. The series’ own genesis has been assisted by the corporate goal of Sky Atlantic in the UK of reducing its dependence on HBO programmes by commissioning more original programming (whatever ‘original’ means in this context) (Tartaglione).

Moreover, this argument might continue, while the show’s multiple literary reference points, and its titular identification with (frequently anonymous) penny serials, would seem to suggest an undermining of the author figure as textual authority, and while the De(Re)Composition model might imply an organic blending of sources, Logan, as creator and writer of every episode, is – to a greater extent than is usual even for US TV showrunners – the single creative force behind *Penny Dreadful*. Hence, the argument would run, its apparent subversions of its precursor texts are ultimately in the interests of subsuming the story-world under one author’s sway, working against the grain of fan fiction’s democratic creativity.

Lastly, the point could be made that the Gothic is so ubiquitous in twenty-first-century culture that *Penny Dreadful*’s production design is actually a cosy and familiar one. Gothic subgenres ‘have moved increasingly from the margins to the mainstream over the last twenty years’, Victoria Nelson notes (8). For Fred Botting, ‘Disneygothic, of course, has already happened … [Gothic] preserves the illusion of darkness, death and sexuality in a world given over to the omnipresence of virtual light and life on screens’ (203). Gothic is omnipresent, observe Kohlke and Gutleben, not only in literature and film but ‘fashion, advertising, tourism and heritage industries’ (1); they ask, ‘How can the Gothic go on celebrating otherness as it becomes increasingly homogenised?’ (2).

Then again, one could hardly expect a series calling itself *Penny Dreadful* to be responsible for keeping alive some notional sacred flame of Gothic, free from commercial contaminants, for the penny dreadfuls – or at least, the penny bloods – were the original mass marketing of the Gothic. Horner and Zlosnik have suggested that ‘Gothic writing always concerns itself with boundaries and their instabilities, whether between the quick/the dead, eros/thanatos, pain/pleasure, “real”/“unreal”, “natural”/“supernatural”’ (1), and it is precisely this imaginative space that *Penny Dreadful* seeks to occupy. As Vanessa asks Ethan on their first meeting: ‘Do you believe there is a demi-monde, Mr Chandler? A half-world between what we know and what we fear?’. The multiple meanings and ironies of the title *Penny Dreadful* precisely calibrate the series’ cultural positioning between seriousness and self-awareness, between period-specificity and anachronism, between blending and trumping concepts of adaptation, and between televisual populism and critical and fan appeal. ‘Penny dreadful’ also, of course makes explicit the fine balance struck between art and commerce: the penny price of the Victorian serial and, in a less visible way, the monetary investment in a cable TV subscription for exclusive content. First give us your penny, and we will show you something dreadful.

1. **Notes**

   As Twitchell notes of the original ‘penny dreadfuls’, the Newsagents Publishing Company was closed temporarily under the Obscene Publications Act, and newsagents were later raided by the Society for the Prevention of Vice who confiscated the publisher’s titles as part of the moral panic over the *Wild Boys* titles of the 1860s and 1870s (170). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See also Poore (86). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The first season of *Penny Dreadful* had eight episodes, the second season, screened in 2015, had ten, and a third season is in production at time of writing. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. In effect, this ‘liberating discontinuity’ with a precursor text is a repetition of the rupture that took place in *Penny Dreadful* 1.2, where the viewer is led to believe that Frankenstein has created a tender-hearted creature who names himself ‘Proteus’, before the doctor’s prior creation, the Creature or Caliban, steps up behind Proteus and tears him limb from limb. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. As are fact and fiction: Frankenstein, in the series, is also fond of quoting the works of the husband of his literary creator, Percy Bysshe Shelley. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Indeed, Twitchell suggests that penny dreadfuls almost died out in the 1890s, because they had been displaced by either the all-text ‘dime novel’, or the all-illustrated halfpenny comic (171). The penny fiction that remained popular in the 1890s consisted largely of school stories and imperial adventures, not the plagiarised Gothic novel formulae of the 1840s that the series seems to reference, so the 1890s were not, in many ways, the age of the penny dreadful. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Henry Jenkins notes a number of instances in the past where producers of TV and film franchises have sought to silence or dismiss fans’ interests in characters’ sexuality (30-32). Most explicitly, this was the case with *Star Wars*, where George Lucas, the films’ creator, once ‘threatened to prosecute editors who published works that violated the “family values” associated with the original films’ (Jenkins 30-31).

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