

Becoming “Better Monsters”: Queer Body Horror in *InSEXts*

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Abstract:

On the basis of Marguerite Bennett and Ariela Kristantina’s *InSEXts: Year One* (2018), this article examines the nexus between neo-Victorianism and the comic genre. The comic’s deconstructive form has great potential to examine neo-Victorian historicity, because the juxtaposed panels resist closure. Applying a blend of queer and monster theory to explore *InSEXts*’s construction of sexual Otherness, the article firstly reads the protagonists’ transformations into butterfly-like creatures as a queer morphology interrogating the Victorian discourse on homosexuality. Secondly, it considers monstrous-feminine propensities like the *vagina dentata* as strategies of empowering appropriation, while patriarchal anxieties about female bodies are projected onto the male body in an act of revengeful reversion. Thirdly, the article discusses the antagonists’ monstrous embodiments as manifestations of internalised, colonial misogyny. Throughout, it addresses questions of neo-Victorian agency, the reader’s complicity in neo-Victorian appropriations of the Victorians, as well as the neo-Victorian tension between reproduction and re-appropriation.

Keywords: Marguerite Bennett, body horror, comic studies, *InSEXts*, Ariela Kristantina, lesbian, monster theory, neo-Victorianism, queer theory.

In spite of its self-professed attempts at deconstructing dominant formations of what is considered ‘Victorian’, neo-Victorianism is often criticised for its nostalgic and supposedly celebratory stance towards all things Victorian (see, e.g., Enderwitz and Feldmann 2014: 52-53). Similarly, the comic genre is often discredited as not critical enough, but such an assessment overlooks “the richness and diversity of its manifestations” (Groensteen 2009: 3). In this respect, neo-Victorian literature and the comic medium share a reputation of being too popular and lacking self-reflection, an ‘image problem’ in two different senses of the term: while the former sometimes struggles to adequately (re-)frame and thus interrogate Victorian images, the latter faces a lack of artistic prestige

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as well as scholarly attention due to its seemingly trivial combination of images and little text. The most prominent phenomenon that comes to mind when thinking of neo-Victorian comics is steampunk, a mode that combines early industrial and futuristic technology and invokes the aesthetics of nineteenth-century England.¹ The fact that neo-Victorianism tends to be reduced to an aesthetic mode in most comics may be tied to comic scholarship's focus "on how any message at all might be conveyed through the juxtaposition of image and text" rather than "what cultural messages might be hidden in the depths of the image-text" (Jones and Mitchell 2016: 19). Most neo-Victorian comic scholarship that does focus on "cultural messages" is devoted to the works of Alan Moore (see, e.g., Ho 2012: 27-54; Halsall 2015; Domsch 2012). While Moore and Kevin O'Neill's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999–2019) adapts popular Victorian literary characters to fight villains in a superhero-like manner, *From Hell* (1991–1996) is set during the 1888 murders of Jack the Ripper. However, by reviving characters from comparatively prestigious, canonised texts as well as narrativising a serial killer whose fame depends on the violation of the female body, these works do little to queer neo-Victorianism from and for the female gaze. In a similar vein, although neo-Victorian comics have received a fair amount of scholarly attention, they are rarely approached through the female gaze. And yet, the comic's usage of sequential yet simultaneous images makes for a strikingly fitting medium to encompass neo-Victorianism and its fetishising and simultaneously re-appropriating effects. This ambiguity is utterly queer in and of itself and encourages the diversification of neo-Victorian images in comics and beyond.

InSEXts: Year One (2018), originally published in thirteen issues between 2015 and 2017 by Aftershock Comics, is a comic series written by Marguerite Bennett and illustrated by Ariela Kristantina. As I will show in what follows, *InSEXts* offers a rich addition to, and diversifying intervention into, neo-Victorian (comic) discourse: focusing on the manifestation of queerness in 'Other' monstrous bodies, I discuss the question of neo-Victorian agency, feminist notions of 'writing back', and the reader's own fetishising complicity in neo-Victorian appropriations of the Victorians. Before outlining intersections between neo-Victorianism and the comic form, I link the comic to notions of queer monstrosity. While the second part considers the monstrous butterfly as a fluid morphology, the third deals

with the comic’s horrification of hetero-patriarchal anxieties surrounding women’s bodies. Finally, I explore the comic’s antagonistic characters as visibilisations of internalised, colonial misogyny. Simultaneously punishing the male gaze and encouraging queer subjectivity, I argue, *InSEXts* celebrates ambiguity as a dynamic state of constant change and becoming.

1. *InSEXts* and Queer Monstrosity

In the comic’s blurb, *InSEXts* is marketed as a story about “vengeful Victorian vixens” and follows the narrative pattern of a revenge plot (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: n.p.). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines ‘revenge’ as “the action of hurting, harming, or otherwise obtaining satisfaction from someone in return for an injury or wrong suffered at his or her hands” (OED n.d.b: n.p.), whereas ‘avenge’ is defined as to “inflict retributive punishment, exact satisfaction, or retaliate, on behalf of (an injured person, violated right, etc.)” (OED n.d.a: n.p.). In contrast to revenge, therefore, the act of avenging is less personal and much more directed at systemic grievances. Thus, neo-Victorianism’s ability to imagine and reconstruct hitherto untold stories opens up the possibility of avenging Victorian wrongs to satisfy contemporary audiences. As Monika Pietrzak-Franger and Eckart Voigts point out with reference to the subversive quality of neo-Victorian humour, it is a generic feature of many neo-Victorian texts to “express indignation at the patriarchal modes of oppression, mixing its humour with the angry rage of the one-time powerless” (Pietrzak-Franger and Voigts 2017: 195). By comparing ‘Victorian’ morals to our own, allegedly superior, standards, neo-Victorian texts attempt to redress the racisms, sexism, and homophobia found in so many (canonised) Victorian texts in an act of retrospect empowerment.

Reviewers have described *InSEXts* as “a comic about bodies” (Collins 2016: n.p.), a “no holds-barred body horror and sex fantasy in Victorian London” (Galvin 2016: n.p.), as well as “an enjoyable body horror story that hinges on the love between two women fighting back at a world that would destroy them” (Schedeen 2016: n.p.). Set in 1894 London, the comic tells the story of Lady Lalita Bertram (metonymically referred to as Lady), who is the daughter of a Scottish doctor and a Brahmin mother, and her Irish Catholic maid-turned-lover Mariah. While the background of Mariah’s magic abilities remains obscure, a dragonfly sting initiates Lady’s

spontaneous transformations into a butterfly-like creature with chewing mouthparts and insect legs. Mariah's powers are less transformative and more pragmatic as she can locate the other characters of the plot, produce amnesia-inducing dust, and practice parthenogenesis. Together, the couple fertilise an egg and impregnate Lady's abusive husband Lord Bertram, who is then forced to carry the baby to full term and, as a consequence of parturition, dies. Afterwards, the new family is faced with Lord Bertram's manipulative relatives, all the while fighting a different monster called The Hag, which runs a brothel in the city, engaging in human trafficking and forced prostitution. As the climactic fight in the seventh issue leaves Lady in a regenerative sleep, the second half of the narrative begins with her awakening three years later in Paris. Here, Lady and Mariah encounter a group of art collectors who trap women in "pretty picture[s]" (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #9). They form an alliance with an Indonesian goddess in the shape of a medusa who threatens to turn against them towards the end. The couple's friend and governess, Phoebe de Azaïs, a black haruspex and art connoisseur, comes back to life after being turned to stone by the medusa, whom she helps transform back into her true divine form. Eventually, the protagonists leave for New York to make a fresh start. *InSEXts*' diegesis and its protagonists are drawn in delicate, yet dynamic lines, creating a feminine Art Nouveau aesthetic that is, at times, reminiscent of the painter and illustrator Alphonse Mucha. The colours are warm and muted throughout the first seven issues with a sudden change to hyper saturation and neon colours from the eighth issue onwards.

As *InSEXts* repeatedly aligns queerness with monstrosity, I have chosen a blend of monster theory and queer scholarship to analyse the comic; both share a similar approach to (hetero-)normativity and sexual deviation. The most basic premise of Jeffrey J. Cohen's 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)' is to recognise the monster as a "cultural body", namely

an embodiment of a certain cultural moment – of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence. (Cohen 1996: 4)

Derived from the Latin *monstrare*, which means ‘to show’, the monster points to societal anxieties at a given moment in time. Still, while the monster always signifies something beyond itself, the monstrous body is deeply physical: “[t]he monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us” and its difference “tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual” (Cohen 1996: 7). Sexual ‘difference’ becomes a physical condition when “[t]he monster embodies those sexual practices that must not be committed, or that may be committed only through the body of the monster” (Cohen 1996: 14). Following Cohen’s argument, queerness is intrinsically linked to monstrous embodiment, because sexual practice is hands-on; it requires a body that acts.

In *InSEXts*, monstrosity is explicitly aligned with femininity, as Lady’s transformations re-enact patriarchal anxieties about women’s bodies, including the *vagina dentata* and the wandering womb. This is where Barbara Creed’s term ‘the monstrous-feminine’ comes into play. The phrase “emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of monstrosity” because female characters are often defined by their sexuality (Creed 1994: 3). The comic’s protagonists are sexually autonomous, which, according to Victorian understanding, roots them firmly in the ‘atavistic’ female body. Kelly Hurley contrasts the “nineteenth-century perception of women as ‘the sex’ – fully constrained within a sexualized identity, and so both corporeal and animalistic” with “Victorian celebrations of woman as a domestic angel, an essentially disembodied creature” (Hurley 1996: 121). As sexual pleasure, nudity, and physical transformation are a cause for celebration in *InSEXts*, the ideal of Victorian femininity, and the empty vessel it represents, are rendered monstrous in turn. Notably, while Lady’s insectoid transformations are painful, *InSEXts* does not visualise physical violence against female characters. This goes against conventional horror narratives in which horror “depends upon the explicit violation of female bodies as opposed to simply the sight of the monster” (Halberstam 2020: 150). Instead, the comic only depicts external violence against male bodies, while female body horror originates *within*. This reversal of horror conventions is attributable to Creed’s monstrous-feminine who “controls the sadistic gaze: the male victim is her object” (Creed 1994: 153).

The highly gendered and corporeal manifestations of monstrosity that I have outlined seem to clash with prominent definitions of queerness as fluid and shapeless. David Halperin loosely defines ‘queer’ as “*whatever is*

at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers*. It is an identity without an essence” (Halperin 1995: 62, original emphasis). While Halperin considers queerness to be an identity, if an inessential one, Lee Edelman claims that “[q]ueerness, unlike ‘lesbian,’ ‘gay,’ ‘bisexual,’ ‘transsexual,’ or ‘transgendered,’ can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one” (Edelman 2002: 183). Alexander Doty, too, uses “the term ‘queer’ to mark a flexible space for the expression of all aspects of non- (anti-, contra-) straight cultural productions and reception” (Doty 1993: 3). Thus, queerness depends on ‘the norm’, because it can only exist in opposition to heteropatriarchal normativity. While this definition of queerness is certainly disruptive, it is neither wholly constructive nor forward-looking. *InSEXts* demonstrates that queerness is more than a mere negation of ‘the norm’ by aligning queerness with monstrous corporeality. More specifically, the comic places queerness in the monstrous body without compromising its flexibility and norm-troubling agency. Similar to the ways in which queer visibility dissolves heteronormativity, the monster’s purpose is “to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability” (Creed 1994: 11). Indeed, queerness becomes visible through the monstrous body in *InSEXts*, and it is only by the body becoming visible that the order can be disturbed.

2. Intersections between Neo-Victorianism and the Comic Form

Scott McCloud famously defines comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud 1994: 9). The often intentional ambiguity of images renders comics especially suitable for engaging with the Victorian past in the neo-Victorian present. Hillary Chute and Marianne Dekoven highlight the medium’s ability to “defamiliarize received images of history” (Chute and Dekoven 2012: 187), which can be traced back to the comic genre’s handling of narrated time. In comics, the grid structures panels into a consecutive narrative, while the panels’ conjunction presents us with the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous. Let us imagine one out of several narratives of history stretched over a comic page: the first panel depicts the nineteenth century, and from here the narrative proceeds to the last panel, showing the present day. The

deconstructive anachronism is striking, suggesting that we are literally ‘on the same page’ as the Victorians when we most certainly are not.

Various critics have suggested that our repeated returning to the Victorians is caused by “our own awareness of belatedness” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 3), a notion which is visualised by the contradictory panels on the comic page. Thus, the comic’s visual immediacy provides neo-Victorianism with a highly productive narrative mode. At the same time, many neo-Victorian texts propose an “ostensible security of coherent narrative structures and textual order as represented by the nineteenth century” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 11). Arguably, it is this very order that keeps neo-Victorianism from diversifying further, from moving away from established (Victorian) conventions and, for instance, providing radically queer images or narratives. For example, popular neo-Victorian narrative devices like chronology and closure tend to reproduce conventions rather than subverting them, while the comic form itself resists chronology and closure.

Of course, neo-Victorianism has engaged critically with its own reimaginings of the Victorians in this respect. Anna Maria Jones and Rebecca N. Mitchell, for instance, have stressed “the layered self-referential, metatextual, and image-textual work” that has become an essential part of many neo-Victorian texts (Jones and Mitchell 2016: 2-4). This becomes apparent in *InSEXts* when the characters converse about their favourite literature, thereby aligning the comic with canonical nineteenth-century Gothic texts such as Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* (1872) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s *Christabel* (1816). In addition, the protagonists discuss penny dreadfuls on more than one occasion, which can be read as a self-reflective parallelisation of contemporary comics and Victorian penny dreadfuls, since the latter “provided a lowbrow counterpoint to the rise to prominence of ‘serious’ or highbrow Victorian literature” (Purchase 2006: 179). Indeed, while textual self-reflection, as observed by Jones and Mitchell amongst others, is inherent in many neo-Victorian texts, it is essential to the comic medium as well.

Additionally, *InSEXts*’ reference to Gothic texts draws attention to the shared Gothic mode of comics and neo-Victorianism. As Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben observe, in trying to “understand the nineteenth century as the contemporary self’s uncanny Doppelgänger”, neo-Victorian texts engage in “resurrecting the ghost(s) of the past, searching out

its dark secrets and shameful mysteries, insisting obsessively on the lurid details of Victorian life, reliving the period's nightmares and traumas" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2012: 4). Similarly, the comic medium follows a Gothic structure, "as embedded stories are presented in a spatial layout where all moments co-exist on the page, recalling tropes of haunting and multiplicity" (Round 2014: 56). Thus, comics visualise the ways in which neo-Victorian texts are themselves artificial reconstructions of the Victorian past by constantly reflecting on their own inauthenticity as well as the tension-filled relationship of consecutiveness and simultaneity. In other words, similar to the ways in which the ghosts of the Victorians are resurrected in neo-Victorian literature, the comic's panel structure allows for simultaneous storytelling that complicates notions of a past that is entirely detached from the present.

Whereas, in this respect, the comic might prove an apt medium for neo-Victorianism on a larger scale, the comic's use of images simultaneously complicates the aim of queering neo-Victorianism, because it relies on recognisable aesthetics and modes of representation that reproduce the male gaze. Thierry Groensteen remarks that "[c]omic art is the art of details, and as such encourages a fetishistic relationship" (Groensteen 2009: 10). For neo-Victorianism, this means that the comic's fetishising attention to detail encourages contemporary authors and readers to appropriate Victorians for their own purposes and stories, often simply adopting rather than properly reimagining Victorian aesthetics and thereby reducing them to a mere stylistic element. Surely, the question of 'historical accuracy' is rendered superfluous by the intentionally unrealistic combination of angles, colours, and lines which highlight the comic's self-reflexivity and deconstructive potential. However, Groensteen's argument draws attention to the conflict of re-appropriation vs. reproduction. Like every postmodern text, *InSEXts*, and comics in general, can neither queer neo-Victorianism without fetishising the Victorians, nor can it subvert the male gaze of the comic form without at least partly reproducing it. It is by embracing this ambiguity – of 'writing back' to the Victorian canon of texts and simultaneously fetishising queer sexuality – that I now turn to my analysis of the monstrous butterfly as a queer morphology in *InSEXts*.

3. “We Are New Creatures”: A Queer Morphology

The first issue of *InSEXts* opens with a paradigmatic song that reappears several times throughout the comic series:

From rot the beauties of the world
 Can only ever spring
 From misery and sorrow
 Comes the music that we sing

The sweetest summer roses
 Arise from squelching mud
 And all God’s little children
 Are born to us in blood

And we who live to suffer
 As seasons flame and die
 Know the hope of every creeping thing
 Is to be a butterfly
 (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #1, 2, 7, 8)

In the beginning, the lyrics underline the montage of a dragonfly’s journey from its hatching to its death on Lady’s chest, where she squelches it beneath her collarbone. While “every creeping thing” is a metaphor for London’s less fortunate citizens, as the accompanying panel depicting two prostitutes unmistakably shows, it can be broadened to include human beings in general. The song’s final line “to be a butterfly” coincides with the opening splash panel depicting Lady Bertram and foreshadows her transformation into a butterfly-like creature in the second issue. However, it is not only her transformation that aligns Lady with butterflies. In the first issue, her confidant Dr William Taylor remarks “[s]he’s the only butterfly in this nest of caterpillars” to her husband, and just before the protagonists enter The Hag’s brothel, Lady states that “once the butterfly is free, it does not go back into the chrysalis. The insect flies or the insect dies” (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #6). Apart from an explicit mention of Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* when Lady’s lover Mariah discusses Gothic novels with William, *InSEXts* also aligns itself with the homoerotic vampire story through the butterfly metaphor. In a conversation with the narrator and protagonist

Laura, *Carmilla*'s eponymous vampire muses about death. "But to die as lovers may – to die together, so that they may live together", she says, and continues to explain:

Girls are caterpillars while they live in the world, to be finally butterflies when the summer comes; but in the meantime there are grubs and larvae, don't you see – each with their peculiar propensities, necessities and structures. (Le Fanu 2008: 270-271)

Le Fanu's text equates becoming a butterfly with turning into a vampire, so the reference to summer clearly indicates a moment of transition – a crossing of boundaries. Notably, while Lady is about to awaken in Paris, Mariah says to the governess/haruspex: "It has been many years of winters, Phoebe. I hope this is the beginning of spring, and the return of the sun" (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #8). Similar to *Carmilla*, the changing of the season from winter to spring indicates metamorphosis as a metaphor for liberation and emancipation. At its core, *InSEXts* is a story of becoming, whether becoming an active character and an autonomous sexual agent in one's own story, becoming part of a queer family, or becoming *something else*. While *Carmilla*'s victims must die to free themselves from heteropatriarchal society, Lady's butterfly-like transformations turn queer liberation into a matter of life rather than death.

A closer look at the grid and panel structure further queers Lady's monstrous butterfly transformations. The beginning of the second issue shows Mariah pinning Lady's hands above her head against a labyrinth wall in a splash panel. Lady's corset is undone beyond her waist and Mariah's hand is buried inside her lap. A close-up of Mariah's profile in the upper left corner depicts her saying: "Let go. Let everything go", while the purple coloured exclamation in Lady's speech balloon – "Mariah--!" – indicates an orgasm (Fig. 1).



Figure 1: Lady and Mariah have sex against a labyrinth wall (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #2). © **Aftershock Comics**, reprinted with kind permission of the Copyright Holders.

Turning the page, the reader is confronted with yet another splash panel showing Lady’s very first transformation from Colonel Fitzgerald’s point of view, who attempts to sexually molest her in the preceding panels. This time, her corset is torn apart entirely, exposing her nude upper body. Her fingertips taper into claws, insect arms shoot out of her back, and her eyes glow in the same turquoise colour as the huge pair of butterfly wings framing her torso (Fig. 2).



Figure 2: Lady’s first transformation (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #2).
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This is not the only instance in the series that parallelises a sex scene with a scene of monstrous transformation. In fact, splash panels in *InSEXts* turn out to be reserved for these very plot elements, thus establishing a close link between queer sexuality and monstrosity. They put the ‘sex’ in ‘insects’, so to speak.

While Creed stresses the connection between female monstrosity and sexuality, Cohen describes monsters as “disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration” and a “form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions” (Cohen 1996: 6). Lady’s initial transformations are commented on as a loss of control over bodily functions. She claims, “It was an accident—I couldn’t control it this time! [...] My body—it changed, it all changed—” (Bennet and Kristantina 2018: #2), while William calls it “a fit! Only *a fit*...” (Bennet and Kristantina 2018: #4, original ellipses). Indeed, Lady transforms into an “externally

incoherent” body, which destroys all notions of physical integrity. She becomes a hybrid of conventional eroticised femininity – a slim figure, long hair, and lush hips and breasts – and monstrous insect – with spiked legs and sharp claws – that embodies her queerness as a threat to the heteropatriarchal order. In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault discusses the “nineteenth-century homosexual” as “being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology”, whose sexuality “was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away” (Foucault 1978: 43). As Lady cannot control her transformations at first, the physical changes can be read analogously as an embodiment of her queer sexuality, which is the secret that always gives itself away. Just like Victorian medical discourse pathologised anyone who did not comply to heteronormative and gender-conforming behaviour (Thomas 2012: 142), as well as racial binarism (see, e.g., Young 1994; Stoler 1995), Lady’s bodily transformations are categorised as “a fit” by her friend and doctor. This “fit” equals the breaking-free of her formerly suppressed sexuality from the (white) colonising male gaze, triggered by her sexual encounter with Mariah against the labyrinth wall. The fact that they have sex next to the entrance of the labyrinth, while the other guests of the garden party are still visible in the background, supports the reading of Lady starting to discover her queerness. Throughout the story, she probes deeper into the labyrinth and further distances herself from the gaze of the guests as she becomes more comfortable with her sexuality and her monstrous transformations. She gradually accepts herself as part of a new species – the newly discovered homosexual.

Rather than merely visualising that homosexuality, in the nineteenth century, is explicitly defined in male terms, Lady and Mariah also contribute to diversifying such nineteenth-century notions of homosexuality. The protagonists embrace physical transformation and monstrous flexibility, because queerness “can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one” (Edelman 2002: 183). Indeed, while they are referred to as monsters by other characters, the couple also self-identifies as such and thereby affirms and celebrates their troubling and subversive potential. “There are no monsters like us”, Lady observes (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #3), and

shortly after she awakens in Paris and the lovers lie in bed together, she states, “We are new creatures” (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #8). Throughout the narrative, Lady’s transformations become more disfiguring, until she loses her human form altogether in her climactic battle with The Hag. While, initially, the only thing that changes about her body are the insectoid legs and wings, eventually, she takes on the form of a giant mantis-like insect, leaving only her arms and hair intact (see Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #7). In a later issue, her arms turn into raptorial legs as well, completing the fusing of bodily transformation and sexual self-acceptance when the women are intimate whilst Lady keeps her insect form (see Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #10). Another surreal splash panel shows the couple having sex while their translucent wings are fanned out on either side of them (Fig. 3).



Figure 3: Lady and Mariah have sex with their insect wings showing (Bennett and Ariela Kristantina 2018: #8). © **Aftershock Comics**, reprinted with kind permission of the Copyright Holders.

Thus, in choosing monstrosity over a fixed identity, they queer and diversify the Victorian discourse on homosexuality.

In horror stories, monstrosity is seldom envisioned as positive. *InSEXts*, however, enables the reader to identify with and relate to the protagonists through its use of point of view. Jack Halberstam’s observation that “most Gothic novels lack the point of view of the monster” (Halberstam 2020: 165) is developed further by Aviva Briefel, who argues that “it is the monster’s pain that determines audience [and reader] positioning”, because the monsters’ “mystery and terror depend on our distance from them” (Briefel 2005: 16, 24). Throughout Lady’s fight with The Hag, we rarely adopt the antagonist’s perspective. Instead, most panels show The Hag from a low angle, her kraken-like limbs looming over us (see Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #6), thus aligning the reader with the ‘good’ monster. As mentioned before, rather than violating women through the body of the monster, body horror originates *within* the female body in *InSEXts*. Only after The Hag kills William in a red-shaded splash panel does Lady’s ultimate metamorphosis begin. On a double page, she squirms with pain as spikes break out of her bloody spine, curving her body in impossible directions. Her outcry – “Aaaah!” – is lettered in bold capitals and pushes past the boundaries of her speech balloon, indicating that the confinements of language cannot express her agony. In comparison, while Lady’s and Mariah’s purple-coloured orgasmic exclamations do influence the speech balloons’ shape, the lettering does not leave the bubble. The pain of losing her close friend, however, is uncontainable and triggers Lady’s ultimate physical transgression. Lady stabs The Hag with her spiky legs, reminding her that the latter was wrong in thinking “that there were no better monsters to bring [her] down” (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #7). The text externalises Lady’s pain through body horror, which enables the reader to feel with her. Not only Lady’s pain but also her queerness is closely linked to monstrous transformation.

Female monstrosity is usually demonised and sanctioned in horror narratives. And yet, queerness, with its inherent ability to adapt, to change, and to appropriate, is what makes the protagonists thrive in *InSEXts*. “Women’s lesbian and gay Gothic erotic horror”, Gina Wisker argues, “can be used to explore the creative and celebratory potential of relationships of mutuality, where difference, becoming, metamorphosis, [and] change are reasons for celebration” (Wisker 2011: 134). This is because “[i]ndividuals are in a state of becoming, [and] metamorphosis is creative, energised potential, not loss and death” (Wisker 2011: 137). While Wisker seems to

use queer, lesbian, and gay interchangeably in her article, my reading of *InSEXts* still resonates with her argument. Difference and deviation from the norm, even in their most monstrous forms, do not have to end in death. Although the queerness of Lady and Mariah's relationship does not explicitly rely on their insectoid transformations, their metamorphosis renders the relationship queer in a way that goes beyond non-heteronormativity, because their kinship is productive and directed towards the future. Carina Pasquesi muses about reasons for queerness's celebratory tone:

Perhaps we have a tradition of describing ourselves as fierce creatures, something more powerful than just human, as a way to be brave, to give ourselves a necessary fiction of power in the face of a kind of negativity that is certainly not enabling. (Pasquesi 2014: 120)

Pasquesi aligns queerness with a positive mindset, stressing the importance of feeling empowered even when one cannot *be* in power. This inherent coping mechanism helps queer individuals thrive in heteropatriarchal power structures that may threaten their very existence.

InSEXts' refusal to connote queerness negatively is quite literally addressed in the comic. "There is only one way your story can end", The Hag states (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #7), which refers to the countless literary texts that narratively sanction their queer characters with death or tragedy. However, Lady and Mariah rewrite the course of their (his)story, fighting for closure and a happy ending. The Goddess' last words can be read as a metatextual self-reflection: "The story changed... yes... we shall be so much better than before" (Bennet and Kristantina 2018: #13, original ellipses; see also Fig. 5). By ending the narrative on a utopian note, The Hag implies that "fiction[s] of power", to borrow Pasquesi's terms, will eventually lead to queer empowerment beyond the text as well.



Figure 5: Lady, Mariah and their son in front of a group of women.

Phoebe stands on Lady’s left (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #13).

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Similarly, *InSEXts* draws attention to the artificial construction of history, thus further contributing to the normalisation of queer women’s stories. Phoebe is a character who displays agency by resisting erasure from history, as she comes back to life after being turned to stone by the medusa. She comments on dead people’s stories as “written or rewritten by others” (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #10). Uttered by a black female character, these words can be read as a criticism of the large body of whitewashed neo-Victorian literature that denies representation to queer women of colour. Cohen, too, comments on the artificiality of master narratives by saying that “[h]istory itself becomes a monster: defeaturing, self-deconstructive, always in danger of exposing the sutures that bind its disparate elements into a single, unnatural body” (Cohen 1996: 9). Thus, if history itself is open to rewritings, why should neo-Victorian queer stories follow the norms of conventional story writing?

Certainly, *InSEXts* is quite self-celebratory when it comes to the empowerment of its female characters. At times, the generous application of ‘liberation’ dilutes the conflict of agency we are faced with in neo-Victorian texts and disregards intersectionality. For example, how free can the prostitutes possibly be after Mariah and Lady destroy the brothel? Would they really be able to travel the world, as Mariah suggests, or go to school? Would Phoebe likely “be well-established in Milan” (Bennett and

Kristantina 2018: #13)? The answer has to be ‘no’. Surely, neo-Victorianism operates in a similar way, offering a “fiction of power” that reclaims queer voices in retrospect only and, thereby, empowers queer people in the present. ‘Writing back’ to the Victorians proves difficult when they are unable to read what we, in the twenty-first century, are writing. Thus, in creating neo-Victorian stories and advancing neo-Victorian scholarship, we can only write for ourselves. This touches on what Helen Davies has theorised as the neo-Victorian’s peculiarly ventriloquist voice: in questioning the ethics of contemporary authors providing voices for voiceless Victorians, she concludes that “[t]here can be no dialogue, no exchange, only neo-Victorianism talking to itself” (Davies 2012: 7). In the following, I will therefore turn to strategies of empowerment in *InSEXts*.

4. Patriarchal Anxieties: Reversion vs. Appropriation

In the very first issue, Lady and Mariah have a son together. Their first sexual encounter is initiated by Mariah: “I can give you a child” (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #1). Earlier, Lady talks about her inability to have children ‘for’ her husband, who calls her a “barren wretch” because she had several miscarriages in the past (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #1). As Creed notes, “when woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions” (Creed 1994: 7). *InSEXts* reverses this notion by visualising a parthenogenetic conception method using Lady’s husband Lord Bertram as an involuntary ‘host mother’, which indirectly normalises and naturalises both alternative methods of conception and family models. Lord Bertram’s violent death is the first display of body horror in the series, even preceding Lady’s insectoid transformation. In the two impregnation scenes, Lady firstly swallows a plant green egg that Mariah produces from her mouth, which Lady then passes on to the husband in a wet kiss. Only indicated by a swollen throat at first, the proceeding panels show him becoming more and more ill, until a detailed splash panel traces his abdomen bulging to an uncanny size, finally ripping the skin open with wine-red organs bursting out. Next, we see Lady and Mariah bent over his disfigured corpse, whose ribcage is bent apart to expose a membraned egg containing the baby. Speaking of monstrous births in horror films, Creed suggests that they are “grotesque because the body’s surface is no longer closed, smooth and intact – rather the body looks as if it may tear apart, open out, reveal its

innermost depths”, so that pregnancy equals a “loss of boundaries” (Creed 1994: 58). Instead of feeding into the anxiety that the female body may tear apart during pregnancy, said anxiety is graphically played out on the male body in *InSEXts*. That way, the psychological and physical horror of a forced pregnancy becomes visible because it *leaves* the female body, which has an irritating effect on the reader. The comic’s visual immediacy fuels this moment of irritation and simultaneously exposes and reverses reader expectations about body horror and pregnancy. It makes us aware of our visual habits and the normalisation of violence against female bodies.

Moreover, Lord Bertram’s pregnancy reverses the disembodied nature of “Victorian celebrations of woman as a domestic angel” (Hurley 1996: 121). At first, Lord Bertram reduces both Lady and Mariah to their domestic practices and gendered labour: he married Lady for her dowry and in order to continue his patrilineage, while he refers to Mariah as “only a maid” (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #1). This notion is overturned when Bertram himself becomes a mere host for the couple’s baby, leading to his literal and horrible disembodiment. In return, by ‘outsourcing’ the pregnancy to Lady’s husband, the protagonists refuse to comply with Victorian femininity and reclaim their reproductive agency.

Notably, while Lord Bertram’s attempt to continue his patrilineage fails, the protagonists’ alternative conception method is rewarded with the birth of a healthy son. From a neo-Victorian perspective, *InSEXts* reimagines a historical legacy of queer family planning for contemporary readers, as countless countries still neither allow joint adoption by same-sex couples, let alone second-parent adoption, nor grant them access to the services of fertility clinics and corresponding state support. In *InSEXts*, the couple gets to be “one happy family” (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #1), which is usually denied to queer characters in a Victorian setting. Fictional representations like these

assert the ‘naturalness’ and ‘rightness’ of such alternative family configurations across and through time, thereby supporting the non-heteronormative equal rights agenda and underlining the neo-Victorian’s ethical as well as political import. (Kohlke and Gutleben 2011: 16)

Thus, while fictional success stories of queer family planning contribute to social and legal discourses on LGBTQI+ parenting, they also unfold neo-conservative ideals, one implication being that “alternative elective families only derive their newfound legitimation from *their conscious emulation or mimicry of the iconic nuclear family* based on self-containment” (Kohlke and Gutleben 2011: 19, original emphasis). In fact, Lady and Mariah are a financially secure, monogamous couple with an empathetic, well-behaved son; the only conflicts they encounter are external, while their relationship remains loving and sexually fulfilling at all times. However, the text offers no heteronormative, conventional, Victorian role model for the couple to emulate. Quite the opposite is true, for the only other child character is the son of Lady’s kitchen staff, a Muslim couple. Apart from this non-white family model, all remaining heteronormative relationships are presented as abusive, including Lady’s own marriage, her husband’s affair with an underage prostitute who ends up pregnant, as well as Lady’s brother-in-law’s relationship with his wife, Sylvia, that only persists because her “hatred of women exceeds even [his] own” (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #5). First and foremost, this rich display of dysfunctional family relations serves to demystify the popular image of nuclear Victorian families and exposes the hypocrisy of the many Disneyfied neo-Victorian success stories of happy families.

However, the text makes use of a rather problematic strategy to do so. In order to normalise the protagonists’ queer relationship, other sexualities are rendered monstrous. In particular, women who work in The Hag’s brothel are repeatedly victimised, as established by the lyrics “and we who live to suffer” in an introductory panel showing two prostitutes (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #1). Moreover, a montaged splash panel contrasts an intimate sex scene between Lady and Mariah with an orgy at the brothel. The written text only enforces the opposition, as Lady’s speech balloon – “You and our child are the truest love in my heart” – in the upper left corner meets The Hag’s utterance – “Hurt each other” – in the bottom right (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #5). As critics have suggested, many neo-Victorian texts project our own obsession with sex onto the Victorians, addressing

the enlightened, hedonistic, pro-sex spectator who has escaped the Victorian moral strait-lacing, laughing knowingly at the secret sex lives of the Victorians, mocking nineteenth-century prudery, repression, and sexual hypocrisy. (Pietrzak-Franger and Voigts 2017: 193)

In this case, both authors and readers of neo-Victorian texts take on the moral high ground to judge Victorians and hold them accountable by applying their own contemporary standard. Eventually, the celebration of private, loving sex at the expense of public, professionalised sex is quite reactionary and slightly undermines the progressive tone of the text.

So far, I have outlined the reversal of patriarchal anxieties about women’s bodies in *InSEXts*. Using the example of Lord Bertram’s monstrous pregnancy, I have shown that he visualises the disembodied state of Victorian femininity as he is reduced to a reproductive host. This exposes the horror of forced pregnancy that threatens to go unseen in the female body. In the following, I will discuss the empowering appropriation of female monstrosity using Bennett and Kristantina’s version of the *vagina dentata* as presented by Lady in the third issue. After having witnessed the negligent murder of a woman by an opium addicted doctor, Lady returns to the doctor’s practice to avenge her (see Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #3). She pretends to suffer from “the most peculiar instincts”, which the practitioner diagnoses as “hysteria, brought on by a wandering womb” (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #3). Just when he goes on to say that “afflicted women must take a husband, produce children, anchor the womb in its proper place” (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #3), a quick succession of panels shows the emergence of Lady’s serrated vulva, which climaxes in a splash panel depicting the crevice extended over her torso (Fig. 4).



Figure 4: Lady consumes the doctor through her *vagina dentata*
(Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #3).

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Starting with the doctor’s arm, Lady consumes his whole body right up to his right foot that remains bleeding on the floor. Creed explores the woman as castrator in her theory of the monstrous-feminine, pointing “to male fears and phantasies about female genitals as a trap, a black hole which threatens to swallow them up and cut them into pieces” (Creed 1994: 106). Here, the myth of the *vagina dentata* becomes a fictional reality in order to punish a character responsible for the myth’s perpetuation and dissemination.

In scenes like this, the text manages to “blur the distinction between us and those no-longer-Othered Victorians” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 24), since pejorative sexual stereotypes, especially concerning sexually active women, persist into the present. Not least, “[t]he notion of the devouring female genitals continues to exist in the modern world; it is apparent in popular derogatory terms for women such as ‘man-eater’” (Creed 1994: 106). Similarly, Marguerite Bennett created *InSEXts* because “to be a woman is to live a life of body horror”, as she writes in the introduction to *InSEXts Volume 1: Chrysalis* (Bennett and Kristantina 2016: n.p.). Following Creed, Jane Usher explores medical and social myths about

the female body from a psychological perspective and finds that “premenstrual change is positioned as sign of the monstrous feminine within – breakdown of this control [is] diagnosed as PMS, a pathology deserving treatment” (Usher 2006: 161). These examples illustrate the persistence of Victorian patriarchal anxieties about female bodies today – be it regarding pregnancy, sexual autonomy, or PMS.

This blurred distinction between the Victorians and ourselves allows *InSEXts* to avenge the perpetuation and dissemination of patriarchal anxieties about women’s bodies today. In line with the comic’s marketing as a neo-Victorian revenge fantasy, the protagonists start out punishing Lady’s abusive husband, playing into Creed’s analysis of the *femme castratrice* who “controls the sadistic gaze: the male victim is her object” (Creed 1994: 153). Indeed, by ‘impregnating’ Lord Bertram, the couple takes revenge on him in an eye for an eye manner for the unwanted pregnancies Lady had to endure. Consequently, his murder can be read as their refusal to be victimised any longer. However, as per the classic pattern of revenge stories, refusing victimisation means to become the offender oneself. In politicising and publicising their revenge throughout the comic series, Lady and Mariah transform it into an act of avenging. For instance, in the third issue, when Lady avenges the death of a woman killed by the butchering doctor, she displays agency by being the aggressor rather than waiting to become his next victim. From that point onwards, Lady and Mariah actively seek out their antagonists, until they meet The Hag. Before their climactic fight, The Hag says: “You will rather have to become me to destroy me, won’t you?” (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #6), while she penetrates Lady’s mouth with her tongue. Immediately after her death, their former ally, Brother Asher, turns against Lady: “Kill the monstress for she will become the new Hag” (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #7). Cohen argues that “[t]he monster prevents mobility [...], delimiting the social spaces through which private bodies may move. To step outside this official geography is [...] to become monstrous oneself” (Cohen 1996: 12). In other words, Lady and Mariah have to adapt to The Hag’s methods in order to fight her. Confronting The Hag as an embodiment of patriarchal power and misogyny equals their stepping out of the domestic realm and shedding Victorian feminine ideals by reclaiming their monstrous, queer femininity. The couple’s leaving of the domestic sphere for the public realm also indicates the transformation of private revenge into systemic acts of avenging. In return, they fill the void

The Hag's death has created, posing a new threat to the patriarchal order. One of the girls from the brothel observes that "[t]he world will always come for us. The world will always want us to suffer" (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #7), which summarises the conflict of agency facing the protagonists. Having the choice between becoming a victim or the aggressor, they choose the latter.

5. "Difference made flesh"? Embodiments of Misogyny

The monstrous feminine not only characterises the protagonists but also the villains they fight. All antagonistic monsters in *InSEXts* can be read as embodiments of misogyny, which roots contemporary sexist discourses in the Victorian era. Firstly, Lady's sister-in-law Sylvia Bertram is introduced in opposition to nature, as the train she is travelling on is shown hitting a deer that perishes next to the tracks (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #2). Secondly, the third issue's cover depicts her pouring a test tube containing poison onto a plant. Throughout the narrative, she uses a variety of sexist and racist slurs to insult Lady and her lover, including but not limited to "whores", "strumpets", "spinsters", "cunts", "harlots" (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #5), "wench", and "half-breed" (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #2), the latter emphasising the discursive-political overlaps between (Victorian) misogyny and imperial discourses of racial degeneration. In a similar vein, when encountering Lady in the street, Sylvia threatens, "I will see you so hungry, so abject, you will happily go gagging, choking, retching on the seed of the vermin of the earth" (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #2); and after the story's final enemy takes possession of her, Lady's sister-in-law is referred to as "a slave so broken and wounded that The Hag's poison could slither in" (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #5). The discourse of slavery is here clearly appropriated to depict the violations of misogyny.

Sylvia's internalised misogyny has made her vulnerable to the ultimate monster – "a hate made flesh", a complex and multidimensional "hatred of women" (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #7) that resonates with Cohen's analysis: "The monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell amongst us" (Cohen 1996: 7). In this case, The Hag is not difference made flesh, but she embodies a normalised and institutionalised, colonising misogyny, rendering visible what has been hiding in plain sight. In general, Cohen observes that "[t]he monster's destructiveness is really a deconstructiveness: it threatens to reveal that difference originates in

process, rather than in fact” (Cohen 1996: 14). All physiognomic monsters in *InSEXts* are female because male privilege is the status quo, and therefore invisible. This is to say that The Hag became monstrous through systemic experiences of discrimination fuelled by the heteropatriarchal order, which is only exposed through her existence. Actually, the text goes to great lengths to explain the monsters’ backgrounds in order to reveal the faults in the system rather than blaming the individual. For example, in an art deco collage, Hattie, a prostitute from the brothel, provides insight into The Hag’s past, including scenes of sexual abuse and torture (see Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #6). Likewise, The Goddess recalls how she was taken for a relic and brought to Europe from Java in an act of symbolic imperialist ‘rape’ of colonised countries, which also functions as a comment on colonialist art robbery (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #11). The collage about The Hag’s past deviates from the usual grid structure and visualises the fragmented ever-present nature of trauma. Chute and Dekoven argue that “trauma itself breaks the boundary of form, and perhaps can be, at least in part, communicated viscerally and emotionally through the visual” (Chute and Dekoven 2012: 193). Consequently, neo-Victorian comics especially lend themselves to addressing intergenerational and cultural trauma that haunts our present day.

Interestingly, when transformed, Sylvia and The Hag share the monstrous feature of a broad mouth with an excessive amount of sharp teeth. This links back to the *vagina dentata* as “[c]lose-up shots of gaping jaws, sharp teeth and bloodied lips play on the spectator’s fear of bloody incorporation”, while “the teeth are threateningly visible” (Creed 1994: 107). The exaggerated mouth also hints at the antagonists’ hate speech, which becomes apparent in a splash panel that shows Lady killing Sylvia after the latter attempted to harm her son (see Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #5). First, Lady attacks Sylvia’s mouth from a point-of-view angle and then stabs her long, dark tongue with a raptorial leg, saying: “Still your tongue” (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #5). Ian Conrich and Laura Sedgwick identify the mouth as “the opening through which an invasion is identified deep within” (Conrich and Sedgwick 2017: 103), which links back to Sylvia’s internalised misogyny as her hate speech springs from her self-hatred.

The last panel of the fifth issue depicts Mariah helping Lady to her feet, while Sylvia’s disfigured corpse is sprawled over the floor with a

gaping wound where her mouth has been. Having earlier threatened to take away Lady's subject status – "I will see you so hungry, so abject" – Sylvia and her own body are now abjected. The misogynist hate speech that haunts *InSEXts*' female protagonists as well as contemporary readers is thus ejected and reduced to a corpse without physical integrity. I have indicated before that female body horror originates within the body, while male body horror stems from external violence in the comic. While one could argue that this does not apply to Sylvia, as her body is violated through Lady's attack, in fulfilling her self-ascribed role as Victorian domestic angel, Sylvia already is "an essentially disembodied creature" (Hurley 1996: 121). Thus, her abjected body merely visualises the disruptive impact of gendered self-confinement.

Indeed, loss of physical integrity turns out to be a signifier for internalised misogyny. For her last fight, The Hag turns into a sea creature with serrated octopus' arms and misplaced goggle eyes. However, after Lady stabs and kills her, the proceeding panels show no trace of her body (see Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #7). The fact that we do not see her human form again indicates that she has irrevocably lost all sense of female solidarity. As Hattie points out, The Hag is complicit in the patriarchy because she deliberately causes female suffering "[i]nstead of making common cause against the reign that makes us hurt each other so" (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #6). While it was too late for The Hag, a monster who had internalised the misogyny of her very name, The Goddess eventually turns back into her divine feminine form, because Phoebe makes her aware of her body dysmorphia caused by patriarchal and sexist discourses. "Do not become that which has harmed you. Do not clothe yourself in the lie they would have you wear", she says, adding "They would make you think yourself a monster, but you are so much more" (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #13). The Goddess is *rendered* monstrous by the male and colonising gaze, and only by rejecting that narrative is she able to accept her 'true' form. In fact, her retransformation spans two consecutive double pages, including smaller aspect-to-aspect panels that focus on distinct features, such as her almond shaped eyes with thick long lashes, her delicate hands, and long voluminous hair.

While this smooth shift in physicality speaks for the fluidity and adaptability of monstrous formations, it draws attention to one, if not *the*, inherent tension of the comic genre, namely that between text and image. At

times, the written text appears to be a dense succession of pop-feminist slogans, such as “No traditions can keep us caged” (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #2), “There is no perfect woman. There are only women” (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #12), or “We will not leave one of our own behind!” (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #13). Thus, on the textual level, *InSEXts* references pop-feminist notions of freedom, body positivity, and solidarity, especially from an intersectional perspective. At the same time, however, the comic art reproduces conventional and idealised images of femininity, quite often from a distinctly male gaze. Indeed, the protagonists’ monstrosity exists in constant opposition to Western beauty ideals of light-skinned, slim, longhaired women with voluptuous breasts and hips. Throughout, the female characters’ poses are aesthetically curved – chest out, back bent, toes pointed (see Fig. 3). In this respect, the text seems to balance out the subversive potential of the protagonists’ physical transformations, because the reader’s expectation of them turning back into their hyper-feminine form is fulfilled without exception.

In her essay ‘(Re)Making the Body Beautiful: Postfeminist Cinderellas and Gothic Tales of Transformation’, Stéphanie Genz compellingly outlines the conflict between femininity and monstrosity in postfeminist Gothic texts. According to Genz, in such texts,

femininity is an actively pursued subject position that becomes available for a potentially subversive resignification that reinterprets the female body as an emblem of agency and empowerment. At the same time, femininity also gains darker, monstrous connotations by shedding its associations with modesty, chastity and innocence [. . .] and instead becoming linked to unnatural and devilish pursuits and desires. (Genz 2007: 74)

Queerness, femininity and monstrosity are closely linked in *InSEXts*. Monstrosity is celebrated as an intrinsic part of the female body and enables Lady and Mariah to fight against the ‘bad’ monsters. Genz further describes the postfeminist Gothic female body as “a locus of ongoing controversy” that is “simultaneously oppressed and liberated” (Genz 2007: 74, 81). Not unlike neo-Victorianism itself, *InSEXts* both liberates and oppresses its protagonists by simultaneously empowering and fetishising them. Indeed,

the comic is only able to show physical transgression by tying it back to the frame of conventional beauty standards. In queering neo-Victorianism, authors and scholars alike face the difficulty of celebrating (sexual) transgression within the confines of Victorian aesthetics.

6. Conclusion: Queering the Neo-Victorian Gaze

The grid structure of the comic form is especially suitable for neo-Victorian stories because it demonstrates the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous and the artificiality of historical master narratives. Just like neo-Victorianism, the comic's simultaneous storytelling resists historic closure and complicates notions of a distinct past. Neo-Victorianism and comics also share a tension of reproduction vs. deconstruction: queering neo-Victorianism is impossible without fetishising the Victorians, while the subversion of the othering, male gaze depends on its reproduction.

Overall, different embodiments of monstrosity coexist in *InSEXts*. Lady's insectoid transformations, I have argued, progress with her increasing confidence in her queerness. The alignment of queer sexuality with monstrosity is made explicit in the splash panels that are either reserved for scenes of transformation or sexual intimacy. In choosing flexible monstrosity over a fixed identity, Lady and Mariah queer the 'discovery' of the predominantly male homosexual in nineteenth-century medical discourses. Instead of horror conventions that normalise the violation of the female body, *InSEXts*' female body horror originates within, so that Lady's climactic transformation externalises her pain and makes her relatable to the reader. While the comic's utopic outlook meta-textually resists the narratological sanctioning of queer characters, it celebrates queer family planning at the expense of sex work, which slightly undermines the feminist tone of the comic.

Meanwhile, the comic reverses patriarchal anxieties about pregnancy and projects them onto Lord Bertram to visualise gendered violence that otherwise remains unseen in the female body. In doing so, the disembodied nature of Victorian femininity, too, is reversed onto Bertram as he becomes a mere host for the baby. This parthenogenic pregnancy also normalises alternative conception methods and queer family planning today. Additionally, *InSEXts* realises and appropriates misogynist myths like the *vagina dentata* to punish its disseminators, which can be read as neo-Victorianism avenging the persistence of patriarchal anxieties about

women’s and Other bodies today. Internalised misogyny is rendered visible by The Hag as a destructive force that is complicit in patriarchal discourses and threatens the survival of women, while The Goddess demonstrates internalised misogyny as a dysmorphic disorder eventually cured by her rejection of the colonising male gaze. Sylvia’s loss of physical integrity visualises the disembodied angel of the house ideal by externalising her internal self-hatred and gendered self-confinement. Throughout, the motive of revenge in the comic establishes neo-Victorianism as potential avenger of Victorian wrongs, such as racism, sexism, and homophobia, that continue to haunt the present day. In choosing to become the aggressor rather than the victim, *InSEXts*’ protagonists avenge and empower women and queer people in retrospect.

Lastly, the tension between text and image in the comic reveals the male gaze as persistently norm-providing and potentially undermining the text’s queer liberatory potential. This inherently neo-Victorian tension is resolved somewhat in *InSEXts*’ epilogue, throughout which we are placed in the point-of-view of a young, drunk man who follows the protagonists onto a cruise ship to New York. We hide behind a door, watching Lady and Mariah have sex until Mariah notices us, the “trespasser” (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #13). Notably, the point of view is interrupted in the following panel when Mariah and Lady’s gaze shifts to the upper right corner where the young man is supposedly standing next to us: “Oh, did you think we were for you?”, Mariah asks him, while Lady draws her hairpin and points it at his eyes (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #13). “Did you think that what is ours was yours to take? Oh, sir...”, Mariah continues and her last words – “You were wrong” – correlate with the blinding of his eyes, indicated by the final splash panel showing a water-colour butterfly (Bennett and Kristantina 2018: #13). In taking on the perspective of the male voyeur, readers are not only made complicit in the sexualising and colonising male gaze of the comic, but also called out on our neo-Victorian appropriation of the Victorians. Yet, as the point-of-view is inconsistent and the panels create a distance to the voyeur in the end, the text can also be read as punishing the male gaze and simultaneously encouraging Other, queerer gazes. Cohen writes that “[m]onsters are our children” and “ask us why we have created them” (Cohen 1996: 20), which also applies to Lady and Mariah as neo-Victorian characters. *InSEXts* suggests that we are the Victorians’ creations just like the neo-Victorians are ours, thus challenging

us to make better monsters – neo-Victorian monsters that encourage us to look them in the eye, albeit with unresolvable tension.

Notes

1. Obviously, this is a very reductive definition of steampunk. On neo-Victorianism and Steampunk, see, for instance, Nally 2019, Bowser and Croxall 2016, as well as Bowser and Croxall's co-edited *Steampunk, Science, and (Neo)Victorian Technologies*, a 2010 special issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies*.

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