

**Betrayed by Time:
Steampunk & the Neo-Victorian in Alan Moore's *Lost Girls*
and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen***

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Abstract:

Alan Moore's neo-Victorian comics *Lost Girls* (2006) and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999-) dramatise enigmatic aspects of temporality, narrative, and history. In particular, the steampunk elements of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* highlight history's 'extimate' quality, neither internal to nor wholly outside the subject. In so doing, they suggest a more conflicted approach to progress and freedom than is usually acknowledged.

Keywords: extimacy, graphic novels, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, Jacques Lacan, *Lost Girls*, Alan Moore, psychoanalysis, steampunk

Steampunk's fascination with brassy, overstuffed Victoriana makes it a natural fit for the comics. The genre presents illustrators the opportunity to lavishly re-create a past that never was, while writers have the chance to play with well-known incidents and characters from history and literature. By now there is a long list of titles featuring a recognisably Victorian world, such as Brian Augustyn, Mike Mignola, and P. Craig Russell's *Gotham by Gaslight* (1989); Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999-); Matt Fraction and Steven Sanders's *The Five Fists of Science* (2006); Ellis Warren and Gianluca Pagliarani's *Aetheric Mechanics* (2008); Ian Edginton and Davide Fabbri's *Victorian Undead* (2009-2010); and more.¹ Steampunk motifs also show up often in comics written by Ellis, even when the world is not especially Victorian, as in *X-Men: Ghost Box* (2008), *Ignition City* (2009), and more. Steampunk is so prevalent in comics that it has evolved into a recognisable visual approach to the Victorian period.

Consider, for example, the following two images of Sherlock Holmes's chambers in *Aetheric Mechanics* and *The Victorian Undead* (Figures 1 and 2).²



Figure 1: Interior of Sax Raker's office, from Warren Ellis's, *Aetheric Mechanics*.
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Figure 2: Interior of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson's office, as it appears in Ian Edginton and Davide Fabbri, *The Victorian Undead*, #1. © 2009 DC Comics, Ian Edginton, and Davide Fabbri, reprinted with permission of DC Comics.

These frames reflect upper-middle-class domestic interiors within the steampunk universe, and they suggest how much the genre's visual signatures depend on early twentieth-century adaptations of Victorian novels and the subsequent rise of British heritage cinema.³ Overstuffed furniture; heavy, patterned carpets, curtains, and wallpaper; crowded living spaces – all of these relics of late Victorian interior design stand in for the Victorian period as such.⁴ What steampunk adds to the mix is the omnipresence of ornate scientific equipment, whether thematically relevant (chemical apparatuses and the heads of automatons) or not (Holmes appears to have indoor electrical lighting in *Victorian Undead*). The casual mixture of the fictional Holmes with real inventors such as Jaquet-Droz, de Vaucanson, and Edison is also wholly typical.⁵ The verve with which comic books illustrate steampunk or neo-Victorian worlds potentially downplays the conceptual interest of such fantasies, turning the relationship between past and present into a matter of style.⁶ There are two different risks here. First, the instantly recognisable Victorian references freeze that period's meaning, and, second, the intricate, vivid drawings and detailed research can turn reading such works into a game of allusion-hunting.

At the same time, readers can find sophisticated accounts of temporality, narrative, and history in some steampunk comics. For example, the great comics writer Alan Moore has written three books that are largely or entirely set in the Victorian period: *From Hell* (1991-1996, 1998), *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999-), and *Lost Girls* (1991, 2006).⁷ The last is technically set on the cusp of World War I, but most of the stories recounted therein are Victorian, and part of the point of the story is that the early Edwardian period is not so very different from the Victorian one. Likewise, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* begins as a kind of Victorian Justice League, bringing together literary characters, such as Captain Nemo, Jekyll/Hyde, Allan Quatermain, Mina Murray, and others to fight evil, although it soon turns into a romp through cultural history. This article will focus specifically on *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* and *Lost Girls*, in order to argue that Moore's interest in steampunk arises neither from a material critique of (neo-)Victorian ideology nor from celebrating the imagination for its own sake as capable of transcending ideology, but rather from the desire to unpack the complex relationship between fantasy, material conditions, and historical change. Resisting equally the idea that historical change occurs outside us and the notion that

such change is largely subjective – indeed, recognising both as forms of escapist fantasy – Moore’s steampunk comics acknowledge the way history rests uneasily athwart, both inside and outside.

To say that history takes place both inside *and* outside historical subjects is also to suggest that it might be ‘extimate’ – a word Lacanian psychoanalysis uses to describe a kind of otherness right at the heart of subjective experience.⁸ In what follows, I first consider the ways in which steampunk plays with history and genre, and then examine how *Lost Girls* and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* address themselves to time, memory, and fantasy. While in the former text, memory or personal history is an endless resource for erotic bliss, the latter exposes history as an abyss. Rather than offering plenitude or even death, it condemns us to existence. This last perspective, I argue, is a more complex vision of history than steampunk is usually credited with. I have argued elsewhere that the most interesting Victorian perspective on history is one that emphasises

enigma, and the limits of our ability to find meaning in our lives [...]. [T]his enigma is a resource for psychic and political change, a guarantor that the symptoms, social or otherwise, afflicting us today are alterable, possibly even for the better. (Jones 2006: 102)

Moore’s most interesting Victorian fictions reveal the enigma at the heart of our best-known, apparently well-understood cultural fantasies, thus potentially allowing us a space to rethink them.⁹

1. Steampunk and History

The very name *steampunk* suggests a playful will-to-anachronism – *steam* is obsolete, whereas *punk*, certainly at the time of the term’s coinage, resonated as deliberately modern and contemporary. The genre depends on a kind of double consciousness, in which we recognise the Victorian period as simultaneously other to and identical with our contemporary moment. A good example of this is the leadership role that Mina Murray assumes in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. The comic firmly corrects the fateful decision in Bran Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) to exclude Mina from the vampire-hunters’ planning. The reader is always both aware of the *League*’s revisionist approach and invited to consider how far, or even whether,

gender equality has actually progressed. (This tension makes it all the more ironic that the film version of *League* [2003, dir. Stephen Norrington] made Allan Quatermain, rather than Mina, the leader of the group.) As readers, we are invited to consider how our own anxieties about shifting gender roles have a history. This is one of the pleasures of steampunk: it delivers a scathing indictment of modern culture, and that indictment somehow becomes simultaneously both more damning and more acceptable by being voiced from the moment of that culture's 'birth'.

Many aspects of steampunk bear traces of this double consciousness. Mainstream readers usually classify steampunk as a sub-subgenre of science fiction, a neo-Victorian outpost within the broader universe of cyberpunk writing. Steampunk and cyberpunk alike are modes of a genre's auto-critique: cyberpunk rigorously decomposes the bloated space operas and techno-futurist dreams of post-war science fiction, while steampunk disports in the literary and actual histories of the nineteenth century in order to throttle the can-do optimism of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century popular fictions about science.¹⁰ Yet it turns out that such mainstream assumptions are mistaken: steampunk predates its parent. While cyberpunk is usually dated to 1984 (McCaffery 1991: 1), steampunk's aesthetic, if perhaps not its ideological interest, was set as early as 1969 or 1971 (Nevins 2008: 3).

Steampunk is not just a literary style: the label is also applied to a culture of makers, who handcraft all manner of items, usually in a highly wrought, often Gothic or decadent Victorian aesthetic – or both. The literary and maker cultures are not always aware of one another (see Jones 2008), and indeed, the maker version of steampunk must remain largely outside my purview. What is relevant about it, though, is its own doubled aspects. In one account, these makers represent a sort of literal embodiment of Walter Benjamin's famous speculations about 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1935): mortified by a consumerist society of simulacra and disposability, steampunk makers seek lovingly to reinvolve the aura of the hand-crafted object.¹¹ The other explanation is more straightforwardly aesthetic: the baroque hyperbole of steampunk detail, and the florid attention to authenticity, represents a yearning for complex styles and forms of beauty, in contrast to the relentless simplification of late-capitalist consumer styles.¹²

It is often stated that steampunk is appealing because there is a close connection between the Victorian world and our own. While this similarity has been proposed by popular historians (see Sweet 2001 and Standage 1993), commenters on steampunk have pushed the similarity to near-identity:

More so than other historical periods, the 19th century, especially the Victorian era (1837-1901), is an excellent mirror for the modern period. The social, economic, and political structures of the Victorian era are *essentially the same* as our own, and their cultural dynamics – the way in which the culture reacts to various phenomena and stimuli – are quite similar to ours. This makes the Victorian era extremely useful for ideological stories on subjects such as feminism, imperialism, class issues, and religion, as well as for commentary on contemporary issues such as serial murderers and overseas wars. (Nevins 2008: 8, emphasis added)

On the one hand, one can recognise that the Victorian and contemporary periods share certain similar features without insisting that their material structures are “essentially the same.” (To take only the most obvious examples, the evaporation of the British empire and, in the United States, the abolition of slavery and subsequent gradual extirpation of Jim Crow laws surely count for something.) Nonetheless, it is probably fair to say that feminism, imperialism, class, and religion are argued about in the Victorian period under something like those names, and around topics that we would find familiar. More vaguely, Alan Moore speaks of “connections” and “resonances”, which seems apt:

There are connections between this century and previous centuries, and I always find that it suits the atmospherics if you can, kind of subtly, connect the time in which your story is set and the time in which your readers are living. It never does any harm, and it can sometimes give an extra level of resonance to the story. (qtd. in Nevins 2004: 251)

The passive voice of “in which your story is set” obscures Moore’s point slightly, which concedes that such connections are at least partly invented for our present needs. Simon Joyce has recently argued that this invention is in fact key to thinking about ‘the Victorians’:

we never really encounter ‘the Victorians’ themselves but instead a mediated image like the one we get when we glance into our rearview mirrors while driving. The image usefully condenses the paradoxical sense of looking forward to see what is behind us, which is the opposite of what we do when we read history in order to figure out the future. (Joyce 2007: 4)

This perspective is helpful when thinking about steampunk and, perhaps especially, steampunk comics: the point here is not some hypothetical correspondence between the 19th and 21st centuries, but rather these comics’ dramatisation of the temporal turbulence of historical change and the role narrative plays in facilitating or impeding such change. Beyond historical defamiliarisation, steampunk exposes the psychological and ideological stakes of invoking the past, whether one’s own or those of cultural history.

Considering how richly the genre depends on well-known nineteenth-century texts, one might easily interpret steampunk’s appeal as a *purely* literary game. Alan Moore has stated that “the most subversive thing about *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*” has always been “pulling down these snobbish barrier fancies between different genres, different levels of literature, supposed high and low literature” (qtd. in Nevins 2004: 254). While a postmodern mixing of genres is certainly a welcome aspect of *The League*, such a safe intellectual proposition hardly seems worth holding up as “the most subversive” aspect of the series. As Jess Nevins has documented in his essay ‘On Crossovers’ (from *Heroes and Monsters*), this sort of gesture is very old indeed. Restricting the comic’s appeal to literary gamesmanship ignores the “resonances”, invoked above, between Victorian and contemporary cultures. By contrast, my essay stresses the implications of literary game playing for political and psychological change – that is to say, what is subversive about the mixing of styles and genres is not that it redefines literary categories, but rather that it can redefine our cultural spaces and identities. Such game playing foregrounds the extimate aspects

of historical change, as something neither wholly external nor subjective. *Lost Girls* and *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* afford a useful proving ground for this argument, since both texts explicitly address questions of narrative, development, and progress.

2. *Lost Girls* and the Erotics of Memory

Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie's notorious *Lost Girls* (1991, 2006) is a work of neo-Victorian pornography. It arises from the observation that late Victorian and Edwardian culture seems to have had a peculiar fascination with and anxiety about prepubescent girls – for example, Alice in Lewis Carroll's stories about Wonderland; Wendy in J.M. Barrie's about Neverland; and Dorothy in Frank Baum's about Oz.¹³ In *Lost Girls*, three adult women meet in the Hotel Himmelgarten (literally 'heaven's garden'), a decadent Austrian hotel run by an amateur pornographer, Monsieur Rougeur. They tell each other their sexual histories, usually while in the midst of additional sexual encounters. It turns out that the three women are named Alice, Wendy, and Dorothy – and the plots of and key characters in their various seductions can be directly mapped onto the plots of the stories that circulate about them in the culture at large. Momentarily, it appears that the Hotel Himmelgarten is a utopia, a pleasure dome dedicated to the imagination and emancipated from Victorian prudery; however, the arrival of German tanks crushes these dreams at the book's end.

Lost Girls is not a work of steampunk – although it performs a critique of its own generic and cultural history, science and futurism play almost no role in it. The text is important to consider here, however, because *Lost Girls* stages an argument about how to read desire, memory, and fantasy, and, I will go on to argue, this argument provides a useful intellectual framework for reading *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*. By focusing our attention on the role of fantasy in narratives of historical change, *Lost Girls* underlines *The League's* scepticism about progress and development.

In bare outline, *Lost Girls* sounds like a brutally reductive, even parodic form of feminist criticism, which might be formulated thus: 'We, the sophisticated moderns, know the secret truths that the naïve, prudish Victorians could not bring themselves to admit. Obviously works such as *Alice in Wonderland* and *Peter Pan* are coded sexual desires, and so we will

explicate them in the most literal-minded way – almost as if this were a sleazy pornographic movie like *Nailin' Palin*.⁷ *Lost Girls* acknowledges this possibility in an early exchange between Harold and Wendy Potter:



Figure 3: Image of the Potters from *Lost Girls*, volume 1, chapter 3.
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During this conversation about shipping reports, which extends for two full pages, the shadows on the wall enact an alternative encounter between the Potters (see Figure 3). At first blush, the conversation appears to perform a standard criticism of Victorian patriarchy. Its desires (for conquest, for gain, and for dominance in male rivalry) are perfectly speakable, while libidinal pleasures are shameful and cannot be directly mentioned, only hinted at.

However, Moore and Gebbie are slightly more generous to the husband, suggesting that he, too, is a prisoner of cultural expectations around masculinity and femininity that he can only parrot. In his view, “there are things one simply doesn’t *talk* about”, and sexuality is certainly one of them (Moore and Gebbie 2006: I.3.8, original emphasis).

There is also something comic in the juxtaposition of shadow-images and couple. If these are Wendy Potter’s dreams, as we are encouraged to believe in Figure 3, then it becomes a little difficult to understand why she should invest so much in this buffoon, who prattles on about shipping. Moreover, what she does not know is that Monsieur Rougeur has a practice of leaving pornography in every guestroom and that her husband has been hiding it from her. As such, Harold is very likely having similar thoughts to Wendy, which doubles the irony. The surface joke centres on how the wife’s dreams reflect her belief that her husband is uninterested in sex – or, more precisely, that she understands his desire to dominate office politics as an especially boring form of sublimation – but readers will know that he may be as turned on as she is. The shadows, which initially appear to point up a discord between husband and wife, suggest that they may have something in common after all, and yet, for failing to realise this, end up poles apart.

Given all this talk of shadows and walls, it is hard not to have in mind Plato’s cave, and *Lost Girls* actually displays quite an interest in discussing Platonic aesthetic theory (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: Image of Alice & Monsieur Rougeur from *Lost Girls* Volume I, Chapter 1.
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This brief exchange turns out to be a key to *Lost Girls*: What does fiction show us? Is it a mere reflection of reality, or is it a more perfect form? Do

the shadows on the wall in the Potters' room reflect some real aspect of their marriage (Monsieur Rougeur's view), or does their marriage represent some wan falling off from the marital ideal (Alice's view)?¹⁴ The argument is worth dwelling on, because it resonates strangely with *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen's* ambivalence about literary-historical representation.

To the extent that their argument concerns pornographic fiction, Monsieur Rougeur and Alice are also disputing the nature of desire. Rougeur suggests that we desire superlative instances of some basic types, whereas Alice insists that our desire is for some lost ideal, somewhere beyond the mirror. The link between Plato's theory of fiction and an understanding of desire is hardly new on Moore's part. Jacques Lacan grounds his theory of desire on just this point in his second seminar. Lacan argues that the Platonic theory of reminiscences will not do as a model of desire. Instead, he insists, we are constantly inventing a field for our desire. We misremember what it was that we originally wanted and so blunder about happily from object to object. There never was an original, ideal object that would satisfy our desire – it is just more pleasurable to imagine that there was one.¹⁵ It is not hard to see that reminiscences, on this model, are related to the “resonances” Moore spoke of earlier: Both evoke a gauzily-remembered fantasy of an original or authentic past, from which we are forever separated.

In *Lost Girls*, the sexual adventures of the women are more than arousing; they force us to think about the women's relationships with their pasts. Are they looking to recreate some primordially lost satisfaction? Or are they simply looking for whatever *jouissance* is available to them, by any means necessary? It seems significant that the stories, as recounted, are almost invariably presented as affirming and pleasurable, even when they describe experiences—such as rape, incest, and bestiality—that might otherwise be traumatic, and also that the women do not try to re-enact their sexual histories as they recount them. Instead, those histories provide an incitement to new pleasures and new desires. To sharpen the Lacan-inflected point further: while we do not, in fact, have a Platonic model of desire, acting as if we did might well be a sound way of finding satisfaction. As I will suggest momentarily, the *League* series as a whole takes a similar approach toward strip-mining literary history. The steampunk approach to

history encourages us not only to imagine new freedoms, but also to recognise more honestly the constraints on that imagining.

While pretending to seek for Platonic satisfactions proves, on balance, a successful strategy in *Lost Girls*, it seems worth acknowledging that memory is a complex thing.

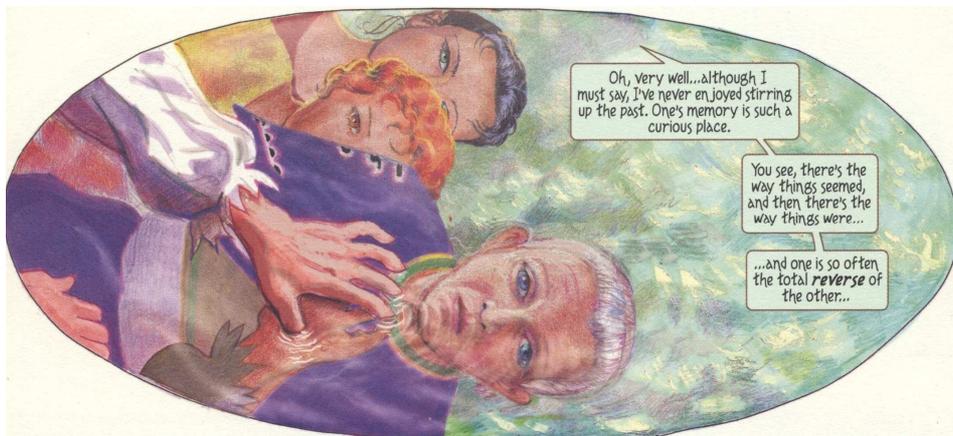


Figure 5: Image of Alice, Dorothy, and Wendy from *Lost Girls*, volume I, Chapter 9. © 2006 Alan Moore and Melinda Gebbie, reprinted by permission of Top Shelf.

What is important here is not the rudimentary difference between “the way things were” and the “way things seemed”, nor even the fact that these are said to be complete opposites. It does not even matter, at least here, which turns out to be ultimately true. Instead, Alice reminds us (see Figure 5) that the problem is that, once one starts talking about the past, the truth and fantasy get all stirred up – both in the sense of mixed and of worked up – quite possibly changing, along the way, one’s stance in relation to that same truth or fantasy. In Seminar XX, Lacan points out that history means no more than this:

People do History precisely in order to make us believe that it has some sort of meaning. On the contrary, the first thing we must do is begin from the following: we are confronted with a saying, the saying of another person who recounts his stupidities, embarrassments, inhibitions, and emotions. What is it that we must read therein? Nothing but the effects of

those instances of saying. We see in what sense these effects agitate, stir things up, and bother speaking beings. Of course, for that to lead to something, it must serve them, and it does serve them, by God, in working things out, accommodating themselves, and managing all the same – in a bumbling, stumbling sort of way – to give a shadow of life to the feeling known as love. (Lacan 1998: 45-46)

Lacan asks whether, when confronted with a memory or any story about the past, our first impulse should be to compare the story against the facts, as they can be recovered, or to watch the emotional effect of that speech act? In *Lost Girls*, the answer is relatively clear: we watch the effect of the stories, which is to arouse both tellers and listeners. In *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, the question of ‘aroused to what end’ is asked somewhat more explicitly – or at least with an answer more substantive than sexual climax.

In *Lost Girls*, all this libidinal stirring verges on voluntarism – a celebration of the imagination that transcends all limitations – and implies that fantasies and desires can be put on as easily as a stylish shoe. In an early panel (Figure 6), Rolf and Dorothy have just met, and he is explaining to her that, no matter what prudery Americans are used to, it is permissible for them to sleep together. (The scene is a bit of a joke at the idea of American innocents abroad being seduced by worldly Europeans. It turns out that Dorothy is at least as sophisticated as Rolf.)

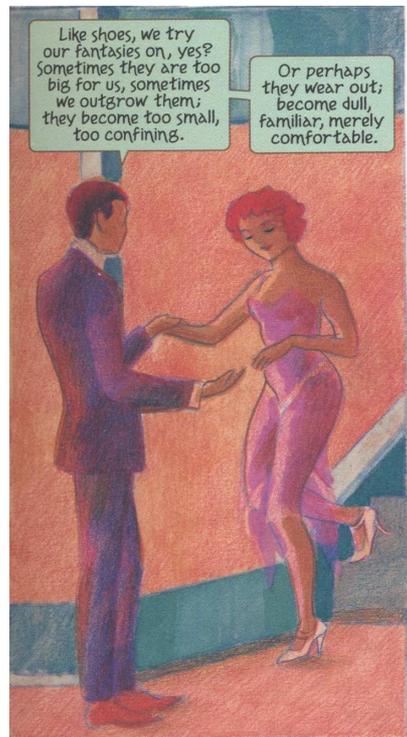


Figure 6: Image of Rolf and Dorothy from *Lost Girls*, Volume I, Chapter 2.
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The notion that fantasies leave no mark – that they can be tried on, worn, and ultimately rehabilitated or discarded with little effort – is scarcely credible. The women’s sexual explorations indicate just how powerful sexual ideas can be in structuring one’s identity.

Arguably, a gendered distinction operates in *Lost Girls*. Men such as Rolf and Monsieur Rougeur assert frequently that fantasy does no harm, and probably does everyone good. Conveniently, this view also makes women and men (both are sexually omnivorous) more available. The women, by contrast, recognise the stakes of their stories. Voicing their histories to others constitutes a risky proposition, both because of what others might do with the information and because of what giving voice to fantasy might commit you to doing. However, the premise of the book is that these sexual histories are, as it were, the ‘truth’ of *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *Peter Pan* – or, at least, of our enduring fascination with these

books. (It goes without saying that, while I am most interested here in questions of narrative and temporality, there are opportunities here for a fuller consideration of the way gender, sexuality, visibility and desire interact in this work.)

Left unstated throughout *Lost Girls* is the extent to which we are being asked to accept its conceit – that Wendy, Dorothy, and Alice really are the girls of legend, all grown up and with sexual histories that would put the author of *My Secret Life* (c. 1888-1894) to shame – as true. It is also possible, for example, that the story simply allows three women to dramatise their fantasies according to culturally convenient plots, which they have sexualised for their own reasons. This second possibility cannot be excluded on the basis of textual evidence, although Moore usually speaks of them as genuinely being the girls in question.¹⁶ The juxtaposition of these alternatives – these *are* the real women, remembering real things, no matter how improbable, or they are women cleverly playing at fantasy in order to satisfy their desires in the present – is compelling, even if we refuse to choose between them. After all, this is the realm of psychoanalysis, in which your memories of what ‘really happened’ become difficult to distinguish from what others have told you about how you should feel and even from how you yourself have felt at different times in your life. Allowing both possibilities to coexist provides a striking way of dramatising the stakes of unconscious fantasy. It also makes it more difficult to cordon off the questions raised by the text as simply Edwardian or Victorian. The ambiguity about whose fantasies these are, and what investments we have in them, makes us more responsible, rather than less, for their impact on us.

3. *The League and the “Abyss of History”*

Alan Moore’s pornographic imagination is closer to the concerns of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* than it might first appear. One of the most memorable moments in the series is the scene, in Volume Two, when Mina Murray discovers that Allan Quatermain admires, rather than is repulsed by, the scars around her throat (Moore & O’Neill 2003: n.p.). It’s a moment of pure misrecognition, as the source of her shame and brittle pride becomes a quilting point in the history of Allan’s loves (commemorated, naturally, by Mina’s desire to be treated like a “jungle princess” – a desire itself encoded in the many narratives of Allan she’d read as a girl [Moore & O’Neill 2003: n.p.]). He also implicitly traces a violent sexuality at the heart

of the *League's* origins. In another important scene from *Century: 1910*, 'Bio of Thebes', who is associated with Orlando and transforms between male and female form over the years, encounters a group of quasi-immortal cave-dwellers, the Troglydyes. The source of Bio/Orlando's narrative also turns out to be sexual, and its violence is palpable, if ultimately explained away: "He would show to her a great and sacred mystery, if she would let him mount her. This struck her as mythical rather than disagreeable" (Moore & O'Neill 2009: n.p.). Every volume of *The League* includes either rape, or the threat of rape, or some other violent sexual practice. Sexuality, especially violent sexuality, is key to Moore's understanding of Victorian culture. The elaborate social graces and reticence of Victorian literary culture are exposed as a mask for crueller desires.

Whatever *The League's* interest in the mythical mysteries of sexuality, there can be no doubt that it is fundamentally a steampunk comic. Consider, for example, the title panel of Volume I:



Figure 7: Title panel from *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, Volume One. © 2000 DC Comics, Alan Moore, and Kevin O'Neill, reprinted by permission of DC Comics.

Instead of a ‘Chunnel’, the Victorians in this world are attempting to build a monumental bridge across the English Channel, although technical delays prevent its actual completion. The scale of the project, the steam stacks on the heavy equipment, as well as their ornate pistons, tubes, and so forth, mark this situation as steampunk. Two details warrant more comment. First, the panel is fundamentally about perspective, and the imperial oversight that Captain Bond and Mina Murray take for granted. Although they look out as masters of their domain, we see them dwarfed by the inhuman scale of late-Victorian construction. The second detail worth noting is the seagulls, which here seem merely like a naturalistic detail; we will encounter them again at the end of this article.

The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen is all about perspective – about who can see what and whether those views are at all reliable. For example, when Mina and Allan are first escaping from Cairo, he panics as Captain Nemo’s *Nautilus* rises up out of the waters. The Invisible Man trades on the fact that he, obviously, cannot be seen – except it turns out that Hyde can see him perfectly well. There are countless moments in the comics when the perspective shifts radically. The entire plot of the first two volumes depends on the members of the League failing adequately to recognise friend and foe, and the later volumes are structured to a remarkable extent by the ways near-immortality and fluid approaches to gender identity reshape one’s perspective.

The most interesting sustained take on these perspectival shifts can be found in ‘Allan and the Sundered Veil’, the pastiche of H. Rider Haggard’s writing and Yellow Book fiction that concludes the first volume of *The League*. Allan Quatermain visits Lady Ragnall to share taduki, a mystical African drug referred to in Haggard’s *Allan and the Ice-Gods* (1927). In Allan’s case, however, things go badly awry: “Normally [taduki] offers vision of time past, but in this instance it would seem to have removed me from time altogether” (Moore & O’Neill 2000: n.p.). While outside of time, Allan teams up with the Time Traveller (from H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* [1895]) and John and Randolph Carter (from Edgar Rice Burroughs’s Martian stories [1912-1943]) to fight off Morlocks and the Mi-Go (from H. P. Lovecraft’s Cthulhu universe). He also foresees several events that happen in the various volumes of *The League* – including events that the reader already knows about, having already read the comic. In short, what the story offers is a *mise-en-abyme*, in which we read Allan

encountering as prophecy information that actually belongs to the reader's reading past. This is not unlike the overall situation of steampunk itself, which lends futuristic shape to stories and images from our cultural past, suggesting that 'Allan and the Sundered Veil' might have special interest to steampunk readers.

Whereas in *Lost Girls* the mirror of erotic memory always lent bodily coherence, and even beauty, to the women recounting their stories, in 'Allan and the Sundered Veil', bodies are exploded and grotesquely twisted. When Quatermain falls out of time, Marisa, the priestess of taduki who had administered the dose, has a vision:

Quatermain was inside out. At least, that was the first impression that Marisa gained on glimpsing the profusion of exposed internal organs; the exploded bones of an exterior skeleton. [...] For one thing, it appeared as if the man still had flesh on the outside, but altered somehow, made transparent to reveal the inner body...and yet that too was not the entire truth of things, Marisa realized as she watched in frightened fascination. It wasn't simply that one could see through the body's outer layers. It was that one could see around them to the viscera inside, as from some unimaginable vantage point that looked on things inside and out and saw both vistas simultaneously. [...] Every inch of the adventurer's wracked body, both inside and out, was visible to the appalled Marisa in its intimate and hideous finery. (Moore & O'Neill 2000: n.p.)

A clichéd Lacanian reading here would appeal to his essay on the mirror stage, interpreting this as a special example of the body-in-pieces. (The body-in-pieces is a fantasy that arises out of the mirror stage, a consequence of the child's identification with the apparently unified image in the mirror.) However, the best way to read these images of the transparent body is as representations of *extimacy*, or intimate exteriority (Lacan 1992: 139).

In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan introduces the concept of extimacy to suggest that what lies at the core of our psyche is not our 'true self', but rather something that we experience as wholly alien or other, and certainly as traumatic. The image of Allan's body as inside out, with the

skin and outer organs made transparent, is a model of extimacy, which Lacan associates with the distortions of anamorphosis (see Lacan 1992: 140-145).¹⁷ He suggests that anamorphosis in art exemplifies the complex ways that the subject keeps its distance, via desire, from the traumatic kernel of psychic life. (After all, the subject still acknowledges the trauma; however it only does so in a distorted way.) This is different, then, from the view expressed by Alice in *Lost Girls*. In that work, the image of the body is beautiful and pleasurable – the image, that is, calls to mind possibilities of beauty and pleasure that can seem hard to find in lived experience. ‘Allan and the Sundered Veil’, like many references to corporeality in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, suggests more complex and disturbing ways in which we react to our bodies and our desires.

There is a temporal dimension to Lacan’s argument about extimacy that seems worth preserving. As Slavoj Žižek has suggested, it is not a matter of the extimate object being *originally* traumatic and, later, less traumatic objects emerging in its wake. Rather,

[the] paradox of trauma *qua* cause that does not pre-exist its effects but is itself retroactively ‘posited’ by them involves a kind of temporal loop: *it is through its ‘repetition,’ through its echoes within the signifying structure, that the cause retroactively becomes what it always-already was.* (Žižek 1994: 32, original emphasis)

Hence, there is no original sin, or some founding lack that can be objectively demonstrated, functioning as a traumatic cause of desire. Rather, we come to recognise the trauma at the heart of desire through its normal, mundane operations. As each successive object proves *not* to be the one that will satisfy desire once and for all, the idea of a primordial object starts to exert a kind of gravitational pull. When Allan sees a dead Morlock fall off the Time Traveller’s ship, we are offered an image of the extimate body caught up in time:

To Allan’s horror, as he watched the bleached corpse fall away from him, he saw that it was undergoing what could only be described as a repellent and unnatural blossoming. What seemed a thousand heads, four thousand limbs and

countless fingers sprouted in a solid and organic after-trail behind the stumbling sub-man, so that it became an elongated, almost centipedal shape, twisting grotesquely in upon itself as it retreated to a livid speck in the seething and awful maelstrom of the centuries exploding at their back. It was almost as if every moment, every slice of the Morlock's trajectory were carved in space behind it as it spiraled away through the fourth dimension's awesome and eternal Now, that constant and unending hyper-moment in which all creation and the terrible and fathomless abyss of history were contained. (Moore & O'Neill 2000: n.p.)

The horror that is the Morlock, spread out across space-time in an always-present eternity, points out the "temporal loop" of subjective experience, "where, by progressing forward, we return to where we always-already were" (Žižek 1994: 32). It is telling here that history is figured as an abyss or chasm – the point instead being that history is an empty field wherein the repetition of experience generates meaning. Or, to put it slightly differently, history interposes a gap that we fill with meaning, including traumatic meaning. As we press on through 'Allan and the Sundered Veil', we simply get closer and closer to Allan's meeting with Mina Murray, which we have already read a couple of hundred pages before.

While the concerns I have raised about extimacy and temporality may seem far afield from a text like 'The Sundered Veil', they are arguably crucial to Moore's treatment of steampunk. Steampunk, in his hands, forces us to reconsider the relationship between present, past, and future, especially in the context of fantasy and desire. Near the end of the story, Marisa, the taduki priest, tries frantically to revive Allan, while he battles a Yuggoth – another Lovecraftian horror – that has attached itself to his astral form:

More shocking still was the appalling, hideous sensation of a body shared, the sense that he was not completely alone inside his skin. No sooner had his astral self re-entered [...] his earthly frame than Allan felt himself attacked by something that was with him in that previously inviolate and personal darkness. (Moore & O'Neill 2000: n.p.)

From Marisa's external view point, "Quatermain seemed to scratch and slap at his own face, as in a paroxysm of self-disgust," while Allan felt something "scrabbl[ing] for purchase on his psychic essence" (Moore & O'Neill 2000: n.p.). But surely the point of the story is that there *is* no difference between self-disgust and Allan's attempt at self-defence. He has come to Lady Ragnall pretending to be dead, and one of the things that the taduki trance offers him is the possibility to become genuinely dead as well – to be completely eradicated, for all time, from the world. Allan wanders in a world that believes him to be dead already, and yet still covets, beyond that, "the obliteration of the signifying network itself" (Žižek 1989: 132). He is saved, however – "betrayed by time" because he is not permitted to die – and must live on, to become a member of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (Moore & O'Neill 2000: n.p.). To put these concerns somewhat more directly, 'Allan and the Sundered Veil' offers an allegory of how to read *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, and indeed steampunk comics generally. We come to these texts, as I have suggested, expecting to find in them confirmation of our own superiority to the (sexist, racist, etc.) past, only to find ourselves enmeshed in these ideological formations by virtue of our response, in fantasy, to their temporal ambiguity.

Like *Lost Girls*, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* can veer into voluntarism. At the end of Volume II, there is a 'New Traveller's Almanac' that plunders the entire canon of Western literature, plus much science fiction, fantasy, and adventure fiction, retrofitting virtually all fictional characters into the same universe. *The Black Dossier* extends this project both forward and backward from the Victorian era, ranging into *Fanny Hill* (1748) and *1984* (1949), among many other sources. To describe the sheer exhilaration of the overall effect of such an imaginary romp through the fields of literature is almost impossible. At the end of *The Black Dossier*, in fact, it appears that *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* will end on a much more optimistic note than *Lost Girls*. *Lost Girls* is sustained by the possibility that erotic freedom will bring actual freedom in the political/social spheres, but, at the end of that graphic novel, the Germans arrive, World War I breaks out, and we are, as Žižek would have it, back where we always-already were. *The Black Dossier*, by contrast, ends with Shakespeare's Prospero insisting that "Imagination's quenchless pyre burns

on, a beacon to eternity”, one that promises “to blaze forever in a blazing world” (Moore & O’Neill 2008: n.p.).

But this is not *The League*’s final word on the problem of narrative, imagination, and desire. At the end of *Century: 1910*, the characters break into a song that serves as a counterweight to Prospero.¹⁸ Here are the final four panels of the book:



Figure 8: Closing panels of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen: Century: 1910*.
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To recognise that mankind is kept alive by monstrous deeds is to recognise what lies behind the horror of extimate bodies in ‘Allan and the Sundered Veil’. Against Prospero’s optimism in *The Black Dossier* that the works of the imagination are “life’s secret soul” (Moore & O’Neill 2008: n.p.), *Century: 1910* affirms that the squalid desires are a secret already known. When Allan and the Morlock’s bodies are turned inside out and splayed across time, that kernel of monstrosity is laid bare for all to see.

The most striking aspect of this final panel of *Century: 1910*, however, is the way it complements the title panel of Volume I. The viewer confronts a similar imperial, all-encompassing perspective, but here gazes on the utter destruction of London’s docks, rather than the ambitious hopes for a new bridge. And while in the earlier book that view was associated with human figures, here it seems to be associated with the eyeball dangling from the mouth of one of the previously mentioned seagulls. Rather than insist on the idealised figures of literature, then, *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* is more interested in the ruinous effects of narrative. Embodied, in time, the “Blazing World” of Prospero’s imagination becomes the blazing docks of London’s destruction. We cannot, it turns out, find meaning readymade in the cultural narratives that are given to us, but must make it anew for ourselves. *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* facilitates that process, by bringing into focus the gap between imagined ideals and their temporal realisation. This, I would suggest, is the most interesting effect of steampunk, as it refuses us any sort of comfortable acceptance of ideals, whether they be located in the past, present, or future.

Notes

1. See Baker 2008 for a more comprehensive overview of steampunk comics, and Klaw 2008 for the (related) impact of steampunk on mass culture.
2. Technically, Ellis’s hero (Figure 1) is ‘Sax Ramer’, but he is a clear stand-in for Holmes.
3. On heritage cinema and the construction of the Victorian, see Joyce 2007 and Sadoff 2009.
4. The best discussion of Victorian domestic spaces is Judith Flanders’s *Inside the Victorian Home*; see, in particular, her chapter on ‘The Drawing Room’

for the economic and cultural drivers of the late nineteenth-century accumulation of things.

5. Steampunk is an obsessive's paradise, as it habitually rewards the chasing down of stray details, whether or not those details are meaningful to the overall story – indeed, to at least some extent, their extraneousness *is* their point!
6. This point is hardly exclusive to comics and graphic novels. For further discussion of this stylistic appropriation, see Shiller 1997.
7. In this essay, I have attributed these works to Alan Moore, whose densely-realized scripts make him something of an auteur within comics. However, it is obviously true that his illustrators play an important role in creating these worlds, and deserve mention: Kevin O'Neill is the artist for the *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* books; Melinda Gebbie drew *Lost Girls*; and Eddie Campbell drew *From Hell*.
8. Lacan's coins the term 'extimate', first found in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, to describe the sensation of "intimate exteriority" that often arises within psychoanalytic sessions (Lacan 1992: 139). In these moments, the speaking subject is overwhelmed by a perception that something deeply internal is nevertheless wholly alien and unwanted. One might think of certain drives in this way or of whatever enjoyment it is that underwrites distressing symptoms.
9. Herbert Sussman has emphasised the defamiliarising aspect of alternative histories in his well-known essay from *Victorian Studies*. His argument is obviously related to my own claim. My interest, however, lies less in the contingency of history than in the inability of narrative to provide a secure ground for cultural identity.
10. Useful histories of each genre are now available: for cyberpunk, see McCaffery 1991; for steampunk, see Nevins 2008.
11. This version of steampunk maker culture is described in Rebecca Onion's essay in *Neo-Victorian Studies*, and briefly by Ann and Jeff VanderMeer in my interview with them.
12. Canonical examples include the numerous steampunk covers for Apple products. See, for example, the "Steampunk iPod Skin" highlighted by Cory Doctorow on BoingBoing: <http://boingboing.net/2007/11/14/steampunk-ipod-skin.html>. The VanderMeers discuss this impulse as well in the interview cited above.

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13. For a more rigorously historical and critical take on these desires and anxieties, see Kincaid 1992.
 14. Moore's own sympathies are with Alice. In the *Blazing World* interview with Nevins, he describes his process this way: "You tease the characters out, you assume that they exist somewhere in some Platonic space, that there is an ideal form of the character, and all that is important is that you be as faithful as possible to that idealized form" (qtd. in Nevins 2004: 256).
 15. I previously work out this reading of Plato, Lacan, and Freud in considerable detail in 'The Time of Interpretation'.
 16. Alan Moore has commented at length on *Lost Girls*. For an extensive collection of interviews with him, see <http://www.alanmooreinterview.co.uk/>.
 17. For a full working out of the ways in which transparency and opacity, and the reversal of our expectations about these qualities, are associated with extimacy and fantasy, see Miller (1994).
 18. Moore has described the song, as illustrated by Kevin O'Neill, as "hyper-real. It was like a Greek chorus, underlining the emotional impact of the scene" (qtd. in Byrne 2009).

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