Disciplining Feminine Performing Bodies in Stephen Norrington's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003)

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Abstract:
Stephen Norrington's film version of *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003) encodes a reified depiction of gender roles, punishing characters who blur boundaries between male and female gender performance. The primary non-conforming characters are Mina Harker and Dorian Gray. Gray's death scene exemplifies his campy femininity and her penetrative masculinity: after Gray stabs Harker with his (phallic) sword cane, she in turn stabs him, putting him in the feminised position of being (sexually) penetrated. Harker and Gray's relationship might suggest a condemnation of queer identities/sexualities, except that the eroticised homosocial relationship between Allan Quatermain and Tom Sawyer is presented positively. The 'manly' Quatermain and Sawyer are rewarded for their gender performance: Quatermain dies heroically, while Sawyer kills the bad guy. *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* thus reveals an on-going challenge for queer neo-Victorianism: to avoid re-encoding Victorian gender and sexuality binaries and hierarchies that still shape patriarchal and heteronormative repression.

Keywords: adaptation, feminism, gender performance, *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, Alan Moore, Stephen Norrington, Kevin O'Neill, queer, sexuality, steampunk.

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"Aaaaaggggghhhh", screams the anonymous henchman as he unleashes a torrent of certainly lethal machine gun bullets into the abdomen of the attractive man in the stylish grey suit. The man's body jerks spasmodically as the bullets enter his flesh, while across the room a horrified woman screams his name. Having emptied the machine gun's magazine, the shocked henchman sees that the handsome man is still standing. Then, to his horror, the man draws the sword hidden in his cane and cuts the ties holding the henchman's armour together before casually thrusting the naked sword blade through his chest. The expiring henchman sinks to his knees, tearing off the man's bullet-riddled shirt, only to see the holes closing on the

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smooth, hairless chest. With his last breath, he gasps, "What are you?" Looking down with a pouty sneer, Dorian Gray answers, "I'm complicated" (Norrington 2003: 29:13-29:40).

I begin with this scene in Stephen Norrington's film version of *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (2003, henceforth *LoEG*), because Gray's simple quip is more revelatory than it might at first seem. The models of gender and sexuality performativity at work in Norrington's film – probably most obvious in Gray's campy performance – appear fairly simple on a casual viewing, but subtly encode a deeply conservative gender politics, a gender politics that is always a potential pitfall for neo-Victorian literature and film. Other critics have written about the gender politics of Norrington's *LoEG* adaptation, as well as the Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill graphic novels that inspired the film.[1] However, previous critical work generally focuses on Norrington's reduction of Mina Murray – Harker in the film – from a strong leading figure to a peripheral vampire, or on Moore's pornographic imagination and penchant for depicting violence against women.[2] Both of these are important arguments, but the gender politics of both Moore's and Norrington's work are more complex. This essay focuses on Norrington's film, which, I argue, punishes characters who blur boundaries between male and female gender performance, particularly characters who perform stereotypically feminine traits.

The Dorian Gray (Stuart Townsend) and Mina Harker (Peta Wilson) character pairing best exemplifies the disciplining of feminine performing bodies because they both blend masculine and feminine traits. In the symbolic economy of the film, they are each punished for their femininity, rather than for 'masculine' violence. Gray and Harker's compromised feminine performativity contrasts the masculinist (and eroticised) homosocial relationship between Allan Quatermain (Sean Connery) and Tom Sawyer (Shane West).[3] This is a same-sex-oriented (and therefore potentially queer) relationship, but because it is built on performative manliness, both Quatermain and Sawyer are rewarded by the film. To be clear, I use the term 'queer' expansively to include any gender or sexuality performativity outside traditional Western heteronormative mores. The performances and fates of other members of the League subtly reinforce the ideological benefits of stereotypical masculine behaviour.

My argument begins from Judith Butler's claims that gender consists of reified performances, and that failure to conform earns the subject social

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castigation – a process Norrington's film subtly makes palatable for mainstream US cinema audiences. Ultimately, the film (and the graphic novel it is based on) raise significant questions about gender and sexuality performances and hierarchies in steampunk, neo-Victorianism, and Anglo-American culture more broadly. While "[n]eo-Victorianism has undertaken some efforts to queer the notion of the masculine-feminine dichotomy, blurring the boundaries to provide a reflection on the performativity of male identity" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2015: 102), Victorian binary conceptions of gender and sexuality continue to haunt neo-Victorianism, always threatening to reproduce regressive gender essentialism and hierarchies. For instance, Claire Meldrum argues that among neo-Victorian detective shows CBC's *Murdoch Mysteries* (2004–present), BBC America's *Copper* (2012–2013), and the BBC's *Ripper Street* (2012–2016) all depict – in different ways and to different degrees – "a reductive gendered essentialism whose underlying ideology betrays an overt, and troubling, misogyny" (Meldrum 2015: 202). This Victorian gender binarism, I argue, is the same trap that Norrington's movie falls into: reproducing stereotypically Victorian attitudes toward the rigidity of gender roles, especially in valorising traditionally masculine gender performances. In particular, the film symbolically endorses the idea that relationships require a dominant/submissive or active/passive dichotomy, which reinforces a Victorian gender hierarchy. Although my focus is primarily on Norrington's *LoEG*, this essay will also contextualise the film's sexual/gender politics in relation to Moore's graphic novel and some other neo-Victorian film and television since the early 2000s, especially examples presenting a more open and fluid conception of gender and sexual identity.

1. Male Effeminacy and Female Masculinity

Judith Butler challenges the notion that gender is biologically encoded, arguing instead that it consists of reified performances continually carried out by subjects whose selfhood is constituted by and through those performances (Butler 1999: 179). She claims that gender performativity demonstrates the possibility of undoing hierarchical norms delimiting gendered behaviour: "The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition" (Butler 1999: 179). In other words, the regime of gendered behaviour that disciplines

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subjects is exposed as a social construct when subjects fail to properly perform expected gender roles. For Butler this is liberatory, undermining patriarchal notions of women's inherent or biological inferiority. Her argument illuminates Dorian Gray and Mina Harker's failure to perform their gender roles properly.

The characters most subject to disciplining in the film's ethical economy are those who blur boundaries between gendered behaviour. Specifically, the biologically male Gray comes across as campy and effeminate, while the biologically female Harker appears subtly but disruptively masculine. These gender performances manifest in Norrington's film, while also evoking the troubled gender/sexual norms in the novels these characters come from. As Sebastian Domsch argues, Victorian Gothic fiction displays a horror of hybridity, instead rewarding ostensible purity, while liminal or transgressive characters are presented as a source of revulsion: hybridity and otherness are "elements that neo-Victorian rewritings tend to emphasise. The world of Victorian Gothic fiction is one in which the fear of miscegenation looms large" (Domsch 2012: 100-101). Ultimately, both 'divergent' characters are punished within Norrington's film, I argue, because of their hybrid masculine-feminine gender performances. The film has a continuum of happy endings, and when I say these characters are punished – and that masculine performing characters are rewarded – I mean that they end up toward a particular side of this continuum.

No male character in the film performs femininity as distinctly as Dorian Gray. Perhaps Gray's most visually effeminate moment is tweezing his eyebrows while on the Nautilus, shortly after Hyde has been captured (Norrington 2003: 36:27-36:34). The intimacy and detail of this personal grooming ritual shows Gray's investment in his appearance. His long flowing hair contrasts the elimination/styling of body hair – symbolised by the tweezers – suggesting a contemporary female approach to hair. This grooming regimen signals a camp aesthetic of artificiality and androgyny linked to gay male culture. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick points out that this stereotypical conflation of gay men with "aristocratic" effeminacy goes back at least to the 1600s and was familiar in the late nineteenth century (Sedgwick 1985: 93-94, 172-173). Susan Sontag's definitive essay 'Notes on "Camp"' – appropriately enough dedicated to Oscar Wilde – argues that

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> Camp taste draws on a mostly unacknowledged truth of taste: the most refined form of sexual attractiveness (as well as the most refined form of sexual pleasure) consists in going against the grain of one's sex. What is most beautiful in virile men is something feminine. (Sontag 2002: 56)

Gray's camp and queer devotion to artifice highlights his conventionally feminine beauty, blurring the lines between male and female performance and disrupting, *à la* Butler, the norms of gender performance. The film does not need to make Gray overtly homosexual; visually aligning him with stereotypical gay culture is enough to encode a critique of effeminate male behaviour.

Imagery of Dorian Gray as lovely, feminine, and bi-sexual (if not gay) is common in neo-Victorian film and television. For instance, in the first season of Showtime's *Penny Dreadful* (2014), Gray is almost magically alluring to both sexes.[4] Repeatedly shown amidst orgies of naked men and women, Gray is equally comfortable having sex with either. In the episode 'Séance', he has sex with Brona Croft (Billie Piper) (Bayona 2014: 20:08-22:18), and he ends the episode 'Demimonde' half naked and making out with Josh Hartnett's Ethan Chandler (Walsh 2014: 57:22-58:25). As Jamil Mustafa writes,

> [t]his sequence typifies the multiform nature of masculinity in *Penny Dreadful*, as it interweaves performativity, passion, violence, homosociality, homosexuality, Eros and Thanatos, repression, and the return of the repressed. (Mustafa 2018: 44)

Penny Dreadful's Dorian Gray is much more fluid and sexually dynamic than *LoEG*'s Dorian Gray. Though they share similarities, *LoEG* does not celebrate or embrace Gray's gender non-conformity, offering little suggestion that such performance can be positive.

In addition to the gay-coded camp aesthetic, Gray's domesticity further highlights his feminine gender performance. The theory of separate spheres shaped Victorian understandings of private and public space, assigning men to the public worlds of business, government, and empire building – a theme I will return to when discussing Quatermain and Sawyer

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– while (middle-class) women were allocated/limited to the domestic sphere of the home. Gray is the only character whose house we see. Every other League member is introduced in a public space: an adventurer's club in Kenya (Quatermain), the League's headquarters (Nemo, Skinner, and Harker), or Parisian back alleys (Hyde/Jekyll). Even Sawyer, introduced in Gray's house, stands in the relatively public position of an intruder. But Gray is at home when the League knocks on his door. He invites them in and cattily offers them hospitality, playing the role of the host(ess?). When Rodney Skinner (Tony Curran), the invisible man, pours himself whiskey, Gray sarcastically invites him to "Please, help yourself" (Norrington 2003: 23:26-23:29). When invited to join the adventure, Gray initially declines, choosing to stay home – both in England as his *home*land and in the domestic space of his library (Norrington 2003: 22:50-22:54). The domestic space and role underlines Gray's lack of manly virtue and enthusiasm for the quest to save the British empire.

This gay- and female-aligned Dorian Gray replicates the alluring, feminine character in Oscar Wilde's novel, who also disrupts gender and sexuality norms. Wilde's initial description of Gray is reminiscent of descriptions of young heroines in romantic novels: when Lord Henry Wotton sees Gray, "a faint blush coloured his [Gray's] cheeks for a moment", and Lord Henry describes the youth as

> certainly wonderfully handsome, with his finely-curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair. There was something in his face that made one trust him at once. All the candour of youth was there, as well as all youth's passionate purity. (Wilde 2000: 59-60)

The physical and moral details echo the idealised terms in which young, beautiful women (often destined for a heart-rending fate) are described in nineteenth-century novels, and no doubt Wilde purposefully parodied these novels in describing his own tragically beautiful beloved.

In Wilde's novel, Gray's femininity is a Butlerian failure of normative gender performance and the site of same-sex male desire. Ed Cohen writes that "[w]ithin the narrative structure, Dorian is an image—a space for the constitution of male desire […]. His is the body on which Basil's and Lord Henry's desires are inscribed" (Cohen 1987: 806). For

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Cohen, the sexual politics of Wilde's novel are bound up with both (repressed) gay male desire and the sophisticated codes Victorian men developed to navigate same-sex relationships. Even reviewers at the time critiqued Gray's feminine gender performance, writing that the novel "'was not only dandiacal, it was feminine' […]. Thus, the *Athenaeum* would refer to the book as 'unmanly, sickening, vicious'" (Cohen 1987: 802). Gray's femininity in Norrington's film thus draws on ambiguities and repressed desires from Wilde's novel to trouble normative notions of masculinity, just as Jonathan Dollimore argues that Wilde himself did. Dollimore claims,

> not only are Wilde's conceptions of subjectivity and desire antiessentialist but so too—and consequently—is his advocacy of transgression. Deviant desire reacts against, disrupts, and displaces from within; rather than seeking to replace the repressive ordering of sexuality. (Dollimore 1993: 633)

Gray and Wilde both undermine standard models of sexuality through Butlerian parodic gender performances. Their non-normative relationships undermine the ostensible stability of Victorian gender binaries – an ostensible stability that, as shall be discussed in more detail, still threatens to colour neo-Victorian media.

The other character in *LoEG* who most overtly blends masculine and feminine traits is Mina Harker. As the only League member visibly gendered female, Harker is the obvious site of heterosexual desire – which every member except Nemo expresses at one point or another – but it is only with Gray that she finds a potential partner and equal. They bond through gender non-conformity, blending conventionally masculine and feminine traits. Their shared transgressiveness is both a source of connection and a source of social ostracism from wider Victorian society – a fluidity the movie presents as distinctly undesirable

Harker appears much less dynamic in Norrington's film than Mina Murray, her counterpart in Moore's graphic novels. Murray challenges Victorian conventions of chaste womanhood. For instance, her gender and sexual non-conformity is demonstrated when she and Quatermain first have sex in *Volume Two*. They check into a hotel posing as husband and wife, and Murray makes it clear she wants Quatermain in bed with her,

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undressing in front of him and saying, "Now, unless I'm to feel even sillier, please undress and come to bed" (Moore and O'Neill 2003: 91). Initially they have missionary sex with Quatermain on top, but when he tires, Murray tells him to roll onto his back and she assumes the dominant position (Moore and O'Neill 2003: 94-95). Despite remaining within the realm of heterosexual sex, even being carried out under the sign of marriage, the inversion of sexual positions challenges the popular image of Victorian morality and patriarchal dominance.

Murray is the first league member to be recruited, and she is sent to get Quatermain from a Cairo opium den. Within the first few pages of *Volume One*, two Egyptians attempt to rape Murray as she tries to persuade Quatermain to join the League (Moore and O'Neill 2000: 8-9). High on opium, Quatermain barely manages to shoot one of the attackers before Murray stabs the other. In this first meeting, "she is established as a strong woman, doing what needs to be done. Quartermain [*sic*], meanwhile, is pessimistic and ineffectual" (Cozine 2007: 44). By defending herself and guiding Quatermain away from the vengeful mob, Murray establishes herself as leader of the emerging League. Throughout *Volume One* (2000) and *Volume Two* (2003), *The Black Dossier* (2007), and *Centuries* (2014), Murray commands the League. She is the most decisive and focused character, and despite her faults, she is nonetheless the driving force behind their success. Norrington's film, by contrast, reduces Harker to a peripheral character important primarily because of her vampirism – which is not present in Moore's novels.

Harker's masculine gender performativity in the film adaptation largely stems from this vampirism, evoking the sexually transgressive politics of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). The penetrative vampiric bite is metaphorically sexual, and the hypnotic power Dracula exerts is a perverse version of a lover's fascination. Christopher Craft traces the distortions of sexual desire in *Dracula*, arguing that forbidden homosexual desire between Dracula and Jonathan Harker is displaced onto Dracula's daughters, who threaten to penetrate Harker on behalf of the Count, thus preserving the appearance of heterosexuality while at the same time fulfilling a homosexual fantasy of male penetration (Craft 1984: 110). In *Dracula*, penetration, particularly penetration by the teeth, troubles models of heterosexual desire. As Craft puts it, "virile Jonathan Harker enjoys a 'feminine' passivity and awaits a delicious penetration from a woman

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whose demonism is figured as the power to penetrate" (Craft 1984: 109). The vampire is a figure of reversal: the lips are soft while the teeth are hard, red lips contrast white teeth (evoking blood and semen or milk), and the penetrative vampiric mouth is both entrance and exit, which confuses "the gender-based categories of the penetrating and the receptive" (Craft 1984: 109). The vampiric mouth's dualities elide the male-female binary.

Harker's vampirism changes her status as a potential sex object for Quatermain – the first member of the League to (at least implicitly) express sexual desire for her. After their initial meeting, Quatermain questions whether Harker should be involved in the adventure: "I've had women along on past exploits and found them to be, at best, a distraction" (Norrington 2003: 21:06-21:13). When Harker asks, "Do I distract you?", Quatermain replies, "My dear girl, I've buried two wives and many lovers, and I'm in no mood for more of either" (Norrington 2003: 21:13-21:23). While this is not the most direct pick up line in history, "[t]he sexual tension is palpable. Why bring up lovers if the two are not to become lovers by the movie's end?" (Cozine 2007: 45). One reason to bring up previous lovers is to establish Quatermain's heterosexual bona fides – positioning Harker as the object of male self-definition and heterosexual performativity. The revelation that Harker is a vampire changes her status in Quatermain's eyes, making her, according to Cozine, no longer a viable love interest. "After all, she is not a woman. She is now simply a killer" (Cozine 2007: 45), and therefore associated with masculine violence. According to Cozine, this revelation ends Harker's sexual desirability, and Quatermain's focus shifts to Sawyer. However, Cozine ignores that Harker remains a sexual object (at least in passing) for Sawyer, Skinner, and Jekyll/Hyde (Jason Flemyng). And perhaps most importantly, Cozine ignores the sexual tension between Harker and Gray. Harker is the site of heterosexual desire, but that desire remains unfulfilled, in part because – as Cozine argues – her vampirism transforms her into something non-woman, making her female-coded body a direct threat to the systems of patriarchal heterosexual desire.[5]

Like Gray, whose feminine masculinity locates him on the fringes of 'proper' masculine performance, Harker's penetrating vampirism marks her as a masculine woman. Jack Halberstam argues that female performances of masculinity highlight the inherent impossibility of an authentic 'male' performance:

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> What remains unattainable in the butch's masculinity, we might say, is what remains unattainable in all masculinity: all ideal masculinity by its very nature is just out of reach, but it is only in the butch, the masculine woman, that we notice its impossibility. (Halberstam 2011: 100)

In other words, the parodic performativity of masculine women foils the continual failure of masculinity in men as well. Female performances are particularly troubling in *Dracula*, because female vampirism challenges the Victorian conception of the sexually submissive female and the penetrative, dominant male who desires women exclusively. As Craft puts it, "[i]mplicit in this argument is the submerged acknowledgment of the sexually independent woman, whose erotic empowerment refutes the conventional assumption of feminine passivity" (Craft 1984: 114-115). Not only, however, does Victorian gender ideology supress feminine sexuality, it also enforces a strict gender binary, conceptualising gender non-conformity as threatening.

Both Gray's femininity and Harker's masculinity pose a threat to the simplistic reified gender norms supporting heterosexual patriarchy, and for this reason they are punished at the end of the film. The perverse intimacies of Harker and Gray's final duel reveal the potential of their non-normative relationship. Set in Gray's bedroom in Moriarty's Mongolian factory, the scene is filled with sexual tension. Gray taunts her – "A bedroom, Mina, does it give you memories? Or ideas?" (Norrington 2003: 1:29:15-1:29:21) – before stabbing her through the abdomen while embracing her like a lover. Harker falls backwards on the bed, impaled on the phallic sword cane Gray has carried throughout the film (Norrington 2003: 1:29:34-1:29-40). Gray's post-mortem witticism highlights the phallic substitution of the sword for the penis: "I hoped I'd get to nail you one more time. Didn't think it'd be literally" (Norrington 2003: 1:29:42-1:29:46). However, the undead Harker takes the sword and runs Gray through with it, pinning him to the wall. She quips, "You broke my heart once, this time you missed" (Norrington 2003: 1:32:54-1:33:05). In this moment, Harker fully embraces her masculinity by using the phallus to penetrate Gray, who thus becomes the receptive (i.e., conventionally feminine) partner. Sexual roles are reversed as the woman enters the feminised male body with the substitute penis. Unable to escape, Gray is helpless while Harker unveils his portrait, which is the only thing

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that can kill him (Norrington 2003: 1:33:10-1:33:39). As Gray dissolves into dust, bones, and rags, Harker looks on in horror. Her eyes show a full consciousness of the terrible fate she inflicted on her enemy and former lover.

Both Butler and Halberstam emphasise the disciplinary function of gender normativity, pointing out that society represses or punishes non-normative gender and sexual expressions, especially feminine gender performances (Butler 1999: 23; Halberstam 1998: 20). The two feminine performing characters, therefore, are on the losing end of *LoEG*'s symbolic economy. The punishment for Gray is fairly obvious – he dissolves into a twisted, screaming skeleton. But it is less evident how the film punishes Harker. She triumphs over Gray, who has, after all, betrayed the League and the world. This is a pyrrhic victory, however, because Harker destroys the one person who, like her, blended male and female gender and sexual performativity, and the one person with whom she develops any emotional connection. Indeed, her look of horror and pity as she watches Gray die bespeaks the terrible burden of causing his death. As a(n implicitly masculinised) killer, Harker is cut off from the companionship, care, and social bonds that supposedly characterised Victorian womanhood. She ends the film solitary and emotionally isolated, and despite being a member of the League, she plays no further significant role in the movie.

2. Masculinist Homoeroticism

One could object that Norrington's film may be coded anti-queer rather than anti-female, but the relationship between Quatermain and Sawyer suggests a different model of sexual/gender politics. To be clear, Quatermain and Sawyer are not lovers, but there is a pederastic mentorship between the two eroticised around the phallic imagery of rifles.[6] These two are the unquestioned heroes of the film, and so their bond is central. The relationship maps Sawyer's *Bildungsroman* or coming-of-age story. For Cozine, this *Bildungsroman* is the central narrative of *LoEG*: to attract male American viewers (a point I will return to in the conclusion), "they inserted Tom Sawyer and made it a narrative about his personal growth. Everyone else in the story exists only as a means to Sawyer's end" (Cozine 2007: 46). Certainly, Sawyer's growth is essential to the plot, but we cannot ignore the contours of the relationships that lead to Sawyer's final success.

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Quatermain's mentorship reveals the film's investment in traditionally manly behaviour. Deep opposition to feminine gender performances by men is a long established and powerful anti-gay trope – as we saw above with Dorian Gray.[7] Quatermain and Sawyer embody a kind of rugged action-hero masculinity, representing the pole opposite Gray's camp, feminine performance. In contrast to the aristocratic Gray, Quatermain and Sawyer fit more into a Victorian middle-class homosocial/homosexual schema, which eschewed femininity in same-sex male relationships. Sedgwick argues that

> [e]ven when men of this class formed overtly sexual liaisons with other men, they seem to have perceived the exclusion of women from their intimate lives as virilizing them, more than they perceived their choice of a male object as feminizing them. (Sedgwick 1985: 207)

In other words, Sawyer and Quatermain's bond maps onto a particular model of Victorian homosocial/homosexual relationship that saw male-orientation as a positive gesture of masculinity by eliminating the female/feminine entirely.

Much of this relationship revolves around the shared fascination with rifles, which are overt phallic symbols. After the shootout in Gray's library, their initial bond is formed over Sawyer's Winchester rifle. As Quatermain admires the younger man's weapon – held suggestively at waist/crotch height – Sawyer says, "You like it? I brought two" (Norrington 2003: 31:54-32:08). The relationship literally begins with the younger man offering his phallus/sexuality in exchange for acceptance and mentoring. The eroticised bonding over rifles continues aboard the Nautilus, where Quatermain teaches Sawyer to target shoot. Standing atop the submarine, Quatermain gives Sawyer his elephant gun – ironically, bearing the female name Matilda (Norrington 2003: 12:03) – and advises him on long distance shooting (Norrington 2003: 46:17-47:47). The men's pose visually evokes the iconic scene from James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997) where Jack Dawson (Leonardo DiCaprio) holds Rose DeWitt Bukater (Kate Winslet) at the front of the ship to the swelling instrumentation of Celine Dion's 'My Heart Will Go On', one of the most romantic images of the film (Cameron 1997: 1:20:35-1:22:45). Quatermain stands behind Sawyer, close enough to put his

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arms around the young man's waist as Jack does for Rose, and both couples are framed by the sea, the sky, and a ship's railing. For movie-going audiences in the early 2000s, *Titanic*'s imagery would be immediately recognisable.

Sawyer even mimics Quatermain's performance of heterosexual desire, through a brief pursuit of Harker and rapid abandonment of that pursuit. Sedgwick builds on René Girard's theory of mimetic desire to argue that male conflict often takes on a triangular form, where two men ostensibly desire the same woman, but the heterosexual object masks the centrality of desire in the rivalrous relationship (Sedgwick 1985: 25). As we saw earlier, Quatermain's reference to his previous lovers helps establish his properly masculine sexual prowess in front of Harker. Sawyer similarly gestures toward his (hetero)sexual abilities when he tries to impress/seduce Harker by offering to assist her (Norrington 2003: 40:32-41:27). When asked how he could help her, Sawyer – rather feebly – suggests heavy lifting, and as evidence opens the Nautilus' hatch (Norrington 2003: 41:03-41:13). Harker dismisses him, saying, "You're sweet, and you're young. Neither are traits I hold in high regard" (Norrington 2003: 41:14-41:19). Shamed in front of both Quatermain and Gray, Sawyer gives up the pursuit. This attempt establishes Sawyer's proper heterosexual desire to copulate with a woman, and simultaneously marks an important point along his coming-of-age journey to adult manhood. In trying and failing – parallel to missing the target with Quatermain's rifle – Sawyer learns he is not yet ready for full adult manhood. By shooting the fleeing Moriarty at the film's climax, Sawyer signals his transition into full adulthood with all the sexual potency associated with it, a potency symbolised by the phallic discharge of the rifle's bullet (Norrington 2003: 1:40:46-1:41:40).

Whereas Gray is visually and thematically aligned with the domestic, both his house and the *home*land of England, Quatermain and Sawyer's masculinity is aligned with empire building. Each is linked to foreign spaces and imperial powers – Quatermain explores and 'tames' the African continent for the British, and Sawyer comes from a US in the waning days of frontier expansion and on the verge of building an overseas empire.[8] Despite his (thinly developed) ambivalence about the British empire, Quatermain is especially linked to colonialism. He is introduced in an explorer's club in British-colonial Kenya, seated in front of a large Union Flag. As we learn later in the film, Quatermain's son had died on an

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adventure, and he blames both himself and the British empire for that loss (Norrington 2003: 45:33-46:09). However, Quatermain does sign on to an adventure that Sanderson Reed presents as protecting the empire (Norrington 2003: 8:06-9:15). We might call Quatermain and Sawyer's masculine prowess a kind of imperio-sexualism – a romanticising or sexualising of men building empires. Both men represent the Victorian ideal of a public man going forth to conquer nations. Their imperial ambitions properly perform a stereotypically public male role, in contrast to the failed masculinity of Gray's domesticity. This imperio-sexual explanation even helps understand Harker's masculinity, linked to her journey to central Europe. Fighting Dracula is not imperialism, but does suggest a Boy's Own Paper adventurism, which the Victorian imaginary often linked to imperial exploits of overcoming 'foreigners' in exotic lands.

Imperio-sexualism surfaces elsewhere in the broader context of neo-Victorian audio-visual media, in shows like the Amazon Prime series *Carnival Row* (2019) or Guy Ritchie's film *Sherlock Holmes* (2009).[9] In *Carnival Row*, Vignette Stonemoss is in a lesbian relationship but then falls in love with Rycroft Philostrate, a soldier whose imperialist entry into her country signals his masculine prowess and turns her – mostly – straight (Foerster 2019). More subtly, the 'sexiness' of empire building appears in *Sherlock Holmes*, a film with its own complex gender and sexual performances (discussed more below). Watson has served with British imperial forces in Afghanistan, and carries a cane as a constant visual – and phallic – reminder of his military service, a cane that Holmes draws attention to as signifying his successful military career (Ritchie 2009: 13:00-13:17). The ex-soldier Watson is presented as a desirable domestic/romantic partner for both Holmes and Mary Morstan, who compete for possession of him. For Watson and Philostrate, as for Quatermain and Sawyer, martial/imperial conquest signifies masculine gender performance. In *LoEG*, this masculine gender performance is admirable and rewarded.

For their 'proper' performances of masculinity, Quatermain and Sawyer are honoured in the ideological economy of the film. Sawyer is most obviously successful, making the long-distance rifle shot that kills the villain Moriarty. Ironically, even at the culmination of Sawyer's *Bildungsroman* – which, as already noted, corresponds to his emergence into adult sexuality – Sawyer's first reaction is to childishly turn back to check whether Quatermain saw him make the shot (Norrington 2003:

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1:41:44). It is less obvious how Quatermain, who dies under Moriarty's knife, is rewarded. But in Sawyer's success, Quatermain both vicariously defeats the villain and fulfils mentoring the young American. While learning to target shoot, Sawyer parallels his own progress with Quatermain's dead son by asking, "Did you teach your son to shoot like this?" (Norrington 2003: 47:38-47:40). Sawyer thus establishes himself as a substitute son, so that his success at the end of *LoEG* corrects Quatermain's failure to protect his biological son. Sawyer's status as Quatermain's heir is reinforced by the older man's dying words: "May this new century be yours, son, as the old one was mine" (Norrington 2003: 1:41:48-1:41:57). Despite its erotically charged homosociality, Quatermain and Sawyer's relationship does not earn punishment, because each character remains distinctly masculine.

Although *LoEG* penalises feminine gender performances, especially in men, other contemporary neo-Victorian media often blurs the boundaries of gender/sexuality performance. In Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes*, for example, male characters perform femininity without compromising their manliness. The physicality and violence of Watson and the eponymous detective confirm their manly virility, despite cohabitating as bachelors, regular flirtatious squabbles, and Holmes's extended campaign to drive apart Watson and Morstan. Jamil Mustafa argues, for instance, that

> [t]he boxing scene, one of several in which Holmes and Watson demonstrate their fighting skills, is less interesting as an authentication of virility than as a means by which two key aspects of hegemonic masculinity, physical aggression and intellectual prowess, are linked. (Mustafa 2018: 43)

The scene signifies that Holmes and Watson embody a confluence of masculine traits. However, these masculine traits exist in unresolved tension with the flirtatious homosociality of the Holmes-Watson relationship and the masculine dominance of Irene Adler, Holmes's love interest. Mustafa describes her masculine traits and how they evoke a submissive, passive, or feminine response from Holmes (Mustafa 2018: 49-50). For instance, she spends the last roughly third of the film in men's clothing – trousers with braces, a button up shirt, and boots. This is the portion of the film when Holmes most actively pursues her; the substitution of Holmes's romantic/sexual attention from Watson to a cross-dressed, dominant woman

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suggests a continuity of same-sex desire, a desire to be dominated by a manly partner. However, this same-sex desire is allowed to continue only under the nominal sign of heterosexuality, in that Adler is gendered female even as she performs masculinity. Holmes's gender performance is clearly male, but that performance does not exclusively conform to male stereotypes.

3. Gender Performances and Other League Members

Having focused primarily on the contrasting pairings of Gray-Harker and Quatermain-Sawyer, I want to turn to the other members of the League, to establish that the film's ideological economy consistently rewards masculine gender performance. This is most obvious with Rodney Skinner. Skinner is laddish, crudely expressing sexual desire for Harker and even grabbing her bottom (Norrington 2003: 1:18:53). Of all the characters, his exclusively heterosexual sexuality is the most aggressive. Despite the film's 'boys will be boys' presentation of Skinner's sexual harassment, it is worth noting that his behaviour is significantly less violent than that of his graphic novel counterpart, Hawley Griffin, who draws the League's attention while using his invisibility to rape students at a girl's boarding school (Moore 2000: 41-44). The graphic novel ultimately punishes Griffin for his violent behaviour, as he is himself raped and murdered by Hyde in *Volume Two* as revenge for an attack on Murray (Moore 2003: 111). Skinner's fate is quite different, however. In Norrington's film, the League members suspect Skinner of betraying them, until he reveals that Gray was the traitor and tracks Moriarty to Mongolia. In death, Skinner becomes truly heroic. An armoured henchman with a flamethrower corners Sawyer, and Skinner rescues his companion by puncturing the fuel tubes, setting both the henchman and himself on fire (Norrington 2003: 1:30:55-1:31:36). Although Skinner's death is painful, it is noble and selfless as he gives up his life for his comrade, even uttering the final witticism "That's the last time I play with matches" (Norrington 2003: 1:33:40-1:33:50). This quip lightens Skinner's sacrifice, indicating a renunciation of the narcissism he displayed earlier in the film.

For Jekyll/Hyde, masculinity is divided between his two selves, with Hyde the more masculine half and Jekyll the more feminine. Hyde is aggressive, violent, and self-confident, but when he first changes back into Jekyll, the doctor is portrayed as a shivering weakling, pathetically

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clutching the rags of Hyde's clothes to cover his pasty body (Norrington 2003: 38:26-39:30). The visual contrast is striking. Similarly striking is the approach each personality takes to the film's heterosexual object of desire: Harker. This desire is presented in a scene where Jekyll plays with his watch – a masturbatory substitute – while gazing at Harker from a doorway (Norrington 2003: 51:07-51:15). As Jekyll walks away, Hyde's image taunts him from the mirrored windows of the Nautilus – "She barely even looks at you" – before reaching out of the mirror to grab Jekyll by the throat, screaming, "She'd look at me!" (Norrington 2003: 51:32-51:37). Hyde's sexual violence is a clear contrast with Jekyll's repressed sexuality.

Jekyll and Hyde's superego/id dichotomy of repressed versus aggressive sexuality is also reflected in the graphic novels. For Hyde, sexuality is inherently linked to violence, as when he rapes Griffin to death (Moore 2003: 111), or from his first appearance murdering prostitutes in the Rue Morgue in Paris (Moore 2000: 21-32). By contrast, Jekyll's sexuality is only mentioned in *Volume Two*, when Hyde calls him "a flinching little Presbyterian spinster frightened by his own erections" and says that Jekyll occasionally masturbates thinking about men (Moore 2003: 117, 118). The contrast between repressed homosexual desire and indiscriminate sexual violence is Jekyll/Hyde's inner conflict. This conflict also maps loosely onto imperio-sexualism: Hyde is introduced in a foreign context, evoking but not quite enacting imperialism, while Jekyll is stereotypically English. Like Harker's Eastern Europe, Hyde's Paris back alleys are foreign without constituting an imperial space. His 'manly' adventures abroad are reflected in Hyde's aggressive heterosexual desire, which Jekyll represses. Hyde both saves the Nautilus after Moriarty and Gray try to blow it up (Norrington 2003: 1:11:28-1:13:15) and plays a central role in rescuing hostages and defeating the villains at the film's end, while Jekyll contributes fairly little of value to the League.

The final member of the League is the stoic Nemo (Naseeruddin Shah), who expresses no sexual or romantic interest in anyone. The closest he comes even to expressing friendship is a grudging respect for Quatermain. One aspect of this apparent asexuality is that Nemo is notoriously anti-colonial: Jules Verne's *The Mysterious Island* (1874) confirms this (Verne 2001: 590), and Moore's graphic novels have Nemo abandoning the League after learning they helped create biological weapons for England (Moore 2003: 144). Nemo explicitly rejects empire and

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therefore has no place in the imperio-sexual schema. However, Nemo's asexuality is also racially charged, because Asian men are often stereotyped as feminine or asexual in the Orientalist Western imagination (see, for instance, Wilkins, Chan, and Kaiser 2001: 427-428). Nemo also performs the orientalised role of mystical guide and spiritual advisor. When Quatermain broods over past mistakes, Nemo counsels him, "I try to live in the now, where the ghosts of old wrongs do not abide" (Norrington 2003: 43:20-43:26). This guru position is often coded Asian in US mainstream media.[10] Nemo is the only character associated with religious practice, further emphasising his mystical function and aligning him with submission to a female deity. Quatermain and Harker observe Nemo worshipping a statue of Kali, and Harker remarks, "That's Kali, goddess of death. Nemo worships death. Can we trust him?" (Norrington 2003: 48:27-48:33). Kali is often depicted standing or dancing on Shiva, her lover, including in Nemo's statue where Kali's left foot rests on Shiva's semi-visible body. In Hindu cosmology, this symbolises Shiva grounding the more active but ephemeral Kali. If the film's main intended audience of Americans – who likely know fairly little about Hinduism – know Kali's iconography at all, viewers would more likely see her standing on Shiva as a sign of female dominance.[11] Nemo's submission to this powerful female deity therefore reinforces broader stereotypes about Asian men's femininity.

Like Harker, Nemo is on the winning side at the end of the film, but he is not a victor in the film's ideological schema. With Quatermain's death, Nemo loses the only person with whom he has any interpersonal connection, and so, like Harker, Nemo ends the film alone. Simultaneously, Nemo's 'victory' is undermined because the League preserves the British empire, Nemo's sworn enemy. We do not see Nemo's recruitment into the League, but Sanderson Reed appeals to Quatermain on behalf of the British empire (Norrington 2003: 8:06-9:15) and Hyde is recruited with the promise of a pardon in exchange for his service to the Empire (Norrington 2003: 37:35-37:45). In victory, Nemo undermines his ideology by preserving and strengthening an empire he blames for the deaths of his wife and child (Verne 2001: 590-591), though this is never mentioned in the film.

4. Conclusion: Neo-Victorian and US Cultural Contexts

Norrington's *LoEG* fails to adequately confront hierarchies of gender and sexuality. As I have argued, the film even actively re-affirms the

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predominance and desirability of masculine gender performance (and imperialism), while punishing characters who display feminine traits. Privileging of male gender performance (at least by male-identified bodies) is part of a punitive socio-cultural system that reifies and delimits gender performance. As Butler puts it, "[d]iscrete genders are part of what 'humanizes' individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right" (Butler 1999: 178). Halberstam reiterates this point: "Ambiguous gender, when and where it does appear, is inevitably transformed into deviance, thirdness, or a blurred version of either male or female" (Halberstam 1998: 20). A cultural edifice that derives its coherence from a clear distinction between male and female requires coded performances and punishes bodies that transgress those reified codes.

Much neo-Victorian audio-visual media embraces transgressions of sexual and gender norms, portraying queer characters – again, using a broad definition of 'queer' – to challenge Victorian binaries. Yet, because film and television are ideological, they inherently participate in shaping gender ideology, which is an especially prominent risk in neo-Victorian media since the popular conception of the Victorians involves prudishness, sexual repression, and distinct hierarchies between men and women. Marie-Luise Kohlke explains the stakes: "the selective figuration of the past—what we choose to memorialise on page and screen but, even more crucially, *how* we do so—offers telling discourses of how we understand ourselves and our own culture and time" (Kohlke 2018: 3). Kohlke's article argues that the third season of *Penny Dreadful* increasingly abandons the feminist/queer representation of the first season (which I mentioned above) and reverts to a Victorian ideology that pathologises or demonises women who utilise violence even for self/community defence. Along similar lines, Nadine Boehm-Schnitker suggests that *Dorian Gray* (2009) depicts homosexual sexual encounters but employs representational and psychological structures to repress homosexuality as a legitimate identity, instead disavowing homosexuality in ways similar to Wilde's novel (Boehm-Schnitker 2015: 150-151). In other words, even when trying to adopt progressive representations of gender/sexuality, many neo-Victorian audio-visual programmes fall into the trap of reproducing Victorian gender and sexual norms.

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The challenge is to balance reproducing elements of Victorian culture/aesthetics without reproducing the prejudices and cultural confines that shaped their world. Kohlke argues that one of the defining aspects of neo-Victorianism is self-conscious engagement with the socio-cultural repressions of the Victorian age, substituting modern ethics to challenge both Victorian and contemporary inequalities (Kohlke 2018: 2). Some texts succeed in these ideological challenges. As Georges Letissier illustrates, for instance, Sarah Waters's neo-Victorian novels succeed in opening new possible family structures based on non-normative interpersonal connections (Letissier 2011: 368). And Margaret Stetz in her reading of James Mangold's *Kate and Leopold* (2001) echoes Kohlke's point above: "neo-Victorian and steampunk texts have in common a fundamental scepticism (if not cynicism) about the past and present alike and, therefore, about the future that will arise from such roots" (Stetz 2015: 285). However, not all neo-Victorian texts embrace an egalitarian ethos, and – as we have seen – not all that pursue liberatory goals succeed, especially when it comes to escaping the gender and sexual norms deeply associated with the Victorian era.

This is especially challenging in a contemporary society still divided along gender lines. Mustafa claims that in the neo-Victorian cinema he analyses, "the fate of women, together with the predominance of male actors and male-focussed storylines, recreates and reinforces the gender-based imbalance of both Victorian and contemporary society and culture" (Mustafa 2018: 59). Similarly, in his study of gendered imagery in steampunk media and cosplay, Martin Danahay suggests that "[w]hile steampunk performances may attempt to subvert unquestioned gender binaries, a wider discursive regime naturalises male and female identities as separate and reaffirms their polarisation" (Danahay 2016: 126). In a society still riven by gender divisions, it is difficult to resuscitate Victorian style or iconography without falling into their problematic gender norms, in part because the Victorian era is often imagined/imaged in popular culture as (sexually) prudish and disciplined.[12]

Ironically, in contrast to Norrington's rather conservative movie, Moore's graphic novels demonstrate a fairly open attitude toward dynamic gender and sexuality. Especially in later instalments of the *LoEG* graphic novel series, sexuality becomes increasingly fluid and complex. Given the pervasive nudity/sex and violence against women in his work, Moore

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presents surprisingly healthy non-normative and non-patriarchal dynamics within sexual relationships.[13] Gender and sexuality are most anarchic and playful in *Volume Three: Century* (2014), when Murray and Quatermain are involved in a bisexual love triangle with Orlando, who changes periodically between male and female. In the first section, set in 1910, Orlando presents as male, but distinctly gender/sexually ambiguous. After a disappointing failure to gather information, Mina furiously tells Quatermain and Orlando that "you can have the double bed to yourselves tonight. I'm sleeping downstairs", thus confirming the other League members' suspicion about the sexual triad (Moore and O'Neill 2014: 44). Ironically, the male Quatermain is more reserved and self-conscious about his sexuality, pleading, "Mina! Don't tell the whole neighbourhood…" (Moore and O'Neill 2014: 44, original ellipses). The three-way romance continues into the 1960s in the second portion of *Century*, with Orlando changing back into a woman during the course of that instalment. This paragraph cannot do justice to the dynamic gender and sexual play in Moore's work, but it should suffice to make the basic point that Moore does not see sexuality or gender as rigid or permanent, but rather as a fluctuating continuum.

Finally, it is worth considering why Norrington made these specific changes from the graphic novel. Some are fairly easy to comprehend, given that Norrington was moving from a graphic novel written for a predominantly young, male, British audience to a Hollywood blockbuster. Abandoning the Fu Manchu-inspired Devil Doctor is understandable, because such an overtly racist depiction would be unpopular with mainstream US audiences in the early 2000s. This, along with the elimination of elements like the rape and sexual violence that pervade Moore's graphic novels, makes the film a more family friendly re-telling. However, it is by no means a neutral re-telling. Cozine claims that the demotion of Mina Murray, leader of the League, to Mina Harker, peripheral vampire, occurred for the same reason as Sawyer's inclusion, because "[t]o attract the intended audience, Hollywood feels that young, white, American males must identify with the protagonist" (Cozine 2007: 46). Producer Don Murphy even said that Sawyer's presence was "the result of a stupid studio note" from Fox (Horn 2003: n.p.). In other words, the film reproduces – or at a minimum fails to challenge – Victorian notions of male superiority and the centrality of male experience. As Kohlke notes, "some forms of critical presentism […] may not actually produce (or even intend) the more ethical

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effects attributed to presentism, or else unwittingly or wilfully subvert those ethical effects in the process of production" (Kohlke 2018: 6). This seems a perfect description of *LoEG*'s gender politics.

The gender normative ideology of Norrington's film works on an intended audience particularly susceptible to its message, an audience that, like Sawyer, stands on the edge of manhood. For young, male, American viewers the film's promotion of masculine violence and imperialism, balanced with enough heterosexual gestures to downplay the erotic quality of Quatermain and Sawyer's pederastic relationship, provides an object lesson in the perils of feminine behaviour and the rich rewards of gender conformity. It is also worth noting that the film valorising these traits came out on 11 July 2003, less than four full months after the US and coalition invasion of Iraq.[14] For a US leading the world – with the support of Norrington and Moore's UK government – into a controversial war, it is not hard to see why glorifying manly violence and empire-building adventurism played an important ideological function. Unfortunately, this ideology does not provide much flexibility in how one performs masculinity.

Notes

1. *Volume One* of Moore and O'Neill's graphic novel is ostensibly the basis for the movie, but Norrington's film has comparatively little in common with its source text. As Joshua Cozine puts it, "[t]hough the names are the same, mostly, the film is barely recognizable as an adaptation of the novel" (Cozine 2007: 44).
2. On Norrington's depiction of Harker, see Cozine 2007. For a discussion of Moore's depictions of sexuality, see, for instance, Dawe 2011 and Jones 2010.
3. According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the term 'homosocial' denotes a continuum of desire, inherently linking relationships between men – even those marked by overt homophobia – with erotic same-sex desire (Sedgwick 1985: 1-2).
4. In contrast to the feminist agenda of the first series of *Penny Dreadful*, Marie-Luise Kohlke characterises the later resurrection of Brona Croft as Gray's lover Lily as "an anachronistic parody of the 20th- and 21st-century Take Back the Night campaign" which "reveals a disturbing misogynist subtext" (Kohlke 2018: 2).

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5. Ironically, the one instance in which Harker's role as heterosexual object is fulfilled is actually with Gray. They make out in her cabin on the Nautilus after he 'accidentally' cuts her finger with broken glass (Norrington 2003: 50:50-51:07).
6. This relationship is pederastic in the ancient sense of a young man trained into the norms of society by an older mentor; the relationship is not abusive or paedophiliac (in part because Sawyer is not underage).
7. Gay male opposition to effeminacy also has a long history, apart from homophobic heteronormativity. Halberstam traces what she calls a "brand of masculinism" functioning in the 1920s and 1930s that valorised homosexual relationships between appropriately masculine men, accompanied by a strident rejection of femininity (Halberstam 2011: 156). Later gay subcultures also adopted stereotypically male, often working-class, styles. For instance, both the Castro Clones and bear culture repurposed outward signs of traditional masculinity into a gay context. The singer Sylvester recalled that some Castro Clones actively hassled effeminate gay men (Gamson 2005: 221-223).
8. For more on the role of the frontier in the history of US colonialism, see Turner, who writes: "Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development" (Turner 1921: para 1).
9. Ironically, this imperio-sexualism of desirable, manly adventurers contradicts a strand of Victorian thought about the perils of empire: specifically the threat of contamination by the 'Other', often figured as sexually permissive. During the nineteenth century, a "paranoid racist thematics of male penetration and undermining by subject peoples became a prominent feature of national ideology in western Europe" (Sedgwick 1985: 182).
10. See, for example, Mr. Miyagi in Robert Mark Kamen's *Karate Kid* series (1984, 1986, 1989, 1994) or Pai Mei in Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill: Volume 2* (2004).
11. US viewers will likely be most familiar with Kali from the cult misrepresenting her worship in Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984). Ironically, US viewers are also likely to see Quatermain as an Indiana Jones-type adventurer, rather than knowing Rider Haggard's original character, even though Jones was inspired by Quatermain. Casting Connery as Quatermain is an ironic reprisal of his role as Indiana Jones's father in Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989).

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Connery played Henry Jones Sr., and in *LoEG* he plays the character that inspired the creation of Indiana Jones – a kind of literary fatherhood.

12. A pervasive popular perception imagines the Victorians as prudish, sexually repressed, and middle-class. This is obviously an image built, in part, by Victorian writers, artists, and social commentators. Contemporary neo-Victorianism, however, often adopts a Gothic aesthetic in which sexuality, violence, slum life, etc. play prominent roles.
13. For more on Moore's pornographic imagination and the prevalence of sexual violence, see Jones 2010: 106, 115.
14. Horn even points out that the film's plot was changed from a biological attack on New York City to a bomb under Venice, because of concerns that it would evoke traumatic memories of the 11 September 2001 attacks (Horn 2003: n.p.).

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