Mad, Bad and Dangerous: Queering Lizzie Borden in *Lizzie* (2018)

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Abstract:
The Borden murders committed in 1892 in Fall River, Massachusetts, have sparked a number of neo-Victorian textualisations. From the perspective of the 'lethal lesbian' trope known in queer cinema, this article discusses the famous suspect in this case, Lizzie Borden (1860–1927), as depicted in *Lizzie* (2018, dir. Craig Macneill). It shows that the titular character (Chloë Sevigny) is queered in this film – not just by her lesbian relationship with the maid, Bridget Sullivan (Kristen Stewart), but also as a madwoman and a spinster who repeatedly refuses to adhere to social and gender codes of nineteenth-century New England. The article examines these various facets of queer disruption of Victorian norms, complicating the discussion by employing an intersectional perspective which points out more nuanced aspects of power relations between characters and the ethical implications of casting female criminals as neo-Victorian, feminist, and/or queer heroines.

Keywords: adaptation, Bryce Kass, lesbian, Lizzie Borden, *Lizzie*, Craig Macneill, neo-Victorian, queer, textualisation.

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Lizzie Borden is a particularly elusive, queer spectre of late nineteenth-century Massachusetts. On a stuffy summer day on 4 August 1892, she allegedly murdered her father and step-mother with an axe. Having been acquitted, as no sufficient evidence of her guilt was found, she remained silent on her true role in the case. The enigma prevailed, and with most historians and true crime afficionados believing in her guilt, she has secured herself a place amongst the highest ranks of notorious Victorian killers. Her exceptional status in both the history of American crime and popular culture is evidenced, among other things, by the continuing dissemination of cultural representations of Lizzie Borden and her potential misdeeds in a range of adaptations, or, rather, *textualisations* – as what is being adapted here is a historical event, not a text. Almost since the incident itself, press accounts, non-fictional books, novels, plays, films and television series have

Neo-Victorian Studies
13:1 (2020)
pp. 100-124

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319187

worked with and re-worked the events in Fall River, some offering a queer reading and trying to, variously, explain the urgency of the crime, make Lizzie's case relatable to a contemporary audience, or capitalise on sensationalism. As such, Lizzie Borden's story is a prime example of how textualisation, understood as "the processes by which some intertexts become sanctified as texts while others do not" (Leitch 2007: 302), has a performative function – not so much *recording* as *creating* historical memory of an exceptional Victorian woman.

This article will focus on the latest addition to this body of textualisations, that is, the 2018 film *Lizzie* (dir. Craig Macneill, written by Bryce Kass), starring Chloë Sevigny as Lizzie Borden and Kristen Stewart as the Borden Irish servant Bridget Sullivan, against the backdrop of previous adaptations that together create a palimpsestic tapestry of myth and speculation.[1] The queering of Lizzie Borden's figure that this film replicates (although not initiates, as will be shown) involves, of course, the lesbian relationship between her and Bridget Sullivan, the only other person present in the house during the murders. In addition, the article proposes to locate queer deviance in Lizzie's precarious physical and mental health as depicted in the film, and in her strategies of resistance against the power held by the masculine members of her family and patriarchal society at large. This treatment of queerness as, broadly, a "deviation from normalcy" (Butler 1993: 176) follows queer studies' investment in recognising and imagining LGBTQIA histories, identities and experiences, which were typically veiled by opaque encryptions and metaphors.[2] Indeed, queer studies situates queerness as transgressing and resisting different kinds of norms, as non-conforming and exposing the "fraudulent artifice of mainstream society's most centrally constitutive taboos and prohibitions" (Schoene 2006: 285). Early on, Sue-Ellen Case pinpoints the queer not only as a matter of gender and sexuality, but as "work[ing] at the site […] of ontology" as a "taboo-breaker, the monstrous, the uncanny" (Case 1991: 3; see also Hall 2003: 56). David Halperin has suggested that "[q]ueer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (Halperin 1995: 62). These propositions facilitate a wider understanding of *queer* as a methodological tool that can be applied to figures that, as Case's essay shows, are monstrous: "[l]ike the Phantom of the Opera, the queer dwells underground, below the operatic overtones of the dominant; frightening to look at, desiring, as it plays its own organ, producing its own music" (Case

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319187

1991: 3). Crucially, in the context of this article, such a methodological approach overlaps with Andrew Scull's definition of madness as a cultural phenomenon and motif, positing the mad as "those who are profoundly at variance with the conventions and expectations of their culture" (Scull 2015: 11).

The present article suggests that *Lizzie* merges notions of queerness, madness, and violation in ways that bind queer themes to notions of danger and depravity – themes of queer cinema that Alex Jung praises as truly subversive (Jung 2018: n.p.) – yet that are also potentially politically ambiguous. Of course, the motif of murderous lesbians is not new; B. Ruby Rich even identifies a 'lethal lesbian' genre (Rich 2013: 103) and sees its proliferation in 1990s cinema as the deconstruction of a filmic trope where lesbians kill themselves or their lovers at the end of the movie, stressing the impossibility of their relationship and perpetuating the limitations of gender and sexuality in a heteronormative society.[3] Macneill's film includes most of the elements enumerated by Rich as staples of the 'lethal lesbian' genre (Rich 2013: 109-110).[4] It features a lesbian couple (Lizzie and Bridget) who are supposed to commit the murder together; the murder plan has elements of a frenzied, erotic ceremony as both undress to commit it; Lizzie and Bridget are abused by the Borden family, which is one of the reasons for their retaliation; and they are non-glamorous women "lashing out against female authority figures" (Rich 2013: 110) – in this case Abby Borden, as well as the patriarchal figure of Andrew Borden. Moreover, the murder is brutal and gory, emphasising blood that is symbolic of female sexuality (Rich 2013: 111-112), and the murder is apparently designed to avoid Lizzie and Bridget's separation. While indicating the historical longevity of the 'lethal lesbian' trope (after all, from the very beginning, textualisations of the Borden case frequently paired Lizzie's murderousness with queer innuendos) and innovatively merging specific capabilities of neo-Victorianism with the conventions of a more presentist queer cinema, *Lizzie* also extends and subverts some aspects of the prescribed trope. When Rich coined the term 'New Queer Cinema' (NQC) in the 1990s, she called it "Homo Pomo" (homosexual postmodernism) and defined it as characterised by "appropriation, pastiche, and irony, as well as reworking of a history with social constructionism very much in mind" (Rich 2013: 18). While, admittedly, *Lizzie* fulfils the latter requirement of NQC, and could be understood as an appropriation of historical facts into queer fiction, it lacks

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319187

the postmodern tongue-in-cheek radicalism that is so characteristic of independent NQC. In contrast, its depiction of 'lethal lesbian' violence is much more thoughtful and severe.

On the basis of historicising textualisations of Lizzie Borden that focus on queerness, this article will offer an interpretation that renders overt the more intricate, at times ambiguous and problematic, relations of power and features of the film. These complicate not only the relationship between the characters but also the film's relationship with queer politics, as dictated not least by the denouement of the film's plot.

1. Queer Lizzie before *Lizzie*

The notorious case of the Borden murders that took place in 1892 in Fall River, Massachusetts, sparked a number of cultural texts and performances in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Lizzie Borden's class and gender status, the speculations on her possible romance with an unknown man, or a lesbian relationship with her servant Bridget, and the evidence of her desire for financial independence as a possible motive for the crime make her an obvious favourite for a queer-feminist rewriting. Nineteenth-century gender codes and their violation through, for instance, committing crimes – such as the murders in the Borden family – is also an attractive point of departure for neo-Victorian cultural texts, where the element of sensationalism and voyeurism is married with a discussion of gender politics and its various intersectionalities.

What is characteristic of textualisations of the Borden case is the palimpsestic nature of the Lizzie Borden myth.[5] Its archive of facts and factoids, or pure conjecture, is transmitted from one text to another, and it is almost impossible to distinguish their origins, and whether they are indeed mentioned in the court transcript (the Holy Gospel for the Bordenites) or re-told rumour or speculation. The long list of these elements – including Lizzie's mental illness, epilepsy, kleptomania, and romantic affairs – indicates that Lizzie's fictionalisation begins with her very trial: "she becomes not some sort of objective truth but a text as equally shaped by ideology and culture as are her fictions" (Schofield 1993: 99). These recurring motifs fuel the ever-growing body of Bordeniana, a palimpsest of textualisations including equally press reports, non-fictional accounts, fictions, and popular appropriations. One of the recurring motifs is the suspicion that Lizzie had an accomplice – a lover, and, in some of these

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fictions, a female one. As Ann Schofield notes, Lizzie Borden's narrative is one in which gender plays a crucial role, for it has followed "either a romantic formula or a formula of an individual's quest for freedom and self-actualization" (Schofield 1993: 93) – a limiting dichotomy, as Schofield stresses (see Schofield 1993: 94), yet one which is collapsed into the queer narrative of Macneill's *Lizzie*. Even in its initial textualisations, Lizzie Borden's case was affected by rumours of a love affair resulting in an illegitimate pregnancy – a story fabricated by a Boston reporter which was later retracted (Gage 2004: n.p.). Yet many of the aforementioned textualisations involved love relationships, indicating the wide-spread understanding that a woman might only be murderous in pangs of passion. Thus, melodrama abounds, for instance in Agnes de Mille's ballet *Fall River Legend* (1948) where Lizzie's romance with a minister, once thwarted by her stepmother, becomes the cause of her rage; similarly, Jack Beeson's 1965 *Lizzie Borden* opera puts Lizzie in a love triangle with her sister's lover, a sea captain (Schofield 1993: 91). Among these fictions of Lizzie's romantic life, there are a number of stories that suggest a lesbian relationship as the original secret and motif behind this 'why-dunnit'.

It is difficult to ascertain where and when speculations about Lizzie's lesbianism originated, although Victoria Lincoln's *A Private Disgrace* offers a suggestion that perhaps such rumours were present already in Lizzie's youth (Lincoln qtd. in English 2015: 175). Lincoln's account is coloured by more than a tint of prejudice, which allows her to see Lizzie's possible lesbian desire – evident in her teenage crushes and friendships, and later in her relationship with Boston actress Nance O'Neil – as immature and sentimental, and impossible to consummate. Lizzie's attachment to Nance (which took place several years after the murders) was the most scandalous of her female friendships, and it was the notoriety that surrounded this couple that could have been the trigger for Lizzie's estrangement from her sister Emma Borden (Gage 2010: vi; Jones 2003: 90-93). As the *Boston Herald* pronounced in an article in 1906, "[a]ll sorts of reasons for the quarrel between the sisters have been afloat, but the best founded ones involve the name of Miss Nance O'Neil, the actress" (reprinted in Kent and Flynn 1992: 329). Evan Hunter, in the afterword to his novel *Lizzie* (1984), also mentions a mysterious quarrel between the sisters that led to their estrangement, as well as a divorce case connected to lesbianism in which a Lizbeth A. Borden (a spelling of her name adopted by

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319187

Lizzie after the trial) was the guilty party (Hunter 2016: 548). Another clue that would provide grounds for perceiving Lizzie as a lesbian is her apparent friendship with Sarah Orne Jewett and the latter's partner Annie Fields, which Alice Morris describes in her autobiography. As Carolyn Gage notes, this might show that Lizzie "had most likely found her way into Boston's most elite network of lesbians" (Gage 2010: vi). Moreover, Gertrude Stein included references to Lizzie in her detective fiction – most notably *Blood on the Dining-Room Floor,* written in 1933 and published in 1948 (English 2015: 170). This 'evidence' is more opaque, however, as Lizzie does not appear there as a recognisable character of true crime fiction, but rather as an invisible narratee, a sort of silent interlocutor to whom the narrator addresses herself frequently and with whom, as Elizabeth English suggests, Stein also felt a lesbian affinity. In a reverie for Borden, Stein "use[d] her to articulate a passionate critique of heterosexual familial dynamics" (English 2015: 174). It is therefore evident for English that Lizzie Borden "may have been understood or available to Stein […] essentially as a lesbian criminal" (English 2015: 175). If English is right, this might indicate that, in Stein's lifetime – her detective fiction more or less chronologically coincides with Borden's death in 1927 – Lizzie Borden could have been renown in lesbian circles of New England as one of theirs.

Literary textualisations of Lizzie Borden that followed in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century evoke her lesbianism in more sensational and, at times, melodramatic ways. Sally Pollock's drama *Blood Relations* (1980) only fleetingly hints at Lizzie's relationship with the Actress (a reference to Nance O'Neil) many years after the murder; it is the Actress's curiosity about the truth of the case that spurs the rest of the play, whereby the two women re-enact the events of 1892, with Lizzie undertaking the role of Bridget and the Actress playing Lizzie. Hunter's already mentioned novel *Lizzie* puts Lizzie's lesbianism much closer to the heart of the murders as a hidden motif. During her trip to Europe in 1890, Lizzie Borden meets Alison, a rich aristocrat, and undergoes a journey of sexual self-discovery when the two of them start a relationship. After her return to Fall River, distraught and abandoned, Lizzie does what Alison warned her against – she seduces the Irish maid Bridget Sullivan. When the two of them get caught *in flagrante delicto* by her stepmother Abby, Lizzie lashes out at her, and then kills her father so that he will not discover the murder of Mrs Borden. Elizabeth Engstrom's *Lizzie Borden* (1990) similarly

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319187

hints at Lizzie's relationships with women and includes scenes of lesbian erotica and more, as Engstrom imagines a scenario of incest and a love triangle in which "Lizzie became her dead mother's sexual surrogate as a child and as an adult shared a bisexual female lover with her father" (Schofield 1993: 93). The possibility of a lesbian relationship is also presented in the rock musical *Lizzie* (2013, music by Steven Cheslik-DeMeyer and Alan Stevens Hewitt, lyrics by Cheslik-DeMeyer and Tim Maner), in which Lizzie has an affair with her friend and neighbour Alice Russel, following the traumatic experience of suffering sexual abuse at the hands of her father. As Marc Napolitano suggests, "the fact that *Lizzie* is grounded in historical detail grants a strange authenticity to the queer reinterpretation, as though the creative liberties reveal a possible, albeit undocumented, historical actuality" (Napolitano 2020: 369).

Nevertheless, the narratives that use Lizzie's lesbianism as a sensational motif are hardly "positive or empowering" (Schofield 1993: 94). Lizzie is shown in these set-ups as the submissive one to her more dominant lovers, easily manipulated by them and driven to murder, "as though the authors are saying that one kind of 'unnaturalness' leads to another" (Schofield 1993: 94). By doing so, these authors are uncritically tapping into the aforementioned stereotype of the evil, violent lesbian, corrupting the innocent (see Faderman 1981: 277). More recently, Gage has written two short plays, *Lace Curtain Irish* (2010) and *The Greatest Actress Who Ever Lived* (2011), in an attempt to re-cast Lizzie's lesbian relationships with Bridget and Nance in ways that seek to overcome stereotyping and offer a more positive lesbian scenario. However, as I will show, Macneill's film interestingly manipulates this stereotype beyond a simple dichotomy of the deviant versus the benign lesbian.

2. Macneill's *Lizzie*: Lesbian Readings and Queer Re-Readings

It is difficult to tell whether *Lizzie*'s producer Chloë Sevigny – for whom the film was a passion project since 2010 (Jacobs 2018: n.p.) – was in any way inspired or influenced by the above narratives when she asked her friend and colleague Bryce Kass to write the script. The film offers a range of possible motives for the crime: Lizzie Borden suffers from epilepsy attacks, which, in combination with her rebellious behaviour such as unattended trips to the theatre, are reason enough for her father to contemplate sending her to a lunatic asylum. Moreover, Andrew Borden is being manipulated by Lizzie's

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319187

brutal and misogynistic uncle, John, to draft a will in which John himself is named the sole beneficiary of the Borden fortune and the guardian of the Borden women – a prospect which, as Lizzie understands, would leave her penniless and, perhaps, institutionalised. Last but not least, the stifling atmosphere of the Borden household affords no respite except brief moments of joy Lizzie and Bridget share in their secret relationship. Ultimately, the film proposes an interpretation of the Fall River murder mystery that posits a thirst for freedom as the real motive. This interpretation is supported by Chloë Sevigny's interviews:

> we just really wanted to focus on how she went about finding [her freedom] and how important that was to her and what that meant to her, […] whether it was through the relationship with [her maid] or ultimately killing her parents for money — because money equaled freedom then. It still does. I wanted it to be this rousing, smash-the-patriarchy piece. (Sevigny qtd. in Jacobs 2018: n.p.)

Although the film does pinpoint the economic, sexual, and social oppression of women, it also shows that, as queer theory explicates, the workings of power are more intricate than a simple oppressor-oppressed axis, and total freedom is not possible.

Lizzie's queer position as a character who crosses the limits of what is regarded as feminine, in more subtle ways than simply refusing to conform to the norms of Victorian femininity, is evident from the outset. The film uses its visual devices to signal both Lizzie's desire for Bridget and her more dominant, active position toward the servant. In one of the opening scenes of the film, the moment Bridget first enters the Borden household, Lizzie observes Bridget from the vantage point of her bedroom window (Macneill 2018: 00:03:10-00:03:22). She assumes the position of the subject who holds an erotic gaze, which conventionally is that of a male gazer onto a female gazee. Thus, the scene additionally undermines the (potentially) heteronormative gaze of the viewer, merging it with Lizzie's lesbian one. The upper window also suggests Lizzie's upper, dominant position, continued when Lizzie enters Bridget's room to start actively pursuing her and to gain her attention (Macneill 2018: 00:04:45-00:05:45). Lizzie becomes Bridget's protector when she refuses to join her family's

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319187

xenophobic insistence to call Bridget 'Maggie', like all other Irish maids, or when she teaches Bridget to read and write, which not only forms an act of rebellion, but also a vehicle for their desire, as they start exchanging notes. This same motif can also be found in earlier queer neo-Victorian fiction, e.g. by Sarah Waters, where acts of writing and reading establish a shared intimacy between lesbian characters, for instance at the end of *Fingersmith* (2002). In this vein, the film seems to be following in the footsteps of Gage's plays which show Lizzie as the embodiment of the guardian/rescuer butch lesbian archetype (Gage 2010: vii-viii), in contrast to the evil, murderous lesbian stereotype that prevails in the depiction of Lizzie Borden's case.

Nevertheless, Kass's script shows Lizzie Borden not only as a "lesbian marching out of the kitchen with a bloody ax" (Jones qtd. in English 2015: 175), but also as a woman implicated in the Victorian discourse of female insanity, a go-to diagnosis for any kind of non-normalcy. One of the initial scenes of the film depicts Lizzie on an outing to the theatre, where she is suddenly gripped by a seizure which – with reference to Victoria Lincoln's speculation – might be read as an epileptic fit (Macneill 2018: 00:09:20- 00:09:40), yet is never described as such by the film's characters. Instead, Lizzie's quarrel with her parents about her evening out on her own suggests, first of all, a gossip mill in town that already identifies her as 'eccentric', but also that such stigmatisation of her behaviour as insane is similarly engaged in by her parents. Lizzie has more of those fainting spells in the course of the film, and these fits appear in moments of emotional intensity, such as for instance in her rage after her father kills her pet pigeons (Macneill 2018: 00:33:18-00:33:34). On the whole, however, viewers may observe a restrained and level-headed Lizzie, who much more shrewdly than her father recognises Uncle John's plot aimed at seizing the Borden fortune after Andrew's death. The proclamations her father makes to the doctor who visits after one of her seizures thus take on a still more ironic edge: "she's always been very emotional" (Macneill 2018: 00:10:20-00:10:22). Andrew Borden later remarks to John that "[my daughters] know nothing of the matters of the world, especially Lizzie" (Macneill 2018: 00:25:00-00:25:03). In his conversation with John, Andrew admits that Dr Bowen recommends the institutionalisation of Lizzie, thus proclaiming her insane and incapable of self-governance, and advises her future guardian to act without sentiment.

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There is no doubt that the male figures of power – father, doctor, uncle/potential guardian – use language pertaining to Victorian insanity discourses to control Lizzie's aspiration to overcome the limits of prescribed female behaviour, which might become threatening to their social positions and financial privilege. Thus, Lizzie's attempts at taking control of her own and Emma's future, and her efforts to protect herself and other women in her family, are both read as queer. Deemed conventionally masculine, they are perceived as 'unnatural' in her as a woman – and pathologised.

In the midst of the conflict between a queer, 'mad' Lizzie (who wants to regain economic and social control) and male figures of authority (who will not relinquish it), a lesbian romance with Bridget provides Lizzie with a degree of self-realisation and freedom. For one reviewer, the film's subtle and silent cinematography used to evoke Lizzie's and Bridget's budding feelings signifies female passivity: "[t]hat [strong, ferocious] Lizzie vanishes after the first half-hour and the two lovers eventually go near-mute, which underlines the film's ideas about female passivity" (Nicholson 2018: n.p.). Yet, this representation of lesbian intimacy defies easy categorisation into active/ masculine and passive/ feminine binaries. The strong, dominant Lizzie becomes quiet and subdued in moments of emotional significance, while the timid Bridget speaks out to rescue Lizzie from her uncle's threatening behaviour (Macneill 2018: 00:49:37). What is more, lesbian intimacy is here contrasted with heterosexual intimacy, which is depicted as characterised by rape and sexual abuse. This shocking disparity helps to evidence that heterosexuality is, ultimately, an oppressive institution, and, within it, sex is an exercise in power. Andrew Borden's sexual abuse of Bridget starts when he notices Lizzie and Bridget in a friendly conversation (Macneill 2018: 00:14:41-00:14:53), as if to assert his dominance over his younger daughter and her relationships to others, and to re-claim the position of alpha male (allegedly) threatened by 'queer' Lizzie. Similarly, Uncle John's attempt at raping Lizzie (Macneill 2018: 00:49:00-00:49:37) is not spurred by lust but designed to threaten her into submission and self-contempt. Thus, heteronormative sex, in the world of the Borden household at least, becomes a policing device and the ultimate form of violence. Desire and intimacy function as a queer form of resistance in this context.

The problematic position of a lesbian couple in the midst of the heteronormative institution of a Victorian family is epitomised by the barn, which not only plays a crucial role in the Borden case as Lizzie's alibi but is

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319187

also significant in Macneill's film. At first, it is a queer space of intimacy, actualising Sara Ahmed's concept of queer orientation as "a matter of residence, of how we inhabit spaces, and who or what we inhabit spaces with" (Ahmed 2006: 543). While the Borden house is the space of heterosexual violence, the barn is where Lizzie escapes to be free from her parents' policing gaze and to read Shakespeare's sonnets (Macneill 2018: 00:12:13-00:12:30), a symbol of her own unbridled queer desire,[6] while Bridget hides there to give way to emotion which she is expected to rein in due to her subordinate social position (Macneill 2018: 00:36:16-00:37:17).[7] Thus, the barn is the space where both women can, metaphorically, shake off the manacles of the social institutions that they are part of. Gradually, the barn becomes a space where Lizzie and Bridget hide to read together and, finally, to follow their queer desire (Macneill 2018: 00:52:55-00:55:10). The camera does not shy away from the display of lesbian eroticism, overcoming the demureness of other LGBTQIA films of its time, bemoaned by Jung (Jung 2018: n.p.). And yet, this is not a space of total freedom, as Nicholson notes: "Even when Lizzie and Bridget first kiss in the barn and their faces flood with sunlight, the camera pulls back from their joy to remind us that they're still stuck in Andrew's domain" (Nicholson 2018: n.p.). Indeed, when they are spied upon by Andrew Borden (Macneill 2018: 00:55:00), we are reminded of the heteronormative gaze that Lizzie and Bridget nevertheless remain imbedded in, even in the barn, and in spite of their attempts to escape its relentless surveillance. After what he has seen, Andrew decides to dismiss Bridget in order to separate her from Lizzie and stop their "unhealthy attachment" (Macneill 2018: 00:56:24), which ultimately leads to his demise at the hands of his daughter. The scene where Andrew looks into the barn through a window to see the women engaging in lesbian sex pinpoints the impossibility of total freedom from patriarchal panopticism, and thus the potential of the barn as a queer space of liberty is ultimately undermined.

Finally, the murders themselves constitute Lizzie's complete break with Victorian ideas of femininity, marked by the symbolic moment when she tears off the necklace she has been wearing (Macneill 2018: 00:59:46). The locket with her mother's photograph hidden inside represents the need to conform to the gender conventions imposed by her father, who earlier declares, as he presents the photograph to her, "Your mother was just about your age when that was taken. Too often I forget how beautiful she was.

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[…] I want us to make a new beginning" (Macneill 2018: 00:26:20-00:27:08). The image of her mother posed as a role model for her – timid, self-sacrificing, beautiful – is rejected the moment Lizzie decides to commit murder. The choice she makes is conventionally masculine; from the point of view of normative gender discourse, the anger of a Victorian woman, unspoken and repressed, would be directed against herself, through hysteria, anorexia, or self-harm. Such an outlet, pathologised as madness, would be nevertheless perceived as being in concordance with gender expectations. However, the path Lizzie chooses – directing her anger against those who are its cause, through violence and slaughter – is what Victorian society would expect of a man. Thus, yet again, Lizzie crosses the lines of gender dichotomies, literally "smashing the patriarchy" (Sevigny qtd. in Rathe 2018: n.p.) through smashing the skulls of those that represent its institutions. Like other 'lethal lesbians', Lizzie "converts introjected rage into outer-directed action" (Rich 2013: 109), refusing to be victimised for her desire.

Like previous movies about Lizzie Borden,[8] Macneill, too, paints a scenario of killing in the nude. In accordance with the plan Lizzie and Bridget must have made outside the reach of the camera (the murder is only depicted as a flashback when Lizzie and Bridget meet in prison), Lizzie strips naked to kill Abby, while Bridget is supposed to kill Andrew, also in the nude. This suggests a form of revenge contract, where Bridget is given a chance to annihilate her rapist. However, she does not go through with it, instead leaving Lizzie to finish the deed. The scene of the nude murderer wielding the axe (Macneill 2018: 01:20:00-01:23:02) attracts the viewers' attention with an emotional intensity that is, in Chloë Sevigny's words, "cathartic" and "sexual" (Sevigny qtd. in Jacobs 2018: n.p.). Lizzie is "so constrained in the whole movie", Sevigny notes, that it becomes "cathartic, for her and the audience" (Sevigny qtd. in Rathe 2018: n.p.). The moment of Abby's murder is preceded by a long shot that travels from the imminent victim, fully dressed, to the naked perpetrator, depicting in detail the interior of a Victorian bedroom: the wallpaper, lamps, furniture, and curtains, layers upon layers of fabrics, wood, and paper (Macneill 2018: 01:19:48-01:20:00). In this context, Lizzie's nudity is queer, abnormal, and deviant, stripped of the Victorian conventions of civilised behaviour to the most primal core; when she kills, she becomes a "blood-smeared mammal" (Nicholson 2018: n.p.). The building suspense of the scene creates more

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319187

erotic tension (much more so than in the image of Andrew Borden's murder), thus doubly queering it. A similar scene is repeated when the naked Bridget (*sans* her necklace – a Christian cross, representing the fact that she needs to reject her Catholic morality if she is to co-commit this crime) stands in the living room, ready to axe Andrew Borden, yet the spell is broken when she is too afraid to go through with it (Macneill 2018: 01:26:55-01:28:04). This time, Andrew again reads the scene as "some kind of attack" (Macneill 01:28:01), pathologising the threat of female violence, and in his final moments, as before, he reads female anger as madness.

Bridget's refusal to perform her part of the plan is the first sign that the film's 'lethal lesbians' scenario is subverted. Instead of the common celebration of their desire and a powerful vengeance that Lizzie and Bridget could relish in together, Bridget leaves Lizzie to finish the deed and later examines her conscience whether to confess the truth about the murder in court. In the end, when Lizzie offers her a life together as a lesbian couple, Bridget refuses to acknowledge that such a utopian ending to their story is at all possible. Thus, not only does *Lizzie* dismiss the prospect of a happy ending, where the 'lethal lesbians' may "get away with murder […] and, most of all, each other" (Rich 2013: 113), but the film also rejects the possibility of queer defiance.

This would be true, if one stopped at a lesbian reading of this film, disregarding other intersectional factors. But Lizzie's and Bridget's queer relationship and their bloody plot of queer rebellion cannot be understood outside the context of social, racial, and especially class dependencies that reflect the intricacies of power and reveal that both characters in the film are not always on the same side of the axis of oppression. When it comes to Lizzie, her privileged position as the member of an affluent New England family is mediated by her status of a spinster, which casts her in a liminal social position (Roggenkamp 2017: 38). Historically apparitional, like the hysteric and the lesbian (Carroll 2012: 14), the Victorian spinster was often suspected of deviance, lesbianism, or mental instability (Roggenkamp 2017: 36, 32). As Roggenkamp estimates, "[n]early ten percent of American women born between 1865 and 1895 never married" (Roggenkamp 2017: 35), and even though Victorians tended to see spinsters as pathetic and miserable, more recently "feminist scholars have sought to emphasise [their] autonomy and agency […], while lesbian feminist scholars in particular have recovered hidden histories of same-sex desire and lesbian identity"

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319187

(Carroll 2012: 14). Still, in the nineteenth-century cultural milieu a belief prevailed that a spinster's unnatural position in terms of her biological and social destiny as a woman made her prone to mental, sexual, or even murderous abnormalcy. One of Lizzie Borden's contemporaries, in an anonymous article, defined a spinster as "the pest and scourge of the circle in which she moves; […] she is little less than a she-fiend", and even her looks mark her as unfeminine: "a quaint untidy dress, a shriveled skin, a lean figure, a bearded lip, shattered teeth, harsh grating voice, and manly stride, and the typical 'Old Maid' is complete" (Anon. qtd. in Roggenkamp 2017: 36). Similarly, a conventionally masculine appearance – and thus, crossing the lines of gender binary – was stressed in journalistic accounts of Lizzie Borden's trial:

> the press at first drew upon the discourses of gender abnormality, defeminizing Lizzie's appearance. Upon her arrest she was described in the press as having 'thick protruding lips, pallid from sickness, and a mouth drawn down into very deep creases that denote either a melancholy or an irritable disposition […] her jaws are strong and conspicuous'. (Jones 2003: 92)

This is a queer position to be in, irrespective of whether 'spinster' was always a code-word for 'lesbian'; the spinster is a queer figure due to her ambiguous gender and social position and her inadvertent undermining of heteronormativity (Carroll 2012: 27). The description of an Old Maid recalls various stereotypes of lesbians, especially butch ones, that Macneill's film depicts in the scene of Uncle John's humiliation of Lizzie. He says, "you think pretty highly of yourself, don't you? […] You're nothing to no-one. You never were, you never will be" (Macneill 2018: 00:48:56-00:49:26). Of course, this is how heteronormativity frames the lesbian spinster, signalling its power to "categorise Borden as deviant, regardless of her class" (Roggenkamp 2017: 35) – or her actual guilt.

At the same time as being marginalised as a spinster and overlooked by and financially dependent on the male family members, Lizzie's position is that of an upper-class lady which, in comparison to the Irish servant, Bridget, incorporates no small degree of privilege. It might seem at first that the women share economic perils: Lizzie burns the new will and kills first

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319187

Mrs Borden and then her father to avoid being financially dependent on her step-mother or her uncle, while she wants to free Bridget from an employer who abuses his position of power in demanding sexual favours. Yet, things are more complicated for Bridget – she is Irish, which puts her near the bottom of the social ladder even among the working class. Her becoming involved with Lizzie and implicated in murders is a greater danger for Bridget, as she can be more easily and believably accused of the crime. Moreover, she has little claim to the freedom Lizzie achieves by gaining access to the family fortune, again putting her at a disadvantage.

One could even venture to say that Bridget exchanges one sexually manipulative employer for another. Although Lizzie's seduction of Bridget is more of a coaxing and encouragement than Andrew's blatant abuse, her incessant pursuit and wooing of Bridget could be seen as based on her need to find an ally to follow through with her plan, and Lizzie's emotional detachment makes it ambiguous for the viewer to decide whether true affection or manipulation is a more plausible interpretation. Even if one sees Lizzie as genuinely in love with Bridget, Lizzie's double-privilege as an upper-class woman and Bridget's employer still puts her in a position of power over and responsibility towards Bridget. Therefore, striking up a sexual relationship with Bridget, from which the servant cannot easily escape without compromising her standing in the house, itself represents an abusive behaviour on Lizzie's part. This becomes particularly clear after the murders, when Lizzie becomes a self-governing heiress of a fortune, free to do what she will. The fact that Lizzie takes Bridget's participation in the murders for granted, and then similarly assumes she will lie for her in court and spend the rest of her life with her shows that Lizzie's privilege allows her to be blind to Bridget's situation and social limitations. The relationship with Bridget that Lizzie envisages after the trial would still be one of dependence; after all, it is Lizzie who inherits money, not Bridget. The economic freedom that is the basis for social freedom is not available to Bridget, and thus the servant performs the only act of liberty to which she has access; i.e., she decides to leave Lizzie and move away from Fall River.

If seen from this perspective, the romantic interpretation of Lizzie's and Bridget's lesbian relationship is called into question; the barn is then not a queer space, but a panoptical one where Lizzie observes Bridget to see how easy it would be to manipulate her, as, in turn, the two are observed by Andrew (and the viewer). What transpires, therefore, is not a dichotomy of

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319187

domination and submission aligned with the division between heteronormative and non-normative, but a concentric structure of power as seen from a queer perspective, that is, a perspective that is sensitive to the manifold workings of oppression and marginalisation.

4. Conclusions: Neo-Victorian Queer Spectrality

Like queerness, neo-Victorianism can be understood as a "deviation from normalcy" (Butler 1993: 176), insofar as it resists categorisation as historical fiction, situating itself in-between fact and fiction. Self-reflexive, metafictional, and performative, neo-Victorianism questions the fictions of authenticity and the coherence of conventional narratives and understandings of the past. It is, therefore, a project of queer history-making, one which is a "game of truth and fiction – or if you prefer, of evidence and fabrication – [which] will permit us to see clearly what links us to our modernity and at the same time will make it appear modified to us" (Foucault qtd. in Halperin 1995: 25). Since the rise of neo-Victorian studies in the 1990s, the role of this new cultural phenomenon has been perceived, like queer historiography, as a postmodern project of "writing the history of those without one", what Carla Freccero terms "a fantasmatic activity that describes an impossible wish; it involves following traces that are lost [and] listening to voices that 'could have' spoken (but, it is implied, did not)" (Freccero 2007: 198). Neo-Victorianism is thus a queer venture of fleshing out the spectres of the past, whose gender and sexuality – but also class, race, ethnicity, or embodiment – is often inconspicuous in historiography. The constant collision between fact and fiction, formal experimentation, presentism, and anachronisms, and other neo-Victorian techniques that destabilise normative perspectives on the past are paramount for the queer Other to be voiced. Lizzie Borden's second life in culture seems to follow this pattern, as is evidenced by the discussed examples. The fantasy of queer Lizzie in Macneill's film is especially attractive as it seems to be "befitting of the #MeToo generation" (Felperin 2018: n.p.), depicting, it might appear, a cathartic resistance to stifling Victorian heteronormativity and social oppression. Nevertheless, a closer queer look at this narrative yields more complicated readings of power structures involved in Lizzie Borden's attempt to 'smash the patriarchy'. As Jennifer Jones notes, Lizzie Borden did not leave any confession, and neither disclaimed nor admitted her guilt. Therefore, "each of us in turn has filled her silence with our own

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319187

desire for coherence" (Jones 2003: 90). The loopholes and inconsistencies in the story of Lizzie Borden make her narrative a queer spectre of the past – impossible to grasp, pin down, or explain, yet inevitably undergoing new attempts at interpretation and clarification. In this way, *Lizzie*'s cultural textualisations replicate the efforts of the attorneys and press during Lizzie's trial to ventriloquise the spectre of the lesbian spinster in lieu of her silence (Jones 2003: 90). At the same time, the queer spectre, remaining ambiguous and incoherent, becomes "an agent of disruption" which "captures our gaze" (Adler 1993: n.p.). The audience's implication in this process lies in our acceptance of the myth disguised as an authentic rendering of the Lizzie Borden case (Jones 2003: 95).

As such, Lizzie can be seen as a spectre that haunts even the expectation that neo-Victorianism might invariably empower marginalised individuals or groups – or that its voicing of the past's spectres is disinterested. The project of queer historiography is paradoxical, as it both sheds light on the Others in history, but at the same time attempts to grasp them within logocentric and coherent narratives, creating "scriptural tombs" for the spectre, as Michel de Certeau has put it:

> this project aims at "understanding" and, through "meaning", at hiding the alterity of this foreigner; or, in what amounts to the same thing, it aims at calming the dead who still haunt the present, and at offering them scriptural tombs. (de Certeau 1988: 2)

The neo-Victorian "scriptural tombs" cannot hold the Other and, as de Certeau states, the spectre returns to "'re- bite' the space from which they were excluded; they continue to speak in the text/tomb that erudition erects in their place" (de Certeau 1986: 8). Therefore, the voices rendered intelligible by neo-Victorianism often take on a form of ventriloquism (see Davies 2012: 7), yet one which the spectre – being queer – perpetually resists and escapes. The palimpsest of the Borden trial documents, journalistic accounts of the murders, and their fictional and non-fictional adaptations have created a myth with an unrecognisable source. Thus, "any artist who decides to retell the story is left shuffling and reshuffling the million pieces of Bordenalia" (Telfer 2018: n.p.). And given the indeterminability of the spectre, another question should haunt us here: even

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319187

if we assume that the role of neo-Victorian fiction was to "let [the spectre] speak" (Derrida 1994: 221), as is often claimed in neo-Victorian studies, then whose spectre is it, or should it be – the victim's (the Bordens' perspective is never shown in textualisations) or the perpetrator's?

The question of the female voice is indeed key. As Ariella Van Luyn writes, since "the subjects of these novels are unable to give their consent, representing them is a fraught act […], reinforcing the very structures these novels seek to disrupt" (Luyn 2019: 67-68). In other words, textualisation of female criminals usually takes place long after they are gone, and therefore their identity and heritage become appropriated and commodified. Critics may claim that neo-Victorian biofictions featuring female criminals potentially "invite an understanding of women's crimes as products of complex power structures, draw attention to the subjective nature of constructions of the past, and give agency to voices silenced in the archives" (Luyn 2019: 67). Yet such claims are somewhat marred by the fact that these depictions may also be used and abused for a similar sadistic titillation of the viewer or the reader as that practiced by the Victorian popular press.

Another possibility, and one that various neo-Victorian critics have called attention to, is that revisionist narratives that pinpoint gender injustices and inequalities in nineteenth-century contexts simultaneously, and perhaps unintentionally, justify or humanise psychopathic murderers. As Marie-Luise Kohlke rightly states, in such fictions "criminals are re-humanised and in part exonerated by deflecting blame onto repressive familial, socioeconomic, and political conditions" (Kohlke 2013: 8), and Benjamin Poore, in his discussion of what he calls the 'villain effect' in neo-Victorian fiction, notes that "to give a villain a backstory – a childhood, a family, disappointments, school friends – all this is to humanise the villain but also to explain and understand" (Poore 2017: 34). The question arises to what extent feminist neo-Victorian biofictions of female criminals paint over and hence side-line their crimes, and whether, while looking for justice for women confined in debilitating sexual and gender roles, these narratives simultaneously excise the justice to which these women's victims would be entitled. This is certainly true about many Lizzie Borden textualisations, although Macneill's film manages to create a more ambiguous image of Lizzie. Even though the audience sympathise with her at the beginning, the realisation of the unequal (and exploitative) power relations between Lizzie and Bridget undermines reading Lizzie as a victim of Victorian social codes.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319187

If she manipulated Bridget to have a co-conspirator and later used her as an alibi, then the lesbian reading of Lizzie's and Bridget's relationship – as one that brings freedom to both – is also challenged. However, this means that the audience have also been manipulated: if they root for a non-heteronormative relationship and the women's happy ever after (as per neo-Victorian convention), what they get is ambiguity at best, being duped by Lizzie at worst, and a good dose of 'lethal lesbianism' (as per the conventions of queer cinema). While the historical Lizzie Borden used the gender norms of her times to escape punishment for her deed, in Macneill's film the viewers' expectations of queer relationships being liberating for both partners and representing long-demanded vindication of victimised minorities has been used against us to sympathise with the villain.

As these considerations indicate, if indeed Lizzie Borden was the perpetrator of a violent, bloody crime – as Macneill's film would have it – the question remains whether the particular collision of queerness and violence in the movie actually fosters confirmation of the queer as the monstrous and, as such, too dangerous to accept. Nevertheless, the 'lethal lesbian' trope that is used in the film epitomises the radical power of this cinematic motif in general and of Lizzie Borden as a queer figure in particular. This trope as used in Macneill's film is perhaps less idealistic than what queer cinema usually offers; its resolution is neither that of bleak self-annihilation nor utopian bliss. Instead, the queer characters of the film achieve some form of freedom – from patriarchy, and also from each other. The film's neo-Victorianism thus not only allows the filmmaker to queer the past, but also the present, undermining viewers' expectations of what a Victorian lesbian story should be like. Macneill's Lizzie, even if violent, is powerfully defiant; and whether her relationship with Bridget is perceived as an attempt at forging a genuine connection in the bleak patriarchal regime of Victorian domesticity, or as a gross manipulation of the less privileged Bridget, Lizzie's appearance as mad, bad, and dangerous potentially prevails.

Notes

1. In my use of the term 'palimpsestic' I am referring to, above all, Linda Hutcheon's concept of palimpsestic/palimpsestuous adaptation: "we

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319187

experience adaptations […] as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation" (Hutcheon 2013: 8). Hutcheon's theorisation of adaptation allows me to perceive the process of textualisation of historical events in a similar vein, where newly-created cultural texts adapt not only the event to which they ostensibly refer, but also elements of previous textualisations and appropriations of this event.

2. On the one hand, queer scholars have been looking for recognisable codes of same-sex desire, "recurring patterns in the identification, social statuses, behaviours, and meanings" (Traub 2007: 125) that would testify to a continuous presence of queer histories, but, at the same time, also presuppose an essentialist understanding of gay and lesbian identity. On the other hand, especially as a result of Michel Foucault's acknowledgement that sexuality is a discourse dependent on its historical and cultural context (see Schoene 2006: 283), social constructivist queer theory has stressed the impossibility of retrospectively applying current labels and understandings of queer desire to historical subjects, thus questioning the possibility of an identifiable queer 'essence'. Perhaps, then, the fantasmatic nature of historiography (including a queer one) is the result of the unfeasibility of reconciling these two tendencies (see Freccero 2007: 198).
3. Films such as, for instance, *Thelma and Louise* (1991, dir. Ridley Scott), *Basic Instinct* (1992, dir. Paul Verhoeven), *Heavenly Creatures* (1994, dir. Peter Jackson), *Sister My Sister* (1994, dir. Nancy Meckler) and, later, *Monster* (2003, dir. Patty Jenkins), have depicted lesbians killing heterosexual males, thus symbolising social anxiety surrounding lesbianism (Rich 2013: 105-119).
4. An explicit distinction between the terms 'queer' and 'lesbian' as used in this article should be made. Although I agree with Clara Bradbury-Rance that replacing 'lesbian' with the umbrella term 'queer' might render lesbian experience barely visible or forgotten (Bradbury-Rance 2019: 8), this is not the main reason why I am using both terms. I would like to make this distinction to show queerness as a wider concept, as discussed above, one which includes not only sexuality, but also points out other aspects of non-normativity in one's subjectivity, behaviour and social positioning, while the term 'lesbian' helps me stress the erotic connection between the characters as well as traditional representation of same-sex desire in history and film.
5. These include e.g. true crime and journalist texts, such as Edwin H. Porter's *The Fall River Tragedy: A History of The Borden Murders* (1893), Edmund Pearson's *Studies in Murder* (1924) and *Trial of Lizzie Borden* (1937), and Victoria Lincoln's *A Private Disgrace: Lizzie Borden by Daylight* (1967);

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319187

theatrical plays, such as John Colton and Carlton Miles's *Nine Pine Street* (1933), Lillian de la Torre's *Goodbye, Miss Lizzie Borden* (1948), Tim Kelly's *Lizzie Borden of Fall River* (1976), and Sally Pollock's *Blood Relations* (1980); Agnes de Mille's ballet *Fall River Legend* (1948); Jack Beeson's opera *Lizzie Borden* (1965), and Steven Cheslik-DeMeyer, Alan Stevens Hewitt and Tim Maner's rock musical *Lizzie* (2013). The literary adaptations of the Borden case range from short stories, such as Angela Carter's famous 'The Fall River Axe Murders' (1986) as well as novels such as Evan Hunter's *Lizzie* (1984), Elizabeth Engstrom's *Lizzie Borden* (1990), or, more recently, Sarah Schmidt's *See What I Have Done* (2017). Popular fiction also offers mash-up novels like Owen Haskell's *Sherlock Holmes and the Fall River Murders* (1997) or C. A. Verstraete's *Lizzie Borden, Zombie Hunter* (2016); Rick Geary's comic book series *Treasury of Victorian Murder* which includes an issue titled 'The Borden Tragedy' (1997); and a recent young adult novel *Lizzie* (2018) by Dawn Ius and Richard Behrens's series *Lizzie Borden, Girl Detective* (2010–2015). The most prominent film adaptations of Lizzie Borden's case include *The Legend of Lizzie Borden* (1975), directed by Paul Wendkos and starring Elizabeth Montgomery as Lizzie Borden, and more recently *Lizzie Borden Took an Ax* (2014), directed by Nick Gomez and starring Christina Ricci as Lizzie. The latter was followed by a spin-off television series, *The Lizzie Borden Chronicles* (2015) produced for Lifetime. For a commentary and a critical discussion of these textualisations, see e.g. Adler 1993, Kabatchnik 2010, Kent and Flynn 1992, Miller 2010, Murley 2008, Napolitano 2020, Roggenkamp 2017, Schofield 1993, and Taylor 1975.

6. The queerness of William Shakespeare's sonnets is a well-researched topic; in the seminal *Shakespeare, Sex and Love* (2010), Stanley Wells includes Sonnet 116, quoted by Lizzie in this scene, "among the long group of poems generally supposed to be addressed to a man" (Wells 2010: 65). The opening line read aloud by Lizzie, "Let me not to the marriage of true minds / Admit impediments", is a form of foreshadowing of further events.
7. Another interesting symbol of (queer) freedom may be represented by Lizzie's pet pigeons that live in the barn. Their flying represents Lizzie's hope to be able to escape her family one day; when Andrew kills them, this becomes a turning point in Lizzie's plan to murder her parents. Interestingly, Marc Napolitano, in his discussion of the rock musical *Lizzie* (2013) also sees pigeons as representation of lesbian desire, especially as they are called 'filthy' and 'sick' by Andrew (Napolitano 2020: 372). Even more suggestively, in Macneill's film, Lizzie kills her remaining pigeons the night

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4319187

before the murder, which shows her desperation and readiness to sacrifice a queer bliss for her plan.

8. Most famously, Wendkos's *The Legend of Lizzie Borden* features a scene where Lizzie disrobes and, having ensured her victims are aware of her presence and sufficiently shocked by her nakedness, first slaughters them and then washes the blood off her naked skin. Such a method is both practical (it would explain why no spot of blood was evident on Lizzie's outfit that day) and sadistic, as well as disturbingly erotic. The scenes in the nude are later replicated in Gomez's *Lizzie Borden Took an Ax*.

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