Viral Monsters: Frankenstein's Creatures in TV Series and Neo-Victorian 'Contagious' Re-Writings of the Canon

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Abstract:
Victorian fictional representations of infection tended to equate normalcy with a healthy state and compliance with the established order, categorising outcasts and non-compliant individuals as enemies of development and menaces to society. This article examines two televisual adaptations of *Frankenstein*'s creature, which interrogate the resulting conflations of non-normative characters with 'carrier of contagion' that precipitate cultural degeneration. In *Penny Dreadful*, during the outbreak of a near-apocalyptic infection, the reanimated John Clare disrupts his creator's unethical scientific work of resuscitating corpses. In *The Frankenstein Chronicles*, the police officer John Marlott is infected with syphilis before becoming an 'undead being', while he investigates the moral corruption at the heart of an epidemic plaguing the poorest districts of London. Both ostracised 'monsters' decode the rotten mechanisms of society, exposing a body politic plagued by economic inequality and inhumanity through acts of (counter-cultural) viropolitical resistance. Subversively, the two neo-Victorian texts thus also metaphorically 'contaminate' the literary canon of horror fiction, refiguring 'monsters' as quasi-political activists.

Keywords: adaptation, contagion, *Frankenstein*, Gothic, monstrosity, neo-Victorian Studies, *Penny Dreadful*, *The Frankenstein Chronicles*, TV series, viropolitics.

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Contagions haunt humankind. With the Covid-19 pandemic, "communicable diseases surged back to 23.0% of all deaths in 2020 and 28.1% in 2021 – a return to 2005 levels" (World Health Organisation 2024: 3). Hence transmittable disease is firmly established among the major threats to our planetary future. As a constant source of fear and anxiety, the event of contagion has also precipitated myriad metaphorical and narrative representations of battles with infection. For Veronique Eicher and Adrian Bangerter, "[h]uman groups have adapted to disease by evolving patterns of behaviour [...] but they have also elaborated symbolic representations of the

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origins of diseases, their transmission, and means of prevention and cure" (Eicher, Bangerter 2015: 385). In this sense, narratives of contagion have strong affinities with fictions of monstrosity: the monster threatens individuals and society, sometimes even the whole of humanity, calling forth efforts to combat, contain, and 'conquer' the peril and restore the status quo.

This article explores two neo-Victorian adaptations for television of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818), which intertwine narratives of contagion and monstrosity in innovative ways. Both series recycle but also contest nineteenth-century discourses of normalcy and disease, which pathologised non-normative bodies and individuals refusing to comply with the established order as menaces to society's progress. In *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016), created by John Logan, Frankenstein's 'creature', who later names himself John Clare (Rory Kinnear), rebels against his creator, disrupting the scientist's unethical work in the midst of a near-apocalyptic (vampiric) infection sweeping through Britain's capital. In *The Frankenstein Chronicles* (2015-2017), created by Benjamin Ross and Barry Langford, the police detective John Marlott (Sean Bean) investigates a spate of child disappearances in London, following the discovery of a corpse apparently stitched together from multiple bodies. In the course of the series, Marlott falls victim to the scourge of syphilis, before being falsely implicated in a child's murder, executed, and reanimated by the actual perpetrator, who resides at the heart of the social establishment. The monstrous Clare and Marlott thus become decoders of the rottenness of the body politic, quasi-political activists engaged in (counter-cultural) viropolitical resistance. Metaphorically, the two neo-Victorian texts thus also 'contaminate' the literary canon of horror fiction, refiguring 'monsters' as agents of social justice otherwise unattainable.

1. Contagion as Social Commentary

Storytelling on the issue of infection is a constant in human history, as "there have been narratives of contagions for as long there have been contagions" (Chen 2020: 2). This seems to be particularly the case when transmittable diseases coincide with scientific, cultural, and economic turning points. Being connatural with human relations and states, contagion is two-sided, comprising both concrete and figurative elements: it is a very *real* cause of social crisis and, at the same time, a powerful metaphor *representing* this condition. As Priscilla Wald points out in her illuminating study, *Contagious.*

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Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative, the issue is associated with a vast area of social discourse and ideology: "Contagion is more than an epidemiological fact. It is also a foundational concept in the study of religion and of society, with a long history of explaining how beliefs circulate in social interactions" (Wald 2008: 2). Wald proceeds to examine the close correlation between human interaction, disease transmission and their transformation into symbolic representations. She argues that "[t]he interactions that make us sick also constitute us as a community" since "disease emergence dramatises the dilemma that inspires the most basic of human narratives: the necessity and danger of human contact" (Wald 2008: 2). As much was exemplified in the COVID-19 pandemic by the reliance on so-called 'essential workers', including healthcare professionals, whose work exposed them to much higher risks of contracting the virus through human contact.

Wald's definition implies that transmissive infections have been, and still are, employed discursively as metaphors for various other conditions, especially those connected with social and political issues. Tropes of contagion represent a common thread that runs through a variety of fictional works, particularly evident in nineteenth-century Britain, when public health and sanitary conditions became a focus of general interest and infectious diseases acquired ubiquitous status in the artistic imagination (see Burgan 2002: 837-894). Significant textual examples include Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826), in which the depiction of an infamous plague veils the author's alarm about the ideology of 'sympathy' that underpins nineteenth-century policies of community and nation formation. Similarly, Charles Dickens transforms his condemnation of London's corrupt, class-based, financial and legal institutions into infections suffered by several of his characters and into epidemics affecting the poor (see Gurney 1990; Woodward 2012). In the same vein, Elizabeth Gaskell's works on industrialism, like *Mary Barton* (1848), in which 'fallen women' are dramatised as carriers of deadly infections, reveal the writer's concern with the exploitation and commodification of women's bodies (see Deren 2017).

Analogously, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, popular novels, films, and television series have adopted images of contagion as metaphors for other fears and anxieties, e.g., the fear of an all-pervasive capitalism, of communism, or of social/racial marginalisation. The frequently cited cases of films produced in the Cold War years, such as *The War of the Worlds* (1953), directed by Byron Haskin, and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*

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(1956), directed by Don Siegel, provide good examples of such adapted contagion narratives. Both films symbolise the Western fear of communism and its nuclear menace, employing contagion as a narrative device to represent political and social anxieties. In the *War of the Worlds*, a banal bacterial disease caught by the Martian invaders of Earth provides the unexpected solution to a seemingly apocalyptic attack from another planet, while *Body Snatchers*, with its allegory of societal massification, describes an invasion of aliens, arriving in pods from outer space. One by one, the inhabitants of a small US town are replaced with emotionless copies. Initially, the event is attributed to a mysterious viral infection, and indeed, its progress is identical to that of a disastrous epidemic right up until its fatal consequences (see Ostherr 2005: 91-97).

This 'narrative turn' is one of the several modes of reacting to, and elaborating on, mass infections. From a historical and sociological point of view, infection leads to the emergence of specific behavioural patterns like avoidance of the 'outgroup' and the process of 'Othering', both of which Clare falls victim to in *Penny Dreadful*. Defined as a group with which individuals do not wish to identify, the outgroup thus contrasts with the majority 'ingroup', to which individuals readily claim membership. Specific cognitive mechanisms – like symbolic representations – encourage individuals to manifest positive feelings and grant privileged treatment to those belonging to the ingroup and, conversely, discriminate and stigmatise members of the outgroup, perceived as 'Other' and not belonging. Originally coined in the field of Postcolonial Studies by Gayatri Spivak, Othering describes "the process by which imperialism creates its 'others' [and] the various ways in which colonial discourse produces its subjects" to legitimate and enact policies of exclusion and marginalisation (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2000: 156). Such policies are based on (constructed) difference or non-normativity that underpins structural discrimination and inequality.

This sociological framework sheds light on the fact that widespread contagion has always affected and conditioned social structures and interpersonal relations, transforming and re-modelling whole civilisations. Much is demonstrated by the case of the bubonic plague epidemic in the Middle Ages, which contributed to the end of serfdom in Britain, but also later epidemics of the disease in nineteenth-century British colonial India and the Ottoman Empire, both of which witnessed "international efforts to impose quarantine" to contain the spread, in part to protect global trade (National

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Library of Scotland 2010: n.p.). Protective strategies, such as quarantine measures, the avoidance of outgroups, or symbolic representations of disease, help to "explain or cope with the breach of meaning that a suddenly occurring social change like an infectious disease outbreak can provoke" (Eicher and Bangerter 2015: 385). In other words, specific acts, namely the isolation of (alleged) infective vehicles and the production of contagion narratives, have a dual function: on the one hand, they aim to reduce the risk of transmitting the disease and, on the other, they sustain the symbolic and ideological dominance of the ingroup. These cultural and political practices, stimulated by the threat of contagion, lead to a complex web of implications that redefine social interactions and spaces (see Wald 2008: 6).

Not surprisingly, the general reaction to HIV/AIDS and the COVID-19 pandemics resulted in an extensive hunt for the respective culprits on a planetary scale that entailed (in the first instance) homophobic and (in the second) xenophobic reactions. In the 1980s, gay people, as transgressors of established social and moral norms, quickly became scapegoats for the spread of HIV/AIDS, while in the case of SARS/COVID the innumerable stories of presumed Asian backwardness in terms of cleanliness and lifestyle, heralded a global resurgence of the racist 'Yellow Peril' narrative, which first emerged during the nineteenth century. This pattern of reaction to contagion is well-established in history, the only change being the narrative amplitude regarding its cultural/informative pervasiveness. In her seminal *AIDS and its Metaphors* (1989), Susan Sontag aptly stressed how a dangerous biased view of HIV contagion was categorising the disease as a sign of decadence and thus condemning specific ways of life: "The unsafe behavior that produces AIDS is judged to be more than just weakness. It is indulgence, delinquency – addictions to chemicals that are illegal and to sex regarded as deviant" (Sontag 1989: 25). In effect, homosexuality itself is pathologised as monstrous.

Wald describes this recursive pattern, which gives rise both to multiple biases and to what she terms the 'outbreak narrative', as per the title of her study, as the usual human reaction to the emergence of a contagious disease. Cumulatively and over time, such narratives have generated "a set of conventions – a vocabulary, images and storylines" – that provide "an account of an outbreak – in its most archetypal and apocalyptic incarnation" (Wald 2021: xiv). The most stereotypical of these "conventions" include, firstly, the conflation of narrative politics with politics of identity;[1] and secondly, the

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simultaneous 'monstrification' of disease and the (metaphorical) transformation of carriers of disease into viral or infectious monsters. Clearly, then, contagion conflates public and private metaphors, so that *the representation of contagion is always* a *political issue*. I thus employ the term 'contagion' both in its literal sense – since the cases examined contain actual episodes of infectious diseases – and as a trope underpinning a complex and multi-layered representation of 'viropolitics' in the nineteenth century and in present times.

The term will be employed here to describe the dynamics of power and governance emerging during pandemics and epidemics, as well as sociopolitical narratives and metaphors associated with contagion. These discursive tropes permeate media, policy-making, and public perception, shaping societal views of contagion, influencing which bodies are considered threatening or vulnerable and constructing boundaries between the healthy and the diseased.

2. Victorian Representations of Contagion

There is a long-standing association between the body politic and the human body. The employment of political metaphor drawing on the human physical condition has a history stretching back to the classical era, with a significant shift emerging in the Victorian age that saw revolutionary developments both in politics and medicine. The considerable progress in these two areas produced a merging of discourse, by which medical and political themes sometimes became interchangeable with the conceptual binaries of order/disorder and morality/immorality representing the pillars of a common medico-political language. Medico-scientific terminology contaminated all forms of political expression: definers like natural/unnatural, healthy/sick, clean/unsanitary, etc., were often used to judge political actors and actions, thus establishing discursive criteria of social admittance and exclusion based on individuals' declared or projected physical condition.

Corinna Wagner remarks how the conflation of medical and political language had become significant in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century when scientific development provided new theories on reproduction and sexuality, cleanliness and contamination, nutrition and disease. From then on, "these new theories circulated not only in popular medical manuals […] but also in all forms of political expression, including broadsides, philosophical treatises, pornography, anti-Jacobin novels, plays, poetry and

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graphic art" (Wagner 2013: 7). The consequent combining of scientific and literary language was boosted in Victorian times when culture and society were deeply impacted by advances in biology and other scientific areas. This said, we should recall, however, that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and the aforementioned *The Last Man* (1826) predate this full flowering of textual contamination between fiction and science.

Late eighteenth-century issues regarding health were strongly associated with contagion: according to prevalent theory, infections were caused by adverse environmental factors. This belief led to various medical and social reforms that have been referred to as 'Sanitationism' (see Baldwin 1999: 53-59), a socio-scientific approach derived from the Galenic model of medicine, which assumes that any disease can be warded off provided that the environment is kept 'healthy', i.e. clean and untainted by noxious substances or individuals. Sanitationism generated a series of government initiatives culminating in the Public Health Act of 1848, which established a General Board of Health to regulate and manage sanitary conditions, especially in particularly poor districts.

Massive slum disinfection and urban rebuilding (causing evictions with the subsequent gentrification of plebeian areas) were passed off as an act of solidarity but actually stigmatised the lower classes as plague carriers and a menace to society as a whole. The sanitation perspective, though it did not explicitly correlate to the Victorian medico-social approach, also impacted strongly on the nineteenth-century world view, triggering a vast literary and cultural output on disease containment.[2] Indeed, as Chung-jen Chen explains, this was part and parcel of a general "moral economy of surveillance" aimed at what was considered the dysfunctional space of contagion within urban agglomerations, as well as "a larger project to control contaminating elements that endangered the social order" (Chen 2020: 5).

Narratives focussing on notions of touch, transition, contact, and restraint flourished, with images of once peaceful realms now infiltrated by carriers of pestilence. Accordingly, "[c]ontagion is a visualization of the unknown, invisible agents transgressing boundaries: in times of emergency, it lends itself to metaphors of invasion" (Chen 2020: 2). The trope of invasion-as-contagion became part of an overarching narrative that permeated the Victorian mindset and extended into the literary realm, perhaps most famously so in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) but also in works like Richard Marsh's *The Beetle* (1897) and even H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*

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(1898). In the latter, an alien invasion mirrors Victorian concerns about disease transmission by depicting the Martians as a foreign, biologically superior force whose demise ultimately comes through their vulnerability to Earth's microbes.

As sanitationism gave space to germ theory, the idea of unhealthy environments gave way to the concept of invisible, insidious vehicles of disease. This presupposes contact between organisms and was favoured by such technological innovations as microscopes, as well as the work of scientists like Louis Pasteur and Robert Koch. The rapid spread of new sanitary protocols went hand in hand with the growth of accounts that overtly attributed contagion to specific social categories and to individual (im)moral conduct. Illnesses were thought to have their origin in the moral failings of emarginated groups of urbanised or rural lower-class unfortunates, promptly stigmatised through stereotypes as being unfit, dangerous sections of society, lacking self-control and decency. The Victorian process of Othering the threat of disease, was thus realised by creating narratives of specific outgroups, bestowing on them a series of negative traits (promiscuity and sexual excess, filthiness, ungodliness, etc.), and linking these characteristics to the causes of infections.[3] The outcome of this discursive approach was the emergence of a medicalised culture that incorporated strict policies of health, surveillance, morality, prudery and classism. In the background loomed a dominant ideological structure generated by (medical) science that enjoyed widespread cultural and literary support.

In evoking the political implications of contagion, Michel Foucault's concept of "disciplinary methods" or strategies (Foucault 1977: 137 and *passim*) from *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975; first English trans. 1977) comes to mind. Foucault observes a frequent recourse to fictionalisation, which governments draw on in their management of plagues, leading to subsequent institutional restrictions:

> A whole literary fiction of the festival grew up around the plague: suspended laws, lifted prohibitions, the frenzy of passing time, bodies mingling together without respect [...]. But there was also a political dream of the plague, which was exactly its reverse: not the collective festival, but strict divisions; not laws transgressed, but the penetration of regulation into even the smallest details of everyday life through the mediation of the complete hierarchy

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> that assured the capillary functioning of power. (Foucault 1977: 197-198)

While Foucault refers to seventeenth-century Europe in this passage, his intent is to evidence how modernity implements 'normalcy' as an organising principle, thus eliciting the idea of disease as deviance.[4] In fact, infections and epidemics recur in the patterning of Victorian (and neo-Victorian) narratives, with explicit links to social division and compliance/noncompliance with the established (sanitary) order. In all this, the individual is marginalised and excluded, stigmatised as an obstacle to modernisation or, even worse, as a social menace. The implications of such Othering make for a painful awareness of the triumph of modern rationality as a discriminating and cruel process achieved at the cost of wiping out the weakest and the non-ordinary. In this way, the brutality of modernity is often represented in the guise of deathly plagues caused by *who* or *what* does not conform to morally inflected standards.

3. Neo-Victorian Contagious Creatures

In monsters' inhumanity, such deviant *who* and *what* coalesce. Yet neo-Victorian texts also subvert neat equivalence between contagion and deviance by re-humanising the carriers of disease. Rather than straightforward recyclings of Victorian tropes of infection, neo-Victorian texts absorb and reconfigure nineteenth-century representations of disease, degeneration, and monstrosity, making their underlying ideological functions visible while adapting them to contemporary concerns. The idea of contagion – biological, moral, or social – remains a central metaphor, but neo-Victorian narratives often complicate the rigid associations between disease and deviance found in their antecedents. For example, in Sarah Waters's *Affinity* (1999), the accusation of hysteria and female deviance that once justified the confinement of women in Victorian asylums is revealed as a mechanism of patriarchal control rather than an objective medical diagnosis. Analogously, Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) revises the Victorian association between prostitution and disease, which in this novel is not just a reflection of historical reality but a means to critique the structures that pointed to women's bodies as sites of contagion and moral judgement. While Faber's novel does not focus on contagion as its central theme, it subtly incorporates the fear of disease – especially sexually transmitted infections –

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as part of its broader critique of Victorian morality, gender inequality, and class oppression. The intersection of bodily affliction and monstrosity, prevalent in Gothic Victorian fiction, resurfaces in neo-Victorian literature but is often recontextualised to generate sympathy for the afflicted figure.

Yet, while neo-Victorian texts frequently expose the oppressive mechanisms embedded in Victorian contagion narratives, they also risk repurposing these tropes for less ethically reflective ends. The aestheticisation of disease and bodily horror often serves sensationalist or shock-driven purposes, drawing on historical suffering as a source of Gothic spectacle. In a sense, many texts even engage in temporal Othering, reinforcing a contrast between the supposedly enlightened present and the ignorant superstitious past. By invoking contagion as a signifier of Victorian excess – be it in terms of sexuality, *fin-de-siècle* anxieties, or pseudo-scientific theories of degeneracy – many neo-Victorian works simultaneously condemn and exploit the very tropes they inherit.

In the remainder of this article, I explore the neo-Victorian drive to represent anti-institutional and unconventional practices as counter-public resistance strategies through the two monstrous figures of John Clare and John Marlott – both, significantly, depicted as creatures of Frankenstein[5] and associated with various forms of infectious diseases. With their non-human bodies, the two men-become-creatures and their radical deviant behaviour signal a patent effort to break into, infect, and defy the dominant structures at the basis of social and discursive mechanisms. Metaphorically, Clare and Marlott thus expose a rotten social organism, riven by economic inequality and political cynicism that can only superficially be 'stitched up' into some kind of respectable order. The omnipresent imagery of contagion, moreover, adds to the portrayal of hostile, alienated characters. The protagonists witness the horrors triggered by the process of entering a new era and become actors of subversive contamination.

The two versions of the creature featured in *Penny Dreadful* and *The Frankenstein Chronicles* differ significantly from Mary Shelley's original creatures. The latter series also initially misleads viewers into mistakenly identifying the corpse of the murdered child rather than Marlott himself with *Frankenstein*'s creature. However, like Shelley's monster, both protagonists are the product of arrogant medical-scientific operators and, as such, prove appropriate fictional embodiments of the monstrous 'side effects' of the nineteenth century's blind faith in science.

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The selection of these characters directly engages with the fundamental issue of a normative health economy – a concern deeply embedded in both Victorian society and contemporary discourse – in which, as Chen notes, the individual body becomes a site of both "external manipulation" and "internal discipline" (Chen 2020:156). This process extends beyond mere physicality, shaping broader moral frameworks and societal standards. At the time, this economy's progressive implementation led to a set of normalised authoritarian practices, such as quarantine measures, preventative inoculations, and compulsory medical examinations – this last as a result of the Contagious Diseases Acts (1864-1869), which resulted in women suspected of prostitution being subjected to invasive medical checks, reinforcing gendered and class-based health control. Analogous mechanisms operate in our age: present throughout society, inherent in social relationships, embedded in a network of procedures, institutions, and technologies, they affect the 'micro-levels' of everyday life. Contemporary examples include mass surveillance for public health purposes (such as digital tracking during pandemics), compulsory vaccinations and health passports, and algorithm-driven health assessments used by insurance companies and employers to monitor individual risk profiles. These mechanisms not only regulate bodily health but also influence access to services, employment opportunities, and social mobility. In many ways, these control strategies exerted on the human body are a legacy of the alienated, crowded, and medicalised nineteenth century that produced the "modernised bio-political body of discipline" (Chen 2020: 10). Like Victorians, people in our own century have astonishingly similar preoccupations, living, as they do, in overcrowded urban spaces, an over-exploited environment, and an uneasy sense that unmanageable forces are transforming the world we know.

Moreover, extending – in characteristic neo-Victorian fashion – the timespan to cover a period outside Victorianism proper, the television dramas under discussion are examples of appropriation, as we shall see.[6] While *Penny Dreadful* transfers Mary Shelley's Georgian literary invention to the Victorian age, specifically the *fin-de-siècle*, *The Frankenstein Chronicles*, set in 1827, opts for a Regency setting. Rather than just regurgitating nostalgic clichés, however, the series' representations engage critically with the Long Nineteenth Century: "Twenty-first-century screen neo-Victorianism […] responds to the period in multivalent ways, recovering the experience of marginalised communities and challenging received ideas" (Louttit and

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Louttit 2018: 7). Specifically, *Penny Dreadful* and *The Frankenstein Chronicles* invest tropes of contagion with restorative justice rather than just societal destabilisation.

In each case, the writer's choice of making Frankenstein's monstrous creature the protagonist in a nineteenth-century environment plagued by contagion is thus coherent with the morbid fascination that Victorians – and, by extension, neo-Victorian fiction – had/has in diseased and/or anomalous bodies. Saverio Tomaiuolo deems this fascination an alternative version of the attraction to deviance that lies beneath the surface of a hyper-regulated society, as represented by the theme of dirt: "While a sanitary problem, dirt also functioned for Victorians as a cultural construction. In being characterised as dirt, unwanted subjects and non-normative attitudes could be controlled, surveyed and eventually silenced" (Tomaiuolo 2019: 17). While the health of the body and the spaces it inhabits came to be considered the 'regular' state, contagious bodies and spaces implied irregularities to be sanctioned. In Chen's terms, "contagion becomes an *abnormality* that demands remedy and containment, if not cure" (Chen 2020: 156, added emphasis). In both television series, the monstrous abnormality of the two characters is also reinforced by the stereotypical representation of London as a Gothicised city. The British capital is depicted as an enhanced and ominous version of nineteenth-century "Horror London" (Hutchings 2009: 190; also see Louttit 2016: 3 and *passim*): nocturnal, full of dark misty alleys barely lit by gas lamps, and in *Penny Dreadful* and *The Frankenstein Chronicles*, haunted by impending outbreaks of epidemics and full of apocalyptic menace.

4. John Clare: Contagion, Exclusion, and the Monstrous Other

In *Penny Dreadful*, Victor Frankenstein's unnamed firstborn, who initially refers to himself as Caliban, brutally slaughters his 'brother' – the second creature, the meek Proteus (Alex Price) – in a fit of jealous rage after being abandoned by his creator (Harry Treadaway). However, despite his monstrous appearance and instincts, Caliban acutely feels and claims for himself a humanity that he is deprived of, a desire to be reconciled with the natural world that his existence denies. Significantly, Caliban re-names himself after the Romantic poet John Clare, the 'outsider' who sang the glories of the natural world increasingly destroyed by industrialisation. Like the so-called 'peasant poet', an uneasy embodiment of unbalanced Romantic

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and Victorian concerns, the fictional John Clare suffers from a painful awareness of being a misfit in his age.

The series is concerned, even obsessed, with a desire to define human identities caught at a moment of transition. Hence, the social and psychological uncertainties of the new millennium afford another direct correlation with contemporary issues:

> [*Penny Dreadful's*] exploration of new technologies, its references to mapping and conquests of the physical world, its fascination with monstrous possibilities of science, with genocidal abuses of power, its pervasive mode of doom, and anticipation of apocalypse, are only too familiar for its contemporary audience. This dark and crisis-ridden world is beautifully crafted from elements of the past but speaks to us of ongoing concerns. (Howell et al. 2017: 2)

Clare constitutes living proof of a fallacious attempt at interfering with the course of nature: his repulsive appearance and violent behaviour – the latter in part a viropolitical response to the discrimination he encounters – result in his shunning and dismissal by society.[7] Metaphorically speaking, he is an infection that must be treated and eliminated to keep the social body intact. His creator starts the process of exclusion when Frankenstein immediately 'aborts' and casts aside his newborn covered in blood and uttering a primaeval scream of terror upon resurrection. Clare's further attempts at forming regular social bonds also result in failure. He is rejected by Lily, Frankenstein's female creature, and then banished from the Grand Guignol theatre, where he had found temporary work as a stage rat, after misinterpreting the small acts of kindness that a beautiful young actress shows him out of pity. Even his effort to fit into the apparently welcoming household of the Putney family's waxworks proves a failure, as Clare ends up trapped and exhibited as a freak in their tableaux of horrors. The episode ends in carnage, with the creature liberating himself in a kind of reverse viropolitical retaliation for his exploited precarity.

Clare's sad progress from one frustration to another follows Mary Shelley's original plot, expanded in *Penny Dreadful* to convey the complex psychological journey of a creature who painfully longs for a vanished 'natural world' and human community while estranged from a modern,

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discriminating, 'sick' environment. This, too, evidences a typically neo-Victorian shared trait between *fin-de-siècle* anxieties and the cultural and socio-economic malaise of our own times.[8] At one point in 'Resurrection', Clare disparages the artistic ambitions of his 'father' Frankenstein, offering a disconsolate depiction of a cold-hearted modern age:

> From your pencilled notations I learned that you favoured Wordsworth and the old Romantics. No wonder you fled from me. I am not a creation of the antique pastoral world. I am modernity personified. Did you not know that's what you were creating? The modern age. Did you really imagine that your modern creation would hold to the values of Keats and Wordsworth? We are men of iron and mechanisation now. We are steam engines and turbines. Were you really so naive to imagine that we'd see eternity in a daffodil? (Walsh and Logan, 2014: 00:11:16-00:11:58).

Clare is left with no choice but to escape this daunting ecosystem and seek refuge among other outcasts, keeping to the shadows, out of sight and beyond the 'legitimate' spaces of the city. It is only in the company of pariahs, "in the underground dwellings of London's homeless and impoverished" (Howell and Baker 2017: n.p.) that Frankenstein's creature finds relief from "the chaotic and bewildering environment of rapid industrializing and growing cities of the nineteenth century" (Parsons 2000: 19).

These same cities, of course, also directly facilitated the spread of disease. Significantly, the only area Clare gains admittance to is an underground soup kitchen that has been converted into a quarantine area. Here, the wretched underbelly of society finds refuge during outbreaks of cholera. Only within this infective context can Clare establishes a pseudo-friendly relationship with Vanessa Ives (Eva Green), the female protagonist of the series, herself a 'deviant' outsider figure with a dark past. Endowed with supernatural powers and devil-possessed, she eventually becomes the bride of Dracula (Christian Camargo) and 'Queen of Hell'. Supposedly doomed to cause a world pestilence and the annihilation of mankind, Ives recognises her affinity with Clare. Both are torn between a monstrous self and a deep but fragile humanity. Both are driven to show solidarity with the

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dejected, the tainted lower classes, found, appropriately enough, in the depths of what Clare, in 'Fresh Hell', calls the "steel-hearted city" (Hawes and Logan 2017: 00:14:36). And both finally become subversive viropolitical counteragents refusing to perpetuate predatory social systems of exclusion and exploitation based on Othering.

Situated right under a train station, the crowded vaults of the soup kitchen provide a telling example of the divided, unequal societal demarcations of Victorian London that condemn some inhabitants to radical precarity. The noise within is constant, the ground shakes incessantly, and the walls are covered with posters warning of a cholera epidemic. Hence, the vaults clearly serve as a metaphor for the compromised vulnerable condition of those excluded from 'normalcy' and from the beneficial but also aggressive technology of modern times, symbolised by the railway above (the infrastructure that at the turn of the century was changing the face of London forever). As stated earlier, since Victorians viewed contagious diseases as the result of disregarding discipline – stigmatising poverty as guilt – indigent victims of the frequent urban outbreaks were consigned to the abhorred filthy underbelly of the social system, here manifested in the underground soup kitchen. Fittingly, the railway itself, which so characterised nineteenth-century progress, was also a conduit of contamination, clotting "everything in soot" and adding to the constant "filth and noise" of Victorian London (Matthew 1984: 474), much as does air and noise pollution from road and air traffic today.

This image of the cavernous space reserved for outgroups, the dark underground tunnels where the exiled, poor, and sick are hidden away from view, aligns with the representation of the nineteenth-century urban space as afflicted with disease and governed through surveillance of the individual – a reflection of "the administrative and financial priorities of a state and society which obsesses over what they see as the economically dysfunctional place of contagion" (Chen 2020: 3). In 'Above the Vaulted Sky', sitting in this refuge, surrounded by the virulent losers of the social system, Frankenstein's creature eventually admits his love of art and humanity, telling Vanessa why he has always felt a kinship with the Romantic poet whose name he adopted:

> I've always been moved by John Clare's story. By all accounts he was only five feet tall, so … considered freakish. Perhaps due to this, he felt a singular affinity with … the outcasts and the

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> unloved … the ugly animals … the broken things. (Thomas and Logan, 2015: 00:34:14-00:34:53, original pauses)

Clare's profound awareness not only of his condition, but also of the discursive context in which he is located, itself constitutes an act of *decoding*: at once a pragmatic approach and an act of interpretation. Ironically, it takes a subversive outcast to unravel the collapse of one society – to which he does not belong – and intimate the move towards a possibly even darker one – where he would nonetheless still be considered damaged goods from an imperfect era. (Significantly, unlike Ives, Clare never receives an invitation to join Dracula's apocalyptic empire, built on those 'infected' by vampirism feeding off weaker humans – a kind of parodic literalisation of inhuman merciless capitalism as a project of contamination.) Paradoxically, Frankenstein's 'monster' assumes the burden of being the sole clear-sighted commentator on a sick brutal age that favours a violent and dehumanising viropolitics.

This provides an explanation for the sad arc of the creature's progress through life. Having recovered his memory, he rejoins his human family only to discover London is being consumed by a plague killing people by the thousands, while his own young son is dying of consumption. He finds his wife Marjorie (Pandora Colin) and son Jack (Casper Allpress) reduced to penury, living in a run-down hovel. An initial spark of happiness is soon extinguished as Jack succumbs to the disease in 'The Blessed Dark', and Marjorie, unable to accept the child's death, insists that her husband has the boy's corpse reanimated as Clare was himself: "Take him to Doctor Frankenstein. Let him perform his miracles. He will bring our son back" (Cabezas and Logan 2016: 00.25.27- 00:25:37).

Her plea, formulated as an ultimatum, elicits a negative response from Clare, who vainly attempts to dissuade her from such a course of action. His wife warns him of the end of any chance of domesticity if he does not comply with her wishes: "Return with him alive, or don't return at all. I could not bear to look at your face if you let him remain like that when you could save him. […] Bring him back as he was or turn from this house forever" (Cabezas and Logan 2016: 00:27:15-00:27:24). Clare warns her that she would be dooming their child to a wretched life, in which he will be seen as a freak, as a creature deprived of humanity:

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> And have all the humanity burned out of him? To become an unholy freak as he who stands before you? [....] You see a monster. A grisly undead thing. That is what I am. That is what Dr. Frankenstein has made of me [....] To make him suffer as I did? Those little bones? That face? To become something so unnatural, so hated. No. (Cabezas and Logan, 2016: 00:26:11-00:26:58)

Clare's heartbroken words fail to convince his spouse, who wants her son 'revived' at any cost, even in permanently Othered form.

In contrast, the creature understands the need to escape the whole pathological cycle of a rampant 'zombification' of humankind, whether through capitalist or vampiric viropolitical dehumanisation. Perceiving this loss of humanity as the actual exterminating contagion of modernity, he makes the most subversive and costly choice at his disposal: the refusal to cooperate. Instead of taking Jack to Frankenstein, Clare chooses to 'bury' his son's tiny body in the Thames, letting him be reclaimed by nature rather than condemning him to a 'life' of isolation as an aberration.

This is undoubtedly both an act of viropolitical insubordination – as Clare refuses to submit to the dominant system of modern science – and of supreme self-sacrifice. Reuniting his son with the watery maternal womb performs a rejection of his very self or, at least, a rejection of the power that made him and of the establishment's boundless faith in the ability to control individual bodies and the body politic. Subversively, Clare refuses to spread the 'contagion' he embodies, as he converts into a harmless sterilised being and ultimately surrenders to an older 'natural' system – one that accepts the body as inherently vulnerable and transient, rejecting the modern fantasy of physical perfection and absolute control. In contrast to the pathological logic of both scientific reanimation and capitalist/vampiric viropolitics, this act embraces imperfection, decay, and mortality as inescapable conditions of existence, refusing the dehumanising ideal of endless preservation, domination, or artificial resurrection.

5. John Marlott: The Nightmare of Bodies as Commodities

The trauma of losing loved ones to contagious disease also lies at the heart of *The Frankenstein Chronicles*, a series pervaded with a sense of guilt since the protagonist becomes the carrier of the infection that causes the death of his

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family. The series follows the war veteran, Bow Street Runner, and detective John Marlott in his investigation of a series of murdered children whose corpses have been used to create a monstrous assemblage of sutured body parts. As Marlott will discover, the crimes stem from the cruel experiments carried out by Lord Daniel Hervey, whose scientific intent – like Frankenstein's – is to resuscitate the dead to vanquish disease eventually. Set in early nineteenth-century London, *The Frankenstein Chronicles*, like *Penny Dreadful*, is a mash-up of multiple historical figures and literary sources: Marlott comes across Robert Peel, the founder of London's modern police force, Charles Dickens as 'Boz', and William Blake, while Mary Shelley and Ada Byron-Lovelace assume more central roles. Of the two series discussed, Ross and Langford's drama is the most evident case of *Frankenstein* 'appropriation', described by Barbara Braid as "an interesting combination of re-enactments of some fragments of the novel, and metareferences to the author and the text itself" (Braid 2017: 234). The show makes patent the oblique metaphor that Shelley employed to criticise the insensitive rationalist bourgeoisie, fully exposing the ideological conflict between the high/middle and lower classes that provides the narrative backbone of the series. The metareferences, too, are more explicit in that Mary Shelley appears as one of the main characters, and her book plays a crucial role in the plot.

Additionally, the whole narrative is full of historical references, which, although deliberately inaccurate, seem intended to create explicit links between the nineteenth century's political, ideological and social issues and those of the present day. Much attention is given to the Anatomy Act of 1832, which authorised and regulated the use of corpses for medical purposes. While meant to stop the widespread illegal practice of body snatching, it also proved a cause of concern, mainly among the poor, who feared becoming fodder for the dissecting table. The Act did, in fact, recommend that the government confiscate the bodies of the destitute as well as those who died in workhouses or hospitals and could not afford the cost of a funeral. It thus aroused fierce controversy and heated protests from the lower classes, who strongly believed that the 'resurrection of the flesh' required the resurgence of the *whole* body, not a dissected one. The great changes made in the preceding decades in the field of anatomy and medical science more generally paved the way for epochal shifts that predominantly impacted the most unfortunate members of society, effectively penalising the poor. As Ruth Richardson remarks, "[d]issection became recognised in law as a

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punishment", and in the case of criminals receiving death penalties, even as "an aggravation to execution, a fate worse than death" (Richardson 2009: 32, added emphasis). Ideological and religious beliefs thus went hand in hand, consolidating the idea that in the new modern age, even the afterlife was a matter of status and income, perpetuating grievous inequalities.

This theme proves even more central and explicit in *The Frankenstein Chronicles* than in *Penny Dreadful*. Marlott struggles to defend the rights of the underprivileged, decrying the abuses of the cadaver trade before and after the Anatomy Act and denouncing the intolerable living conditions in the slums of London: a pitiless city characterised by heinous crimes and a lack of sanitation. In fact, one of the central conflicts depicted in the series involves class and capitalist exploitation, as the driving force of modernity is reflected in the amoral objectification of the body, since "the bodies of the poor *are* commodities, in life (through physical work) as in death (as cadaver)" (Braid 2017: 239). Marlott thus exposes the dubious viropolitics that exacerbate precarity for some citizens in order to benefit those in power.

However, social and ideological divisions run deeper than the mere divide between rich and poor: monstrosity is rooted in the aristocrat's desire to maintain dominance over science and religion, refusing to yield to the new bourgeois secular world that resists Lord Hervey's patronising approach to medicine as a viropolitical means of exercising social control. Significantly, the end of the series exposes Hervey as the murderer and dissector of children in the ruthless pursuit of his ambitions. In 'Seeing Things', in her initial conversation with Marlott, however, Lady Hervey defends her brother's practice as a philanthropic physician and argues *against* assigning the unclaimed bodies of the poor to the anatomy schools:

> A punishment formerly reserved for murder. Denying them their last hope of redemption on Judgement Day. No holy burial, no body intact. No resurrection. See, if we deny Christ to the poor, Mister Marlott, don't we also deny him to ourselves? And that's what is at stake here. Not merely the future of medicine. But the prospect of a world without God. (Ross and Langford 2015a: 00.20.05-00:20:33)

In this scenario, the infectiveness of the protagonist and the subplots concerning epidemics in the indigent areas of the city have multiple functions:

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contagion means the stigma of social exclusion and, at least in the case of Marlott, a trigger for existential turmoil. The physical deprivation of the needy and the derelict districts of London, ravaged by epidemics, exploited by the ruling classes and sold off by cynical politicians, reflects the material and metaphorical topography of the cruel nineteenth-century governance of the marginalised that Marlott despises and defies. Taking sides with the neglected matches his status as an isolated misfit; deprived of his family but still longing for his lost wife and child, he is barely tolerated by the institution he serves because of his unconventional approach to the investigation and his direct manner and unprepossessing appearance.

Marlott is no flawless hero, however: stemming from the idea that contagion equates to transgression of moral standards, his sense of guilt is represented by his syphilis. The quintessential shameful disease, sexually transmitted, became the cause of the destruction of his family, after his baby daughter contracted syphilis from her infected mother and died, and his spouse then succumbed to despair and took her own life. Trudging around London, mainly in the poorest districts, the traumatised Marlott also falls prey to the hallucinatory effects of the mercury he takes for his illness. In one of his semi-conscious moments (the viewer cannot tell for certain whether a supernatural vision or a simple dream), Marlott sees not his reflection but a monster in the mirror, a monster hidden within this man who administers justice and seeks out perversion. Marlott proceeds to identify this figure with the daemonic beast that the visionary William Blake in the series implicates as the perpetrator of the uncanny killings: "The beast with the face of a man" (Ross and Langford 2015a: 00:05:44-00:05:51).

Undeniably representing the conflictual society of his time, Marlott's inherent duality is doubly tainted. While he sides with the virulent squalid population of the slums, by virtue of his occupation and role, he is also an integral part of the capitalist bourgeoisie and at the service of arrogant aristocrats, precisely those who promote the idea that immoral and undisciplined activities are intrinsically connected to contagious disease. In this respect, Marlott *is* the monster from the very beginning of the story. Well before becoming Hervey's Frankensteinian 'creature', Marlott represents the whole viropolitical establishment he contests.

Marlott is initially recruited by Robert Peel, the Home Secretary and thus part of a government soon revealed to be even more rotten and diseased than the marginalised who are damned to crowd together in the city's filthy

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slums. The protagonist's idiosyncratic methods and growing suspicion of the upper classes, combined with his growing solidarity with social outcasts, quickly puts him in an awkward position. Marlott soon realises that he is just another pawn on Peel's political chessboard, repeatedly promoted or destroyed depending on the Home Secretary's whims and needs. With the series opening in 1832, Marlott's fluctuating fortunes coincide with the imminent passing of the Anatomy Act and its ideological implications regarding the commodification of the body.

Having solved the mystery and identified Lord Hervey, the scientist opposed to the Anatomy Act, as the perpetrator of the crimes, Marlott receives no recognition. On the contrary – already ruined by his superiors in the Police Department – he is falsely indicted for murder and condemned to death, with his 'criminal' body made available for dissection. In the plot twist of the first season finale, 'Lost and Found', Lord Hervey emulates Shelley's fictional Frankenstein and revives Marlott before his planned dismemberment, replicating the famous birth scene in the source text but also drawing on iconic film adaptations, with Hervey performing the 'miracle' and exclaiming, "He lives!" (Ross and Langford, 2015b: 00:35:48) – even if no such utterance by Frankenstein, of course, appears in Shelley's novel. At this point, the troublesome, unaccommodating detective becomes, in all respects, a monster to fear. While his new interstitial status as neither living nor dead has rid him of syphilis, he is relegated to little more than rubbish to be disposed of at will by the representative of the very system he had dared to defy by revealing its inherent corruption.

Nonetheless, Marlott does not surrender to the constrictions of health control, nor does he go along with the exploitation of the lower classes. He strives to disrupt the system from within, while continuing to investigate the complex links between the mechanisms of health control in the city. Marlott gives up his name, thus registering his lost identity and, akin to John Clare in *Penny Dreadful*, assumes a new name, Jack Martins. With the ambiguous outcast Spence, an ex-priest, works as a casual undertaker, burying the victims of the epidemic that is devastating London. The two men soon discover a plan centred on Devil's Acre, a notoriously overcrowded slum district of foul alleys like Pye Street lined with ramshackle buildings.

In line with the series' viropolitics, the epidemic goes hand in hand with building speculation in the area. The clergy might preach of God raging against the wretches who live there, but the poor's only guilt lies in occupying

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properties that could become profitable with slum clearance and gentrification. In 'Seeing the Dead', a desperate sick mother, who has buried almost all her children, half realises she is nothing but a puppet in the hands of an obscure superior will:

> MARLOTT: Do you know how your children came by the sickness?
> WOMAN: They say it's the air that's killing us. They gave us a choice. Freeze to death without a roof over our heads or hold our breath. Whatever the cause, no one is coming to save us. It is God's will. (Gabassi, Farragher and Tomalin 2017a: 00:08:28-00:08:45).

However, this higher power is not God's will by any means, proving it is all too earthly and lacking all benevolence.

The revelation of the deceit and deceivers falls to Marlott, the no-longer-human Frankensteinian creature, in league with a disgraced church minister:

> SPENCE: The church blames the devil, the Pye Street deal goes through, and the Dean's pockets burst with gold.
> MARLOTT/MARTINS: Pye Street? Who would buy it?
> SPENCE: Fetch me another nail for my coffin, and I shall think on it. Small beer, please. The plague is clearing the place. You forgot my drink.
> MARLOTT/MARTINS: You said the Dean wanted to sell Pye Street, but you don't know who to? This land is worth a hundred times that value. If they cleared the slums, that is. The plague is doing that for them.
> SPENCE: Read the bible, Martins. Only God can send down a pestilence to punish us sinners.
> MARLOTT/MARTINS: Not only God's work. A man of science who believes he has God's power.
> (Gabassi, Farragher, and Tomalin 2017a: 00:14:58-00:15:41)

Marlott's pursuit of justice develops a viropolitical dimension as he and Spence act to expose the truth behind the epidemic and its role in getting

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rid of the poor. In fact, their investigation reveals that the outbreak was not an unfortunate natural disaster but a calculated means of clearing out the slums to make space for profitable investments. Thus, the plague was weaponised as an economic and political tool to reinforce social hierarchies, sacrificing the most vulnerable for the benefit of the ruling class. In *The Frankenstein Chronicles*, justice is not administered through official channels since the government is complicit in these horrors. In this sense, Marlott's revenge proves both subversive and extrajudicial. Though once part of the establishment, his resurrection as an undead being places him outside its structures, permanently. Spence, the fallen priest, also acts from the margins. He uses his knowledge of religious hypocrisy and institutional corruption to turn the tools of deception back on their users, leaking evidence and leading the oppressed to recognise their own subjugation.

At the same time, Marlott's personal struggles parallel his political rebellion. An emotional counterpart to his ideological battle, his relationship with Esther in many ways reflects the same conflict between life and death, while also highlighting the unsettling liminality of artificial resurrection – one that defies natural and religious conceptions of rebirth. Like Frankenstein's creature in Shelley's novel, Marlott seeks connection, but his transformation into something neither fully human nor entirely dead renders this impossible. Esther eventually becomes yet another lost love, reinforcing his monstrous solitude.

It is no coincidence that the series' final episode, 'Bride of Frankenstein', is an explicit metafictional reference to Shelley's text and its later adaptations. This title functions as a closing reconsideration of Marlott's journey – seen not merely as a detective's quest for truth but as a tragic narrative of unnatural creation, societal rejection, and the inescapable consequences of scientists and politicians 'playing God'. Ultimately, his struggle is not simply against the influential figures controlling the city but against the viropolitical logic that seeks to define which lives are valuable, which bodies are disposable, and who is permitted to exist within the structures of modernity.

As a neo-Victorian monster, Marlott departs from the archetypical solitary figure who avoids mankind and (romantically) finds refuge in nature (see Dodworth 2018: 105). Likewise, even the nostalgic John Clare does not eschew the city; instead, he is portrayed

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as a sophisticated thinker who dwells only in an urban landscape. As for Marlott, any references to nature are limited to his persisting delusional reveries, most probably the result of damage caused by syphilis prior to his death. He often imagines a redemptive future and a happy reunion with his family in a bucolic peaceful scene, but just as often has nightmarish visions where he wanders along a desolate beach beside an enraged sea. This last situation, mirroring his unresolvable purgatorial state, recurs at the end of the final episode of the second season, leaving the ending open: Marlott stands on the seashore, looking out at the horizon, but whether it is real or hallucinatory, the audience cannot tell.

Marlott's condition as a viropolitical counteragent deprives him of a secure, definitive place. He remains trapped between worlds, neither fully reintegrated into society nor able to dismantle the overarching body politic he resists. The battle he has fought may have exposed systemic corruption; yet, fundamentally, it does not alter the status quo, refiguring Marlott's very existence into a symptom of the oppressive structures he opposes.

6. Conclusion: Infective Monsters of (Post)Modernity

The Neo-Victorian penchant for taking "an activist stance against their source text" (Dodworth 2018: 105) is explicit in the portrayal of the central characters in these two series. Adopting the Frankenstein template, both series provide new narratives that echo but also purposely alter the literary original with a postmodern inflexion directed at refashioning an entire period as a means to speak about our own (see Sanders 2016: 154).

Beneath the apparently predictable tropes of Gothic fiction, challenging subtexts highlight a call for anti-institutional and unconventional practices focused on the body subjected to viropolitics. Both *Penny Dreadful* and *The Frankenstein Chronicles* subvert the dehumanising drive of modernity, involving the objectification of individual existence and exploitation of the disadvantaged through the malicious control of science and technology. The 'creatures' examined here display (politically) radical and deviant traits: they undermine established structures of institutionalised power that have hitherto condemned them to an existence of perennial suffering and exclusion, refusing to know and keep their place. Thus, their condition, in many ways, parallels that of infective carriers and societal

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disruptors associated with contagion, whether metaphorically and/or through actual infectious diseases that they suffer from, spread, and combat in contexts of urban dereliction. Aptly exemplifying the idea of contagion as "a social network which subversively connects us all" (Wald 2020: 12), Clare and Marlott carve out a space for self-definition and expression against the marginalising forces of dominant structures, ironically through the very viropolitics meant to contain them.

In this sense, both protagonists function as 'viral monsters' at the service of a neo-Victorian bid to re-write the canon of literary history and its viropolitical narratives. Clare and Marlott enter and contaminate the canon with infective acts of counter-cultural resistance in an ongoing dialogic exchange between past and present.

Notes

1. Megan de Bruin-Molé and Sara Polak note that Ward's delineation of "the history of the 'outbreak narrative'" underlines "the ways in which the politics of fictions and the fictions of politics have always been intertwined" (de Bruin-Molé and Polak 2021: 1). Particularly prevalent in times of rapid social transformation, this narrative typology "has contributed to a larger contemporary obsession with metaphors and modalities of contagion" (de Bruin-Molé and Polak 2021: 2).
2. Apart from the already cited literary examples of Dickens' *Bleak House* (1852) and Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), as well as her *North and South* (1854), non-literary examples include the following: John Snow's *Cholera map* (1854), a landmark in epidemiology that strongly influenced public health discourse and urban sanitation reforms; Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851-62), a journalistic reportage that vividly illustrated the connection between poverty, overcrowding, and contagion; and *The Punch Magazine Cartoons* (mid-to-late nineteenth century) that satirised public health policies, particularly in response to the 1858 Great Stink and later cholera outbreaks.
3. On human response to (contagion) risks and Othering, Hélène Joffe writes: "People respond 'not me', 'not my group', 'others are to blame' when initially faced with risks [...]. People tend to attain a sense of personal invulnerability to risk by externalising the threat" (Joffe 1999: 1).
4. Elsewhere, in *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (1963), Michel Foucault explains this implicit gothicisation of sickness and

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disease as follows: "Nineteenth-century medicine [...] was regulated more in accordance with normality than with health; it formed its concepts and prescribed its interventions in relation to a standard of functioning and organic structure, and physiological knowledge" (Foucault 2003: 35). The progressive moral (rather than just physiological) pathologisation of the diseased body, along with "the prestige of the sciences of life in the nineteenth-century" relied on the arrangement of "these concepts […] in a space whose profound structure responded to the healthy/morbid opposition" (Foucault 2003: 35).

5. Clare, of course, is not the only reiteration of Frankenstein's creature in *Penny Dreadful*. Lily is a female creature created by Victor Frankenstein from the corpse of the prostitute Brona Croft. Shy and insecure at first, she quickly develops resentment and a vengeful attitude towards men as she gradually becomes aware of the brutality she endured in her previous existence as a woman in a position of submission. She eventually becomes a quasi-terrorist, leading an army of marginalised women, spreading subversive ideas and wielding brutal force rather than disease: "[Lily] and her monstrous party of women are a rampant pack, intent at destabilizing, subverting and infecting society with the same violence they endured" (Serra 2022: 157).
6. Here I adopt Julie Sanders' distinction between 'regular' adaptation and appropriation; in the latter case, "the intertextual relationship may be less explicit, more embedded, but what is often inescapable is the fact that a political or ethical commitment shapes a writer's, director's or performer's decision to reinterpret a source text" (Sanders 2016:3). Appropriation thus aligns with the dominant progressive agenda of neo-Victorianism.
7. With reference to the monstrous characters in *Penny Dreadful*, Tobias Locke stresses that they are situated "amidst one of the Gothic principal discursive archetypes, the abhuman, through which the Gothic media demarcates or interrogates the ideological division between the human and the monstrous" (Locke 2017: n.p.), especially in Victorian writing. He further specifies that Victorian depictions of the abhuman/monstrous body were based on the juxtaposition of a conventional "stable" identity (i.e., male, white, middle-class) "against an abhuman other, in a process that foreshadowed Kristeva's theories of abjection" (Locke 2017: n.p.).
8. According to Amanda Howell and Lucy Baker, "[d]espite being himself a creature of modernity, of industrial manufacture, Clare [...] turns inward and back in time to the ethical and aesthetic frameworks of Romantic poetry to find meaning in a world he experiences as utterly hostile, a source of continual anxiety and pain" (Howell and Baker 2017: n.p.). In similar vein, neo-Victorian

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audiences also engage with the past, though sometimes with different motivations. Clare's return to Romanticism represents a desperate search for meaning and solace in an increasingly alienating modern world, whereas contemporary audiences often turn to the Victorian era not for mere comfort but with a comparative attitude. This allows them to project anxieties about their own time onto a displaced historical setting. While Clare seeks refuge in the Romantic ethical and aesthetic ideals, neo-Victorian authors tend to reassure audiences that modern crises are not unprecedented, and that history offers a lens through which the present can be observed and critiqued.

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