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## *Penny Dreadful* (2014–2016). Postmodern mythology and ontology of otherness

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### Abstract

The television series *Penny Dreadful* (2014–2016) is an appropriation, intertextuality and transfiction exercise of four modern myths from nineteenth-century literature –*Frankenstein* (Mary Shelley, 1818), *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (Robert Louis Stevenson, 1886), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Oscar Wilde, 1891) and *Dracula* (Bram Stoker, 1897)– to which the mythological figure of the lycanthrope is added. This myth syncretism is completed by linking these characters, located in the Victorian London of the late 19th century, with different mythologies: biblical, Egyptian, American West, Native American or witch mythology. The article aims to analyse, focusing on the final season of the series, how the narrative complexity of contemporary seriality and the different materialisations of postmodern image –multiplex-image, distance-image and excess-image– become perfect tools to both narrate the identity search of the different characters and subvert and resemantise these modern myths. Their identity searches emerge from an ontology of otherness that defines postmodernity –from *otherness of*

*conscience to otherness of other people*–, using the mythical figure of the monster. It allows then the subversion and resemantisation of each mythical character, generating a kind of *postmodern mythology* that reflects on our contemporaneity: feminist emancipation and violent revolution, patriarchy and machismo, family institution, social marginalisation, individualism and lack of commitment, classism and racism.

### Keywords

**Contemporary seriality, postmodern image, myth syncretism, identity, otherness.**

## 1. Introduction

The television series *Penny Dreadful* (Showtime/Sky Atlantic, 2014–2016) is an appropriation (Sanders, 2006), intertextuality (Brooker, 2017) and transfiction (Pearson, 2018) exercise of four essential modern myths of nineteenth-century literature: *Frankenstein* (1818) by Mary Shelley, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) by Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) by Oscar Wilde and *Dracula* (1897) by Bram Stoker, to which the mythological figure of the lycanthrope is added. The myth syncretism is completed by linking these characters, located in the Victorian London of the late 19th century, with different mythologies: biblical, Egyptian, American West, Native American or witch mythology. This article aims to analyse how contemporary seriality and postmodern image become perfect

tools to materialise this myth syncretism and thus generate a kind of *postmodern mythology* based on subversion, which reflects on our contemporaneity: “So the Victorian era proves in the end ripe for appropriation because it throws into sharp relief many of the overriding concerns of the postmodern era: questions of identity” (Sanders, 2006, p. 129). The identity search of the characters is then produced through an ontology of otherness that defines postmodernity. I will focus my study on its third and final season, since it crystallises, as I will analyse below, the contemporary interpretation of this television creation.

## 2. Contemporary seriality

The creator of the series, John Logan, decided, during the filming of the second season, that it would conclude with the third. Therefore, the final season was conceived as such. This decision was not announced, and the spectators did not know that it was the outcome of the series until the last episode concluded with the intertitle *The end*. This fact, an unusual practice in contemporary seriality, in which the renewal or cancellation for a new season of any series is announced as soon as the decision is taken, perfectly defines the emotional bond established with the spectator, which is one of the defining features of seriality (García, 2016):

[T]elevision series are better equipped to allow spectators to develop a bond with fictional characters than feature films. This is because television series more effectively invoke the impression that we share a history with their characters: first, because of the series’ longer screen duration and, second, because our own lives progress as the series goes on (Blanchet & Vaage, 2012, p. 28).

The narrative complexity of contemporary seriality (Nelson, 2007; Mittell, 2015) materialises thanks to the potential of its format, transforming the rigidity of its episode and season structure into endless creative possibilities:

[T]he narrative structure of a series always needs to be understood as a malleable and dynamic concept. The episodic segmentation, audience feedback, and intermittent periodisation (if not between episodes, at least between seasons) make any structural postulate, in the strict sense, pale in comparison with the formal dynamism of the series (Garín, 2017, p. 31–32).

This complexity is also possible thanks to another characteristic of contemporary seriality: it moves away from series –anthology plot– in favour of serial –running plot– (Creeber, 2005, p. 8–12). The extension and structure of the story –27 episodes, 3 seasons– and its viewing temporality –2 years–: “[A] series is a cumulative narrative that builds over time” (Mittell, 2015, p. 18), are the elements that make this exceptional and dense myth syncretism possible. And, I must add that, in this case, the spectator builds it as co-creator of the work, since the interpretation of the different appropriations and intertexts will be different for each individual in relation to their knowledge of them. Therefore, “complex seeing” (Nelson, 2007, p. 169) joins narrative complexity.

Throughout the three seasons, the mythical characters gain density and complexity thanks to the deep relationships they establish among them and the gradual revelation of their past life experiences. The mythical syncretism then materialises in a new and coherent universe that offers valuable philosophical and existential reflections, exemplifying what Mittel calls “centripetal complexity:”

[T]he narrative movement pulls the actions and characters inward toward a more cohesive centre, establishing a thickness of backstory and character depth that drives the action. The effect is to create a storyworld with unmatched depth of characterisation, layers of backstory and psychological complexity building on viewers’ experiences and memories over the program’s numerous seasons (p. 222–223).

The series brings the mythical characters together, each of them providing the essential idiosyncrasy of his/her corresponding myth, around a new invented one, Vanessa Yves. She

turns into the Mother of Evil and the epicenter of the syncretism that builds and complexifies throughout the 3 seasons, its 27 episodes and the two years of the spectator's viewing experience. Ethan's condition as a lycanthrope is linked to his traumatic life experience and its tragic consequences. Caliban, Frankenstein's monster, transforms into John to abandon his monstrous existence and go in search of his past identity. A second monster, now a feminine invented character, Lily, not only transforms the myth, but gives her creator, Victor, a new and profound development. The immutability of Dorian Gray acquires different meanings regarding the characters to whom he relates. And all this, as I say, thanks to the relationships that the series establishes among them, which constantly evolve: love, sexuality, friendship, family; with all their virtues and perversions.

This narrative complexity also materialises in a procedure of repetition-variation throughout the different seasons that becomes a powerful tool not only of myth syncretism but also of its subversion, as I will analyse below: "Serial articulation depends on the practice of reiteration, in which repeating and reframing helps define which linkages are maintained and discarded over the course of a series, highlighting how the political interpretations of any series are always subject to revision and recontextualization" (Mittell, 2015, p. 346). The flashback episodes of the first two seasons (1.5 and 2.3) find their full meaning in the fourth episode of the last season, in which past experience is transformed into hypnotic regression. The encounters of Vanessa and John in the second season (2.2 and 2.5) and their farewell (2.10), take on a new meaning after the memory of that forgotten first encounter and farewell (3.4). The variations, as a subdued woman, between the vital journey of Brona (first season) and her second existence as Lily next to Victor (second season), make sense of her insurrection in the final season. The responsibility of Ethan saving Vanessa's life in the first two seasons (1.7 and 2.10) gives the outcome of the series a deep, and controversial, reflection. Thus, *Penny Dreadful* uses all the possibilities of contemporary seriality to generate a fruitful myth syncretism and its contemporary interpretation.

### 3. Postmodern image

Along with contemporary seriality and its narrative complexity, the second element that favours this myth syncretism is the postmodern image. The aesthetic influence of contemporary cinema on the series (García & Ortiz, 2018) generates a "cinematic television" (Nelson, 2007, p. 10) that assumes the specificities of the postmodern image. Jameson's analysis of pastiche (1991) becomes here the perfect tool to carry out this appropriation-hybridization of myths, which allows to configure a postmodern mythology that appeals to our contemporaneity. *Penny Dreadful* becomes an "exemplary piece of pastiche" (Fuchs, 2017, p. 153), a clear exponent of the postmodern aestheticism of hypermodernity: the multiplex-image, the distance-image and the excess-image defined by Lipovetsky and Serroy (2007)<sup>1</sup>. Firstly, the multiplex-image generates hybridization, plurality and formal complexity: "Structure, narration, genre, characters: it is time of desimplification, deroutinization, diversification [...] the mixtures of tones, the jamming of lines, the ambiguities of meaning..." (p. 72-73). Its authors "defend diverse affiliations [...] thus building a cultural syncretism actually very individualised" (p. 104). Cultural syncretism so described becomes myth syncretism in the series. Secondly, the distance-image of reflective self-referentiality, which we already found in modern cinema, it now changes its characterization: "[T]he phenomenon changes its nature: it is banalised, diversified, becomes the language of a cinema in which reference, rereading, second degree, parody, homage, quotation, reinterpretation, recycling, humour are part of the common practice [...] an art that creates its own culture and feeds on it" (p. 73-74). We can apply this same concept, again, to myth syncretism: an art that creates its own mythology and feeds on it. This postmodern mythology manipulates myths in order

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<sup>1</sup> Translation by the author.

to generate contemporary reflection. In this way, the series is not only fuelled by the literary works it appropriates, but by all the previous cinema productions on those works (from classical adaptation to postmodern appropriation), many of them becoming milestones in cinema history. Finally, we also find the excess-image of hyperbolization, which pursues saturation, in relation to two topics, violence and sex: “[A]n aesthetics of the excess [...] a kind of exponential and vertiginous proliferation [...] that of never enough and never too much” (p. 72). Multiplexity-image and distance-image manage to combine all these dynamics around intertext, appropriation and the “de(re)composing model” (Elliott, 2003, p. 157; Poore, 2016, p. 72) in order to surpass them: “*Penny Dreadful* [...] should not be read merely as adaptations and appropriations, but as remediations of the various intertexts used in the construction of their characters” (Manea, 2016, p. 48). It is therefore possible to materialise the “irradiation power” (Brunel, 1992, p. 82)<sup>2</sup> of the mythical element and to show the questioning of contemporary identity through an “ontology of otherness” (Ricœur, 1992, p. 322) defined by ambivalence and uncertainty.

#### 4. Ontology of otherness

The principle of otherness in relation to contemporary culture was widely studied in the eighties by different authors. Zygmunt Bauman analyses it through the concept of *strangeness*, understanding it as “the existential and mental ambivalence” (1991, p. 95) universalised in Postmodernity: “Uncanny, foreignness is within us: we are our own foreigners, we are divided” (Kristeva, 1991, p. 181). The identity search of the characters is defined by the conflict with their own otherness in its two aspects: “the one of *estrangement* (in front of the environment) and the one of *strangeness* (in front of oneself)” (Imbert, 2010, p. 255)<sup>3</sup>. This reflection on otherness uses the mythical figure of the monster: “The monster can transmute into the good and vice versa, exposing the fragility of such borders, and the interpenetration between the two” (Jobling, 2010, p. 169). In this way, the characters face an otherness that presents different variants. Vanessa’s “otherness of conscience” (Ricœur, 1992, p. 352) in front of her evil otherness and Ethan’s in front of his monstrous otherness, that of the lycanthrope, in which otherness implies the transformation into a strange other. Victor’s “otherness of other people” (Ricœur 1992, p. 329) in front of his creations. And, between both of them, Lily’s and John’s otherness in front of their respective past existences. Finally, Dorian faces the lack of otherness due to his immortality. Therefore, the “presentation of consciousness,” that shows “the characters’ mental processes” (Allrath, Gymnich & Surkamp, 2005, p. 19, 21) is essential in the narrative. Regarding this, the spectator finds, in the final season, the mental spaces of some characters: the oneiric communications between Kaetenay and Ethan; John’s past existence memories; and Vanessa’s hypnosis sessions. They reach their highest signification through the materialisation in postmodern images.

After the density of the mythical syncretism of the first two seasons and the depth of the vital experience of its characters, shared by the spectator, the third and last one crystallises the contemporary reading of the whole series, as I will explain below: “[T]he television serial may actually better reflect, engage with and respond to the subtle nuances, political preoccupations and social realities of the contemporary age” (Creeber, 2005, p. 15). The different characters make a sort of antihero’s journey defined by the subversion of their corresponding myths and the final confrontation with their otherness. The second season concludes with an epistolary sentence from Ethan to Vanessa: “So we walk alone” (2.10), that reveals how the characters confront “permanent otherness, their absolute solitude, an irremediable uncertainty” (Imbert, 2010, p. 728).

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<sup>2</sup> Translation by the author.

<sup>3</sup> Translation by the author.

## 5. Subversion of myths

The final season dates its beginning on October 6, 1892, the day of Alfred Tennyson's death, one year after the beginning of the narration. Vanessa, depressed and isolated, decides to face her evil otherness through psychological therapy with Dr Seward. Thus, mythical space becomes psychic space, pointing out the contemporary reading of the character. Performed by the same actress, Joan Clayton, the witch of the previous season, becomes the therapist Seward. The latter, a female version of the literary character of *Dracula*, confirms to be a descendant of the former, thereby prolonging the theme of sorority already addressed in the second season. While Joan defended Vanessa from the witches resulting in being burnt at the stake, Seward will accompany her on a psychic journey in search of mental health. In this sense, it is necessary to point out the different strategies used to introduce female characters in this myth syncretism: creation of new characters (Vanessa and Catriona); prolongation of male characters (Lily); and female versions of male characters (Dr Seward). Therefore, the series confirms the invisibilisation of women in these modern myths, always relegated to passive characters and almost always as love partners of the male main character: Elisabeth in *Frankenstein*, Lucy and Mina in *Dracula*, Sybil in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Vanessa is willing to start a new life, but Dracula decides to execute his final attack, incarnating Alexander Sweet, head of the Natural History Museum of London. They meet there and Vanessa is immediately attracted to the zoologist, with whom she begins a relationship. In one of their encounters, at a fair, a vampire approaches Vanessa in the attraction of the mirrors and reveals to her that she will soon be reunited with her master. Vanessa manages to elicit where they met before: "In the white room where there was no time" (3.3). She deduces that this is her room during her stay at the Banning Clinic where she underwent a lobotomy (narrated in episode 1.5). Vanessa then asks Seward to hypnotise her so she can remember that encounter.

The fourth episode will be completely dedicated to this hypnosis session, creating a postmodern narrative exercise that "allows radical ruptures regarding the regular aesthetic development of a series [...] They tend to be episodes with the aroma of becoming references, with the will of not looking like any other." In this "device of exceptionality" (Balló & Pérez, 2005, p. 119)<sup>4</sup> the myth syncretism proposed by the series crystallises in a contemporary reading about Vanessa's character, that of a female identity as a result of her emancipation: "The women of *Penny Dreadful* are both literally and figuratively claiming power over their male counterparts [...] asking audiences to consider a third space for female characters, one that encompasses the binary and pushes against its boundaries" (Rose-Holt, 2015).

The myth of Frankenstein, which has been prolonged with the creation of a female creature, now extends its beginning to let us know the monster's previous life. John was an employee of the Banning Clinic and was responsible for looking after Vanessa during her stay. In this way, the three previous encounters between John and Vanessa (episodes 2.2, 2.5 and 2.10) will take on a new significance. The spectator will reinterpret them, confirming how contemporary seriality utilises the repetition-variation strategy as a powerful narration tool. The account of the hypnosis session, and thereby that of the memory of what happened at the Banning Clinic, materialises through Vanessa's mental space, where both experiences are connected. Thus, the narrative is generated through the distance-image and the multiplex-image, confirming the evolution of these mental spaces in contemporary seriality.

During the emotive relationship between them, John reads *A child's garden of verses* (1885) by Robert Louis Stevenson to Vanessa. The book had been given to him on the occasion of his son's birth. Therefore, his taste and sensitivity for poetry, which has been shown in the three encounters with Vanessa during the second season, would have been born from this experience. This sensitivity became his only emotional tool against the marginalization that

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<sup>4</sup> Translation by the author.

he suffers due to his monstrosity. That is, the spectator discovers the crucial importance of this first encounter in John's second existence. After creating this deep bond between them, John is possessed by Lucifer to tempt Vanessa. Then, the apparition is duplicated to show the two brothers already described in the *verbis diablo* of the second season, generating a postmodern multiplex-image of the mythical image previously emulated (Image 1):

So, we were cleaved apart, two brothers cast out to two realms. One brother to Earth and the other to Hell. And thus, were we set in eternal enmity. My brother on Earth, to feed on the blood of the living by night. And myself in Hell to feed on the souls of the dead. Both in an eternal quest for the Mother of Evil, who will release us from our bondage and allow one of us to reconquer Heaven and topple God from his bloody throne. And so, will the Darkness reign, on Earth, in Heaven, everlasting. And so comes the Apocalypse (2.8).

### Image 1



After defeating both Lucifer and Dracula, the hypnosis session can conclude. But Vanessa wishes to remember one more thing from that past experience: John's farewell, which occurred the same morning she was subjected to a lobotomy. Vanessa's image is so identified with the mythical figure of Jeanne d'Arc, previously recalled by her with great admiration. The multiplex-image and the distance-image transform it into a feminist heroine who refuses to renounce any aspect of her emancipation: from men, love experience, social impositions and, of course, religion. That is, the religious and patriotic myth is subverted, turning into a feminist secular myth. Then, a second farewell occurs (in fact, previous to the first one, in episode 2.10), in which roles have been exchanged. While John was the marginalised character, the monster, who decides to leave social space in the first one, it is Vanessa the marginal, sick, monstrous character, which must be normalized by means of a lobotomy in this one (Image 2).

## Image 2



After the hypnosis session, Vanessa is ready, once again, to fight against the evil that stalks her. On this occasion, with the help of the thanatologist Catriona Hartdegen. She is an anachronistic character that is configured as an incarnation of the contemporary woman, thereby reinforcing the actual interpretation of the narrative. This completely emancipated woman, already freed from the circumstances that have conditioned Vanessa's and Lily's lives, culminates the sorority experience recounted in the second and third seasons. Thanks to Catriona, Vanessa finally discovers Dracula's identity and goes to meet him with the intention of killing him. However, during their conversation, she finds her identity vindication and consents to the transformation. Thus, female characters always refuse male control and victimisation and turn them into self-decision:

- Do you accept me?
- I accept myself (3.7).

For his part, John, who had embarked to the north, has, at last, a memory of his previous life, of his otherness: the images of his wife and son. He decides then to return to London in their search. We observe how these flashes of memory materialise in images of different characteristics, which make them immediately recognizable and take the spectator back to a costumbrist aesthetics, to the family stories that cinema history has narrated through it. That is to say, the distance-image can evoke a whole previous classical narrative and visual tradition, which gives meaning to John's past. These memory-images allow him to find his wife Marjorie and his son Jack, the latter seriously ill. He observes them without being seen until one night he decides to approach Jack's bed, who screams in horror at his image. John goes to Vanessa for consolation and advice. The spectator witnesses the fifth encounter between them, in which they talk, once again, about loneliness: the woman's loneliness in a patriarchal world; the monster's loneliness in a society that marginalises him because of his appearance. Vanessa asks him about his first meeting at the Banning Clinic but he does not remember it. She encourages him to pursue the life he wants: "Then let us dare" (3.7). John dares to appear before Marjorie, who celebrates his return, and together they talk to Jack. In this way, John seems to recover his past existence, moving away from his monstrous and marginalised identity.

Ethan is transferred to the United States by the British authorities. This introduces the mythical space of the American West and also the Native American mythology. After participating in an attack against the Apaches (already mentioned in the previous seasons), Ethan killed his superior in the army and gave himself to the Apache chief Kaetenay to execute

him. He let him live as a crueler punishment and Ethan became a member of the tribe that fought against the American army. On the verge of extermination, the Apache group attacked Ethan's father's ranch in search of weapons and supplies. Without Ethan's knowledge, Kaetenay killed the whole family (mother, sister and brother) after a cruel torture. The Apache chief, who has gone in search of Sir Murray to ask him for help to save Ethan: "Our son needs us" (3.1), communicates with Ethan through his dream in order to announce him his arrival. Again, this mental space of oneiric communication (episode 3.2) materialises by dream-images that are distinguished thanks to their specificities as well as their montage, using the distance-image of the western genre. A quick succession of fragmentary images gives way to the encounter between the two, as if it were a duel, in which Ethan expresses his intention to kill his father first and Kaetenay later. Once again, the series takes a mythical story, this time the biblical parable of the prodigal son, to subvert it.

The journey through the desert ends with the meeting of the two couples (Ethan and the witch, Kaetenay and Sir Murray) at the moment when the father's employees rescue them and take them with him. Ethan then orders that the wounded Kaetenay is left there to die. The son wakes up in a bed next to his father: "I love you my son. I am so happy you are at home." These words, similar to those of the merciful father in the parable, are enunciated, however, by a cruel father who claims that his son asks forgiveness for the violent deaths of his mother and siblings, which Ethan did not witness. He remains in his rejection: "I am done repenting. And I belong in hell" (3.5).

After the bloody dinner in which the witch dies and Kaetenay returns, the final confrontation between father and son takes place. Ethan points a gun at him in the same chapel where his family died. The prodigal son does not return to ask forgiveness and be forgiven, but to murder the father (Image 3). However, he is not able to pull the trigger and Sir Murray does it instead, avoiding Ethan's sin and becoming the father figure that Ethan recognises. It is worth considering if this incapacity to kill the father still responds to the current patriarchal hegemony even in subversive fictions as this one.

### Image 3



Ethan decides to return to London and Kaetenay reproaches him for abandoning his people, to which he replies: "My people are in London now [...] My friends. That is my tribe" (3.7). As he has repeated on several occasions, Ethan's family is not that of his birth nor the adoptive tribe caused by tragedy, but the one freely chosen, the one found in London. Therefore, once again, the myth is subverted to generate a contemporary questioning of family institution and a defence of diversity in new family models in opposition to its traditional conception. It must



be remembered here that Ethan had a romantic relationship with a prostitute (Brona) and a sexual encounter with a man (Dorian) in season one, challenging again traditional conceptions about sexuality and the male stereotypes associated to the lycanthrope myth.

Like Vanessa and Ethan, Victor also wants to face his otherness, his creation, and destroy it. After Lily's rejection, he asks his colleague and friend, Dr Henry Jekyll for help to end her life. Thus, a new modern myth is introduced. The literary character becomes a young mixed-race doctor, bastard son of an English aristocrat and a young Hindu woman that the father abandoned in India to die of leprosy. Henry awaits his death to inherit the noble title and his possessions. As it happens with the rest of the characters, the myth appropriation implies a transformation at a social level, in this case addressing the themes of classism and racism.

Henry convinces Victor to apply his experiment to Lily and so to return her a benevolent nature. Thanks to Victor's knowledge, they modify the serum to convert the temporary transformation achieved by Henry into definitive. Before applying it to a patient, Victor explains to him that he will wake up having forgotten all his past life: "After all, it is our memories which make monsters, is it not?" (3.5). Again, the myth is transformed. The literary Jekyll/Hyde had memory of both personalities and, however, in the series, the transformation implies, once again, the loss of memory, the erasure of identity. Victor insists on his mistake and blames Lily for his own crime: he places her monstrosity in her capacity to remember her past life instead of recognising that the monstrous action was to resurrect her in order to satisfy John's desire first, and his own one later. In this way, the series develops the themes of patriarchal machismo and gender violence through the subversion of the myth of romantic love, which Victor and his cousin Elizabeth experienced in the literary text. After the success of the experiment, Victor resolves to carry out Lily's kidnapping.

Lily, for her part, also confronted to her otherness –her past existence as Brona and the submissive woman Victor tried to turn her into–, decides to create, with Dorian's help, an army of women in order to carry out the violent revolution against men that achieve their domination. Therefore, the subversion of the Hebrew myth of Lilith is developed as a contemporary reflection on the use of violence in the feminist struggle or the expression of the so-called misandry. Her actions are not caused by an innate malignity, as in the myth, but they respond to the macho violence suffered in her past existence:

Adapting *Frankenstein* into a story in which the female Creature is the main focus pinpoints the message on the role of female in patriarchal society, but also on the role trauma plays in identity construction. But it perhaps also speaks of our culture's ambivalent attitude to radical feminism, and the fear that the feminist will turn out to be a man-eater (Braid, 2017, p. 238).

Lily and Dorian perform a kind of ritual with which to initiate her violent revolution. After recruiting the first soldier, Justine, they kidnap her first owner and rapist and give him to her to have him executed. Then, the three of them have sexual intercourse bathed in the victim's blood. This is a perfect example of the excess-image generated by the series around violence and sex, in this case as materialisation of the violent revolution that Lily pursues, in which female domination is associated with sexual liberation. However, her dedication to the cause, having already gathered a large group of women who she trains to murder, results in Dorian's discomfort, since he does not want to renounce his hedonistic existence, "his search to transcend the dullness of eternal existence through extreme excitation" (Green, 2017).

Lily's past existence, that is, Brona's life experience, is revealed in a visit to the cemetery. The spectator discovers in this moment that Brona was the mother of a baby, Sarah, who died when she was only one year old, just before the beginning of the narrative. Thus, the spectator knows the depth of Lily's existential ambivalence, as a subdued and abused woman in her previous life. Her own liberation, from Victor and John, is not enough; she has to face the oppression of all women. Her female army is ready for its first mission. In a passionate speech:

“Rise up! Rise up!” (3.7), she entrusts her women soldiers with a mission: find an unworthy man and cut off his hand. The women follow her orders and Dorian decides to end the uprising and agrees with Victor on her kidnapping. In a conversation with Lily, Dorian synthesises the myth of the dandy: aesthetics versus ethics, hedonism versus commitment. In this way, and in a contemporary key, the series reflects on the individualism and the dissolution of the social bond of our postmodernity. Dorian’s immortality precludes identity ambivalence and turns him into an immutable identity, with no possibility of evolution.

After the conversation, Victor and Dorian kidnap Lily and take her to Henry’s laboratory. Then, a very powerful multiplex-image of this myth syncretism materialises, generating a contemporary reflection. Three male literary characters, Victor Frankenstein, Dorian Gray and Henry Jekyll, are preparing to subdue a woman (Images 4 and 5) that was born from the contemporary appropriation of one of the narrative, vindicating the feminist struggle and evidencing at the same time the absence of female main characters in these stories:

- What are you going to do to me?
- We are going to make you better [...] We’re going to make you into a proper woman (3.7).

**Image 4**



**Image 5**



It is, therefore, a new repetition–variation of the image of the fourth episode, in which Vanessa faced Lucifer and Dracula; another female character that is born from contemporary appropriation and myth syncretism as a feminist vindication must fight for her life, for her freedom, for her rights, against patriarchy and machismo, also in the art creation field.

Victor and Lily speak alone. He insists on his macho discourse of a romantic love that only him has experienced, and she vindicates her identity: “I would rather die who I am than live as your demure little wife.” She tells then the identity experience that she does not want to forget: the death of her daughter, caused by the cold, one winter night Brona could not return home on time because of a client’s cruelty: “Please, do not take her from me.” Victor finally seems to understand his mistake and releases her: “It is too easy being monsters, let us try to be human” (3.8).

Later, Victor argues with Henry. He tells him that he deceives himself by thinking that his discovery will provide him with the desired acceptance in the scientific community and high society. Before leaving, Henry gives him the news: his father has died. The inheritance and the title will be finally his to become Lord Hyde. Once again, the myth is utilised in pursuit of a social interpretation. Malignant otherness is metaphorically assigned to the aristocratic sphere, to the social and political privileges that we presume will corrupt Jekyll when it becomes the new Hyde.

Lily returns to Dorian’s house, where she finds him next to Justine’s corpse. Dorian returned home and expelled her. Justine, who had nowhere to go, chose to die rather than return to her former life. After kissing her, Dorian took her life by breaking her neck.

Then, the final encounter between Lily and him takes place. Dorian accepts solitude as the price to pay for immortality. Lily leaves in search of another existence that opposes such a sad destiny. Therefore, she does not renounce commitment but transforms it by facing her otherness, her past existence. By accepting and integrating it into her current identity, she gives a powerful example of feminist resilience, another feature of the series female characters.

The outcome of the narrative brings together Vanessa’s friends to try to save her and stop the apocalypse. Ethan discovers that Kaetenay is also a lycanthrope and so knows the origin and purpose of his otherness in the words of the Apache chief: “It was to give you the power to save all people [...] I claimed you for God.” Ethan manages to get to Vanessa, as she has arranged. She asks him to fulfil his destiny and put an end to her life. The repetition–variation device is now used in the outcome of the story. In episode 1.7, during Vanessa’s possession, she already asked Ethan to shoot her. In that moment, Ethan accomplished the exorcism using Brona’s medallion. In this moment, death is inevitable. After a kiss and the shot, Vanessa dies in God’s presence: “Oh, Ethan, I see our Lord” (3.9).

Vanessa’s death at Ethan’s hands caused the disappointment of many spectators, who felt that her resignation betrayed the feminist values on which the character was based. However, I believe that this outcome proposes a contemporary reflection on the issue of euthanasia, the right to a dignified death decided by each individual. The same dignity that they pursued in the first season around Mina’s death, the one that is denied to Joan Clayton in the second, or the one that Justine chooses in this final one: “By choosing death, Vanessa is then –if we take Logan’s words at face value– more in control of her own life than by living a ‘normal’ life. She ‘owns’ her death” (Schubart, 2017, p. 31). Ethan shows Vanessa’s corpse to Dracula and her friends while the apocalyptic fog that looms over the city dissipates and the sunlight returns.

John, like Lily, must face his past existence. After Jack’s death, Marjorie asks him to take her son’s corpse to Frankenstein and bring him back to life. John refuses and she gives him a choice: to return with him alive or to never return; to condemn their child to immortality or to definitively renounce his past existence. John decides not to resuscitate Jack and he delivers him to the sea waters, thus reaffirming his present identity. Then, his voice-over emerges,

reciting two passages from William Wordsworth’s poem *Intimations of immortality* (1807). A few verses, about loss, by the first poet Vanessa and John talked about in their first encounter. His voice, accompanied by music, continues until the last image, without any other dialogue.

The series conclusion shows Vanessa’s funeral, to which John attends without being seen. His desolation and sadness are also those of the spectator, who, after two years accompanying Vanessa in her tortuous existential journey, must now say goodbye to her. John has to wait for everyone to leave before approaching the grave. Faced with his loss, the friendship relationship between the two is revealed as the most transcendent one of those narrated in the series. It has succeeded in subverting, throughout the three seasons, the Beauty and the Beast myth. The relationship between the two characters is not forced against Vanessa’s will, its purpose is not the romantic relationship, and its outcome does not need to turn John into a handsome and powerful man. *Penny Dreadful* subverts the myth to transform it into a truly valuable story, poetic and emotional, about friendship and empathy and against prejudices of every kind.

## 6. Conclusions

If I try to synthesise what I have developed in the article in a diagram, I conclude how the different characters of this myth syncretism develop different contemporary themes through the subversion of myths and in pursuit of an identity search focused on an ontology of otherness. Feminist emancipation and violent revolution, patriarchy and machismo, family institution, social marginalisation, individualism and lack of commitment, classism and racism are the themes developed by the appropriation and syncretism of different myths that are subverted and resemantised.

<p><b>Vanessa</b>                      Feminist emancipation                      Sorority:                      Clayton – Seward – Catriona Hartdegen                      Mythical figure of Jean d’ Arc                      Otherness: Mother of Evil</p>	<p><b>Ethan</b>                      Family institution                      Father figure:                      Ethan’s father – Kaetenay – Sir Murray                      Parable of the prodigal son                      Otherness: Lycanthrope</p>
<p><b>Victor</b>                      Patriarchal machismo                      Creator’s despotism:                      Henry Jekyll                      Myth of romantic love                      Otherness: His creations</p>	<p><b>Dorian</b>                      Individualism                      Myth of the dandy                      No otherness: Immortality</p>
<p><b>Caliban/John</b>                      Social marginalisation                      Myth of the beauty and the beast                      Otherness: Past existence</p>	<p><b>Brona/Lily</b>                      Violent feminist revolution                      Hebrew myth of Lilith                      Otherness: Past existence</p>

This powerful narrative development is possible thanks to the defining elements of *Penny Dreadful*. Contemporary seriality allows the density of this subversive myth syncretism through a temporality that multiplies the narrative possibilities and generates a deep emotional experience in the spectator. Postmodern image, by means of the work with the multiplex-image of the hybridization and the distance-image of the audiovisual intertext, generates a postmodern mythology defined by the subversion of the myth that in turn resemantises it, offering a contemporary reflection on our identity search.

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