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# Young Adult Crisis Heterotopias and Feminist Revisions in Colleen Gleason's Stoker and Holmes Series

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**Abstract:** In this article, we investigate neo-Victorian YA fiction's efforts to mirror twenty-first-century feminist ideals in nineteenth-century spaces through examining the role of heterotopia in Colleen Gleason's Stoker and Holmes series (2013–2019). We first consider how the novels' steampunk elements figure in Gleason's feminist framing of neo-Victorian London, particularly in terms of common heterotopias—primarily the garden and the museum—that the protagonists briefly navigate over the course of the series. Second, we explore how the series' three female protagonists each occupy spaces that function as pseudo—"heterotopias of crisis"—that is, while each of them claims space within which to subvert expectations of women, these spaces and the activities they support are themselves fundamentally insular and yield no socio-cultural critique. Finally, we consider how the spaces created and occupied by the books' villain, known as the Ankh, serve as heterotopias. We find that the fact that the only truly heterotopic spaces in the novels belong to the villain, whose transgressive deviance the series frames as a bridge too far, illustrates how disappointingly limited neo-Victorian YA can be in its ability to offer subversive mirrors to twenty-first-century feminism.

**Keywords:** neo-Victorian fiction; young adult fiction; Colleen Gleason; Michel Foucault; crisis heterotopias; steampunk; feminism; historical revisionism



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## 1. Introduction: Foucault's Heterotopias and Gleason's Pseudo-Heterotopias

Set in a version of Victorian London that is inflected with both steampunk and supernatural elements, Colleen Gleason's Stoker and Holmes series (2013–2019) features the alternating first-person narration of its intertextual, metafictional protagonists, Mina Holmes (daughter of Mycroft) and Evaline Stoker (sister of Bram), whose initially strained partnership evolves into true friendship as they navigate personal and professional conflicts alike. Paired by Irene Adler under the authorization of Her Royal Highness, Princess Alexandra of Wales, Mina and Evaline are tasked with solving a number of mysteries, but their primary goal throughout the series is to identify and apprehend the mysterious, androgynous Ankh, eventually revealed to be Lady Isabella Cosgrove-Pitt, who plots to take over England. Notably, Gleason positions both her heroines and her villain within a framework of feminist impulses: Mina and Evaline long for more freedom, but the Ankh takes the desire for power to dangerous extremes. In *The Carnelian Crow* (2017), the fourth novel in the series, Mina finds herself being recruited into the Ankh's scheme. "We could work together to change the way [women are] perceived, treated," Lady Cosgrove-Pitt argues. "We'd have everything we ever wanted—the freedom to act and dress as we choose—trousers every day if we like!—the ability to possess and manage our own money, property, businesses [ . . . ] To marry whomever we wish—or not at all" (Gleason 2017, p. 247). This moment, as well as Mina's rejection of the seemingly appealing offer, capture a larger tension present throughout the series, which locates its characters at the intersection of their nineteenth-century setting and twenty-first-century ideals about gender and power. In the process, the Stoker and Holmes series exemplifies the larger challenges posed and faced by revisionist efforts in neo-Victorian literature for young people.

In this article, we investigate neo-Victorian YA fiction's efforts to mirror twenty-first-century feminist ideals in nineteenth-century spaces through examining the role of heterotopia in Gleason's series. As part of her neo-Victorian feminist project of framing her female characters' actions as historically subversive while normalizing them for contemporary readers, Gleason imagines a version of Victorian London full of exceptional spaces that are meant to signal deviance from nineteenth-century cultural norms. Mina has a home laboratory where she conducts forensic experiments; Evaline has a sparring studio where she trains as a vampire hunter; Irene Adler has a secret office in the British Museum that serves as the protagonists' headquarters; and, throughout the series, the Ankh maintains a variety of locations that she uses to foster countercultures and advance her revolution. Notably, the heroines' spaces are largely private, inaccessible to most people and certainly not used by society at large; in contrast, the Ankh tends to adopt much more public spaces, inviting comparisons between how such spaces were actually used in Victorian London and her own subversion of those conventions. All of these sites provide spaces in which women of unconventional desires and skill sets belong and thus they function as loci of feminist empowerment. In line with the process, these spaces, associated with the books' female protagonists and their nemesis, unsettle the patriarchal neo-Victorian world in which they exist by reflecting anachronistic subjectivities and ostensibly functioning as sites of transgressive female agency. However, after careful analysis, these spaces merely resemble—but frequently fail to fully embody—Michel Foucault's concept of crisis heterotopia.

In his theorization of heterotopias as "counter-sites" in which "all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted," Foucault emphasizes the importance of recognizing the nature of heterotopias' relationship to other spaces or locations within a culture; it is through their connection to these spaces and the ideologies informing them that heterotopias are able "to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect" (Foucault 1984, p. 3). In other words, heterotopias are separate sites that always in some way reflect, with distortions, the culture in which they exist and the spatial ideologies that comprise it. Through these distortions, heterotopias reveal and critique various aspects of the culture that otherwise appear natural, normal, and true: "their role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory" (Foucault 1984, p. 8). The cultural commentary of which the heterotopia is capable springs from its replication of a hegemonic space.

What Foucault terms "crisis heterotopias" are particularly relevant to our analysis here: these are "privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, etc." (Foucault 1984, p. 4). Foucault claims that "these crisis heterotopias are persistently disappearing" from modern society, presumably as it continually grows more permissive and inclusive of a wider variety of human conditions. This phenomenon itself is especially pertinent to the neo-Victorian goals of our texts, in that the Stoker and Holmes novels are framing the pseudo-heterotopias we examine here as subversive in Victorian society and typical for contemporary readers. We focus here on the distinctions between the Ankh's intentional heterotopias and the private, secret spaces in which Mina and Evaline generally operate in order to more fully unpack their specific implications for reimagining the possibilities of young womanhood in Victorian England, as these most actively demonstrate the ways in which Gleason actively blends nineteenth- and twenty-first-century feminine ideals.

While Gleason clearly seeks to interrogate restrictive Victorian gender norms through the portrayal of Mina's laboratory, Evaline's sparring studio, and Ms. Adler's office, these spaces are ultimately not heterotopias because they do not function as counter-sites to particular locations that comment on the nineteenth-century cultural sites they mirror. As private spaces, they do not disrupt Victorian ideologies; instead, they simply provide the novel's exceptional female protagonists private places in which to pursue exceptional

vocations that are generally disconnected from the rest of their Victorian cultural reality. The sites manipulated and utilized throughout the novels by the Ankh, on the other hand, are heterotopic in the ways they participate in existing Victorian spatial ideologies and draw others into a distorted, transgressive subculture. Ultimately, then, Gleason's portrayal of her protagonists' 'different' spaces, coupled with the Ankh's manipulation of public spaces into heterotopias to suit her own nefarious purposes, suggest that the potential of this series' neo-Victorian feminist project is quite limited.

In order to explore the tensions at work in the Stoker and Holmes series and the role heterotopias play in them, we first consider how the novels' steampunk elements figure in Gleason's feminist framing of neo-Victorian London, particularly in terms of common heterotopias—primarily the garden and the museum—that the protagonists briefly navigate over the course of the series. In the process of imagining an alternate version of Victorian England in which steam power dominates and electricity is illegal, the novels showcase various heterotopic spaces in which parts of Mina, Evaline, and Irene Adler's transgressive feminist agency can play out. Second, we explore how these three characters each occupy spaces that function as pseudo-heterotopias of crisis—that is, while each of them claims space within which to subvert expectations of women, these spaces and the activities they support are themselves fundamentally insular and yield no socio-cultural critique. Finally, we consider how the spaces created and occupied by the Ankh serve as both heterotopias and reminders of the limits of historical revisionism.

## 2. The Heterotopic Potential of Gleason's Steampunk London

The London of Gleason's series relies entirely on steam energy and gaslight, electricity having been outlawed by the Moseley-Haft Act, and the characters interact—with differing degrees of enthusiasm—with a number of steam-powered and clockwork gadgets. Mina and Inspector Ambrose Grayling are each referred to as a "cognoggin" (Gleason 2013, p. 36) due to their particular interest in technology, and Gleason makes a point of costuming both characters in steampunk fashion throughout the series. This version of London also features multiple street levels, with the lowest being populated by the poorest members of society; rising to the upper levels requires a ride in coin-operated elevators and gives pedestrians access to cleaner and more luxurious accommodations. This construction clearly acts as a commentary on class distinctions, which certainly play a role in both characterization and plot throughout the series: Evaline's family depends on her to make a financially-advantageous marriage, for example, and the villainous Lady Cosgrove-Pitt is the wealthy wife of one of England's most powerful Members of Parliament. More generally, Gleason's decision to craft a steampunk version of Victorian London highlights the importance of spaces to her larger neo-Victorian project. As Helena Esser notes, literature that reimagines the city through a steampunk lens "re-constructs a fantastic Victorian London through which to explore the origins of the present we inhabit, and call into questions [sic] paradigmatic ideas about progress, technology, and identity" (Esser 2019, p. 163). In this way, because the specific spaces we discuss in this article are so clearly tied to steampunk influences and gadgetry, their connections to and commentary on contemporary culture are multiplied.

More importantly, the novels' steampunk setting, as well as their metafictional ties to Victorian culture and literature more generally, allow Gleason to populate the series with spaces that illustrate in broad strokes various connections between heterotopia and the novels' neo-Victorian feminist messaging. For example, the British Museum that houses Irene Adler's office is, like all museums, a heterotopia "of indefinitely accumulating time" because it contains artifacts from all historical periods and across all corners of the globe (Foucault 1984, p. 7). However, the museum also plays an important role in the novel's construction of a steampunk version of Victorian England via a subplot involving twenty-first-century American teenager Dylan Eckhart, who has accidentally traveled through time and into an alternate version of reality after interacting with an ancient Egyptian artifact he encountered at the same museum in 2016. Trapped in a strange past

where electricity is illegal and both Sherlock Holmes and vampires are real, Dylan accepts Irene Adler's offer to live and work at the British Museum until he can find a way back to his own time. As Dylan's point of entry and place of residence, then, the museum takes on new meaning as a heterotopia that "enclose[s] in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes" (Foucault 1984, p. 7). As such, it enables a contemporary feminist critique in the form of Dylan himself, who, while fascinated by the alternate modes of technology and version of reality, condemns the oppressively patriarchal and misogynistic Victorian social mores that restrict women in general and Mina in particular. Throughout the series, Dylan reminds Mina that the rules of propriety that confine and alienate her are historically bound rather than universal: "in my time," Dylan tells her, "women aren't treated the same way they are now—told to sit and do nothing. Just get married and have kids" (Gleason 2014, p. 217). At the conclusion of *The Chess Queen Enigma* (2015), when Dylan is—albeit only briefly—able to return to his own time, he even begs Mina to come with him so that she can enjoy the rights and freedoms that all women so richly deserve and live in a historical period in which her independent spirit can finally feel at home. In this way, Dylan himself functions as a sort of anachronistic artifact of the British Museum who is able to reflect, through his twenty-first-century perspective, the inequities of the reality in which Mina and the others live.

Similarly, the extravagant New Vauxhall Gardens, rebuilt by Sir Emmet Oligary to be "the Most Modern Pleasure Park of Our Time" (Gleason 2014, p. 187), is both a marvel of technological advancement that reimagines the original Vauxhall Gardens with clockwork and steam-powered amusements and a heterotopia that "juxtapos[es] in a single real space [ . . . ] several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault 1984, p. 6).<sup>1</sup> When Mina and Evaline visit New Vauxhall with friends while solving a case for Irene Adler, they experience both of these aspects of the pleasure garden: they are enchanted by the "[s]mall mechanized butterflies and birds [that] darted about, along with gear-ridden fireflies as big as [a] thumb", amidst the garden's foliage and flowers, and also struck by the myriad attractions, including "ANIMAL CURIOSITIES", "MEDALLION MAZE & CLOCKWORK", "RIVER STROLL & BOAT PARK", "JUNGLE FAIRE" and "OLIGARY'S OBSERVATION COGWHEEL" (Gleason 2014, pp. 192–93, emphasis in original). Oligary's blending of the mechanical with the natural constitutes both a classic steampunk image and a distorted reflection of the artifice by which all gardens are created, while the amusements' startling disparity in both focus and design illustrates how New Vauxhall seeks to recreate "the totality of the world" in "the smallest parcel of the world" (Foucault 1984, p. 6).

The New Vauxhall Gardens also provide a space in which Mina and Evaline can engage in subversive acts of feminist agency. While the secluded pathways of the original Vauxhall were famously ideal for lovers' assignations, Evaline has come secretly armed with stakes and other weapons and plans to "slip off and have some real fun" hunting the vampires she is certain are roaming the park (Gleason 2014, p. 191). Mina, for her part, comes to the aid of a woman in distress and chases down a pickpocket while the rest of the crowd is distracted by a fireworks display. Though Mina is not entirely successful—she and the thief both fall into a river during their struggle, and she is pulled from the water by Inspector Grayling—her unconventional actions are not lost on those around her; strangers in the crowd censure her for "improper" behavior, while Dylan compares her to women of the twenty-first century by way of a compliment and commends her for being "really brave" (Gleason 2014, pp. 215, 217, emphasis in original). Meanwhile, Evaline, who fails to encounter any UnDead in the park, emerges from the shadows to catch the thief for Mina and places the stolen valuables where others can find them.

While the British Museum and New Vauxhall Gardens figure most prominently, Gleason's novels also incorporate various other familiar heterotopias in their portrayal of Victorian London, such as the Lyceum Theatre—which is powered by steam engines and managed by Evaline's brother Bram Stoker, who allows Mina and Evaline to borrow various costumes and props for the disguises they require to infiltrate forbidden spaces while working cases—and Newgate Prison, the "evil-looking structure" whose architectural

design in this version of London includes metal spikes and gas flames, where Evaline fears her love interest Pix has been incarcerated following his arrest (Gleason 2019, p. 57). In centering heterotopic spaces within her steampunk landscape and linking them to the transgressive behaviors of the novels' heroines, Gleason gestures at the possibility of heterotopia in neo-Victorian literature while also foreshadowing how the series situates its female characters in both public and private spaces to explore their subversive potentials.

### 3. Pseudo-Heterotopias and Feminist Subversion

As the series progresses, Gleason attends not only to the central mysteries of each novel—each of which involves the endangerment of young women, including Mina and Evaline themselves—but also to the larger ways in which the protagonists' vocational activities increase their frustration with the limitations placed on young women in their society. Prior to Miss Adler's invitation to form a partnership, Mina and Evaline have been practicing their skills only in private. The secrecy required for Mina's forensic experiments and Evaline's combat training as a vampire hunter not only reflects Victorian expectations that women of their age and class would marry rather than pursue vocations, but also that the careers that *were* available to women—which, by the end of the nineteenth century, included detective work, if not vampire hunting—were generally associated with widows and spinsters.<sup>2</sup> Although Mina, Evaline, and Irene Adler engage in their operations across a variety of locations throughout the novels, the private sites that have been dedicated to their pursuit of their vocations prove the most important in fostering their sense of personal autonomy and potential socio-political power, as well as to signaling their profound difference from other women in their society. Significantly, these spaces both invite and disappoint comparisons to heterotopia.

Mina and Evaline's pseudo-heterotopic spaces are each located within their own homes, functioning in their own ways to reject the domestic expectations of the rooms that have been repurposed as a laboratory, in Mina's case, and a sparring studio, in Evaline's. As actual rooms and analogues to their professional goals and subversive postures, these spaces "are both physical locations and metaphorical constructions" (Caleb 2020, n.p.). Mina's lab is merely a "back room" on the first floor of her house, but she has claimed it for herself and outfitted it to match her own scientific and forensic activities, many of which involve feminine materials such as face powder, signaling Mina's concern for filling in gaps in forensic knowledge men have tended to overlook regarding evidence associated with women (Gleason 2015, p. 11). Furthermore, throughout the series, the existence of this laboratory remains central to Mina's ability to investigate crimes for Miss Adler and Her Royal Highness Princess Alexandra as she uses her skills and tools to examine various clues, including notes written in invisible ink and soil deposits found in unusual places. In other words, this laboratory is a crucial site to Mina's performance of the vocational identity she seeks to assume and her ability to challenge claims that young women cannot be taken seriously as detectives.

Although the space is not secret, Mina's 'inner sanctum' tends to be so inhospitable and uninteresting to others that she generally does not have to share the room with anyone: her housekeeper Mrs. Raskill avoids coming in, largely because Mina's unfeminine clumsiness and the volatile nature of her experiments render the space chaotic and even dangerous, and her father Mycroft typically prefers his gentlemen's club to residing at home (Gleason 2013, p. 134). As a result of this isolation, Mina does not have to attend to concerns about propriety or feminine etiquette as she works, strapping on goggles or her Ocular-Magnifier without regard for the strange marks these tools leave on her face, and even going so far as to work in her nightgown for the sake of convenience (Gleason 2017, pp. 9–10). While Mina's eschewal of convention in her laboratory means that she occasionally suffers awkward interactions with unexpected visitors to her home who are surprised by her appearance and/or activities, these moments help mark the laboratory as a space in which social norms regarding science, gender, and Victorian domesticity are irrelevant for Mina.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike Mina's lab, which is not secret but remains secluded nonetheless, the purpose of Evaline's sparring studio is actively hidden from other members of her household, especially her sister-in-law Florence. It is located in what was intended to be the music room or the ballroom of Grantworth House, a large, empty room that does not see frequent use and has been equipped as a space in which she can train to fight vampires.<sup>4</sup> Her tools include "Mr. Jackson's Mechanized Mentor" with which Evaline spars, described as "a life-size machine sporting two 'arms' and self-propelling wheels, along with the ability to squat or duck from side to side" (Gleason 2013, pp. 10, 67–68), and "the Sure-Step Debonair Dance-Tutor, which was supposed to be used to teach young ladies to dance" but has been reprogrammed as a fighting device (Gleason 2019, p. 11).

The activities Evaline practices in her sparring room are not only intensely physical and violent in ways that are usually coded masculine, but also more generally subversive to the appearances and behaviors she knows she is supposed to exhibit as a proper young woman. For example, she wears "a loose tunic and trousers" to give her free range of motion as she trains, and her intense workouts leave her "drenched with perspiration" and her hair "a wild mess"; she also uses her sparring room and equipment as a means of venting anger and excess aggression (Gleason 2015, pp. 256, 257). These masculine traits bleed into Evaline's speech as well: throughout the series, Evaline's narration relies on slang that Mina considers crass, though modern readers are unlikely to be too shocked by Evaline's go-to phrase of "blooming fish" (Gleason 2013, p. 170). Indeed, Mina explicitly links Evaline's use of profanity to men when she notes that "I'd been around my uncle and his friend Dr. Watson enough not to mind curse words, but I was taken aback that Miss Stoker employed them as handily as the men did" (Gleason 2013, p. 83). The space is also implicated in the series' more general investment in networks of mutually supportive women, as Evaline notes that until recently, she has been trained by a woman she knows only as Siri, who is later revealed to be Mina's mother Desiree Holmes. The room is therefore not only a space for Evaline to pursue her training, but also one in which another woman is positioned as a mentor and authority on a specifically physical profession not generally associated with or available to women.

While Mina and Evaline each enjoy their own individual spaces, Irene Adler's office actively brings the young women and their prospective professions into contact with each other. Though Adler's official employment as the museum's keeper of antiquities is primarily a cover for her government work and is not central to the books, the interior of her office does reflect in obvious ways her labor in this capacity: everywhere there are "books in French, Latin, Greek, and Syrian, and papers organized with curious metal clamps" as well as cabinets with museum artifacts and a variety of steam-powered and clockwork machines designed to aid a scholar in performing research (Gleason 2013, p. 9). In this way, this space subverts the period's social norms regarding women's professional and intellectual identities by replicating traditionally masculine spaces tied to the culturally vital activities of thinking and working—the study and the office—and giving a woman dominion over them. Indeed, Gleason's placement of Irene Adler in this space expands on understandings of her gendered agency that began with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's original characterization of her in 'A Scandal in Bohemia' (1891): as Victoria Rosner points out, the key factor in Adler's ability to outwit Sherlock Holmes in Doyle's story is her possession of "a space of her own to write, read, and conceal important papers. Such a space is tantamount to the usurpation of a masculine prerogative, and it gives her the power to act as a man" (Rosner 2005, p. 107). It is also meaningful that Adler's cover role as keeper of antiquities—i.e., a job that apparently was considered plausible and/or possible for her to perform when it was offered to her—itself reflects the enormous cultural power of interpreting and controlling the history of civilization and requires knowledge that expands in all directions.

More importantly, though, Irene Adler's office functions throughout the series as the headquarters for the secret society she forms with Mina and Evaline. As she invites the two women to join in her covert work for Princess Alexandra, Adler describes this work to her protégés as "the service of their country" that "many young men your age" perform but

that “no other young women are called to do” (Gleason 2013, p. 14). Their task provides an opportunity to participate in a doubly masculine endeavor because it involves forms of physical, intellectual, and political engagement associated primarily with men in Victorian England and endows the girls with significant, albeit secret, agency—in Mina’s words, it allows them “to do something” that is “real” (Gleason 2013, p. 15, emphasis in original). In this way, the primary significance of Irene Adler’s office is as a space in which this all-female, professional/political alliance and the work it entails can be acknowledged as real and planned out. As such, it is the locus of a vocational identity that both does and does not exist in the novel’s ‘real’ world of steampunk Victorian England, since it is both a secret and a role that only men, such as Mina’s father, Mycroft Holmes, hold. Moreover, as the headquarters for an all-female alliance that strategically partners individuals with different strengths, personalities, and values, Adler’s office functions as a safe space in which Mina and Evaline can practice the behaviors of mutual trust, respect, and communication that help them survive the dangerous situations in which they find themselves and empower them, both individually and collectively, as women.

However, while it is obvious that Mina, Evaline, and Adler have constructed spaces for themselves that invert and contest the norms of the society in which they live, it also becomes clear that these inversions and contestations are wholly disconnected from that society’s broader spatial ideologies, pertaining to these three women alone and expanding into the world around them only covertly, if at all. For example, as a secret room hidden in the bowels of the British Museum, Adler’s office is clearly framed as “not freely accessible like a public place”; despite being contained within a public space, it is virtually impossible to find without “certain permission and [ . . . ] certain gestures” (Foucault 1984, p. 7). In order to locate the office and enter it for the first time, Mina and Evaline rely on a written invitation from Adler that guides them to locate “an unobtrusive door” marked “with [a] diamond cross” along a side wall of the museum and then to “f[i]nd and slid[e] a hidden lever” to open the door (Gleason 2013, p. 8). Yet the main factor that bars others from penetrating this space is not “a system of opening and closing” that grants—or compels—entry to some and not to others (Foucault 1984, p. 7), but rather the fact that the majority of London has no idea it exists at all. Adler’s office thus coheres with Aviva Dove-Viebahn’s definition of feminist heterotopia as “a site where juxtaposition of contrasting or opposing elements is necessary for survival and proves to be a source of strength” (Dove-Viebahn 2007, p. 599), yet these benefits are limited to the three women—and occasionally Dylan; the strength this space provides has no larger cultural impact. As spaces that are each used by just one person, Mina’s lab and Evaline’s training room also seem “designed to embrace difference” (Dove-Viebahn 2007, p. 599), but only that of one young woman rather than a larger subset of the population that culture has categorized as deviant. Given the importance of these spaces to the identities of the protagonists and the novels’ narratives as a whole, their lack of any larger cultural situation or culturally experienced critique reveals the absence of a meaningful call for systemic change in the series’ characterization of its heroines. Disconnected from larger spatial ideologies and the resulting power imbalances, these pseudo-heterotopic spaces and the characters who inhabit them do not actually unsettle the culture they seek to resist.

#### 4. Pseudo-Feminist Heterotopias

Mina and Evaline’s nemesis, the Ankh, also resists conformity to the patriarchal Victorian culture; yet while the spaces she constructs throughout the series—and her larger socio-political objectives—are ostensibly feminist, she is focused primarily on her own accrual of power and pulls up the proverbial ladder as she deceives, manipulates, and sacrifices other women for her selfish purposes. In this way, Gleason sets up the Ankh and the sites in which she operates as a foil designed to underscore the collaborative nature of the protagonists’ form of feminism. The steampunk setting and the complex place of electricity within it also inform Gleason’s construction of the Ankh, as she both profits from the corrupt steam monopoly through her alliance with steam baron Sir Emmet

Oligary and uses electricity extensively to advance her schemes, from electrocuting her acolytes in an attempt to ‘awaken’ the Egyptian goddess Sekhmet in *The Clockwork Scarab* (2013) to building electric collars that allow her to control vampires in *The Chess Queen Enigma*. Her willingness to exploit both sides of this political equation demonstrates not only her savviness but also her slipperiness as a character, which is crucial to maintaining her disguise. Notably, the Ankh is further marked throughout the series by her ability to dress and behave in an androgynous manner; at first, Mina and Evaline are not even able to discern whether they are dealing with a man or a woman. The Ankh’s androgynous disguise appears to signal the contemporary feminism of her message through her defiance of binaries but ultimately reflects her desire to claim personal power for herself by confounding others and escaping recognition rather than advancing communal empowerment for all women. Yet the spaces that the Ankh constructs to carry out her agenda are striking in the ways they regularly foster a subculture of transgressive women, as well as the ways they reveal and subvert, through their unsettling distortions, the systems that oppress women in her time: government, economics, marriage, and commerce.

The secret locations the Ankh uses throughout the series to gather her followers frequently reflect the heterotopia’s combination of incongruous elements, “the juxtaposing in a single real place [of] several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (Foucault 1984, p. 6). For example, the subterranean chamber where the Ankh first recruits young ladies to her Society of Sekhmet in *The Clockwork Scarab* is located in the Thames Tunnel, an underground network that was once open to the public but now contains only train tracks, “remnants of old shops in the alcoves, [and] evidence of human presence and of the nonhuman creatures that existed below the streets” (Gleason 2013, p. 109).

Yet, in this dark, filthy, and dangerous place is a room that could have been a parlor inside any well-appointed home during an afternoon tea party or musicale. It was lit by numerous electric lights, which gave off a cleaner, whiter light than gas lamps [ . . . ]. The room was comfortable in temperature without the lingering dampness that pervades underground spaces, and was furnished with rows of upholstered chairs. Rich, heavy fabrics had been draped on the walls, and a small table of refreshments held lemonade, tea, and a generous assortment of biscuits. (Gleason 2013, p. 110)

In other words, this space involves an uncanny layering of diametrically opposed environments. The opium den where the Society of Sekhmet meets at the end of the novel is much the same: a room located at the back of a pawn shop in a dangerous part of the city, it is richly decorated in “[s]ilky fabric in crimson, garnet, topaz” while “[l]arge cushions and other soft, round furnishings littered the floor” (Gleason 2013, p. 260). The behavior of the young ladies the Ankh has recruited while they occupy these spaces constitutes a similar contradiction; while they have been bred to behave as models of decorum in the ballrooms and parlors of Victorian England, in the Ankh’s opium den, they smoke narcotics and flirt with bare-chested male servants while “arranged in lounging, unladylike poses” with “loose hair falling over their shoulders, missing gloves, and stockinged feet” and “bare ankles exposed by their bunched up skirts” (Gleason 2013, p. 260). In replicating the iconic Victorian opium den for high-ranking socialites, the Ankh’s Society of Sekhmet headquarters inverts and contests the gendered dichotomy of vice and virtue that has shaped these young women’s upbringing and the expectations their families place upon them regarding respectability and marriage.

The Ankh again imagines a space for women to partake in a transgressive subculture with *The Carnelian Crow*, the secret establishment she operates in the fourth novel in the series. Ostensibly a “woman’s club”—which subverts the conventional men’s clubs of Victorian London, one of which Mina and Evaline infiltrate while disguised as gentlemen in an earlier novel—*The Carnelian Crow* is also described in terms of inversions. When she first arrives at the club, for example, Evaline realizes that it is “in either a courtyard or an alley, completely hidden by buildings on all sides,” yet topped with a glass ceiling that provides a view of the sky (Gleason 2017, p. 202). Furthermore, Mina and Inspector

Grayling are shocked to discover that the wealthy women who patronize the club are there to experience being fed on by vampires, an activity only partially concealed behind the “privacy screens” built into each of the club’s booths (Gleason 2017, p. 231). This feeding, to which Mina and Grayling are alerted by the “rusty and pungent and rich” scent of fresh blood in the air, clearly gives the women involved a pleasure that is sexual in nature (Gleason 2017, p. 231). This, coupled with Mina’s description of the feeding as “both intimate and violent” (Gleason 2017, p. 231), highlights how The Carnelian Crow and the activities it hosts constitute a distorted version of aspects of Victorian culture in which women are preyed upon by men, particularly through the sexual exploitation that can occur both in and outside of marriage as a result of gendered power imbalances that keep women in sexual ignorance and men in socioeconomic control.

In *The Chess Queen Enigma*, the workspace the Ankh constructs in the subterranean remains of the White Friars monastery near Fleet Street constitutes another jarring incongruity: she has selected a historic site of Christian religious devotion for her experiments on the UnDead. Mina “deduce[s] the space might originally have been a chapel or even a small church for the friars” (Gleason 2015, p. 290); the Ankh has reimagined it so that now “[i]t was a laboratory; that was the only way to describe it. Machinery, wires, lights, and a variety of tools filled the space” (Gleason 2015, p. 290). In this case, the Ankh’s goal is to determine how to raise and control an army of vampires. This bizarre and, in many ways, impractical objective, along with the Ankh’s transgressive repurposing of a religious site, invites recognition of how institutions such as the military are simply one more form of the brute power wielded by men in the Ankh’s world. The Ankh’s work in this laboratory space serves once more to illustrate that though she consistently seeks to arrive at her goals by strange means, they are concretely political as well as personal. As she tells Mina, “the next stage of my plan [is] to take over Parliament by controlling the men in it—with the help of their wives”, which she intends to lead to “bring[ing] down the English government completely. Soon, there will be no Parliament—no Home Office” (Gleason 2017, p. 249).

These sites that the Ankh creates for herself and her acolytes can be understood as revelatory foils to the spaces the novels’ female protagonists occupy, as well as to the heroines’ ethos in general. All of the Ankh’s locations reflect, in one way or another, distorted versions of Victorian spatial ideologies, contesting aspects of the patriarchal culture that seem to be natural and immutable. For example, the role of both the Society of Sekhmet’s meeting locations and the Carnelian Crow “is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory” (Foucault 1984, p. 8): the fantasies in which women indulge in these places reveal the emptiness of Victorian cultural constructions of women as the weaker sex and angels of the home, thus enacting a critique on a society that refuses to recognize women’s desires. Certainly, that is the Ankh’s ostensible goal as she entices followers into these spaces: to provide women with opportunities to violate, unabashedly and with impunity, the Victorian regulations they find so oppressive, and to revel in their transgressions as an expression of socio-cultural and socioeconomic power. However, the activities for which these places are designed are not actually empowering; instead, they provide dissipative pleasures that the Ankh uses to acquire more followers and manipulate and exploit them for her own purposes. Furthermore, her megalomaniacal political agenda forms a critical commentary on the unjust distribution of power in her society; she wants to “govern a nation, unlike our own, which is managed by a cadre of men [ . . . ]. These men make laws for and about us women without our consent or opinion—many of which keep us placed even more deeply under their control” (Gleason 2017, p. 247). However, Mina points out to the Ankh that there is no equity or justice in the inverted world she imagines: “[i]nstead of harnessing all of your brilliance [ . . . ] and using it to improve the stature of women, you’re using it to repress and control, and to even murder men. You mean to inflict upon them the precise antithesis of what you want for yourself: freedom to live as you wish” (Gleason 2017, pp. 255–56). Ultimately, then, the Ankh’s villainy is grounded in her duplicity and her willingness to not only deceive but endanger the very young women she promises to

empower, which stand in stark contrast to the higher moral ground Mina, Evaline, and Irene Adler occupy, particularly in the eyes of the novels' twenty-first-century readers. In this way, the Ankh's subversive, heterotopic spaces are only pseudo-feminist because they are not focused on helping women in general acquire broader cultural and political agency.

### 5. Conclusions: Neo-Victorian Heterotopias and Social Control

The private nature of the feminist spaces utilized by Mina, Evaline, and Irene Adler highlights the double lives of these neo-Victorian women and frames their gendered power as both transgressive in Victorian society and appropriate to twenty-first-century readers—both strange and familiar. As Gleason's protagonists navigate the contradictory demands of their cultural place as young women and their professional goals, they play out the conventional Victorian tensions between public and private that represent pressures to perform respectability versus opportunities to be one's authentic self; they also demonstrate the ways in which "neo-Victorian fictions representing Victorian girl subjectivities for the consumption of twenty-first-century girls [ . . . ] have no choice but to present a fragmented, multifaceted self—one that can be placed in both periods" (Fritz 2021, pp. 56–57). However, the sites the protagonists use in which to act out their differences from other Victorian women are insular, disconnected from the spatial ideologies of both the nineteenth and the twenty-first centuries, and because of this they provide no larger cultural criticism or unsettling of the systemic injustices that marginalize women. The tension between the young women's abilities, goals, and desires and the sociocultural vacuum in which they pursue these things is further emphasized by the Ankh and the heterotopias she operates, through which she enacts different but ultimately equally problematic plans to critique and destabilize the patriarchal culture that oppresses women. The fact that the only truly heterotopic spaces in the novels belong to the villain, whose transgressive deviance the series frames as a bridge too far, shows how disappointingly limited neo-Victorian YA can be in its ability to offer subversive mirrors to twenty-first-century feminism, which posits women as powerful socio-political agents.

As we close this article, then, we also want to consider to what extent the neo-Victorian engagements with heterotopia examined here ultimately reinscribe social control. They are spaces of subversion, but some have argued that the freedom they offer is balanced by or offset by other forms of social control. Indeed, in his consideration of heterotopic spaces in the work of Jorge Luis Borges, Robert J. Topinka asserts that "heterotopias are not primarily sites of resistance to power but instead sites of reordering" (Topinka 2010, p. 56). Gleason actively frames these spaces in terms of the expectation that they are temporary—i.e., heterotopias of crisis—because the female adolescent protagonists still do not see many options available to them outside of traditional marriage/spinsterhood. The final novel in the series makes an effort to subvert this trajectory with Mina considering the possibility of marriage for the first time and Evaline choosing a partnership that does not adhere to conservative Victorian gender norms. It would seem that Mina has developed a relationship with Detective Grayling that will not only allow but encourage her continued investigations into forensic sciences, in which she would not need to improvise her own home laboratory but would have access to its official police counterparts; likewise, Evaline's marriage to Pix will allow her to train and hunt the UnDead without maintaining the same degree of secrecy she has had to use at Grantworth House with her family. Like the spaces in which both women have exercised their exceptional abilities, however, these heterosexual romantic partnerships would not disrupt the status quo: both would still be conventional marriages,<sup>5</sup> merely with idiosyncrasies that make them more appealing to the female members. Mina and Evaline may benefit from the liberating possibilities of twenty-first century feminism, but they (and the novels themselves) do not call into question ongoing experiences of sexism and oppression; indeed, the series ultimately upholds aspects of feminism that have frequently come under attack for their erasure of marginalized women. The pseudo-heterotopias, then, serve as part of a larger system that allows only limited

relief before reasserting ongoing and still-problematic systems associated with women's rights.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The original Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens were active for roughly two centuries, first as New Spring Gardens before a name change occurred in the late eighteenth century, and they closed in the mid-nineteenth century. Part of that land became a public park in 1976.
- <sup>2</sup> For discussion of female detectives in Victorian literature and culture, see, for example, Joseph Kestner's *Sherlock's Sisters: The British Female Detective, 1864–1913* (Kestner 2003) and Arlene Young's "'Petticoated Police': Propriety and the Lady Detective in Victorian Fiction' (Young 2008).
- <sup>3</sup> For a consideration of laboratories as heterotopic spaces, see Sarah Laborde's 'Environmental Research from *Here* and *There*: Numerical Modelling Labs as Heterotopias' (Laborde 2015).
- <sup>4</sup> In the first novel of the series, Gleason locates Evaline's training studio in the music room; in what appears to be an editing error, it is placed in the ballroom in the third book.
- <sup>5</sup> Notably, the fact that this series ends with matrimony—or the imminent possibility thereof—makes it part of a larger, arguably postfeminist trend of early marriage in contemporary young adult literature. See Sara K. Day, 'Reimagining *Forever* . . . The Marriage Plot in Recent Young Adult Fiction' (Day 2020).

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