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Penny Dreadful's Queer Orientalism: The Translations of Ferdinand Lyle

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Abstract: Cultural expressions of Orientalism, the Gothic, and the queer are rarely studied together, though they share uncanny features including spectrality, doubling, and the return of the repressed. An ideal means of investigating these common aspects is neo-Victorian translation, which is likewise uncanny. The neo-Victorian Gothic cable television series *Penny Dreadful*, set mostly in *fin-de-siècle* London, employs the character Ferdinand Lyle, a closeted queer Egyptologist and linguist, to depict translation as both interpretation and transformation, thereby simultaneously replicating and challenging late-Victorian attitudes toward queerness and Orientalism.

Keywords: Gothic; neo-Victorianism; Orientalism; *Penny Dreadful*; queerness; the uncanny

1. Queerness, Orientalism, and the Gothic in *Penny Dreadful*

Orientalism, neo-Victorianism, the Gothic, the queer, and the uncanny coalesce in *Penny Dreadful* (2014–2016), a cable television series set mostly in 1891 and 1892 London whose title references the nineteenth-century “penny dreadfuls,” mass-market, one-penny serials that featured mysterious tales of “violence, torture, blood and gore” (Killeen 2012, p. 46). This title, which portrays *Penny Dreadful* as a contemporary intermedial adaptation of cheap Victorian thrillers, is somewhat misleading. Whereas penny dreadfuls were mostly pulp fiction, *Penny Dreadful* is an acclaimed series created for Showtime, a prestigious cable channel. More importantly, though *Penny Dreadful* is indeed a serial involving plenty of mystery and gore, it is fundamentally a pastiche whose characters come together not from penny dreadfuls but from classic Gothic novels including Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897). These differences in quality and form between *Penny Dreadful* and its precursors call our attention to the modes and means of adaptation and translation, and to the character whose translation of ancient artifacts is crucial to the show’s narrative arc: the learned, flamboyant Ferdinand Lyle (Simon Russell Beale), a closeted queer Egyptologist and linguist. Through Lyle, *Penny Dreadful* depicts translation as both interpretation and transformation, thereby—in the uncanny mode that typifies the neo-Victorian Gothic—simultaneously replicating and challenging Victorian attitudes toward queer Orientalism.

My reading of *Penny Dreadful* contributes to studies of the Gothic, queerness, and Orientalism that have progressed along both separate and converging channels during the past five decades. After (Sedgwick 1985) revealed how paranoid desire between men propels Gothic texts, several monographs have linked queerness and the Gothic (see Haggerty 2006; Fincher 2007; Hughes and Smith 2009; Palmer 1999, 2012, 2016; Haefele-Thomas 2012). Likewise, following Edward Said’s claim that the Orient is “a living tableau of queerness” (Said 2014, p. 103), Joseph Boone (2014) has connected queerness and Orientalism. There is far less scholarship relating the Gothic, queerness, and Orientalism, and nothing of book length. This absence is surprising, given that these fields have been interrelated since the late eighteenth century—most notably in William Beckford’s *Vathek* (1786), but also in texts such as Lord Byron’s *The Giaour* (1813) and Charles Dickens’s *The Mystery of*

Edwin Drood (1870). The synergy among the queer, Gothic, and Oriental is especially pronounced in the late-Victorian period; and, as might be expected, scholarship that does bring together all three areas focuses on the 1880s and 1890s. Gothic fiction enjoyed a renaissance in this era, which saw the publication of *Jekyll and Hyde*, *Dorian Gray*, *Dracula*, and Richard Marsh's *The Beetle* (1897)—all novels that feature both queer and Orientalist motifs. Furthermore, as Elaine Showalter explains, in the 1880s and 1890s “the laws that governed sexual identity and behavior seemed to be breaking down” (Showalter 1990, p. 3), and compelling cultural and socioeconomic forces were redefining masculinity and femininity. Lastly, “there is a break in British Orientalism in the 1880s as a new mass readership emerges, hungry for writing about exotic places” (Long 2009, p. 21) and helping to fuel a resurgence in Orientalist fantasy. The Gothic, queerness, and Orientalism are thus most closely interconnected in late-Victorian culture.

Neo-Victorianism provides an ideal means of exploring this nexus, in part because the uncanniness of its constituents is paralleled and amplified by that of neo-Victorianism itself. Freud indicates that “the uncanny proceeds from something familiar which has been repressed” and made unfamiliar, and that uncanny phenomena include “doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self” and “repetition of the same thing” (Freud 1955, pp. 247, 234, 236). For many, the uncanny manifests itself “in the highest degree in relation to [. . .] spirits and ghosts” (Freud 1955, p. 241). Neo-Victorian narrative “offer[s] simultaneous possibilities of proximity and distance” (Llewellyn 2008, p. 175) that are intensely uncanny, for it “represents a ‘double’ of the Victorian text,” involves “the conscious repetition of tropes, characters, and historical events,” often “defamiliarizes our preconceptions of Victorian society,” and acts as “a ghostly visitor from the past that infiltrates our present” (Arias and Pulham 2010, p. xv). Neo-Victorianism’s uncanny spectrality also abounds in the Gothic and the queer. As Julian Wolfreys notes, the Gothic “returns through various apparitions” (Wolfreys 2002, p. 11). Queerness is similarly ghostly, for heteronormative society “[attempts] to suppress homosexuality by relegating the queer subject to the role of ‘phantom other’” (Palmer 1999, p. 7), and by representing “the homosexual as specter and phantom, as spirit and revenant” (Fuss 1991, p. 3).

Like the neo-Victorian, the Gothic, and the queer, Orientalism—particularly as it relates to queerness—is deeply uncanny. While Said’s poststructuralist approach is influenced by Foucault and Derrida rather than Freud or Lacan, and while he does not employ the term *uncanny*, his interrogation and problematization of the key binary opposition that underlies Orientalism nevertheless underscores the phenomenon’s essential uncanniness. Said contends that “Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the *familiar* (Europe, the West, ‘us’) and the *strange* (the Orient, the East, ‘them’)” (Said 2014, p. 43; my italics). This distinction between what Freud calls the *heimlich* and the *unheimlich* likewise informed dualistic theories of race in Victorian Britain, where non-westerners were situated at the opposite end of the evolutionary scale from Europeans (see Wald Sussman 2014, pp. 11–42) and where “arguments for the inferiority of the non-white races became part of mainstream scientific and social thinking” (Malik 1996, p. 96). Seeing the world through this racist theoretical lens, the nineteenth-century “imperial gaze” assumed that “the white western subject [was] central” (Kaplan 1997, p. 78), and viewed the marginal Oriental other as both different from and less evolved than the Occidental self. Yet, given the bidirectional nature of evolution and degeneration, the same ideology that enabled these divisions might uncannily elide them. Drawing on the methods of both postcolonial and psychoanalytic criticism, Piyel Haldar explains how the westerner might discover an eastern doppelgänger who, though “strange, [. . .] reminds the traveller of something long ago forgotten, a previous incarnation of himself” (Haldar 2007, p. 99). Indeed, the Orientalist par excellence Sir Richard Burton saw all of “Arabia” as “a region so familiar to [his] mind that even at first sight, it seemed a reminiscence of some by gone metem-psychic life in the distant Past” (Burton 2004, p. xxv). Burton and his contemporaries found “something ‘hauntingly familiar’ about [. . .] the Oriental who is excessive and animal in desires” (Haldar 2007, p. 99), and foremost among the uncanny desires that fascinated them was male homosexuality. As Boone contends, the “ghostly presence of something ‘like’ male homoeroticism [. . .] haunts many Western

men's fantasies and fears of Middle Eastern sexuality," and "no other geographical domain onto which the Anglo-European gaze has fixed its [. . .] eye has been so associated with the specter of male-male sexuality" (Boone 2014, p. xx).

This specter is uncanny insofar as it involves not only the return of repressed queer desire, but also the mutual haunting of past and present that characterizes queer studies, historical inquiry, and the Gothic. Dina Al-Kassim contends that "haunting" is "the best figure for the kind of history that can emerge from within queer studies," since "[h]istories of sexuality and desire in the past are caught up in the present," whether because "presentist concerns, like that of the sodomy/homosexuality dichotomy," inform research into the past, or because "traditions (say, of sexual taboo) are constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed in the many presents that they traverse" (Al-Kassim 2008, pp. 298, 338). More broadly, Iain Chambers observes that "[t]he present is not merely haunted by the past, but is shot through with heterogeneous fragments whose recognition can only render the world unhomely, 'out of joint'" (Chambers 2008, p. 56). The uncanniness of historical research and representation is most striking when it involves the Gothic, which, as David Punter explains, is at once "[a] particular attitude towards the recapture of history" and "a mode of revealing the unconscious" (Punter 2013, p. 4) that looks both backward and inward.

From its first episode, *Penny Dreadful* demonstrates a keen awareness of the complex relations among the uncanny, queerness, Orientalism, and the Gothic. In "Night Work" (2014), Sir Malcolm Murray (Timothy Dalton), Vanessa Ives (Eva Green), and Ethan Chandler (Josh Hartnett) walk through a Chinese opium den en route to a clash with a vampire coven. A closeup shows a young Chinese man heating opium over a candle. The subsequent shot, an extreme closeup, depicts a prone, middle-aged Englishman smoking an opium pipe. The camera moves along the length of the pipe, from the man's fingertips on its stem to his lips on its bit, before lingering on his sucking mouth. These two shots link the Orient and the Occident via symbolic fellatio, provocatively queering and inverting the Sino-Anglo relationship by personifying imperial Britain—historically the dominant partner, forcing opium on China—as a submissive consumer of the drug. These shots also foreshadow the uncanny meeting between the West and the East that occurs when the vampire hunters confront their adversaries. The vampires' location in a basement underneath the opium den connects them with both the id and the Orient (regions that overlap in western fantasies), while suggesting that vampirism lies beneath the opium trade: the Chinese opium dealers are the vampires; the British opium addicts, the victims. Yet the opium-smoking Englishman is also implicated in vampirism: his drug addiction and pipe-sucking align with vampiric bloodlust and blood-sucking; moreover, in the late-Victorian imagination, imperial Britain functions as a vampire whose thirst for territory and resources is at once reproduced and punished by Stoker's *Dracula*, who "mimics the practices of British imperialists" (Arata 1990, p. 639). It is therefore fitting that the symbolically fellating and vampiric opium smoker looks a great deal like Sir Malcolm, an accomplished explorer and agent of empire—who, in his turn, is the spitting image of Sir Richard Burton, the polyglot linguist, world traveler, and adventurer who declared that "opium taken in moderation is not a whit more injurious to a man than alcohol," and who explored the male brothels of Karachi with zeal (Lovell 2000, pp. 53, 57). This *mise en abyme* makes sense of the moment when a cadaverously white—and apparently western—vampire addresses Sir Malcolm in Arabic, and he responds fluently in the same language. The exchange draws the two together in an unexpected but logical (if transgressive) fashion, at once augmenting and reducing the monster's exoticism while blurring the borders crucial to Orientalism.

The opening scenes of "Night Work" simultaneously establish and deconstruct the bifurcations of Orientalism, while subtly calling attention to the construct's queer and uncanny features. They thus engage with Victorian Gothic fictions such as *Edwin Drood*, *Dorian Gray*, and Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Man with the Twisted Lip" (1891), in which the opium den signifies eastern debauchery and helps western men to lead double, sometimes queer, lives. "Night Work" renders this familiar cultural site unfamiliar. The contrast between East and West still obtains, though the Victorian emphasis on duality is complicated by liminality and hybridity. This complication informs *Penny Dreadful*,

whose characters inhabit liminal spaces between good/evil, and human/non-human.¹ On the day after the night in (and under) the opium den, Vanessa explains to Ethan that they have visited a “demimonde, a half-world between what we know and what we fear” (Bayona 2014a, pp. 25:28–25:34). Appropriately, this half-world is populated by hybrids: not only figurative ones such as the vampires and Sir Malcolm, but also an actual one in the form of the master vampire, a male humanoid whose body has extruded “a tensile exoskeleton, like an insect or a crustacean” (Bayona 2014a, pp. 21:25–21:29). Beneath this outermost layer lies the creature’s skin, which is covered in hieroglyphic tattoos that draw Ferdinand Lyle into the plot when Sir Malcolm and Vanessa bring him photographs of them for translation.

2. Ferdinand Lyle Translates (into) an Oriental Vampire

Lyle’s appearance in “Night Work” involves the act of translation with queerness and death. After an establishing shot of the British Museum’s entrance, a closeup shows carrion beetles in a glass case, crawling over a skull and eating what flesh remains upon it. Drawing life from death, the beetles evoke the beetle-like vampire whose tattoos Lyle will translate and trace to the Egyptian Book of the Dead; Egyptian scarabs and their link to the solar cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (Hart 2005, p. 84); and, anachronistically, *The Beetle*, whose eponymous character is an “insect-like creature of ambiguous gender” (Harris and Vernooy 2012, p. 339). The camera then moves, remarkably, from the beetles to a medium shot of Lyle’s backside as he bends over a table, the better to examine and translate ancient writings. This cheeky shot telegraphs his sexual orientation and role, while associating his queerness with his status as “an expert in dead languages” who works “amongst dead things” (Bayona 2014a, pp. 29:16–29:17). It thereby exemplifies not only “the transitory and dangerous nature” of “fin-de-siècle homosexual love” (Vicinus 1999, p. 85) and the “confusion of gay identity with a death-driven narrative” (Nunokawa 1991, p. 317), but also the centuries-old “analogy drawn between translation and sexuality,” and the recognition that “translation [. . .] holds out dangerous pleasures” at once “textual and fleshy” (Basile 2018, p. 27). As Gayatri Spivak observes, “[t]ranslation is the most intimate act of reading,” during which “the translator must surrender to the text” (Spivak 2012, pp. 313, 315). That the text to which Lyle surrenders is the flesh of a corpse discloses how *Penny Dreadful* links necrophilia with translation, whether from one language to another or from one state of being to another. In “Verbis Diablo” (2015), Lyle demonstrates his understanding that translation is both a dangerous, potentially lethal act and a queerly erotic one. After answering a summons to translate inscriptions on various artifacts, he asks Sir Malcolm’s group, “So we’re to have another adventure in translation, are we?” (Hawes 2015, pp. 25:18–25:21). He then says, coquettishly, “I feel Mr. Chandler can provide able rescue should we find ourselves suddenly afoul of the odd glyph” (Hawes 2015, pp. 25:12–25:17). In Freudian fashion, Lyle’s jokes disclose his intuition that translating the *Verbis Diablo* (a demonic language) is in fact a perilous undertaking, and he is proven right.

The lethality, queerness, eroticism, and exoticism² of translation are captured perfectly by Lyle’s translating the hieroglyphs on a dead male vampire’s skin. While Lyle examines photographs of the symbols, Sir Malcolm tells him, “They’re from a tattoo on a corpse” (Bayona 2014a, pp. 31.01–31.02). The reaction shot, in shallow focus, reveals canopic jars and a sarcophagus behind the Egyptologist. These exotic appurtenances of death provide a visual echo of the word *corpse* and anticipate Lyle’s response: “That’s outré” (Bayona 2014a, pp. 31.06–31.07). After briefly examining the hieroglyphs, Lyle explains that they constitute “a standard funerary text,” and that “[c]onjoined in this fashion, they translate roughly to an idea meaning ‘blood cure’ or ‘blood transformation’” (Bayona 2014a, pp. 31.25–31.38). He then considers that they might instead imply a “blood curse,” before remarking wryly, “Those Egyptians

¹ The protagonist, Vanessa Ives, is torn between good and evil. She is also at times a human-demon hybrid. Her likewise morally conflicted love interest, Ethan Chandler, is a werewolf. Other good/evil, human/non-human characters include Frankenstein’s Creature (Rory Kinnear), Dorian Gray (Reeve Carney), and Brona Croft/Lily Frankenstein (Billie Piper).

² For an analysis of relations among the erotic, exotic, and deadly, see Bataille 1986.

were a bit madcap when it came to specifics. It's all very metaphoric" (Bayona 2014a, pp. 31.40–31.49). Lyle's translation requires contextualization if we are to appreciate its key role in *Penny Dreadful's* queer Orientalism. His reference to a "blood cure" is foreshadowed by the opening shot of the British Museum, in which a man holds a newspaper advertising "Dr. Tibbald's Blood Tonic." This image links ancient Egyptian mysticism to late-Victorian pseudoscience, and hieroglyphics to newspaper print, in order to prepare viewers for the revelation, in "Séance" (2014), that Vanessa is the contemporary reincarnation of the ancient Egyptian goddess Amunet, consort of the vampiric god Amun Ra. Lyle's use of "blood transformation" and "blood curse" implies not only the means by which characters in *Penny Dreadful* become vampires, but also the "notion of 'syphilitic blood' [that] became highly popular [. . .] in the late nineteenth century" (Pietrzak-Franger 2017, p. 33). In late-Victorian culture, vampirism and syphilis are closely connected, especially in *Dracula*, whose "images of [. . .] contaminated blood" and "pseudoscientific 'remedies' [. . .] resonate powerfully with Victorian panic about sexual contagion, [. . .] and the attendant rise of blood-purifying quack cures" (Skal 2004, p. 74). "Dr. Tibbald's Blood Tonic," ostensibly a "blood cure," is in fact a "blood curse" akin to the disease it purports to treat. Likewise, the seemingly benign Dr. Alexander Sweet (Christian Camargo) is actually Dracula, an avatar of Amun-Ra bent on seducing, penetrating, and infecting Vanessa. He achieves his goals in "Ebb Tide" (2016), biting her on the neck in a tableau of sensual abandon.

Their coming together is at once sexual and textual, for it fulfills the prophecy that Lyle discerns in the "conjoined" hieroglyphs he translates. The word *conjoined*, whose root verb is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "to unite" or "to unite sexually," indicates the erotic features of inscription and translation alike. The sexual nature of both the hieroglyphs and the story they tell becomes explicit in "Séance," when Lyle, with double entendres, tells Sir Malcolm that the vampiric flesh-text foretells "the annihilation of man and the coming of the beast" (Bayona 2014b, pp. 45.33–45.35) following the moment when Amun-Ra and Amunet are "conjoined" (Bayona 2014b, 45.27), for "[i]f they ever came together, Amunet would become the mother of evil" (Bayona 2014b, pp. 45.13–45.16). The queerness of both Lyle's translation and the prophecy itself, signaled by his droll portrayal of ancient Egyptian scribes as "a bit madcap," is evinced by the fact that heterosexual carnal union leads to the birth of ultimate wickedness and the end of the world.

Queer, necrophilic, perilous eroticism is evident not only in Lyle's translation of the photographs that Sir Malcolm brings him, but also in his responding to them as if they were not necroscopic but pornographic. After seeing something in one that arouses his interest, he stops speaking, becomes absorbed, and leans forward to look at the image more carefully. Vanessa turns toward Lyle curiously, and the camera draws closer to him, both movements replicating his own dangerous voyeurism and underscored by ominous extradiegetic music. "Are there more of these?" he huskily asks Sir Malcolm, who responds in the affirmative. Lyle becomes even more agitated, and says, "I should like to see them. But not here" (Bayona 2014a, pp. 31.59–32.09). As he hurriedly closes the folder holding the photographs, a brief closeup reveals it to be made of a dark leather embossed with arabesques—an apt metonym for the hieroglyphic Oriental skin represented within it. Lyle tries to conceal his obvious excitement with a quip: "The British Museum is no place for actual scholarship, after all" (Bayona 2014a, pp. 32.09–32.12). Ironically, his deflection focuses attention on the potentially obscene nature of the photographs. As he explains to Ethan in "Verbis Diablo," when they steal into the museum's archives after hours in search of artifacts, "[t]he British Museum holds the world's largest collection of historical pornography," and "[p]eople are always sneaking in for a look" (Hawes 2015, pp. 36:39–36:49). By translating an erotic experience into a scholarly one, Lyle reverses how intellectuals in the Gothic novels upon which *Penny Dreadful* is based use research to sublimate and/or liberate their libidos. Frankenstein's experiment is "a model of sublimation" (Baldick 1990, p. 50) that enables him to translate his repressed desires into scientific inquiry, thereby releasing them in the form of a doppelgänger who can murder at will and openly express his desire for a mate. Jekyll's research goes beyond sublimation and represents an explicit attempt to double his delights by splitting himself into one man who could do "the good things in which he found his pleasure,"

and another who could “[drink] pleasure with bestial avidity from any degree of torture to another” (Stevenson 2015, p. 77, 80–81). Desire, sublimation, liberation, and duplication are similarly implicated in the scopophilic pleasure Lyle takes in translating hieroglyphs. That his translation empowers Sir Malcolm’s group to conquer their supernatural Egyptian adversaries exposes the (queer) desires that accompany—and might underlie—western imperialism, together with the uncanny doubling that results from these desires (Hyam 1990, pp. 10–13).

Lyle duplicates the carrion beetles and the corpse of the Egyptian vampire, as the witch Evelyn Poole (Helen McCrory) demonstrates. Poole uses (homo)sexually explicit pictures of Lyle to coerce him into reporting to her on the activities of Sir Malcolm and Vanessa. “All those photographs,” she taunts him. “First you’d lose your job. Then your position in society. And your wife’s money. Then you’d just be a sad old sodomite” (Hawes 2015, pp. 44:14–45:48). These dangerous, ominous, pornographic pictures evoke those that Lyle translates. Moreover, like the beetles and the vampire, he has an exoskeleton of sorts, a protective covering in the form of his marriage and outward heterosexuality; and, like them, he is a parasite, draining money rather than blood from his wife. Under the vampire’s shell is inscribed, photographed flesh, decipherable to the expert eye, which tells the story of his kind. Likewise, when Lyle’s figurative carapace is removed and his flesh exposed and photographed, his queerness becomes legible. The Egyptian vampire, an Oriental Other, is thus a ghastly double of the queer Orientalist who reads his body.

Lyle’s figurative vampirism is bound up with his Jewishness—which, in turn, is conflated with his queerness. In “And They Were Enemies” (2016), he prays in Hebrew before he and Victor confront Evelyn Poole and her coven. Afterward, he asks, “You will have a mind to my particular secret, yes?” Victor, confused, replies, “I’m sorry?” “That tribe into which I was born,” Lyle explains (Kirk 2015, pp. 30:07–30:15). Victor’s confusion appears to stem from his uncertainty as to whether Lyle is admitting to being Jewish or being queer. The scene demonstrates how “Jews and homosexuals have frequently been paralleled” as “moral degenerates, sexual predators, [and] outsiders” (Lapidus 2009, p. 105). The alignment of Jewishness, queerness, and vampirism is again exemplified when Lyle, still agitated by translating the hieroglyphs on his vampiric alter ego’s corpse, hurries Sir Malcolm and Vanessa out of his office with the excuse that he has “[e]ver so many papyri to translate.” He then muses, “Isn’t that a delicious word, *papyri*? Sounds like something eaten by little Persian boys, doesn’t it?” (Bayona 2014a, pp. 32:44–32:54). Lyle enjoys eating his words, and his witticism accentuates the oral pleasures of translation. Yet its dangers are also made apparent by the pederastic desire animating his wordplay. He consumes words as Persian boys eat exotic fruit; but his comparison suggests that he would much rather eat exotic boys, as if consuming (forbidden) fruit. Lyle thus resembles the opium-smoking, symbolically fellating Englishman in the opium den, and his queer Orientalist desire is similarly vampiric—especially when we recall that the hieroglyphs he has been translating “aren’t from a scroll” (Bayona 2014a, pp. 31.18–31.19) but from a body, and that both flesh and fruit can substitute for papyrus. Moreover, Lyle’s appetite for boys evokes the age-old “notion of Jewish men as fellators of children” (Hirsch 2003, p. 331, n. 29), which was related to ritual circumcision, or *metsitsah*, wherein the *mohel* would put his “mouth on the open wound to extract blood” (Lapidus 2009, p. 120). Historically, *metsitsah* was seen by some Christians as evidence of Jewish “blood lust” as exhibited by the *mohel*, whose “mouth [was] stained with blood after he had sucked the wounded infant penis” (Glick 2005, p. 101). Lyle’s queer, vampiric hunger for youth is likewise evident in his “vanity about [his] complexion and hair color” (Skogland 2015, pp. 6:45–6:47), and his “trying to remain fit” in order to compete with “men who [have] the thrill of genuine youth” (Skogland 2015, pp. 6:15–6:28). These efforts to maintain unnatural youth relate Lyle to the “vampiric Wandering Jew” (Davison 2004, p. 120) epitomized by Dracula, who can “[grow] young” (Stoker 2008, p. 172). *Penny Dreadful*’s elision of vampirism, Jewishness, and queerness speaks to its verisimilitude rather than its viewers, most of whom are unlikely to appreciate this synthesis—and, indeed, would find it outdated and offensive. That Lyle translates (into) an Oriental vampire shows

how meticulously the series translates historical prejudices into its plot and characters, and how potentially problematic these translations are for its contemporary audience.

3. Divergent Representations of Queer Orientalism

Penny Dreadful simultaneously replicates and challenges late-Victorian attitudes toward queerness and Orientalism. The divergence between these modes of representation is evident in the relationship between Sir Malcolm and Lyle. Each signifies different aspects of Sir Richard Burton's career and personality, while both share a bond that transcends their differences. Sir Malcolm embodies Burton the fighter and adventurer; Lyle, Burton the scholar, hedonist, impersonator, and explorer of male brothels. This Jekyll-Hyde division separates Burton's "acceptable" and "objectionable" aspects, while exemplifying the duality of Victorian society and culture. Yet binaries do collapse: like Sir Malcolm, Lyle can be valiant; and, like Lyle, Sir Malcolm can be vain. During an attack on Evelyn Poole's coven, Lyle kills a witch after advising her, "Never underestimate the power of a queen with lovely hair" (Kirk 2015, pp. 19:15–19:18). Sir Malcolm is "vain about needing spectacles" to read and translate an Arabic inscription (Thomas 2015, pp. 37:35–37:38). When Lyle offers Sir Malcolm his own reading glasses, their similarity is emphasized by a *mise en scène* that aligns linguistic and geographical exploration. In the foreground, Sir Malcolm and Lyle face each other across a table covered with artifacts featuring the *Verbis Diablo*. In the background, a map of Africa covers the wall. This scenic alignment is echoed by Lyle's insightful remark to Sir Malcolm: "Now that you've given up the Nile, you need a new quest" (Thomas 2015, pp. 36:01–36:03). Sir Malcolm never returns to the Nile, but near the end of *Penny Dreadful* Lyle leaves for Egypt, since "Cairo is considerably more accepting of [his] particular way of life" (Cabezas 2016b, pp. 5:19–5:25); and, as Burton observes, "[w]hat is offensive in England is not so in Egypt" (Burton 2004, p. xxxiii). While Lyle's move from West to East may be interpreted by contemporary viewers as his liberation from hypocrisy and his self-actualization as a queer man, it also denotes an expulsion that reinforces the late-Victorian association between queerness and Orientalism, and that fixes him as an Oriental Other who must be eliminated by the conclusion of a Gothic text.³

The same tension between neo-Victorian translation's pursuit of historical accuracy and its "desire to re-write the historical narrative [. . .] by representing marginalized voices [and] new histories of sexuality" (Llewellyn 2008, p. 165) is evident in how *Penny Dreadful* depicts Lyle's queerness as at once biologically determined and socially constructed. When he and Ethan Chandler enter the British Museum archives after hours, Lyle is overwrought. "My heart is fluttering like mad," he confesses to Chandler, coyly inviting him to "[f]eel [his] pulse" (Hawes 2015, pp. 35:32–35:35). He later describes their trip to the archives as "heart-stopping" (Hawes 2015, pp. 42:03–42:04). To late-Victorian sexologists, Lyle's excitability—for instance, his claiming that translating the *Verbis Diablo* "just about [gives him] the vapours" (Thomas 2015, pp. 3:32–3:34)—would be among the signs of his homosexuality. As Albert Moll, one of the founders of sexology, avers, "[m]any of these perverts are neurasthenic or hysteric," and "easily excited" (Gilman 1993, p. 165). Lyle's campiness, however, indicates that his flamboyant queerness is as much performative as neurological, if not more so. In accordance with Susan Sontag's observation that those with a camp sensibility view "life as theater" (Sontag 1999, p. 56), Lyle sees all the world as a stage. When called upon to translate the *Verbis Diablo*, he declares, responding to Sir Malcolm's cue, "I'm on!" (Thomas 2015, pp. 3:15). Describing a séance in which the Egyptian goddess Amunet manifests herself and Vanessa is possessed by a demon, he calls her possession "a riveting performance" and notes that Amunet "performed such a spectacular star turn" (Bayona 2014a, pp. 42:16, 43:03–43:06). Lyle's use of theatrical terminology, and his playing a damsel in distress with Chandler, not only reinforce his melodramatically queer

³ As (Khair 2009) notes, "It is when the Other enters [. . .] that the action of most Gothic narratives really commences. And they usually end with the predictable destruction or containment of this Otherness" (p. 6).

self-fashioning, but also suggest his awareness of what Judith Butler terms “gender performance” (Butler 2014, pp. 175, 178). His campy performativity also calls attention to how the Gothic is engaged in *Penny Dreadful*’s bifurcated representation of queer Orientalism.

Drawing on both camp and the Gothic, *Penny Dreadful* by turns dispels and evokes the western fantasy of the queer and dangerous Oriental Other. Essential to each mode is the association between reality and artifice, which in the Gothic often expresses itself via a twofold narrative wherein the realistic frames the fantastic, and the present frames the past. This structure is uncanny insofar as its constituents double and defamiliarize each other, as when “editors” are revealed to be authors, and “found” old manuscripts are actually contrived new ones. Duality and uncanniness are redoubled in neo-Victorian Gothic texts, for in both the neo-Victorian and the Gothic relations among past, present, fantasy, and reality continually shift. These dynamics are illustrated in *Penny Dreadful* when Dorian Gray, who lived in the East in 1453 when “mobs [sacked] the temples of Byzantium” (Cabezas 2016a, pp. 41:28–41:30), compares Lyle’s over-the-top home décor with “last season’s panto[mime] of Aladdin” (Bayona 2014b, pp. 27:16–27:17). Gray’s gibe at Lyle’s campy taste for the Oriental, which renders the Egyptologist’s home *unheimlich* by likening it to a stage set, exposes queer Orientalism as make-believe, harmless, and silly. Conversely, the showy Madame Kali (Helen McCrory), a “[t]heatrical spiritualist beyond compare” who conducts a séance in Lyle’s house, appears to be an innocuous “fraud”—until she succeeds in summoning the Egyptian goddess Amunet and reveals herself as the bona fide witch Evelyn Poole. Then “the occultist dabbler” Lyle “[finds] himself amongst the real thing” (Hawes 2015, pp. 44:03, 44:13–44:17). In *Penny Dreadful*, whose Grand Guignol Theatre functions as a metonym for the series as a whole, the theatrical and the actual are so closely entwined as to be sometimes indistinguishable. Such a postmodern sensibility clashes with the very real diegetic threat posed by the Egyptian deities Amun-Ra and Amunet, who nearly succeed in destroying the (western) world.

This conflict reveals the strains in *Penny Dreadful*, and in neo-Victorian translations generally, between past/present, fictional/real, and regressive/progressive. The series seeks to accurately translate for modern viewers the late-Victorian milieu, even while problematizing the verisimilitude of this translation by positioning it within Gothic novels. These frame texts likewise use ostensibly authentic, yet in fact imaginary, concentric or interlocking narratives to translate into fiction the real-world concerns of the nineteenth century. One result of the intricate intertextual engagement among *Penny Dreadful* and the novels it adapts is a *mise en abyme* whose uncanny duplications at best reflect the Gothicism of its constituents, and at worst create a “blurring effect” (Whelehan 2012, p. 274) between the Victorian and the neo-Victorian that leaves viewers struggling to distinguish between the two. Another result is hybridity: like its hybrid characters, *Penny Dreadful* is a hybrid form; and, like them, it is in conflict with itself. Lyle at once enacts and undermines late-Victorian attitudes toward queer Orientalism, and it is difficult to determine the extent to which he, and the overarching East-versus-West plot in which he plays a part, demonstrate our own values, those of the late Victorians, or a blend of both. That said, *Penny Dreadful* appears to align more closely with past attitudes than present ones, though its depiction of queerness is arguably more progressive than its approach to Orientalism. Lyle banishes himself from London, but he may be happier in Cairo. In contrast, the avatars for Amun-Ra and Amunet are, respectively, defeated and destroyed. As the series concludes, the eastern menace is quelled, reverse colonization is itself reversed, and London returns to what passes for normal. Translations physical, spiritual, and linguistic have restored the status quo ante. Most importantly, Lyle’s translation of the Verbis Diablo has exposed and thwarted a return of the repressed, in the form of ancient Oriental prophecy that threatened to overturn the Victorian narrative of progress. As Sir Malcolm explains, this eastern tale is not merely “history,” but “an ongoing story” with “relevance now” (Thomas 2015, pp. 41:04–41:06). His remark might well describe *Penny Dreadful* itself.

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