

Gendering of the Female Sex in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian*

*Gray* (1891) and in the Plotline of Dorian Gray in John Logan's

*Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016)

BA Thesis English Language and Culture, Utrecht University

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21 June 2019

## Abstract

This study explores female gendering in Oscar Wilde's Victorian novella *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and in the plotline of Dorian Gray in neo-Victorian TV series *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016). The concepts of agency, transgression, praise, and punishment collectively constitute this study's theoretical framework. More specifically, female gendering is investigated through the thematic focal points of power, romance, and beauty. This study finds that separately, but also in relation to one another, these themes depict women in an inferior, non-agentic role in patriarchal Victorian society. Women's obedience to society's expectations of the female sex is followed with social praise. In both the novella and the series, women are punished for their transgression, however the primary sources deal with punishment differently. Another difference is that the novella mostly demonstrates the inability of women to reach the expectations set by patriarchal Victorian society, whereas *Penny Dreadful* shows female characters actively and deliberately defying society's norms

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## Introduction

Over the years, the works of Victorian poet, writer, and playwright Oscar Wilde have often been adapted for new purposes. Works such as *Salome* (1891), *The Canterville Ghost* (1887), and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) have been revisited many literary pieces, films, musicals, and plays numerous times. One of Wilde's most revisited works is *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), a novella that revolves around main characters Dorian Gray, Basil Hallward, and Lord Henry Wotton and the aging and sin-showing portrait of Dorian Gray. One of the main reasons for writers and producers to adapt this novella is Wilde's progressive depiction of the male gender, as it contains implications of homosexual romanticism between the male protagonists. One of the novella's latest adaptations, the neo-Victorian horror drama *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016), adapts not only *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, but also Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1992) and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1918). This study, however, will focus on the plotline of Dorian Gray in the series' third season exclusively. A first reason for this is that in this particular season, the character of Dorian Gray serves as a main character, whereas in the series' first and second seasons, Dorian Gray remains a minor supporting character in other plotlines. Also, exploring this specific season is an obvious choice, as it includes a large group of female characters that are highly influential on the novella's original plot.

Whereas Oscar Wilde appears to challenge Victorian gendering of men by implicitly including notions of homosexuality, *Penny Dreadful* seemingly challenges socially constructed expectations of the female gender. It is the latter that this study focusses on: exploration of female gendering in both sources. More specifically, the study is performed through the focal points of beauty, romance, and power. Analysing female gendering based on these themes will not only complement earlier researches that explore the novella especially in light of (one of) these themes, but it will also offer new contributions to academic discussions about the novella and the series. Much has been written about *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as the novella has proved to be of academic interest, especially in terms of the theme of romance. Romance, in this study, focusses not only on romantic love, but also on sexual encounters between characters: physical romance. The implicit suggestions of homosexual romanticism in the novella have been extensively explored (e.g., Kersten 1; Nunokawa 311; Alexander and Meem 1). The theme of romance in specific relation to female

gendering, on the other hand, has received much less attention in the academic field. The same holds for beauty as a theme in the novella (notable exceptions are Craft [109] or Mao [5]). In this study, the notion of beauty is understood as a combination of qualities, in this project mostly physical qualities, that pleases the aesthetic senses (Carroll 40; Scruton 34). The theme of beauty is one of significance within the novella. Next to the characters' repeating deliberations about beauty, the author dedicates novella's preface is to his own notion of the theme. It expresses: "Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated ... They are the elect to whom beautiful things mean only beauty" (3). This quote relates to Wilde's connection to the Aesthetic Movement, a late nineteenth century movement that believed that art in its various forms should not seek to convey a moral, sentimental, or educational message, but rather give sensual pleasure (Brookes par 1). The combined mentions of "beauty" and "the cultivated" indirectly foreshadow the characters' deliberations about appreciation of beauty and culture in upper class society, which is a reoccurring topic throughout the novella. This study's understanding of power embodies the societal and hierarchal relations between men and women, and the intent and ability to actualise one's wishes (Fayard 7; Profit 64). The notion of power in the novella is also often academically explored (e.g. Profit 92; Fayard 1), but just like the notions of beauty and romance, this project pioneers in exploring the themes in relation to female gendering and in relation to one another. Until now, virtually no academic literature exists that explores (female) gendering in *Penny Dreadful*. Nonetheless, the investigation of female gendering in both sources is a worthwhile cause since it ties in with female gendering as subject of a heated discussion in modern day society, in Western-European and North-American society especially (Collins 65; Sargisson 130). An increasing group of people desires to abolish the idea of being born either male or female, and strives to dismiss stereotypical gender roles. Since the series is presented as neo-Victorian, meaning that the show amalgamates Victorian phenomena with modern principles and technologies (Heilman & Llewellyn 1999), this study contributes to the discussion on whether the show adheres to Victorian gendering of the female sex, responds to the contemporary gender discussion, or includes elements of both time periods.

In this study, the theoretical concepts of agency, transgression, punishment, and praise establish the academic framework in which female gendering is investigated. Collectively, these

filters are well applicable in this analysis for they have been key elements in feminist theories over the past years (McNay 1982; Sargisson 131; Clegg et al. 310). Also, in some way or another, female agency, transgression, and praise and punishment are in influential relationship to each other. The concept of agency, which essentially encapsulates an individual's freedom and capacity to live or act independently in a defined world (McNay, 1983; Montenach and Simonton 4; Vanden Bossche 4), is applied in order to explore female characters' experienced freedom and independence in relation to the thematic focal points. For the purpose of exploring how female characters respond to the gendering of their sex, it is necessary to explore female transgression as well. Transgression is identified as "any act of expressive behaviour which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values and norms" (Babcock 17; McNay 1985). It is important to note that female transgression could be an active phenomenon, but could also occur subconsciously and unintentionally (McNay 1986). Including the concepts of praise and punishment is valuable, as any kind of behaviour, either transgressive or obedient, is followed by rewarding or punishment in one form or another (Behrendt 91; Robinson 13). Exploring how the female characters' surrounding environment responds to their behaviour expands the understanding of female gendering in the particular source.

Based on the aforementioned information, the current study aims to answer the following research question: "How is female gendering manifested in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and in the plotline of Dorian Gray in John Logan's *Penny Dreadful*?" (2014-2016). This question is explored in four chapters, of which the first chapter sets out to construct a theoretical understanding of (Victorian) female gendering. Next, chapter 2 explores female gendering in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. In chapter 3, an analysis is performed on female gendering *Penny Dreadful*. Finally, the two primary sources are discussed in broader context in chapter 4. Eventually, a conclusion is included, in which an overview of this study's results is established, limitations and strengths are considered, and suggestions for further research are offered.

## Chapter 1 | Understanding (Victorian) Female Gendering

The concept of gender can be identified as biological, being born with either masculine or feminine genitalia (Amandele and Clark 18), or understood as socially constructed. In the latter case, a gender identity could be defined as social associations of certain kinds of activity with either masculinity or femininity (Mellow 3; Bradley & Valiulis 2). The process of assigning supposed behaviour, attitude and appearance to either the male or female sex is also called “gendering” (Butler 6; Matschinkse I; Ward 28). Female gendering, in this sense, can be explained as the socially constructed expectations of behaviour, attitude and appearance concerning individuals of the female sex. Female gendering establishes cultural understandings of what it means to be a true woman, and these kind of convictions have shaped women’s lives for centuries (Jackson and Jones 1; Amandele and Clark 3).

Conceptualising a gender identity requires reviewing one’s agency. The western woman’s history with agency has been rather turbulent, as women have generally not been constituted as agentic throughout the ages (Davies 42; Kittredge 13). For women, agency has been the exception rather than the rule (Davies 43). This was also the case for the female sex in Victorian England, as the dominant patriarchal ideology that prevailed in Victorian society did not grant women much agency. The Victorian woman was considered inferior to men, and her primary role was of domestic nature. The female sex’ ultimate goal in life was supposed to be marriage, which signified giving themselves to their husband and his wishes and demands (Appel par 6). A woman’s ambitions beyond a job as homemaker were generally rejected, as women were expected to perform household and motherly duties rather than, for example, seek formal education (Elliot 6; Altick 54; Cunnington 21). In terms of sexuality, the ideal Victorian woman was to be pure, chaste, refined, and modest (Cunnington 20; Russett 45). Women were expected to only engage in sexual relationships with their husband, whereas men experienced more freedom as they could “take” multiple partners in their lives (Russett 141). Victorian men were also granted more agency as they experienced more independency in, for example, civil discourse. Men were to speak freely and share their opinions and ideas, whereas women were not to be granted this freedom (West et al. 8; Lessa 179). Especially in Victorian times, civil discourse reflected female gendering as not only the content of one’s spoken message, but also the manner of speech revealed asymmetrical power relations and/or (socially constructed)

expectations of the feminine (West et al. 5). Moreover, women were to position themselves as “followers” of male authority and leadership (Madhok et al. 2), which also included agreeing with men’s ideas and beliefs (Lessa 285). Demonstrating compliance with socially constructed expectations of the female sex was rewarded with social acceptance as praise. For example, women were seen as “good spouse[s]” (Appel par 29) when they rendered certain “feminine qualities,” such as gentleness, empathy, nurturance and compassion, and proved to fulfil their tasks as mothers and wives (Altick 54). Nonetheless, the subordination of the female sex caused for (female) transgression (Grace 230), which ultimately engendered the first women’s rights movements to develop in the United Kingdom in the second half of the Victorian era (Krolokke and Sørensen 2). This form of feminism and Victorian literature mutually influenced each other in the sense that female writers especially, such as Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë, started challenging the patriarchal Victorian society in their literary works. Female writers began representing the “New-Woman” in their works, of which it was imagined that she could transform her society (Nsaidzedze 7). For example, female writers countered the prevailing patriarchal society by ascribing progressive roles to female characters. Women became the heroines of stories, were portrayed in an equal relationship with the male sex, or resisted positions of dependency (Moore 118). Some female characters opposed marriage or rejected motherhood outright (Moore 27; Krolokke and Sørensen 12). Most male writers, nonetheless, did not respond to feminist movements in their style of writing, as their work remained rather conservative with regard to the depiction of the female sex. One’s transgression against socially constructed ideas was followed with punishment, which mostly manifested itself in social disdain and alienation (Kittredge 84; Sargisson 26). Also, female incomppliance with society’s stereotyped take on women was often punished by a woman being considered “unsuitable” (Appel par 5) or a “social outcast” (Davies 93), which entailed an indefinite condescending treatment by the other or sometimes even the same sex.

Chapter 2 | Female Gendering in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

What immediately stands out when critically analysing female gendering in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) is that the narrator's representation of the male and female sex reflects the hierarchical power structure that prevailed in Victorian society in England, and that, in this context, the female sex is strongly inferior to men. Although the male protagonists consider themselves as Victorian London's elite in which, unlike in middle and lower class, women were not expected to adopt the common, submissive role of home maker, the female characters' agency still illustrates the patriarchal power relationship between the male and female sex. Women are expected to keep to their everyday task as upper class women by paying social visits as well as organising dinner parties, at which they are to show good taste and serve as symbols of their social status (Harvey 58). The fact that the story predominantly revolves around the male protagonists Dorian Gray, Basil Hallward and Lord Henry and their dialogues and individual monologues and streams of consciousness and that female characters makes rare appearances throughout the novella reflects the minimal influence and social visibility women had in Victorian society. The female characters rarely receive verbal agency as their discourse is indirectly shared through the male characters' narrative (Kersten 12). For instance, Lord Henry's aunt is indirectly narrated by Lord Henry: "My aunt has spoken to me about you. She told me you are one of her favourites..." (Wilde 24). The fact that female characters' thoughts and expressions are verbalised by men constructs the idea that men literally control women's messages and ideas. Interestingly, when female characters' utterances are directly shared, their speech is described with unfavourable verbs. Although the narrator introduces the male characters' speech by using words as "said" or "asks" (37), female characters "[cry] out" or "[exclaim]" (38) their words, which suggests that hysteria or hysterical forms of expressions are tied to the female sex. By doing so, the narrator accentuates female inferiority. Furthermore, the male characters repeatedly self-confirm their superiority in power by not only articulating their expectations of women, but also scorning the female sex (Felski 1100). One of Lord Henry's misogynistic monologues is an example of both:

Ordinary women never appeal to one's imagination. They are limited to their century. No glamour ever transfigures them. One knows their minds as easily as one knows

their bonnets. One can always find them. There is no mystery in any of them... They have their stereotyped smile and their fashionable manner. They are quite obvious.

(49)

This listing of (expected) female qualities is a typical illustration of the male sex translating their low opinion of the female sex to enforce male superiority (Felski 1100). Uniquely, there is one female character that transgresses against the subordination that is imposed on women. The Duchess of Monmouth openly counters social norms by taking agency and freely expressing her (progressive) opinions that oppose most patriarchal ideas commonly held by men. In her conversation with Lord Henry, for instance, she challenges and disagrees with his take on subjects such as social popularity. Lord Henry states that “to be popular, one must be a mediocrity,” which the Duchess ripostes by expressing: “Not with women ... and women rule the world” (178). Reacting to this, Lord Henry tells her that “women are not always allowed a choice” (180). Also, to others, he describes her as “wilful,” labelling the woman as stubborn (176). Female transgression thus appears to be verbally and socially punished, as in a later conversation with other men, the Duchess is degraded for “[tiring]” society with her “speeches” because her “clever tongue gets on one’s nerves,” with the result that she will not be invited for upcoming social gatherings (185). This form of punishment collides with the characters’ internal urge to maintain a high social status, as it is not socially appropriate to be connected with someone that breaks culturally constructed conventions.

Along with the theme of power, the concept of beauty also demonstrates inferior gendering of the Victorian woman. Throughout the novella, the aesthetic concept of beauty is a recurring theme amongst the three protagonists, as they believe that “it is better to be beautiful than to be good ... It is better to be good than to be ugly” (Wilde 176). By this, the characters express that more value is attached to physical beauty than to good, civil behaviour, which the characters show by recurrently assessing their surrounding environment on its physique (Gillespie 55). Women are not to deviate to take agency and present themselves differently from what was considered ultimate Victorian female beauty, which included a pale skin and a small, thin figure. This suggests that women were able to afford not to spend their time outdoors, which would inevitably result in a tan (Gio par 3; Kortsch 77). Women applied zin oxide to their cheeks, and painted blue veins on their faces (par 5). Hair was dyed

blonde and red was applied to lips and eyes to emphasise dark circles in faces (par 6). Female characters that meet these expectations are praised and utilised for their beauty, which is explained by Basil Hallward: “If [a man wants] to gain a reputation for respectability, [he has] merely to take [a woman] down to supper” (46), indicating that connection with a woman showing Victorian beauty equals respectability for men. The woman, in this case, receives credits for adhering to upper class’ standards. Female characters that mismatch these expectations are verbally punished as they are described as a “badly bound hymn book” (Wilde 37), “tawdry” (76), or “[waving their] crooked, false-jewelled fingers” around (57) by both the characters and the narrator. Eventually, these women are regarded “unworthy” spouses since they cannot act as a symbol of beauty and class to others. Reduced female agency in relation to beauty is illustrated in the description of Lord Henry’s wife’s dresses, as they look “as if they had been designed in a rage and put on in a tempest” (44). Plausibly, the “rage” and “tempest” reflect the despondent mood the woman was in as, in order to be praised and socially accepted, she has to refrain from her individual preferences and beautify herself according to social expectations of appearance. Also, by using the words “rage” and “tempest,” the narrator implies that anger and tumult are related to the feminine.

Similarly, female gendering in light of the theme of romance also demonstrates the poor value that is generally attached to Victorian women. The male protagonists do not consider romance as the necessary foundation of marriage. Instead, upper class marriage is regarded common practice, a “bad habit” (Wilde 192), that much more encapsulates obligation to show off class and respectability. Characters are to marry someone from the same class to maintain a high social status, and taking agency and disobeying this idea by choosing romance over a socially strategic relationship is generally followed by alienation (Appel par 43). This is illustrated, for instance, when Dorian’s mother is disdained for her choice to elope with a “penniless young fellow, a mere nobody” (33). Lord Henry’s uncle states that she has made a “stupid choice,” and exclaims: “What on earth induced her to behave as she did. I could never understand” (33). Also, Mrs. Vane frowns upon Sibyl’s wish to depart from the man she and her mother are in debt to in order to be with Dorian. By saying: “Mr. Isaacs has been very good to us. I don’t know how we could manage without him,” Mrs. Vane articulates women’s dependency on men, relating weakness, in one form or another, to the feminine

(Wilde 57). Female characters that do engage in a marriage to a respectable man are to cater to their husbands' needs and care for their children, which includes marrying them off to someone respectable. If a woman is willing and able to do this, she is praised a good wife, which is straightforwardly and repeatedly articulated by the protagonists. For instance, Basil Hallward describes a female character as "an excellent wife to one of [the] most tedious ambassadors," as she "married off her daughters to some rich, rather elderly men" (159). Regardless of her husband's "tediousness," she remains a faithful wife who maintains performing her marital "tasks" (159). Moreover, it is explained that "[a wife's] feet of clay make the gold of the image precious" (164). This expression can be interpreted as men desiring a woman to be obedient and inexperienced, presumably sexually as well as intellectually, for the man can then "mould" the woman's identity into a form that will serve him. If the girl has "porcelain feet, they have been through fire, and what fire does not destroy, it hardens. She has experience" (164). It suggests that if a wife has a will of her own, possibly from life experience or a preceding marriage, it will impede the husband of constructing a creature that will meet his standards and wished behaviour. In one of his monologues, Lord Henry adds the following:

When a woman finds out that [her husband] is indifferent to her, she either becomes dreadfully dowdy, or wears very smart bonnets that some other woman's husband has to pay for. I say nothing about the social mistake, which would have been abject, which of course I would not have allowed, but I assure you that in any case the whole thing would have been an absolute failure. (92)

Lord Henry believes that any marriage is doomed to fail since the man will inevitably lose interest in his wife, which will result in the her "abjectly" making "the social mistake," which can be understood as committing adultery. In his own marriage, Lord Henry's wife Victoria defies Victorian standards by stepping out of her marriage and running away with another man. Although it was officially allowed for women to divorce men since 1857, undermining a husband's power remained considered socially improper (Marcus 207). This idea is exemplified in the protagonists referring to Lord Henry's wife as "poor Victoria!" (Wilde 192). It suggests that she ultimately suffers the most, although Lord Henry, in this context, is the one abandoned. Social punishment of transgression is also illustrated

when Sibyl challenges the idea of a strategically constructed relationship with a man rather than a relationship built on romance by stating that “love is more than money” (57). Immediately, she is corrected as Mrs. Vane shows antipathy and yells: “Foolish child! Foolish child!” (57). Moreover, women’s limited agency in (romantic) relationships is articulated, as the narrator writes: “The joy of a caged bird was in [Sibyl’s] voice. Her eyes caught the melody and echoed it in radiance, then closed for a moment, as though to hide their secret. When they opened, the mist of a dream had passed across them” (58). The comparison to a caged bird symbolises Sibyl’s captive position in a society that does not allow her to act as an agentic, independent woman. The joy that is echoed in her melody, her speech, represents the happiness Sibyl feels when she thinks of her lover. However, since she knows that her deviation from society’s norms will be frowned upon, she closes her eyes to keep them from radiating her joy. By doing this, she keeps her transgressive feelings unknown to others, protecting herself from punishment. She dreams off to her kiss with Dorian, mentally distancing herself from society’s ideology that is conveyed through her mother’s words.

Potentially, the female characters are portrayed as poor spouses to enforce the implications of homosexual desires between the three male protagonists. The men’s anxieties about (their) sexuality are projected onto the female characters, “so that the female body functions as a primary symbolic site for confronting and controlling the threat of an unruly nature” (Appel 32). Dorian’s romantic feelings for Sibyl Vane can be understood as confirmation of this observation, as in fact, he develops passionate feelings for the Shakespearian characters that she portrays on stage. In his description, Dorian solely characterises Sibyl as the characters she plays, ignoring her own personality. Also, Lord Henry’s question “[h]ave you seen [Sibyl] today?” is answered negatively, for Dorian never truly sees the woman behind the characters (71). Dorian wants to continue a romantic relationship with the characters portrayed by Sibyl, but refuses to acknowledge the actress herself. His obsession with one of the played characters is especially remarkable, as Dorian particularly adores Sibyl in her role as Rosalind, who disguises herself as a boy: “Her voice was very low at first, with deep mellow notes ... [She was] disguised as a pretty boy in hose and doublet and dainty cap” (50). Dorian’s admiration not for Sybil, but for the art that she performs in addition the characters’ deeply ingrained misogynistic attitudes to women contribute to the implications of the protagonists’ presumed homosexuality.

Evidently, when analysing female gendering in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* according to themes of power, beauty, and romance, it becomes clear that the three themes are consistent in their depiction of the inferior, non-agentic position of the Victorian woman. Collectively, the themes reflect the characters attaching great value to their upper class position in society, which entails specific gendering of the female identity. To maintain respectability, female characters have little agency as they should perform according to socially constructed standards that do not grant women the freedom to act independently. Throughout the novella, the male characters as well as the narrator repeatedly narrate these expectations and assess surrounding female characters' compliance with these norms, which is concluded by either social praise or punishment. Social praise, in the novella, is achieved when female characters meet upper class' norms by showing physical beauty, compliancy to men, and good taste during social visits and dinner parties. This behaviour translates into maintaining high social status. However, the novella mostly shows cases of female transgression against socially constructed norms as the female characters are seemingly not able to meet these norms. Punishment of these women mostly manifests itself in loss of respect and honour, and being outcast of London's elite for socially undesired behaviour.

Chapter 3 | Female Gendering in the Plotline of Dorian Gray in *Penny Dreadful*

What should be taken into consideration when analysing female gendering in the plotline of Dorian Gray in *Penny Dreadful* is that, according to Kohlke (389), the show shows hints of presentism. This means that the neo-Victorian TV series recreates the past with historical hindsight that is part of the present's view (370). Connected to this, Lee and King explain the adaptation process of *Penny Dreadful* as one of "contamination," in which memes derived from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* have been transformed into contemporary cultural iconography (par 1). For example, *Penny Dreadful* regards the character of Dorian Gray and his hedonistic lifestyle as Victorian memes that continue to live in contemporary culture. With regard to the theme of power, *Penny Dreadful* demonstrates presentism and contamination by responding to two popular topics in modern day society, namely feminism and the challenging of female stereotypes in order to seek gender equality (Collins 64; Sargisson 130). This is visible in the female characters' active and violent transgression against the Victorian patriarchal power structure that has dominated their lives. The female characters, however, go beyond the ambition of gender equality, as Lily Frankenstein constructs an army of former prostitutes and victims of woman trafficking, not to fight for equality, but in order to seek "female mastery" (*Penny Dreadful* S3E3 00:12:03). Originally, Dorian and Lily envisioned an army that would fight for them in order to create an empire that would be ruled by Dorian and Lily together. However, Lily takes ultimate agency by going against what society expects from her as a woman as she refuses to conform to male authority, including Dorian's. In her speeches, she sends out her "army" on murderous crusades aimed at men:

My doomed, keening women. Shall we be immortal? ... We must be bloody or nothing else! And now you must prove your commitment to our cause. Go now. Every one of you. Rise up! Go into those dark streets you know so well, those foul alleys and secret back lanes and find me a bad man! A faithless husband. A cruel lover. A scrofulous john fucking some girl just like you, and quick with the back of his hand while he's at it. Find him and bring me his right hand! (E7 00:15:40)

Since the right hand is most commonly one's dominant hand and symbolises authority, power, and strength (Jobes 71), Lily's demand for men's right hands symbolises her mission for matriarchy. By

taking this specific limb, the female characters take away men's physical as well as general strength and dominancy. Such gruesome forms of female transgression are followed by social punishment, which are familiar to the women as Lily teaches them that "[they] will be branded radicals. Revolutionists," and that "women who are strong, and refuse to be degraded, and choose to protect themselves, are called monsters" (E6 00:09:57). By adding: "That is the world's crime, not ours," Lily stresses that Victorian society should adapt to their mission, instead of the women adapting to society's ideologies (E6 00:10:05). Although the female characters are only shown celebrating, suggesting that their revolution is successful, the series does actually not include shots of women actively harming men in any way. This leads to believe that actually, women remain the weaker sex. This idea is supported by the fact that the women remain dependent on Dorian as he provides them with a shelter, food, and clothing. Also, initially, Dorian understood his relationship with Lily to be based on their shared interest in world domination. However, when Dorian comes to understand that the female army has a different vision, namely matriarchy, and that the women turn against him as well, he and "gives" Lily to scientists Victor Frankenstein and Henry Jekyll who want to "heal" her into a proper woman that acts as an "obedient little bride" (E8 00:22:33). To Lily, Dorian says: "We've unleashed the inmates, have we not? All the Bedlamites come home to roost" (00:41:13). The reference to women as "inmates" and "Bedlamites," referring to residents of London's psychiatric hospital, suggests that insanity and madness is linked to the feminine. By saying that they "roost" in Dorian's house, the women are compared to animals, which is their worth to him. The men intend to inject Lily with a serum that serves as a "mental reset" in order to punish Lily for her "unhealthy" behaviour which includes showing "anger, hate, and sadness" (E8 00:28:34). The fact that a cure is needed, suggests that their behaviour is considered an illness. A camera shot shows the three men standing next to each other looking down on Lily, who shows vulnerability as she sits on the ground, crying and chained to a chair. This image expresses the power and control the men hold over the female sex, as the characters have taken Lily's agency and are in control of her freedom. Also, the picture shows the men's self-assigned superiority as they, literally and metaphorically, look down upon her. The show depicts women's inability to be powerful, for the army's revolution against men fails, and men retake control over them. Another example of men retaking their superiority can be

found in the moment Dorian evicts the legion of women from his house. By doing this, he cancels his support to the women, which sets them back into their old, inferior position to men. Justine fights Dorian as a final attempt to overthrow male power by stabbing him in the heart while yelling: “No man could defeat us” (E8 00:22:44), but is surprised by Dorian’s immortality as he calmly pulls out the knife. His immortality symbolises men’s triumph in any case women try to attack the male sex in one form or another. Eventually, as Justine refuses to return to her “short little life,” Dorian warns her: “I can toss you out like the baggage you are whenever it pleases me” (E8 00:22:56 - 00:34:01), displaying his superiority, and kills her by smoothly breaking her neck. By killing her with his bare hands, Dorian’s character illustrates that a woman’s life is literally in the hands of men.

Analysing female gendering in light of the theme of beauty shows women’s transgression against not only reduced female agency, but against society’s expectations of upper class as well as lower class women too. As praise for their violent crusade against men, Lily and Dorian sponsor their female soldiers with dresses and jewellery that were generally associated with female aristocracy. However, the women collectively take agency by deviating from upper class beauty norms and altering their dresses in a way that reveals their female sexuality. This constructs an ironic paradox as however the women’s appearances suggest that they live and behave according to Victorian norms, their behaviour contradicts these expectations. Also, dressing as Victorian elitists but obviously displaying sexuality can be considered transgression against the condescending attitude upper class had towards prostitution and sexuality (Walkowitz 35; Davis 13; Harvey 88). The fact that Justine often wears “bloomers” illustrates her activist attitude since these provocative trousers were often worn by Victorian female protesters as it was easier to run in trousers rather than running in dresses (Kortsch 77). Overall, it can be observed that the female characters’ clothing reflects the agency that the women have claimed. This idea is enforced when Dorian ends the women’s revolution by evicting them from his house. He tells them: “You may keep the gowns, the trinkets ... treasure them as forget-me-nots” (E8 00:21:33). Labelling the dresses as forget-me-nots creates the idea that they serve as sweet commemorations of the agency the women have had a chance to experience, but which has now come to an end.

When analysing female gendering in the light of romance, presentism and contamination are particularly evident in the extensive display of sexuality, by which the show responds to the pornification of contemporary media (Kersten 7; Attwood 83). Pornification, or pornographisation, involves the increasement of inclusion and the absorption of (soft- or hardcore) sexuality in contemporary media and culture (Paasonen 2; McNair; 110). In *Penny Dreadful*, pornification manifests itself in the use of physical romance as a form of praise for dedication to revolution. For example, when Dorian and Lily confront Justine with the question whether she will forgive the men from her past, Justine answers: “Would you have me forgive them?”. Lily steps forward and kisses her on the lips, praising Justine’s obedience to her. The same event takes place after Justine has made her first kill, for Dorian rewards Justine by kissing her passionately, praising her hatefulness and violence towards men. Moreover, strong attention to sexuality evident in the extended lovemaking scene between Dorian, Lily, and Justine. Dorian teaches the women about the sacrifice novitiate nuns had to make in order to become a legionnaire: “[They] were asked to pledge themselves to God... In blood. You were not a legionnaire unless painted with blood” (E3 00:40:24). Later, the three engage in a passionate threesome, covered in Justine’s victim’s blood, which suggests not only ultimate connection between the characters, but also Justine’s devotion to the revolution. Although the three naked bodies painted in blood refer to the novitiate nuns’ gory sacrifice, the series’ producers presumably added the erotic touch to adhere to the modern idea that “sex sells” (Kohlke 10; McNair 37). Not only Dorian, Lily, and Justine engage in sexual encounters, but also the female soldier seek comfort with each other by dancing closely, caressing, and kissing one another. Considering the series’ (neo-)Victorian setting, this behaviour can be considered an act of female transgression against the taboo that rested on public display of sexuality and romance in Victorian times (Walkowitz 35). However, it could also be suggested that in order to acknowledge the modern-day discussion on feminism and redefining gender roles, the female characters are ascribed homosexual behaviour to reflect the idea that women do not necessarily need men in order to find sexual pleasure.

On the whole, it becomes clear that the themes of power, beauty, and romance collectively reflect violent female transgression against male dominated Victorian society. The female characters are portrayed as rebellious women whose transgression manifests itself in agentic behaviour that

breaks socially constructed norms, the ideology that women are inferior to men in particular. Praising of women manifests itself in providing them with luxury and upper class clothing, but most importantly by sexual pleasure. Using sexuality as an instrument of praise can be understood as transgression against Victorian society's prudish lifestyle. Also, it suggests that sexuality is linked to (lower class) women. Either way, by paying much attention to erotica in the series, the producers go along with the pornification of contemporary media. By combining lower class associations (e.g., open display of sexuality) with upper class characteristics (e.g., luxury), the female characters seem to challenge elitist view on lower class women. Despite the women's depiction as revolutionists, the female characters remain gendered as the weaker sex. This idea is created as the male characters successfully punish the women for showing rejecting male authority and for showing rage and sadness, which is considered "unfeminine" behaviour. The male characters discipline the women by cancelling their support for them, which inevitably results in the abrupt fall of Lily's revolution. This forces the fallen women to retreat to their lives as deprived women, obediently living in the shadow of men.

Chapter 4 | Comparing Female Gendering in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Penny Dreadful*

This chapter discusses this study's results by making a careful connection to earlier findings on (Victorian) female gendering. Also, a deeper understanding of female gendering in the primary sources is constructed by discussing the works in a broader context. With regard to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, this study finds that generally, the misogynistic depiction of women throughout *The Picture of Dorian Gray* aligns with the common Victorian opinion of the female sex. The female characters experience minimal agency in, for example, romantic and social relationships, especially to men (Davies 42; Kittredge). Women are considered "good spouses," or generally accepted if they show compliance with socially constructed expectations of the feminine (Appel par 29; Altick 54). Transgression against these expectations, on the other hand, is followed by social punishment, which mostly takes form in alienation or a position of social disdain (Kittredge 84; Sargisson 26; Appel par 5). Ultimately, the novella illustrates the poor value that was generally attached to women in Victorian England (Madhok et al. 2; Lessa 285). Nonetheless, despite the female characters being generally portrayed according to Victorian society's common view on women, it could be proposed that the subordination of women in this particular work is result of a stylistic choice made by Wilde rather than the writer's articulation of an inherent patriarchal ideology. This suggestion would counter the idea that male Victorian writers (sub)consciously expressed patriarchal beliefs through their work as a sign of compliance to the ideology (Moore 118). As briefly discussed in chapter 2, although never explicitly confirmed by the writer himself, Wilde plays with implicit notions of homosexuality of main characters in his works (Kersten 5; Nunokawa 311; Alexander and Meem 15). Taking this into consideration, it comes to mind that Wilde possibly assigns inferior and impotence to women in order to promote the male sex, and thus indirectly to suggest the allure of homosexuality. In other words: by devaluing women and attaching more value to men, Wilde indirectly proposes the general attractiveness of the male sex. In reality, Oscar Wilde was, and still is today, renowned for his progressive thought on women and liberal mind (Stetz 230; Schaffer 222). The writer was of high importance for the promotion of "the New Woman," and was even denounced as "the prophet of corruption" in Victorian England (Stetz 232). Although the writer was related to the Aesthetic Movement, which believed that art in its various forms should not seek to convey a moral, sentimental

or educational message, but should give sensual pleasure (Brookes par 1), Wilde often showed transgression as part of aestheticism in his work (Dierkes-Thrun 127; Mendelssohn 164). The idea is created that Wilde, trialled for engaging in homosexual “indecentities,” vocalised his transgression against the Victorian society that considered homosexuality as “sodomic” through his artistic works (Dowling 125; Dierkes-Thrun 129). The incongruity of Wilde’s unfavourable, subordinating depiction of women and his actual liberal, (feminist) attitude can be considered Wildean irony (Eastham 37). The objective of his art, which, as this study suggests, is transgression, was supported by the use of irony. By exaggerating the condescending depiction of the novella’s female characters, Wilde enforces his work’s underlying cause: transgression against Victorian gender expectations.

*Penny Dreadful*, on the other hand, presents itself as neo-Victorian, meaning that Victorian sensibilities are mixed with modern principles and technologies, and it should be explored how the series gives attention to Victorian influences, but also which elements show modern-day principles. First of all, the series shows Victorianism in its setting. The characters, mostly adapted from well known Victorian novels, live in Victorian London and are confronted with monstrous and supernatural creatures from Victorian fiction. With respect to female gendering, the show adheres to the subordinating, Victorian view on women by ultimately depicting its female characters as the weaker sex (Madhok et al. 2; Lessa 285). The given that the female characters are never displayed actively and successfully harming men in one form or another, ultimately fail in their mission to female dominance, and are punished for their transgressive behaviour (Appel par 5; Davies 93) suggests that women remain inferior to men (Davies 42; Kittredge 13). However, the series does not pay as much attention to Victorian society’s expectations of the female sex as the novella does. Instead, the series strongly emphasises female transgression against the patriarchal ideology that is present within. The female characters are presented as rebels who show agentic behaviour that goes beyond what is expected of them as Victorian women. This behaviour is performed in extremity, meaning that the women drink and smoke excessively, engage in exaggerated, yet passionate sexual encounters, and use violence in order to harm men. The display of extreme forms of transgressive behaviour is not consistent with common Victorian feminist writing (Nsaidzedze 11). Although Victorian feminist writers did challenge socially constructed beliefs, female characters that embodied

the writer's transgression received more peaceful roles, and less violent personalities (Nsaidzedze 12). As briefly discussed in chapter 3, it may be suggested that by deviating from the primary text and placing strong emphasis on female transgression (Halder 11; Hutcheon 149), *Penny Dreadful* responds contemporary feminism in order to attract and interest a modern-day audience (Collins 64; Sargisson 130). By departing from gender expectations, the characters challenge gender norms, which is an important component of contemporary feminism (Muñoz 34; Collins 65; Sargisson 130). Moreover, as also suggested in chapter 3, *Penny Dreadful* also engages their audience by responding to pornification of contemporary media (Kersten 7; Attwood 83). Pornification is illustrated in the extensive display of sexuality. Today, especially western society's sexual freedom and sexuality in media are in influential relationship to one another (McNay 37; Attwood 460), which is why sexuality in series and films often increases audience pleasure. The series' response to feminism and pornification of media stands in line with the idea that *Penny Dreadful* is a process of contamination (Lee and King 5) and presentism (Kolke 385), as the show combines historical elements (e.g. Victorian setting and the novella's main character), with contemporary popular phenomena (feminism and pornification of media).

## Conclusion

This study has investigated female gendering in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and the plotline of Dorian Gray in *Penny Dreadful*, specifically in terms of agency, transgression, punishment, and praise. The concepts of beauty, romance, and power were used as thematic focal points. The results demonstrate that the sources align in their depiction of women as the weaker sex. The female characters are assigned little to no agency, considered inferior to men, and expected to behave according to society's norms. Obedience to society's expectations is mostly praised with social acceptance, although both sources, the novella especially, pays little attention to social praise of women. In *Penny Dreadful*, women's dedication to Lily's revolution is praised with sexual pleasure, which is most likely included in order to respond to the pornification of contemporary media. Punishment of women in the novella, which usually follows women's (unconscious) disagreement with social norms, which mostly takes form in a woman's alienation from society. Female transgression in the series, on the other hand, is punished by a "mental reset," which is realised by a by men developed serum that should change a woman's behaviour. Female transgression manifests itself in either showing "unladylike" behaviour or actively fighting male superiority. A notable distinction between the two primary sources is that the novella mainly includes male characters judging women's inability to adhere to society's standards, whereas *Penny Dreadful* much more addresses female transgression against patriarchal society. This study's discussion finds that Wilde portrays the female sex in a subordinate position in order to implicitly suggest homosexuality, which could be considered his transgression against the disapproval of homosexuality in Victorian society. This transgression reflects the aestheticism of Wilde's work. In *Penny Dreadful*, transgression operates as a main theme in the plotline of Dorian Gray. This study shows that female transgression in the series is emphasised in order to respond to present day's audience, amongst which feminism and redefining gender norms are popular issues.

Whereas much research has been performed on the depiction of the male sex in relation to implications of homosexuality throughout Wilde's novella, few studies have explored the work's gendering of the female sex, especially in light of the themes of romance, power, and beauty. Hence, this study offers new interpretive insights that complement the academic discussion of the novella.

Although existing studies have already confirmed the inferior depiction of women in the novella, this study contributes the observations that the themes of romance, power, and beauty agree with this depiction. Namely, with regard to these themes, female characters receive minimal agency, are praised for obedient behaviour, and are socially punished when they show transgressive behaviour that counters society's norms. Also, the observation that the patriarchal social structure throughout the novella supports the writer's implicit hints towards the main characters' homosexuality is noteworthy to mention. As this study does not extensively discuss Wilde's transgression as part of his art, it is suggested that further research investigates this idea in relation to female gendering in not only this particular text, but also in his extended repertoire. With regard to *Penny Dreadful*, there is a lack of existing studies that critically analyse the series, the depiction of its women especially. This causes for the current study to be based on a thin academic framework for the relatively new series. On the other hand, this lack could also be considered one of this study's strengths, as this research now pioneers in investigating the neo-Victorian show, in relation to female gendering especially. The most striking finding is the idea that despite the inclusion of progressive, strong-minded female characters, the female sex remains depicted inferior to men. Also, the observation that sexuality is used as a form of praise, presumably in order to respond to pornification of media and to attract a modern-day audience, is worth mentioning. These two notable results are worthwhile to explore more extensively, and this research lays the groundwork for further exploration. For example, it could be investigated how female gendering manifests itself in the series' other plotlines, also in the plotlines of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, and whether these findings align with this study's observations. Also, it could be further explored how sexuality plays part in the series' totality. A final strength of this research is the effectiveness of the framework of agency, transgression, praise and punishment as reading filters, as it sufficed in constructing a transparent picture of female gendering in the sources. In order to construct a bigger picture of female gendering in the primary sources it is suggested that further research is conducted on female gendering through focal points other than beauty, power, and romance, for example through the notion of art. Finally, further studies could complement this project by considering the characters' social class and female gendering in relation to moral beauty more explicitly and consistently.

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