

Dorota Babilas

University of Warsaw, Poland

d.babilas@uw.edu.pl

<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5055-2741>

Family Resemblance: Frankenstein’s Monster and the Phantom of the Opera in *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016)

ABSTRACT

The Creature of *Frankenstein* never managed to fulfil his desire of finding a loving partner in Mary Shelley’s novel, but his symbolic progeny continues to haunt modern popular culture. The article discusses the case of “family resemblance” between Frankenstein’s Creature and the title antihero of Gaston Leroux’s *The Phantom of the Opera*. In their respective literary sources, they share an inborn deformity, an appreciation for music, a romantic yearning for love and acceptance matched with sociopathic violence. Recently, the TV series *Penny Dreadful* elaborates on these allusions, conflating the narratives by Shelley and Leroux, as well as their later adaptations.

Keywords: *Penny Dreadful*, *Frankenstein*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, mash-up, adaptation

Recombining iconic Victorian characters has become something of a staple of millennial popular culture – e.g. Kim Newman’s novel *Anno Dracula* (1992), Alan Moore’s graphic novel *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999), or the TV series *Dickensian* (2015-2016), to mention but a few examples in different media. The phenomenon of the continued popularity of the Victorian era and the cultural need to reinvent it has been theorised by scholars of the Victorian (Sweet, 2002), Neo-Victorian (Mitchell 2010), and Gothic Studies (Halberstam, 1995) alike. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that John Logan, the creator of horror drama television series *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016), would choose to draw upon a wide array of Gothic fiction. The series presents a complex and erudite mash-up of (mostly) Victorian Gothic stories including the characters from Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), and tales of witches, werewolves, demonic possessions etc. It would not be unanticipated that in a tale that reworks so many characters and plotlines from

late-19th and early-20th century Gothic tradition, Gaston Leroux's *Phantom of the Opera* (1910) would also make his appearance. Especially regarding the fact that the novel – known for its many adaptations, most of them in the English language – has generally been accepted as part of the anglicised Gothic canon, so much so that *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* lists it alongside the works of Stoker, Stevenson, and Wilde (Hogle, 2002b, p. 9) rather than position it in the tradition of the French *fantastique*.

In a way the Phantom (called Erik in the novel) does appear – and yet he doesn't. In the spirit of Derrida's "hauntology" (1994, p. 10), subtle but clear allusions to Leroux's story and its numerous subsequent "progeny" (Hogle, 2002a, p. 1) are visible in one of the central characters of *Penny Dreadful* – Doctor Frankenstein's (first) Monster (played by Rory Kinnear), known also as Caliban and later as John Clare. The Creature follows many of the narrative paths used by Leroux's antihero, making the Phantom the ghostly presence haunting the show. The ghostly presence of the Phantom is evident by the narrative traces he leaves behind, yet hard to grasp, continually recycled and altered – and in turn engendering constant alterations in the Creature.

1. The Monster and the Opera Ghost

The origins of this "ghostly presence" run deep in the past. Already in the original novel, Gaston Leroux's antihero, Erik the Phantom, bears more than a passing likeness to Shelley's monster. In their respective literary sources, they share an inborn deformity able to scare and repulse onlookers, an appreciation for music and poetry, a romantic yearning for love and acceptance, matched with sociopathic violence – and some physical characteristics including long, black hair, thin, black lips, a deathly pallor and otherworldly, inhuman yellow eyes. In Chapter 5 of Shelley's novel, Victor Frankenstein recalls his first view of his creation with horror: "I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open," continuing with a fuller description:

His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips. (Shelley, 2005/1818, Chapter 5)

The characters of Leroux's *Phantom of the Opera* offer equally terrifying accounts of the appearance of the presumed "Opera Ghost":

His jacket hangs on a skeletal frame. His eyes are so deep that you can hardly see the pupils. There are only two big black holes, like a dead man's skull. His skin is stretched

out across his face tight as a drumhead and is not white, but a pasty yellow. His nose is so insignificant that you almost can't see it and its very absence is too awful to behold. The only hair I saw were three or four long dark locks on his forehead and behind his ears. (Leroux, 2004/1910, Chapter 1)

Later on, they repeatedly stress that the most terrifying element are the villain's "blazing, yellow eyes" (Leroux, 2004/1910, Chapter 13, 21, 26).

Popular culture has acknowledged the visual resemblance between the two classic Gothic monsters ever since they were played by Lon Chaney and his son Lon Chaney Jr. in the early decades of the development of horror cinema. The Creature – first played by Boris Karloff in 1931 in what began a whole series of *Frankenstein* movies – had an elongated skull with a distinctive high forehead and strands of black hair, thin lips and deep-set eyes, whose colour was impossible to tell in black and white. Many of these features were reprised from the famous make-up devised by Lon Chaney – known in Hollywood as "the man of a thousand faces" – and used in 1925 in Universal's earliest horror, *The Phantom of the Opera*. The face of the Phantom, originally kept secret before the movie's premiere, in time became something of a fetish in re-releases of the film, further emphasizing the visual connection between Leroux's character and *Frankenstein*. When Lon Chaney Jr played the Monster in *The Ghost of Frankenstein* in 1942 – shortly before a Universal remake of the *Phantom* with Claude Rains in the title role reached the cinemas – the "family resemblance" (Wittgenstein 1969: 32), that is a set of well-established unifying characteristics, was made even more obvious to horror fans. Not all of the distinguishing features of the character must be present at the same time, but there seem to be too many of them to be dismissed as purely coincidental.

Actually, the parallels go beyond the rather superficial references in horror movies. In a more direct take, the 2004 (re-)translation of Leroux's novel into English by the French-American husband and wife team Jean-Marc and Randy Lofficier (the 4th official translation of *The Phantom*) includes an added prequel titled "His Father's Eyes," in which the Phantom is revealed to be a biological son of Frankenstein's Creature. The short story opens with a terrified young woman named Rosemary held captive in a dishevelled shack in the Scottish highlands by an unnamed monster, whose description sounds strangely familiar: "corpse-like face," "lipless mouth," "dirty strands of long, black, matted hair," and especially "burning yellow eyes" (Lofficier). The reader of Leroux's novel may immediately assume that this is Erik the Phantom, possibly before he settled in the Paris Opera (we know from the novel that he had travelled all over the world and moved in only as an adult). However, the creature – referred to by Rosemary only with an italicized *he* – seems rougher and more animalistic than the Phantom, he also remains almost completely silent. As Anne Myers observes:

Rosemary is, like her parallel [Leroux's] Christine, a self-sacrificing figure; just as Christine does Erik's will in order to save [her fiancé] Raoul and the opera house from eradication, so Rosemary does not escape when given the possible opportunity to do so, for fear of bringing the creature's wrath down on others (specifically her father and her village). Her belief in the creature's near-omnipotent ability to track and find her is very similar to Christine's spellbound belief in Erik's abilities, while, as in Leroux's story, her father is the only family member mentioned in connection to her. (Myers)

Lofficier's story contradicts much of Leroux's internal chronology and the information given in his novel, but it offers some interesting intertextual connections. The monster assaults Rosemary sexually and then unexpectedly leaves, and she soon discovers that she is pregnant. Her father ships her off to Rouen to live with some relatives. She gives birth to a baby boy, but is terrified to see "his evil yellow eyes" (Lofficier) which resemble his father's. Only then it is revealed that it is the baby who is supposed to be Leroux's Erik, although in the novel he is raised by an unloving mother, and here Rosemary soon dies and leaves him in the care of her aunt and uncle. As a final touch, at the end of Lofficier's short story a motto is given in the form of a quotation from Shelley's *Frankenstein* – attributed directly to the Monster: "Shall each man find a wife for his bosom, and each beast have his mate, and I be alone? I had feelings of affection, and they were requited by detestation and scorn" (Shelley quoted in Lofficier).

The short story addresses the question of the Phantom's inborn deformity, placing him in the line of monsters rather than, as Leroux did, making him unique and singular in his hideousness, and thus even more solitary both in his genius and in his madness. Moreover, the name Rosemary and the whole concept of monstrous birth may be a further reference to Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (based on Ira Levin's novel), in which the protagonist also was terrified to see her new-born son's monstrous flaming eyes, in this case linking him to the devil himself. Perhaps, then, Lofficier's aim was to remove the whole story of the Phantom and Frankenstein one more generation back and suggest a demonic lineage of the resurrected Creature.

Like Frankenstein's Creature, Erik is what Franco Moretti (1983, p. 84) calls "a totalising monster", extremely adaptable to embody any symbolic threat. Literary criticism has made ample use of this flexibility. In consequence, *Frankenstein* has been discussed in terms of anxieties of the modern society, tensions between nature and nurture (Levine, 1973; O'Rourke, 1989), the sublime (Clubbe, 1991), or identity issues concerning gender, class, and race (Veeder, 1986; Dickerson, 1993; Mellor, 2001). Much in the same vein, Leroux's *Phantom of the Opera* has been, as demonstrated i.a. by Jerrold E. Hogle, perceived to be a tale about various kinds of otherness. He can represent the menace of an underclass climbing up the social ladder, with additional allusions to a dangerous Middle-Easterner or a Semite (especially resonant in a post-Dreyfus French society);

he could be a lurking criminal, or even a sexually undefined hermaphrodite or a deviant (Hogle, 2002c, pp. 214-222). Leroux's novel deals with the fears of "degeneration" and "decadence," which pose threats to the stability of bourgeois society of the turn of the twentieth century, but it could also be analysed in terms of the social fear of feminine talent (Hawkins, 1990) and the disruptive power of art (especially music) in general.

In his 1981 non-fiction book *Danse Macabre*, Stephen King acknowledges *Frankenstein's Monster* (together with *Dracula* and the *Werewolf*) as a powerful archetype of the horror genre – a type he calls the "Thing Without a Name" (1981, p. 37). The same soubriquet could be applied also to the *Phantom*, especially in his most famous pop-cultural incarnation in Andrew Lloyd Webber's blockbuster musical of 1986, where he remains nameless.

2. Frankenstein created the Phantom

These constantly developing parallel literary histories seem to inform the rewriting of the character of the *Monster* in *Penny Dreadful*. In the three seasons of the series, the *Creature's* plotline follows almost exactly the trials and tribulations faced by Erik in the century after the publication of Leroux's novel in its multiple adaptations and remakes (Hogle, 2002a; Picard, 2016). This adds another layer of complexity to the cultural history shared by the two characters. As Linda Hutcheon (2013) observes in the revised edition of her seminal *Theory of Adaptation*, playing with recognisable motives and tropes – especially pertaining to stories with an established fan following – often implies a degree of prior knowledge on the part of the audience who joins in the game of riddles and associations. Of course, for any adaptation to succeed, artistically and commercially, it is necessary to be attractive "for both knowing and unknowing audiences" (p. 121), but erudite and playful mash-ups usually rely on knowing audiences more than other types of adaptations. In the case of the *Phantom* this includes at least basic familiarity not only with Leroux's novel, but also with its later reworkings.

Even from his first appearance in the series (Season 1, Episode 2), the *Monster* – revealed to be the first, discarded original creation of the youthful Victor Frankenstein (Harry Treadaway) – displays the characteristics shared by Shelley's antihero and Leroux's *Phantom*: the long black hair, deathly white skin, thin black lips and the yellow eyes. Still, some of the secondary characteristics of the *Phantom* seem to be diffused also among different characters in the series – such as the (post-Lloyd-Webber) half-mask hiding the mauled face of the revenge-driven detective Warren Roper (Stephen Lord) or the fact that spoiled and megalomaniacal Dorian Gray (Reeve Carney) lists opera among his many artistic passions.

The *Creature*, despite being articulate, literate, and even quite talented, is rejected and feared both by his creator and the general populace, mostly on

account of his supposedly “abhorrent” looks. The right-hand half of his face is badly scarred following Frankenstein’s experiments – recalling the half-deformed face of Lloyd Webber’s (nameless) Phantom. Searching for acceptance, a purpose in life and personal identity – and after surviving an unprovoked attack in the street, recalling David Lynch’s *The Elephant Man* (1980) – the Monster finds shelter in a rather low-brow theatre, where a friendly elderly actor takes him in, offers him a job of a stage technician, and calls him Caliban. He soon befriends a beautiful actress Maud Gunneson (Hannah Tointon), and attempts to woo her by reading poetry together (including – what else? – his favourite *Paradise Lost*). Tragically, Caliban mistakes Maud’s compassion (he reminds her of her brother, disfigured in a factory accident) and small acts of kindness for romantic interest and barely resists attacking her in grief and anger when finally she rejects his advances.

The relocation of the place of action from an opera house, to a theatre – given a meaningful name of “Grand Guignol Britannia” – points not only to the original Grand-Guignol theatre, an important Parisian landmark of the *belle époque* macabre (Hand and Wilson 2002), but also to the transposition of Leroux’s *Phantom* from the realm of high art to popular culture. Moreover, the whole subplot, including the Swedish-sounding name of the actress, bears direct resemblance to the central plot of *The Phantom of the Opera*, namely Erik’s obsessive love for the young soprano Christine Daaé whom he teaches through the dressing-room mirror, promotes her career at the theatre, and finally kidnaps to his lair (Persephone-like) – only to be confronted by her handsome aristocratic suitor. In *Penny Dreadful*, the heartbreak pushes Caliban to demand of Victor Frankenstein the creation of an undead, resurrected mate especially for him – a task that Victor reluctantly undertakes, only to himself fall in love with the revived consumptive prostitute he names Lily (Billie Piper).

3. The Creature on Erik’s narrative path

The second season has Caliban – who has now taken the name of John Clare, after another of his favourite poets – working at a waxworks museum, further conglomerating the narratives by Shelley and Leroux, or more specifically Leroux’s inspirations and reworkings. Following the classic horror movies path, the inclusion of the wax museum as Gothic space recalls the 1933 *Mystery of the Wax Museum* (dir. Michael Curtiz) with its mutilated sculptor bent on revenge. As noticed by film critic Richard Koszarski (1979, p. 16): “the description of the monster’s face recalls the make-up of Lon Chaney” in the 1925 *Phantom*, and “the unmasking scene in particular is direct plagiarism”. Additionally, another recurring Phantom trope – filmic and literary – is present, that of a blind woman as the implicitly perfect partner for the disfigured protagonist. The classic example of such a heroine is Dea from Victor Hugo’s *The Man Who Laughs* – an important

literary influence on Leroux's novel, also adapted later for the big screen in early Hollywood. Being blind, Dea cannot be repulsed by the ugliness of her lover, the circus freak Gwynplaine, but can fully appreciate his sensitivity and talent. A similar motif of a blind girl who can symbolically see beyond the repulsive face of the Phantom appeared relatively early on, in the series of Chinese film adaptations entitled *Song at Midnight* (1937, multiple later remakes). In Western culture, a character of a blind pianist, Miss Lowell, who comforts the heartbroken Erik was introduced by Sam Siciliano in his rendition of "Sherlock Holmes meets the Phantom" story, *The Angel of the Opera*, in 1994. *Penny Dreadful* uses this melodramatic motif very creatively and openly plays with the audience's expectations – as Lavinia (Tamsin Topolski), the blind daughter of the owners of the waxwork exhibition, proves deceitful and heartless despite the idealistic assumptions that her lack of eyesight could imply. She tries to ensnare Clare, so that her parents can imprison and exploit him for their profit. She is eventually spared when the monster takes his revenge, but it is because of his pity rather than her own merit.

The third and last season of *Penny Dreadful* offers yet another possible Phantom-related storyline for Frankenstein's Creature. In the series, Clare starts having flashbacks of his life before the unholy resurrection. Gradually he remembers having a wife and a small son, whom he decides to find and reunite with. His plan succeeds, and in a surprising turn of events, both Marjorie (Pandora Colin) and 10-year-old Jack (Casper Allpress) welcome their undead family member with open arms and tears of joy. They refuse to see anything monstrous in his creation and are happy to see him brought back to life. The family idyll is unfortunately short-lived, as Jack who suffers from terminal tuberculosis dies in his father's arms soon after his return. Despite Marjorie's pleas, Clare refuses to take his son's body to Victor Frankenstein so that he can be "cured" and resurrected the way he himself had been. Knowing that this would tear up his relationship with his wife, Clare buries Jack in the waves of the Thames and once again is left alone in the world.

The idea that the Phantom of the Opera might wish to have a wife and offspring is present already in Leroux's novel, when Erik declares to the kidnapped Christine (and earlier to his friend, the Persian) that he wants to "have a wife like everyone else," to take out for walks on Sundays and entertain (Leroux, 2004/1910, Chapter 23). A Sunday walk in Kensington Park is precisely what Clare promises to his ill son – a dream of happiness that is never meant to be. A sad observation that "a home, even wife and children were not out of the question" for Erik is made in Donald Barthelme's short story "The Phantom of the Opera's Friend" published already in 1970. The friend in the title might be the Persian from Leroux novel, or possibly anyone sympathetic towards Erik's plight, including many of the readers. In fact, a baby (usually male) fathered by the Phantom with Christine, or with

another partner deemed more appropriate, can be found not only in countless works of fan-fiction, but also in professionally published sequels and novelisations of Leroux's story, such as Susan Kay's *Phantom* (1990) or Frederick Forsyth's *The Phantom of Manhattan* (1999). The latter novel provided the inspiration for a much-criticised sequel to Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical, entitled *Love Never Dies* (which premiered in 2010 in London). Here the child survives, but the Phantom's newly found family bliss is also tragically cut short.

The Creature of Doctor Frankenstein and the Phantom of the Opera have shared much of their characteristics from the onset, and the paths of mutual inspiration of the subsequent adaptations of both stories have been complex and winding, but never far apart. In a way, the Phantom is the Creature's "monstrous progeny," developing some aspects of his character and its cultural significance. But in the century that followed, the engendering went both ways – with Frankenstein's Monster acquiring some traits borrowed from the Opera Ghost and his quest for identity, recognition, and acceptance. The protagonist of *Penny Dreadful* may serve as proof that this "family connection" is beneficial for both sides.

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