

‘There’s no room for demons when you’re self-possessed’

Supernatural Possession in British Girls’ Comics

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This chapter analyses the depiction of possession in British girls’ comics from the 1950s to the 1970s and reflects on the development of this motif to give insight into changing views of girlhood. It begins with a brief historical background that notes early instances of the possession motif in 1950s and 1960s British comics. This timeline shows that early possession stories often give a rational explanation (hypnosis, alien, or computer technology), or provide some justification for the villain’s actions. However, by the 1970s supernatural possession was a well-established motif with a clear set of visual indicators. The chapter then compares two 1970s comics: *Spellbound* (DC Thomson, 1976-78) and *Misty* (IPC, 1978-80), using quantitative analysis of their entire run to demonstrate how often possession appears, in what types of stories, and what qualities are associated with it.ⁱ This is complemented by qualitative discussion which closely analyses two serial stories and reveals that, although possession and loss of control often appear as threats in these comics, undergoing possession can also have positive benefits such as allowing characters to address or negotiate historical trauma, particularly relating to gender. Further, while scientific or paranormal possession may be used to control girls who are disobedient, badly behaved, or perhaps just too powerful, many stories instead choose to foreground the ways that these characters struggle against such influence. These tales present strong willpower, personal strength and even rebellion as important and desirable traits. This makes the possession motif an excellent example

of the contradictory line that these girls' periodicals had to tread as they balanced thrills and adventure against conservatism and propriety.

Background to British girls' comics

British girls' comics were launched in 1950 when Amalgamated Press revamped their text story paper *School Friend* into a weekly picture story paper. It sold a million copies a week in its first few years (Digby 2017), and was followed by titles such as *Girl* (Hulton Press 1951) and *Girls' Crystal* (Amalgamated Press, 1953-63). These early girls' comics are characterised by pre-war British values: ideologically conservative and based on fixed social relations with the focus entirely on middle- or upper-middle-class characters (Chapman 2011: 112) in gender-approved occupations. A second wave began in 1958 with the launch of *Bunty* (DC Thomson 1958–2001), which was aimed at a working-class audience (Gibson 2003: 91) with a 'cheap and cheerful' look (Sabin 1996: 82). *Bunty* gave its readers outsider protagonists with stories that often revolved around their inability to fit in, often with psychological cruelty (Chapman 2011) and bullying. It was followed by many imitators, such as *Judy* (DC Thomson 1960–91), *Diana* (DC Thomson 1963–76), and *Mandy* (DC Thomson 1967–91). Of these, *Diana* stood out with its larger format and higher quality colour printing, and combined hard-luck tales with more spooky stories and science fiction. The late 1950s and early 1960s also brought a parallel wave of romance comics such as *Marilyn* (Amalgamated 1955–65), *Valentine* (Amalgamated 1957–74), *Roxy* (Amalgamated 1958–63), *Mirabelle* (Pearson 1956–77), and *Romeo* (DC Thomson 1957–74). *Jackie* followed (DC Thomson 1964–93), becoming an exceptional success that by the early 1970s was selling over a million copies per issue (Sabin 1996: 84). The subsequent third wave of girls' comics was led by *Tammy* (IPC

1971–84), followed by *Jinty* (IPC 1974–81), *Spellbound* (DC Thomson 1976–78) and *Misty* (IPC 1978–80). This ‘dark wave’ took the established hard-luck tale and increased the cruelty and angst: putting protagonists in extreme situations and testing them to their limits, alongside tales of mystery and supernatural stories.

As this summary shows, the British industry swiftly became characterised by a back-and-forth approach where each new title would be met with a competing one from a rival publisher, upping the ante and ultimately sparking a new wave. For example, DC Thomson’s *Bunty* reinvigorated the stale school formula for a more diverse group of readers, which was successful until IPC responded by increasing the suffering and emotional content in the third wave. As decades passed, the struggle became condensed down to a tussle between two rivals: DC Thomson, a family-run company in Dundee, and IPC, a London-based holding company that absorbed the other smaller companies (most prominently Amalgamated Press, renamed Fleetway Publications, which had previously bought companies such as Odhams (incorporating Hulton Press), and George Newnes).

As girls’ comics evolved, the ‘hard luck’ story template became quite common. This story type is known by various names: publisher John Sanders calls it the ‘cry with me’ story (2018), writer and editor Pat Mills (2011; 2014; 2016) calls it the ‘slave’ story, as the protagonist experiences weekly setbacks and tragedies, and writer Alison Fitt (2020) calls it a ‘weepee’ due to its sad content. But although there is a perception that this was a third-wave invention (Sanders 2018), themes of isolation and persecution appear in the girls’ comics from the start and are obvious in their best-known stories. For example, ‘The Silent Three’ (*School Friend*, originally drawn by Evelyn Flinders, written by Horace Boyten and Stewart Pride) initially band together to rebel against bullying from a tyrannical prefect, before moving on to solve

mysteries. ‘The Four Marys’ (*Bunty*, originally drawn by Bill Holroyd, then multiple artists) battle all sorts of problems including victimisation as one of the Marys is a working-class scholarship girl. ‘Bella at the Bar’ (*Tammy*, art by John Armstrong, written by Jenny McDade) sees Bella struggle against numerous setbacks including her obstructive and exploitative relatives as she tries to fulfil her dream of becoming an Olympic gymnast. Notorious stories such as ‘Slaves of War Orphan Farm’ (*Tammy*, art by Desmond Walduck, written by Gerry Finley-Day) heaped on the suffering and abuse. In this way the girls’ comics developed many tales based around themes of psychological cruelty and oppression, set against individual strength and capability. The drive towards discord and hardship appears from the very beginning, linked clearly with repeated themes such as exploitation and isolation (see Round 2019). These qualities intersect with the motif of possession, making it an excellent tool to examine these stories.

Defining possession

1. to have or to own [...] 2. to occupy or dominate the mind of, *be possessed by a devil* or *with an idea*; *fought like one possessed*, as if strengthened by an evil spirit or a powerful emotion.

(Oxford English Dictionary)

The wording is striking – ideologically loaded with violent and supernatural concepts (dominate, devil, fought, evil, spirit) and tied clearly to the cerebral (mind, idea, emotion). These tropes find an echo in writer and editor Lizzie Boyle’s comments on the IPC girls’ comics archive:

There’s a real thread of characters being haunted, controlled or otherwise psychologically manipulated either by evil, scheming adults or by

everyday items like mirrors, jewellery, hairbrushes or even sunglasses. A lot of the stories are about how far you can be pushed mentally on[c]e you have placed yourself in a situation and how much destruction you're willing to do to friends and family along the way.

(Boyle 2020)

Again, the lexis suggests negative and violent connotations (controlled, destruction) alongside Gothic and supernatural tropes (haunted, evil), and reference to the cerebral (manipulated, scheming, psychological, pushed mentally). Boyle's summary also adds a clear focus on the feminine (through vanity items such as mirrors, jewellery, and hairbrushes, and the domestic context of friends and family) and references an active participant ('you have placed yourself', 'what you are willing to do'). This sense of culpability is particularly interesting since 'to possess' is commonly understood as a loss of control and agency. It suggests that the girls' comics employed a more nuanced and complicated notion of possession than is often used, as the title of this chapter (a quote from the late Carrie Fisher) also implies. Like Boyle's summary, this statement addresses the receiver directly and places the responsibility for their own emotional state firmly on their shoulders, stating baldly that self-control and composure are the means for avoiding negativity and danger. This reinterpretation of the possession motif accords with many of the 'contradictory urges of aspiration and rebellion' that appear in girls' comics (Gibson 2015, 126).

To explore whether this is an accurate description of the treatment of possession in girls' comics, this research began by tracing a timeline of early appearances of this motif.ⁱⁱ An early instance is the serial story 'You Will Obey', in the romance comic *Marilyn* #30–36 (Amalgamated Press, 8 Oct–19 Nov 1955, art by Robert McGillivray, writer unknown). In this story, the famous hypnotist Cosmo

takes control of protagonist Judy and attempts to make her kill his wife. His plan fails when Judy resists his will and falls in love with Mark, who helps her show the police that her confessions are false. In this tale possession is a dangerous negative force: Cosmo takes control of Judy's body for his own reasons. But alongside this there are competing tropes that complicate the depiction. Judy is special: 'She is the girl in a million I have been searching for!' (#31) as Cosmo can control her from a distance. She also retains her self-awareness and a degree of agency throughout the experience ('I don't want to do it! Don't make me! Don't make me!' #31) and is able to resist Cosmo's will, although it causes her physical pain ('Let me go. Oh my head, my head!' #33).

Judy's resistance to Cosmo's will is initially framed as her own power and agency in both the narrative voice ('Judy fought a silent battle', #31) and her own thoughts, as she first questions her own actions ('Where am I? What am I doing here?', #30) and later decides 'I'm going to fight back!' (#31). But her helplessness is also emphasised, as the narrative describes her as a 'slave to a force she could not understand' (#30). Her agency diminishes as the story continues and instead her ability to resist is presented as the result of Mark's love (see figure 1), which becomes the dominant interpretation.



Figure 1: ‘You Will Obey!’, *Marilyn* #31. Art by Robert McGillivray. Reproduced with permission of Misty™ Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd.; copyright © Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd., all rights reserved.

Although hypnosis is a genuine psychological therapy, ‘You Will Obey’ presents it as uncanny and supernatural. Judy feels ‘as if a spell had been put over me’ (#31) and the story uses many visual markers that connote unnaturalness, as Cosmo’s disembodied eyes loom over Judy (#30) and his voice echoes in her thoughts in a ghostly font (‘Confess! Confess!’ #33). While under his power her body language becomes rigid, with a glassy stare, and both her posture and her actions are consistently intertwined with death (she is nearly hit by a car when first possessed, attempts to kill Cosmo’s wife, etcetera). This early example thus presents the motif as something with mysterious and dangerous overtones, and which threatens female identity and agency.

Possession begins to appear much more frequently in the 1960s, associated strongly with a science fiction theme. ‘The Strange Ones’ appeared in *Diana* #61–72 (DC Thomson, 18 Apr–4 July 1964) and reprinted in *Spellbound* #23–34 (26 Feb–14

May 1977, art by George Martin, writer unknown). Three identical new girls enrol in a ballet school and enslave various teachers and pupils, turning them into white-haired people like themselves. The Strange Ones always appear as a group (standing in identical poses, moving together) and the iconography of the tale draws on science fiction tropes, such as circular lines indicating their effects of their power (#63), and (as in ‘You Will Obey’) ghostly images of their faces and eyes overlaying those they have possessed (#65; #70). It was followed by other similar stories, such as ‘The Other Katie’ (dates and creators unknown), where identical alien women with strange powers transform protagonist Katie into a champion ice skater (Rushton 2021), and ‘Singing for the Green Stranger’, *Diana* #133–139 (4 Sep–16 Oct 1965, art by George Martin, writer unknown) where a green-skinned alien kidnaps and hypnotizes a Scottish girls’ choir and teaches them how to sing weird high-pitched notes that break glass. All these examples recall Boyle’s comments through the gendered nature of the coveted skills (ballet, ice skating, choral singing) and the way that hypnotic control is presented as an inhuman and uncanny ability.

A different tone appears in ‘Mimi the Mesmerist’ (*June and School Friend*, 11 Dec 65–c.66, reprinted in *Schoolgirls’ Picture Library* #316 and *June and School Friend Picture Library* #352, art by Philip Townsend, writer unknown). Here Mimi is in control of the hypnotic power, and the story has a more light-hearted tone – it is called her ‘fluence, and she uses it to revenge herself on bossy prefects, teachers, and so on. Other examples from the mid-1960s include ‘The School Under the Rocket’ (*Diana*, 1966), in which Sharon is hypnotised by a female alien robot to sabotage a space flight (Rushton 2021) and ‘The Mysterious Medallion’ (*Bunty* #481–492, 1 Apr–17 June 1967, writer and artist unknown), where Julie finds a medallion with mysterious powers that gives her ability to control people’s minds but also makes her

cruel. She believes it is a computer sent from another planet, and the science fiction theme is stressed many times in this story – rays of control appear to emanate from the medallion (#484); jagged speech balloons are used to convey its computerised voice (#485), and those who fall under its control are presented in identical poses with a rigid stance (#484; #485). The lexis also connotes science fiction, as Julie is ‘caught in the medallion’s force beams!’ (#485) and receives messages ‘transmitted into her brain’ (#485). In ‘Wonder Girl’ (*Diana*, c.Sep–Dec 1967), a mysterious silver ball with a ‘voice from a far-off planet’ (#243) gives Sylvie the ability to be good at everything, but also makes her act oddly and show off. Possession as hypnosis also appears in *Judy*’s ‘Sandra Wilson’ series, such as ‘Sandra and the Vengeance Ballet’ (*Judy* Annual 1967) in which teacher Boris Rambine hypnotises his dancers to perform better, and ‘Sandra and the Ballet of Macbeth’, (*Judy* Annual 1974) where Sandra herself is hypnotised into attacking a fellow ballerina (Goof 2021). These examples demonstrate that alien or hypnotic possession was a frequent and popular story trope. They also offer a more complicated depiction of possession than the earliest appearances. It is often a two-way street: characters may gain great abilities and new skills, but this comes at a price. An association with death and darkness also continues, despite the rational explanations (whether scientific or alien) that are given.

Supernatural connotations begin to appear towards the end of the 1960s, for example in ‘The Doll of Terror’ (*Diana* c.May–July 1968). Pam finds a creepy silver doll with the power to control her and others and when it vibrates, she is taken over by a new persona who delights in the trouble it causes. The story’s title and the way the doll is presented position it as an uncanny and unnatural object: Pam exclaims ‘It’s moving! I can feel it throbbing, as if it had a heart! And its eyes! It’s coming alive!’ (#273) The story is remembered by readers as an instance of demonic

possession (Rushton 2021) but in fact ends with a rational explanation, revealing that the doll was planted by ‘a foreign power experimenting on causing trouble in our country’ and will be investigated (‘I’m taking this head to the laboratory [...] inside, we’ll find the secret of its hypnotic power’, #281). Similar overtones appear in ‘The Black Marks’ (*Judy*, c. Dec 1969) where four girls are affected by strange black marks which give them strange powers such as superhuman strength and an ability to run at great speed. Like ‘The Doll of Terror’ it leans heavily on sinister and supernatural tropes, such as the marks themselves and the glassy stares of those who have been possessed and is remembered as terrifying by readers (Moulson 2016).

By the 1970s, then, stories of unnatural and mysterious possession were well-established. New comics such as *Sandie* and *Jinty* launched their first issue with such a tale, leading Jenni Scott (2017) to point out that the possession story ‘was clearly seen as a core story type at the time, a good winning formula to include right from the off.’ ‘The School of No Escape’ (*Sandie* #1–12, 12 Feb–29 Apr 72), reprinted in *Misty Annual 1979*, art by B. Jackson, writer unknown) is another iteration of the alien control theme, as mysterious new head teacher Miss Voor hypnotises teachers and replaces schoolgirls. The same visual iconography appears as in the 1960s: ‘cold eyes’ are mentioned more than once; the alien characters are drawn with similar replication, the possessed girls have a rigid stance and stilted speech, and hypnotic power is signalled via circular lines.

‘Gail’s Indian Necklace’ (*Jinty* #1–13, 11 May–4 Aug 1974, art by Phil Gascoine, writer unknown) is thus one of the earliest confirmed instances of supernatural or magical possession. Gail finds the necklace at a bring-and-buy sale and falls under its control, leading to negative acts such as stealing, until she returns it to an idol in the museum. Although this possession is magical, it contains similar

tropes to the previous examples: the power has a dangerous physical side, for example when Gail wishes her aunt out of the way she is run over. Yet it also has some positive effects, such as giving Gail the power to read minds (see Scott 2017). Many other prominent examples appear by the mid-1970s, with both supernatural and science fiction themes. For example, ‘The Balloon of Doom’ in *Bunty* #981–1003 (30 Oct 1976–2 Apr 1977, then reprinted in 1986, art by Robert MacGillivray, writer unknown), where Kathy’s little sister Sarah falls under the influence of a mysterious balloon, which causes destructive weather events and turns her into a mean and malicious child. Other notable examples include ‘Spell of the Spinning Wheel’ (*Jinty*, 5 Mar–25 June 1977, art by Jim Baikie, written by Alison Christie); ‘Slave of the Clock’ (*Tammy* 17 July–30 Oct 1982, art by María Barrera Castell and Guillermo Gesalí [credited as Barrera Gesalí], written by Jay Over); and ‘The Portrait of Doreen Gray’ (*Tammy* c.1983, art by Tony Coleman [credited as George Anthony], written by Charles Herring), in which shy Doreen first benefits from the self-confidence and improved skills that she gains from a mysterious painting, before this goes too far.ⁱⁱⁱ

To summarise, the possession motif has limited presence in the 1950s, but develops in the 1960s with a science-fiction focus. These tales generally end peacefully, and the antagonist is given some justification for their actions. The shift towards supernatural or evil possession begins in the late 1960s, where Gothic tropes are initially used to mislead the reader before a rational explanation ultimately prevails. Clear-cut examples of paranormal or magical possession emerge in the early 1970s and will now be explored through a more detailed comparative analysis.

Possession in 1970s girls’ comics

The working definition of possession emerging from these stories is a loss of control of either one's personality or one's actions. More specifically, the victim cedes autonomy their over mind or body to another's will. This is an important qualification, since the girls' comics also contain a lot of other motifs and themes that share some qualities with possession. For example, characters may find that they have been replaced with a sinister double or doppelganger ('Lyn Dean's Deadly Double', *Spellbound* #39–47; 'The Body Snatchers', *Misty* #92–101), or they might suffer from dreams or visions ('Don't Look Twice', *Misty* #57–66). They may realise that their reality has been manipulated in some way ('The Experiment', *Misty* #100), or that they have false or inexplicable memories, perhaps as the result of reincarnation or a haunting ('Hush, Hush, Sweet Rachel', *Misty* #42–52). Drugging might also be used to render girls compliant or incapable ('The Cauldron', *Spellbound* #51).^{iv} The following section uses data from a quantitative analysis project conducted by Paul Fisher Davies, which reviewed summaries of *Spellbound* and *Misty*'s entire corpus of stories to identify the various forms possession might take. This is complemented by qualitative analysis of examples which shows how the possession motif engages with gendered issues and particularly instances of historical trauma to emerge unexpectedly as a mediating presence

Davies (2021) points out that 'The word 'spellbound' implies control' and DC Thomson's *Spellbound* certainly exploited the possession motif. *Spellbound* was launched in 1976 and ran for 69 issues, publishing 227 individual stories.^v These were a mixture of serials and single stories, in both text and graphic forms. *Spellbound* also included some *Diana* reprints, such as 'The Strange Ones' (discussed above) and 'Supercats', about an all-female space crew with special powers who fly around the

galaxy solving problems on other planets (created by Marion [Fiona] Turner, art by Jorge and Enrique Badia Romero).

Spellbound's very first issue contains two possession stories ('When the Mummy Walks...' and 'The Haunting of Laura Lee'). A deep dive into its content reveals that 32 of the 227 stories (14 per cent) use the motif. These were tagged using the following categories: whom (possessee, patient), who (possessor, agent), what (verb, action), how (manner), where (place), when (time), and why (motivation). Surveying these categories reveals that most possession tales are set in the future (15 stories) or present (12 stories), while just 6 take place in the past. The possessed character is most often the protagonist, but only by a slim margin (17 stories versus 15 where the possessee is a secondary character, plant, animal, or something else). There is a clear gender split in the possessor character: most are female (15 stories), while just 5 are male, and 12 fall into some other category (a robot, computer, giant brain, group of spirits, sentient object, etcetera). The means of possession is varied but includes various objects, magical power, or a hypnotic gaze. Characters' motivations fall into the following main categories: enslavement (6), greed (6), revenge (5), and redemption or needing help (4), plus some other less common reasons such as accident or romance. Taken together, this data suggests that possession is depicted as something extant and ongoing, with a strongly gendered aspect, and driven by reasons that tend primarily towards selfishness or vengeance, although help and redemption also feature.

Possession appears in 12 serial stories and 20 single stories, of which 15 are Supercats tales. This is a significant deviation from the ratio underpinning the rest of the comic: nearly half of all *Spellbound*'s possession stories are Supercats tales (47 per cent) or, viewed another way, nearly a third (28 per cent) of the 53 published

Supercats stories deal with possession in some way. Olivia Hicks' (2021) research into British and American supergirl comics argues that these characters enact fantasies of white imperialism and their feminism is superficial. Hicks points out that the Supercats might reject male dominance but their actions frequently conform to prescribed gender roles and stereotypes, such as bickering over music or men. The high proportion of possession in these stories, then, perhaps suggests it is used to make sure that these girls don't have too much power, and to undermine their autonomy. It is particularly notable that Hercula, the most masculine of the Supercats characters as her power is one of great physical strength, is only possessed individually once in these tales, while the other Supercats are all possessed a minimum of three times.

For example, in 'The Star Minstrel' (#55, art by Jorge Badia Romero, writer unknown), the Supercats discover that everyone on Planet Penthor has been hypnotised by Zillon's guitar music, and Zillon then hypnotises the Supercats and comes with them on their ship where they serve him. The Penthor police follow them and broadcast his song backwards which breaks the spell and the Supercats turn Zillon into their servant until they hand him over to authorities. The story follows an established pattern of a creepy male mesmerist controlling female character to their own ends,^{vi} and Romero's sexualised art emphasises this. This treatment supports Hicks' claims: the Supercats' powers are limited as they fall under (male) control very easily. Youth and femininity are explicitly positioned as their weakness: the use of music here (like the links with ballet and singing in earlier examples) all support a reading of possession as a dangerous aspect of youth culture.

In 'The Haunting of Laura Lee' (#1-10, art by Josep Gual, writer unknown) Laura becomes possessed by the spirit of an older pianist, Wanda, who controls Laura

via a ring on her finger and through a portrait that watches her. Laura gains great musical ability and is given her friend Ellen's place in recitals, while Ellen acts as her assistant. Laura then discovers that Wanda left her own assistant to die in a fire and as she plays in a recital a fire breaks out as before, but Laura decides not to leave Ellen and breaks the cycle. Possession takes both physical and mental forms in this story: Laura first experiences a dissociation from body parts ('I can't stop. My hands don't seem to belong to me', #1), but soon Wanda takes over her personality, and she becomes rude and has tantrums ('How could I say that to mum?', #2). The divisive nature of the experience is made explicit, for example as Laura says 'It wasn't me at all. It was horrible' (#1) and 'It was as though someone else was speaking' (#2). It is also emphasised visually, as Wanda is consistently depicted as a separate person – her portrait is shown repeatedly, Laura hears her laughter (#1), and ghostly images of her are superimposed over Laura (#3). Often the artwork positions Wanda's portrait staring directly at Laura, so her gaze dominates the composition (#5), reiterating the established visual tropes of the possession motif.

As in earlier examples, Wanda's power is not absolute: Laura has moments where she regains control, but swiftly loses it again. Likewise, the possession does bring some benefits, giving Laura great musical ability and also some control over others, for example bewitching her audience to dance (#7). It is also intertwined with danger and death – when Wanda's wishes are not followed there are violent attacks: broken glass cuts Laura's face (#3); a window slams shut on her instructor's hand (#5), the ring burns her (#6), and her dad is pushed down the stairs (#10). The key themes of the girls' comics 'hard luck' tales are also present: her parents are not averse to exploiting Laura ('There's a fortune at her fingertips, Katie, if she can play like that', #1) and she consistently feels isolated and alone ('I can't say anything to

mum or dad', #2; 'They'd never believe me', #6). The counterpoint to these themes is Laura's friendship with Ellen, who remains loyal even though Laura mistreats her ('You're not really like that. I'll stay by you, Laura', #8). The possession motif is shaped by these established girls' comics themes: it is the reason for Laura's exploitation and for her isolation, and friendship is positioned as the way to escape.

The story gives insight into the physical and mental trauma of the possessed victim, for example as Laura cries 'I'm so tired' (#1) and 'My hands ache so' (#2). But trauma also underpins Wanda's story, as Laura discovers Wanda is haunted by memories of how her assistant died, and the story is finally resolved when Laura stops the past repeating itself, shouting 'I WILL go back [...] Wanda left her assistant to die, but I won't!' (#10) This recalls Cathy Caruth's comments on trauma in Gothic literature, which draw attention to its possessing and consuming qualities, claiming that 'To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event [...] Indeed, modern analysts as well have remarked on the surprising literality and non-symbolic nature of traumatic dreams and flashbacks [...] It is this literality and *its insistent return* which thus constitutes trauma' (Caruth 1995, 4-5). As Caruth suggests, to suffer from trauma is literally to be possessed by a past event; to relive it.

A similar argument is put forward in Jordan Kistler's work on *Dracula*, which argues that 'Scenes of mesmerism and hypnotism in Gothic novels are commonly read as symbols of sexual assault that reinforce traditional hierarchies of gendered power. Yet [Stoker] presents this connection as a means by which Mina can regain power after a traumatic assault' (Kistler 2018, 366). Kistler suggests that *Dracula* goes against the dominant narrative of Victorian literature about mesmerism and that Mina's psychic link with the Count is not a source of weakness (as his attacks on her take place outside this, and in fact the connection allows her insight into his mind),

but rather a means by which she can escape and negotiate her own trauma. The claim allows Kistler to offer a provoking new reading of *Dracula* that suggests Stoker is celebrating rather than criticising the new woman, as sympathy (not similarity) is what enables Mina to become the pivotal point of the Crew of Light. It also suggests that mesmerism and possession can in fact be positive and powerful experiences. This accords with some of the trends seen in the earlier girls' comics examples, where some justification was often given for the possessor's actions, and the experience bestowed some positive benefits. This is foregrounded in 'Laura Lee' where possession becomes an enabler of active agency rather than a passive and limiting experience: a means of representing, negotiating, and perhaps ultimately escaping or closing the loop on female trauma.

Misty was launched by IPC in January 1978 as a competitor to *Spellbound* (which folded a few weeks later) and contains a similar mix of serial and single stories in both text and graphic form. It branded itself as a mystery comic but is well-remembered today for its moments of outright horror. There are 443 total *Misty* stories, of which 22 (5 per cent) contain instances of possession. As in *Spellbound*, possession appears from the very first issue ('Paint it Black', 'The Cult of the Cat'), and is situated almost entirely in the present (19 stories, with just 3 set in the past). The possessor generally presents as female (11 stories, versus 3 male possessors, and 9 stories where gender is ambiguous or undefined, such as demons, sentient objects, a space egg). Methods of possession are again extremely varied (magic, singing/music, hypnotism, technology). Common reasons for taking control include the pursuit of power (8), to protect or rescue someone or something (4), revenge (3) and greed (2). However, *Misty* departs from *Spellbound* in some ways: secondary characters or objects are the most likely targets of possession (12 stories) while just under half the

possession stories have the protagonist as the possessed character (10). The split between serial and single stories is also less pronounced, with 9 serials and 13 single stories featuring the motif. Overall, this data suggests that possession is again depicted as a contemporary threat with a gendered element, although protagonists' battle against this is foregrounded, and both possession and the struggles against it may occur for protective reasons.

Misty is particularly remembered for its single stories – vicious cautionary tales which often resulted in a bad or ambivalent end for their protagonist. For example, in 'The Monkey' (#80, art by Mario Capaldi, writer unknown) Kitty teases an organ grinder's monkey which bites her, she then starts acting more monkey-like, and ultimately changes place with the monkey, condemned to dance 'till the end of my days...' The story template for the *Misty* cautionary tale was notorious and well-set so it is perhaps no surprise that possession is absorbed into this and used repeatedly as a punishment ('The Mark', #60; 'The Devil's Pipe', #76).

However, the *Misty* serials offer a more nuanced and positive treatment. In 'The Loving Cup' (#70–82, art by Brian Delaney, writer unknown) destitute Italian orphan Lucy inherits a loving cup as a family heirloom and is sent to live with relatives in the UK. She becomes good friends with their daughter Trisha but this is destabilised as the cup increasingly takes control of Lucy's actions. She acts oddly (stealing money from the family safe and from a bank) and experiences terrifying dreams of an older woman, revealed to be Lucrezia Borgia. Lucy is captured by acolytes of the Borgia family who claim she is the reincarnation of Lucrezia Borgia, but ultimately saved by Trisha, who smashes the cup.



Figure 2: ‘The Loving Cup’, *Misty* #72. Art by Brian Delaney. Reproduced with permission of Misty™ Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd.; copyright © Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd., all rights reserved.

Delaney’s page layouts consistently foreground the cup as a dangerous and uncanny object. It is often placed centrally and emphasised by unnatural lighting, or appears as a shadowy image haunting Lucy, or is recalled through circular panels – and so its presence dominates both form and content of many pages (figure 2). The narrative also emphasises its unnatural qualities: it is warm to the touch and produces a strange smell (#71). As in other examples, Lucy also experiences its influence in a very physical way, for example feeling faint (#71), or hearing it whisper her name (#72). The cup is even given agency in the form of strategy and motivation – for example we are told ‘the Loving Cup waited, building up its powers...’ (#77) and that ‘it was driving her [Lucy] on towards a destiny of darkness and evil’ (#81).

The relationship between Lucy and Lucrezia is also continually referenced visually. Many panels suggest a split identity or a doubling as Lucy is often shown with her face half-shadowed (figure 2), including the story logo which appears at the start of every episode. Their characters are explicitly doubled more than once, for example as when Lucy tries on a historical costume for a school play and sees her ancestor talking back to her from the mirror (#73). However, the separation between the two is simultaneously preserved throughout the tale, as Lucy sees Lucrezia as a distinct person and conceptualises her as ‘the woman from my dream’ (figure 2). Lucy also dissociates herself from Lucrezia’s actions, saying ‘That’s not like me at all’ (#76). Eyes again become a repeated marker: Lucy’s eyes sometimes shine with stars when she is possessed (#77) and Lucrezia is often drawn with heavily shadowed eyes (#73, see also figure 2).

The historical Lucrezia Borgia was the daughter of Pope Alexander VI and is remembered as a powerful *femme fatale*. Her rumoured acts included many affairs, incest, poisoning, and murder, but she was also transgressive in other ways – exoticised as a beautiful blonde Italian, and even taking her father’s place on the papal throne in the Vatican (Cowper *c.*1908-14). In ‘The Loving Cup’, she repeatedly leads Lucy towards disruptive acts, such as uncontrollable laughter (#73) and unacceptable desires: as Lucy reflects ‘I remember feeling greedy and ambitious, I wanted so much, starting with money...’ (#76) Barbara Creed’s analysis of the monstrous-feminine is relevant here, as Creed’s taxonomy of monstrous female types includes the possessed monster. Creed defines the possessed female body as a spectacle that demonstrates the abjection (as the border between self/other is erased), arguing that ‘Possession becomes the excuse for legitimizing a display of aberrant feminine behaviour which is depicted as depraved, monstrous, abject – and perversely appealing’ (1993: 31).

Lucy's possessed acts and her desire for money are presented in precisely this way – she smiles maniacally surrounded by a shower of bank notes (#76) and while the narrative presents these acts as terrible and monstrous (for example noting 'the screams of the terrified customers', #76), their appeal is clear. After all, Lucy has been orphaned, left destitute, sent to a different country and a new family without any control – is her desire for money and power so bad?

According to this narrative and the wider themes of girls' comics, yes. Mel Gibson notes that, although readers often read actively and brought their own interpretations to bear on stories, 'important feminine qualities' such as humility and 'not showing off' (2010, 127) underpin many narratives. In 'The Loving Cup' Lucrezia's control gives Lucy permission to misbehave and allows her to step outside of the restrictions (poverty, humility) that characterise her life. As Creed suggests, 'The possessed female subject is one who refuses to take up her proper place in the symbolic order' (1993: 38) and Lucy's unruly behaviour and attempts to grab power certainly speak to this. Creed continues that 'Woman is constructed as possessed when she attacks the symbolic order and reveals that this is a sham built on social repression and the sacrifice of the mother' (41) and perhaps it is no coincidence that Lucy's story begins with exactly this: the death of her mother and the gift of the cup, which is then literally repressed (locked away in the family safe) as it begins to exert its influence.

Creed concludes that possession is framed as a process of abjection and that used to define this sin (abjection) as something which comes from within. In her words, it 'opens up the way to position woman as deceptively treacherous [...] It is this stereotype of feminine evil – beautiful on the outside/corrupt within – that is so popular within patriarchal discourses about woman's evil nature' (42). This rhetoric

also pervades 'The Loving Cup' as the story recaps repeatedly claim that 'Lucrezia was so powerful, that the cup became instilled with evil!' (#82) and that Lucy is 'powerless' to escape this (#78). This echoes the treatment of Laura Lee, where Wanda – another older, powerful woman whose behaviour in life was rebellious and transgressive – is punished through trauma, and in turn possesses Laura.

Final thoughts

This discussion has explored the evolution of the possession motif in British girls' comics, particularly noting the ways in which this motif is tied to gender, youth, and popular culture. Possession does appear as an uncanny and evil method of control and as a way to limit the girlhood and potential of characters – which, as Gibson suggests, 'may tell us more about adult desires to control the female child than about girls themselves' (2018: npag). However, there are some unexpected developments as the motif gains in popularity. Rather than being a passive state, possession is often depicted as a physical experience that can provide its victim with autonomy and even power. Possessed characters generally retain some identity and agency (although these are attacked) and their struggles to reassert themselves or save another are pivotal to the narrative. This allows them to demonstrate strength and resilience that mark them out as heroines and survivors, which Gibson (2017) notes are 'prized qualities' in girls' comics. Female friendship and solidarity are also essential to escape from a possessed state. Further, and although it is a traumatic experience, possession is often shown to negotiate and even escape historical trauma, particularly relating to female abuse and transgression. That this process then returns the world to its status quo is perhaps not surprising, and reflects the conservative qualities of the

comics industry, which had to balance adventure and propriety in equal measure to satisfy parental concerns while exciting child readers.

Gibson's (2015) work on girls, memory, and comics stresses that readers may remember these stories very differently and might also privilege different things than those intended by the stories' creators. For example, victimhood becomes survival, as the 'hard luck' stories are not remembered as tales of abuse, but as stories about brave and resilient girls. We see all these qualities in the possession stories, and the ambivalent treatment of the motif demonstrate how this sort of flexible interpretation was possible. Possession is certainly depicted as an exploitative means of restraint, demonstrating a view of girlhood as something dangerous, transgressive, and hard to control, but the stories also have space for female power and rebellion to be celebrated, and for characters reacting to possession to resolve underpinning traumas.

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ⁱⁱⁱ See Tammyfan 2021 for further examples.

^{iv} See www.juliaround.com for searchable databases of stories, plot summaries and creators for *Spellbound* and *Misty*.

^v The total number of stories in a comic has been counted using story title rather than number of instalments (so a serial story is counted as a single entry, rather than as multiple separate episodes). This is because my arguments relate to the decisions made when devising the comic's content rather than the experience of reading it every week.

^{vi} A very similar story appears a few weeks later in *Spellbound* #58 where pop music (played by a mysterious ruler called Dee Jay) enslaves all the young people on a different planet ('The Music Master', art by Jorge Badia Romero, writer unknown).