Misty, Mash-Ups, and the Marginalized in British Girls' Comics

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Gothic has famously been described as "Frankenstein's monster, a collocation of materials drawn from other sources, bound together in a monstrous (dis)unity" (Otto 2013, npag). It is an encompassing mode of writing that absorbs and subsumes other genres and ideas: re-presenting them to us with a macabre edge. This often relies on some sort of adaptation, as existing texts and products are "gothicked up" (Byron 2012, 72). Famous recent examples might include *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (Seth Grahame-Smith, 2009), or the comic book series *Afterlife with Archie* (Robert Aguirre-Sacasa and Francesco Francavilla, 2013–present), which both disrupt their fictional worlds with a zombie apocalypse.

Comics are also known for their multiplicity, as many of their best-known stories and characters have spin-offs, adaptations, revivals, and reboots. The medium is multimodal: capable of sustaining many different communication channels, and digital comics may even bring in sound, virtual reality, or other enhancements. Stories may juxtapose or merge art styles, for example combining photographs and caricature. Superhero stories often feature hybrid characters, team-ups, and multiverse franchises. Comics are also a collaborative medium, not just between creators of an individual title (writers, artists, letterers, editors, and more), but also in the sense that creators may work on a given title for a short time only: with the tale passing to someone else when they have finished their 'arc.' This means that the rights attached to comics characters and storyworlds have frequently been disputed, as publishers assert ownership of various properties. This approach to intellectual property encourages a sense of freedom and creativity but also practices of exploitation that align with the mash-up.

This chapter will analyze the British girls' supernatural mystery comic *Misty* (IPC, 1978–1980) to examine the ways that the British comics industry of the last century used mash-up titles, stories, themes, and characters. It first reviews recent academic work on Gothic and adaptation, noting how mash-ups and manipulation have been characterized. It then gives some background to British comics, explaining how both boys' and girls' titles followed the model of exploitation cinema by reworking versions of adult texts for younger audiences. It then moves to examine *Misty* more closely and discusses the mash-up methods it used, which ranged from superficial namechecks to the reworking and recombining of Gothic themes and stories. The analysis shows that while *Misty* sometimes used mash-ups and namechecks quite superficially to create an atmosphere of Gothic horror, in other respects it significantly reworked existing Gothic content into accessible and relatable storylines for young female readers. This dichotomy helped *Misty* to negotiate a line between conservatism and adventure (a requirement for all the girls' comics): disguising its shocking content under a veneer of acceptability and branding itself as a 'mystery paper' rather than a 'horror comic.' It demonstrates the subversive potential of the comic book medium and the exploitative nature of the industry. These mash-ups therefore reveal tensions that underpin both Gothic and comic books.

Critical Framework

Gothic seems more popular than ever in recent years across multiple media. Mainstream television shows such as *Penny Dreadful* (Showtime/Sky, 2014–2016), *iZombie* (The CW, 2015–2019), and *Gotham* (Warner Bros, 2014–2019) center on horror characters and darker themes, often combining these with unexpected genres (the high school romance, the police procedural). Many established texts have also been given a monstrous facelift: the

high school sitcom *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (ABC, 1996–2003) re-emerged in 2018 as the dark and satanic *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (Netflix, 2018–2020) in which Sabrina Spellman's comedic mishaps are replaced by a pact with the Devil, cannibalism, sororicide, and insanity. While the adventures of a witch of course lend themselves to this sort of reimagining, other less likely adaptations have also appeared, like Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* (2010).

Darker aesthetics and Gothic allegories are thus used to rebrand and remarket. Critics such as Fred Botting (2008) and Glennis Byron (2012, 2015) have argued that many contemporary texts are easily "gothicked" in this way (Byron 2015, 5), for example as "Clothes, puppets, masks, lifestyles, dolls, sweets, locate Gothic images in a thoroughly commodified context in which horror is rendered familiar" (Botting 2008, 9). Gothic becomes little more than a commodity or brand, and this claim often forms part of an elegiac argument that contrasts modern popular works unfavorably with older texts. Botting draws on the work of Baudrillard (1983), Lyotard (1984), and Derrida (1990, 80) to suggest that ghosts and other monstrous figures today are "recognisable, reiterated, familiar" and thus become "normal monstrosities" (Botting 2008, 10).

But for other scholars, such as Megan de Bruin-Molé, modern Gothic instead continues to expand and subsume, finding new ways to adapt and co-opt and even combine the traditions it exists within. One example of this is De Bruin-Molé's concept of "Frankenfiction," where works out of copyright are reworked into something new, such as *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (Grahame-Smith, 2009) or *Sense and Sensibility and Sea Monsters* (Ben H. Winters, 2009). These mash-ups are inherently subversive, capable of challenging the expectations and values attached to Gothic literature. Catherine Spooner's (2017) recent research also explores newer incarnations of Gothic, with adaptation and mash-up informing many of her ideas, such as the "whimsical macabre": a new mode of Gothic

popular culture that merges carnivalized images of childhood with the “monstrous/cute.” These often take the form of franchises modelled around particular characters, such as *Ruby Gloom*, *Emily Strange*, *Monster High*, and *Living Dead Dolls*. Traditional Gothic archetypes and tropes are blended with new settings or scenarios (for example *Monster High*’s fashion dolls include Frankie Stein and Draculaura). These newer Gothic forms seem to thrive on juxtaposition: Frankenfiction takes ‘classic’ literature and inserts sensational violence or monstrosity; the whimsical macabre puts the cute and the creepy in dialogue with each other.

Value judgments also haunt the history of adaptation studies. Early debates privileged the pre-existing text and often used fidelity as a standard for judgment. However later work from scholars such as Linda Hutcheon instead emphasizes the creativity that underpins adaptation, drawing on intertextual theory to argue that “adaptation is an act of appropriating or salvaging, and this is always a double process of interpreting and creating something new” (2006, 20).

Scholars may believe that modern Gothic forms are superficial and commodified, or alternatively might argue for their positive and creative attributes. But both critical angles suggest a disconnect between the ‘old’ Gothic and the new (whether elegiac as in Botting and Byron’s fears or celebrated as in de Bruin-Molé and Spooner’s work). However, I wonder if this divide is more of a superficial scratch, rather than a deep cut. My own work has often drawn attention to Gothic’s underpinning contradictions and tensions: since its early days the grisly genre has undermined simple divides and binaries. It blurs boundaries, is transgressive yet conservative, literary but sensationalist, attracts and repels, and finds monstrosity in both self and other. The mash-up’s combination of old/new, its potential to offer the expected/unexpected, and, indeed, address the mainstream/marginalized speaks to this and will be investigated below.

British Comics and Adaptation

British comics were a vibrant and vast industry that dominated children's entertainment between 1950 and 1980: a survey by Fenwick (1953) reveals that 94% of fourteen- and fifteen-year-old girls read comics, and at its peak the industry was publishing hundreds of weekly titles, with individual circulations that could top one million copies (Digby 2017, Sabin 1996). There was a lot of pressure to produce content, and the relentless publishing schedule and small teams assigned to each title created a high-pressure set of circumstances that drove creativity through brutal competition. Two main publishing companies emerged: DC Thomson (a family-owned company based in Dundee, and publishers of titles such as *Beano, Jackie, Bunty,* and *Warlord*), and IPC, a holding company that swallowed up London-based publishers like Fleetway and Amalgamated Press (responsible for titles like *School Friend*, *Girl*, *Tammy*, and *2000AD*). There is a perception today that these comics were all very similar (ballet and boarding schools for the girls, war and sports for the boys) but nothing could further from the truth. The breadth of titles was astonishing, with clear subgenres emerging at various points. For example, the first wave of British girls' comics (1950s) printed school stories alongside tales of adventure ("Kitty Hawke and her all-girl air crew," *Girl*) and expanded into multiple different formats, ranging from glossy color publications like *Diana* to cheap and cheerful looking comics like *Bunty.* A wave of romance comics arose from the mid-1950s and stretched into the 1960s (*Marilyn, Romeo*, *Valentine*, *Jackie*); followed by a more dramatic series of titles in the early 1970s with working-class protagonists and both urban and fantastic stories (*Tammy*, *Jinty*, *June*), including dedicated 'supernatural mystery' titles like *Spellbound* and *Misty*. The back-and-forth between the two publishers produced periods of intense industry growth as each tried to

outdo the other by either releasing a similar title to compete in the same subgenre or developing in a new direction.

Adapting content from other media was common practice. For example, DC Thomson's *Diana* featured a full-color, licensed comic strip adaptation of *The Avengers* (1961–1969) in 1967 (#199–244, art by Emilio Frejo and Juan Gonzalez Alacrejo). These comic strip plotlines were original although had to be approved by the Avengers production office and sometimes ideas from the comic made their way into the television show (McGachey 2021). Other more subtle instances of reworking were also present. "The Girls from N.O.O.D.L.E.S." appeared in *Diana* c. #186-261 (10 September 1966–17 February 1968) (art by Phil Winslade and Geoffrey Whittam). It was about two young girls who are secret agents for the National Organisation for Order, Discipline and Law Enforcement in Schools: referencing the award-winning television show *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* (1964–1968) through its dual protagonists, spy fantasies, and gadgetry (radios, homing devices). In both instances a high-profile contemporary television property was reworked with motifs suitable for younger female readers. For example, in *Diana* #212–215 (10–31 March 1967) the Avengers pursue the jewel thief Black Heart and her Seven Dwarfs, who disguise themselves as children or teddy bears and use exploding toys as part of their robberies. Black Heart herself is a Maleficent-type figure with long cloak, high pointed collar, and heavily made-up eyes with arched eyebrows, even using "a special, closed-circuit television set in the shape of a crystal ball" (#214). "The Girls from N.O.O.D.L.E.S." replaces male leads with younger female protagonists "of outstanding character" (#187) and transposes the spy activity to more appropriate spaces for girls: for example they are dispatched to "The School for Adventure" (#187) and to investigate the mysterious leader of the Masked Ballet company (#260).

British boys' comics used similar tactics in some of their most popular series. Perhaps the most notorious example is the case of IPC's comic *Action* (1976–1977). This was devised by writer and editor Pat Mills to compete with DC Thomson's *Warlord* (1974–1986) following a previous attempt in the form of *Battle Picture Weekly* (IPC, 1975–1988). *Action* upped the ante by moving away from classic war settings into contemporary, urban stories with a heavy dose of gore and violence. Many stories adapted box office hits into comics format, such as "Hookjaw" (art by Ramon Sola, written by Ken Armstrong), which reimagined *Jaws* (1975) with the shark as an environmental anti-hero intent on eating corrupt criminals, and "Death Game 1999" (various artists including Costa, Ian Gibson, and Massimo Bellardinelli, written by Tom Tully), which stripped *Rollerball* (1975) down to its plot basics. These "dead cribs" (Barnard 2018) combined contemporary texts with a new slant and were extremely popular. In this they followed the model of exploitation cinema: an industry designed to create a fast profit and quick product by exploiting contemporary cultural fears (social problems, teenage rebellion, violence, and so forth). *Action* focused on many controversial subjects, from teenage gangs to football hooliganism, and this combined with the level of violence led to outcry in the press and on national television. The 23 October 1976 issue was withdrawn and pulped, and *Action* then continued in a much-sanitized form for the rest of its run (see Barker 1990 for further information).

Mills was also the co-creator of *Misty* (IPC 1978–1980), a supernatural mystery comic for girls that ran for 101 weekly issues alongside three holiday specials, and eight annual publications (1979–1986). It grew from his initial idea for a girls' horror comic that would be a vehicle for his serial story "Moonchild" (an adaptation of Stephen King's *Carrie*, discussed further below). The comic was passed to co-creator Wilf Prigmore to develop when Mills turned down an editorial role and it became a quite different comic than intended. This was doubtless in part to compete with DC Thomson's *Spellbound* (1976–1978)*:* a creepy

‘mystery paper’ that had taken over from *Diana* and contained a mix of supernatural stories (such as “The Haunting of Laura Lee” who becomes possessed by a ghostly musician), science fiction fantasies (“Supercats,” about an all-female space crew; “Dangerous Days for the Tiny Taylors” who are shrunk by a strange potion), and investigative mysteries (“Whatever Became of Betsy?” in which a journalist tracks down an old schoolfriend she believes has been abducted).

Mash-ups were key to *Misty*’s conception. Mills’ initial vision was “we should look at all the kinds of female adults’ fiction that were around at the time, and do girls’ comics versions of that” (Mills 2011) as this was a strategy that had worked well for him on previous titles. But in the hands of its editorial team (Malcolm Shaw, Bill Harrington, Jack Cunningham, and Ted Andrews), *Misty* became something quite different: a blend of supernatural mystery and horrifying cautionary tales, both present-day and historical, alongside regular slapstick comedy strips, and with a mysterious and alluring host who welcomed readers to each issue. The initial idea for a horror comic was toned down significantly, and it was branded as a ‘mystery story paper.’

Mash-Ups in *Misty*

Misty was launched as “A great mystery paper for girls!” Other common cover straplines included ambivalent statements like “Step into the unknown” and “Enter the midnight world,” as well as the slightly more threatening “Stories not to be read at night!” But *Misty* relied entirely on horror and Gothic themes, as can be seen from examining its covers, story titles, and content. These often reveal a contradiction between its self-definition as a mystery comic and the stories and associated visuals which were quite often shocking and terrifying. For example, considering the entire collection of 101 weekly covers, 40%

show a fearful reaction (wide eyes, screaming, running) and 36% show a hideous image (a skeleton, monster, or animal). Just 14% show an image of Misty herself, and 10% contain a benign or abstract image (horses, fairies). *Misty* was quite happy to overtly show fear on its front cover, with suggestive forms only narrowly outweighing explicit images.

However, the story titles pull back from these threatening references and mostly create mystery and suspense rather than outright fear. The majority tend toward the suggestive rather than the explicit, for example, by referencing a mysterious item without explanation, as in "The Window Box" (#93), "The Wicker Basket" (#63), "The Black Gauntlet" (#83), "The Green China Man" (Annual 1982), and so on. Similarly, many titles are puns or knowing references to the story's content, such as "Sweet Tooth" (#78), "Shadow of a Doubt…" (#58), "Run, Rabbit, Run!" (#64), and "It's a Dog's Life!" (#9). Gothic language (such as namechecking monsters, or using words like fear, doom, darkness, death, evil, even magic) only appears in 28% of the story titles.

This meant that *Misty* was constantly looking for more subtle ways to conjure a Gothic atmosphere, and one way it did this was through its story titles, which often mashed up Gothic texts. For example. "The Four Faces of Eve" namechecks the 1957 movie *The Three Faces of Eve*, a dramatic treatment of dissociative identity disorder. The title of Pat Mills's serial "Hush, Hush, Sweet Rachel" echoes the movie *Hush… Hush, Sweet Charlotte* (1964), a psychological thriller about infidelity and a falsely accused murderess. It blends this with the TV movie *Sweet, Sweet Rachel* (1971), a pilot for a 1972 series about a murderer who uses extrasensory perception. "Whistle and I'll Come…," about runaway Toni and her ghost dog Albert, truncates *Whistle and I'll Come to You* (M.R. James, 1904; adapted for BBC in 1968). Although the titles might not be explicitly Gothic or horror-focused, they connote some quite strong stuff—death, murder, and psychic danger—by referencing big-name texts with Gothic, horror, and mystery overtones. This is backed up by other *Misty*

content—there are features on writers like Edgar Allan Poe (Annual 1983), whose tales are recommended as "a 'must' for the *Misty* fan who has not encountered them." There are also feature articles on Dracula (Annual 1980), the Borgias (Annual 1980), and horror stars like Christopher Lee (Annual 1983).

Mills (2016) has spoken out repeatedly against the direction *Misty* took, particularly objecting to its use of one-shot historical tales, saying:

> the people who followed in my footsteps would look for the easy way rather than say 'OK, well the reason Pat's done that Stephen King story is because there is a principle here that we can follow up on' so it would have been a natural thing for example to have other Stephen King stories and had a hotel, or a giant werewolf [but] they didn't want to […] because it requires a commitment, you've got to sit down, you have to read a 400 page novel, in the case of *The Shining* or whatever it is, you've got to analyse it and then say 'Can I make this acceptable for 11−12 year old girls?'

For Mills, adapting texts is not a cynical, easy, or convenient way to write—it is a process of hard work that demands creativity. This view of adaptation as an act of creation (rather than one of derivation where elements of the original are always lost) is borne out by scholarship and the success of texts that have taken their content in a new direction, such as those mentioned above, or other examples like AMC's *The Walking Dead* (2010–2022, based on the comic by Robert Kirkman and Charlie Adlard) and HBO's *Watchmen* (2019, based on the comic by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons).

Mills scripted five stories for *Misty* in total, of which two are reworkings of existing texts: "Moonchild" (based on Stephen King's *Carrie,* adapted into a film in 1976), and

"Hush, Hush, Sweet Rachel" (based on Frank de Felitta's *Audrey Rose*, 1975, adapted into a film in 1977). In "Moonchild" Rosemary Black is a school outcast and abused child whose mother beats her. She discovers her telekinetic powers after a dangerous practical joke is played on her at school. Her only support throughout this is her friend Anne, and the discovery of telekinesis reveals a murky family history in which Rosemary's grandmother also had this power and accidentally killed her husband, meaning Mrs. Black was sent to an orphanage. It's soon revealed that her grandmother isn't actually dead though, and while Rosemary tries to unravel this mystery, she is consistently bullied by school tearaway Norma and her gang. The story's climax is a birthday party that they throw for Rosemary, at which they give her mean gifts, a disgusting cake, spray her with paint, and blindfold her, causing her to fall off a balcony. Rosemary's reappearance rising into the air (Figure 12.1) is pure Carrie—drawn from the bullies' perspective and with the menacing threat "You've had your turn. Now… it's mine" (#12, #13). As in *Carrie*, the building also catches fire (albeit due to Norma's smoking), but Rosemary's grandmother appears and saves the girls, although the strain is too much for her and she dies. Rosemary's mother leaves, her powers vanish, and she goes to live with her friend Anne: a new start, but "at a terrible price" (#13).

<INSERT FIGURE 12.1 HERE>

Figure 12.1: "Moonchild", *Misty* #13, 29 April 1978, art by John Armstrong, written by Pat Mills (London: IPC). Reproduced with permission of Misty™ Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd; copyright © Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd, all rights reserved.

The rewriting directly reworks the key story elements into more juvenile forms, removing the sex, death, and gore. Rosemary's powers are unrelated to puberty; they are brought on by trauma when she is scared by an exploding chalk trick that is played on her. There is no competition over boys or hint of romance and no shower scene or bucket of

blood—but resonances remain, such as when Norma's gang decide to throw a birthday party for Rosemary and begin chanting, "Shame! Shame!" (#9) rather than "Plug it up!" This preserves the animalistic bullying and mob mentality that are so disturbing in *Carrie*, and there are numerous other small nods to the original text: Rosemary Black is an obvious antonym for Carrie White; gang-leader Norma takes her name from Chris's bully-in-chief in the De Palma movie; Rosemary has nightmares about being surrounded by flames with all her classmates laughing at her (#4); she knocks a boy off of his skateboard (#6; this is a bike in the novel), and Mrs. Black rants continually about the "wickedness" she is trying to save Rosemary from (#9).

However, transposing this story into a girls' comic is not just a case of "tak[ing] out all the kind of sex and ultraviolence" (Mills 2016). Instead, Mills mashes up the common themes and motifs of girls' comics into the skeleton of *Carrie*'s plot. He has spoken about his other writing for girls' comics in terms of writing to a distinct set of formulae. These established story patterns included the Slave story (about hardship and bullying, directed at a victimized individual/group that is systematically exploited and abused), the Cinderella story (an unlucky heroine in unfortunate circumstances), the Friend story (in which the heroine's desire for a friend is paramount), and the Mystery story (which could be as simple as "What's inside the box?") (Mills 2011, 2014, 2016). They are not unique to Mills' writing and often appear in girls' comics. Three of these formulae are recognizable 'Moonchild"—the bullying Rosemary receives creates the established structure of a slave story, where the heroine is subjected to increasing torment every week. Rosemary's desire for a friend and her relationships with loyal Anne and false friend Dawn also underpin the story. Mystery is also continually present: first arising from Rosemary's powers, and once these have been identified as telekinesis, the mystery of her grandmother is introduced. As Mills (2016) describes it: "not just Stephen King but there was certain rules that could apply and this

brings us back to the formula […] all those kind of basic formula rules can just as easily apply to the mystery and the occult."

Mills (2016) also stresses the importance of bringing in his own experience, saying,

> you have got to find something of yourself in it. In other words you take a story like Carrie [and] say 'OK, what can I bring to this? What works for me?' So I would have drawn on personal recollections of bullying or sort of mildly psychic events that I was familiar with personally […] and I certainly did in the case of 'Moonchild.'

Here, personal energy and experiences are described as vital to engage readers and revitalize the adaptation.

A very similar process takes place in Mills' only other *Misty* series "Hush, Hush, Sweet Rachel" (art by Eduardo Feito). This retells Frank De Felitta's novel *Audrey Rose*, in which young Ivy Templeton comes to believe she is the reincarnated spirit of a dead child. The novel begins when Ivy's parents first become aware that a strange man is stalking her and believes she is the reincarnation of his daughter, developing into their acceptance of this supernatural event, a kidnapping court case, and ending in tragedy when regression hypnosis is attempted on Ivy. "Sweet Rachel" follows a similar pattern as Lisa meets the mysterious Mrs. Prendergast and then finds herself consistently lapsing into fugue states where she speaks and acts like a much younger child. After Mrs. Prendergast explains her reincarnation theory, the plot is based on Lisa's struggle to prevent herself lapsing into Rachel's personality, until ultimately Mrs Prendergast dies, and the possession vanishes. As with "Moonchild," the sexual and unsavory overtones are removed (*Audrey Rose* is told from the point of view of Ivy's parents who have concerns about the motivations of Audrey's father);

and Lisa is given a group of friends who try and support her through her ordeal (as well as a school enemy who consistently tries to bring these attacks on to humiliate Lisa). Whereas Ivy Templeton ends up dead in the book, Lisa escapes the supernatural and Rachel's control, and it is Rachel's heartbroken mother who dies instead (just as Rosemary's grandmother sacrifices herself in "Moonchild").

Mills was not the only *Misty* writer to use mash-up techniques in his stories. Malcolm Shaw was *Misty*'s editor for the bulk of its run and wrote many other girls' comics stories. His *Misty* stories include "The Sentinels" (art by Mario Capaldi, #1–12) in which Jan discovers a terrifying alternate dimension where Britain lost WW2 and is Nazi-occupied, via a deserted towerblock building. This plot shares its alternate history setting of Nazi-occupied Britain with the film *It Happened Here* (1964) and perhaps also takes its title and scenario from *The Sentinel* (Konvitz, 1974; movie adaptation dir. Winner, 1977), in which protagonist Alison discovers that her Brooklyn apartment building contains the gate to hell.

"End of the Line" (Malcolm Shaw and John Richardson, #28–42) is about protagonist Ann, who is hunting for her father (who she had believed dead) after seeing him through a tube train window as one of an enslaved force of Victorian workers underground. The set-up is very like another existing text, the movie *Death Line* (or *Raw Meat*, 1972), in which missing people are being kidnapped by the cannibalistic descendants of a group of Victorian tube tunnel workers trapped underneath central London. As in the other examples discussed, there are some namechecks referencing the movie—the catchphrase "Mind the Doors" appears at the cliffhanger end of #29, and the dramatic curving shapes of panels evoke endless tube tunnels (#31), just like in the film. However (and in counterpoint to the near-complete removal of violence in "Moonchild"), some fairly brutal images remain in the comic: we see starving and impoverished workers (#28, being whipped by foremen in #29) plus the threat of violence with workman's tools like a hammer (#31), which again both

recall the movie. Ann's investigative role also parallels the movie, which has a female lead who becomes obsessed with the fate of a man found collapsed in the subway after his body disappears.

However, whereas "Moonchild" and "Sweet Rachel" both follow a very similar plot to their equivalents, "End of the Line" departs swiftly from the scenario of *Death Line.* After Ann becomes convinced her father is still alive, she learns about an older tunnel collapse in the same place. She shares her suspicions with reporters (who are abducted by the underground dwellers when they investigate) and then must constantly try and prove she isn't crazy as well as struggling to stop her mother marrying again. She escapes from therapists and sanatoriums, and follows the mystery to Vicary Hall, whose owner built the underground lines and was also a scientist who thought he had discovered the secret to eternal life. She enters the tube tunnels, infiltrates his underground village of labourers, is caught but allowed to stay on as a maid and makes friends with another child worker, Lucy. Ultimately, Ann convinces Lucy to help her rescue her Dad and although this plan fails, they are saved by the police with Lord Vicary killed in the process. The workers are sent to an island to be rehabilitated, Anne promises to keep it all a secret, and her father returns home.

In "End of the Line," then, a completely new plot is grafted onto the scenario of lost Victorian workers trapped underground. Like the Mills adaptations, we can see the girls' comics story formula being applied here: the mystery is introduced early and baffling developments drive each instalment forward, and Ann's friendship with Lucy underpins the second half of the story. It therefore works similarly as a mashup between an existing classic horror text and the themes/formulae of girls' comics—foregrounding two additional features. These are firstly the isolated heroine, as nobody believes Ann. She must investigate on her own and is repeatedly disbelieved and thwarted, for example the reporters who support her vanish (#31), and her mother and boyfriend have her sedated (#33) and take her to a

psychiatric hospital (#32). As Ann says: “I can’t go on having everyone think I’m either crazy or a clever liar!” (#31) and “You don’t understand… none of you…” (#33).

This mash-up plot also emphasizes a second theme common to British girls’ comics—that of parental mistrust. Ann’s mother’s boyfriend, Neville Chandler, is drawn as an unappealing bald fat man, and his thoughts reveal he is only interested in marrying into the family for their money. This accords with the common treatment of male characters in Misty, who appear most often as antagonists. There are no male protagonists and only a few stories have brothers, male friends, or other positive male figures. Fathers, stepfathers, and grandfathers are present, but their roles are quite variable, and they are often lying to protagonist about something, or complicit in some sort of bigger deception (“Roots” [#1], “The Family” [#6]). They are also often representatives of institutional authority, like doctors or scientists (“The Secret World of Sally Maxwell” [#48–60], “The Silver Racer-Back” [#83–91]). Alternatively (and mainly in the historical tales) they may represent this sort of patriarchal power through social status, such as the cruel landowner in “Sure-Footed… to Eternity” (#3), the murderous Squire in “The Last Hunt” (#95), or Sir Mortimer in “Violets in the Moonlight” (#62), who unwittingly rejects his own daughter. Lord Vicary’s enslavement of his workforce and his brutal treatment of them echoes this stereotyping.

This type of Gothic mash-up features often in the *Misty* serials but also appears occasionally in the one-off stories, where we might see fairy tales like “The Red Shoes” or “Red Riding Hood” being reworked. In “Danse Macabre” (#52, art by María Barrera Castell), Lois and Nadia are competing for the lead role in a ballet. Nadia cheats to get the role and steals their mistress’s famous ballet shoes, but when she wears them, she is compelled to dance unendingly with a skeletal partner and chorus until she collapses. There are clear echoes of Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Red Shoes” (1845) in which Karen buys a pair of red shoes against her guardian’s wishes and is cursed to dance relentlessly until she dies. Like

the other mash-ups, we have a recognizable Gothic motif (the cursed object), which is merged with the common themes and set-ups of girls' comics. The ballet setting provides the catalyst for the theft of the shoes, and like other stories the two characters are clearly marked as heroine and villain in both speech and action (Figure 12.2). While Lois modestly muses "I'd so love to be the star of the show, but I'm not sure I'm a better dancer than Nadia," the other girl thinks "I've gotta make sure that little drip Lois doesn't get the part. I know I'm the best and I've gotta let the rest of the world know I am!" Nadia's thoughts are marked by lower-class slang and selfish arrogance. This is reinforced later in the story, both when she steals the shoes ("Stupid old trout. She didn't see me pinch her keys") and when she begins to dance ("I'm on stage. The centre of attention. All eyes watching me…")

<INSERT FIGURE 12.2 HERE>

Figure 12.2: "Danse Macabre", *Misty* #52, 3 February 1979, art by María Barrera Castell, writer unknown (London: IPC). Reproduced with permission of Misty™ Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd; copyright © Rebellion Publishing IP Ltd, all rights reserved.

Mel Gibson's analysis of girls' comics and reader memory points out that "Parental disapproval and intervention in girlhood reading was largely based around issues of class and 'proper' femininity" (2013, 126) and that characters modelled important feminine qualities such as humility and "not showing off" (2010, 127). "Danse Macabre" reinforces this message as Nadia's behaviour is motivated by arrogance and marked by lower-class speech patterns (even though the story's plot suggests she is richer than Lois who doesn't have a telephone and so must rely on Nadia to relay a message about the audition, which she lies about). The story's artwork also emphasizes this divide, and the characters are juxtaposed when they first appear (Figure 12.2). Lois has short tousled blonde hair and freckles and outside of ballet is plainly dressed in a midi skirt (past the knee) and long-sleeved

blouse—representing simple and unpolished femininity. Nadia has dramatic long black hair that is worn up with a few artful curls, made-up eyes, and wears patterned clothes and trousers—she has worked to enhance her appearance, and her clothes suggest a dynamic and rebellious attitude. So rather than sticking with the original tale's moral message of obedience and religious humility (as an angel curses Karen to dance ceaselessly), the story's plot instead rewards selflessness and personal modesty, and punishes selfish dishonesty: mashing up a dark fairy tale trope with a contemporary setting and established set of cultural messages.

The cursed shoes are also a good example of "commodity Gothic," which draws on the uncanny elements of commodity fetishization to depict objects that are able to wreak historical vengeance and reveal their own hidden grotesque origins (Lootens 2013, 132–33). These sorts of magical items litter the pages of *Misty*: 40% of its stories have some sort of external magic catalyst (an object, a magical charm or curse, or a haunted place) whose effect might be positive or negative (see Round 2019, 165). For example, a box of paints allows the finder to create haunting pictures that resolve a family mystery and right a wrongful death ("Paint it Black," #1–18); an evil car possesses its owner to relive its past as a gangster getaway car ("Journey into Fear," #14–27); and a stolen clock requires its new owner to wind it forever ("Slave of Time," #55). These examples all use mash-up tactics to blend this Gothic trope with settings and temptations that are familiar and relatable to a younger audience.

Conclusion

The *Misty* mash-ups bring older texts into dialogue with younger concerns, creating tales that conjure a Gothic atmosphere but are also familiar and relatable to a younger audience. Existing stories are edited down and reshaped into allegories for the concerns of

young female readers (friendship, bullying, isolation), with classic Gothic motifs or set-ups welded to the familiar plots, characters, and messages of British girls' comics. By reworking established Gothic forms into accessible and relatable tales for young female readers, the *Misty* stories negotiate a line between conservatism and adventure, disguising their horror content under a veneer of acceptability that looks back to prose story papers and the literary Gothic. They also foreground the concerns of girlhood, which are frequently marginalized and ignored, and whose literature and tastes are often denigrated. Ormrod (2011), Priest (2011), Spooner (2017), and Buckley (2018) all draw attention to the ways in which Gothic scholarship has historically devalued female creators, readers, and characters. My work on *Misty* continually seeks to illuminate and reclaim these stories, which were abundantly popular but today are critically underexplored and mostly forgotten—despite the ongoing and increasing presence of overtly Gothic material in literature for young female readers.

The mash-up subverts expectations of motifs, characters, and plots that we think we know. It revels in a juxtaposition of creativity and copying, exposing a tension between Romantic and collaborative views of authorship. This tension seems particularly applicable to comics, which has often been perceived as a subversive medium (caricature, political cartooning, working-class origins), but has frequently operated as an exploitative industry (creator rights, intellectual property, work for hire). By blurring these boundaries, the *Misty* mash-ups foreground tensions that underpin both Gothic and comics.

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