ARTICLE

Misty, Spellbound and the lost Gothic of British girls' comics

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ABSTRACT   This article is a case study of the 1970s British girls' comics *Spellbound* (DC Thomson, 1976–1977) and *Misty* (IPC, 1978–1980). These mystery anthology comics followed the more famous American horror comics from publishers like EC Comics - but were aimed at pre-teen girls. The article situates these comics with respect to Gothic critical theory and within the wider landscape of British girls' comics. Firstly, it closely considers and compares the structure and content of their stories with respect to theories of the terror and horror Gothic. It discovers that both comics offer similar fare, with a subversive streak that undercuts established horror archetypes. The article then looks closely at both titles' aesthetics and their use of the page to draw comparisons. It uses comics theory and Gothic cinematic theory to demonstrate that the appearance of *Misty* is more strongly Gothic than the aesthetic of *Spellbound*. Finally, it considers a selection of stories from both comics and analyses their common themes using Gothic critical theory. It argues that both comics rework Gothic themes into new forms that are relevant to their pre-teen and teenage readers. It concludes by summarising the study's findings and suggesting that these comics offer a "Gothic for Girls" that is part cautionary tale and part bildungsroman. This article is published as part of a collection on Gothic and horror.

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Comics and Gothic might seem an unlikely pair to those raised on the *Beano, Tin-Tin* or *Peanuts*. What have the saccharine adventures of Superman or Marvel's latest mega-franchise got to do with horror, terror and evil? But whether brightly coloured fantasy, literary graphic novels, or DIY confessional fanzines, the comics medium problematizes cultural worth, distorts reality, and transgresses borders and boundaries. This was never more apparent than in the 1970s girls' comics industry in Britain.

The British comics industry is perhaps best known for children's humour titles such as *The Dandy* (DC Thomson, 1937-present) and the *Beano* (DC Thomson, 1938-present), which began the golden age of British comics. Alternatively, some older readers might argue that the jewels of British comics are titles such as *2000AD* (IPC, 1977-present) or *Warrior* (Quality Communications, 1982–1985). These offered science fiction, superhero and dystopic tales that challenged readers' assumptions and expectations. By comparison, British girls' comics have never received the same attention and respect, despite having many of the same creators and at their peak both outselling and outlasting the boys' titles. Comics such as *Tammy* (IPC, 1971–1984) outsold *2000AD* on launch, selling 250,000 copies per week compared to *2000AD*'s 220,000 (Mills, 2012). The longest-running British girls' comic, *Bunty* (DC Thomson, 1958–2001), lasted for 2249 issues and 43 years, while at the time of writing *2000AD* has just reached its 40th anniversary.

Little scholarly and critical attention has been paid to British girls' comics and until recently many comics dealers deemed them unworthy of collection. Original art and the comics themselves have been largely lost or destroyed (Gibson, 2015: 21; Barker, 1989: vii). This article seeks to recover some of the lost history of British girls' comics by discussing two "mystery" comics: DC Thomson's *Spellbound* (1976–1977) and IPC's *Misty* (1978–1980). It will first give a brief background to the development of literary horror and gothic and the publishing context of *Spellbound* and *Misty*. It then examines these comics' use of horror and Gothic structures, aesthetics and themes. It argues that these comics predominantly offer a form of terror-Gothic, reconfigured to suit their child and teenage audience.

Gothic, horror and terror

Gina Wisker (149) argues that "…not everything that is Gothic is horror". The terminology blurs and contradicts, and particular meanings can be hard to separate. Scholarship struggles with content-based definitions and often subsumes horror within Gothic (or vice versa), depending on the writer's critical perspective or the medium being discussed.

Wisker identifies Lovecraft's (1927) *Supernatural Horror in Literature* as the first major text that locates and defines supernatural horror. Lovecraft opens by claiming "The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown." He then goes on to point out that the "spectral macabre" demands "imagination", mobilizing our fears of the world around us into a "literature of cosmic fear". Lovecraft looks back to the folkloric incarnations of the horror tale and the early British Gothic novels from Walpole *et al*, noting their quick establishment of "dramatic paraphernalia" (stock characters and settings). He seemingly finds little value in these novels except as settling the Gothic as a "literary form" and acting as inspiration for "the real weavers of cosmic terror—the line of actual artists beginning with Poe". Lovecraft uses the terms horror and terror interchangeably as responses to a larger cosmic fear that finds one incarnation in Gothic literature.

However, Lovecraft's work is prefigured by a number of writers and philosophers who have tried to define and distinguish between different types of fear and its literature. Beattie (1783: 615) first distinguishes horror by its physical effects, as it "make [s] the blood seem to run cold." Ann Radcliffe then further defines the affective qualities of both horror and terror in her landmark essay "On the Supernatural in Poetry" (1826). This is written as a fictional dialogue debating the use of the supernatural in the works of Shakespeare, pointing out that its value lies in its "secret effect upon the imagination", which works in two different ways. Radcliffe (1826: 5) claims that "Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them." Because of this, terror is a source of the sublime, and horror is not. However, Radcliffe goes beyond affect in defining the two, and for her the great difference lies in the "uncertainty and obscurity" that accompany the first. Terror "is seen in glimpses through obscuring shades" and excites the imagination to provide the rest. Somewhat ironically, Milton's use of the phrase "horror plumed" therefore "imparts more of terror than of horror", as his lack of description creates the sublime. Radcliffe's speakers go on to debate obscurity and confusion, which are also terms that have been used interchangeably, but are not the same, as "obscurity leaves something for the imagination to exaggerate; confusion […] leaves only a chaos" (1826: 6).

Radcliffe's famous distinction between terror (the obscure, unseen) and horror (the shown atrocity) has been explored by numerous later critics and creators, from Varma (1957) to King (1981). In general, there is agreement: Wisker points out that "While using elements of the literary Gothic, horror is more likely to be or to threaten to be violent and evoke disgust and/or terror" (149). Townshend (2016) also concurs that "Terror is the writing of sublimity, horror the literature of sensation" (37). Both critics also point out that the two categories cross and blur at points. Wisker (8) claims that "horror uses many [Gothic] formulae", and Townshend also notes that both "horror and terror are subsumed under the broader category of the 'Gothic'" (25) in Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1765) through hyperbole and excess.

Punter (1980: 14) defines Gothic at the widest level: as a mode of writing that responds to cultural trauma, and which thus gives rise to various historical genres at different points in time. Punter's approach reconciles the different qualities of the American and English Gothics, as well as subgenres such as body horror, psychological horror, and so forth. Other critics also seek to distinguish between different types of Gothic and horror writing, although their positions vary according to the medium and historical perspective that they use. For example, Wisker argues that horror is "A branch of Gothic writing" (8), but by contrast, Xavier Aldana Reyes defines Gothic literature as "the beginnings of a wider crystallization of horror fiction" (15). Reyes' (2016) argument in particular seeks to divide the two terms, as he points out that as the meaning of "Gothic" "becomes more intrinsically connected to aesthetics in the contemporary period—being used, for example, to describe art and fashion—it is even more crucial that a distinction be drawn between the Gothic, an artistic mode, and horror, an affective marker." (15)

Linda Holland-Toll accords with the affective standpoint, defining "Horror fiction […] as any text which has extreme or supernatural elements, induces (as its primary intention and/or effect) strong feelings of terror, horror or revulsion in the reader, and generates a significant degree of unresolved disease within society." (Holland-Toll, 2001: 6) Fred Botting names horror as "the limit of reason […] the very emotion in which the human reaches its limit" (1995: 131). By focusing on affect, these definitions do not offer much in the way of textual markers, and critics such as Wisker add to horror's indefinability by pointing out that it may come from both realist and supernatural sources.

Horror is mobile and fluid, taking on different forms: "Horror is in everyday reality, but it is also a genre, a construction, and a representation of what terrifies and disgusts, what we fear and secretly desire." (Wisker: 5) Further, and as established above, it is, of course, also an affect and a response to these images.

Critics do not even agree on the structural forms that horror and Gothic may take. Jancovich (1992) argues that the pleasure of horror comes from its resolving narrative structure. For Jancovich, horror stories proceed from normality through a period of disorder, and ultimately reach "a point of closure and completion in which disruptive, monstrous elements are contained or destroyed and the original order is re-established." (Wisker: 9). However, Jancovich's model does not fit with the accepted syntagmatic narrative progression established by Todorov and Weinstein (1969). This instead suggests that narrative moves from equilibrium, through disequilibrium, to a *new* equilibrium (emphasis mine). This notion of a changed equilibrium most strongly underpins genres such as the *bildungsroman*, where characters develop and change during the course of the tale. Jancovich's model also ignores the ways in which horror changes its characters and the new understandings that its narrative disruptions offer. By contrast, Wisker argues that "the lingering pleasure of horror is its constant destabilizing influence rather than its tendency for resolution." (Wisker: 38) Holland-Toll's definition also draws attention to the disaffirmative strength of horror, a genre that Wisker stresses "is the most effective because it refuses to close down the terror at the end of the tale and restore an order." (Wisker: 159)

Many content-based definitions of horror are either so wide as to be useless, or contain an inner tension that weakens their validity. Seeking a textual definition of horror, Clive Barker suggests that "Perhaps the body and its vulnerability. Perhaps the mind and its brittleness. Perhaps love and its absence." (1997: 16) Just as Botting's definition above combines reason and emotion, there is a paradoxical nature to Barker's pairings, where the corporeal is fragile, consciousness is tangible, and desire is also loss.

Critical models of Gothic also sustain contradiction and the term is difficult to define as it changes to suit its time and place. Fred Botting identifies a shift from early Gothic, where the object of terror is cast out, to later Gothic where the menace comes from within (1995: 10). Critics such as Spooner (2007) and Botting (2007) stress the term's mobility, arguing that it has moved from the marginal to the mainstream. "Gothic" is thus often used without definition, to refer to a historical canon of texts, and then this meaning is co-opted into an adjective that is applied back to more modern fare. For example, David Pirie's (2009) pioneering history of cinematic horror is the first to describe Hammer's movies as Gothic but throughout his entire book (and despite opening with a chapter entitled "The Characteristics of English Gothic Literature"), Pirie does not state concisely what this might mean in practice. Instead he draws attention to the differences between early Gothic writers, noting qualities such as morbidity, Manichaeism, sadism, and poetic voice.

Textual and structural definitions of Gothic taken from the work of critics such as Hogle (2002) and Castricano (2001) cohere in their focus on paradox and secrecy. Hogle's "gothic matrix" suggests four tenets: an antiquated space, a hidden secret, a physical or psychological haunting, and an oscillation between reality and the supernatural. Castricano's model of "cryptomimesis" denies linearity and approaches narrative as an encrypting process. My own critical model (Round, 2014) uses the Gothic tropes of haunting, the crypt and excess to decipher the comics page, arguing that these concepts underpin the structure and aesthetic of the medium.

Definitions of Gothic, horror and terror all refer primarily to a fearful reaction, but to analyse these stories without surveying reader response requires textual criteria. Heiland (2004) points out that fear goes beyond subjective response and we can be on the alert for signs of its textual presence, for example in the scenarios or characters offered. I take this as my main rationale for approaching these two "mystery" comics as texts that use both terror and horror and can thus be defined as Gothic. For the purposes of this article I will define these terms as follows:

I use the term Gothic at the widest level to refer to a mode of creation that is both disturbing and appealing. It is an affective and structural paradox: giving us both too much information (the *super*natural) and too little (the obscured and unseen). It inverts, distorts, and obscures. It is transgressive and seductive. Its common tropes include temporal or spatial haunting, a reliance on hidden meaning (the crypt), and a sense of excess beyond control (both aesthetic and conceptual).

Within Gothic I recognize the distinctions Radcliffe draws between horror and terror. The terror-gothic awakens our faculties to areas we fear to venture (and yet must), enticing us with obscured imagery, and the promise (or threat) of something more. By contrast, horror-gothic shocks us with the grotesque or obscene, entrapping and overwhelming our senses, and disturbing our complacency.

Alongside these terms I also recognize horror as a cinematic and literary genre that privileges this second type of fear. Horror is an affective representation and a response to the same. It is a reaction to complacency and a critique of normality. It shocks, upsets, disturbs, and appals. It entraps and engulfs our senses, but does not seduce or obscure. Its images may linger, but its impact is instantaneous and engulfing. It is Radcliffe's annihilation of our senses and recoil from fear.

Girls' comics

At their time of publication, both *Spellbound* and *Misty* may have been reluctant to identify themselves as horror comics. American crime and horror comics had gained notoriety in the 1940s and 1950s and created controversy and moral panic in both England and America. In the United States, a series of press articles had fanned the flames of public outrage and resulted in a Senate investigation that forced the American comics industry to commit to drastic self-censorship in 1954 with the creation of the Comics Code (enforced by the Comics Code Authority). Although too lengthy to reproduce here, the Code forbade any subversive depiction of authority or social institutions; any use of monster archetypes; any lurid or disturbing images of violence, bloodshed, lust and depravity; the use of the words "horror" or "terror" in titles; profanity, deformity, nudity; and the final catch-all restriction "All elements or techniques not specifically mentioned herein, but which are contrary to the spirit and intent of the code, and are considered violations of good taste or decency, shall be prohibited." (Comics Code Authority, 1954)

The subjective nature of this censorship (which relied on undefined notions of "good taste") also characterized the evidence submitted to the Senate. This came primarily from psychiatrist Fredric Wertham, who worked with disturbed and delinquent children at the Lafargue Clinic in Harlem, New York. Wertham (1954) provided extensive anecdotal evidence on the stand and in his book *Seduction of the Innocent*, which claimed the horror and crime comics were responsible for increased delinquency and psychiatric damage in young readers. While the titles were certainly unsuitable for children, looking back on the horror comics reveals a strongly moral overtone that is overlooked in Wertham's partial analysis, as discussed by critics such as Hajdu (2009) and Nyberg (1998). In addition, and as these scholars point out, the fact that these troubled children read comics does not prove causation.

The American horror comics were anthologies, with EC's most memorable titles (*Tales from the Crypt, The Haunt of Fear* and *The Vault of Horror*) hosted by the "Ghoulunatics". Warren Publishing would offer similar fare in the 1960s with their titles *Creepy* (1964–1983, 2009-present) and *Eerie* (1966–1983). Their exportation meant that fears were shared in the United Kingdom. Books such as Pumphrey's (1955: 61) *Children's Comics: A Guide for Parents and Teachers* warned of the medium's 'evil communications' and public pressure resulted in the Children and Young Persons Harmful Publications Act (1955). Barker (1984, 1989) argues that the British anti-comics campaign was used by the Communist Party as a pawn to gain political power through anti-American sentiment.

Although horror comics remained controversial, when *Spellbound* and *Misty* emerged in the 1970s the British comics industry was thriving, and pushing back against the previous generation's moral panic. DC Thomson launched *Warlord* in 1974 and *Bullet* in 1976, both offering wartime stories with some nuance, for example by occasionally showing sympathetic German characters. Rival publishers IPC hit back by launching their ultra-violent title *Action* in 1976 (although this would run for less than a year). Running alongside these titles and selling even more copies was the booming girls' comics industry, which had been growing exponentially since the 1950s. While just two girls' story papers (*Girls' Crystal* and *Girls' Own Paper*) had survived World War II, in 1950 Amalgamated Press[1] revived their (text) story paper *School Friend* as a weekly comic strip paper and a few years later repeated the formula with *Girls' Crystal* (1953–1963). AP used the comics medium to breathe new life into these anthology titles which now offered a mix of prose stories and comics strips. The other key title launched at this time was *Girl* (Hulton Press, 1951–1964): the sister title to the popular boys' comic *Eagle*. All were wildly popular: Fenwick (1953) (cited by Chapman, 2011) claims that 94% of 14–15 year old girls read comics. However the dominant themes were conservative and conventional: often set in the safe, enclosed space of the school and based around a fixed social hierarchy (although this was sometimes disrupted). While career girl protagonists featured comics like *Girl,* they mostly appeared in gender-approved occupations, such as "Angela Air Hostess", "At Work with Janet —Fashion Artist", and "Belle of the Ballet". The original lead strip "Kitty Hawke and her All-Girl Air Crew" goes against this type, but a lack of popularity and feelings that it was too masculine led to it being quickly moved to the comic's interior and replaced on the cover page by a school strip.

The publication of *Bunty* in 1958 (DC Thomson) was a direct reaction to these safe titles and launched the "second wave" of British girls' comics, offering a "cheap and cheerful" look and outsider protagonists whose victimisation or exclusion provided the dramatic tension. *Bunty* was followed by numerous imitators such as *Judy* (DC Thomson, 1960–1991) and *Mandy* (DC Thomson, 1967–1991). It also sat alongside an emerging wave of Romance comics, offering stories of pop stars and domestic true love. The first of these was *Romeo* (DC Thomson, 1957–1974) but the most tenacious was *Jackie* (DC Thomson, 1964–1993), whose sales peaked at over a million copies per issue by the 1970s (Sabin, 1996: 84). The romance genre would dominate the market from the late 1950s onwards, but dwindled as the 1970s approached.

The 1970s brought another "new wave" of girls' comics, headed by *Tammy* (IPC) in 1971. This group of titles were aimed more clearly at a working-class audience and filled with "kitchen sink" stories of angst and cruelty. The notorious "Slaves of War Orphan Farm" (*Tammy,* 6 Feb 1971–17 July 1971, written by Gerry Finley-Day with art by Desmond Walduck) exemplifies this trend. It begins with protagonist Kate's parents being killed in the Blitz and her adoption by "Ma Thatcher" whose farm resembles a workhouse where the children sleep in a barn and are hired out as slave labour to other local landowners. Horrific punishments, attempted infanticide and fairly explicit violence colour the story throughout (Kate is repeatedly hit and knocked unconscious, although she seems to recover quickly) and, although the children finally escape, their attempts (and hopes) are consistently thwarted until the very end of the serial. This type of "Cinderella" or "slave" story is emblematic of *Tammy*'s standard themes: containing a working class heroine, constantly thwarted hope, and overt violence against girls, usually from an older authority figure. This "dark wave" of British girls' comics is the one that included *Spellbound* and *Misty*, and to which they added supernatural tropes to bring Gothic terror and horror to a new generation of readers. Arguably, these titles also paved the way for later (more gender-neutral) titles such as the short-lived *Scream!* (IPC, 1984): another weekly anthology with a horror theme.

Spellbound was released by DC Thomson in 1976 and ran for 69 issues. It shared some of its freelance Spanish artists with *Misty* and featured covers by Norman Lee in his trademark haphazard style. Announcing itself as 'The NEW all mystery story paper for GIRLS', *Spellbound* was a 32 page anthology comic. Each issue contains an average of 8 comics stories, 1 or 2 prose stories, a letters page entitled "Spookyspot", "Zodicat" horoscopes, and weekly features on pop stars talking about ghostly experiences. The comic is introduced by the "Supercats"—the all-girl crew of the Spaceship Lynx, who have their own serial story in the centre pages (drawn by Jorge B. Galvez) and a double-page feature on the "Supercats Club", which includes letters, short articles, and exclusive competitions for members. An additional host figure also appears: Damian Darke, an older man dressed in a Hammer Horror style Dracula outfit (complete with a widow's peak, ruffled shirt and black raven on his shoulder) who bookends the weekly "chilling tale". A similar function is performed in later issues by Miss Hatherleigh, an elderly lady who bookends stories about the "mysterious Cremond Castle". These types of "Collector Story-teller" (Coote, ndat) stories are the only real one-shot tales and *Spellbound* predominantly offers on-going serials in three-page instalments. These tales focus on subjects such as Egyptian mummies, witches, and protagonists who are thrown into strange and threatening situations; as well as the space adventures of the Supercats, and a selection of prose tales including ghost stories, myths and legends. The content and aesthetic of the comic is varied, mixing science fiction adventure with supernatural stories and historical realism.

Misty was published by IPC between 1978–1980 and ran for 101 issues before merging with *Tammy*. Wilf Prigmore, group editor for IPC's Girls' Comics, was the driving force behind its creation, with the majority of the run then headed by a consistent team made up of editor Malcolm Shaw, sub-editor Bill Harrington, art editor Jack Cunningham and art assistant Ted Andrews. Pat Mills was involved in its inception and held an initial role as consulting editor, also scripting a few early stories. The majority of the content was provided by a range of freelance and in-house writers, including Shaw and Harrington, with art mainly supplied by British freelancers and the Spanish studios.[2] Each 32-page issue of *Misty* contains a selection of one-shot stories (generally four pages long) and serials that stretch over 10 or so issues in four-page instalments. It opens with an inside cover welcome from Misty herself, our fictional editor and 'Friend of the Mists', who sets the tone for each issue by appearing in a delicate full-page line drawing and welcoming readers to her realm, urging them to "tread softly […] and follow me… if you dare" (#43) (see further example at Fig. 1). The rest of the issue also includes 1 or 2 prose stories and "true ghost stories" sent in by readers, a "Write to Misty" letters page, a horoscope section called "Star Days", a regular comedy cartoon strip called Miss T
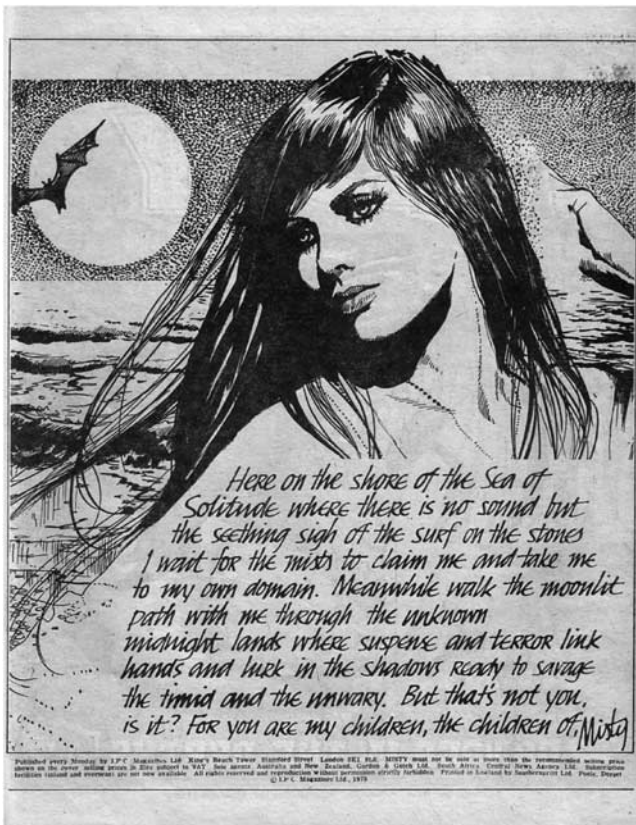
Figure 1 | Inside front cover from _Misty_ #84. Art by Shirley Bellwood, lettering by Jack Cunningham, writer unknown but likely Malcolm Shaw or Bill Harrington. This figure is not covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Reproduced with permission of Misty™ Rebellion Publishing Ltd; copyright © Rebellion Publishing Ltd, all rights reserved.

about a hapless witch (written and drawn by Joe Collins), and a handful of half-page adverts. With the tagline "stories not to be read at night" and a strong strand of horror and punishment in its one-shot tales, _Misty_ is most remembered for terrifying its young readers. Collings (2012) describes it as "a potential 'life ruiner'" and its one-shot stories are cautionary tales with a Gothic twist. They are most frequently based around transgressive scenarios where a cursed item or delinquent behaviour brings about a bad end for the protagonist. Its longer serials have girls thrown into threatening situations or discovering some unwanted or uncanny ability and ultimately coming to terms with this. In contrast to _Spellbound_, _Misty_ also has a very Gothic aesthetic throughout: from its vampy host (drawn by Shirley Bellwood) and associated motifs (bats, full moon, willow trees) to its typography and subject matter.

Horror in other media was on the rise at this point and _Spellbound_ and _Misty_ can also be read as part of a more general spread of horror into domestic media. Anthology series telling horror tales had long existed on radio in both the United Kingdom and the United States, looking back to radio programmes such as _The Witch's Tale_ (1931–1938, WOR) which was hosted by "Old Nancy" "the Witch of Salem" and _Inner Sanctum Mystery_ (1941–1952, Blue Network). In literature, the _Pan Book of Horror Stories_ series began in 1959: a series of 30 low-cost paperbacks collecting taut visceral short stories. This was followed by the _Fontana Book of Great Ghost Stories_ (1964–1984) and _Fontana Book of Great Horror Stories_ series (1966–1984), across 20 volumes and 17 volumes, respectively. Television shows

such as _Alfred Hitchcock Presents_ (1955–65, CBS and NBC), _Boris Karloff's Thriller_ (1960–1961 and 1961–1962, NBC), and _The Twilight Zone_ (1959–1964, CBS) also made use of the anthology format. Helen Wheatley notes the controversy around the BBC's decision to begin broadcasting supernatural drama on television, arguing that what was acceptable in the public space of the theatre was more controversial when moved into the domestic sphere.

Gothic structures and archetypes

Wheatley (2006) claims that the anthology structure resulted in two distinct types of tale: the understated ghost story (Radcliffe's "terror") and the effects-driven supernatural horror—and that these types were developed across literature, film, theatre and radio. The use of these two types of story structure in _Spellbound_ and _Misty_ seems a good starting point. Using a discrete random sample of 10% of the run of each comic (that is, 10 issues of _Misty_ and 6 issues of _Spellbound_), I set out to evaluate the use of each story type, the construction of terror and horror, and the appearance of traditional motifs. Horror and terror both seem well-suited to the comics medium, whose stylised art and staccato panel structure lends itself well to horror's grotesque image and the horrifying reveal. However, the medium also exploits terror's imaginative potential as pivotal events can be obscured or omitted between panels. The reader is required to recognize, interpret and even create the story events by combining the shown panel content and the unshown contents of the "gutter" between panels in order to create a complete story.

My analysis of 6 issues of _Spellbound_ reviewed 49 individual stories, of which just 12 (24%) could be defined as effects-driven horror (featuring living dolls, ghostly dragons, mummies, giant bats, a mask, and "a grotesque black cloud" (#37)). The remaining 37 stories (76%) contain no visible threat: mysterious events involve uncanny portraits, familiar-looking characters or overheard threats. Much of the tension is created through the protagonist's suspicions or their perception of places and people as "sort of eerie" (#36).

The equivalent analysis of _Misty_ across 10 issues (totalling 64 individual comics stories/instalments of serials) revealed that just 14 of these (22%) rely upon a monstrous image or effect to horrify (instances included skeletons, gorgons, spiders, sea demons, a fire, rats, snakes, beetles, melting waxworks, and zombies). The remaining 50 stories (78%) do not show anything that could be considered horrifying: although dramatic events and characters such as traffic accidents and witches feature there is no grotesquery or gore. Instead they raise tension through their narrative stance and by suggesting an impending doom: for example "Monster of Green Acres" (#85) in which a "madman" stalking the town is addressed throughout in second-person narration, before finally being revealed as a scarecrow who "didn't know when to stop". For those who, like Collings, remember _Misty_ best for its shock story endings of grotesque transformation, these results are revealing. In fact, overall both titles shy away from showing horrifying images. Horror remains largely unshown and instead the tales terrify through the unseen and suggested.

I also conducted a content analysis of 12 (different) randomly selected issues of _Spellbound_ (which represents 17% of the comic's entire run) to see how often Gothic archetypes appeared in its comics content.[3] The total was extremely small, with mummies and witches being the only figures to appear. The serial "When the Mummy Walks" produced five instances of this figure, and various other serials produced a total of eight instances of witchery. Using these figures suggests that Gothic archetypes appear in just 14% of the total comics content of this title. In addition, it should be noted that all the instances I found in this

sample came from the early weeks of the comic's run, suggesting that in later issues the focus moves further away from established archetypes.

I also surveyed *Misty*'s entire run of stories[4] against the average number of stories per issue to see how many times Gothic archetypes explicitly appear (Table 1). There are limitations to this method, as there are many other stories in *Misty* where 'the dead' are mentioned in more general terms, which I have not included. However it does give a sense of the weighting given to named Gothic archetypes in *Misty* content—and reveals that they make up just 22% of its total content.

In both titles, then, Gothic archetypes appear less than might be expected. In addition, they are often treated in a subversive manner. As ghosts are a very wide category that can take many forms, I looked more closely at the treatment of the witch archetype, as this is an established figure with a well-defined generic purpose.

Roper (2012: 3) argues that the witch is "symbolically and psychologically capacious" and can be morally ambiguous despite her association with evil. He draws attention to the contradictions and tensions that frequently appear in images of witches, for example in between word and image in early woodcuts of executed witches (13) and (most often) in the "strange and uncanny" combinations of sagging age and nubile youth in many paintings, citing the work of Hans Baldung Grier (15). Through the witch the female body thus "becomes the focus of projections about evil, sexuality, envy and death" (18) and the stereotypical hag is a consequence of the witch's artistic association with the figure of Envy.

Even in the horror and Gothic genres the witch is somewhat marginalized. Freeman (2016: 745–746) argues that, while witchcraft features heavily in early modern writing (folklore, children's literature and fantasy), it appears less often in Gothic than male-dominated forms of black magic. In addition, when present in later texts, it is often modernized in some way ("in the service of ecology, feminism, spiritual renewal, and personal development") and he notes that the "good witch" frequently appears in the Gothic film. The exclusive use of female witches in *Spellbound* and *Misty* thus redresses this gendered imbalance. In addition, the variety of ways that the figure is used in these titles sustains her flexibility, undermining superficial or fixed definitions.

The dominant witch figure in the issues of *Spellbound* that were analysed is Aunt Armida in "I Don't Want to be a Witch!" (#1-#15, art by Norman Lee, writer unknown). Rather than an old hag she is a contemporary witch of the type that Freeman (2016: 746) claims was a "significant aspect of countercultural life in Britain" in the 1960s. Aunt Armida is beautiful, with flowing long black hair, and often shown dancing around a cauldron or fire. She is able to transform her own appearance and is in league with familiars. But although she holds the traditional narrative

position of antagonist, her motivation is not evil. She wants to expose her niece Celia's supernatural powers so that Celia will become a witch like her, which Celia does not want. However, Armida's attempts are often trick-like rather than malevolent and her motivation can be read as female ambition rather than destruction.

While considering this type of witch we should also examine *Misty*'s fictional editor, who also fulfils this visual stereotype (see Fig. 1 above). Roper (2012: 6) points out that "Journeys featured, too, in the stories of witches' flight" and that "the wildness of mountains and deserted landscapes […] became part of the iconography of witchcraft". *Misty*'s appearances always picture her either in a natural wild environment (including the sea, as above, or a lake, forest, mountain, and so forth) or sometimes amongst ruins or rocks. However, it is not just the imagery that emphasizes these witchlike tropes. *Misty*'s welcomes are notable for drawing extensively on images of the body and the journey (see Round, 2018, forthcoming) as we are constantly urged to "walk" with her (as in the figure above), or to "journey", "quest", "venture", "step" or "follow me" on a journey elsewhere. Despite this, she is a reassuring presence, signing off as "your friend" in over half of the inside cover greetings, and promising that "the followers of Misty will come to no harm" (#13).[5] Like Aunt Armida she is a powerful figure, but placed in the position of ally, and addressing the reader most often as a friend and equal: offering up stories for "our delight" rather than inflicting her ideals on us.

Within *Misty*'s entire run (of just over 600 stories), witches appear explicitly 21 times, and offer extreme variety.[6] They can be placed into one of four categories: innocent victims or helpful forces (six instances); justified (if somewhat extreme) avengers (five instances); malevolent antagonists (seven instances); and protagonists who discover their own witch powers (three instances). In six instances they are innocent victims or helpful forces, as in "A Girl's Best Friend" (#48) where blind Carla has her sight returned thanks to her dog's sacrifice and with the help of Old Greta. Five of the tales have witches meting out justified (albeit extreme) revenge, such as "Elmo's Revenge" (#32) in which Paula steals from her neighbour Old Wanda and in return Wanda takes over her body after a fall. In seven of the tales witches are malevolent antagonists: for example "What's on the Other Side?" (#26), where a medieval witch travels to the future and traps disobedient Peggy on the other side of her TV. Finally, there are three stories in which protagonists discover their own witch powers, such as "Was it Just… A Game?" (#14) in which Nina is bullied at school and called a witch, but the denouement shows her enacting accidents (that come true) on all the bullies with her dolls. Within this last category, two of these three tales can also be classified as either witch as avenger (#14; #59) or witch as innocent victim (#21). This very brief list demonstrates that in over half these appearances witchcraft is either given some

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Table 1 | Gothic archetypes in *Misty*

Archetype	Appearances	Total	% (of 606 comics stories)
Ghosts	22 one-shots, 5 serials (49 episodes) [+ 21 prose]	71	11.72
Witches	21 one-shots	21	3.47
Vampires	9 one-shots, 1 serial (12 episodes) [+ 2 prose]	21	3.47
Zombies	1 one-shot, 1 serial (6 episodes)	7	1.16
Werewolves	6 one-shots	6	0.99
The Devil	5 one-shots, 1 serial	6	0.99
Skeletons	3 one-shots	3	0.5
Frankenstein's creature	2 one-shots	2	0.33
Warlocks	2 one-shots	2	0.33
TOTAL		**139**	**22.94**

justification or the witches themselves are unfairly victimised. In addition, although the visual stereotype of an aged crone dominates in the stories where the witch turns out to be good, across the other tales they range from babies to old ladies. So *Misty*'s focus is on destabilizing the stereotype either visually or functionally and sustaining the archetype's variety and duality.

"When the Mummy Walks" appears in *Spellbound* #1–#10 and is also more subversive than it initially seems. Mummies are a less obvious choice for a horror archetype, however the Egyptian mythology background to the story is completely undeveloped and all is not what it seems. Although the "Golden Priestess of Manaton" initially appears to be enacting a stereotypical standard mummy revenge by attacking members of the party of Egyptologists that raided her tomb, as the plot develops it is revealed that the mummy is controlled by Miss Brisson who is using it to steal the relics that were recovered. The mummy then ultimately takes its own revenge against Miss Brisson at protagonist Jenny's urging. As Lorrsadmin (2015) points out, the real villain of the piece is Miss Brisson and so the mummy's role throughout is really just misdirection. The story uses various locations such as graveyards, the museum at night, foggy streets and shadowy settings to create a compelling atmosphere of Gothic horror. Norman Lee's art renders the mummy a terrifying (though shapely) figure with trailing bandages and blank eyes that nonetheless can kill. Again, it seems the Gothic trope is being subverted a little, as the mummy is a tool for mere theft and its abilities include non-standard skills (as in its stare of death).

Rather than outright horror, both titles rely primarily on uncanny events and suggested consequences. While *Misty* is harsher than *Spellbound* through its reliance on one-shot stories in which protagonists frequently come to a sticky end, both titles heap mysterious, frightening or downright unlucky events upon their protagonists. This continues the trend of the "slave" story so often found in the "dark wave" of girls' comics. For example in "No Cheer for Cheryl" (*Spellbound* #36–#49) our protagonist undergoes a series of false accusations, bullying, struggles with school work and her own talents, all set against the backdrop of her mother's increasing blindness. In "The Shop at Shudder Corner" (a portmanteau serial in which our protagonists enter the history of a different antique every week thanks to the magic glass in Sheila's torch), Sheila and Jean are often thrown into scary or life-threatening situations despite their best efforts to "not use the torch on anything sinister-looking or nasty. I've had enough scares!" (#36)—in this tale they are taken to a deserted inn and nearly sucked into the pages of a mysterious book.

Both comics' use of established horror and Gothic archetypes tends towards the subversive, and reader expectations are often exploited or inverted. Will Eisner (1985) claims that "it is inherent to narrative art that the requirement on the viewer is not so much analysis as recognition" (38) and with this in mind the deliberate inversion and misuse of established symbolism and archetypes seems odd. While horror is subversive and socially aware in a radical and political sense (Wisker, 2005), in these comics the subversive streak is also reflexive and comments ironically upon its own genre.[7] This may only be explainable by the presence of Gothic, whose tensions and contradictions frequently construct unreliable or paradoxical narratives and thwart expectations. The ways in which both comics exploit other visual markers of Gothic will now be discussed.

Gothic style and aesthetic

In one of the first discussions of cinematic Gothic, Stephen Farber claims that Gothic cinema is "baroque and self-conscious" in its expression, and employs "arresting distortions in mood and cinematic technique" (1972: 95). In particular he identifies black

costumes and settings, "weird" lighting and camera angles to unsettle the audience, exaggerated shadows, and large asymmetrical settings and shot compositions (Wheatley, 2006: 9).

A comparison reveals that *Spellbound* is much more conservative in its use of visuals than *Misty*. While there are many instances of acute angles, borderless and broken panels, circular borders and so forth, the pages of *Spellbound* still conform in the main to a grid-type structure (generally of 3–4 rows and 2–3 columns). Each story averages 26 panels spread over 3 pages.[8] MacManus (2016) draws attention to the scripting practices of British comics (based on his work on *2000AD*), explaining that writers would not script by the page but instead by the panel, with each instalment or self-contained tale lasting around 30 panels. So while *Spellbound* offers more space for its panels than the average, its writers are following a similar scripting practice, where the page divisions are left to the artist (as also confirmed by *2000AD* artist David Roach).[9]

The typography of the comics is also different. *Spellbound* has a neat typewritten look to its font, with the majority of speech and narration appearing in lower-case. The typewritten aesthetic is precise and regimented, as lines are completely level and letter size and position systematic. Each page is also headed with a sentence summarising or quoting its content ("Journey into Danger" "Mysterious Miss Brisson" "Dad! You can't mean it!" and so forth). This, together with the shorter segments, means that events often seem summarized rather than dramatized.

By contrast, and although *Misty* uses a similar style of typewritten font, all of its dialogue and narration are capitalized, giving a more casual feel. Although rows of text are clearly typeset at regular intervals, italics are used to emphasize long sections and these strategies bring it closer to the aesthetic of American comics. Its story pacing is also different: almost all the *Misty* stories and instalments are four pages long (and a few stretch to five or six pages). However, like *Spellbound*, they also average 26 panels, as they often open with a large splash page. The extra page allowed for each story means that the panels are much more varied in size and allow for an increased use of splash pages and overlarge panels to open and close the stories.

Mills (2012) claims *Misty* as "my attempt to use my *2000AD* approach, big visuals, on a girls' comic", as the extended length of the story instalments (increased from three to four pages) allows increased space and large opening splash panels. Art editor Jack Cunningham also reveals he would annotate some scripts for the artists to suggest ways of keeping the action moving by using strategies such as borderless panels.[10] But *Misty*'s dynamic aesthetic is primarily the result of the exceptional Spanish and British talent that worked upon it. It also draws heavily from the previous generation and surrounding girls' comics for its dynamic layouts, where asymmetrical patterning and circular and other panel shapes were not uncommon. As a result of all these factors, *Misty* is able to depart almost completely from a conventional (or implied) grid layout by varying panel sizes so dramatically that on many pages it is impossible to identify panels by row or column.

The "big visuals" used in Misty create asymmetrical double page spreads that are dominated by panels whose size, shape and position vary wildly, as Fig. 2 shows. Taken from the short story "Catch the Moon if you Can" (#95), this double page spread exemplifies Farber's model through its black backgrounds, uncanny perspectives, the acute and obtuse angles used for panel borders/frames, and overall asymmetrical composition.

Thierry Groensteen's (1999) landmark work on comics argues that the page (rather than the panel) should be considered as the smallest signifying narrative unit, and draws attention to the signifying properties of panel shape, size and position. Applying his framework to the figure above is revealing. Darkness dominates the final panel (which has a privileged space due to

Figure 2 | "Catch the Moon if you Can" (*Misty* #95). Art by José Ariza, writer unknown. This figure is not covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Reproduced with permission of Misty™ Rebellion Publishing Ltd; copyright © Rebellion Publishing Ltd, all rights reserved.

its position), wherein our protagonist Mary discovers she has nearly fallen over a cliff edge but has been saved by the spirit of her grandmother. However the absence of a vertical border (including a white gutter) between this and the penultimate panel sustains the high contrast between light and dark that has characterized this narrative by giving the appearance that the entire bottom row is part of a single panel.

The page is also significant for the number of times that the panel borders which are present are broken, which happens four times as Mary's head breaks the clear border separating the panel. Critics such as Hogle (1994, 2002), Bruhm (1994) and Heiland (2004) have all stressed the centrality of transgression and rule-breaking in Gothic, saying: "Gothic fiction at its core is about transgressions of all sorts: across national boundaries, social boundaries, sexual boundaries, the boundaries of one's own identity" (Heiland, 2004: 3). *Misty*'s panel borders are frequently broken by character limbs in an example of aesthetic transgression. Another good example is the final page of the story "Mirror Mirror on the Wall" (#61) where Sally fights her mirrored reflection via a mass of shattered angular panel frames. This type of transgression is also reflected in the comic's content, which focuses strongly on rule breaking (of many types) and its consequences.

Wheatley summarizes Farber's framework as "a tension between a glossy surface and degraded interior" (2006: 9) and Catherine Spooner's (2004) work on Goth fashion also emphasizes the tension between surface and depth (through fabric that is ripped or layered or contains contrasting surfaces such as fishnet, PVC, chiffon, leather and so forth). *Misty*'s dramatic page layouts also emphasize surface over depth, where acute angles and circular panels disrupt the implied grid of the comics page as identified by Groensteen, and broken borders exploit the illusion of depth. Given this, they benefit from further exploration.

In previous work (Round, 2014) I argue that the comics page can be read using three key Gothic tropes: haunting, excess, and the crypt. Rather than separating out the compositional elements on the page, we should approach it holistically and reflect on its strategies. Effectively, I am saying that each comic is unique and will use a selection of the formal strategies available to it to best convey its intended meaning. Within this, haunting might refer to intertextual or paratextual echoes found in page content or layout; intersections between the priorities of ornamentation, functioning and scaffolding; mirroring and doubling of content or layout; temporal disruption through repetition or flattening of time, and so forth. In Fig. 2 the acute panel borders and the rotating perspective echo the disorienting content and the dangerous physical space Mary finds herself in: thus ornamentation and function coincide and are necessarily divorced from the basic scaffolding (of the grid) to do so.

Excess also comes into play here as the reader's perspective shifts and changes between mid-range and long-range: but the position we are offered fluctuates no more than this. We are not given Mary's visual (literal) point of view within the story, but by contrast we are limited to her perceptions: we only realize she is about to fall from the cliff at the point she is told this. There is a contradiction here between the literal point of view assigned to the reader and the content or information that s/he is given. This tension creates an uncanny feeling as the reader is simultaneously both aligned with Mary, and not.

This uncanny position of the reader is also emphasized through the notion of the crypt, which refers to the unseen elements of the story in the gaps (gutters) between panels. We know what is in them based on the surrounding panels, and yet these elements remain unseen. The gutters are consistently invaded by various characters in this story and the hidden events are not significant: in fact the arrangement of panels looks more

like the borders of photographs thrown down on top of each other (something that the static-looking art further reinforces). The layout therefore echoes the narrative format which tends towards 'telling not showing' as Mary and her Granny explain each point of the plot to us.

By contrast, looking closely at a double page from *Spellbound* (Fig. 3) reveals a different aesthetic and use of the page. Although this story is set at night (Beryl is held up from performing her chore of feeding her neighbour's cat), the page is dominated by white space due to the large gaps between panels and the use of empty space for emphasis around the cat's eyes and around Emily in her rocking chair. The silhouettes on the first page are all clearly identifiable (as a tree, and Beryl herself). Returning to Farber's model, there are no black costumes and settings, no "weird" lighting, and no exaggerated shadows. While the panel borders are irregular and angled at points (for example, the first row of the second page), they nonetheless conform to an implied grid on both pages and the overall effect is thus not one that unsettles the audience.

The angles used do change radically, however, and, to return to my critical model, switch between various points of view. For example as Emily breaks the fourth wall to shout directly at us on the second page the perspective changes from disembodied (unassigned point of view) to embodied (where we are given the point of view of a story character). This is an example of excess in the varying perspectives being offered—but the opening and

closing panels from narrator/host Damian Darke have already normalized this strategy somewhat and so it is less effective than it might otherwise have been. Haunting is also not used effectively: while there are panels without borders and which 'bleed' into the page edges, the only significant break of a panel border is when Beryl returns the key to her neighbour the next day (the other breaks are all from speech balloons: themselves a "desperation device" that are not properly part of the diegesis). Including a formal transgression like this only when normality has been restored to the narrative seems an odd fit for the story. Finally, in terms of the events hidden in the crypt or gutter, large gaps of time and summary events take place between panels (such as Beryl's entry into the cottage, or the switch to the following day) and so the page layout here does not offer any sense of urgency or claustrophobia that might enhance the story.

Applying Groensteen's model also gives a mixed evaluation of these pages. The most dramatic panel is arguably the first of the second page, showing "Miss Agnes" sat in her rocking chair. The panel's form (shape) and area (size) both emphasize this, as it is the largest and most angular one on these pages. Its position (as the first panel, a privileged location) also reinforces this, although it does not come after a page turn, which would have increased the impact. This suggests that the artist did his work well (by situating this panel on a new page) but the publisher undermined this (by not including a page turn here). So while both comics

Figure 3 | "The Rocking Chair" (*Spellbound* #22). Artist and writer unknown. This figure is not covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Reproduced with permission of Spellbound; copyright © DC Thomson & Co Ltd.

depart from convention, the aesthetics of *Spellbound* are less Gothic and transgressive than the layouts and visuals used in *Misty*.

Gothic for girls

By way of conclusion, I would like to explore the thematic ways in which Gothic tropes are adapted for a child audience. Both comics exploit Gothic's gendered and subversive qualities by offering open endings, inconclusive mysteries, and reframing Gothic motifs such as transformation or isolation as metaphors for youthful experiences.

Many of *Spellbound*'s serials such as "Hetty in the House of Secrets" and "Poison Penny" have protagonists thrown into mysterious situations where their concerns and fears are disbelieved. Other serials such as "The Tiny Taylors" and "Supercats" emphasize particular aspects or limitations. For example, the Taylor family are shrunk to a small size and must negotiate their way across a strange and dangerous island they have landed on. The Supercats team all have a different strength and some encounters see this being exploited by their enemies as they turn on each other (for example, "Roxana's Revenge" (#37)). Marginalized or ignored concerns and the limitations of physical strength or other skills are fears that seem well-suited to literature for young girls, who are becoming aware of their changing position and clashing with their parents and other authority figures. As Sweetman (2007: 31) points out in a discussion of *Misty*, "the sinister subtleties of the tales centred on troubled girls who were becoming aware of strange feelings and did not quite know what to do with them".

While *Misty*'s one-shot stories are generally cautionary tales that end badly for a wayward protagonist, its serials often show protagonists struggling to accept some aspect of their self. For example, Nicola in "The Cult of the Cat" is told she is the chosen one of Bast. Initially she struggles against this destiny, saying "No, no, go away. Keep out of my head. I hate your gods and your cats" (#7), but ultimately she accepts her new identity as "a very special person, the chosen of Bast." (#12) In "The Loving Cup" Lucy fights against her 'other within' when she discovers she is the reincarnation of her ancestor Lucrezia Borgia (#82). In "The Secret World of Sally Maxwell" Sally struggles against her telepathic powers, but at the close of the tale accepts these, saying "I think that's as normal as I can ever hope to be…but it'll do!" (#60) Sometimes this hidden 'other' is externalized completely as a ghost or spirit that must be helped or appeased: for example in "Paint it Black", "The Ghost of Golightly Towers", or "Hush, Hush, Sweet Rachel" (a rewrite of Frank de Felitta's 1975 novel *Audrey Rose*, adapted into a movie starring Anthony Hopkins in 1977). This last is particularly relevant as protagonist Lisa is infantilised by Rachel's manifestations: losing control over her actions and speaking in baby talk. Lucy's encounters with the Loving Cup also make her lose control, and Sally and Nicola are both scared by and ashamed of their telepathic incidents. These *Misty* stories can therefore be read as *bildungsroman* tales of self-growth in which characters ultimately learn to either control or accept themselves.

These stories explore identity, and *Misty* in particular is both conservative and transgressive by combining Manichaean morals with uncertain outcomes and fantastic scenarios. However, in its stories transformation is often linked to puberty, uncertainty and hidden pasts arouse parental doubt, and Gothic others and doubles are reframed as infantile personality traits or secrets to be hidden or conquered through journeys of self-acceptance. Although established horror and Gothic archetypes appear in both comics they are seldom the main focus and figures such as the witch take on a variety of plot functions and cannot be clearly delineated as evil or good. One-shot stories in particular often end on an offbeat note and without narrative closure. While the patriarchal storyteller Damian Darke bookends *Spellbound*'s stories, he seldom confirms the story's events or resolution and instead sustains uncertainty and openness by questioning the things that have been shown.

Spellbound offers on-going mystery and the potential (if not the actuality) of magical and supernatural happenings, but it is in *Misty* that the Gothic themes of transgression, excess and inversion are most apparent. *Misty*'s one-shot stories provide clear moral guidance and inflict grotesque and abject punishments on those who break the rules. But it also uses its serials to interrogate issues of control, authority, and self-value and offers a strongly subversive message that celebrates female power and openness as brave girls are enabled to defeat a host of evils. It pairs together the cautionary tale and the *bildung* in a very Gothic duality: offering (and perhaps even creating) a 'Gothic for Girls'.

Notes

1 Amalgamated Press would become Fleetway Publications in 1959 and ultimately be incorporated into the holding company International Publishing Corporation (IPC) in 1963. A reorganization in 1968 saw IPC divided into six divisions, one of which ('IPC Magazines') included the 'Juveniles Department', from within which the comics were published.

2 See my Misty database at www.juliaround.com/misty for all known story accreditations.

3 It should however be noted that the majority of the prose pieces contained ghosts or other supernatural figures.

4 My *Misty* project includes a database at www.juliaround.com/misty. This lists every story published in *Misty*, along with writer and artist details and a short story summary, and can be used to search for patterns and common motifs.

5 My thanks to Paul Fisher Davies for his research on this project.

6 It should be noted that this relatively low number does not include stories that deal with a discovered magical item or anonymous curse.

7 There are also many stories in *Misty* that deal with social issues, please see Round (2018) for a full discussion.

8 Average calculated from a single-issue sample, excluding single-page stories.

9 Personal interview, 2016.

10 Personal interview, 2017.

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Data availability

Additional information