

THE HORROR OF OUR LOVE:  
HANNIBAL LECTER AND THE RECLAIMING OF QUEER VILLAINS

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## ABSTRACT

Gender and sexual diversity have a history of being invoked, explicitly or implicitly, to further the monstrosity of villainous characters, including those who are (nominally) human. One such example is popular culture's most famous cannibalistic serial killer, Hannibal Lecter. This paper traces the meanings constructed by queerness in the Hannibal Lecter stories, beginning by addressing the implications of queerness within Thomas Harris's tetralogy and Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs*. Next, this paper turns to Bryan Fuller's 2013 television adaptation, *Hannibal*, and its inheritance of homophobic depictions of villains, both from broader gothic and horror contexts and from its direct source material. Despite this legacy of queercoding, *Hannibal* breaks from the longstanding connections between queerness and villainy, using gothic tropes and aesthetics to readdress queer monstrosity through the gothic context where it emerged. Fuller's choice to center his adaptation on a love story between two men resists the negative connections between queerness and monstrosity. Instead of recreating homophobic tropes, I argue that Fuller's adaptation provides a space for reclamation, where Hannibal's queer desires are not a furthering of villainy but a sign of his humanity.

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## The Horror of Our Love: Hannibal Lecter and the Reclaiming of Queer Villains

“Moonlight walking, I smell your softness  
 Carnivorous and lusting to track you down among the pines  
 I want you stuffed into my mouth  
 Hold you down and tear you open, live inside you  
 Love I’d never hurt you  
 But I’ll grind against your bones until our marrows mix  
 I will eat you slowly” – “The Horror of Our Love” by Ludo

### **(Re)constructing Villainy**

The ways in which we talk about desire are full of expressions of appetite, so it is no wonder that the popular cultural figure of a cannibal provides such rich ground for discussions of sexuality: there is a certain intimacy in consumption. The carnal invocation of threat to the physical body which also pushes past moral taboos is key to the construction of a character that has fixated readers and viewers alike since the 1981 publication of *Red Dragon*, the first novel in Thomas Harris’s tetralogy: Dr. Hannibal Lecter, popular culture’s most famous serial-killing cannibal. Hannibal’s infamy has expanded to include several film adaptations, including Michael Mann’s *Manhunter* (1986), based on *Red Dragon*, and Jonathan Demme’s *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), based on Harris’s second Hannibal novel and which earned Anthony Hopkins an Academy Award for playing Lecter. One recent adaptation that garnered the enthusiasm of fans worldwide is Bryan Fuller’s television series, *Hannibal*, which starred Mads Mikkelsen as Hannibal Lecter and Hugh Dancy as FBI criminal profiler Will Graham and aired from 2013-2015 on NBC. The show is mired in dark, saturated colours and darker morality, with visuals that not only reveal but revel in the violence its killers leave in their wakes, encouraging constant awareness of the connections between beauty and destruction. Drawing on gothic aesthetics aided by the grey skies of the D.C. area where the show is set, *Hannibal* brings up questions that have echoed within the gothic about where to draw the line between humans and monsters—even those who inhabit human bodies.

In the wake of the cinematic success of *The Silence of the Lambs*, Fuller chose to walk the audience back in time from Hannibal's consultations with FBI trainee Clarice Starling, portrayed by Jodi Foster in Demme's film. Instead of focusing on the Clarice-Hannibal relationship, Fuller's show draws from Harris's entire tetralogy to construct a world in which Hannibal's crimes have not yet been discovered. Although Hannibal is the titular character, the show is driven by his relationship with the hyper-empathic Will Graham, a character who gets significantly more screen-time in the television adaptation than in the books that inspired it. Throughout the course of three seasons, Fuller transitions *Hannibal* from a show that could pass for a crime procedural, in which normative agents of the law pursue a diverse array of serial killers, to a story about the terrifying vulnerability of being seen and known, and the human potential for connection and reciprocity. Over its run, what begins as an emphasis on reading the subtext of the show, grounded in the shared understanding of Hannibal's cannibalism and shrouded in veiled metaphors, becomes explicit. Hannibal's violent proclivities go from being talked around to being fully on screen; the blossoming relationship at the center of the show follows a similar trajectory from subtext to text.<sup>1</sup> Fuller recognizes the presence of hunger implicit and explicit in the source material and uncovers the desire and yearning that are entangled with the urge to devour. One significant change Fuller makes to the source material is his transformation of Harris' repeated use of deviations from sexual or gender norms to signify monstrosity: in response to the historical phenomenon of queercoding, where characters are created with signifiers that suggest (but do not confirm) a queer identity, Fuller brings Hannibal's

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Emily Sutton's paper "'Do You Ache for Him?': Uncloseted Queer Desire in NBC's *Hannibal*" for putting in words the parallel of these dual revelations.

love for another man onto the screen in an explicit gesture towards the potential and power of queerness to reveal humanity.<sup>2</sup>

In order to make clear the potential of NBC's *Hannibal* to enable queer readings fueled by queer people instead of at the expense of queer people, this essay will establish a link between Fuller's television adaptation of the Hannibal Lecter books and films and the history of the monstrous other that the adaptation inherits, with mindfulness of the broader phenomenon of queercoding and its role in the gothic mode. I will discuss the queercoding within the Hannibal Lecter novels and their film adaptations to provide insight into the connections Harris and his adaptors develop between queerness and villainy. By exposing the grey morality established in *Hannibal*, and expanding on the use of liminality within the show, I will establish the basis for revisioning a past where queerness is inherently villainous through the very same genre that so often constructs monstrosity on the basis of the other. Rather than escalating his monstrosity, I argue that Hannibal's love for Will is deeply humanizing. Responding to the historical use of queercoding villains in gothic fiction more generally, and the specific way Harris invokes queerness as a function of horror, Fuller constructs a version of Hannibal who engages in a tender and fraught romantic relationship with another man. For Fuller's *Hannibal*, queerness is a redemptive and humanizing factor, strongly at odds with the tradition from which it grows. I will address how, by addressing the homophobic history of its source material and the queercoded conventions it inherits, *Hannibal* enables a connection between queerness and humanity that

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<sup>2</sup> Other significant changes in Fuller's adaptation include increased attention to gender and racial representation as expressed via the transformation of four significant characters who are all white men in the books. Psychiatrist Alan Bloom becomes Alana Bloom (Caroline Dhavernas) and tabloid reporter Freddy Lounds becomes blogger Freddie Lounds (Lara Jean Chorostecki). The grizzled head of the Behavioural Sciences Unit, Jack Crawford, is portrayed by African American actor Laurence Fishburne. Agent Katz, a member of the FBI's laboratory, undergoes a racial and gender transformation: the series' Beverly Katz is portrayed by Korean American actress Hetienne Park. These changes in part reflect Clarice's absence: rather than a single character exemplary in her role in an otherwise white, male, and middle aged FBI, Fuller presents a more diverse range of competent and well-rounded characters, a patchwork in which Will Graham is just one piece.

speaks to queer viewers who have witnessed the oft-reproduced connections between queerness and villainy; the show affirms instead that queerness can be a life-giving source of connection in a world where being queer can sometimes feel isolating and monstrous.

Coding supernatural creatures as evil has long relied on stereotypes of the Other as part of a specifically gothic response to humanity's fear of the unknown. Ruth Bienstock Anolik, in *Horri-fying Sex: Essays on Sexual Difference in Gothic Literature*, recognizes the place of the unknown as an inciter of horror within the genre, especially as it pertains to kinds of sexuality which challenge normative ideals. Such horror from the other is, Anolik argues, due to the gothic's emergence as a response to the rote, rational categorization of the Enlightenment (1). Anolik further acknowledges how representation of such boundary-pushing unknowns has evolved and diversified: "Traditionally, the emblem of the unknown that lurks behind the Gothic wall is the supernatural, the monstrous, the inhuman ... [y]et there is an equally powerful Gothic tendency to locate horror upon the human Other who becomes the emblem of unknown danger" (2). Anolik recognizes the importance of sexuality to the gothic when she argues that "Gothic anxieties regarding sex and sexuality are a manifestation of the fear of the unknown; the anxiety is not generated by some generalized fear of sex but is an anxious response to the difference of the sexual Other ... who is as unknowable and therefore as mysterious and frightening as the supernatural" (4). When dealing with human monsters, the production of evil tends to still rely on naming the characteristics of the other; human groups who have been marginalized by racism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, or antisemitism. Among these forces of marginalization, homophobia and transphobia contribute to queercoding villainy in the gothic, where the horror of a text can be located in digressions from norms of gender and sexuality.

A queercoded character is a marker of possibility, of potential for a reading of queerness, but also of plausible deniability. Whereas queercoding can be used as a tool by queer or queer-



positive creators to produce queer characters while avoiding punishment from homophobic networks or publishers, it can also be used as a tool to other, relying on the implied negative connotation of queerness in a homophobic society. One classic representation of such coding is the archetype of the effeminate male villain, a stereotypical depiction widely identifiable in many different cinematic genres through such examples as varied as Scar from Disney's *The Lion King* (1994) (voiced by Jeremy Irons) and Peter Lorre in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). As Harry Benshoff articulates in *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film*, there is a storied history of texts signifying queerness to indicate villainy; "homosexuality becomes a subtle but undoubtedly present signifier which usually serves to characterize the villain or monster" (15). Villains may not explicitly engage in queer sexual or romantic relationships, but their manner of dress, behaviour, interactions with other characters of their gender, or dialogue may imply their otherness—and in doing so, reinforce their villainy. The queercoding of villains capitalizes on what Benshoff articulates as the way "some people have always considered anything that opposes or lies outside the ideological status quo intrinsically monstrous and unnatural" (2). The Hannibal books, films, and television show inherit this history of queercoding villains, and to understand the unique approach of the television show it is vital first to revisit the ways queerness and villainy are intertwined in prior iterations.

### **Hannibal, A History**

The controversy surrounding the character of Jame Gumb (also known by the tabloid moniker Buffalo Bill) in *The Silence of the Lambs* is the most notable recognition of queercoded villainy in the Hannibal universe, but it is far from the only example. Harris' novel goes out of the way to distinguish Buffalo Bill from "typical transsexuals" but continues to reproduce stereotypes of transgender women as predatory pretenders (*The Silence of the Lambs* 165). Head of the FBI Behavioural Science Unit, Jack Crawford, in his conversation with the lead doctor at a

clinic providing transition-related healthcare, insists that “the man we want is *not your patient*. It would be someone you *refused* because you recognized that he was *not a transsexual*” (165; emphasis original). Crawford trusts Dr. Danielsson’s medical authority to sort those who are authentically trans from those who aren’t, and Jame Gumb does not, as it were, fit the bill. The denial of Jame Gumb’s transness is one of a multitude of factors muddying the categories of gender and sexuality, manifesting and intertwining homophobia and transphobia in the process of coding a character as queer. Nevertheless, the presentation of Buffalo Bill goes beyond mere queercoding; Buffalo Bill’s murderous ways are not just accompanied by queerness but fueled by it as he hunts, captures, and kills young women to create a “skin suit.” Jack Halberstam’s pivotal article on this film articulates the postmodern nature of Buffalo Bill’s monstrosity as inseparable from the portrayal of Jame Gumb’s gender: “What he constructs is a posthuman gender; a gender beyond the body, beyond human, a carnage of identity” (39). Halberstam reads *The Silence of the Lambs* as a film in which Buffalo Bill is just the loudest representation of a chorus of voices, a bevy of “skin dis-ease,” reflecting the way the society of the 1990s had shaped ideas about monsters (39). No more can monsters be isolated as bad apples, individuals who made cruel choices; today, the monster is in all of us. Still, it is inescapable that those who create the most evil in Harris’ and Demme’s universes are marked by their divergence from norms of gender and sexuality, and Buffalo Bill is not alone in such queercoded villainy.

Much has been written about the queercoding of side characters in Harris’ Hannibal universe,<sup>3</sup> including the mannish butch lesbian Margot Verger. Although Margot is not the villain of *Hannibal* (2000), the novel in which she appears, the perceptions of heroine Clarice Starling paint Margot’s gender variance and sexuality as repulsive: “The twill riding breeches whistled on

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<sup>3</sup> For further investigation into the queercoding of side characters like Francis Dolarhyde, Randall Tier, and Margot Verger, see Deshane and Elliott.

Margot Verger's big thighs as she climbed the stairs. Her cornsilk hair had receded enough to make Starling wonder if she took steroids and had to tape her clitoris down" (62). Margot's sexuality and her lack of femininity are implied to be a direct result of the sexual abuse her brother perpetuated towards her throughout their childhood which has turned her against men on the whole. She is often represented by Harris as crushing walnuts with her bare hands, which is at once an act coded as masculine and man-hating (*Hannibal* 263). Although Margot is allowed a relatively happy ending—she kills her brother after Hannibal helps her extract his sperm to use for her partner Judy's pregnancy—her queerness is repulsive to the tetralogy's heroine, especially because of her gender nonconformity.

The queercoding of Margot's brother, Mason Verger, is perhaps less obvious, but more intimately connected with the queercoding of Hannibal himself. Mason's monstrosity in *Hannibal* relies largely on the villainy coded by his disability. He is a predatory man who resembles "a creature of the deep, deep ocean" after surviving an attack from Hannibal before the events of the book (*Hannibal* 65). That attack is deeply queercoded and is immediately preceded by a scene where Mason explains his predilection for auto-erotic asphyxiation to Hannibal, who responds "show me" (70). Such an invitation implicates Mason and Hannibal both in the experience of queer sexuality and desire. Watching another man masturbate already violates the boundaries of heteronormativity, but Hannibal's knowledge of the "amyl poppers" he offers Mason, drugs commonly used during parties and sex by gay men, points to a deeper immersion in the queer community (70). Although Hannibal is using this offer of drugs as part of his attempt on Mason's life, the manner in which he does it identifies him as a queercoded character, and ties that queerness, like other instances of queerness in the novels and films, to villainy—in this case both Mason's and his own.

Within Harris' novels, Hannibal himself is coded as queer in less explicit ways. Although his human ingredient list gives a unique twist to his passion for cooking, Hannibal nevertheless is repeatedly associated with preparing and consuming gourmet food, a hobby linked to gay men and flamboyance.<sup>4</sup> In the first novel in which Hannibal appears, *Red Dragon*, FBI consultant Will Graham comes out of retirement to help the FBI catch a serial killer. Although Will helped capture Hannibal, the novel begins with Hannibal already in prison: he is "on his cot asleep, his head propped on a pillow against the wall. Alexandre Dumas's *Le Grand Dictionnaire de Cuisine* was open on his chest" (*Red Dragon* 77). Hannibal's penchant for the sensual pleasures of fine dining is such a part of his personality that it leads to his capture when Clarice Starling notices recurring "receipt[s] from the Florentine fine grocer Vera dal 1926 for two bottles of Bâtard-Montrachet and some *tortufl bianchi*" (*Hannibal* 255). Linked again through his delight in the sensual, Hannibal is often presented as somewhat of an Oscar Wilde aesthete: as Sean Donovan argues, "The queer danger posed by Hannibal has historical roots and calling cards, tracing the viewer back to patterns of Victorian aestheticism" (46). Hannibal delights in beauty, and even his motives for murder are often linked to the pursuit of artistic expression, or at least aesthetic sensibilities. Sometimes his murders are even intertextual, referencing his role as the Chesapeake Ripper or even referencing pieces of art: Hannibal arranged one of his victims in the manner of the anatomical sketch known as "The Wound Man" ("Entrée"). Within the universe of the Hannibal novels and films, Hannibal's queerness is implicit, laying just below the surface, and it is part of a legacy of queercoding within the gothic mode.

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<sup>4</sup> Notably, Fuller expands Hannibal's already queercoded interest in cooking by framing his cooking as often domestic and nurturing, as when he brings a home-cooked scramble to Will's hotel room in season one's "Aperitif" and, later that season in "Relevés," medicinal soup to Will at the hospital. The combination of cooking and care is often coded as feminine and thus, for a man, as queer.

## An Intertextual Inheritance

The gothic visuals that permeate *Hannibal* compellingly connect a homophobic history inherited from the monstrous queer other to a revisioning of queer villainy. The monstrous act of murder is central to the show, and is conveyed artistically in ways that reflect the gothic mode, from crime scenes that trouble the idea of safety in the home (“Oeuf”) to those that engage with the potential for beauty in death.<sup>5</sup> Although, as discussed earlier, the gothic is linked to the history of queercoding and of associating monstrosity with gender and sexual diversity, the role of love within gothic romance tropes offers an alternative to simple, uninterrupted villainy. Romantic relationships in gothic texts are often passionate and tumultuous, but beyond that, they have a tendency to anchor a sense of humanity in otherwise villainous characters. Traditionally, the love of another person could be the key factor in transforming a villain from a monstrous threat to a human antihero, as is reflected in the connection between the gothic villain and the Byronic hero. With varying degrees of success, both these archetypes can find “redemption by the utterly unique moment of love” (Lutz ix). Such redemptive potential does not deconstruct or excuse the actions of the gothic villain; rather, it advances a sympathetic possibility despite the villainy. By ensconcing Hannibal in reminders of the gothic, Fuller creates an adaptation that simultaneously reflects the historical connection of queerness and monstrosity and provides possibility for complexity and redemption through a revision of the idea of a love that saves.

*Hannibal* encourages a more complex reading of queercoding by repeatedly invoking in its visual strategies the concept of liminality. The term liminality originated in anthropology, where it was used to describe transitional life stages (Garner 401). It has since expanded into the context of spatial studies, where a liminal space is a place between two states: a staircase between

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<sup>5</sup> The episode titles, which reference courses of food, juxtapose the elegance of fine dining with the central presence of murder in *Hannibal*, as well as hinting at the way hunger and desire permeate the series.

first and second floor, a beach between dry land and the water, a highway rest stop between one destination and another. Although the term liminality did not exist during the Gothic period, it has been used since to recognize the pattern of in-betweens that populate this genre, where “the term ‘liminality’ is employed by critics of the Gothic to refer to spaces of bodies situated either on or at the recognized borders or boundaries of subjective existence” (Garner 401). *Hannibal’s* stylized visuality brings forward the gothic concept of liminal space, encouraging the questioning of clear boundaries between good and evil and between reality and imagination, as in the use of Hannibal’s memory palace. The memory palace is a Renaissance strategy for memorization, wherein information is stored symbolically in an imaginary, visualized space. Hannibal’s memory palace includes key aesthetic touchstones from periods of his life, stripped down and represented as single places. The foyer of his memory palace is the Norman Chapel in Palermo, adorned with a “single reminder of mortality”: a giant mosaic of a beatific skeleton in the center of the floor (“Mizumono”). In addition to the interaction between life and death signified by the invocation of a chapel, the barriers between reality and unreality are blurred and shifted. In the latter half of season three, Hannibal’s prison cell and his memory palace become interchangeable: although the surrounding plot and dialogue make clear Hannibal’s incarceration, the visual depictions take up Hannibal’s perspective and recall his promise in a season two episode, where he tells Will “if I am ever apprehended, my memory palace will serve as more than just a pneumatic system. I will live there” (“Mizumono”). Hannibal’s memory palace life is depicted in scenes where other characters interview him, where the setting shifts between the prison setting and various other locales, most of which the characters have visited together previously, via a series of point of view shots. The conceit of the memory palace is established in the episode immediately following Hannibal’s capture, where shots of Hannibal sitting peacefully in a chapel while a young boy sings are interspersed with shots of him being arrested and processed; he is

handcuffed and his cheeks are swabbed. After this scene, Alana Bloom, Hannibal's former mentee and friend, visits his cell to discuss her role in Hannibal's capture, and Hannibal's point of view places them in his office, where she has visited him numerous times ("The Great Red Dragon"). There they discuss the beer Hannibal used to brew for Alana, which she drank in his office in the season one episode "Oeuf." The illusion of Hannibal's perception is only broken when Alana acknowledges the specifics of Hannibal's crimes: "I stopped drinking beer when I found out what you were putting in mine," at which point a new shot from Alana's point of view places her on the other side of a glass barrier from Hannibal, who is wearing a prison jumpsuit rather than the suit and tie he imagined ("The Great Red Dragon"). The placement of Alana in Hannibal's office reaches back into earlier scenes from the show and ties them to the current moment through juxtaposing visual liminality and content. By piecing together these discordant moments and spaces, *Hannibal* reinforces both its connections to a gothic and villainous past and its central restructuring of source material, making way for the kind of major change that allows explicit queer reclamation.

Gothic liminality as site of possibility is akin to gothic villainy as a site of potential reclamation of queercoded characters, a parallel supported by the use of liminality in Hannibal and Will's relationship. In contrast to the connection between Alana's imagined stance in Hannibal's office and her previous presence there, when Will approaches Hannibal in episode nine of season three, "And the Woman Clothed with the Sun," Hannibal appears to stand at the front of the Norman chapel, the foyer of his mind palace. Will tracked Hannibal to the chapel in the beginning of season three, but the two men never stood there together. Nevertheless, the camera follows Will into the aisle of the chapel, where he approaches Hannibal, framed by icons and candles. The point of view used for this shot implicates Will, implying that he is viewing the chapel just as Hannibal does. The moment ends; the camera cuts away while Hannibal's back is

to Will, reverting to Hannibal's cell and re-establishing the literal location of the scene. The chapel is invoked again in a tense conversation in the middle of the show's finale, where both men are pictured standing on the skull on the floor. The space of Hannibal's memory palace hovers outside the boundaries of realness and not realness; the fact that Hannibal and Will can be there together and can perceive it the same way at all is a testament to their deep bond, and yet the reality of this space is never clearly established. Hannibal's memory palace exists in Harris' novels,<sup>6</sup> but Fuller transforms it to a space of *relational* possibility. In the possibility enabled by liminality, queerness exists beyond oppressive, stereotypical coding: rather, the relationship between two men is powerful enough to be reflected by Hannibal's memory palace, and thus to remake the show's depiction of what is real and tangible. The reality of Hannibal and Will's queer relationship is woven into the show's images, making visible that which has so often been hidden.

Queercoding frequently happens through symbolism: queerness is discernable, if not explicit, in queercoded characters because of the symbolism through which it is signified. Some of the queercoding in *Hannibal* can be attributed to adaptational choices where Will stands in for Clarice in scenes that are framed romantically in the source material. For example, Hannibal's rescue of Clarice after she is tranquilized by Mason Verger's guards in Harris's novel *Hannibal* (1999) ends with "Dr. Lecter, erect as a dancer and carrying Starling in his arms" (Harris 477). In Fuller's *Hannibal*, the season three episode "Digestivo" contains a scene where Hannibal carries an unconscious Will out of the aftermath of chaos at the Verger estate and towards safety, not in a practical fireman's carry but in the bridal style. By mirroring scenes from the source material

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<sup>6</sup> In Harris's novels, Hannibal learns about memory palaces from his tutor Mr. Jakov when he is a child. Mr. Jakov cautions that "To remember everything is not always a blessing" before telling Hannibal that in order to achieve such a memory he "will need a mind palace, to store things in. A palace in your mind" (Harris 32).



which, when containing a man and a woman, are widely read as romantic, Fuller's *Hannibal* queers heterosexual norms to make clear the connection between Hannibal and Will.

Additionally, *Hannibal* uses intertextuality to signal queerness to viewers who are fans of popular culture. In the latter half of season three, Will and Hannibal address one another from opposite sides of the glass barrier of Hannibal's prison cell. In these scenes, the glass can be read as interfering with a queer reading: it prevents physical touch, and is in place in no small part because of Will's indecisive reaction to Hannibal suggesting they escape together. At the same time, the image of two men separated by glass is linked to an iconic image of *Star Trek*'s Kirk and Spock, regarded both by viewers at large and by Bryan Fuller specifically as a queer couple (@BryanFuller).<sup>7</sup> Viewers familiar with the ways transformative fanworks follow through on queercoding may recognize Hannibal and Will's separation by glass as further indication of mainstream resistance to queer interpretations and of fans' subsequent embrace of them.<sup>8</sup> Such intertextuality is one way that Fuller's show recognizes and acknowledges the history of queerness that *Hannibal* is born into, which in turn lays the groundwork for reclamation of queercoded villains.

### **Murder and Morality**

*Hannibal*'s gothic mode provides an important context for reclaiming queercoded villainy because of the way it engages with villainy as a whole. Morality in this series is complex and grey, in stark contrast to the morality of the crime procedural *Hannibal* may initially appear to be,

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<sup>7</sup> In *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan*, a scene where Kirk bids farewell to a dying Spock by pressing his hand against the glass separating them has become extremely important for fans who read Kirk and Spock's relationship as romantic. For more on Kirk, Spock, the glass, and the role of all these elements in queer fan spaces, pursue Henry Jenkins' "Normal Female Interest in Men Bonking." Notably, Kirk and Spock are widely regarded as the first "slash" pairing (reading a romantic relationship between ostensibly heterosexual male characters) fans engaged with at such a level, and the legacy of its fans shapes fan spaces to this day.

<sup>8</sup> For more on the intersection between Fuller's status as a pop culture fan and his work on *Hannibal*, see Morimoto.

and this grey morality provides a foundation for understanding a serial-killing cannibal as worthy of love. The first season of *Hannibal* is structured as a detective show, where other murders are compared to Hannibal's, but that surface resemblance does not carry through to the black and white view of justice present in many procedurals. Murderers in *Hannibal* are humanized, and those fighting on the side of the law often display cruelty rivalling that of the people they endeavour to catch. Such humanization in turn softens the implications of queer representation in which, by the end of the first episode, both parties are killers. In season three of *Hannibal*, this moral approach becomes the clearest through characters who have previously been involved on the side of the FBI. After surviving an attack by Abigail Hobbs, who has been framed as the surrogate daughter to Will and Hannibal,<sup>9</sup> psychiatrist and professor Alana Bloom conspires with Mason Verger to capture Hannibal. She is not seeking a fair trial for him; rather, she is willing to use him as a pawn to aid her girlfriend, Margot. Significantly, Alana and Margot murder Mason partway through season three, and Alana goes on to oversee the psychiatric hospital where Hannibal is imprisoned. Hannibal is aware of the way he is taking the fall for a murder Alana and Margot carried out – he confronts Alana directly at one point, saying “Lest we forget Mason Verger – you’re welcome” (“The Great Red Dragon”). Alana responds “*You’re* welcome, Hannibal” and goes on to imply her role in preventing Hannibal from getting the death penalty (“The Great Red Dragon”). Even though she has also killed a person, Alana still positions herself as morally superior to the inmates in her care. The breakdown of clear morality within *Hannibal* provides a context in which murder can serve as a core part of Will and Hannibal's relationship

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<sup>9</sup> Both men voice a feeling of fatherly responsibility for Abigail, and at the end of season two it is revealed that Hannibal was creating another life for the three of them to escape to: “A place was made for all of us. Together” (“Mizumono”).

without reinforcing the link between the taboo of murder and the perceived deviance of queerness.

The character arc of Jack Crawford, head of the FBI Behavioural Sciences Unit, also attests to the moral ambiguity of characters within *Hannibal*, especially in the contrast between Will's relationships with Jack and Hannibal. These parallel relationships weave connected stories about the value of human life in general and Will's life specifically, serving to emphasize Hannibal's care for Will as well as Jack's intense pursuit of a narrow view of justice. At his introduction, Jack and Will allude to a previous conflict they've had: Will disagreed with Jack's naming of "The Evil Minds Research Museum," which he calls "a little hammy" ("Apéritif"). In this interaction, Will expresses discomfort with theatrical extremes of good and evil in the work he does with crime solving, while Jack is content to draw those boundaries around human behaviour. For the first two seasons, Jack pursues justice within the constraints of his job, carefully tiptoeing within the limits. At the same time, Jack shows little regard for Will's wellbeing. Will says to Jack that "the reason you have me seeing Dr. Lecter and not an FBI psychiatrist is so my mental wellbeing stays unofficial," since if the FBI knew the extent of Will's mental illness he would not be permitted to do fieldwork ("Buffet Froid"). In the binary view of justice that Jack initially adopts, the destruction of Will's wellbeing is well worth the lives he saves by doing his work. Hannibal's attempt on Jack's life at the end of season two markedly changes him, and this change is fixed in place when he gives his wife, Bella, dying of terminal cancer, an overdose of pain medication. After that point, Jack goes rogue. When he pursues Hannibal in Italy, he is no longer motivated by justice as defined by the legal system. In the episode "Contorno," he attacks Hannibal in a brutal fight at the gallery where Hannibal is working under an assumed name, and notably, Jack is not looking to subdue him and hand him to the proper authorities. Rather, he is fighting with a deeply personal motive, fueled by the loss of

his wife and Hannibal's near-fatal attack at the end of season two. When Jack approaches Hannibal in the gallery, footage of his feet and legs on the gallery floor is followed by a shot of Hannibal's face that reveals Jack approaching him from behind, undetected. The sequential shots of Jack's feet on the gallery floor and then his head behind Hannibal mirror the end of a flashback in the season one episode "Entrée" during which Hannibal subdued and kidnapped Jack's former trainee, Miriam Lass. In sharp contrast to how Hannibal quietly and efficiently subdues Miriam, however, Jack's actions are much more overt: after his initial approach, he throws Hannibal bodily through a glass display cabinet. The tenuous line between those who fight for justice and criminals, a line that has never defined Will, has crumbled for Jack as well. The beating Jack inflicts on Hannibal is just one act in a sea of violence. By the show's final season, the moral transgressions of the criminals the FBI investigates are not actually all that unique. In a way, such normalization of violence makes queer reclamation in *Hannibal* possible, where in another setting where violence was rarer, reclaiming such a villain might simply feed into the connection between queerness and evil.

The range of violence committed and perpetuated by those on the side of the law gives important context to the ways in which the relationship between Hannibal and Will can be reclaimed, especially given Hannibal's predilections for murder and cannibalism. In a world where violence is constant, violence does not disqualify the relationship Hannibal and Will establish from being transformative or positive. The liminal space of the gothic mode allows for nebulous connections between love, beauty, violence, and death which would be out of place elsewhere. Hannibal's murder and cannibalism are used as a form of relationship-building that allows Hannibal's humanity to shine through and reflects a tantalizing and unsettling connection between sensuality/sexuality, aesthetic beauty, and terrible violence.

## Love, Beauty, and Violence

The portrayal of Hannibal's crimes in *Hannibal* combines horror and aesthetic beauty, generating a complex image of morality which helps to complicate notions of queerness and violence. In Hannibal's first scene in the show's first episode, his crimes are contrasted with those of Garret Jacob Hobbs, the serial killer Will and his colleagues are attempting to catch. A washed-out scene in the sanitized white of the behavioural science unit lab features Will using his highly developed empathy to analyse the body of the latest victim in a string of serial murders. While lab techs note that the victim's liver was removed and then sewn back in, Will observes with dawning horror: "There was something wrong with the meat ... he's eating them" ("Apéritif"). The discordant music overlaying this scene changes completely in preparation for Hannibal's introduction, and a bright instrumental, Bach's "The Goldberg Variations," starts to play. In contrast with the sickly white of the lab, the dark wood and rich, saturated colours in the display of cut pomegranate on Hannibal's dining room table invoke sensuality. Even as Hannibal serves himself sliced meat from what the viewer understands to be a human victim, the plating and presentation are worthy of any high-end restaurant. Hannibal's face is in shadows as he takes a bite of his meal, but the viewer can still see his eyes close with pleasure. Already at his first introduction, Hannibal is shown to be a different, more sophisticated, kind of monster than the ones the FBI usually pursues. The relationship between Hannibal's monstrosity and his sense of aesthetic beauty continues over the course of the show. Hannibal, as the Chesapeake Ripper, creates elaborate, symbolic displays, many of which are strikingly beautiful.<sup>10</sup> For example, in the season two episode "Futamono," the FBI investigates the murder of a man who has been grafted

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<sup>10</sup> The fascinating and unsettling connections between beauty and murder mapped out in, for example, Thomas de Quincey's "On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts," and the connections between beauty and death articulated in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Philosophy of Composition," are depicted visually in *Hannibal*. The show simply *portrays* murder as a fine art, and in doing so forces its audience to reconsider what makes a monster.

into a cherry blossom tree. All organs but his lungs have been removed, and his abdominal cavity is full of poisonous flowers, which Jack interprets as a sign that the Ripper “believes his victim was toxic, somehow. A poisonous man.” This murder has an aspect of poetic justice to it: the victim is a councilman who “brokered a woodlands development deal, despite the disapproval of the EPA” (“Futamoto”). The parking lot where Hannibal displays his body was once a nesting habitat for endangered songbirds. This murder demonstrates Hannibal’s aesthetic sensibilities as well as his sense of justice. In “Evil, Monstrosity, and the Sublime” Richard Kearney argues that the monstrous and the sublime can coexist in the same story, person, or act: “As such it is an objectless and borderline experience of something monstrously alien and disturbing which fills us with both repulsion and a perverse attraction” (490-491). Hannibal’s murder and cannibalism are immoral actions, but the way they are framed by aesthetic elegance and a sense of social justice results in the tension between repulsion and attraction when confronted with an untraditional monstrosity. Hannibal’s monstrosity is linked to this unspeakable sublime, which Kearney further characterizes by the way it is witnessed: “the one who experiences or bears witness to the sublime becomes what Kant and the romantics call a genius: the ‘involuntary addressee’ of some inspiration, come to him/her from an ‘I know not what’” (492-493). In the case of *Hannibal*, the person bearing witness is Will, an empathic detective whose growing connection to and love for Hannibal provides a unique perspective on Hannibal’s humanity. The blending of the horrific and the beautiful reinforces how Hannibal and Will’s relationship can be simultaneously surrounded by violence and mutually metamorphic for the characters and for the queer viewers who have absorbed cultural equations of their identities with violence and villainy.

The blending of the horrific and the beautiful in *Hannibal* also inherits the sensational blurring present in horror films, connecting ecstasy and agony through their embodiment. For Linda Williams, the purpose of melodramatic media, be it horror or romance, is to capitalize on

bodily sensation – both that experienced by the characters on screen, and that experienced by the viewer. In Williams’ analysis, pornography, horror, and romance films share a common fixation: “in each of these genres the bodies of women figured on the screen have functioned traditionally as the primary *embodiments* of pleasure, fear, and pain” (4; emphasis original). The spectrum of sensations in Hannibal is accessible by various characters, but it is Will who embodies the spectrum of sensations as well as articulating them. Especially in season one, when Will is suffering from stress-induced encephalitis, his physical reactions walk a fine line between pleasure and pain. We watch him wake up drenched in sweat, become increasingly agitated to the point of tears, and even have a seizure. In each case, as Williams writes, “these ecstatic excesses could be said to share a quality of uncontrollable convulsion or spasm—of the body ‘beside itself’ with sexual pleasure, fear and terror, or overpowering sadness” (4). In addition to his depiction of the sensational spectrum, Will speaks in ways that reinforce connections between bodily extremes. In season one’s second episode, Hannibal senses this kindred connection and asks Will “It wasn't the act of killing Hobbs that got you down, was it?... Did you really feel so bad because killing him felt so good?” (“Amuse-Bouche”). The depictions of sensations in Hannibal recall the ways in which the horror film as a “body genre” weaves together opposing feelings, mirroring the broader connection between violence and beauty with the relationship between pain and pleasure.

### **Hannibal, Love, and Vulnerability**

While Hannibal has often been characterized as incapable of real love beyond obsession, his admiration, vulnerability, and capacity to change because of his love for Will anchor their relationship throughout the series and provide the foundation for reciprocity which defines their mutual transformation and separates historical queercoding from the queer relationship portrayed in the show. The ways that Hannibal desires, admires, and values Will are consistently contrasted

with the weight placed on him by the FBI. From their first meeting, Hannibal is fascinated by Will, and accurately pinpoints the difference between his view of Will and the view held by Jack and those he employs: “I think Uncle Jack sees you as a fragile little teacup. The finest china, used for only special guests” (“Apéritif”). He positions his feelings about Will in a way that makes clear his recognition of Will’s subjecthood, calling him “The mongoose I want under the house when the snakes slither by” (“Apéritif”). As the season progresses, Hannibal plants himself firmly in opposition to Jack’s desire for Will to save lives at all costs: “I’m your friend, Will. I don’t care about the lives you save; I care about your life” (“Trou Normand”). Hannibal is interested in Will and his hyper-empathy, but he is also concerned about Will personally in a way that contrasts with Will’s treatment by the FBI. Indeed, Hannibal’s feelings for Will are clearly defined in the penultimate episode, where Dante’s *La Vita Nuova* provides a tantalizing intertext. Will asks Bedelia, Hannibal’s psychiatrist, “Is Hannibal in love with me?” and her response is to paraphrase Dante’s famous text to his beloved Beatrice: “Could he daily feel a stab of hunger for you, and find nourishment at the very sight of you? Yes. But do you ache for him?” (“The Number of the Beast is 666”). Bedelia’s words suggest that Hannibal’s love for Will surpasses his desire for violence; his hunger for Will can be satiated, nonviolently, by Will’s very presence, in sharp contrast to the desires that lead Hannibal to kill and consume others. Leading up to this moment, Hannibal’s dialogue with Will often has romantic connotations which suggest the depth of Hannibal’s feelings for Will. One particularly significant scene occurs in an Italian art gallery, where after weeks of retracing Hannibal’s steps in Europe, Will has tracked him to a bench where he sketches a version of Sandro Botticelli’s painting “Primavera.” A key shot features Hannibal and Will’s backs as they sit side by side, their silhouettes in focus as Botticelli’s painting blurs on the wall in the background. Hannibal looks at Will, smiling softly, and Hannibal says “if I saw you every day forever, Will, I would remember this time” (“Dolce”). Hannibal’s love for Will



has changed him such that Will is a focal point in his life, clearer even than the Botticelli, and their reunion would still stand apart in his mind were they to spend eternity with one another. In his feelings for Will, Hannibal's desire to consume is sublimated from a literal and cannibalistic urge to a sensual, erotic, and romantic yearning.

Because of the way he feels about Will, Hannibal allows himself to become vulnerable in a deeply human display that overrides his investment in safety and even in the pleasure he takes from causing havoc. Hannibal's vulnerability to Will is utterly unique. His vulnerability is visible to some extent to Jack, who develops a plan with Will in season two with the intent of catching Hannibal, because he knows using Will as bait will lure Hannibal to kill in a way that can be traced ("Su-zakana"). Hannibal has remained free and untied to the murders he has committed for years. During this time he has managed to conceal his identity while orchestrating violence because, as he explains to Abigail in season one, he "was curious what would happen" ("Relevés"). It is not Will's skill as a detective that reveals Hannibal's connections to the Ripper murders; Jack's former protégé, FBI trainee Miriam Lass, showed a similar degree of promise but was captured by Hannibal. Rather, it is the personal relationship Hannibal and Will form that has an immense amount of influence on Hannibal's level of risk-taking. Hannibal himself is aware of the uniqueness of this situation. When he believes Will has betrayed him, his anguished words reveal the depth of his feeling: "I let you know me, see me. I gave you a rare gift, but you didn't want it" ("Mizumono"). Hannibal's increasingly risky behaviour culminates in season three, where he gives himself in to FBI custody, risking full legal repercussions for his crimes. During his surrender, on his knees with his hands up and surrounded by officers, he turns to Will and explains "I want you to know exactly where I am and where you can always find me" ("Digestivo"). The experience of being truly seen transforms Hannibal, shifting his priorities

from the continuation of killing for fun to sharing the most intimate parts of himself with another person; the intimacy of cannibalism has been surpassed by the reciprocal intimacy of connection.

### **Will, Agency, and Reciprocity**

Crucially, the relationship between Hannibal and Will is mutually transformative. Existing criticism on Hannibal and Will's relationship has posited Will as a passive victim to Hannibal's manipulation, with, for instance, Jeff Casey claiming that "in their relationship, Lecter is the dominant, phallic personality who seeks to implant his self-image into Graham's plastic and receptive psyche. Graham, thus, assumes a stereotypical 'feminine' position in the relationship, becoming the passive material that Lecter may shape" (556). Such a reading, however, neglects Will's immersion in a world of violence before his interactions with Hannibal and goes on to deny Will agency within their relationship. Before even meeting Hannibal, Will is ensconced in a world of murder—he dryly remarks in the season one episode "Potage" that "it's not very smart to piss off a guy who thinks about killing people for a living." Such a thought process is indeed second nature to Will long before he vocalizes it to tabloid reporter Freddie Lounds: at the conclusion of his lecture in episode one, he advises his students that "Everyone has thought about killing someone, one way or another" ("Apéritif"). Rather than "Graham willingly [taking] on Lecter's murderous personality" (Casey 559), Will's early fascination with murder and violence suggests a compatibility that is innate and develops over time, as opposed to one that is specifically implanted by Hannibal as part of his plans for Will.

Will's agency in *Hannibal* is a notable departure from Hannibal's romantic interludes in the novels or films. Figuring the removal of Clarice Starling from the television version of *Hannibal* as an intriguing example of *Hannibal*'s heterosexual erasure, MaryKate Messimer attests to the major difference between the Hannibal-Clarice relationship and the Hannibal-Will relationship: "The show's removal of Lecter's heterosexual fixation on Clarice opens a path for

Hannibal's onscreen relationship with Will" (180). Notably, the relationship between Clarice and Hannibal in the novels and their film adaptations focuses on Hannibal's manipulation of Clarice, particularly in the books, which end with "the couple traipsing about Europe in a coerced but disturbingly happy sexual relationship" (Messimer 179). While Clarice's agency is overpowered by Hannibal's quest to possess her,<sup>11</sup> Will is afforded significantly more agency,<sup>12</sup> with which he makes the conscious decision to return to Hannibal over and over, even after they cause each other physical and emotional damage. Hannibal is not the only ravenous one in this relationship; the two are tangled up in acts of mutual consumption.

Will's perspective as the audience-surrogate narrator in *Hannibal* is crucial to the marking of Hannibal as a sympathetic character. From the first episode, *Hannibal* is visually marked by Will's thought process: most notably in the way a golden pendulum swings as Will reconstructs crime scenes, systematically swiping across the scene of the crime as evidence of decay and violence disappears and demonstrating Will's approach to profiling the killer. Subsequently, the importance of Will's point of view is reinforced in the ways Will's mental health becomes reflected by what is on screen, as in his escalating hallucinations in season one of Garret Jacob Hobbs, who Will kills in episode one to save Hobbs' daughter, Abigail. The bloodied body of Hobbs continues to haunt Will throughout the first season, in what first hints at Will's capacity and perhaps even proclivity for violence but then escalates as a way of indicating his worsening encephalitis. For example, near the end of season one, Will perceives the figure of escaped

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<sup>11</sup> The intertextuality inherent in *Hannibal* means that many viewers will be at least passingly familiar with Clarice and Hannibal's relationships as depicted in the novels and films. It is important to note that while Hannibal's relationship with Clarice is certainly coercive, many audiences still rooted for the two as a couple, to the extent that early responses to Hannibal often rejected the premise of the show because it foreclosed the potential to see Clarice and Hannibal as a couple in a television adaptation (Romano).

<sup>12</sup> While an in-depth exploration of the gendered implications of Will and Clarice's respective agency is outside of the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that including Will and not Clarice in the television show amounts to the replacement of a female FBI agent with a man who is subsequently afforded more agency.

convict Abel Gideon as the decaying body of Garret Jacob Hobbs (“Rôti”). A point of view shot captures a decomposing Hobbs as Will looks past his gun. Hobbs is still present in the wide angle shot that follows, but when the camera takes Hannibal’s point of view after Will asks “Who do you see?”, an identically framed shot shows Abel Gideon where Will saw Hobbs (“Rôti”). The continuous hallucinations of Garret Jacob Hobbs establish the influence of Will’s perspective on the show, and Will’s perspective greatly shapes the way Hannibal is understood.

Will’s interest in Hannibal is revealed to the viewer through violent, erotic fantasies, sometimes including Hannibal as he is in life and sometimes featuring an antlered, humanoid Wendigo-like creature as a stand in for Hannibal, or a giant black feathered stag that symbolizes their entanglement. In season two’s “Naka-Choko,” a complicated sex scene blurs two separate encounters. Hannibal and Alana, then in a romantic relationship, and Will and Margot, who is, unbeknownst to Will, attempting to become pregnant via a one-night stand with him, are blurred and interchanged in a series of complicated visuals that invoke the image of the Wendigo as well. The scene serves as a collage of parts which, together, sexualize Will’s mental symbol of Hannibal, bringing this figure of cannibalistic hunger into the context of carnal desire. *Hannibal* blurs lines between violence and eroticism through the fervor with which Will fantasizes about Hannibal’s death, and through the erotically charged way the two men discuss these fantasies. Will has a dream in “Shiizakana” where the stag pulls a rope tight around Hannibal’s neck as they discuss Hannibal’s nature as a killer—a nature he believes Will shares. As the rope tightens around his throat, Will’s vision of Hannibal says “no one can be fully aware of another human being unless we love them” (“Shiizakana”). Will’s viewpoint makes the connection between violence and desire clear, while the heteronormative expectations rampant in media relegate such connections to the symbolic forms of the stag and the Wendigo rather than direct acknowledgment.

In addition to the erotic coding that emerges from Will's perspective, in season three Will's perception allows for a fuller and more sympathetic understanding of Hannibal following the bloody finale of season two. Will has tracked Hannibal to Europe after surviving Hannibal's heartbroken attack, wherein he lashed out at Abigail, Will, and Jack because of his belief that Will had betrayed him. For an entire episode, Will processes his feelings through speaking to Abigail Hobbs. This visual device allows the viewer to understand Will's perspective as he voices uncertainties about Hannibal's intentions and Abigail offers other ways to understand Hannibal and his actions. Will says "he left us to die" and Abigail responds that Hannibal had other plans for the three of them: "We were all supposed to leave together. He made a place for us" ("Primavera"). These discussions occur with the presumption that Hannibal, Will, and Abigail have formed a family—a notion repeated throughout the show and that draws attention to the romantic tension between Hannibal and Will as well as the commonality all three share in this situation of consuming human meat. Just as crucially, though, at the end of the episode it is revealed that Abigail succumbed to her wounds at the end of season two. Will's conversations with Abigail have been a storytelling device all along, enabling the audience to see inside Will's head, and so the longing for a family expressed by Abigail can be accurately attributed to Will. Within this episode, Abigail expresses Will's desire to return to Hannibal. He asks her "after everything he's done, you would still go to him?" and Abigail nods in affirmation ("Primavera"). With Abigail as a way for the audience to listen in on Will's thought process, his feelings about Hannibal remain clear: even after the extent of Hannibal's violence is unleashed on himself and Abigail, Will still chooses to return. Will's choices mark Hannibal as worth loving, and in doing so, emphasize the depth of his humanity without erasing his status as a serial killing cannibal.

## A Historically Grounded Reclamation

In recent years much has been said about 2SLGBTQ+ representation on television.<sup>13</sup> Some of this discussion has focused on the necessity of “positive” queer representation, but in doing so has defined such representation very narrowly. Although the bloody courtship of Hannibal and Will might be offputting to some, engaging with the negative history of queercoded villainy necessitates representation that moves beyond the homonormative.<sup>14</sup> While a television show about a serial killer may not seem the ideal grounds for a revolution in the representation of queerness, the generic possibility of *Hannibal* achieves a reclamation that is not possible for homonormative representations. By refiguring the implied queerness of Hannibal’s character in the original books and films, Fuller’s television adaptation does what homonormative representations could not: it acknowledges the past and refuses to sever the ties with it. The queerphobic and transphobic violence lurking in Hannibal’s history are present in the show, but are complicated by the liminality of the postmodern gothic. Rather than shying away from such roots, *Hannibal* takes them to their conclusion, confirming Hannibal’s queerness and using it to anchor his humanity rather than reinforce his villainy. For queer viewers who have ever felt outcast, monstrous, and alone as a result of living in a homophobic and transphobic world where implied connections between queer characters and villains abound, the powerful humanity of Hannibal’s queer love story is groundbreaking. The history of queercoded villains cannot be

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<sup>13</sup> For further discussion of the way *Hannibal* fits into the landscape of 2SLGBTQ+ representation on contemporary television, see Donovan and Messimer.

<sup>14</sup> Homonormative representation of queer characters leans heavily on the desire to depict queer people in ways that appear palatable to straight audiences. Such characters tend to be desexualized and often mirror heteronormative ideas about relationships that prioritize marriage and childrearing. As a result, these depictions may be so focused on representing queer people that are just like straight people that they skirt the particular material and political circumstances of queer people.

changed, but it can be responded to. *Hannibal*'s response is to showcase a queer villain whose queerness is a signifier of humanity in a world of violence.

Fuller's *Hannibal* retrieves a homophobic history from the depths of the associations between queerness and villainy, and through its gothic sensibilities and postmodern visuality marks queerness as a force for humanization. Through collaging and changing its source material, *Hannibal* acknowledges past queercoding and resituates it in a world marked by complex morality upheld by gothic liminality and postmodern ideas of truth and justice. The central relationship between Will and Hannibal realizes the queer potential of the Hannibal universe, and marks that relationship as uniquely transformative. Will and Hannibal choose, change, and satiate one another, and in Will's love of Hannibal, Hannibal becomes humanized, refiguring the meaning of queerness and villainy to present a queerness which exists alongside villainy but signifies humanity and belonging rather than otherness. When Will sees Hannibal and loves him as he is, both men are transformed in a way that would be impossible if presented on a more homonormative scale. At its core, *Hannibal* is about the intimacy of being known, and the love that comes with that intimacy. Being truly understood is a key to love in *Hannibal*, and turning that understanding to the history of queercoded villains allows that love its full power to nourish and to transform.

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