MEDICAL GOTHIC MASCULINITIES IN BRAM STOKER'S *DRACULA*

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Abstract

The present paper makes use of Michel Foucault's theory from *Discipline and Punish* according to which one of the means by which women's bodies are controlled is through their hystericization by the power-knowledge-wielding medical profession. Taking Stoker's famous novel as a case in point, I mean to show that the men of the novel, embodiments of Reason and Empire, gathered around the guiding medical intelligence of professor Van Helsing, act upon the bodies of the vampirized women (Lucy and Mina) in a way that is the metaphorical expression of the symbolic violence perpetrated against women socially. Thus, the novel is gothic in more ways than one: its much-discussed portrayal of sexually-liberated femininity through vampirization finds its counterpart in the less-approached medical masculinity, a reinforcer of masculine domination.

Keywords: *composite; fin-de-siècle, gender, gothic, masculine domination, Michel Foucault*

Tabitha Sparks' book on medical practices in the nineteenth century and their illustration in literature draws attention to a certain "competition" between doctors and women at the end of the nineteenth century (especially with the admission of women in colleges and the appearance of the first qualified female doctors), a hostility based on the emergence of the New Woman, the emancipated first-wave feminist who wished to free the female body from the mechanisms of male medical surveillance by advocating the use of birth-control and encouraging women themselves to take up the profession. The 1864 Contagious Diseases Act

allowed, in the United Kingdom, the arrest of any woman that looked as though she might suffer from venereal disease (Sparks 33). Since there was no objective way for a policeman to assess the state of a stranger's health (for that, he would have needed the previous expertise of a doctor, in the private quarters of home or hospital), the law essentially permitted the literal policing of under-privileged, lower-class women's bodies by the actual merger of Law and Medicine. Furthermore, there was nothing that these women could do to oppose arrest, as they would be taken into custody first and interrogated later. Designed as a measure against the rampant spread of syphilis¹, which was contracted by respectable household fathers who visited prostitutes and then passed on to the wife, the law was not only sexist, equating contamination with womanhood while completely neglecting the responsibility of the men and targeting an already financially and socially disadvantaged category, the prostitutes. (Sparks 133)

The fear or worship either towards the doctor or his patients (respectable wives or prostitutes) is reflected, in gothic turn-of-the-century fiction, in the respective ambivalent attitudes towards women as makers or breakers of home, and, exponentially, Empire are embodied in the stereotypes of the angel-of-the-house and night-walker/female vampire. In Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, for instance, the two vampirized women, Lucy Westenra and Mina Harker, represent two avatars of the turn-of-the-century femininity, an acceptable variant of the New Woman (Mina Harker, technologically adept and the men's right hand in documenting the journey of Dracula's exclusion from Britain), and the hypersexual Lucy, whose name evokes the *lux*, light, of the Western civilization; she is the star to which empire and look for salvation, who turns into a "street walker" during the night, i.e. prostitute after her death, and is promptly vanquished through impalement in her grave by professor van Helsing and his helpers, Quincey Morris, and John Seward. The figure of Mina (Wilhemina) is a non-threatening avatar of the New Woman because she uses her practical secretarial abilities (which would have allowed her to earn a living on her own in the city, had she not married her lawyer husband) to vanquish the foreign force which has completely emasculated her spouse; she is an acceptable New Woman not because independent of the male and emancipated, but because she can assist the men for the fulfillment of the greater good. Jonathan's long illness after his visit at Dracula's castle means that he is unable to protect his wife; the vampire's targets are the women, as they are the symbolic preservers of the nation's future.

¹ A disease which first appeared in Europe in the late fifteenth century, during the withdrawal of the French army from Italy. According to one theory, it was brought from the Americas by Columbus' crew; according to another, the baccillum pre-dates the discovery of the New World (Farhi and Dupin).

Jonathan's masculinity and his failure to protect his wife are replaced by the joint forces of the professor (Dutch van Helsing), the psychiatrist (John Seward, who works in a mental asylum) and the adventurer (the American Quincey Morris, who dies in Transylvania while inflicting Dracula's fatal wound). Western masculinity is thus a collective apparatus meant to protect and preserve womanhood from the grip of the foreign male; it resents, disciplines and punishes women who are hypersexual (Lucy is more vulnerable to the vampire's power because, out of her three suitors, she would like to marry all) and rewards those who use their intelligence and skill to help men (Mina). *Dracula* thus provides an accurate picture of the turn of the century preoccupation with medicine and psychiatry, the change of mentality regarding new and traditional types of women; it engages with technology, it combines the epistolary novel with typewritten transcripts from diaries, medical notes and clippings of newspaper articles; it is a *modern* novel whose Gothicism consists of the fear of the past and the foreign (an Eastern vampire dating back to times immemorial), barbaric and primitive, is conquered by the Western forces of progress, as embodied by the specialized, professionalized men.

The novel showcases the triumph of modernity and of the Western civilization which, despite anxieties of its own collapse and fears of its inability to cope with the demands of a new age, adapts to it brilliantly: the advances of science are not to be feared, but embraced. The New Woman can, after all, be of assistance to man and join forces with him for the common preservation of the species; even the more occult and eccentric specialists, such as the Dutch professor (who seems to be an odd combination between an eccentric lover of the occult and a caricatural Dr. Freud, with his Germanic accent and combination of scientific and pseudo-scientific methods,² such as the hypnosis which he applies to Mina, thus revealing her telepathic connection with the vampire) contribute their share. Progress, as the overarching meaning of the plot seems to show, is met with least resistance by the novelty-fearing masses, when that which is menacing by virtue of being new proves its merits slowly and gradually. The actual usefulness of things which were previously Othered because feared is proven, of course, at the time of a crisis – what better device to craft a plot in which the Westerner is forced to face his shadow and use it for his own advantage, for lack of other options.

² Foucault himself, when drawing the distinguishing line between scientific and literary discursivity, leaves psychoanalysis out of the former. While he acknowledges Freud as a founder of psychoanalytic discursivity, he does not deem his method scientific. Thus, a comparison between Van Helsing and Freud as both using methods deemed unorthodox and pseudo-scientific by the medical community of the time would be appropriate.

The turn of the century poises civilization on the cusp of the old and the new: it is merely the full rejection of both that would entail disaster; pretending that the vampire, whose very existence cannot be explained by science, would be catastrophic, but, conversely, attempting to vanquish it just by resorting to the instruments of modern science would be equally damaging. John Seward's medical records of his Dracula-worshipping patient's ramblings, Renfield, complete the end of the century's urban landscape with the familiar space of the mental hospital, but it is in the character of Van Helsing that the two collaborating and opposing forces of old and new science fully meet. In this turn of the century world, garlic garlands and blood transfusions, crucifixes and hospitals not only coexist, but collaborate; past knowledge of vampires and obscure diseases inflicted by monsters is preserved and new knowledge, further professionalized as "science", builds on it instead of rejecting it fully, acquiring the "power-knowledge" construct articulated by Foucault and reinforcing the dominant ideology. The scene of Lucy's obliteration in her guise as minion of the Un-dead is also striking from the point of view of the medical and pseudo-medical preparations, tailored to the measure of both laymen and specialists of his trade. The following excerpt from *Dracula* is emblematic for the mumbo-jumbo of scientific and pseudo-scientific paraphernalia to be found in professor Van Helsing's medical bag, highlighting the semantic differences between the concepts of knowledge and science, between the sum of unofficial systems of thought and official ones:

Van Helsing, with his usual methodicalness, began taking the various contents from his bag and placing them ready for use. First he took out a soldering iron and some plumbing solder, and then a small oil-lamp, which gave out, when lit in a corner of the tomb, gas which burned at fierce heat with a blue flame; then his operating knives, which he placed to hand; and last a round wooden stake, some two and a half or three inches thick and about three feet long. One end of it was hardened by charring in the fire, and was sharpened to a fine point. With this stake came a heavy hammer, such as in households is used in the coal-cellar for breaking the lumps. To me, a doctor's preparations for work of any kind are *stimulating and bracing*, but the effect of these things on both Arthur and Quincey was to cause them a sort of consternation. (*Dracula* 204)

Like a surgeon carefully placing the instruments of his craft at the ready, van Helsing retrieves objects will play a part in the future extinction of the vampire: the soldering iron will be used to seal the door of the crypt, the oil-lamp, practical and discreet, will assist in the inconspicuous carrying on of their covert dealings; the medical operating instruments (the knives will later be used to decapitate the

corpse) are placed right beside the heathen woonden stake, the latter's evident phallic nature underscoring the same penetrating nature in the first, only sublimated. The baseness and uncouthness of the stake and hammer, decidedly lower-class ("used in the coal-cellar") proves van Helsing's praised open-mindedness – his lack of elitism in harnessing the benefits of each social class, regardless of prestige, in fighting the vampire. Seward's own comment on the anticipatory feeling given to him by the professor's preparations, the scientist's typical elation before a discovery or experiment, are lost on the medical laymen in attendance, as those as yet unaware of the true meaning of each object and the role they will play is puzzling – they are, as yet, signifiers without a signified. Seward's excitement bespeaks less the worries of Morris and Holmwood, Lucy's suitors, who anticipate her second, and real, death, but a doctor's prevailing interest in the operation itself, rather than the patient; carried away by the scientific potential of his professional idol's preparations, his pupil is more fascinated by the ritualic nature of the medical act than the recovery of the "patient". As a socially productive entity, Lucy cannot be recovered; the redemption of her soul is the stated purpose of the intervention, which in fact veils their preoccupation with the protection of the Victorian social body by eliminating one of its predators, a voluptuous vamp who feeds on innocent babes.³ She cannot be saved, lest in soul, which is what the men declare is their intention; regardless of this, Seward's interest in the process betrays itself as not colored by personal or religious objection; it retains the medical student's excitement for a necropsy, where the human body, divested of the middle-class cheap sentimentality, can fully allow itself to treat the corpse at what it really is – an object – without sentimentalizing or aestheticizing it, thus fully making use of its "medical gaze". What might be construed by others as a desecration of a body is, for him, a stimulating opportunity to learn.

The enactment of the final blow to the Un-Dead is similar, in a way, to the purely medical act of the administering of the blood-transfusions – a vampirism in reverse via Science that is supposed to counteract Dracula's initial aggression. This fails because the parasitic nature of the transgression does not stop at the mere exchange of bodily fluids between predator and preyed-upon; the blood-sucking is symbolic, as it also turns the victims into the original vampire's slaves and copies as they retain a hypnotic, telepathic connection with him even when he is far away, and he is thus able to trace them. The reversal of the vampire's depletion of blood cannot simply be counteracted by blood transfusions; by consorting with the Un-dead, she is now unclean also in soul, not

³ Lucy's monstrosity as a vampire also consists in her rejection of motherhood (May, p. 19). For a class and gender-based reading of Victorian family ties, see Claudia Nelson's book (*Family Ties in Victorian England*).

merely in body, by having espoused someone other than her intended. The scientific method of the transfusion shows “new science”, for all its claims to astuteness, to be less perceptive than the tried and tested efficacy of the gruesome stake-to-the-heart, garlic-in-the-mouth of van Helsing’s knowledge. Similar to the beheading of the Gorgon, the men simply collect their instruments and leave after annihilating the ultimate predator of males (vamp/prostitute) and children (degenerate mother), whose gaze petrifies and emasculates; a medical gaze for a Medusan one, a (vampiric) blood-sucking tooth for a life-giving, blood-filling transfusion.

When commenting of the medical gothic of novel, Tabitha Sparks notices the policing of Lucy’s body by the doctors, Seward and Van Helsing, who administer the transfusion while the patient is asleep, having previously been given a narcotic. This recalls the same yielding, passive female body as that of the sleeping vampire in its coffin, which Sparks interprets as symbolic of the medical establishment’s battle to control the physiological and reproductive function of the docile woman; symbolically, “Stoker rests medical progress on the woman’s prostrate body and gives the male new, generative power” (125). Sparks’ choice of words echoes the life-giving energies of the Frankenstein narrative, where the narcissistic scientist feeds upon the success of his enterprise, on which he pins his sense of worth. The ability to restore Lucy to health and happiness is the “regenerative power” found at the very core of the medical profession; the doctor’s mission is to heal, and his science and success are based on the glorification of a violation- a performed transfusion secretly on a heavily sedated patient. From a Foucaultian point of view, medical discursivity is part of the regimen of power; if Lovelace’s desire to preserve Clarissa’s body is a violation both aesthetic and perverse, when the purpose is construed as noble (i.e. the salvation of a fair maiden’s body and soul) masculine domination is encouraged. From pure perversity of the rake’s gaze to the objective medical gaze whose higher purpose is to treat the patient as the object of scientific inquiry, a step on which, through observation and experimentation, new science is built. Unsurprisingly, as Sparks remarks (125) their own act is a reiteration of Dracula’s own gesture; what they believe to be a civilized way of fighting the barbaric is the repetition of the same subjection of the feminine to the masculine, only by different perpetrators. That Lucy can receive the blood of several men in the attempt to make her better proves that the patriarchal Victorian society has a collective claim over the female body; it is when the perpetrator is foreign that the vampirization of the feminine, its exploitation by the male, is forbidden.

The contrast between the impressive size of the wooden stake, “three feet long”, sharpened and charred in a fire to ensure its efficiency, and the almost neglected operating knives, draws a parallel between old and new knowledge that van Helsing is able to mix and match to an optimal proportion, in true alchemist

fashion: the first one is primitive, but effective, redolent of the brute force of the vampire which must be met with corresponding withering impetus, while the second is a spawn of the first and its sublimation. As instruments that penetrate the female's body, both stake and scalpel allude to an intrusion upon a body that resists this violation either by seduction (Lucy-as-vampire asks Arthur to embrace her, but he wisely rejects her advances, as instructed by van Helsing) or death (as in a necropsy, the patient's body is now the property of science, having lost all individuality). A pathologization from the point of view of religion symbolized by the primitive, but effective superstition of the stake through the heart (accompanied by prayer) is replaced by the pathologization enacted by science, for Lucy is abomination from the point of view of both, an aberration of spirit and nature. Only after the "foul Thing" leaves Lucy's body and her "purity" is restored is her fiancé allowed to kiss her. The other, more horrid details of the desecration of Lucy's body are glossed over quickly, in a few lines: the goodbye kiss is swiftly followed by the corpse's beheading; its mouth filled with garlic, in a very matter-of-fact account contrasting with the detailed description of the Un-Dead's shrieking and "withering". The soldered door to the grave ensures that the ritual is final; the key is symbolically given to Arthur, the would-be husband, in a gesture that, for lack of practicality, remains purely symbolic.

In Abraham van Helsing, John Seward, Arthur Holmwood, Jonathan Harker and Quincey Morris, bourgeois morality reflects the noble features of traditional masculinity such as courage and a worship of chaste, modest femininity, which, in its turn, is intersected by science. Science as power-knowledge poses the doctor at the fore of masculine hegemony under the guise of medical authority which polices and disciplines those female bodies which are unruly⁴, such as the prostitutes. 1864, the year of adoption of the Venereal Disease Act⁵ by British Parliament, which legally allowed the arrest of suspicious-looking women off the streets, was also the year of the publication of art historian John Ruskin's lecture of femininity which defines wifely duties as eminently passive⁶, thus underscoring the coexistence of conflicting Madonna-whore dichotomies in Victorian society. By dropping into Lucy Westenra's Victorian tomb and awaiting the return of the child-feeding vampire, van Helsing and his crew are literally making sure that a lascivious night-walker is permanently taken off the streets.⁷ A perverted figure of femininity, debauched and preying on children, instead of

⁴ Tabitha Sparks adequately refers to the gothic medicine in *Dracula* as "treating in order to punish" (127).

⁵ Repealed, due to public pressure, in 1869 (Sparks 117).

⁶ In "Lilies of Queens' Gardens", published in *Sesame and Lillies*. (Ruskin 38).

⁷ Van Helsing even remarks that, as a yet unexperienced nocturnal predator, "The career of this so unhappy dear lady is but just begun" (204).

nurturing them, Lucy as a vampire is the complete opposite of the bourgeois ideal of the wife: immodest, assertive, openly sexual, polygamous:: “She seemed like a nightmare of Lucy as she lay there; the pointed teeth, the bloodstained, voluptuous mouth—which it made one shudder to see—the whole carnal and unspiritual appearance, seeming like a devilish mockery of Lucy’s sweet purity.” (204) The blood on her lips and the flush in her cheeks are not merely the marks of fulfilled or anticipated sexual appetite; the profusion of blood is immodest due to the connotations of broken maidenhood and its symbolic debasement by Lucy, a woman who is not only ashamed by it, but also flaunts the proof. The sacramental red stain on the white sheet, the new bride’s evidence of purity, is re-figured as monstrous and obscene in the vampire’s stained clothes. The discursive regime of imperial British power is thus built on the science of its men and the reigning in/sublimation of the women’s drives.

The woman attains, as a vampire, all that was forbidden to her as a respectable beautiful middle-class young woman waiting to settle down in the comfort of domesticity. The men that she allows into her bedchamber are only those authorized to prevent her moral and social dissolution; even if she does get blood transfusions from several different suitors, symbolically consorting with all, she is ultimately punished for this pre-marital exchange of bodily fluids by being written out of the plot. The way in which she is killed is also significant. Because her vampiric self is empowered, she becomes masculine; the act of biting, of plunging her elongated teeth into her victims, is in itself penetrating, phallic. The gesture that undoes the vampire – the stake through the heart – has to be performed by her fiancé as it most closely resembles a consummation of their erotic connection in a corruption of a wedding night scene.

If Arthur cannot sexually enjoy Lucy in the socially sanctioned rites of bourgeois marriage, all other forms of her sexuality must be obliterated. When it comes to the vampiric woman, whose unbridled appetites are offensive to middle-class notions of propriety, she has to be socially erased, for when woman becomes too bodily, she is socially bodiless, following the same logic according to which hysteria had to be “invented” or constructed as the illness of feminine excess – too much of one leads to the exclusion of the other. When Arthur realizes that the coffin is empty and glances at Lucy’s silhouette, he asks: “Is this really Lucy’s body, or only a demon in her shape?” (Stoker 204), to which Van Helsing replies “It is her body, and yet not it.” (Stoker 204) The ghostliness/bodilessness of Jane is also echoed in Lucy’s; societal views of a woman’s body’s symbolic status simply erase the young woman’s corporeality as legitimate. Lascivious and voluptuous Lucy simply cannot be herself; she only exists as the male projection of purity envisioned by her suitors and husband-to-be. Any such manifested attitudes can only be the result of her possession by an alien, malevolent spirit, that of the vampire.

When the “possessed” body is that of a male, as in the case of Jonathan Harker, who is preyed upon by Dracula’s three brides in the Transylvanian castle in a scene that doubles Lucy Westenra’s blood transfusions by three different men, he is emasculated; the trauma of the ungodly sights witnessed by him sends him into recovery for months and he is barely present in the remaining pages of the novel, but to haunt them. His assertive wife, Mina, is much more present than he is, playing an active role in the vanquishing of the vampire, despite being its target herself. Because Lucy’s vampirization also affects her body, while Jonathan’s does not (he is violated psychologically, but also in the flesh), only the second can be redeemed. The different responses in the male and female body faced with vampirization highlight the gender disparities in Victorian sexual politics: a woman who is strong in the face of physical and mental depredation, such as Mina, can uplift a weaker man (Jonathan) and join the men in protecting the nation, while a naturally sensual woman (the “sweet”, but less intellectual Lucy) is vulnerable and can consequently expose the country to vampiric infection. As Jennifer Wicke brilliantly argues (in *Vampiric Typewriting: Dracula and Its Media*), the vampire’s barbaric multiplication is counteracted by the parallel duplication allowed by modern technology.

The woman’s body is thus not only useful from a strictly biological point of view, by increasing the ranks of the nation in producing children; when it can do neither but it also compromises itself morally, it is obliterated. The biological requirements of gender are again subverted in Stoker’s novel when Lucy’s reversal of femininity is doubled by Mina’s. In an iconic scene, the vampire breastfeeds her as if she were a child. (*Feeding the Vampire: The Ravenous Hunger of the Fin de Siècle*). This perversion of motherhood and the fixation at the oral stage of sexuality is a regression; the intellectual faculties of Mina, one of the staunchest and most effective of Dracula’s opponents, is thus countered by the vampire’s reduction of the dangerous “intellectual woman” to her bodily reproduction. By forcing her to breastfeed off of him, the vampire infantilizes her and reduces her to the biological.

In *Dracula*, gothic medicine is also an instrument of female repression and the reinforcement of the discursive regimens of the cultural hegemony in a bid to define progress, à la John Ruskin, in the queenly terms of clearly separated spheres. In the treatment of Lucy and Mina’s passive bodies, the symbolism of the uterus haunts Bram Stoker’s novel, by giving access to only husband and doctor into the private space of femininity, the bedroom, the disciplining and punishing roles of these two embodiments of rational masculinity are merged.

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