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Cover Page Footnote

Victoria Amador is a Professor of English at Western New Mexico University. Her specializations include women writers, American Literature, the films of Alfred Hitchcock, and gothic cinema and literature.

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The twentieth century has been interpreted, among other things, as the century of women. It follows then that part of that century would involve women constructing new, appropriate myths for themselves and that from these myths the vampire would emerge as a totemic figure. There has been, thankfully, a great shift since the chastened New Women of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*; as Phyllis A. Roth has noted, "[F]or both the Victorians and twentieth century readers, much of the novel's great appeal comes from its hostility toward female sexuality" (411). That hostility has been a source for female transformation, particularly in the feminist and now post-feminist eras from the 1960s to the present. The search for powerful icons led women through a variety of personal, creative and artistic pursuits to the vampire myth, which seemed particularly attractive and malleable. In other words, women claimed their equal rights to the manipulation of the vampire, as writers and, mirroring the "evolution" of art in the twentieth century, as actresses and filmmakers.

There are many examples in the film and literature of the last century that offer a reinterpretation of the vampire by women. I would like to examine a few examples in both genres, which are most relevant and ideologically important in terms of feminist/post-feminist images of women, of women producing those images; and of the LGBT (lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender) community actively participating in the creation and celebration of those images.

First, however, let's examine a few significant examples of works which demonstrate how the female vampire developed in obvious and not-so-obvious ways. Two short stories written by women in the early 1900s demonstrated women's ways of recognizing power in other women via the vampire myth, and also forwarded the evolution of the myth by implying that there were many kinds of vampires. The revenant who drinks blood is not the only dangerous life-taker; there are other kinds of dark desires brewing within women as well.

In her story "Luella Miller," New England regional writer Mary Wilkins Freeman relates the tale of a helpless, gorgeous little thing who, if she "got her pretty claw on you" (219), sucked the life out of everyone who came near her. She is the archetypal helpless little girl with fangs of steel. British author Mary Elizabeth Braddon offers an updating of both Hawthorne's "Rapaccini's Daughter" and the Elizabeth Bathory legend in "Good Lady Duayne," a tale of a "Superior Person" who uses a "practice so nefarious, so murderous" (403) that she drains the blood of a number of young female companions in order to imbibe their youth and extend her own.

Films in the first decades of the century also depicted the disturbingly powerful potential of women through the vampire metaphor. Theda Bara was "The Vamp" in a number of silent films, portrayed xenophobically as an Eastern European *femme fatale* around whom no man or marriage was safe. German chanteuse Ute Lemper sings a 1932 *Lied* on her *Berlin Cabaret Songs* c.d. entitled "Ich bin ein Vamp!" which declares, "I wear the stockings of Dubarry/bathe in coffins for a lark/I am a vamp, I am a vamp/half-woman, half beast/I bite my men and suck them dry/and then I bake them in a pie."

Even T S Eliot expressed his fear of this kind of woman in *The Waste Land* when he described a terrifying female vampire:

A woman drew her long black hair out tight
And fiddled whisper music on those strings
And bats with baby faces in the violet light

Whistled, and beat their wings
And crawled head downward down a blackened wall
And upside down in air were towers
Tolling reminiscent bells, that kept the hours
And voices singing out of empty cisterns and exhausted wells.

This is the woman who evolved into the heartless flapper of F Scott Fitzgerald's stories, manipulating men with the toss of her bobbed hair. Fitzgerald saw Joan Crawford in such films as "Dance Fools Dance" as the penultimate flapper, the devil-may-care wild girl who would carouse and sing and jump into fountains all night until dawn. Fitzgerald's wife Zelda did such things and also, in the minds of many historians and critics, drew out his life's blood and creativity. As for Joan Crawford she herself bared her fangs at MGM and Warner Brothers to carve out a career that lasted fifty years, and as her alter ego Faye Dunaway declared in the biopic *Mommie Dearest*, "Don't fuck with me, fellas. This ain't my first time at the rodeo." Indeed, who would?

This vampiric figure shape-shifted in Hollywood cinema through the decades, her mixture of intrepidity and sexuality both endearing and dangerous. She became the screwball comedienne of the 1930s – Katharine Hepburn, Carole Lombard, Irene Dunne – who pursued her *objet desire* with the ruthlessness of Dracula's brides. Her "Rosie the Riveter" persona in World War II offered both the object of the soldier's affection and the subtle fear that she could defeat Hitler as readily as could he. She became the 1950s vamp Marilyn Monroe, whose deceptively soft stupidity masked a successfully hard diamond who seems to live even forty years after her mortal death. The hippie chick ingenue of the 1960s and 1970s extolled free love "as many women across the United States and in Europe demanded sexual pleasure and sexual equality with their husbands and boyfriends, and many more left these men and proclaimed their lesbianism" (Weiss 90). The 1980s yuppie superwoman conquered Wall Street without laddering her stockings or mussing her lipstick. And the 90s Generation X-er explored Gothic subculture with a hitherto unknown freedom. In other words, the vamp evolved within the parameters of cinema to become a feminist *femme fatale*.

As we can see, however, much of this vampiric action in film was metaphoric for women. The introduction of Bela Lugosi's Count to movie audiences in 1931 appropriated the vamp's power as vampiric for men directly until the advent of the Hammer Films horror seductresses of the 1960s and 1970s. However, even then, a few sharp nails slashed through male domination of the myth. Consider the images, for example, of Mina/Eva, Lucy/Lucia and the brides in the 1931 Spanish language version of *Dracula*.

The Spanish version was filmed simultaneously on the same sets, utilizing even the same hairpiece for the two Counts. Producer Paul Kohner had recognized early on the power of Stoker's novel and brought it to Universal Pictures. His control over the project was taken away, however, and given to Carl Laemmle, Jr, along with the studio. In a kind of vampiric revenge, Kohner secured production control of the Spanish version. He wanted to top the English film, and in many ways he did. He accomplished this in many technical ways, but Kohner also presented the women in the film as far more livid than those pallid femmes in the Hollywood version.

From the transparent negligees of his fiancée, heroine Lupita Tovar; to the overt sexuality of Lucy; to the feral, violent, madwoman quality of the brides (who embody the Rudyard Kipling figure of "a rag and a bone and a hank of hair"), the Spanish film offers far more titillating visions of female *vampiros* or *ciuatateos* (Silver and Ursini 18). David Skal, in *Hollywood Gothic*, describes the sisterhood of

Spanish *vampiras* [as] wild, exotic creatures with flowing hair and low-cut gowns ... one with teeth bared, and another ... backlit in such a way that her nimbus of blonde hair frames ... but a shadow. It is ... one of the great...images from the horror films of the 1930s. (166)

And how do these girls spend their time when Dracula's away?

As to the characterization of Mina/Eva, Tovar herself once said, "The wardrobe was different.... What they gave me were big décolletage – what you would call sexy. I wasn't even aware of it." Both

Mina/Eva and Lucy/Lucia are *noir* brunettes, wearing transparent black peignoirs to entertain the Count. Tovar laughed, "When my grandson saw the film, he said, 'Now I know why Grandpapa married you!'" (Wolf, *Connoisseur* 218).

In 1936, a brave attempt was made to maintain the gains of the dangerous fatal female by Universal, the Hollywood studio that gave us Bela Lugosi's Count. *Dracula's Daughter* featured Gloria Holden as the unfortunate offspring of the Count. Her favorite tidbit to succor her sorrow at being a vampire was tender female flesh, reiterating the lesbian echoes of Sheridan LeFanu's 1872 landmark novella of semi-sapphic love, *Carmilla*. Possibly based on the real-life Barbara von Cilli, who was beloved by Sigismund of Hungary but who, to be saved from death in 1451 was reportedly condemned to life as a vampire (McNally 8), LeFanu presents Carmilla as a tragic, almost romantic figure.

Countess Zaleska, Dracula's daughter, is also sympathetically portrayed, an interesting reversal of traditional interpretations of Lilith-like women. After meeting renowned psychiatrist Dr Jeffrey Garth (Otto Kruger) at a party, the Countess tries to free herself of her hunger through psychoanalysis. Despite her seduction of the innocent waif Lily and her abduction of Dr Garth's girl friend, the Countess is a figure of both power and pity. For example, she fails a test proposed by Dr Garth to control her desires. Her henchman Sandor, a 1930s Lurch with a jealous streak, plays a reversed role as he pimps for the Countess, luring the cold and hungry Lily to Zaleska's studio to pose for a painting. The innocent removes her blouse and lowers her chemise straps, querying, "Will I do?" Countess Zaleska's unblinking reply, "Yes, you'll do very nicely," betrays her attraction to the young woman, as does her predatory advance upon her. As to the doctor's girlfriend, Janet, the Countess has kidnapped her only as a last resort to persuade Garth to help her cure herself. Still, her passion rises for her supine victim as she sinks almost to Janet's neck before the camera cuts away. Naturally, for her cupidity, she is pierced phallically by an arrow through the heart: "the female invert's *aggressiveness* was what marked her as deviant and therefore dangerous, *not* her object choice ... it was the invert's usurpation of masculine privilege that defined her sexuality" (Hart 9).

Still, there is an interesting byproduct of Countess Zaleska's punishment. As Ellis Hanson notes in "Lesbians Who Bite,"

While [*Dracula's Daughter*] partake[s] of a politically dubious tradition of demonizing female sexuality, [it] also raise[s] the attractive possibility of a queer gothic, rich in all the paradox and sexual indeterminacy the word *queer* and the word *gothic* imply.... I am struck by a certain covert attraction to the vampire myth, a certain identification with the creatures of the night, among even the most canonical of feminist theorists. (183-84)

We barely see the female and/or lesbian vampire appear again with any real force in American film for several decades. It is in sexually-progressive Europe that Carmilla is reincarnated in a contemporary version of LeFanu's novella in the 1960 French film *Blood and Roses*, directed by that Dracula-esque seducer of young starlets, Roger Vadim. This subtly erotic interpretation of the story offers a sympathetic perspective on the love between Carmilla and her prey, and perhaps its classically French tolerance of all forms of love makes the film a template for the films of the 1960s onward. Andrea Weiss, in *Vampires and Violets*, has noted that the film "is more closely related to the European art cinema tradition ... [and] avoids the typical exploitation approach, [although] sexuality and violence are visually coupled" (94).

The lesbian element in vampirism represented the perverse fear of and desire for female sexuality felt by men in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Bram Dijkstra wrote in 1986 a fascinating study of feminine evil entitled *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siecle Culture*; of course lesbian relationships in particular, and women's sexuality in general, are part of that perverse idolatry. Andrew Schopp notes this in his essay, "Cruising the Alternatives: Homoeroticism and the Contemporary Vampire": "Given its late nineteenth-century origins, we should not find it surprising that the vampire product both affirms and resists culturally and historically determined discourses of sexuality" (232).

Thus it makes sense that much of the film imagery and literary depiction of the vampire in the latter part of the twentieth century would incorporate the homoerotic, and/or would be written by women, and would indicate that women's desire for power, sexual freedom, and self-determination would be

demonstrated in a variety of ways in the culture, not the least of which being the vampire myth. As Andrea Weiss has said,

[T]he lesbian vampire is more than simply a negative stereotype. She is a complex and ambiguous figure, at once an image of death and an object of desire, drawing on profound subconscious fears that the living have toward the dead and that men have toward women, while serving as a focus for repressed fantasies. The generic vampire image both expresses and represses sexuality, but the lesbian vampire especially operates in the sexual rather than the supernatural realm. (84)

Hammer Films of Britain made a great deal of money remaking old Universal Pictures horror movies during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Their vampires and virgins were voluptuous, bosomy creatures with false eyelashes and ample cleavage, giving as good as they were getting fang-wise. Whether they were Christopher Lee's brides or victims, they represented the sex bombs which were popular in that era, but they also represented bloodthirsty women with a great deal of power both on screen and at the box office. Clare Whatling asserts, "While it is largely true that ... the lesbian vampire in the Euro-horrors of the 1960s and early 1970s were intended to appeal to a male heterosexual audience, I cannot agree that a pandering to male voyeurism necessarily inhibits the articulation of either lesbian identification or desire" (69).

For example, consider Hammer's *Lust for a Vampire* from 1971. Using the girls' school film trope that goes back to 1931's *Madchen in Uniform* and Lillian Hellmann's *The Children's Hour*, a lovely Scandinavian vampire has been reincarnated with the blood of a sacrificial virgin and goes romping through the classrooms and forests, sleeping with men and women alike. And again, while this film and others may be "much more indicative of a straight man's fear of women's sexuality than they are representative of any expression of lesbian desire" (Benshoff 195), at least the threat of Dracula has been replaced by Dracula's granddaughters. As Benshoff notes in *Monsters in the Closet*, "The valorization of the monster queer as sexual outlaw, a counter-hegemonic figure who forcefully smashes the binary oppositions of gender and sexuality and race, has become a seminal stance among queer theorists and critics" (231).

One of the most notorious of the Hammer vamps was Ingrid Pitt, who made a number of films for the studio. The most infamous was 1971's *The Vampire Lovers*, another adaptation of *Carmilla*. It too is remembered primarily for its nude lesbian love scenes, but it also stands as a representation of women's control of their own sexuality and of the genre. In an e-mail, Ingrid Pitt offered her perspective on her role in that film:

I never knew anything about lesbianism when I made *Vampire Lovers*. Like everybody I had the odd encounter in the swimming pool shower but I always found it funny or I got pissed off... I must admit I never thought a lot about it until I was asked to open a season of Lesbian Films at the National Film Theatre on London's South Bank. It may sound naïve but I had always thought of *Carmilla* as a story about a couple of bored girls lolling around with nothing better to do than get friendly....

The Female Vampire as a Power Figure, for me, is the same as for the Male Vampire. Women have ruled the roost since they painted the outline of their hand on the cave wall. Ingrid still has a thriving career and a website called www.pittofhorror.com, so clearly her impression as an erotic, girl-loving lesbian has been lasting, no matter what her or Hammer Films' intentions may have been.

Another important 1970s film with a lesbian theme was *Daughters of Darkness*, which established Delphine Seyrig as a sapphic pinup queen. In another retelling of the Elizabeth Bathory legend, Seyrig portrays a contemporary version of the woman who bathed in virgins' blood. While the film has been alternately called campy and erotic, it established Seyrig as a "queer cult actress" (Benshoff 191). Indeed, as Ellis Hanson points out, "While lesbian vampire films are sometimes silly, they are never sweet. They

are violent, fetishistic, and voyeuristic; they are man-eating and phallic; they are bruisingly butch and fabulously femme” (188).

It is from the 1970s to the present that we really see the rise of the number of women participating in creative ways in depiction of the vampire myth. Of course, one of the most famous vampire films is 1983’s *The Hunger*, presenting a lesbian love scene between Catherine Deneuve and Susan Sarandon which is still discussed as a triumph of eroticism. In fact, in the documentary about LGBT depictions in Hollywood entitled *The Celluloid Closet*, Sarandon discussed her insistence that her character “didn’t need to be drunk” to be seduced by Deneuve. Instead, she goes to bed willingly with the French actress’ vampire queen, Miriam. Independent female filmmakers at the end of the 1980s were also producing lesbian vampire films, including *Mark of Lilith* from 1986 and *Because the Dawn* in 1988, presenting their protagonists not as male fetishes but as female objects of desire (*Vampires and Violets* 107-8).

There are also many heterosexual female vampires filling the screen. We saw Kate Nelligan as a New Woman/feminist/sexual aggressor in the 1979 *Dracula*. Sadie Frost commanded the screen as a red-peignoir-clad Lucy in the 1992 Coppola film. Grace Jones in *Vamp*, Kirsten Dunst in *Interview with the Vampire*, Jennifer Beals in *Vampire’s Kiss*, Meg Tilly in *Carmilla*, and of course *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in both screen (Kirsty Swanson in the 1992 film) and television (Sarah Michelle Geller) – these incarnations continue the presence of female vampires onscreen. Remember too that *Buffy* also introduced a lesbian relationship between Tara and Willow as a subplot last year. We have also seen a sympathetic female vampire in Elina Lowensohn, part of a dysfunctional and grieving vampire family in *Nadja* (1994). Another independent film, *The Addiction* (1995), featured Lili Taylor as a philosophy doctoral student who is attacked by a female vampire, and whose symptoms mirror those of hard drug addiction. Former porn star Traci Lords appeared as a bad girl blood drinker in *Blade* (1998), and Salma Hayak danced her way to George Clooney’s neck in *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996).

It is in literature, however, that women have really taken control of the power and eroticism of the female vampire. An entire genre of writing has emerged, for example, which can be labeled only as lesbian vampire writing. Anthologies such as *Daughters of Darkness* and *Dark Angels*, edited by Pam Keeseey; *Night Bites: Vampire Stories by Women*, edited by Victoria A Brownworth; and Stephen Jones’ *Vampire Stories by Women*, feature stories by lesbians or about lesbians, all reinterpreting vampire legends from feminist perspectives. African-American, lesbian author Jewelle Gomez produced both *The Gilda Stories: A Novel* featuring a black lesbian, and the novella *Louisiana 1850*, dealing with issues of slavery and economic independence as well as sexuality. Her female vampire protagonists run a bordello, which is also a part of the Underground Railroad and which two female vampire lovers run.

Hispanic author Terri de la Pena’s short story “Refugio” addresses gang problems in the barrio by offering a lesbian middle-aged nurse who turns troubled gang members into vampires who can help alleviate their community’s problems. Her vampire chooses “muchachas y muchachos to carry on after me” to help “en nuestra lucha” (with our struggle) with gangs and drugs (174).

Perhaps the penultimate tribute to this trend is the camp play *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom*, which had a long off-Broadway run and featured actors in drag. Lesbian or heterosexual, women have asserted themselves as a major force in the depiction of the vampire myth at the end of the twentieth century.

The most important vampire book of the 1970s was Anne Rice’s *Interview with the Vampire* in 1976. Rice herself is heterosexual, but her hero Louis and his antagonist Lestat suggested the love that dare not speak its name in this and other sequels, and hit a note with readers who were about to face the spectre of AIDS in the 1980s. The notion of blood as life-bringing and life-destroying was prescient in Rice’s book, and the movie version “delivered a compassionate memorandum to a world in need of empathy, the message being that neither Aids or drug addiction are a choice” (Sullivan 7). Rice’s book also signaled the co-opting of the vampire as metaphor for Otherness, whether that is as an LGBT person or HIV positive survivor or feminist, as well as hearkening back to the disease-obsessed nineteenth century. Rice has, of course, become an industry now, giving house tours, producing innumerable vampire characters, and filming both *Interview* and the 2002 *The Queen of the Damned* with the late African-American actress/singer Aaliyah.

The list of female writers, both gay and straight, producing vampire fiction is extensive. Chelsea Quinn Yarbro has published a very popular series of novels about the sympathetic Count Saint-Germain,

beginning with *Hotel Transylvania* in 1978. Laurell K Hamilton's Anita Blake series features a female detective who just happens to consort with vampires, and the detective genre is yet another claimed by women writers and readers in the late twentieth century. Meredith Ann Pierce wrote *The Darkangel Trilogy*. African-American writer Tananarive Due has published two books, *My Soul to Keep* and *The Living Blood* featuring a middle-class Black family whose patriarch is a 500-year-old revenant. Tanith Lee publishes extensively, as have Nancy Collins, PD Cacek, Alejandra Pizarnik, Lois Tilton, Charlaire Harris, Amelia Atwater-Rhodes, Vivian Vande Velde, Melanie Tem, Jeanne Kalogridis, and the late Angela Carter. Their vampire figures vary from predator to crimestopper, but their very variability demonstrates the flexibility of the myth and its female propagators.

Clearly the vampire myth continues to find new blood for new audiences in the new millennium, shapeshifting with the times, evolving as it must in order to stay alive. The victimized virgin of the early nineteenth century has become the social activist avenger of the twenty-first century and shows no sign of playing dead. At a time when the word "vampire" has as much of a dangerous cachet as the word "feminist," more and more women continue to be fascinated by the children of the night, and the bittersweet music they make.

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