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Cover Page Footnote

Laura Linneman is currently a Master's student at the University of Dayton. She intends to continue research on the dread of female sexuality, inversion of gender roles, and the “Vagina Dentata” motif in Dracula and other fiction.

The Fear of Castration and Male Dread of Female Sexuality: The Theme of the “Vagina Dentata” in *Dracula*

Laura Linneman

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Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* reflects the Victorian fear of reverse colonization by the “Other” or the encroachment of the outsider on the British Empire as well as the repression of sexuality in Victorian England; however, there is one facet of the text that has never been fully explored: the inherent male fear of castration and feminine sexuality as well as its relationship to the “vagina dentata” motif. Furthermore, this dread of female sexuality has not been adequately explored in light of the novel’s historical context. Written during the rise of the New Woman, Stoker crafts a response to the increasing independence of women, embracing the strength and abilities of women, but rejecting the New Woman’s sexual forwardness and lack of maternal instinct. Using the female vampires to represent the New Woman, Stoker creates a social commentary that juxtaposes the New Woman with the reinvented traditional woman to demonstrate the dangers the New Woman poses.

By re-envisioning the critical landscape of *Dracula*, the discussion on the place of and misconceptions of female sexuality within a phallogocentric discourse will be extended to demonstrate that a vaginally-centered discourse exists. As Judith Butler states, “Within a language pervasively masculinist, a phallogocentric language, women constitute the *unrepresentable*. In other words, women represent the sex that cannot be thought, a linguistic absence and opacity” (9). Therefore, female sexuality is not verbalized as clearly as male sexuality; however, through the male dread of the unrepresentable nature of female sexuality, particular motifs and images, such as the vagina dentata, are used to visually represent the male projection of female sexuality in light of a phallogocentric discourse.

The “Vagina Dentata” Motif

The fear of female sexuality, particularly of the vagina itself, has proliferated cultural folklore for centuries. The most prevalent of the symbols found in folklore is the myth of the vagina dentata, or the “toothed vagina”: “This motif occurs in a widespread geographical area, as well as crosses the lines of social and economic differences. In one form or another, the *vagina dentata* motif exists as a representation of the fear of castration inside the vagina” (Otero 269). In *Dracula*, the physical attributes associated with the vampires revolve around the teeth and the lips. Because the vampires’ teeth and lips are the point of penetration and sexual contact, the physical attributes of the vampires can be seen as a modern adaptation of the vagina dentata motif, particularly because five of the six vampires are fully female and Count Dracula exhibits characteristics of both genders.

Not only are these monstrous women virulently sexual, but they also exhibit the typical attributes associated with symbols of female sexuality. As Jill Raitt states, “feminine symbols remain mysterious, cavernous, unpredictable, dangerous: at once life-bearing and death-dealing... the negative side of the feminine symbols is exaggerated and even rendered terrible”

(419). It is important to note that the sexually aggressive, non-maternal women are vampires who are also equipped with a set of fangs that are able to literally and symbolically castrate men; however, in order for these women to be deemed socially acceptable and restored to purity, it is necessary, as in all *vagina dentata* tales, for the teeth to be removed.

The first women that are clearly described in the text are the vampire women in Count Dracula's castle. When Jonathan meets these women, his description accentuates their explicit sexuality, focusing on his attraction and repulsion to their lips, the physical attribute that causes his uneasiness in their presence: "All three had brilliant white teeth that shone like pearls against the ruby of their voluptuous lips. There was something about them that made me uneasy, some longing and at the same time some deadly fear. I felt in my heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips" (Stoker 46). As the primary orifice of sexual contact in *Dracula*, the vampire mouth is representative of the *vagina dentata* in that it is deceptively tempting yet dangerous. The mouth is first seen as an alluring orifice, inviting with promised pleasure and "voluptuous" softness; however, upon contact the orifice actually contains sharp, penetrating teeth that can subdue, kill, and even castrate a man.

In the text, it is obvious that the women are influenced by the New Woman, an influence that generally seems to be embraced and respected; however, the overt and aggressive sexuality of the New Woman is rejected by the male characters as well as Mina Harker. As Carol Senf states, "When it came to sex the New Woman was more frank and open than her predecessors. She felt free to initiate sexual relationships, to explore alternatives to marriage and motherhood, and to discuss sexual matters such as contraception and venereal disease" (35). As an educated woman with a "man's brain" (Stoker 241), Mina embraces some of the newfound independence of the New Woman, but seems to reject the sexual forwardness that many New Women displayed, including the otherwise traditional Lucy Westenra: "Some of the 'New Women' writers will someday start an idea that men and women should be allowed to see each other asleep before proposing or accepting. But I suppose the New Woman won't condescend in the future to accept; she will do the proposing herself" (99-100). This discomfort with gender reversal in sexuality is prevalent throughout the text with the male characters describing women as passive and idealized; however, this typical heterosexual relationship is not shown. On the contrary, sexual advances are initiated by the females (excluding encounters with Dracula, which will be explored later) and the men are passive sexual partners.

Upon transformation into a vampire, the latent sexuality is awakened in Count Dracula's female prey. This awakened sexuality is the point of gender transgression, in which the male and female characters reverse traditional sexual roles. Returning to Jonathan Harker's encounter with the three vampire women, Harker vividly describes this inversion of conventional sex roles. In this scene Harker describes himself as a passive and effeminate participant: "I lay quiet, looking out under my eyelashes in an agony of delightful anticipation" (46). Emasculated at the hands of these "thrilling and repulsive" (46) women, Harker fearfully yet anxiously awaits penetration by the "hard dents of two sharp teeth, just touching and pausing there" (47). This scene of the female aggressor is repeated throughout the text, most explicitly in the confrontation between the vampiric Lucy and Van Helsing's Crew of Light.

This scenario is particularly important because it inverts all of the sexual norms that were propagated in Victorian Britain. In this setting, the male is the passive, penetrable sexual partner while the female is the dominant, penetrating aggressor. Furthermore, it qualifies the fact that all females are able to enjoy sex as opposed to the Victorian notion that only perverse females enjoyed sex (Demetrakopoulos 106). As Butler argues, "The libido-as-masculine is the source

from which all possible sexuality is presumed to come” (53); however, in this instance, the males are libido-less and the females are the source of sexuality. Although the vampire women do not physically castrate the men, their sexual dominance psychologically castrate and emasculate the male characters by indicating female power over men. Not only are the women in this text more sexually potent, and in some cases smarter, but as with *vagina dentata* myths, this power emanates from their sexed bodies – bodies which are seductively feminine and soft, yet threatening and harmful. Due to the transgressions of these women, in stepping outside of their gender roles and emasculating the men, it is necessary for the dangerous “teeth” to be removed in order to make the women suitable and subject the male’s restoration of dominance and sexual virulence.

In Karen Horney’s “The Dread of Woman,” Horney describes how the male fears of castration and dread of female sexuality are projected onto women and the women are objectified in order for men to never have to deal directly with their fear, but only deal with the projected “threat” of female sexuality (350). By idealizing females, as the Crew of Light idealizes the purity of femininity, men are able to distance themselves from female sexuality by denying its existence. In their staking of Lucy’s corpse, the attitudes of the men mirror these ideals in Seward’s description of Lucy’s body after it has been “restored”: “There, in the coffin lay no longer the foul Thing that we had so dreaded and grown to hate that the work of her destruction was yielded as a privilege... but Lucy as we had seen her in life, with her face of unequalled sweetness and purity” (Stoker 222). In this passage, the vampiric Lucy is not even identified as human; the male dread objectifies her as a “Thing” so monstrous that it is only fit for destruction. On the other hand, when male dominance is reasserted and she again becomes submissive and penetrable, Lucy’s femininity is idealized. It is the male dread of female sexuality that allows men to either identify women as idealized females or as monstrous whores.

Male Fears and Desires

At the core of this text lies the root problem of the male response to the sexualized woman: the male fear of the vagina, the ambivalence to women’s “monstrous” sexuality, and the need to restore gender norms by maiming the transgressive woman. In phallogocentric discourse, many of these male fears are unfairly projected onto women (Otero 280). Therefore, in a phallogocentric culture, the vagina is intentionally viewed as monstrous to mask male fears of female sexuality. Butler also asserts this male definition of self based on the otherness of women in her reading of Lacan, “By claiming that the Other that lacks the Phallus is the one who *is* the Phallus, Lacan clearly suggests that power is wielded by the feminine position of not-having, that the masculine subject who “has” the Phallus requires this Other to confirm and, hence, be the Phallus in its “extended” sense” (44). Consequently, in the *vagina dentata* motif, the male fear is projected as the teeth; however, the true fear stems from the ambiguity of the vagina itself as well as the male fear of losing his manhood, both physically and psychologically.

The actualization of castration of the penis by the *vagina dentata* is a fearful and gruesome scenario: the vagina physically devours the penis and turns it into some semblance of another vagina. This physical emasculation never takes place in *Dracula*, but the psychological emasculation is very evident in the sexual encounters between the Crew of Light and the female vampires, particularly the transformed Lucy Westenra. Lucy’s repressed sexuality before her transformation is apparent, as Senf argues: “her desire for three husbands suggests a degree of latent sensuality which connects her to the New Woman of the period... she is torn between the

need to conform and the desire to rebel” (Senf 42). After her transformation, the restraints of conformity no longer have a hold on her and she sheds both her sexual restraint and any maternal instincts she had.

As Lucy’s transformation takes place, her sexuality grows evident through the changes in her physical appearance. Like the female vampires at Dracula’s castle, Lucy begins to radiate sexuality and much of the focus is on her mouth:

Her breathing grew stertorous, the mouth opened, and the pale gums, drawn back, made the teeth look longer and sharper than ever. In a sort of sleep-waking, vague, unconscious way she opened her eyes, which were now dull and hard at once, and said in a soft, voluptuous voice, such as I had never heard from her lips: - “Arthur! Oh, my love, I am so glad you have come! Kiss me!” (Stoker 167-168)

As is typical in Stoker’s narrative style, when he describes the vampire women he reiterates the voluptuousness that defines the overt sexuality. This word, *voluptuous*, is repeated throughout passages where the vampire women instigate sexual situations. The repulsion men like Seward and Van Helsing feel towards Lucy’s vampiric sexuality mirrors an extreme version of typical Victorian attitudes towards explicit sexuality, particularly in women. To Victorian readers the physical descriptions of the vampires would warrant feelings of disdain: “Women should not be ‘wanton’ or ‘voluptuous’; they should be ‘pure’ and ‘spiritual’” (Stevenson 145). Therefore, as is common in vagina dentata myths, the violence used against a woman like Lucy and her vampire counterparts is justified. The removal of the danger of the teeth is the utmost concern; a woman can only be returned to purity by having the “teeth” removed through violence, in order to return her to a desexualized, non-threatening state.

The most explicit description of this desexualizing and violent removal of the teeth is in the Crew of Light’s final encounter with the undead Lucy in her burial crypt. In this final confrontation, the men violently stake and behead Lucy, effectively separating her sexed body from the most dangerous and controlling part of her sexuality – her mouth. The Crew of Light justify this violence, stating that it “would restore Lucy to us as a holy, and not an unholy, memory” (Stoker 221). As a vampire, Lucy is seen as a monstrous nonhuman creature that needs to be destroyed and returned to a passive, harmless, unsexed woman.

In this violent encounter, the true fear of emasculation and castration becomes evident. The Crew of Light does not fear the supernatural nature of the vampire; rather, the true threat of the vampire is that vampirism blurs traditional gender roles. Human prey, in this case females, transform into creatures in which the typical distinction between male and female roles becomes inverted. To restore order it is necessary to rid these female vampires of their teeth – the physical feature that allows women to enter a phallogocentric world as an equal. As Jane Gallop suggests:

The phallus is both the (dis)proportion between the sexes, and the (dis)proportion between any sexed being by virtue of being sexed (having parts, being partial) and human totality. So the man is ‘castrated’ by not being total, just as the woman is ‘castrated’ by not being a man. Whatever relation of lack man feels, lack of wholeness, lack in/of being, is projected onto woman’s lack of phallus, lack of maleness. Woman is then the figuration of phallic ‘lack’: she is a hole. (22)

What previously separated men and women was the males’ ability to penetrate; hence, now imbued with vampire fangs, women are able to penetrate rather than simply being the penetrated. Therefore, the men can no longer project this lack of phallus onto the vampire women. Instead, these vampires are sexually capable of both male and female roles. No longer are they deemed

as inferior, but rather now as a sexual whole, possessing both the phallus and the vagina. The vampires have the ability to both penetrate and procreate, making the male irrelevant except as a submissive partner used to pleasure the vampire through penetration with the teeth. It is this threat that is most dangerous to the Crew of Light and allows for them to justify their extreme violence towards these transgressive “Others.”

The Equation of Sexuality with Nonmaternal Instincts

In addition to transgressive sexuality, the vampire women further violate Victorian beliefs about female nature in their lack of maternal instinct. This suspicion towards nonmaternal women stems from a wider mythology directly related to the vagina dentata motifs. As Otero purports, “the ‘terrible mother’ is an image that represents the fear of ambivalence and androgyny in female sexuality” (273) and, like the vagina dentata motif, is prominent in folklore. The “terrible mother” motif features a sexualized female, one that is capable of nourishing a child, but chooses instead to devour children.

Within the text, Stoker equates overt sexuality in females with cruelty to children, making children the prey of choice for the female vampires who identify with both the vagina dentata motif and the “terrible mother” motif. The first instance of this preying on children is witnessed by Harker in his encounter with the three female vampires in Castle Dracula:

“Are we to have nothing to-night?” said one of them, with a low laugh, as she pointed to the bag which he had thrown upon the floor, and which mover as though there were some living thing within it... If my ears did not deceive me there was a gasp and a low wail, as of a half-smothered child. The women closed round, whilst I was aghast with horror; but as I looked they disappeared and with them the dreadful bag. (Stoker 47-48)

It is traditionally believed that women have a natural maternal instinct and nurture children, but this generally accepted notion is deconstructed as these women not only reject motherhood, but are nourished through draining the blood from children. Similar to the later confrontation with Lucy, the vampire women’s behaviors are so atypical that Harker must convince himself that these women are not women at all, stating “Mina is a woman, and there is nought in common. They are devils of the Pit!” (61). Like the sexual inversion, the lack of maternal feelings inverts social norms and further dehumanizes the vampires so that violence against them is further justified.

Returning to the Crew of Light’s encounter with the vampiric Lucy, Seward’s account reinforces and parallels Harker’s earlier account of the three vampires. Harker was obviously appalled by the sexual forwardness as well as their feeding on a child. Seward reiterates this same horror when he witnesses Lucy’s cruelty towards her child-victim and her sexual forwardness: “With a careless motion, she flung to the ground, callous as a devil, the child that up to now she had clutched strenuously to her breast, growling over it as a dog growls over a bone” (Stoker 217). As Harker objectifies the three vampire women, so too does Seward now reject Lucy’s womanhood, comparing her instead to a dog and a devil. The actions are so unladylike and socially unacceptable that it would seem impossible to define these vampire women as females; instead their identities are projected onto nonhuman creatures.

The Pure Woman: Mina Harker

On the opposite spectrum of femininity, Stoker's heroine, Mina Harker, is representative of a more traditional Victorian woman in terms of her sexuality and maternal instincts, but also a New Woman in terms of her intellect and independence. It is unfair to define *Dracula* as a misogynist text when it is clear that Stoker embraces the intellectually liberated modern woman. Stoker's objection, like many Victorians, was to the sexually liberated New Women; therefore, it is clear that Mina, although she is preyed upon by Count Dracula, is not consumed by vampirism and able to aid the Crew of Light due to her rejection of the omnisexual and overtly sexual vampire behavior. Through Mina, Stoker aligns himself with the conservative branch of modern women, creating a heroine who is intellectually equal to her male counterparts, but is desexualized and still chooses the traditional roles of wife and mother (Senf 38). In the beginning of the text, Mina is an assistant schoolmistress who is intellectual and self-sustaining; however, after her marriage, Mina adopts traditional female roles of wife and mother.

Not only does Mina possess the qualities of a wholesome woman in terms of her conduct and lack of sexuality, but she also separates herself from the image of women created by the female vampires by having blatant maternal instincts. In fact, Mina becomes the mother-figure for the Crew of Light, comforting and nurturing them as if they are her children: "We women have something of the mother in us that makes us rise above smaller matters when the mother-spirit is invoked; I felt this big sorrowing man's head resting on me, as though it were that of the baby that some day may lie on my bosom, and I stroked his hair as though he were my own child" (Stoker 236). Not only does this demonstrate Mina's maternal qualities, but it also foreshadows the birth of Quincey Harker, an actualization of Mina's role as a mother.

A major question that underlies *Dracula* is why is Mina saved from Dracula's curse? Mina is spared the same fate as Lucy because she is endowed with the appropriate masculine qualities that allow her to survive and even destroy Dracula, but also because she rejects the unacceptable qualities vampirism endows in women, such as increased libido. In discussing Stephen Heath's argument, Butler states that "relying on the postulated characterization of libido as masculine, Heath concludes that femininity is the denial of that libido" (53). Therefore, because Mina is idealized as the model Victorian woman, she rejects her newly awakened sexuality whereas Lucy succumbs to Dracula's curse because she embraces her sexuality. Since qualities like intelligence were valued yet considered noncompetitive when paired with passivity and a desire to fulfill traditional female roles, Mina is not considered a threat to masculinity.

Another factor in Mina's salvation is her resistance to Dracula's advances. In complete opposition to Lucy who never attempts to resist, Mina is portrayed as fighting Dracula as hard as possible: "When the blood began to spurt out, he took my hands in one of his, holding them tight, and with the other he seized my neck and pressed my mouth to the wound, so that I must either suffocate or swallow some" (Stoker 294). This indicates that Mina has both the intelligence and the morality to withstand Dracula's assault and eventual curse.

Count Dracula

It is impossible to study this text without looking at the source of vampirism, Count Dracula himself. Like the female vampires, Dracula's physical appearance is described multiple times, using the same vocabulary. For instance, when Mina first lays eyes on Dracula, she states: "I knew him at once from the description of the others. The waxen face; the high aquiline nose, on which the light fell in a thin white line; the parted red lips, with the sharp white teeth showing between; and the red eyes... I knew, too, the red scar on his forehead where Jonathan had struck

him” (292-293). Similar to his female counterparts, much of the fixation in Dracula’s appearance is on his oral features. Furthermore, it is notable that in Dracula’s physical description, the colors of red and white are stressed. As Stevenson points out, “Stoker consistently uses a combination of red and white to indicate wither incipient or completed vampirism” (141). Hence, in physical descriptions of the female vampires, including Lucy and Mina as they fall prey to Dracula’s seduction, the colors of red and white are present. What is more is that Mina grows to share the same scar as Dracula, a scar that marks her as an untouchable. Upon seeing it, Mina wails, “Unclean! Unclean! Even the Almighty shuns my polluted flesh! I must bear this mark of shame upon my forehead until the Judgment Day” (302). These colors and this scar are notable because they are signs of the categorization of vampires into a recognizable, homogenous group of monstrous “Others.” By adopting Dracula’s coloring of red and white, a different physical appearance, as is evident in Lucy’s transformation, allows the Crew of Light to further objectify the vampires as nonhuman creatures.

For all purposes, Dracula is essentially a physically male version of his female progeny; however, in the text he represents something just as terrifying through his parodic adoption of a male form. While all of the females are capable of the omniseual acts, it is only Dracula who acts on his abilities to be both the male and female sexual partner. Therefore, Dracula truly blends gender roles by using his sexuality to penetrate as well as give birth and even breastfeed. Equally alarming is Dracula’s ability to seduce wholesome women and turn them into his sexually liberated progeny. This ability of awakening latent sexuality in wholesome Englishwomen is alarming because it emasculates their male partners; this vampire is able to taint these women and awaken something in them that no honorable Victorian man could awaken or satisfy. While the Victorian male is threatened by female sexuality, Dracula thrives on it.

The most obvious threat that Dracula represents is his extreme sexuality and his ability to coax other men’s women into sexual consummation. As Foucault discusses in *The History of Sexuality*, to be overtly sexual in the nineteenth century was a blatant transgression of social mores: “Not only did it [sexuality] not exist, it had no right to exist and would be made to disappear upon its least manifestation – whether in acts or in words” (4). In this case, Dracula takes it even further by engaging in sexual acts with other men’s women in plain sight. This sexual audacity is a complete inversion of Victorian attitudes towards sex; attitudes which preferred to deny the existence of female sexuality rather than try to awaken it. Nowhere is this threat more clearly described than in Dracula’s forceful seduction of Mina Harker: With his left hand he held both Mrs. Harker’s hands, keeping them away with her arms at full tension; his right hand gripped her by the back of the neck, forcing her face down on his bosom... The attitude of the two had a terrible resemblance to a child forcing a kitten’s nose into a saucer of milk to compel it to drink... His eyes flamed red with devilish passion... (Stoker 288).

In this passage, Dracula’s sexual passion is evident as well as his seizure of another man’s wife; however, there is something else that fearful in this passage. Not only is Dracula engaging in a sexual act, but he is also acting as a mother breastfeeding a child. Dracula’s sexual nature now makes itself apparent – sexual consummation and procreation are one in the same. Therefore, Mina is seduced, but she will also be reborn as a daughter of Count Dracula. This ability to be both a male and female partner as well as to seduce married women is the ultimate emasculation for the Victorian man. Furthermore, it is only through Dracula that these women are now armed with “teeth,” the penetrating phallus that the women did not possess before their vampiric transformation. Essentially, Count Dracula is sexually capable of anything including asexually

creating a new race of omnisexual females, making the traditional man useless in sexual endeavors. The fear, then, is not just of female sexuality, but also “a fear of superior sexual potency” (Stevenson 146).

It is through Count Dracula that the vagina dentata motif is most explicit. In stories containing the vagina dentata, females possess all sexual organs: testicles, penis, vagina, breasts, and womb. While it is implicit that all vampires possess all of the sexual organs, it is Count Dracula who flaunts his omnisexuality and uses his feminine organs as deftly as his male sexuality. Dracula’s occupation of both gender roles is monstrous to the Victorian Crew of Light which protects the traditional gender roles of what is “male” and what is “female.” This gender confusion is further discussed by Butler: “precisely because certain kinds of “gender identities” fail to conform to those norms of cultural intelligibility, they appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities from within that domain” (17). Hence, Dracula’s gender transgression, as with his female counterparts, is written off as developmentally flawed and inherently monstrous because the vampiric identification of gender roles does not fit within Victorian norms.

Conclusion

Through the use of the vagina dentata motif, I am suggesting that *Dracula* allegorically projects the male fear of castration and the fear of the nullification of the male’s role in intercourse and procreation through Stoker’s use of vampires. The men are unable to directly deal with their emasculation anxieties and, thus, must eliminate the threats to their dominance. From this deep-seated anxiety expressed in this vagina dentata story, violence against gender transgressors and sexual “others” is justified through the objectification of those not clearly categorized in the social strata.

The perversity of vampirism lay in its inversion of gender roles, the awakened sexuality (including the ability to perform male and female sex roles), and the female rejection of feminine behavior, most shockingly anti-maternal actions. Stoker’s visualization of the vampire women suggests the author’s aversion towards to the New Woman because of her rejection of conventional female roles. Not only do they reject these roles, but they also act as an incapacitating threat to masculinity, able to physically and psychologically castrate men. Hence, *Dracula* insists that removal of the female phallus (the teeth) is necessary to remove the monstrous libido present in these transformed women.

It is important to understand that this text can be read through several critical lenses, but for my purposes, *Dracula* uses vampirism metaphorically to articulate Victorian anxieties about the relationship between sexuality and gender roles. As Foucault states, “If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression” (6); therefore, it would have been unacceptable to directly discuss matters of sexuality. Stoker, then, had to use vampirism to parallel trends caused by the New Woman and demonstrate that it is necessary to quash this sexual rebellion before male dominance and virility is usurped.

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