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**Gender and the Apotropaic in
Charles Keeping's Illustrations to *Dracula***

Alice Mills

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People across the millennia and across the world have attempted to avert supernatural evil with a multitude of rituals and objects. Such apotropaic practices tended to be most dramatic in earlier cultures, but still today they are more discreetly prevalent, as in the wearing of eye-shaped talismans to avert the evil eye or advertisements recommending prayer to St Jude, patron of seemingly lost causes. Instances of the apotropaic can thus be ranged along a scale from the aversive to the invocative. At one end of the scale can be found the practice of putting garlic over the lintels of doors, to guard against the feared attacks of vampires, or (in Christa Sutterlin's interpretation) the carved female figures displaying their pudenda on church walls, to drive off the ever-threatening devil. Closer to the other end can be placed the apotropaic formulae of stranger-danger campaigns,

designed to protect children against the real threat of predatory paedophiles but running the risk of turning all strangers into likely abductors and rapists in the mind of the impressionable child. Such an apotropaic does not create, but grossly magnifies, the threat against which it offers safeguard.

Once the threat is no longer believed in, the apotropaic moves into the realm of fantasy and can become entirely invocative within that realm, as in the cross on the bedroom wall in the exorcism sub-genre of horror, useless as a tool to avert, functioning instead to provoke the devil into manifestation. In horror fiction and film, each apotropaic gesture or artefact attracts whatever it nominally protects against. Horror is thus the genre of pseudo-apotropaics.

Serious practitioners of horror, artists, film-makers and writers, thus face the problem of how to use these pseudo-apotropaics without resorting to camp posturings. It is almost impossible within the confines of a book or film to restore genuine apotropaia to the cliched apparatus of the horror genre. Rather, the finest practitioners of horror move their discourse from the dread supernatural to some other category still capable of horrifying and touching the reader within the secular world; what is pseudo-apotropaic when the work is read as orthodox horror, can become an embodiment of both supreme evil and supreme good in their hands. Such an artist of horror is the twentieth century illustrator, Charles Keeping, and his command of the pseudo-apotropaic is best exemplified in his

illustrations to Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. This 1991 publication was sold as a children's book (the copy I bought was shelved in the bookshop among the picture story books), and considering it as a book for children would add an extra dimension of outrage to my analysis; the verbal text of this work, however, is Bram Stoker's entire novel, which was unlikely to succeed either as bedtime reading by parent to young child or as independent reading for the newly literate, slightly older child. It is as uncompromising art addressed to an adult sensibility that I propose to analyse Keeping's version of *Dracula*.

Keeping's illustrations to this text, as to many others, have the potential to restore to the adult audience the pleasures of the illustrated text, relegated to children's literature since Victorian times. These illustrations do not necessarily please the eye but their details please the intelligence willing to reflect on their implications. Keeping's illustrations to *Dracula*, *Frankenstein* and *The Lady of Shalott* were pioneer works inaugurating for the latter part of the twentieth century, the picture story book and illustrated novel for adults.

In his illustrations to *Dracula*, Keeping's first manoeuvre away from reliance on the tired conventions of the pseudo-apotropaic as horror apparatus is to remove Stoker's emphasis on the power of good human beings. In particular, his illustrations omit the good men of Stoker's novel. There are five of these, including Jonathan Harker whose adventures at Castle Dracula form a lengthy, exciting prelude to Stoker's main story of the

Count's visit to England and his attacks on Lucy and Mina, his attempt to people the world with fresh vampires. Keeping illustrates Jonathan's adventures in Transylvania with pictures of the Count, Castle Dracula and the three female vampires who threaten Jonathan's life, but there is no depiction of Jonathan himself. His presence is merely implied as observer, along with the book's reader. Similarly, later in Stoker's novel, the professor, Jonathan, and Lucy's three suitors all play important parts, offering an illustrator the chance to depict scenes of action and intense feeling. Yet in Keeping's pictures, the men are absent except as implied observers. Only at the end are they set down on the page in three pictures representing the wild pursuit of Dracula across Europe by steamboat, on horseback and by horse and carriage. In all three of these pictures, the men are small black figures, indistinguishable from one another, wearing black clothes and tall black hats, with Lincoln-style beards (serving to indicate their probity and dedication, but also, in the context of their perilous quest, hinting at Lincoln's death by assassination). In Stoker's text four of these men, Jonathan and Lucy's suitors, are indeed very similar. The professor is described as markedly different in age, status, wisdom, ethnicity, occupation and personality. Yet in Keeping's pictures no attempt is made to differentiate them. The five are for Keeping one man seen fivefold. Such doubling suggests an already imperilled identity for each of the men, even before they face the vampire whose bite threatens their entire humanity.

With regard to the first of these pursuit pictures, the corresponding section of Stoker's text speaks of wild adventures, of rushing through the darkness, of engines throbbing and doing their utmost; in comparison, the boat in Keeping's illustration seems remarkably static, leaving no perceptible wake. The torsos of the men in this picture are as black and upright as the smokestack behind them. Like the black gondola in *Death in Venice*, this black vessel with its sombre crew has overtones of the ship of death and its ferryman Charon in Greek myth. Keeping's is a black, sooty, mechanised late nineteenth version of the mythic vessel. As an illustrator, Keeping is elsewhere highly capable of conveying storm and speed at sea; this funereal stasis is markedly incongruous with the text and suggests that the forces of good are already death's victims.

Also incongruous is the contrast between human body and horse in the next picture, where the animals are blurred with speed while their two riders are again shown as black, solid and upright, giving little impression of the headlong pursuit of which the verbal text speaks. Only in the third of these pictures does the coachman lean forward a little. His black clothes merge into the coach so that vehicle, horses and man all press forward together. Even so, this is far from wild riding, as masterfully depicted in the first illustration to the book, where Dracula acts as coachman, urging on his horses. In this picture all is indistinct, betokening speed and danger, from the lurching change of perspective between coach and horses to the grey blots and

blurs of coach and horses merging into the smudgy greyness of the whole design. In terms of the depiction of energy, this Dracula picture has the advantage; death incarnate is incomparably more alive than the deathly-black living.

There are also disconcerting similarities between the two illustrations. According to Stoker's text, the pursuit coach has Mina as its passenger, but its window is as blankly black in the picture as that of Dracula's coach in the first illustration. The forces racing to destroy the vampire could thus be read as equivalent to those of the vampire himself, as deathly black as Dracula himself racing to ensnare Jonathan. Such an uncanny resemblance suggests that Keeping is proposing a profound reevaluation of the forces of good throughout the story as both death's victims and death's black agents—as such closely resembling the vampire's actual victims, who die to their human existence to live as vampiric predators. Such deathly representatives of life as the men in these pursuit pictures seem at once doomed and sinister, far from eligible to wield the apotropaics of the vampire-hunter.

Dracula, lord of evil, is also represented in a far-from-conventional manner. The male force for evil is, on the whole, as feeble in Keeping's version as the male forces for good. Twelve illustrations, almost a third of the total, depict the Count. In the first extended description of Dracula, Stoker speaks of "hair growing scantily round the temples, but profusely elsewhere" and a heavy moustache. The dark smudge around Dracula's mouth in some of

Keeping's pictures may be a slight moustache, but he is depicted as clean-shaven. Throughout, his elongated upper skull lacks hair, with all its symbolic potency. Six of Keeping's illustrations of Dracula are studies of his disembodied head (anticipating his final decapitation and death). With the exception of the coach-driving illustration, these pictures show a remarkably passive and unsuccessful vampire. In one, he retreats through a smashed window. Another, of Dracula as bat in menacing pose, corresponds to a section of verbal text on the facing page where the bat at the window is driven away by one of Stoker's heroes with a shotgun; in this instance, the verbal text promptly defuses the vampire's threat.

Keeping also chooses to illustrate the episode just before Jonathan manages to escape from Castle Dracula, when he opens the box of earth in which the Count lies waiting to be shipped to London. In Stoker's text, Dracula is described as open-eyed and dripping blood:

on the lips were goutts of fresh blood, which trickled from the corners of the mouth and ran over the chin and neck. Even the deep, burning eyes seemed set amongst swollen flesh...There was a mocking smile on the bloated face. (57)

In the corresponding illustration, Dracula's eyes are squeezed shut and however the expression of his mouth is understood, opening into blackness, fringed with unhealthy-looking fangs, it is not a smile. The dark splotches over his face and hands suggest a skin disease or rotting flesh rather than

blood. There is no question of a lack of artistic ability here, for elsewhere in the series of illustrations, *Keeping* depicts a bloody mouth and hands powerfully and unmistakably, in the figure of Lucy risen from the dead. Dracula in this earlier picture is therefore deliberately rendered as more passive and less menacing than in Stoker's novel. His hands clasped over his dark clothing, together with the closed eyes, suggest a parody of some ecclesiastic at prayer rather than a vampire secure and triumphant. In retrospect, from the end of the book, this figure appears connected with the upright, black and static quintet of pursuers, the forces of good.

The allusion to an ecclesiastic at prayer functions to appropriate the apotropaic into the mocking repertoire of the evil being himself. If the male powers of good seem already tainted by death's darkness, powerless to move as though dying or dead, even before they catch up with the vampire, the male power of evil has long ago demonstrated the powerlessness of apotropaic prayer, as Jonathan witnesses when he gazes into the vampire's earthen bed.

Only in two of *Keeping's* illustrations is Dracula depicted in the act of attacking women, and even here he is far from the ferocious monster of the verbal text. As the source of all the novel's evil energy, *Keeping's* Dracula is a disappointment. For one of these pictures, *Keeping* chooses the moment when the Count is surprised as he forces Mina to drink blood from his breast. Stoker describes this scene in terms suggestive of rape:

With his left hand he held 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. Her white nightdress was smeared with blood, and a thin stream trickled down the man's bare breast. (283)

As with the pursuit pictures, *Keeping* is highly competent to depict such a scene as Stoker describes, but he refrains from any indication of violent struggle, compulsion or refusal. In this picture there is no hint of the blood that Stoker describes as smearing Mina's nightdress or Dracula's breast. The scene appears to depict a heterosexual encounter with overtones of patriarchal power-play but no explicit evidence of sadomasochism: the man is in the more powerful position, standing, clothed, while the woman kneels before him on the bed, her nightdress slipping from her shoulder and breast. This Dracula is not the demonic rapist-vampire of Stoker's words, for he holds Mina comparatively gently and he is shown at the instant of turning away.

Only once does *Keeping* offer something like the expected iconography of Dracula as vampire at his victim's throat, in the picture where something long, black and shadowy bends over Lucy's half-reclining body on the park bench. Here the curves of Dracula's dark form enhance rather than obscure the woman's sexually suggestive pose, with her head thrown back, lips full and breast half-exposed. As in the later picture of Dracula with Mina at his breast, it is questionable whether Lucy

is his helpless victim or a willing participant in sexual pleasure—a pleasure in which the reader is also invited to participate, for this woman's lips, breasts and genitals face the illustration's viewer rather than the vampire.

To present the male vampire's attacks on women in sexual terms, with the reader as voyeur, is not a very bold reevaluation of the text for our post-Freudian age (unless the book's status as a text for young children is taken into account). Keeping has far more power to disturb when he turns his attention to the female vampires in two sets of illustrations within the *Dracula* series. Framing the story at beginning and end are two pictures of the female vampires of Castle Dracula. There are five representations of Lucy's slow transformation into a female vampire. In this sequence, Lucy's mouth and teeth are given great attention, as might be expected. Less predictable, however, is Keeping's emphasis on her breasts rather than her throat, as her nightdress slips ever further down from her shoulders. Indeed, the sexy, clinging, revealing nightdresses of both Mina and Lucy are quite out of style with their full-skirted daywear. Anachronistically, Keeping uses the women's clothes to symbolise their night-time sexual self and its decorous, buttoned-up day-time façade. In bed, Lucy's body opens ever wider in the course of these five pictures. First her hands spread apart, her mouth opens further, then her eyes take on the fixed and horrible stare characteristic of Keeping's vampires, male or female. This series of illustrations culminates in a remarkable, Lady

Macbeth-like rendition of Lucy risen from the dead, mouth and hands thick with blood. In this picture, as in Stoker's text, she is simultaneously erotically attractive and repulsive.

Ever-increasing, explicit sexual invitation, ever-increasing threat from the fanged mouth: this is a representation of the notorious *vagina dentata* of Freudian theory, a terrifying manifestation of female sexuality in which the woman's genitals are fantasised by the man to take the shape of a mouth full of lethally castrating teeth. Each female vampire in Keeping's illustrations can be interpreted as manifesting the *vagina dentata*, mapping the female genitals in her face. Each of these females displays her body naked to the breasts, while the depictions of Dracula always present him as either fully clothed or an indistinct darkness or a head without a body. The centre and source of vampire energy and threat is to be found in Stoker's male vampire but in Keeping's women. The Freudian reading that I am proposing here is supported by Keeping himself in one of the oddest details of these illustrations: in the early picture of the Count looking up from his box of earth, his grotesque head uncannily resembles late photographs of Sigmund Freud himself.

The picture of Lucy as Lady Macbeth hints at still deeper associations between vagina and vampire. Blood comes from a woman, in classic vampire initiation, when her throat is bitten and sucked by the male vampire. In ordinary everyday living, blood comes from a woman's genitalia to mark three thresholds of her sexual life, three

possible initiations. There is the blood of menstruation, designated by patriarchal culture as unclean and unmentionable to the point of taboo. There is the blood shed when the hymen is torn, shed by a man in patriarchal culture in a ritual of power and possession. Finally, there is the blood of childbirth, barely mentionable in twentieth-century literature and art. Of these three kinds of vaginal bleeding, Keeping's Lucy can be interpreted as mapping the first two in this amazing picture, that is, the menstrual blood that signifies a sexually mature woman and the blood of a first sexual penetration—for Lucy is a virgin who dies before her marriage. At this point in Stoker's text, she is inviting the man who was once her husband-to-be to join her in their marriage-bed: "My arms are hungry for you. Come, and we can rest together. Come, my husband, come!" (215). Here, in both picture and verbal text, a woman's full expression of her sexuality is so unacceptable, so threatening and laden with blood taboo that it can only manifest to the male heroes in the form of a female vampire, grotesque and murderous. Within traditional vampire conventions, the only admissible response is to kill, to subdue that dreadful sexuality with whatever brutality required.

A critical issue in analysing these illustrations is whether Keeping endorses or even strengthens Stoker's misogyny, or whether he is being quietly subversive in his illustrations' additions to the verbal text, their omissions and their distortions of it. How, for instance, is the remarkable object protruding from a female

vampire's mouth to be identified in the depiction of the three females seducing Jonathan at the novel's start? As Stoker describes her, the foremost vampire:

licked her lips like an animal, till I could see in the moonlight the moisture shining on the scarlet lips and on the red tongue as it lapped the white sharp teeth. (46)

In Keeping's illustration, the cylindrical shape that laps the sharp, white teeth is implausible as a tongue, but makes sense as a further example of sexual mapping from genitals to face. If Keeping is understood to be a misogynist, the object could be read from a Freudian perspective as a severed penis held in the dread vagina dentata. As with the picture of Lucy, threatening and alluring, this female vampire is issuing an uninhibited sexual invitation that would mean the death of the man both literally and as a sexually capable being. If Keeping is understood to be a subverter of Stoker's misogyny, however, the strange object could be construed not as a mutilated penis but as a clitoris with vaginal lips (more unmentionable attributes within the patriarchy). Not only, then, do Keeping's illustrations hint at the bloody initiations of female sexuality, but they also force on the reader's uneasy gaze the woman's hermaphroditic nature, encompassing both feminine and masculine aspects. In this instance, the vampire woman's "tongue" simultaneously suggests penis and clitoris: is this vampire a man-killer driven by Freudian penis envy or a completely and unabashedly sexual woman?

Freud's stern lineaments on the face of Keeping's Dracula, in the earlier illustration where Jonathan discovers him lying in the earthen bed, lend credence to this second reading. Freud, Stoker's contemporary, systematically omits the clitoris in his writings on female sexuality. He too maps the female genitals onto the face, but locates a woman's sexual drive in her nose rather than her mouth. To subdue the female libido, Freud is prepared to operate on the nose, with much loss of blood and some risk of death. In Freud's system of symbols the nose must stand for the unspeakable clitoris: to cut at the nose is the equivalent of cliterodectomy. No apotropaics are possible against this evil, not even the charms of the therapist's couch (and here Dracula lying mockingly in his earthen coffin takes on another meaning, the destroyer of the soul masquerading as the healer of the psyche—or should that be, the healer of the psyche revealed as just another vampiric gouger of women's flesh?)

In Stoker's story, vampires are killed by driving a stake through the heart, filling the mouth with garlic and cutting off the head. Dracula's decapitation is dealt with in cursory fashion by both Stoker and Keeping, compared with that of Lucy, the much desired and much feared female vampire. Similarly, Keeping's illustrations of Dracula and his male antagonists lack the sexuality and violent energy of his female vampires. It is the female libido that is the true threat in these pictures. The most disturbing illustration of all is Keeping's picture of Lucy's severed head after the ritual of

vampire-killing has been accomplished. This illustration may seem at first glance innocuous, even prettified, devoid of the blood and mess of a realistically depicted severed head. Her mouth is distended, stuffed full with a remarkably large clove of garlic. Apotropaics have not protected Lucy from the vampire, but they can at least function as killing devices, it appears. Post-Stoker, garlic is one of the vampire text's pseudo-apotropaics, heralding the vampire's inevitable return rather than protecting against it. Here, however, it marks the ultimate defeat of even the female vampire. In Keeping's illustrations, where the female version of vampires is far more dangerous than the male, the insertion of garlic can be read in this picture as the triumph of patriarchal power over the female libido, despite its manifestation as *vagina dentata*. A mouth stuffed full of garlic is in no condition to bite.

The implications of this picture are not exhausted with such a reading. Lucy's stretched mouth, especially in the context of the previous illustration of the female vampire's "tongue", resembles a woman's genitalia at the moment of birth, and the circular shape partly visible within resembles the crown of an emerging infant. Such a subject breaks a taboo on the representation of women in Western art that few but Blake dared before Keeping. This illustration can thus be read as representing the third threshold of initiation for a woman's sexuality, after menarche and the tearing of the hymen. Stoker's male heroes destroy the vampire woman by mutilating her body and stuffing her mouth. Keeping can be understood as setting

out an equivalent but non-murderous means for a man to keep a woman quiet, subduing her sexuality via pregnancy and the care of children.

Following the life-cycle further, from menarche to hymen-breaking to childbirth, Keeping's illustrations can be read as alluding to another vampire theme common in women's experience, that of the teething child that does not suck at the breast but bites to draw blood. Keeping's illustration of someone biting at the breast is that of Mina forced to draw Dracula's blood in a parody of the child at the mother's breast. For Dracula to take the mother's role here puts another connotation upon the entire sequence of illustrations. The covert story would now run: sexuality destroys the proper boundaries between man and woman; for a man to be sexual with a woman, he runs the risk of either being castrated by the vagina dentata or turning into a woman himself, while women, those seeming victims, are the true vampires, both bleeding and bloodsucking. Against this threat men have no apotropaic. Garlic, according to the symbolic logic of Lucy's death portrait, neither kills the vampire nor controls the woman, but metamorphoses into new life. In vampire cliché, the vampire always returns, despite pseudo-apotropaics. Here, in Keeping's Lucy picture, it is the pseudo-apotropaic that promises new birth.

Although Stoker's text speaks here of Lucy as one truly dead, finally at rest, of all Keeping's illustrations to *Dracula* this is the most suffused with energy: at once garlic stuffed into the mouth and child emerging from the birth canal.

Simultaneously misogynistic and celebratory of female power, this illustration is reminiscent of the uncanny female figures carved on the walls of Christian churches, displaying their genitals and pointing to them, whose meaning to their carvers we are unlikely ever to know for certain. Are they apotropaics, warding off spiritual evil with their ugliness and obscenity, or are they beautifully sexual invokers of the great goddess? Is Keeping's Lucy a figure of horror or magnificence? This balancing of horror and woman's bodily magnificence is the way in which Keeping renews the vampiric pseudo-apotropaic.

In Keeping's version of *Dracula*, the male forces of good are tiny, rigid and static, and the male forces of evil are disembodied, passive or in retreat. Read as misogynist, Keeping's illustrations devalue the men of the text, attenuating their role in the story, concentrating their force on the women as source of all sexual threat. Read slightly differently, they celebrate female sexuality. Even if to the terrified patriarch the woman manifests as a vampire with *vagina dentata*, the pictures depict her energy as indestructible, reborn despite death, decapitation, a stake through the heart. The apotropaic becomes the promise that new birth, new life, cannot be denied.

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Author's Note: Some of Keeping's illustrations to *Dracula* can be found through a Google search for "Charles Keeping Dracula" (first two rows of images as accessed on 17/08/2015). See also this link:

https://www.google.com.au/search?q=charles+keeping+dracula&biw=1168&bih=626&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjCsNS0t5LOAhVFsJQKHWW4D0QQ_AUIBigB#imgrc=nFvAAcn7f3_r3M%3A