

THE VAMPIRE'S KISS: GENDER, DESIRE AND POWER IN *DRACULA* AND *THE PENANCE OF PORTIA JAMES*

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As what Nina Auerbach has called “a compendium of fin-de-siècle phobias”(7), Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* has come to be seen as a text that is curiously representative of the late Victorian period, an authoritative guide-book to the ideological processes of a deeply conflicted era. It has engendered an enormous corpus of criticism and a seemingly endless diversity of readings of the particular horror that the vampire represents: from the fear of imperial and racial decline figured as “excessive exogamy,” “reverse colonisation,” and anti-capitalist Semitism, to the spectre of bourgeois impotence in the face of aristocratic degeneracy, and the deep anxieties about the stability of gender and sexual categories threatened by the political ideals of the New Woman.¹ Despite the apparent incompatibility of these disparate readings, I would argue that they all arise from one common premise: whatever is at stake in Stoker’s novel—Englishness, class stability, gender and sexual identifications—it is a text that anxiously defends the social, political and sexual ideals of a conservative, middle-class, masculinist ideology.

With this premise in mind my own reading of *Dracula* examines the relationship between gender and power, and in particular the manipulation and control of female sexuality as a means of safeguarding the masculine privileges of cultural authority. By combining this reading with a similarly angled reading of *The Penance of Portia James* written by “Tasma” a female contemporary of Stoker’s, I seek to ask, and perhaps to answer, the following questions. To what extent did women, as a source of fear themselves, share in the cultural phobias of the *fin de siècle*? How could women’s texts critique Victorian sexual culture as a totalising apparatus and yet claim to effect ideological change? Was it possible for these authors to write women as simultaneously inside and outside culture? Is masculine cultural authority a vampiric entity that feeds on the social and sexual bodies of women to perpetuate its own dominance?

With its focus upon the English middle-class female body as the site of both sexual and racial corruption, *Dracula* can be said to address a heterosexual white male imperial subjectivity and, through the medium of the infinitely penetrable bodies of Lucy Westenra and Mina Harker, to produce, and re-produce, this male subjectivity as natural. As both the recipients of the vampire’s kiss and the object of the vampire-hunters’ punitive acts of moral reclamation, Lucy and Mina become the central figures in a power-play between masculine desire and the maintenance of a dominant and dominating coalition of masculine authority as the guarantee of culture. What Craft calls the text’s “blaring theme of heroic or chivalric male bonding” (236) performs a series of maskings of the isomorphism between the vampire and Van Helsing with his band of “good, brave men,” whose relationship can therefore be read as intrasubjective: *Dracula*

¹ These disparate readings represent the work of critics John Stevenson, Stephen Arata, Judith Halberstam, Christopher Craft, Alexandra Warwick and Judith Weissman.

as feared and desired other is no less than a manifestation of the men's own secret appetites, a polymorphic penetrator of women without social or moral consequences. His monstrosity lies in the voraciousness of his desire which operates externally to Victorian codes of sexual behaviour and threatens both the ideal of feminine purity and the moral basis of patriarchal jurisdiction over women. The vampire's kiss, however, results not just in the corruption of women but in their contagion. Vampiric desire is infectious, occasioning the mobilisation of a female desire so potent and penetrative that it promises to disrupt the "natural" order of gender divisions and relations and hence the entire ideological basis of institutionalised male power. Infection and cure become indistinguishable as the newly desiring woman provides the justification for her own brutal correction.

Lucy Westenra, representing what Alexandra Warwick terms a "free lance" or "independent phallus" (205), is punished for her sexual mobility in horrifyingly apposite fashion: her wandering "undead" body is transfixed by a phallic stake, wielded by her fiancé but carrying with it the full force of patriarchal vengeance against the sexualised woman. In this way the men of Stoker's novel manoeuvre responsibility for their own extra-social desires onto the "monstrous" woman while at the same time strengthening the homosocial bonds which, as Heidi Hartmann observes, "establish and create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women" (qtd Sedgwick 244). It is the orchestration of female sexuality that is revealed as the source of patriarchal authority, the cement that bonds the arbiters of imperial English social and political ideals together to form a powerful alliance dedicated to preserving the structures and ideals within which their power is invested.

The Penance of Portia James was published in 1891, six years before *Dracula*. While it was certainly intended as a literary contribution to the debates surrounding "the Woman Question" which had been ongoing since mid-century, it cannot by any means be labelled a New Woman novel, despite the appearance within it of a character who fits that description. Within a genealogy of feminist ideology it is therefore a transitional text occupying a space somewhere between early "feminist" novels, which problematised women's role within marriage while not necessarily questioning the institution itself, and the more radical novels of the *fin de siècle* in which not just the ideologies of patriarchal institutions were challenged, but the supposedly immutable concepts of "woman" and "femininity" also came under attack.

Thus, like *Dracula*, *The Penance of Portia James* contains at its core what Craft identifies as the "pivotal anxiety of late Victorian culture" (217)—a deep ambivalence about the social demarcations of sexuality and gender. The particular "monster" that it entertains and then repudiates is the possibility of an autonomous female sexuality coexistent with socially sanctioned categories of feminine identity. Perhaps best described as an anti-romance, the text is an interesting exercise in generic inversions and manipulations which allow its Gothic inclinations textual play. Working from within the romance plot Tasma charts her heroine's quest for self in such a way that the traditional gesture of romantic closure in marriage subverts both the genre itself and the social expectations mirrored in its structures. It is the institution of marriage which becomes the breeding ground for feminine monstrosity as it first proffers and then withdraws the promise of identity from the feminine subject, forcing her to explore alternative

identifications. In an exact inversion of the process of surrogation already noted in *Dracula*, Tasma displaces responsibility for the monstrosity of female sexuality onto patriarchal circumscriptions of feminine identities, effecting both a justification of women's desires and preempting their inevitable disallowance within the ideological strictures of masculinist institutions.

If *Dracula* can be said to be a defensive text anxiously shoring up the fortifications of masculine identity and power, Tasma's novel, through its examination of the effects of those structures upon female identity, appears exhausted and defeated at its close. The central character, Portia James, begins the novel as a virtual non-entity, a tabula rasa: female, colonial and without the social authority of marriage. At its end she has acquired only the knowledge that marriage cannot provide the identity she seeks. In Tasma's text the operations of homosocial power that ensure the death of the vampiric Lucy Westenra and the conformity of Mina Harker are concentrated within this single institution. Marriage, writes Portia's friend Anna Ross, is "the most foolish and suicidal step a woman can take. Why should we bind ourselves to belie for the remainder of our natural lives our real natures, our real selves, as expressed in the new instincts, promptings or desires we may feel?" (90). Conformity to the kind of sexless and selfless femininity so prized in the ideal Victorian wife results only in the slow self-immolation of the female subject, a form of death-by-marriage. Without the opportunity to follow her "instincts" and "desires," woman's "real" self remains obscured and frustrated, a prisoner of institutionalised oppression.

While Stoker's text, unsurprisingly, refigures feminine conformity as moral salvation, it also insists upon women's complicity with this project. Mina Harker pleads with her husband to kill her should she eventually succumb to Dracula's contagion, not because she fears for herself, but because she then becomes part of the degenerative force that threatens the very power structures that he represents: "I myself," she affirms, "shall be leagued with your enemy against you" (426). Interestingly Tasma does not shrink from acknowledging the complicity of her heroine in her own downfall, but compensates for it textually by overdetermining the "monstrosity" of Portia's husband. She exposes first of all the innate paternalism of Victorian gender relations and the social elision between father and husband that ensured women's continued obeisance to paternal authority. In true Gothic tradition both Portia's parents are dead, and it is John Morrison as surrogate father who secures the fifteen-year-old Portia's promise to marry him when she reaches her majority. Then the red-bearded John's coloniality, "too red and too rough," is contrasted unfavourably with the refined Englishness of another of Portia's suitors, the young artist Harry Tolhurst, whose protective paternalism only serves to accentuate the implied coerciveness of her union with Morrison. Harry, for example, thinks of Portia as Undine "endowed with an embryonic soul, that was still awaiting the influence that was to transform it into a steadfast one," or as Una "walking in her virginal innocence through a world beset by beasts of prey in human guise" (69). While Harry here betrays his own desire to mould and protect the sexually and psychologically innocent Portia, he intimates at the same time that Portia's choice of mate, the wrong mate, may lead to euphemistic horrors and aberrations: feminine "unsteadfastness" and "bestial" contamination.

As a "beast of prey in human guise" John Morrison, metaphorically at least, comes to embody the polymorphousness of the vampire form, shifting shape from man to animal and incorporating a host of monstrosities in a single body. Portia repeatedly pictures John as both wolf and lion, and the threat of sexual and psychological consumption that he represents to her is corporealised in his bizarre trait of constantly licking his lips "as though he were literally hungering to devour her bodily, and were whetting his lips in anticipation of the feast" (82). While John's bestiality would once again appear to be exaggerated for Gothic effect, the reasons become clear when it is revealed to Portia on her wedding day that her husband has fathered a child by another woman, the daughter of one of his colonial employees. Whereas early in the text Tasma only hints at the coerciveness of paternal authority as it is exercised through the institution of marriage, she now sets about exposing the sexual and moral hypocrisy that underlies the maintenance of that authority. As Mary Willett's seducer and Portia's husband, John is both a corrupter of women sexually *and* their safeguard from corruption, both the agent for the mobilisation of illegitimate female desire *and* the means of its suppression through marriage. By combining these actions in a single character, Tasma clearly exposes the isomorphic relationship between vampiric seducer and patriarchal protector that remains latent in Stoker's text. She illustrates what *Dracula* cannot or will not: that the vampire's kiss, with its double action of contagion and cure, is the central mechanism of power that polices women's conformity to the conventions of traditional gender roles.

As Craft observes, the relationship in *Dracula* between the practices of vampiric infection and paternalistic cure is disturbingly close. In counteracting Dracula's power to effect the sexualisation of his female victims the doctor-cum-priest Van Helsing mirrors exactly the actions of the vampire, matching penetration for penetration. While Craft acknowledges that Van Helsing's penetration-as-healing "glosses the troubled relationship between paternalism and violence" (235), it might be more precise to say that it successfully obscures the foundations of paternal authority in the exercise of control over women's bodies and sexualities. Reading *Dracula* as an exercise in homoerotic anxiety, Craft argues that the novel deflects its own fears about same-sex desire through the representation of a "monstrous heterosexuality" figured as the penetrative woman. Dracula's threat to possess Van Helsing and his crew through their women is, Craft claims, a typical "heterosexual displacement" of unspeakable homoerotic desire (218-19). However, Dracula's pledge that "your girls that you all love are mine already; and through them you and others shall yet be mine" (394) can be read another way. If the vampire represents men's own socially inadmissible desire for unrestrained heterosexual congress, then the fear that he embodies for these "good" men is that of the exposure of the corrupt sexual standards that allow them to dominate women.

Dividing women into the categories of virgin and whore both precludes the necessity for the provision of an adequate array of feminine subject categories and absolves the arbiters of moral law from responsibility for their own complicitous desires, a fact of which Tasma is well aware. It is through the figure of Mary Willett, whose "fallenness" marks her as a victim of vampiric contagion, that Tasma's novel sets out to illustrate the impossibility of a third space in which her heroine might reconcile

the social and sexual. It is Mary's visit to Portia on her wedding day that is the catalyst for Portia's escape to Paris where she is exposed to the feminist influence of Anna Ross, and Mary's death-bed plea that lures Portia back under John's control. In refusing the socially proscribed identity of "wife," if only temporarily, Portia, like Lucy Westenra, enters the realm of the "undead," a liminal space in which women's desire for sexual expression collides with the given boundaries of femininity, and within which women themselves cease to be able to claim a social identity. Re-reading Stoker's Gothicisms through the lens of Victorian sexual mores, it becomes apparent that the state of being "undead" closely resembles the condition of the "fallen" woman. As the only actual fallen woman in either text, Mary Willetts illustrates beautifully Ellen Bayuk Rosenman's point that "fallenness" is the "vanishing point of subjectivity" (36). As neither virgin nor wife she is forced to adopt a pseudonym to disguise her lack of identity, and to authorise the paternity of her child. Interestingly, she chooses the name "Mrs Morris," which is not quite that of her seducer, and which linguistically withholds from John Morrison access to his son. The "fallen" woman, like the "undead" woman, is therefore the woman who has died socially but whose body continues to circulate as a signifier of her desire. Lucy's body and its appetites cannot be contained by her tomb, nor Portia's by marriage. In an ironic inversion Mary Willetts' body circulates in Harry Tolhurst's portrait of her as the Madonna, her illegitimate child in her arms.

With its exposé of late Victorian limitations upon feminine identities, Tasma's novel would appear to be committed to a radical feminist project. It becomes clear, however, that it remains deeply captive to the ideological proscriptions of the culture in which it was produced in the sense that it prefigures the same horror of feminine sexuality so evident in Stoker's text. While a preliminary reading seems to present the reader with a single vampiric figure in the form of John Morrison, closer reading reveals a much more complex source of horror. If, as Craft argues in relation to Count Dracula, the vampire is a manifestation of the self as other, an embodiment of perverse and unspeakable desires, then the real figure of monstrosity in this text is Portia's friend Anna Ross, the prototype of the New Woman whose social and sexual unconventionality Portia finds at first enticing but ultimately repulsive.

Anna is the sexual invert, "a solitary woman with male brains," who has the power to "topsy-turvy us all." She upholds the doctrine of "free love" and despises the institution of marriage as "one of the cumbersome contrivances by which man, who has systematised war and rapine, and oppression and persecution, has further burdened our existence upon earth" (91). While she clearly threatens the stability of gender distinctions and relations, Anna's sexual philosophy is revealed to have far-reaching consequences for the upholders of moral, social and political authority. Women's individual desires for sexual expression represent an attack upon the ideological foundations of the institutions at the very core of English culture. "The ideals are only perfect," Anna claims, "as long as they remain ideals . . . Monarchy without a monarch, religion without a god, *and* marriage without a husband" (177). By removing the signifiers of masculine power in each instance, Anna proposes a literal emasculation of the institutions in which supreme authority is invested. The danger that she represents is therefore not simply sexual or social, but encompasses the end of culture itself.

In making explicit the connection between gender and cultural stability, Tasma reveals her own ambivalence about the ideological agenda of the New Woman. While her text flirts with the possibilities offered by the redefinition of gender codes, ultimately it cannot countenance a political position that threatens so radical a disruption of the status quo. The monster of female sexual autonomy, entertained for just long enough to “produce a pleasurable, indeed a thrilling anxiety” (Craft 217), must finally be repudiated. *The Penance of Portia James* has, however, entertained dual monsters, and the spectre of absolute and intransigent masculine authority over women remains to cloud its final pages. As in Lucy Westenra's case Portia's and Mary's sexual and geographical mobility is only a short-lived release from the control of institutionalised male power: all three suffer a violent rehabilitation to a more amenable femininity through the immobilisation of their freely circulating bodies. Just as Lucy's staking and decapitation by Van Helsing and his crew reclaims her “unequaled sweetness and purity” from the “foul Thing” she had become (Stoker 278), so too does Mary's death reclaim her from the sin of sexuality. Like Lucy she undergoes a form of decapitation when a carriage runs over her neck, a punishment which is, as Elaine Showalter says, both a castration of the sexually voracious woman and a separation of woman's pure mind from her desiring body (181-82).

While Portia suffers only a metaphorical death in a coercive marriage, its inferences are no less clear. Exposed to the contagious sexualities of both Mary Willets and Anna Ross, the forces of paternal authority combine to effect her cure. Meeting Harry Tolhurst again in Paris, Portia contemplates putting Anna's philosophy into practice but is rebuffed by his dedication to upholding the tenets of paternal law. Harry speaks to Portia as “father, brother, lover—all in one,” to remind her of her “duty” towards her husband, even against the force of his own feelings:

If love and inclination are to be the only arbiters; if honour and duty and self-control are to have no say in the matter at all, what is to prevent me acting upon the impulse that moves me now? . . . I set too great a value upon your peace of mind and your reputation, to ever want you to fling them away for me. There are things that count for more than love— (273)

Portia's moral salvation, like Lucy Westenra's, is to be at the expense of her desires. Her return to London confirms both the illegitimacy of those desires and the futility of feminine revolt against the Law of the Father. John, as Portia's “legal lord and master . . . her owner,” shows no remorse for his own sexual transgressions, acting “more like a severe judge than a penitent evil-doer”: “armed with undeniable authority; he had power if he chose, to call her to account for her desertion of him” (284). Compassing the conformity of its heroine through this confederation of masculine authority, *The Penance of Portia James* insists, as Craft says of *Dracula*, “that successful filiation implies the expulsion of all ‘monstrous’ desire in women” (237), so that women themselves become only the medium through which male desire, heterosexual or homosexual, is expressed.

In a final confluence between the two texts the classic Victorian binarism of virgin/whore is deployed to respectively obfuscate and reveal the real nature of the gender/power nexus. In the final chapter of *Dracula* Jonathan Harker describes the birth of his child whose "bundle of names links all our little band of men together" (485). However, as both Halberstam and Craft point out, Little Quincey is "as much the son of Dracula as he is of the 'little band of men'" (Halberstam 263) having been "luridly conceived in the veins of Lucy Westenra and then deftly relocated to the purer body of Mina Harker" (Craft 237). Just as Mina's body is substituted for Lucy's to deflect responsibility for feminine monstrosity from the male and to preserve the ideal of feminine purity, Portia's body stands surrogate for that of the defiled Mary Willets in a gesture which despairingly acknowledges that the validity or otherwise of woman's sexual nature is always subject to a shifting statute. The dying Mary asks not only that Portia adopt her child but also that she forgive John, a plea to which Portia accedes. As "virgin" mother and wife, Portia is able to absolve male sexual aberration through her own sexlessness even if she is not able to understand fully the reasons why: "Did Mary's child," she asks herself, "forge the chain that must bind her henceforth to John? Was it that her short insight into Anna's life had been a disillusion Was she moved by the sudden impulse to immolate herself?" (290)

If Tasma herself is unsure of the answers to these questions she does, by means of her curious collappings of Madonna and Magdalen images around both Portia and Mary, attempt an overt criticism of the sexual double standard and of the way in which conventional sexual ideology fails to provide women with identities that encompass both the social and the sexual. Her understanding of the functioning of Victorian gender relations is encapsulated in her representation of the vampire's kiss which enacts the division of women into sexual and non-sexual categories, and which incites female sexuality only to suppress it violently, or disables it completely within narrow conceptions of the roles of wife and mother. For Tasma the vampire's kiss is an ideological tool which ensures that women's desire is always manipulated for the advantage of men.

Both *Dracula* and *The Penance of Portia James* are texts which represent the late-Victorian era as a time of enormous sexual anxiety, but which hold vastly differing viewpoints as to the cause of this anxiety. The violence with which Stoker will defend his chauvinistically masculinist society is certainly a clue to both the content and execution of a novel like Tasma's. Gail Cunningham has written of the qualified success of the New Woman's ideals that they were "far too advanced for their environment." The novelists were faced with the dilemma of representing both "the moral and social case for a high degree of emancipation" and the immovability of the "creeds and conventions which oppressed women." It is little wonder, she comments, that the ideals of these fictional New Women culminated most often in "weary disillusion" (49-50). While Tasma regretfully abjures the consolations of romantic love, in her portrait of the indecisive Portia she intimates that the price women must pay for both political and sexual passivity is a life-long penance. In offering a feminine, if not a feminist, perspective on *fin-de-siècle* gender relations, her text is no less representative than Stoker's. And if its ability to challenge the ideological basis of the Victorian sexual economy is compromised by its author's ambivalence about the kinds of social change

the New Woman demanded, the text does go some way towards undermining its own reluctant complicity by representing the very things which it cannot be seen to support.

In conclusion it is possible to say that Tasma's text foreshadows not perhaps the end of culture as a masculine preserve, but an end to its pretensions to transparency and universality. She uncovers the workings of Victorian sexual ideology and in so doing manages to position herself as woman and author, participant and observer, both inside and outside its operations. In the character of Portia she demonstrates her understanding that the institutions of male dominance vampirise female sexuality while also acknowledging that those same institutions "have intervened in the construction of women's desires so as to facilitate their complicity under the guise of choice, need and self-regulation" (Singer 93). More pragmatic than radical, Tasma nevertheless appears to understand the Foucauldian equation between knowledge and power, and it is a measure of that understanding and its consequences for the woman writer that her knowledge was not employed towards more powerful ends.

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