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‘The foul Thing that we had so dreaded and grown to hate’: Sexuality as Disease in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* and Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla*

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Abstract:

This paper examines how the Victorian medical theories of ‘contagionism’ and ‘miasmatism’ (Willis 113 – 114) relate to the female characters of two key Victorian Gothic texts, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) and Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* (1872). The extended metaphor in both texts of female sexuality as a disease, curable only by methods of extreme violence, is discussed primarily in relation to the physical figure of the sick woman, and the fact that sexuality is equated with infection in the characters of Lucy Westenra in *Dracula,* and the eponymous antagonist and narrator Laura in *Carmilla*. Roth’s discussion of the ‘fear of the devouring woman’ (419) in relation to *Dracula* proves a particularly useful corroboration of this argument. Male medical figures in both texts are also compared; their collective bewilderment, contagionist methods of treatment, and ultimate violence as a result of the problem of sick women, are likened to unease with active female sexuality. Contagionist methods are employed by the doctors in both texts, though contagionism’s effectiveness is questioned to some extent in *Carmilla.* The role of the figure of the New Woman (Auerbach and Skal xi) is also applied to the female characters in the texts; the male medical figures’ determination to suppress female agency through medicine is another confirmation of the parallel between sickness and female sexuality. Ultimately, the paper shows that imagery of disease and contagion serves to equate female sexuality with disease in *Dracula* and *Carmilla*, using the conflict between two different ideologies of medicine as a framework.

Medical discourse in Britain during the mid-to-late nineteenth century centred around conflicting theories of disease origin. Those advocating the theory of 'contagionism' argued that disease was spread from individual to individual, with little importance placed on factors such as squalid living conditions and polluted water (Willis 113-14). As a result, complete isolation of the infected individual was the solution favoured by contagionists (113). Meanwhile, 'miasmatists' sought to overturn contagionist theory and prove that environmental issues such as polluted water were often crucial in disease transmission (114). Gothic vampire narratives such as Sheridan Le Fanu's 1872 novella *Carmilla* and Bram Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula* feature contagion and the conflict between different medical approaches as a central concern, questioning the methods used to cure the principal female characters of illness. These texts employ infection as an extended metaphor for women's sexual desire and agency, and make use of the imagery of disease and contagion to ultimately portray female sexuality and sexual desire as a serious illness.

The physical figure of the sick woman is one of the principal ways in which female sexuality manifests as a contagious affliction in *Dracula.* Through the portrayal of Lucy Westenra and her degeneration into vampirism, Stoker alludes to discourses surrounding male attitudes towards women's illness, and how they are shaped by theories about the spread of infection. In particular, the metaphor serves to align Lucy's symptoms with women's sexual desire and liberation. Lucy is, in her vampiric state, 'changed', 'the sweetness turned to adamantine, heartless cruelty, and the purity to voluptuous wantonness' (Stoker 187), which shocks the men standing at her coffin. This parallel of vampirism with sexual desire, and the men's lack of understanding, influences their 'contagionist' (Willis 113) decision to contain her in isolation for the duration of her illness. Dr. Van Helsing instructs his psychiatrist counterpart Dr. John Seward that Lucy should not leave her bedroom nor be left alone without a male warden during her illness, instructing Seward that Lucy is his 'charge', and to stay with her 'all the night, and you must not let your sight pass from her' (Stoker 116). Lucy is contained in her bedroom, and therefore within the male characters' sphere of influence. The doctors have ultimate authority over her wellbeing, and their solution to her transgressions demonstrates their lack of comprehension of, and unease about, the disease of female sexual agency. Roth argues that, in *Dracula*, 'vampirism . . . is equivalent to sexuality' (414), and that its 'central anxiety' is 'the fear of the devouring woman' (419). Lucy's violent death at the hands of the doctors, her suitors and rejected lovers, demonstrates this primal 'fear' (Roth 419) of Lucy and her ability to exist beyond the confines of her

bedroom or coffin. Arthur Holmwood, her husband to be, stabs her with a stake, resembling 'a figure of Thor' (Stoker 192) in his determination to destroy 'the foul Thing that we had so dreaded and grown to hate that the work of her destruction was yielded as a privilege to the one best entitled to it' (192). After the killing, the body in the coffin finally resembles that of Lucy in her original form, 'with her face of unequalled sweetness and purity' (192). The men have destroyed the dangerous, 'devouring' (Roth 419) form of womanhood, which is replaced by their ideal of feminine chastity. Thus, Lucy's metamorphosis, and her containment and destruction, emphasise the fact that the Victorian figure of the sick woman was structured through a medical understanding which was inherently masculine. Lucy's lips are 'crimson with fresh blood' that stains 'the purity of her lawn death-robe' (Stoker 187). The literal sullying of Lucy's 'purity' by a foreign fluid equates her vampirism with sexuality and shame (Roth 414), and her death by a phallic stake demonstrates male determination to reassert dominance in an age of uncertainty surrounding male and female sexual agency. In this regard, *Dracula* comments on the Victorian fear of female sexual agency and its depiction as an illness, mainly through the portrayal of Lucy as a diseased, 'devouring woman' (Roth 419).

A similar focus on the diseased, vampiric female occurs in Le Fanu's *Carmilla.* As in *Dracula,* the figure of the doctor represents male efforts to contain female sexuality, and the desire to cure it as though an illness. However, *Carmilla,* a tale of the relationship between the young female protagonist Laura and the vampire Carmilla, portrays these efforts as more futile, and women's sexuality as a more permanent blight on society. The first doctor who visits Laura after her first encounter with Carmilla, for example, is described, unlike Van Helsing, in terms which imply weakness. He is 'pallid and elderly', 'slightly pitted with smallpox', and gives her 'medicine, which of course I hated' (Le Fanu 247), while Carmilla herself declares '[d]octors never did me any good' (270). Throughout *Carmilla*, doctors are portrayed as lacking authority, and, like Van Helsing and Seward, conform to 'contagionist' theories (Willis 113) of isolation, which prove ineffective in Le Fanu's novella. In *Dracula,* sick women are mentally as well as physically subject to male power. Lucy's first impression of her fiancé Arthur Holmwood is that he has 'a wonderful power . . . over his patients' (Stoker 57), while she ends her life entirely at the mercy of Holmwood and the authoritative Van Helsing, meaning Lucy's destruction is final. Carmilla suffers the same, violent fate as Lucy; however, her death lacks the latter's resolution, and ends with the abrupt conclusion that 'the body and head were . . . thrown upon the river and borne away, and that territory has

never since been plagued by the visits of a vampire' (Le Fanu 316). The question of the effectiveness of Carmilla's killers' actions is never resolved; at the end of the novella, Laura confesses to often imagining 'the light step of Carmilla at the drawing-room door' (319). The Gothic anxiety of a buried past resurfacing is interrogated here, with the question of whether Carmilla is actually dead demonstrating that the 'contagionist' desire to destroy the immediate problem, without considering the wider implications, is impractical (Willis 113). Willis declares that '[c]ontagionist strategies of disease management tended to focus on the individual . . . [t]he body of the other therefore becomes the prime site of disease' and gives the example of 'the invisible, but presumed, pollution of the prostitute' (113-14). The lack of authority of the doctors contributes to this image of the sexualised Carmilla as dangerous, and unable to be suppressed by medicine and male power. Stott characterises the threat posed by this kind of female agency, describing such women as Carmilla and Lucy as 'powerful and threatening . . . bearing a sexuality that is perceived to be rapacious, or fatal' (viii). As in *Dracula,* the male characters attempt to destroy Carmilla, but the disease of female sexual agency is seen in more 'miasmatic' terms (Willis 113) in Le Fanu's novella. The physical body can be destroyed, but the lasting effects of the illness, such as Laura's memories, cannot. In *Dracula,* the sick, or sexual, female succumbs to Victorian patriarchal anxieties about female sexual agency; in *Carmilla,* she cannot be contained by male, medical authority, and these anxieties remain beyond the story's conclusion.

The role of disease and contagion as equated with gender is further developed in *Dracula,* particularly in relation to the character of Mina Harker, wife of Jonathan Harker, and portrayals of femininity. In particular, the idea of the New Woman (Auerbach and Skal xi) as a contagious, malignant force, influences readings of the two principal female characters. Auerbach and Skal define the Victorian New Woman as a caricature of 1890s feminist women who were characterised as either having forceful personalities and masculine traits such as considerable sexual appetites and gluttony, or as excessively punctilious (Stoker 86). In other words, the concept of the New Woman was constructed to "other" women who did not conform to Van Helsing and Seward's idealistically chaste model of how women should behave, and, in Mina's case, characterised their appetites as an invasive disease. In contrast to Lucy, Mina is portrayed as an inherently virtuous woman; however, she is not infallible, and her steps towards corruption by Dracula and Lucy are portrayed as a departure from her marriage-orientated, righteous existence. Van Helsing effusively praises her purity and angelic qualities, declaring '[s]he is one of God's women, fashioned by His own hand to

show us men and other women that there is a heaven . . . [s]o true, so sweet, so noble, so little an egoist' (Stoker 168-69), while Seward labels her 'that sweet, sweet, good, good woman in all the radiant beauty of her youth and animation' (Stoker 268). In a passage with highly sexual connotations, however, Dracula forces Mina to drink blood from his chest (Stoker 246-47), after which Mina declares herself '[u]nclean, unclean!' (248), confessing 'strangely enough, I did not want to hinder him' (251). This departure from the saintliness ascribed to her by Van Helsing and Seward is symbolised when Van Helsing attempts to 'guard' Mina from further damnation by touching her forehead with a sacramental wafer, and her forehead is 'seared' and branded by the holy symbol (258). This explicit link between Mina's consumption of Dracula's blood and her ignominy is reminiscent of a moment early in the novel, when, after eating a large meal with Lucy, she comments 'I believe we should have shocked the "New Woman" with our appetites' (86). The mark on Mina's forehead is a symptom of the Victorian anxiety over the New Woman and the threat she poses to patriarchal society; Mina's only option is to be restored to her original state by the men around her, and for her forehead to once again be 'all white as ivory and with no stain' (260). In particular, Seward's repetition of 'sweet' and 'good' (268) emphasises the desperation of the male characters to trap the women in *Dracula* within male expectations. This demonstrates the 'contagionist' theory that disease came from within the individual, and was perhaps indicative of a moral failure. Therefore, through the character of Mina Harker, Stoker presents the notion of the Victorian New Woman, and correspondingly reiterates anxieties about female sexual agency, emphasising the association of disease and contagion with a woman's departure from male ideals of purity.

Le Fanu similarly correlates the idea of the New Woman (Auerbach and Skal xi) with disease and sexuality in *Carmilla,* with particular reference to religion. As in *Dracula,* ideas of female purity link with adherence to the Christian religion, and the characters' reactions to religious symbolism indicates male attitudes towards their transgressions. Carmilla responds with hostility to Christianity as a result of her transgressions, and Laura's mysterious illness represents her corruption by the irreligious, monstrous Carmilla. Carmilla tells Laura '[y]ou pierce my ears' (Le Fanu 266) when Laura sings a hymn, calling it 'discord and jargon' (267), and Laura worries about Carmilla's lack of dedication to praying (277). The uncertainty surrounding her religious beliefs correlates with the link between vampirism and irreligiousness and illness found in *Dracula*. Carmilla tells Laura that '"People say I am languid; I am incapable of exertion . . . and every now and then the little strength I have

falters"' (274), while Laura displays similar symptoms, complaining of 'lassitude and melancholy, which, however, did not exceed a degree that was almost luxurious' (280). The unusual combination of illness and pleasure experienced by Laura is reminiscent of Mina's reluctance to 'hinder' (Stoker 251) Dracula's advances. This association of illness with sexual pleasure is then linked with a rejection of religion in both texts. As Mina and Lucy demonstrate in *Dracula*, *Carmilla*'s portrayal of women falling ill as a result of moral depravity reflects concerns about the New Woman, and the 'collision between the old and the new' that formed the basis of Victorian anxieties during the mid-to-late nineteenth century (Ledger 22). Ledger describes the New Woman as 'a problem . . . a challenge to the apparently self-identical culture of Victorianism which could not find a consistent language by which she could be categorised and dealt with' (24). Van Helsing's use of religion to rein Mina in from moral degradation, and the references to Carmilla's hatred of religious imagery throughout *Carmilla,* represent Ledger's concept of 'the old' (22), with religion serving as a substitute for the absent 'language' (24) with which to address the 'problem' (24) of the New Woman, and of overt sexuality in general. Illness and defilement represent moral corruption, with Stoker and Le Fanu critiquing the methods used to manage the issue. In *Carmilla,* a mixture of contagionism and miasmatism accounts for disease. While Laura originally believes that her illness is not 'that terrible complaint which the peasants called the [vampire]' (Le Fanu 282), miasmatism triumphs in the end with Carmilla's ambiguous demise. Once again, the problem of expressive female sexuality as personified in the idea of the New Woman is widespread, with little consensus reached regarding how to manage, or cure, women of their metaphorical illness. Therefore, in *Carmilla,* the New Woman is also associated with sexuality and disease, with religion used, as in *Dracula,* as a moral symbol of guidance, with Laura's Christianity and Carmilla's religious ambiguity in stark contrast.

Disease and contagion imagery in *Dracula* and *Carmilla,* then, has the overall function of depicting female sexuality and sexual desire as a disease in need of a cure. The texts differ in their respective approaches to this cure, with Willis' examinations of theories of disease transmission (113-15) applying to varying degrees. In *Dracula,* Lucy, in her vampiric state, symbolises sexual liberation, which in turn is portrayed as illness due to the male characters' 'fear of the devouring woman' (Roth 419). The male characters' patriarchal dominance is asserted in the brutal killing of Lucy, which ensures the disease of vampirism, and, correspondingly, of sexual desire, favours a 'contagionist' approach (Willis 113), as isolation and death are crucial in Lucy's suppression. Meanwhile, the concept of the

Victorian New Woman (Auerbach and Skal xi) and its correlation with disease are visible in the portrayal of Mina, with religion proving an important device with which Van Helsing restores Mina back to virtuousness. Ultimate good health is portrayed as the adherence to male ideals of purity, which Lucy transgresses. Similarly, in *Carmilla,* Le Fanu also uses the image of the diseased, female vampire and her relationship with Laura to depict female sexuality as a blight on society. The figure of the doctor in *Carmilla* lacks the authority of Van Helsing and Seward, however, and ultimately fails to dispose of Carmilla in an unambiguous manner, meaning 'contagionism' (Willis 113) is criticised as lacking. In *Dracula,* the sick woman is subject to the authority and actions of the male characters, whereas in *Carmilla,* women cannot be contained in the same way, and are therefore more dangerous. Correspondingly, the New Woman and sexual desire in *Carmilla* are portrayed as a societal crisis that language cannot account for (Ledger 24), and religion is used as a familiar, established weapon against the infection of female agency. Overall, both texts use disease and contagion to engage in a debate between two means of curing the disease of female sexuality, with 'contagionism' (Willis 113) succeeding in *Dracula,* and Le Fanu favouring 'miasmatism' (114).

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