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The Dangers of Female Sexuality: Contagion, Infection, and Disease in Gothic Vampire Narratives.

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"Unclean! Unclean! Even the Almighty shuns my polluted flesh! I must bear this mark of shame upon my forehead until the Judgment Day"

(Stoker 342)

Contagion, infection, and disease played an important role in Victorian society and, in turn, in Gothic fiction. In this period, fear of contagion and disease was ever-present. Bloomfield attributes the accuracy with which Gothic authors were able to describe symptoms of disease to the fact that early death and illness were omnipresent (293). For instance, Bram Stoker was alleged to have contracted syphilis, whilst all the Brontë siblings are recorded to have died of tuberculosis (Belford, Alexander). Fear of diseases and contagion easily translated into a fear of other social maladies. These themes presented themselves as easy metaphors for wider societal issues. This article will discuss this process based on two Gothic vampire narratives that have been studied on this course: the short story "Carmilla" by Sheridan Le Fanu and the novel *Dracula* by Bram Stoker. It will argue that metaphors of contagion, infection and disease, vampires and vampirism were used by authors to discuss the dangers of unrestrained female sexuality. First, it will discuss how disease and infection function as a subject in these narratives. This article will continue by examining the influence disease theories had on the subjects as well as the formal themes of the two works. From here, it will elucidate how references to disease and contagion in Gothic vampire narratives can be interpreted as being of sexual nature, concluding as to why female sexuality was seen as an especially dangerous and infectious "disease."

Many Gothic works place illness and disease at the centre of their plots, employing the language of infection and contagion. Le Fanu, for instance, frames his collection of short stories *In a Glass Darkly* as an assortment of cases by the fictional Dr Hesselius, giving every single story a medical character. Both "Carmilla's" Laura as well as *Dracula's* Lucy Westenra are at first treated as invalids when they are first "infected" by a vampire. Le Fanu describes Laura as "pale, [her] eyes were dilated and darkened underneath, and the languor which [she] had long felt began to display itself in [her]countenance" leading her father to question her health and calling a doctor (282). Similarly, Stoker portrays Lucy as "paler than is her wont,

and there is a drawn, haggard look under her eyes" (114). Both women are described with common features of infection and whilst Laura questions this by stating her "complaint seemed to be one of the imagination, or the nerves," both girls are visibly suffering (Le Fanu 282). The characters use medical language to describe vampirism, for instance, Dr Van Helsing describes Mina as "infected" whilst Jonathan Harker uses the words "tainted […] with the devil's illness" to describe his wife (Stoker 369, 409). Another feature of infection the narratives share is the spread of disease through close physical contact with a vampire. Here, the vampire bite and implicit exchange of fluids is an especially evocative image. There have been interpretations identifying vampirism with diseases such as tuberculosis, syphilis, anorexia, hysteria, and others. However, Victorians also simply feared disease and infection themselves. During this time in which diseases were at once ever-present as well as inexplicable to most members of society, diseases were treated as a mystery. In this context, Susan Sontag claims diseases that were seen as mysterious were also the most fertile ground for metaphors of social and moral degeneracy, which was further supported in narratives of Gothic literature that discussed the themes of contagion and disease (61). For example, Lucy's transformation into a vampire as a result of her "disease" complicates her definition as a victim. Therefore, themes of contagion and infection were used in Gothic vampire narratives to metaphorically turn victims of illnesses and diseases into threats to society and blame them for their own suffering. These threats were various and reflected the many anxieties that surrounded nineteenth-century society, including the threat female sexuality posed to Victorian moral life.

A further important aspect of nineteenth-century discourse on infection and disease is the debate between the three theories of miasmatism, contagionism and germ theory. These theories contributed to how Gothic writers presented the course and process of infection. For instance, Le Fanu's Laura evokes ideas of miasmatism when she asserts, she "should be very

much [afraid] if [she] fancied there was any real danger of [her] being attacked as those poor people were" (270). Due to her higher social status and better living conditions, Laura falsely considers herself save from infection. This debate is reflected in the formal themes of Gothic narratives rather than explicitly in their subjects. For instance, both vampires in *Dracula* as well as Carmilla's arrival is accompanied by a change in environment. A "mass of dank mist, which seemed to close on all things like a grey pall," surrounds Count Dracula's ship when he arrives at Whitby, which is not only metaphorically but literally fatal to the ship's crew (Stoker 94). Contagionism and germ theory, are also worked into Gothic vampire narratives. One example of this is how superstition and hysteria are treated. In "Carmilla," Laura's father dismisses the local peasants' superstitions saying, "these poor people infect one another with their superstitions" (Le Fanu 269). To him, the real problem is not the disease, which he sees as "natural," but the spread of panic and superstition (Le Fanu 269). Superstition and hysteria are often juxtaposed with male rationality and composure and are, thus, seen as inherently female. The last sentence of Le Fanu's story - "often from a reverie I have started, fancying I heard the light step of Carmilla at the drawing-room door" - invites the reader to join in with Laura's female superstition and tries to "infect" them with it on another level (319). In both novels, medical authority and logical resolution to problems mainly stem from male doctors. For instance, in *Dracula*, scientific Dr Van Helsing places garlic flowers around Lucy Westenra because, as in relatively modern germ theory, he believes in the flowers' antiseptic quality. Lucy's mother removes the garlic saying she "feared that the heavy odour would be too much for the dear child in her weak state" evoking the idea that a hygienic environment is needed to prevent infection (Stoker 157). In this scene, Stoker presents Mrs Westenra's ideas as outdated, while Van Helsing represents disease theory's rational future. Even though Van Helsing is first to suspect Lucy has been attacked by a vampire, he uses evidence to prove this, rather than basing his diagnosis on superstition. Thus, contagion, infection and disease

are important formal themes in Gothic vampire narratives to establish male rationality as superior to female emotionality and superstition.

Though many issues in nineteenth-century Britain were addressed through themes of contagion and disease, vampire narratives particularly invoked anxieties surrounding sexuality. The invocation of bodily fluids and diseases of the blood allows imagery of sexual intercourse. For instance, the scene in *Dracula* in which the Count forces Mina to drink his blood, and, thus, infects her with his vampirism, is reminiscent of a rape scene: „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" (Stoker 326). The fact this is taking place on the bed she shares with her husband adds to this scene's sexual nature. Similarly, in "Carmilla" Laura describes Carmilla's affection as "the ardour of a lover" and the vampire's following statement "you and I are one forever" invokes the biblical idea of a union between husband and wife consummated through sexual intercourse (Le Fanu 264). A further image that suggests vampires' inherently sexual nature is that of penetration. In both narratives, victims are only fully infected with vampirism after being penetrated by the vampire's fangs. Thus, in *Dracula,* Jonathan, though infected by the Count in some way, is never transformed into a vampire and recovers completely, whilst Lucy and Mina who are attacked frequently and forced to exchange fluids with the Count are at risk to become "undead" themselves. The idea of women as sources of procreation is invoked and inverted as through penetration and "infection" a new member of a vampire race is produced. Thus, when interpreted in this way, vampirism can be defined as a sexually transmitted disease (STD). Critics such as Alexandra Warwick often refer to Stoker's alleged infection with syphilis as it is a fatal disease of the blood (209). In "Carmilla," malaria is mentioned as a possible risk for Laura, which, while not specifically being an STD, Ross Forman argues "is inherently sexual in that the parasite reproduces within and through the

blood of the host" (Le Fanu 281; Forman 938). Similarly, to STDs at the time, vampirism is identified by visual appearance. Both authors use a similar physiognomy in their vampire characters, with their sharp teeth, pale skin, and fiery eyes. In Stoker's *Dracula*, Mina's reaction to her infection by the Count is telling as she proclaims herself "Unclean! Unclean! Even the Almighty shuns my polluted flesh! I must bear this mark of shame upon my forehead until the Judgment Day" (342). Here, she again refers to her appearance, however, the connection with cleanliness and pollution infers an infection of which she is ashamed. Therefore, in Gothic vampire narratives, invocation of sexually transmitted diseases is important as it discusses anxieties surrounding unrestrained sexuality.

The spread of STDs was especially problematic in female prostitutes and, thus, a fear of specifically female sexuality was spread. According to Warwick, the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864 "penalized the female prostitute for what was considered to be the debilitation of the British fighting forces" and in this way, female sexuality presented as immoral and dangerous (209). In Le Fanu's "Carmilla," this anxiety is especially poignant since it is about two women presenting loving and sexual feelings for each other. Insinuation of love between the two women is very strong in this story, with Carmilla proclaiming she has "been in love with no one, and never shall […] unless it should be with [Laura]" (Le Fanu 273). During the progression of Laura's "illness," she describes a feeling "as if warm lips kissed [her], and longer and longer and more lovingly as they reached [her] throat" which underscores the sexual nature of her infection through Carmilla (Le Fanu 282). This relationship would have been seen as sexually deviant because of the feelings of homosexuality with which Carmilla "infects" Laura. Laura admits to her "love growing into adoration" but describes an "abhorrence" (Le Fanu 264). Carmilla is tempting Laura, but her conscience still tells her it is morally wrong to love her. Thus, vampirism as a metaphorical disease served to demonstrate the danger female homosexual desires posed. However, same-sex attraction between women

was not often discussed, or at least it was not as harshly prosecuted as male homosexuality. The power dynamic between the two women is uneven. Laura's desire, though sparked, is not as strong as Carmilla's. In utterances such as "I live in your warm life, and you shall die—die, sweetly die—into mine" and "as I draw near to you, you, in your turn, will draw near to others" Carmilla foreshadows her true intentions with Laura (263). She does not want to innocently love her but turn her into one of her own so she can possess and control her forever whilst Laura, in turn, continues to "infect" other women and continue the cycle. The only way in which Carmilla's sexuality is restrained is through violent male intervention, which Rae Yan argues "mirrors the practices of nineteenth-century "regular" medicine, which is defined by its direct application of pharmaceutical and surgical intervention in the treatment of symptoms and disease" (408). Thus, the importance of disease is not only to demonstrate the dangers of female homosexuality but unrestrained female sexuality in itself.

Whilst Bram Stoker's Count Dracula, unlike Carmilla, is a man, he only attacks women with the intention of infecting them with his vampirism. Other than him, every other vampire in the novel is a female and presents a very clear sexual threat. Female vampires threaten to tempt innocent and moral men and "infect" them with their immorality. Thus, when three vampire sisters attack Jonathan he describes "a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss [him] with those red lips" (Stoker 49). Similarly, Lucy becomes increasingly sexual during the course of her "illness", ultimately trying to tempt Arthur to come and lie with her as husband and wife (Stoker 246). From the beginning of the novel, Lucy is seen as the more flirtatious and sexually improper of the two female protagonists. For instance, she wishes society would let her "marry three men, or as many as want her" after receiving three marriage proposals (Stoker 73). Dr Van Helsing even suggests she has committed bigamy when she receives blood transfusions from four different men, including the three men who proposed to her (Stoker 205). Again, metaphors of penetration and exchange of bodily fluids

become important, however, not just as a way of infection by the vampire but as a cure for sexually deviant women. This time, the men save the women from the disease of vampirism through blood transfusions and stakes. At first, Dr Van Helsing prolongs Lucy's life by transfusing blood into her, however, the ultimate cure to vampirism and in turn to female sexuality is penetration of the woman by her legal husband. Thus, when her fiancé releases Lucy from her vampire-state by killing her with a stake, the scene takes on a sexual connotation (Stoker 251). Ultimately, female sexuality can only be restrained by a moral relationship between husband and wife. For instance, Mina Harker is presented and praised for being the perfect version of a Victorian woman with exclamations such as "if ever there was a woman who was all perfection, that one is my poor wronged darling" (Stoker 358). According to Kathleen Spencer, "in late-Victorian theory, […] marriage [was] designed to tame the sexual impulses of husbands," and this is exactly what Mina does in her marriage to Jonathan (216). She is a very caring wife, however, there is never any erotic feeling expressed between the two. So not only does marriage control women's sexuality, but morally good women and implicitly unsexual women serve to keep their husbands away from temptation. Thus, disease and infection are important in Gothic vampire narratives to demonstrate the destructiveness of female sexuality.

This article has proven that metaphors and themes of contagion, infection, and disease permeate every facet of Gothic vampire narratives. Both "Carmilla" and *Dracula* treat disease and contagion as something inherently gendered. Both Sheridan Le Fanu and Bram Stoker stress the fact that the largest threat of contagion and disease, whether in form of hysteria, superstition, or even sexual deviancy, stems from women. The authors present women as the weaker sex, more vulnerable to becoming infected, but also more dangerous in passing on their disease. In conclusion, both authors use metaphors of disease and contagion to propose that men must constrain female sexuality to preserve society's morality.

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