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Hospitality, Rape and Consent in Vampire Popular Culture

Letting the Wrong One In

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Palgrave Gothic
ISBN 978-3-319-62781-6 ISBN 978-3-319-62782-3 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-62782-3

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017947175

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Cover credit: Mátyás Nagy/EyeEm/Getty Images

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

FOREWORD

There is something about vampires that is perpetually intriguing. This inhuman creature is meant to wait for an invitation before crossing the threshold, but it seems that we humans are desperate for the vampire to touch our lives—even if only vicariously. Perhaps it is the vampire’s intensity (its superior senses and physical passions) that we seek, for if the vampire can be characterised by one word it is “intense”. The vampire wants our blood; we want its life force, despite its predatory nature. Bram Stoker published his famous text simply called *Dracula* in 1897; since that time, it has never been out of print. The vampire, however, is much older than Count Dracula and not necessarily male. One of the earliest recorded vampires was Lilith, a figure from Jewish mythology, considered by many scholars to be Adam’s first wife. Because Lilith was created from the same earth as Adam, she refused to submit (“I will not lie below”) and abandoned him. In the modern era, the depiction of vampires in popular culture, including novels, films, music, theatre, paintings, television series and comics, is ubiquitous. Vampire films in particular have dominated the genre, with at least one hundred and seventy versions inspired by Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* and Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* (1872)—two nineteenth-century tales which introduced the modern subject to amorous heterosexual and lesbian vampires respectively. As the editors of this fine collection of essays point out, “The monster is thus a threshold figure—both emphatically of this world and a portal to another.” Once bitten, the victim (particularly if a virgin) is newly energised, eager to join the deadly circle, and guaranteed eternal life.

It seems that the vampire is what one wants it to be. It is a shape-shifting, transitory, border-crossing creature. Critical discussions within vampirology have ranged from the mythical, to the psychosexual and the socio-political. The vampire has been interpreted from many perspectives: as a diabolic fiend or anti-Christ; a Freudian monster signifying the release of repressed sexual desire; a harbinger of the new and unsettling forces of social change that threaten traditional values; an alluring, phallogocentric male; an erotic lesbian seducer; a sexually ambiguous, queer creature representing all forms of desire; a mythic figure aligned to the full moon, menarche and the female menstrual cycle; a postcolonial invader; a representative of capitalist greed; and a liminal figure who signifies the twilight or border zones of all contested spaces. It would seem that every age searches for the vampire that most clearly represents the anxieties, fantasies and desires of the time. Nina Auerbach explored this dimension of the ubiquitous fanged monster in her aptly titled and fascinating book, *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (1995).

The title of this volume refers to a contemporary vampire novel, *Let the Right One In* (2007; first published in Swedish in 2004), by the Swedish author John Ajvide Lindqvist. The film adaptation of 2009 directed by Tomas Alfredson has been hailed as a modern classic. In Lindqvist's novel, the threshold crossed is between two twelve-year-old children: one human, the other non-human. Eli, the vampire, appears to be a girl (she has actually been castrated) who befriends Oskar, a lonely, pale boy who is bullied at school. Although they look alike, she is his physical opposite—as dark as he is pale. As they fall passionately in love, Oskar discovers that Eli is not what she seems: she is not a girl, she is not youthful and she is not human. The film is tender and brutal, uncanny and strange. In contrast to many vampire narratives, the title of this collection focuses our attention on an aspect of vampire folklore that has been largely forgotten or ignored in popular culture's engagement with the inhuman: a vampire (like werewolves, witches, doppelgangers and ghosts) must be invited in before it can cross the threshold. Once inside, a vampire cannot be ordered to leave, and those within are placed in terrible danger of submitting to the vampire's murderous desires and sexual predations. Herein lies the appeal of the vampire. Because the creature represents the Other—the opposite of everything its victims signify (on the surface at least)—its temptations are even more deadly.

What does it mean—to “let the right one in”? How might the right one quickly metamorphose into the “wrong one”? And what are the

implications of this for the vampire's victims? And, more importantly, what might be the consequences for those who enter this world vicariously—the spectator, reader and listener? The authors of this collection explore these questions from different perspectives; each one offers a complex analysis of what is at stake when one lets a vampire through the portal and under one's skin. They do so from a fresh perspective, that is, the authors all focus on popular culture's fascination with the vampire (male and female) and “the intertwining and yet often contradictory spaces of hospitality, rape and the question of consent”. This challenging volume encourages the reader to ask new questions. What happens when the vampire is the “wrong” one for its victim but potentially the “right” one for the viewer or reader? To what extent is the vampire a catalyst or an agent of transformation, one whose horrific actions challenge the viewer/reader to explore her or his own beliefs, values, fears and fantasies? All the chapters offer astute and complex readings of the vampire legend; they frequently challenge traditional approaches while offering new, original and creative interpretations, particularly to the problem of consent. The authors also explore the role of the reader and/or viewer and the way in which she or he may be unsettled, even “perpetually frustrated” as one writer argues.

On a literal level, letting the right one in refers to the vampire's physical entry; on a psychosexual dimension, it refers to the vampire's entry into the body, symbolised in that iconic moment when the vampire plunges its sharp incisors into its victim's neck and blood begins to flow freely. It is the victim's skin that forms the threshold, which must be penetrated to bring about the necessary transformation. One traditional interpretation is that the male vampire narrative constitutes a patriarchal discourse that legitimises sexual aggression and rape within the confines of an erotic and forbidden sexual encounter. Penelope Shuttle and Peter Redgrove, in their volume *The Wise Wound* (1978), argue that the vampire narrative represents a rite of menarche and menstruation. Yet, others see the vampire narrative as an elaborate fantasy about sexual yearning, which leads to the fulfilment of desire in sexually restrictive cultures in which it is taboo to speak openly about sexuality or topics such as sado-masochism. In this context, fantasy can have a radical, transformative potential.

One of the most famous paintings depicting the threshold between pleasure and pain is Edvard Munch's *Vampire* (1894). Significantly, the

artist called his painting “Love and Pain”, and it was only later that it became known as *Vampire*, named as such by Munch’s friend Stanislaw Przybyszewski. Munch created six different versions: one is a woodcut entitled *Vampyr II* (1895) and another, a painting entitled *Vampire in the Forest* (1916–18). Nazi Germany condemned these works, along with all modern art, as morally “degenerate”. The first was painted when the figure of the vampire was very much a part of the European cultural imaginary, and the painting developed an iconic status. It depicts a woman with long red hair, her bare arms enfolding the figure of a fully clothed man, as she appears to kiss or bite his neck (in *Vampyr II* she is clearly biting him). He seems to welcome her embrace as he buries his face in her lap, his head of dark hair covered by her long red hair. The background is dark and the mood is both intimate and unsettling. Her red cheeks create an impression that she is imbibing blood as she sucks on his neck. One might argue that the painting depicts a man in anguish being comforted by a woman. However, when it was put on public display, many considered the work shocking; they argued that it showed a perverse scene of sado-masochism. Leopold von Sacher-Masoch published his controversial sado-masochistic novella *Venus in Furs* in 1870, so the topic was then much in the public arena, where it has remained to the present day.

The fact that the vampire itself experiences a sadistic moment of intense sexual pleasure, akin to an out-of-body experience, or what the French describe as a “little death” is clearly illustrated in Andy Warhol and Paul Morrissey’s *Blood for Dracula* (1974), known in the United States as *Andy Warhol’s Dracula*. Here the Count is depicted in close-up with his head thrown back, eyes glazed over, mouth open, and two lines of blood streaming over his lower lip. His expression of orgasmic pleasure is overlaid with a trance-like expression, as if he were on the brink of death. This is also the moment that constitutes the threshold between mortality and immortality. Many vampire narratives focus on this iconic scene. Do readers and viewers identify with the vampire and/or its victim? As Elizabeth Cowie argues in her essay “Fantasia”, the representation of fantasy in film creates a space in which viewers can experience multiple forms of identification in the same scene.

Another increasingly important threshold central to the vampire story is that between human and inhuman. This is the area perhaps most relevant to contemporary culture in the twenty-first century. Throughout the history of popular culture, the vampire as “Other” has represented

a range of disparate figures—alien, foreigner, femme fatale, demon and animal—all of which signify the inhuman. As this book argues, a study of the nature of this “other” across time reveals that the identity of the Other is socially relative and specific to actual events in the social and political sphere. The vampire is human yet not human. What is the appeal of the inhuman? Has the vampire always been posthuman? In human/animal theory there has been much criticism of the anthropocentric nature of discourse. Writers such as Cary Wolfe argue that to see everything from a humanist and/or human perspective has only resulted in the oppression of other species. Does the vampire somewhat perversely reopen old questions about the relationship of the subject to other species? Humankind has gone to great lengths to deny its animal origins. Yet we are drawn almost compulsively to the figure of the vampire who brings human and animal together in scenes of uncanny transformations from human to bat, rat and wolf. Does the vampire offer a different perspective on anthropocentrism while offering a new way of thinking about what it means to be human? Is Dracula—female, male or other—an uncanny doppelganger for the human subject, or a radically other creature, both of which could be seen to threaten the accepted definition of what it means to be human? The risk is that the human subject might have to let the vampire in before attempting to answer this question. The great strength of this volume is that it challenges the reader to revisit popular culture’s fascination with the vampire and to ask new and sometimes difficult questions. From the vampire’s perspective, the human who seeks the creature’s destruction is just as threatening and sometimes even more duplicitous. This is a stimulating and challenging collection that opens up new questions just when we thought that there was very little left that could be said about our troubled relationship with vampires and what might occur when we invite the wrong one in.

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In December 2014, under the auspices of the Griffith Centre for Social and Cultural Research, we organised a public symposium at the Shore Restaurant, Southbank, Brisbane, entitled *Vampires and Popular Culture*. The specific aim of this symposium was to convene scholars from different disciplines—sociology, psychology, literary studies, film studies, cultural studies and media studies—in order to consider and discuss the status of the vampire in popular culture.

A range of vampire issues brought us together: origins and evolution, dwellings and habitats, erotic desire and violence. Our point of departure was a general agreement that sometime around the early 1970s there was a turning point in representations of vampires in popular culture narratives. We recognised a loosening of the close connection between vampiredom and Christianity and a consequent gradual shift away from Christian iconography. Corresponding with this shift has been the rise in attractive, sympathetic, sexy and “misunderstood” vampires who continue to have serious problems in dealing with impulse control.

We recognised that although vampires are a well-researched phenomenon, there has been little by way of a sustained and rigorous focus on the problems raised around vampiric violence. When humans and vampires intersect, problems of invitation routinely arise. Vampires provide hospitality, and hospitality is, in return, provided to them. Humans may offer vampires their consent and permit the monstrous threat into their homes and lives, too often entirely unaware of whom they are letting in. Then, humans may desire what only a vampire can truly give them,

and vampires may consent to satisfying those desires. Yet, as vampires are prone to illegitimate interpretations of human consent, we may easily find that the monster has taken more than was agreed upon. Given that a vampire attack is often a thinly disguised metaphor for rape and home violation, misunderstandings and misrepresentations around consent are a serious issue, particularly when the vampire becomes a figure of romance and seduction.

This series of problems and complexities motivated our desire to gather a group of essays where scholars illuminate questions of hospitality, rape and consent from a range of perspectives, across a range of vampiric texts and pertaining to an assortment of different incarnations of the figure of the vampire. We are hopeful that our contribution will stimulate further discussion of the manifold and complex ways in which vampires provide means for revealing ourselves to ourselves.

We wish to thank the Griffith Centre for Social and Cultural Research and the Griffith School of Humanities, Languages and Social Sciences in Brisbane and Gold Coast, Australia, and the Institute of American Studies and Polish Diaspora, Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland, for encouragement and financial support for the development and completion of this project. Working from opposite sides of the world presented certain challenges, but digital technologies helped us stay in close daily contact and allowed for speedy exchange of materials and ideas.

We wish to thank the individuals who have contributed in various ways to help make this book a reality: Lina Aboujeb, Malcolm Alexander, Andy Bennett, Barbara Bieńkowska, Anna Bukowska, Iwona Bukowska, David Ellison, Karina Jákupsdóttir, Teresa Kameczura, Chrissy McKinley, Kimberley Podger, Radek Rybkowski, Elena Schak, Ewa Stasiewicz, Michał Stasiewicz, Rebecca Wildermuth, Ian Woodward and Danni Zuvela.

We should like to express our heartfelt gratitude to all the contributors to this volume for their unwavering enthusiasm, good humour and hard work. It has been a joy and a privilege to work with you! Last but not least, our deepest appreciation goes to our respective partners and

families, Andrzej Bieńkowski, Alicja and Maja, Linda Middleton and Ian Hutchesson, for their enduring love and support.

Nathan, Australia
Southport, Australia
Krakow, Poland

David Baker
Stephanie Green
Agnieszka Stasiewicz-Bieńkowska

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