

Thoroughly Modern Mina: Romance, History, and the *Dracula* Pastiche

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Abstract: *Dracula* pastiches have been popular for decades, but it is only since the 1970s that authors have regularly turned to imagining romances between Dracula and Mina Harker. This article analyzes how *Dracula*/Mina romance plots exist at the intersection of the paranormal romance and the neo-Victorian novel, illuminating many of the unspoken conventions and assumptions of each genre. I argue that vitalized by Dracula's attentions, Mina's body comes to signify a "modernity" identified loosely with an emergent liberal feminism. Her experiences emphasize erotic pleasure, romantic egalitarianism, and individual liberty in the context of her *free choice* of motherhood and monogamy, in sharp contradistinction to her Victorian inheritance, which insists on male control of women's bodies. While the *Dracula* pastiches join with their neo-Victorian realist counterparts in making egalitarian monogamous relationships the precondition for social stability, they insist that human agency alone cannot bring modernity into being, suggesting that late-Victorian humanity has hit a moral and physical dead end. At the same time, these pastiches challenge the paranormal romance genre's celebration of vampiric sexuality, which they cast as initially attractive but, eventually, too self-obsessed to form the basis of either romance or, ultimately, parenthood.

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Not content to remain in the nineteenth century, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* continues to stalk his prey through endless pastiches, parodies, and revisionist sagas. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century alone, the Count has been everything from the villain lurking in the library of Elizabeth Kostova's *The Historian* (2005) to the paradoxical hero of Dacre Stoker and Ian Holt's *Dracula the Undead* (2009) to an unlikely Hollywood mogul (via possession) in the finale of Kim Newman's *Anno Dracula* trilogy, *Johnny Alucard* (2013). But there has been another, more unexpected, trend: *Dracula* the would-be romantic hero, ardently chasing Mina Harker. Although the silent film *Nosferatu* (1922) first imagined a variant on *Dracula* in love with a stand-in for Mina Harker, such plots have proliferated since the 1970s, from Fred Saberhagen's *The Dracula Tape* (1975) to Karen Essex's *Dracula in Love* (2010). The rationale behind this pairing is not immediately obvious: in Bram Stoker's original, after all, Mina agonized over her violation by the vampire and enthusiastically participated in his destruction. Yet, when considered as a romance narrative, the relationship looks far more predictable. The eroticized vampire meets his match in the pure but determined Madame Mina, encumbered by a weak and ineffectual mate: the scenario has all the spicy allure of an adultery plot. Novelist Syrie James, author of one such romance, *Dracula, My Love* (2010), hints at the allure of such tales: "If you ask me," she sighs, "there was a whole lot more going on in that bedchamber than Mina revealed" (James, "Dracula: The Roots").

But, as James goes on to argue, this fantasy is bound up in the vampire's explicitly Victorian milieu, with its atmosphere of sexual repression. Although James' reference elsewhere to the mythic clothed piano legs—which the British understood to be an example of quintessentially *American* prudery, not their own feminine modesty—exaggerates the Victorian fear of the erotic, her insistence that there is something Victorian at root about this phenomenon is suggestive. In fact, the *Dracula*-Mina romances illuminate and critique the more familiar sexual politics of neo-Victorian romance plots, from John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) to Sarah Waters' *Fingersmith* (2002). Even though we rarely think about reworkings of *Dracula* as neo-Victorian, these literally bloody romances engage, like their more respectable cousins, in self-conscious (if not always sophisticated) reflections on the end of Victorian culture and the beginning of what we consider "our own" time—guardedly wondering, as Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn have suggested, if "this search for endings really signifies [...] the fact that we have not been able to bring the Victorian narrative to a conclusion yet?" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 27). Although as pastiches, the novels usually seek to emulate *Dracula*'s key themes rather than its forms—while multiple narrators abound, few try to fully echo *Dracula*'s patchwork narrative structure, let alone Stoker's prose style—many of them seize on *Dracula*'s obsession with "modernization" as the centerpiece of their own plots (E. Butler loc. 484). Set at the end of the nineteenth century or the beginning of the twentieth, novels like *Dracula the Undead*, Newman's *Anno Dracula* (1992), or Kate Cary's WWI-era *Bloodline* (2006) use the adventures of *Dracula* and/or his descendants to reference the end of empire and the coming of the Great War; acknowledge new developments in psychiatry and medicine, including blood-typing; and register the impact of feminism and secularization.

In the case of *Dracula* romances, modernization and feminism are at the forefront. I argue that the primary figure for modernization in these texts is Mina Harker's newly-awakened body. Vitalized by *Dracula*'s attentions, Mina's body becomes shorthand for a "modernity" identified loosely with an emergent liberal feminism. Once fully awakened by

the vampire, Mina's experiences emphasize erotic pleasure, romantic egalitarianism, and individual liberty in the context of her free choice of motherhood and monogamy, in sharp contradistinction to her Victorian inheritance, which insists on male control of women's bodies—in bed and out of it. In that sense, Mina's journeys both engage with larger trends in neo-Victorian narratives that imagine how "modern," companionate heterosexual couplings come into being, and continue the pattern of Gothic romances in which, as Victoria Nelson dryly puts it, "soft-core pornography is essentially framed within a heterosexual relationship that is monogamous after the first encounter" (108). At the same time, they point to difficulties in imagining how the "historical" in "historical romance" might actually function. What does it mean for a single woman's romantic entanglements to signify an entire complex of historical transformations?

While the *Dracula* romances join with their realist counterparts in casting such egalitarian relationships as the precondition for social stability, they rework romance plots in two ways. First, they insist that human agency alone cannot bring modernity into being, suggesting that late-Victorian humanity has hit a moral and perhaps physical dead end. Second, they refuse to recuperate Lucy Westenra, who is sexually problematic in the original *Dracula*—a woman who "through her excessive emotion and sexual desire [...] is positioned outside Victorian normativity and thus draws the vampire to her" (Prescott and Giorgio 500), and remains so in these later reworkings. Lucy's more playful sexuality, aimed at self-fulfillment instead of motherhood, turns out to be invested in the same Victorian paradigms that animate the men who, heroes in Stoker's original, become monsters in their own right when reworked. To examine how these dynamics play out, I begin by situating these novels in the context of neo-Victorian romance and marriage plots, in which male heterosexuality frequently becomes a source of deep terror. I then survey how *Dracula* pastiches from the 1970s on invest the *Dracula*-Mina romance with supposedly liberatory potential, before unpacking in detail one recent novel, Karen Essex's *Dracula in Love* (2010), and its celebrations of women's choice of monogamous maternity over eternal life with the vampire.

A good undead man is hard to find: romances vampiric and neo-victorian

Dracula-Mina romance plots echo but noticeably deviate from the fad for sexy vampires that began in the 1970s. Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1975) sparked the appeal of paranormal or supernatural romance, a genre popular with both adult and young adult readers.[1] Stephenie Meyer's bestselling *Twilight* series (2005-08), featuring sparkly vampires and a none-too-subtle emphasis on sexual abstinence, is only the most famous of these texts. Meyer's work in particular has been critiqued for straightening out the threateningly perverse figure of the vampire—"otherness itself," as Jack Halberstam says of *Dracula* (88)—transforming vampire sexuality's creative possibilities into a brief for heterosexual monogamy and feminine subjection.[2] In general, the paranormal or supernatural romance plot translates the dark, brooding hero of conventional genre romance into the vampire (or werewolf, or demon) who can be transformed by the love of a (frequently virginal) young woman. Strictly speaking, this literalizes more conventional romance plots in that the innocent young woman really does succeed in the "fantasy conquest of

patriarchy,” redeeming the brutal “alpha male” through the ultimate power of love (Roach n.p.). Such romances may well end, as *Twilight* does, in the woman joining her lover in his now-rejuvenated monstrous world, finding a happy ending in which eternal happiness is not an illusion.

Perhaps appropriately enough, the marriage plot that is so central to both nineteenth-century realism and romance frequently structures neo-Victorian fiction. But in the latter, the marriage plot is also a sexual liberation plot, and representations of sex become a key method of critiquing, or at least claiming to critique, earlier narrative norms. Crucially, such plots have little to do with the actual strategies of Victorian feminists, which were deeply rooted in arguments for self-control and self-sacrifice now at odds with contemporary beliefs about sexuality and personal fulfillment (Kohlke, “The Lures” 7). By contrast, if “sex and freedom are ontologically linked” (Fletcher 104), then opening up representations of Victorian culture to stories of erotic discovery supposedly reveals both moments of resistance in the nineteenth century and the origins of liberty in our own. Neo-Victorian novels signify their “realism” by filling in the interstices of what was supposedly kept silent in nineteenth-century texts, or translating Victorian code into twentieth- or twenty-first-century plain speech. They engage in a dynamic of exposure that owes much to Steven Marcus’ now-classic *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England*, swapping out the staid Victorian of legend for a much raunchier version. In effect, neo-Victorian fiction constantly produces a “repressed” Victorian era in order to advertise its own subversion thereof; the Victorians must be cast as not-us sexually, the better to narrate the historical transformation from sexual imprisonment to sexual liberty. Or, as Marie-Luise Kohlke argues, with some asperity, “[b]y projecting prohibited and unmentionable desires onto the past, we conveniently reassert our own supposedly enlightened stance towards sexual liberation and social progress, indulging in the self-satisfactions of our assumed superiority” (Kohlke, “The Neo-Victorian Sexsation” 58; cf. Botting 7; Fletcher 129).

It is no accident that several recent neo-Victorian novels have featured women as writers or publishers of erotica. Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002) ultimately denies its heroine the ability to reappropriate her body in the act of writing, but Belinda Starling’s *The Journal of Dora Damage* (2006), Faye Booth’s *Trades of the Flesh* (2010), and (arguably) Sarah Waters’ *Fingersmith* (2002) all suggest that women’s engagement with erotica appropriates the capitalist trade in female bodies for subversive ends, as the writing and/ or publishing woman takes control of sexual fantasies in the name of her own professional and financial independence.[3] Lydia, the heroine of *Trades of the Flesh*, proudly announces to her now-married lover that, thanks to her erotica, she has obtained a veritable room of her own in which to write: “this place might not be much [...], but it’s mine, or as close to mine as I can get” (Booth 302). These narratives do not subvert the sex trade so much as they argue that women, too, can participate in it as agents, creating texts to consume instead of circulating their own bodies. The system remains, but women join the ranks of the suppliers rather than the products.

This liberal strategy for reclaiming women’s autonomy sits alongside neo-Victorian fiction’s critique of male sexuality, especially heterosexuality, as monstrous—a desire that explicitly understands its targets as objects to be consumed, not subjects for mutual pleasure, and thus destroys in the act of consummation. Kohlke has aptly pointed out that “neo-Victorian fiction panders to a seemingly insatiable desire for imagined perversity”

("The Neo-Victorian Sexsation" 55). Recent neo-Victorian fiction is populated by an astonishing run of male predators, from the evil (and sadomasochistic) version of Walter Hartright in James Wilson's Wilkie Collins pastiche, *The Dark Clue* (2007) to the abusive (and closeted) Somers Ingram in Linda Holeman's *The Linnet Bird* (2004) to the violent (and fatally diseased) Kester in Kate Darby's *The Whore's Asylum* (2012). The aristocratic Kester, for example, turns out to be a sadist who participates in orgies and is aroused by the prospect of murdering the heroine; his upper-class male privilege enables him to abduct her by passing her off as a "notorious drunk" prostitute to would-be rescuers who wind up watching her struggles with "mild interest" (Darby 274). As in other neo-Victorian narratives, the heroine finds her very reality rewritten by the male monster, whose cultural centrality enables him to engage in acts of sexual and other violence that remain safely unspoken. The sexual male body thus becomes one of the prime sites of neo-Victorian Gothic, all the more so because this is the privileged body at the heart of nineteenth-century culture; the "façade of the normal," as Halberstam says, "that tends to become the place of terror within postmodern Gothic" (162). That is, the true horror revealed by neo-Victorian narrative is not that the "other" plots to invade the safe haven of Victorian domesticity, but that the monstrosity of middle-class and aristocratic men goes safely unchallenged; the monsters define the monstrous.

For the brutalized heterosexual women in these novels, then, full autonomy requires the advent of a new masculinity, often represented as exotic or otherwise non-normative. While in some ways these figures resemble the so-called "New Hero" of late twentieth-century romance, a self-assured figure who winds up exploring the possibility of "emotional connection" with the female protagonist (Zidle 26, 27), the relationships, figured as equal partnerships, may or may not involve sexual activity, and often redefine the nature of mental and physical strength. Most conventionally, there is Daoud in *The Linnet Bird*, a stereotypically mysterious, exotic, and sexy Pashtun chief who swoops in on his white stallion. Less so, there is the partly disabled Shaker from the same novel, with whom the narrator joins as part of an alternative family at the end. Similarly, Belinda Starling concludes *The Journal of Dora Damage* with the loving marriage of Jack Tapster (a gay man) and Pansy (an infertile woman). More mystically, David Rocklin's *The Luminist* (2011) celebrates a spiritual connection between photographer and diplomat's wife Catherine Colebrook and her adolescent Indian assistant, Eligius. In this narrative strategy, "good" masculinity may or may not be heterosexual, but it always emerges from the margins of a culture that identifies manhood with the ability to possess and consume as many bodies as possible (whether the bodies of men, women, children, people of color, or the poor). Notably, men of color are not, in Judith Wilt's phrase, "dis-Oriented" (113), as in the case of the revelations about the eponymous hero of *The Sheik* (1919); for this trope to work, the men must remain resolutely Other to the white heroine. The disadvantaged male Other is himself objectified in the Victorian frame of reference, and thus becomes an appropriate mate to the women who occupy an analogous position. Although Georges Letissier, discussing Sarah Waters' neo-Victorian fiction, notes how representations of alternative domestic forms have explored both their liberatory quality and the space they open up for "fraud and deceit" (381), treating the "Other" man as a solution to women's problems poses yet another set of issues. It often exoticizes people of color as updated versions of the Sheik (of which Daoud is a prime example) or turns disabled or otherwise disadvantaged men into premium accessories for demonstrating the heroine's moral superiority. Moreover, as we shall see later, the monster-

ing of “bad” male heterosexuality carefully limits the critique it purports to offer: the always-awaiting revelation that normative masculinity is somehow warped, as opposed to the positive masculinity embodied by the male Other, produces a conveniently Manichean vision of the social order. Modernization in neo-Victorian fiction is not about transitioning from a repressed to a non-repressed regime, then, but about redefining what constitutes a sexual norm.

Sex and the single vampire

Certainly, sexual norms are at the forefront in Dracula novels, revisionist or otherwise. William Patrick Day has argued that the eroticized, “Byronic” vampire “give[s] structure to our own use of the vampire as a romantic transgressor and a protagonist in the struggle for freedom from repression” (12), and Dracula-Mina romance plots celebrate the link between sexual freedom and the flourishing of female (and male) subjectivity. As several critics have pointed out, although the Byronic vampire has been part of vampire lore since Polidori’s Lord Ruthven stalked the pages of *The Vampyre* (1819), his potential as a romantic love interest dates back only to the 1970s or so. It requires, Jules Zanger has argued, the vampire’s mutation “from an objectification of metaphysical evil into simply another image of ourselves” (23).[4] The modern vampire is us with fangs. Dracula’s passionate pursuit of Mina is part of this transformation. While Orlok’s interest in the Mina substitute in *Nosferatu* only goes one way, the Dracula-Mina romance plot posits that the vampire’s interest could be enthusiastically reciprocated. At the same time, the trajectories of these plots escape the vampire romance formula familiar from paranormal or supernatural romance: the characteristic vampire-lover of paranormal romance may be perfect as-is and possess an “inherent moral compass” that keeps good humans bite-free (Bailie 142, 143), but the eroticized Dracula is a far more ambiguous figure who, except in rare cases, is never the appropriate final love interest. His centrality to the plot line thus invokes one conventional romance plot, in which the heroine rejects and then returns to the man she truly loves (e.g. Ebert 41-44), but with a new twist: Mina and Jonathan can only learn to love each other by appropriating the vampire’s erotic and political insights. Mina may find that, like Harlequin romance heroes, the vampire may “recognize her as a subject, or recognize her from her own point of view” (Rabine 166)—but this affirmation of Mina’s selfhood and autonomy almost always falters and collapses. Instead, Dracula’s love for Mina usually ends up reaffirming “primarily heteronormative relationships reinforced by ‘traditional’ family values,” something that Melissa Ames associates with young adult rather than adult paranormal romance (49). As we shall see, Mina’s encounter with Dracula initiates our heroine into a world of alternative sexual experience, only to leave her to choose monogamous heterosexuality with the resolutely “normal” Jonathan at the end. It is this narrative of choice that turns out to be the crux of these novels.

At first glance, it seems strange that many Dracula novels do not recuperate Lucy Westenra, the character most explicitly associated with sexuality in the original *Dracula*, and whose phallic death by group staking is often interpreted as patriarchal punishment in the form of “corrective penetration” (Craft 117). Fred Saberhagen’s Lucy in *The Dracula Tape* (1975) comes to Dracula “as smoothly and willingly as any wench that I have ever clasped to

lips or loins" (78); the relationship, Dracula admits, is pure sex, and his choice of "wench" implies that her behavior transgresses class boundaries. Similarly, Syrie James's Lucy in *Dracula, My Love* (2010) is a flibbertigibbet thrilled by her own sex appeal. The morning after her first encounter with Dracula, she has "a sparkle in her eye and a little, self-satisfied smile on her face," and later she responds to the sight of a bat with a "wanton expression" (James, *Dracula, My Love* 51, 84). Indeed, Dracula tells Mina that far from seducing Lucy, she actively seduced him (James, *Dracula, My Love* 269). In Karen Essex's *Dracula in Love* (2010), Lucy has been having a sultry affair with Morris Quince (that is, Quincey Morris) while engaged to Arthur. In one voyeuristic scene, Mina stumbles upon them having sex (Essex 104). In these and other examples, Lucy Westenra enters the novel already erotically liberated, freely choosing sexual pleasure and rejecting social norms. Unlike Mina, whose discovery of her sexual potential drives the Dracula-Mina romance plot, Lucy appears to model a late-twentieth or twenty-first-century model of women's sexual autonomy. But if Lucy's embrace of pleasure seems to be the endpoint of the narrative that Mina is just beginning, why is history bound up with Mina's sexualization, and not Lucy's sexual freedom? Or, to put it differently, why is the "initiation story" Mina's plot and not Lucy's (Day 27)?

Although the *Dracula* novels embrace Lucy's sexual transgression-and-punishment plot from the original novel, it is inadequate for us to read these Lucies as the kind of promiscuous romance character who "makes explicit the threatening implications of an unleashed feminine sexuality capable of satisfying itself outside the structures of patriarchal domination that are still perpetuated most effectively through marriage" (Radway 74). It is not so much that Lucy is having the wrong kind of sex as that she is having it with the wrong kind of men. Or, to put it more paradoxically, the already-liberated Lucy's sexual relationships, including her purely sexual encounters with Dracula, belong to a matrix of masculine perversity that the novels code as part of the *past* that must be abandoned. Ken Gelder has observed that in recent critical readings of *Dracula*, "the vampire is to be redeemed—the problem lies, instead, with the upstanding heroes" (66). By this, Gelder means that the "good" characters have frequently been understood as being in need of further psychoanalytic, political, and/or sexual unpacking. But these novels take Gelder's point a step further: the morally pure, chivalrous heroes of Stoker's novel are often boring at best, depraved and/or insane at worst. At the boring end, Saberhagen's *The Dracula Tape*, Essex's *Dracula in Love*, and Elaine Bergstrom's *Mina* (1994) all cast Jonathan Harker as far more repressed than his wife ever is, although Saberhagen's Harker is never more than a stopgap before Mina reunites with Dracula. Bergstrom's Harker, for example, simultaneously yearns for the "passion" Mina displayed for Dracula, yet feels ashamed of himself for his desire (60). Freda Warrington goes one step further and has both Mina and Jonathan agree that sex in wedlock must be "restrained and decorous," as a "Christian marriage" must rule out all "lasciviousness" (102); in other words, they have consigned themselves to eternal sexual ennui.

At the depraved and/or insane end, Saberhagen's Arthur and Quincey plot to pick up women while *en route* to killing the Count (237). Far from being Stoker's quintessentially chivalrous guardians of female virtue, Saberhagen's men are would-be sexual predators in their own right. They are, as Nina Auerbach says, "more dangerous than the vampire" on the grounds of sheer "smug stupidity" (loc. 2381). More seriously, Dacre Stoker and Ian Holt's Harker in *Dracula the Un-dead* (2009) is a drunk, their Seward a drug addict, their Van Helsing a vampire (!), whereas Dracula turns out to be an exemplar of Christian virtue, a "knight of God" (378). Similarly, Essex's Von Helsing, Arthur, and Seward are gold-diggers,

murderers, and would-be rapists, feeding off and consuming the female protagonists. Von Helsing's figurative vampirism through blood transfusion, in fact, is intended to produce a "race of supermen" from women "relieved of [their] biological and moral weaknesses" (Essex 227), a materialist obsession with blood and bodies that evokes both the eugenicist theories advocated during the nineteenth century by theorists like Francis Galton and, to a twenty-first century reader, the Nazis. This variety of vampirism proves far more dangerous to Mina and Lucy than Dracula does, rooted as it is in a terror of femininity that Dracula, at first, disclaims. Even the more heroic Morris Quince falls prey to the general corruption; as Mina thinks to herself, if Arthur was underhanded, then so was Morris, "seducing a friend's fiancée" behind his back (Essex 93).

As these examples suggest, plots turning on Dracula's romance with Mina posit two competing sites of monstrosity: the middle- and upper-class Victorian man, whose monstrosity turns out to be the cultural norm, and the vampire, whose monstrosity is partly inflected by his more subversive eroticism. Rather than being the sort of vampire who "obeys human laws, respects Western society's norms, and shares its values" (Tenga and Zimmerman 77), Dracula, at least initially, offers a radical alternative to an utterly degraded culture. In this context, Lucy Westenra's sexual liberation depends on and partakes of the same corruption that affects her male counterparts. Although she may well represent "modernity," it is a modernity that itself must be swept away by the vampire's providential arrival on English soil.[5] If we think about these figures of male inadequacy and degeneracy facing off against Dracula, the international threat and potent male, we can see a counter-history coming into play. Bram Stoker's Dracula unites men from multiple nations and professions to successfully ward off the threat of reverse colonization by a would-be warrior from the East; his Dracula is a hangover from an age of brute force that stands in implicit contrast to the manly and civilizing powers of British imperialism. In Mary Hallab's turn of phrase, the "antique patriarchal Dracula" seems not to understand that both he and everything for which he stands are "dead" (39). Here, though, the putative forces of empire, far from being manly, are in thrall to their own basest desires; their resistance to Dracula is no nationalist or imperialist self-defense. Rather, it implies a mass cultural suicide. What sort of men will *they* reproduce?

By contrast, Mina's erotic awakening is energized by a force independent of the late-Victorian corruption around her, and often requires the mass immolation (sometimes literally) of those whose sexual morals are not up to the novel's par. Andrew Smith has argued of the neo-Victorian Gothic that "the past [...] appears to re-energise the present and transforms political views and private lives" (71). Similarly, Dracula's temporal otherness—as remnant of a historical past and potential inhabitant of an as-yet unknown future—turns him into a suitable vehicle for historical critique. Vampire eroticism, which allows both male and female to penetrate and be penetrated, suggests that women may express desire actively as well as succumb to it passively (although the Dracula romances noticeably downplay the violence and exploitation *also* suggested by feeding on another). Moreover, the close connection between sexuality and feeding suggests that monogamy may not be a requirement for romance—the vampire, after all, needs many sources of food. In that sense, the Dracula-Mina romance plot also puts the adultery plot onto a collision course with the far less familiar polygamy plot. And even though it is Dracula who redirects Mina's sexual energies, he inadvertently redirects them towards her husband: unlike the wayward Lucy, Mina's sexuality will reach its full flowering only in her choice of monogamy.

Mina makes her choice: *Dracula in Love*

Here, let me slow down and offer a closer analysis of a single novel, Essex's *Dracula in Love*, to see how this narrative strategy plays out in practice. Essex's Mina is associated with the Celtic supernatural: her adult self exists in a disenchanted world, in which spirits do not communicate with humans and animals have no intelligible speech, but her encounter with Dracula restores her awareness of the organic connection between natural and supernatural, body and spirit. In effect, Mina experiences the world through the point of view of what Charles Taylor calls the "buffered self," grounded in reason, and believing in the possibility "of disengaging from whatever is beyond the boundary, and of giving its own autonomous order to its life"; the novel's plot, by contrast, promises the utopian return of a "porous self," in which the "extra-human" shapes human experience "emotionally and spiritually" (38-39, 40).[6] The novel actually begins with an attempted rape (real or imagined), from which Mina is rescued by a mysterious gentleman whom she compares to "the image of the Christ welcoming his flock" (Essex 9). This sacralized Dracula is the savior, the comforter; moreover, Mina's instinctive response anticipates Dracula's eventual revelation that his vampirism developed from a "sect of warrior monks," who argued, in a revisionist reading of the Eucharist, that "drinking blood was the secret to life everlasting" (Essex 273-274). Mina has grasped something of significance: from the get-go the novel associates human male sexuality, especially sexual penetration, with violence, cruelty, and a will to power over women, whereas Dracula's violence is pure, redemptive (albeit within the context of what turns out to be a very Dan Brown-type vision of Christianity, rooted in esotericism and conspiracy theory). What Mina sees around her confirms her anxieties about sex: after all, a former friend, betrayed by her lover, is now forced to walk the streets, an example of how male sexuality turns women into consumable objects (Essex 23).

Mina's not-yet-blooming eroticism is at a standstill between two poles, the voyeuristic and the physical—a position echoed by Jonathan's own inability to reconcile his moral and desiring selves. The journalist Kate Reed (a character initially conceived by Stoker for *Dracula*, then deleted) points out that Mina had enjoyed a performance by two drag kings and that, in general, she is very much "the *daring* sort" (Essex 24; emphasis in original). Mina's adventurousness, in other words, is confined to the gaze, and stops short at the actual sexual act; moreover, her self-imposed limitations are echoed by her fiancé Jonathan, who considers himself, in Mina's words, a "thoroughly modern man" (Essex 33), and yet plans to have a stereotypical marriage in which Mina will be his "princess" (Essex 34). This fantasy, which casts the bride as the protected virgin to Jonathan's manly, knightly protector, fails to survive Jonathan's adventure in Dracula's castle and afterwards. Jonathan confesses that he "succumbed to what were the most overt advances," but that later, under the power of multiple women who "shared me among them," he "felt as if I had no choice in the matter, that my will was entirely suppressed" (Essex 149, 151). Despite the phrasing, neither Mina nor the novel distinguishes between the self-justification of the first instance (Essex 149-50) and what appears to be rape in the second; instead, Mina, Jonathan, and, indeed, Dracula cast these incidents as equivalent sexual and emotional betrayals. Jonathan's lack of masculine "will" signals his incapacity as a good husband and foreshadows more frightening betrayals. But simultaneously, Jonathan's and Mina's joint possessiveness *also* marks the boundary line between Victorian past and modern "us": the two characters must journey beyond this phase

of their emotional existence to enter into a modernized, more egalitarian relationship. First, though, they require Dracula.

The conflict between Dracula and Jonathan plays up the tension between Mina's desire for liberty and Jonathan's interest in being a Disney prince. The battleground is Mina's autoerotic self-discovery: in caressing her own body, she simultaneously becomes aware of literal hidden depths and of the perils of her exploration. "It felt like nothing I had ever felt before," she muses of her own interior, "soft and smooth, and empty and full at the same time, a moist cushion of a cave" (Essex 46). She becomes aware that she is somehow split, that culture has decreed that her own body must remain a mystery. The Dracula romance plot promises to heal that split, in much the same way that it promises to reenchant Mina's sense of the world. But first, she must overcome her own fear of independence, which sends her to "Lucy's exuberant company, where we might share excitement about our destiny as brides" (Essex 47). Marriage, Mina thinks later, is supposed to provide "order" (Essex 157). The marriage plot promises to transform the unruly, disruptive energies of desire into something organized, socially legitimated, and carefully controlled. "Destiny," too, implies that marriage is a *given*, a pre-determined rather than a freely chosen state. The irony, however, is that Lucy is feeling no such excitement, as she prefers her secret affair with the artistic Morris over her conventional future with Arthur. In that sense, the novel initially appears to shatter the romance plot altogether. Surely the future lies with Lucy's unwillingness to adhere to social norms about female sexuality, rather than Mina's investment in a comic romance plot that banishes chaos?

But that is not the case: Mina's choice is between two husbands, not a lifetime of sexual libertinism. Nina Auerbach argues that *Dracula* is, in part, about forcing "the restraints of marriage" (loc. 1354) onto an unwilling young woman, but Essex and her fellow novelists recast the Dracula marriage question in terms of choice and inclination. "The choice is yours," Dracula says, when Mina warns him that she might refuse to accompany him to Ireland (Essex 263); and again, Jonathan "chose to remain at the castle, just as you chose to stay with me" (Essex 281). Everyone, in other words, is a free agent.[7] Yet "choice" turns out to be in conflict with the romance plot—as well as with Jonathan's own problematic sexual experiences with the vampire women. Granted, Dracula does bed Mina (or, at least, bite her) on her wedding night, but he does so under the guise of being her "true husband" (Essex 152). This encounter casts vampire sex as "communion" (Essex 154), with all the religious overtones that entails, and posits a perfect union between lover and beloved; it sharply contrasts with both Mina's aborted wedding night and a later sexual encounter with Jonathan that leaves her "angry and humiliated" (Essex 234). Once again, Dracula the vampire usurps the position of Christ the bridegroom, while he also becomes the idealized eternal beloved. Yet an anxious Mina worries that she, too, has given in to chaotic desires, thinking that "Lucy had seemed possessed by the same passions that had consumed Jonathan and left him howling in the fields of Styria" (Essex 156). Communion, possession, consumption: does erotic desire lead the self to awareness, or is it a form of madness, or even a form of dangerous erasure? If the vampire offers an alternative to the corrupted sexuality of late-Victorian culture, does he merely point the way to another form of self-loss?

In fact, Lucy's libertinism boomerangs into literal imprisonment in Seward's asylum; the sexually free woman finds herself entrapped in a loveless marriage that reduces her to a bank account and a body at man's beck and call. Stripped of direct control over her own finances, unwillingly sedated, Lucy finds that the marriage plot—which had included a

dream of Arthur as a forgiving, self-sacrificial angel—has become more Bluebeard than Cinderella. Part of her “treatment” under Von Helsing is to be subjected to both Arthur’s and Seward’s sexual caresses, which inspires only “self-disgust” instead of her earlier exhilaration (Essex 179). Lucy’s initial sexual autonomy does not survive marriage. Instead, her plot morphs into a near parody of the neo-Victorian Gothic marriage, defined by male domination, sexual objectification, and commodification. As Mina soon discovers, Seward is aroused by constraining women in straitjackets—an obvious figure for male sexuality’s effects on women’s liberty. But he also proposes an adulterous relationship based on “empty[ing] our minds to each other” (Essex 215)—the mirror image of the perfect communion Mina experiences with the Count, which again raises the question of the latter’s desirability. It becomes difficult to separate communion from self-destruction.

To make matters worse, Seward, Von Helsing, and even Jonathan turn against Mina by charging her with “sexual hysteria” (Essex 242), pathologizing female sexuality altogether. This nineteenth-century precursor to Freudianism again stands as Victorian “other” to our “now,” insofar as it subjects women’s sexual agency to male rule—literally imposing another one of Seward’s straitjackets on a wayward woman. The rejected Seward diagnoses Mina’s signs of sexuality as “erotomania” (Essex 243), a side effect of female biology that leaves women prey to their own passions. The sexual woman is a woman in thrall to her own body, rather than an autonomous, desiring subject. When Mina insists that she has not brought Dracula’s visitations upon herself, Von Helsing sneers that “the female always feigns innocence when seducing the male” (241). This marks the end of the fantasy of Lucy’s sexual liberation: Von Helsing’s contempt signals that men read female “virtue” as an act intended to cover for their libidinous excesses. For the men, the real monster here is the sexually active woman herself, who must be purged and brutalized (the water cure, for example) until she is rendered submissive. Even Jonathan demands that Mina “accommodate my wishes” (Essex 243), identifying proper masculinity with absolute control over women’s agency.

Luckily, before Mina can be raped, Dracula magically appears and whisks her away—a repetition of the Dracula-as-Christ analogy with which the novel began, but also an assertion of the vampire’s more-than-human masculine potency. As Dracula explains, Mina has “entered a magical kingdom” (Essex 266), finally rediscovering her true self in a world that unites the material and the spiritual. “Within you is the ability to fully integrate the body with eternal consciousness, to fuse flesh with spirit” (Essex 283), Dracula promises, in stark contrast to the novel’s more punitive uses of Christianity for sexual and social discipline. (Jonathan, after all, argues that the diagnosis of Mina’s sexual hysteria is divine providence in action [Essex 244].) As in Francis Ford Coppola’s film *Bram Stoker’s Dracula*, Mina is “eternally united” (Essex 267) to the Count, her soulmate—who, of course, also turns out to be an incredible lover. Where the narrative shunted Lucy from freewheeling sexuality to imprisonment and death, it whirls Mina in the opposite direction; where Lucy’s eroticism was material, Mina’s turns out to be literally on a higher plane of existence. It is not clear if this is supposed to be ancient wisdom or backdated New Age thinking, as Dracula sources part of his enlightenment to a stereotypical variant of Kali worship, complete with heavily sexualized (and, it is hinted, homoerotic) rites (Essex 293).

Vampiric eroticism turns out to be a syncretic version of all purportedly blood-obsessed religions, joined together with the immortality conferred by the blood of the Sidhe (Essex 304); in that sense, it is a global construct incorporating East and West, monotheism

and polytheism, paganism and Christianity, mortal and faerie. A by-product of the Crusades, post-medieval vampirism turns out to be a variant on the imperialism practiced by the late-Victorian British. But this is supposedly a kind of counter-imperialism that rejects territorial conquest. Dracula's sexual and spiritual enlightenment derives from an anti-materialist worldview ruled out by Mina's late-Victorian cultural context: the vampire hunters, entranced by biology and hard cash, fixate on the physical (the blood, the body) rather than on the ineffable (the exchange of energies between vampire and prey). As Dracula explains, Von Helsing is wrong to believe that "the blood draining" is what affects victims; instead, it is "the exposure to our power" that kills them, sometimes accidentally (Essex 282). Von Helsing's attempt to breed up a new race thus finds its transcendent match in the vampire's immortal perfections, which ultimately break down the boundaries between bodies and souls.

While Dracula conjures up visions of a new broad path to salvation, the novel instead leaves us with a rejuvenated understanding of heterosexuality, now appropriately updated to include both love and non-pathologized eroticism. As Gary Waller has pointed out, vampire narratives default to heterosexual marriage in the end, and these novels are no different (loc. 3095; cf. Botting 160).[8] In that sense, the novel is perhaps more Victorian than the author recognizes: Mina's and Jonathan's mutual embrace of a new domesticity, founded on egalitarian principles, is precisely the kind of "love which is based on a deep respect" that Victorian feminists like Josephine Butler thought would rejuvenate the institution of marriage (xxxiii). The problem is Mina's baby, as it also is in Saberhagen's *The Dracula Tape* and James' *Dracula, My Love*. Mina immediately terminates her romantic relationship with Dracula in order to prioritize her child's needs, opting for the relatively uninteresting Jonathan (the good provider) over the flamboyant vampire (the good lover). Far from being the "generally perfect" lover whose "ability to love and be loved is just another aspect of that perfection" (Mukherjea 13), Dracula turns out to be not just useless as a romantic companion, but also incapable of understanding compromise, self-sacrifice, or even the possibility of development. For Essex, the novel's key narrative tension plays out explicitly as a matter of a woman's power to choose, and the vampire reveals his inadequacy as a potential lifemate once Mina chooses something other than sexual freedom. Dracula knows Mina will choose Jonathan and the baby because "you have destroyed our love time and again with your foolish choices" (Essex 333). Their fantastic union of souls across time thus collapses into bathetic failure, as the vampire pursues the beloved he *knows* he will lose, and whose mind he is eternally doomed not to understand. Fred Botting suggests that Anne Rice's vampires seek romance as the last available route to "meaning, faith and credibility" (84), but are always doomed to find it inadequate; however, Essex's Dracula disqualifies himself not because his dreams of romance are too cosmic in their implications, but for the far more mundane reason that they are solely about his own wants. The novel castigates any self-gratifying female sexuality as a potential loss of liberty, yet equally warns that sex without male emotional reciprocity is just as dangerous. Far from celebrating the substitution of "romantic passion" for a lost religious faith (Hallab 121; cf. Williamson 44), the novel constrains such passions in maternal concerns. Dracula may believe that his erotic encounters with Mina are "a way to create a family or create a substitute for a family" (Nakagawa), but his fantasy of an eternal pair-bond cannot accommodate biological reproduction, let alone the demands of child-rearing. Mina's choice to raise her child with

Jonathan can only strike Dracula as selfish, and the vampire's inability to comprehend self-sacrifice and self-control indicates the limitations of his allure.

By contrast, when Mina unwillingly reunites with Jonathan, he insists that he will make himself "worthy" to be the child's father (Essex 354). Mina vanquishes the vampire not by staking him, but by choosing a man who is more other-directed, more aware of himself as a man in need of moral improvement. Jolted into self-consciousness through his encounter with the vampire, Jonathan at least hints at the possibility that male monstrosity can be tamed or sublimated. But Mina's choice also suggests that the freer world of vampire sexuality is a childlike world—a place "for children who have not yet come to terms with life's realities" (Crawford 94)—that must be abandoned for a life in which, for both sexes, fulfillment encompasses attending to the needs of others. Dracula's childishness manifests itself less in his criminality and more in his sexuality, which cannot brook the possibility of restraint on the satisfaction of any and all immediate desires. Jonathan can seek moral redemption; Dracula, forever engaged in the same unsatisfactory quest for his one beloved woman, is not even capable of thinking himself out of his self-imposed romantic imprisonment, a failing that ultimately aligns him with the corrupt human men he professes to despise. Unlike the type of romantic vampire hero whose desire for gore conceals his "true character" (Franiuk and Scherr 19), Dracula is *exactly* what he appears to be on the surface, and proves himself unable to be anything else.

Conclusion: vampires and the Victorian sexual other

The vampire's narrative function, then, is less to provide an acceptable life choice than, as an "idealised mirror of human states" (Botting 82), to render Victorian constructions of female sexuality painfully apparent, and in this novel, as in many others, he enables Mina to understand how her needs have been confined within the narrow parameters of nineteenth-century sexual conventions.[9] "I told him [Jonathan] that I loved him," Elaine Bergstrom's Mina notes in her journal, "then asked him to decide if he can love me with the passion I need" (Bergstrom 325). Dracula, the "other," instead others the Victorians, whose sexual repressions become monstrosities that can only be overcome through an energized marriage bed. In *Dracula in Love*, Mina and Jonathan, having passed through the fires of infidelity, now enjoy a "world of infinite sensuousness" (Essex 367), but they do so safely in the comfort of their own home. Having explored alternatives to monogamy, in other words, the characters *choose* monogamous married life, while reserving their more outrageous experiments for the privacy of the bedroom. Instead of asking the female protagonist to make a "sacrifice of sexual love" (Weisser 78; cf. Sturgeon-Dodsworth 175-76), for the greater good, *Dracula in Love* and the other Dracula romances insist that the heroine's monstrous erotic past is the necessary prologue for her marital future—even if, as in Saberhagen's *The Dracula Tape*, true erotic satisfaction only happens when Mina enters her undead future with the Count. Here, then, is a modern egalitarian marriage, founded solidly on the bedrock of romantic ideals of perfect companionate relationships between men and women—indeed, the novel's conclusion could come straight out of *Jane Eyre*, if one ignored the blood. At the same time, despite endorsing women's sexual pleasure, the novel pathologizes anything that does not look like "normal" human sex—Seward's sadomasochistic tendencies, for example.

The “new” modern woman ultimately confines herself to celebrating the mutual recognition of complementary male and female desires within otherwise traditional marriage.[10]

Many neo-Victorian novels have no happy ending for their heroines, entrapped in Gothic narratives in which male sexuality is irredeemably monstrous. The *Dracula* pastiches try to solve the problem by introducing a literally otherworldly mode of male sexual identity. Mina becomes thoroughly modern by defeating Dracula, not by killing him (usually) but, rather, by asserting autonomy through rational choice: she endorses his vision of desire and then transforms it into a new form of marriage that rests on a fully privatized form of sexual egalitarianism. Lucy Westenra, the woman who prioritizes desire over marriage, must be evacuated from the narrative. So, too, must men whose lusts manifest themselves primarily through a desire for absolute control over female bodies. Yet Mina’s choice of monogamy with the “right” man—who usually turns out to not be Dracula—does nothing to challenge the conditions under which late-Victorian men have become monstrous, conditions that seem as magical as the vampire himself. That it takes an interview with the vampire in order to get from “them” to “us” hints at a conceptual blockage about sex, and particularly male sexuality, in neo-Victorian fiction.[11]

[1] Gelder notes that these novels, along with others like those by Chelsea Quinn Yarbro, strongly resemble “women’s romance—notably, the tracing out of the vampire’s search for fulfilment, for a ‘complete’ love relationship” (109).

[2] For critiques of *Twilight*’s sexual politics, see, e.g., Jennings and Wilson; Kane; Platt.

[3] Kohlke argues that *Fingersmith*’s conclusion is far more ambivalent than it first appears (“Neo-Victorian Female Gothic” 224).

[4] Similar attempts to date this trend have ranged from the mid-twentieth century to the early twenty-first: see, e.g., Clements; Crawford 46-59; Hessels 62; Nakagawa; Poole 211-14. By contrast, Williamson dates the “sympathetic vampire” to the mid-nineteenth century (30-36).

[5] Abbott argues that “[t]he vampire is in a constant state of disintegration and renewal, and it is through this process that it is intrinsically linked to the modern world, which is also perpetually in the throes of massive change” (loc. 140).

[6] Nelson suggestively argues that the allure of vampires is, in part, due to “desiring to experience a reality beyond the material world, even if the need itself is not consciously acknowledged and even if the only vehicles available are the uniformly dark imaginary supernatural characters that pop culture presents outside organized religion” (133).

[7] It is worth noting that Essex’s interest in “choice” does not really follow Karen Sturgeon-Dodsworth’s critique of neo-Victorian fiction, in which such “choice” rests on the assumption that “emancipation has already irrefutably occurred” (174). Both Essex’s novel and the other *Dracula* pastiches are quite emphatic that without the vampire’s intervention, emancipation is impossible within the constraints of contemporary Victorian culture.

[8] Insofar as the novels reject *Dracula* as a romantic option, however, they deviate from current trends in vampire romance fiction, in which vampires “really are just like us, and all they really want is to live quietly in a monogamous marriage with the person they love” (Crawford 87).

[9] This narrative outcome complicates Łuksza’s argument that modern vampire romances turn the “damsel in distress” plot into a story about resistance, self-sufficiency, and

personal development (435). In Essex's novel, Mina tends to *remain* in distress until Dracula comes to the rescue, and her self-discovery cannot be separated from Jonathan's.

[10] This trend is even more obvious in both Warrington's *Dracula the Undead* and Stoker's *Dracula the Un-Dead*: the former has an evil lesbian vampire and two evil gay vampires, the latter an evil lesbian vampire. Cf. Crawford on other vampire romances (78-81; 115).

[11] This article is based on a presentation originally delivered at the *Neo-Victorian Cultures* conference at Liverpool John Moores University in 2013. I am grateful to Nadine Muller for her comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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