"There is a curse on her": British Fin-de-Siècle Anxieties and Patriarchal Appropriation of Women's History in Florence Marryat's *The Blood of the Vampire.*

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Bram Stoker's *Dracula* was published in 1897 and its enduring popularity has shaped forever our understanding of vampires. Thanks to innumerable plays, films, and re-writings, as well as significant academic interest, still today, "mention the word 'vampire' and the image created by Count Dracula always springs to mind" (Beresford 139). 1897, however, was a significant year for vampire literature also because it saw the publication of another piece of Gothic fiction, Florence Marryat's *The Blood of the Vampire*. Although still relatively unknown, this novel has been recognized by recent scholarship as an important work within the female vampire tradition together with Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872), Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Ducayne* (1896) and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's "Luella Miller" (1902).[1]

The story concerns young and beautiful Harriet Brandt, a psychic vampire doomed to drain of vitality and eventually kill all the people close to her. She is a formidable predator but, being unaware of her deadly power, she is innocent of any malicious feelings towards her victims and the reader cannot but sympathize with her and her personal tragedy.[2] Harriet is also an Anglo-Jamaican heiress and the "blood" referenced in the title has less to do with the traditional notion of a vampire's thirst for the vital fluid than with her multiracial ancestry.

Marryat, unfairly criticized for her supposed attempt to imitate Stoker's Gothic tale, was the object of a scathing contemporary review in the *Speaker*: "Truth to tell, this vampire is no more terrifying to grown-up minds than would be the turnip-bogey of our childhood. … and instead of being, as it is intended to be, appalling and blood-curdling, "*The Blood of the*

Vampire" produces an impression of tediousness and disagreeable sensationalism" (*The Blood of the Vampire* 214-5).[3] Apart from the sensationalistic element and the homage to Gothic fiction through references to Obeah witchcraft and vampirism, however, the story deals with more prosaic and urgent issues of the period, issues that caused a great deal of anxiety and controversy. Harriet was never meant to be the bloodthirsty un-dead of the Gothic tradition, but rather the embodiment of threats that fin-de-siècle patriarchal Great Britain perceived as coming from both within and without the Empire. She is "a 'heroine' who encodes many late nineteenth-century concerns such as transgressive women and sexuality, race, and ideas of heredity" (*TBV* xi).[4] In her novels, Florence Marryat often created complex female characters who challenged gender norms and stereotypes, so we can safely assume that "she is using … Harriet Brandt to give voice to these issues, rather than merely attempting to be 'terrifying'" (xi).[5]

We first meet Harriet at the Belgian resort of Heyst, the object of admiration and curiosity: she is young, beautiful, sensual, wealthy, and quite uninhibited in her enjoyment of life's pleasures. Above all, she is very self-confident: "The new-comer did not seem in the least abashed by the number of eyes which were turned upon her, but bore the scrutiny very calmly, smiling in a sort of furtive way at everybody" (*TBV* 4).

After years of loneliness in a convent, Harriet hungers for companionship and tries to befriend two English ladies, Margaret Pullen, and Elinor Leyton. No one suspects that she is of Anglo-Jamaican ancestry, both because her physical features do not reveal it and because she repeatedly emphasizes her English side: "I am an English woman, you know! … My father was English, his name was Henry Brandt, and my mother was a Miss Carey – daughter of one of the Justices of Barbadoes" (13). Margaret likes Harriet and even allows her baby Ethel to be left in her care; Elinor, on the other hand, openly disapproves of the girl's lack of English propriety and

avoids her company. The plot thickens with the arrival of Elinor's fiancé Ralph Pullen and Margaret's godfather Dr. Phillips.

Ralph, a vain and self-conceited officer, is immediately attracted to Harriet and flirts with her shamelessly, spending most of his time with the her and her new friends the Gobellis. He keeps his engagement to Elinor hidden and finds Harriet's ancestry just pleasantly exotic when it is first revealed to him: "Ah! A drop of Creole blood in her then, I daresay! You never see such eyes in an English face!" (49).

So far, the only notable event is the sudden illness of baby Ethel, attributed to teething by her nurse; but the arrival of Dr. Phillips represents a turning point in the story. He immediately notices Harriet and asks if she has anything to do with the West Indies; introduced to the girl, he recollects meeting her father in Jamaica, but his tone of vague reminiscence changes abruptly once he is alone with Margaret and Ralph: "It is about that Miss Brandt! … She comes of a terrible parentage. No good can ever ensue of association with her"! (67).

From then on, and throughout the novel, not only does the doctor repeatedly appropriate Harriet's family history, but he also divulges it with a plethora of lurid details - some of them folklore, superstition, or unverified hearsay - without her knowledge or consent. He is unmistakably determined to socially isolate her and, in order to understand his behavior, we must consider how she encodes several threats to the patriarchal fin-de-siècle British culture.

With her European appearance, Harriet can easily mingle with English society and even charm an Englishman into marrying her and having mixed-race children. Fear of reverse colonization and pseudo-scientific theories about heredity and race degeneration -especially resulting from miscegenation[6] - generated hostile reactions in those who refused to accept that Britain was becoming the multicultural country we know today. The fact that Harriet ignores the

truth about her own ancestry and confidently introduces herself as an English woman also plays into the late-Victorian concerns that "hereditary degeneration could be anywhere – hidden or latent – even in those who believe themselves to be 'normal' and respectable" (Ifill 85). Through his derogatory, racist language Dr. Phillips expresses both the perceived threat of the racial "Other" to the white English middle class, and the fears about heredity that were dominant in contemporary scientific and social thought.

Harriet does not possess only a mixed-race identity: being an orphan and an heiress, she has social and economic control over her life; she is also not easily intimidated and willing to enjoy every pleasure available, regardless of social conventions or gender norms. In the story, for example, we see how liberally she spends her money on whims; how avidly she gorges on food in public; how sexually forward she is with Ralph and how ready she is to defy scandal when discovering his duplicity. As Helena Ifill observes, "The fin de siècle is the era of the New Woman who was associated with increased social and sexual, as well as political, freedom. Harriet's position as a financially independent, willful, and sometimes shockingly liberated young woman, reflects a society in which women were increasingly able to act as independent beings" (87-8). Of course, that does not mean that women were no longer imprisoned within patriarchal strictures and we will see how Harriet herself will eventually succumb, her 'vampirism' becoming one of the metaphors of entrapment that will characterize much of the twentieth-century Female Gothic literature, from Daphne du Maurier to Angela Carter or Margaret Atwood.[7]

Dr. Phillips, with his medical knowledge and professional status, represents patriarchal authority working to neutralize the threats embodied by Harriet and it is not a coincidence that he

is a doctor. In many of her novels, Marryat exposes the vulnerability of women at the hands of the medical profession, especially those women diagnosed with hysteria, "the quintessential female malady" (Showalter 129). Female nervous disease was often attributed by Victorian physicians to women's ambitions for intellectual, social, sexual, and financial freedom that could not easily find a place in the patriarchal late nineteenth-century society. In other words, female rebellion to the traditional domestic and conjugal duties was unacceptable and needed a medical treatment intended to establish the male doctor's total control: "the medical ideal of a full and radical cure took the form of a kind of moral checkmate – the complete submission of the patient to the physician's authority. … The goal was to isolate the patient from her family support systems" (Showalter 137).[8] Dr. Phillips portrays the power that comes with the supposed superiority of medical wisdom and the patriarchal desire to control female behavior: with his words of authority and his 'diagnosis' of vampirism, first he frightens away Harriet's potential friends and love interests by warning them against any sort of association with her; then he unwittingly brings about her death.

We can draw parallels with other literary female vampires destroyed by medical men, most notably Carmilla and Lucy Westenra. They both exhibit a behavior that transgresses gender norms: Carmilla is lesbian, while Lucy becomes in death sexually aggressive; similarly to 'hysterical' patients, they need male doctors to be controlled and treated, even in extreme ways. Doctors are never far away from vampires and the portrayals of Carmilla, Lucy and Harriet "establish the very strong parallels between vampirism and hysteria and show how writers used … recognizable tropes to depict demonic characters that symbolized transgressive women. … The figure of the vampire is clearly a malleable concept and can be adapted to represent fin-de-siècle fears that threatened the stability of gender ideologies concerning women" (*BTV* xiii).

There are, however, some important differences between *Carmilla* and *Dracula* and *The Blood of the Vampire*: Dr. Phillips does not drive a stake through Harriet's heart, nor does he behead her; instead, he appropriates and manipulates her story, denying her the right to tell it in her own words. Maria Tatar reminds us that "language, speech and plot were among the few instruments of challenge and change available to women in times past" (102), but here the doctor claims ownership of storytelling for himself only, seeking to contain and control Harriet's potential for damage and ultimately playing a significant part in her decision to end her own life.

Zealous Dr. Phillips begins by providing both Margaret and Ralph with disturbing information about Harry Brandt, a scientist who, expelled from Swiss hospitals for his cruel and unnecessary experiments, had moved to Jamaica. Here he had continued his crimes on slaves, finally meeting his well-deserved end: "Brandt was a brute – the perpetrator of such atrocities in vivisection and other scientific experiments that he was finally slaughtered on his own plantation by his servants, and everyone said it served him right" (*TBV* 76).

Conveniently glossing over the unsavory reality of colonial abuse, Dr. Phillips proceeds then to describe Harriet's nameless mother in derogatory terms: "The most awful woman I have ever seen. … She was the daughter of a certain Judge Carey of Barbadoes by one of his slave girls and Brandt took her as his mistress before she was fourteen. At thirty … she was a revolting spectacle. Gluttonous and obese – her large eyes rolling and her sensual lips protruding … She was said to be 'Obeah' too by the natives" (76-7).

The good doctor condemns Harry Brandt, a fellow medical man, for a thwarted use of his scientific knowledge, but not for sexually assaulting a child; Harriet's mother, on the other hand, far from being considered a victim, is a "fat, flabby half caste [with a] low forehead and

half-formed brain" (68) who also thirsts for blood. The reason for her unusual taste is explained by servants' gossip and superstition that Dr. Phillips seem to consider indubitable truth: "They declared that when her slave mother was pregnant with her she was bitten by a Vampire bat … Anyway the slave woman did not survive her delivery and her fellows prophesied that the child would grow up to be a murderess "(68-9).[9]

Harriet's mixed-race background becomes for Dr. Phillips a certainty of inherited evil: "The bastard of a man like Henry Brandt, cruel, dastardly, godless, and a woman like her terrible mother, a sensual … and blood-thirsty half-caste – what do you expect their daughter to become? … There is a curse upon her and it will affect all within her influence" (69). The inheritance of her mother and grandmother's black blood is perceived to be the most dangerous hereditary legacy, so Phillips explicitly links Harriet's sensuality to her racial background: "The girl is a quadroon, and she shows it distinctly in her long-shaped eyes … and her wide mouth and blood-red lips! … I can tell you by the way she eats her food, and the way in which she uses her eyes, that she has inherited her half-caste mother's greedy and sensual disposition" (77).

Harriet's racial characteristics as a Creole are continually emphasized and "the encoding as belonging to an 'other' race suggests a fear of the non-white … [and] of miscegenation and the eugenic belief in the need to keep the white races pure" (xxiv). Both vampires and mixed-race people transgress boundaries and, through their ability to disguise themselves, represent the hidden threats in a reverse invasion narrative. They become "metaphors of destabilization [whose goal] is to weaken the patriarchy and strengthen the repressed and excluded" (Asma 329), so Dr. Phillips uses language to transform Harriet into a monstrous creature in the attempt to contain her within close boundaries: "She possesses the fatal attributes of the Vampire that affected her mother's birth - … that will make Harriet draw upon the health

and strength of all with whom she may be intimately associated – that may render her love fatal to such as she may cling to!" (*TBV* 79).

With Harriet, Florence Marryat presents her own version of the dangerous colonial outsider "passing as white [who] lures white British men to their eventual doom, with the most famous figure being Charlotte Brönte's depiction of Bertha Mason, who, according to Rochester, "tricked" him into marrying her by hiding her family history" (Edmundson 84). Fifty years after *Jane Eyre*'s publication, Creole women were still object of fear and racism; but Marryat had lived in Anglo-Indian society for many years and was well aware of the theories of racial inferiority and the perceived dangers of racial intermixture of her time. She knew that "mixed-race women were viewed as a threat to the cultural and racial superiority of the British because they had the ability to attract, marry and produce children with British men without having to reveal themselves as biracial" (75).

Dr. Phillips' accusations of vampirism seem to be confirmed when baby Ethel, who has spent quite some time with Harriet, dies. Rather than admitting to his own failure, the doctor chooses to demonize the girl once again: "I have no other means of accounting for [the baby's] sudden failure of strength and vitality. … My medicines have not had the slightest effect upon her condition, which is inexplicable" (*TBV* 79-80).

The action moves to London, where Harriet is a guest at the Gobellis' house. During a stormy meeting, she is angrily confronted by Elinor, who has discovered some letters to her fiancé Ralph and demands an end to any further contact; however, the heiress violently threatens to publicly shame the deceitful officer. Dr. Phillips once again decides to interfere in Harriet's life; he turns to his acquaintance Anthony Pennell, a successful writer, asking him to persuade the girl to be reasonable. The doctor worries about Ralph's attraction to Harriet, but he has not

considered the officer's stronger attraction for Elinor's money and social position. Ralph has now contemptuous words for Harriet, repeating a pattern of history appropriation and colonial arrogance: "Miss Brandt is not the sort of girl that any man could marry. … you should hear old Phillips talk of her and her parents. They were the most awful people, and she has black blood in her, her mother was a half-caste, so you see it would be impossible for any man in my position to think of marrying her. One might get a piebald son and hair! Ha! Ha!" (143).

Harriet and Anthony fall in love and plan to marry, but tragedy strikes again. Bobby, Baroness Gobelli's teenage son, with whom Harriet has been in frequent company, is found dead. Distraught by grief, the Baroness openly accuses the girl of killing not only the boy, but also baby Ethel with her "curse of black blood and of the vampire's blood which kills everything it caresses. Look back over your past life … and you will see that it is the case! And if you do not believe me, go, and ask your friend Dr. Phillips" (156).

And so a distraught Harriet finally confronts the man who is condemning her to a friendless and loveless life. Dr. Phillips's first reaction is indignant: "Madame Gobelli was extremely wrong to speak in such a manner and I do not know on what authority she did so" (161). Only he, the representative of male authority, has the right to appropriate Harriet's story and manipulate it for his own ends. In a patronizing tone masquerading as concern, the doctor confirms Madame Gobelli's wild accusations, although he is utterly unable to provide the least medical proof of the girl's supposed vampirism. Surprisingly enough for a man of science, he does not make any comment on the absurdity of the vampire bat story[10] and only talks in vague terms about nourishing natures who "*give out* their magnetic power" (161) and "those … who *draw* from their neighbors … sapping their physical strength and feeding upon them … until they are perfectly exhausted" (161). After adding that such 'drawing' natures have been

compared to a vampire bat, but that it is only a "fable" (162), this esteemed medical professional proceeds nonetheless to give Harriet some devastating warning based exactly on that fable: "You are not likely to make those with whom intimately associate stronger either in mind or body. …You must never hope to keep anyone near you for long, without injuring them. … I should advice you seriously *not* to marry" (162).

Considering herself now the unwitting cause of all the deaths experienced so far, and fearing for Anthony's life, Harriet at first refuses to marry him, but soon defers to his judgment. They get married and leave for the Continent, where he dies from apparent exhaustion after few weeks. Devastated by loss and guilt, Harriet leaves all her possessions to Margaret, wishing to make her financially independent and to atone for the death of baby Ethel, and then takes her own life. Her last words are an of echo Dr. Phillips' own: "My parents have made me unfit to live. Let me go to a world where the curse of heredity which they laid upon me may be mercifully wiped out" (187).

Harriet's fate is tragic and somehow the reader is left with the impression that she is an innocent prey, rather than an evil predator. In fact, a careful reading of the novel reveals that Marryat does not actually exclude the possibility of natural causes for the death attributed to psychic vampirism. Teething was considered a disorder in the Victorian era and babies were often given opium by well-meaning parents and nurses to help them sleep. Baroness Gobelli's son Bobby is described as sick and weak from the start, with possible hints at consumption. Anthony Pennell complains about dampness, unhealthy climate, and defective sewers in the cities they visit on their honeymoon. Harriet is not a monster, and her innocence is also evident when we compare her with other literary *femme fatale* or 'vamps' of the time, for example the

protagonist of Igino Ugo Tarchetti's novel *Fosca* (1869), who deliberately leads her unwilling lover to dishonor, depression, and mental and physical exhaustion.[11]

However, with her independent fortune, her uninhibited sensuality and her Afro-Caribbean blood, Harriet transgresses boundaries not only of class and gender, but also of culture and race. Dr. Phillips, a representative of patriarchal authority, perceives in her the threats of the New Woman at home and of the racial "Other" from the colonial outposts; he therefore sets out to neutralize such threats by appropriating, manipulating, and misusing her story, and by claiming scientific legitimacy to control her life. "There are no real monsters except those defined so by the powerful" (Asma 328) and Harriet is transformed into a monstrous outcast by patriarchy. A male doctor's words will eventually lead her to take her own life, but her death – unlike Carmilla's and Lucy Westenra's – will be on her own terms and her legacy will empower another woman.

Notes

[1] Florence Marryat (1833–99) was a prolific novelist, as well as a playwright, editor, spiritualist, actress and singer. Although considered just a "popular" writer in her time, she is finally attracting more scholarly attention, especially in the field of Women's Study. A biography is currently being written by Catherine Pope, managing editor at Victorian Secrets and manager of the very informative website florencemarryat.org.

[2] Marryat's deeply sympathetic portrayal of Harriet might be due to her own "diagnosis" by a medium in 1879 as having the qualities of a psychic vampire, as she wrote in her work *There is No Death* (1891). See Melissa Edmundson, *Women's Colonial Gothic Writing, 1850-1930. Haunted Empire,* pp. 91-2.

[3] Unsigned review, *Speaker*, 17, Jan. 1, 1898, pp. 29-30. The review appears in full in Florence Marryat, *The Blood of the Vampire*, ed. by Greta Depledge (Brighton, UK: Victorian Secrets Ltd, 2010), Appendix D, p. 213-5. All quotations in this essay are taken from this edition.

[4] From now on, *TBV* is the abbreviation for *The Blood of the Vampire*.

[5] Roman numbers in the text refer to Greta Depledge's Introduction to the novel.

[6] The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines *miscegenation* as "a mixture of races, especially: marriage, cohabitation, or sexual intercourse between a white person and a member of another race" (merriam-webster.com). The Cambridge Dictionary offers the following definition: "sexual relations between people of different races or the act of producing children from parents of different races" (dictionary.cambridge.org).

[7] It should be clarified that, while some critics read Harriet's independence and uninhibited behavior as representative of the New Woman, others point out the non-New-Womanly elements of her character, for example her deferring to Anthony Pennell's judgement, or her complete lack of political or reformist interest. For a detailed analysis of this topic, see Helena Ifill, "Florence Marryat's The Blood of the Vampire (1897): Negotiating Anxieties of Genre and Gender at the Fin de Siècle" (2019).

[8] For a detailed study of psychiatric treatment of mentally ill women in the Victorian and Edwardian eras, see Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady. Women, Madness and English Culture 1830 – 1980* (London: Virago Press, 1987), especially Chapter Five, "Nervous Women: Sex Roles and Sick Roles," pp. 121-44.

[9] Although by the early 1800s natural history had come a long way from its wonder-cabinet days, during the century some grotesque and hilarious descriptions of semi-fantastic creatures, like vampire bats, still circulated. In 1825 the British explorer and naturalist Charles Waterton (1782 – 1865) wrote in his *Wanderings in South America*: "At the close of the day … the vampires leave the hollow trees … and scour along the river's banks in quest of pray. On waking from sleep, the astonished traveler finds his hammock all stained with blood. It is the vampire that hath sucked him. … and so gently does this nocturnal surgeon draw the blood, that instead of being roused, the patient is lulled into a still profounder sleep." Quoted in Stephen T. Asma, *On Monsters. An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*. (Oxford UP, 2009), p. 132-3.

[10] Marryat herself does not seem to doubt the veracity of the vampire bat fable, possibly because she is drawing upon pseudo-scientific theories of her time about "maternal impressions". See Brenda Mann Hammack, "Florence Marryat's Female Vampire and the Scientizing of Hybridity" (2008).

[11] It is interesting to notice how actresses started exploiting vampire roles to achieve popularity at the beginning of the twentieth-century. Theda Bara (1885–1955), for example, the first "vamp" of silent movies, rose to fame in the 1915 film, *A Fool There Was*, in which she played the role of a psychic vampire, "a woman who was very much alive and who seduced, drained and ruined the men she encountered, several of whom die over the course of the film. There was no blood-sucking involved, but it was very much in keeping with nineteenth-century images of female vampires: they were beautiful but lethal" (Harkup192).

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