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Cover Page Footnote

A TSD member, Chris McGunnigle recently completed his Master's degree in English at Montclair State University in New Jersey. He gave a version of this article as a paper at the 2002 International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts.

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Chris McGunnigle

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If I could begin with a personal anecdote. A few weeks ago, I was having a conversation with my fiancée and father-in-law when my sister-in-law -- only 15 years old -- interrupted me. "Look at your teeth," she exclaimed. "You have fangs like Lestat." I thanked her kindly but in retrospect, I felt somewhat slighted. I don't want to have teeth like Lestat. I never liked him very much but I never knew why.

Until now.

He's too real.

Whereas once the vampire was a loner, he now has built his own cities, with his own cable access channel with reality TV and Barnabas Collins doing ads for denture cream. There are vampire clubs and parades and the metaphor becomes sensitive in its repercussions because to me, it does not sound like I am talking about vampires any more but rather an oppressed culture begging for acceptance, a minister's dark veil hiding the metaphor of cultural narration.

While I am a vampire fan, my specialty does not only involves vampires. Instead I focus my academia on what I call *phantom lovers* -- demons, vampires, ghosts -- products of our dark imagination given form as autoerotic, masturbatory expressions of our romantic fantasies. Sadly, I must break the chain of creativity and inform all the attentive readers of vampire stories that vampires are not real.

And they never can be.

Vampires today, in their evolved humanity, present a detached and oppositional portrait to the inhuman beasts of yesteryear, but in this metamorphosis of the undead metaphor, its revamped image for today's mass consumption, does the vampire as an abstract metaphor of deep expression retain its power? In the zeitgeist of 21st-century vampire icons, where do the legends of the past stand in the threat of today's images, and are today's images a menace that threatens to dethrone not only the Prince of Darkness of his power but the power of vampirism itself that has held us in thrall for centuries?

Why do we love vampires? A question as old as time, but times are changing. Martin Riccardo, in *Liquid Dreams of Vampires*, gives us an excellent overview of our fascination with the metaphor. Arguing that vampires provide an expression for forbidden passions and sexual ambiguity, he suggests that "On the level of dreams and fantasies, vampirism can be an outlet for erotic feelings that might be difficult to accept in a direct way" (89). But in a society that now engages in little else but the exploration and expression of dark and forbidden erotica, does the vampire become a more potent metaphor or does it fade into obsolescence?

We are already seeing clues that might lead us to a negative conclusion. Perhaps we have noticed that the vampires of today are different. We have Louis and Lestat -- dysfunctional, quarreling, angst-ridden, puerile androgynous partners who give new meaning to the institution of marriage -- like an insane asylum of the internalized other. Most of all, they are so utterly human, so below us. There is Angel, the dead-again virgin, writhing in the shadows of his own masculinity

for fear that three minutes of happiness will rob him of his humanity and turn him into an id-thirsty fiend. And Spike -- William the Bloody, acquiring his ominous moniker by attribute of his bad poetry -- implanted with a top secret, sci-fi government agency microchip in his head that prevents him from all violent vampiric interaction with humans.

The Gothic literature within which the vampire myth evolved thrives, takes great pleasure in the deconstruction of gender roles, the vampire one of many monstrous products of gender experimentation by Gothic authors. But now, with the vampire metaphor deconstructed possibly to the point of destruction, I ask, is this the vampire with which we fell in love? What effect has the slow castration of the vampire had upon the vampire myth and its attraction to both popular culture and literary arousal? In the day and age of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Blade*, is the vampire becoming a dying breed, given a root canal by Gothic degradation, or is it on the verge of return to its original roots?

I am not so much concerned about the final fate of the vampire itself but about the most important part of the vampire text: us. The vampire of today dates at least (for our purposes) as far back as 1819 with the publishing of John Polidori's "The Vampyre." Polidori's Lord Ruthven is the vampire at its original Romantic incarnation, the basis upon which we can measure all who follow him.

To summarize, Lord Aubrey journeys towards a meeting with the ominous Lord Ruthven, reading a letter from his sister about the man, a letter "breathing nothing but affection" (Polidori 3). The young woman who is Aubrey's sister loves Lord Ruthven passionately, longs for him, but those with some semblance of insight find him detestable and long to avoid him. Although Miss Aubrey dies in the end at the hands of her newly-wed vampire groom, do we ever know what attracts Miss Aubrey to Lord Ruthven? What Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* ask about Satan applies equally to the vampire:

He is in most ways the incarnation of worldly male sexuality, fierce, powerful, experienced, simultaneously brutal and seductive, devilish enough to overwhelm the body and yet enough a fallen angel to charm the soul. As such, however, in his relations with women he is a sort of Nietzschean Übermensch, giving orders and expecting homage to his "natural" -- that is, masculine -- superiority, as if he were God's shadow self, the id of heaven, Satanically reduplicating the politics of paradise wherever he goes. And yet, wherever he goes, women follow him, even when they refuse to follow the God whose domination he parodies. As Sylvia Plath so famously noted, "Every woman adores a Fascist, / The boot in the face, the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you." (206)

These issues of sadomasochism, of dominance and submission, of an erotic hierarchy have long been discussed as core to the vampire lore and allure. The vampire haunts us, hypnotizes us, hurts us, and while I frown upon the trend in feminine masochism and self-victimization that seeks to explain this destructive arousal towards the vampire, I cannot deny some sort of subordination exists between the vampire and its victim, between the vampiric text and its reader. The vampire exists at the top of the food chain, on top in missionary sex.

What do we find attractive in this story, in the thought of a young innocent woman being murdered by her husband? In the angst of Lord Aubrey as his sister's corpse is revealed?

We know very well the thrill of being hunted by the vampire. Riccardo writes, "the figure of death itself chooses to take the form of a human adult male. Indirectly sensing his nature while in this disguise, women find themselves attracted to him and infatuated with him, so long as they do not consciously become aware of who he truly is" (14). No, we are not repulsed by the incarnation of death: we want our lovers to be vampires -- this justifies the insecurities they breed within us.

The feelings of loneliness when they leave. The feelings of dependency when they stay. The doubt, the corruption of love into hatred. The feelings of entrapment. As the vampire bites us, we can finally exclaim, "I knew there was something wrong with you; it wasn't me after all."

Is there something thrilling in being stalked by a vampire? Is there some sense of validation in the negative attention of being chosen as his victim? Riccardo argues that in the days of real-life threats such as date rape, stalking and domestic violence, the vampire has become a safe sex metaphor for expression of self-victimizing fantasy. But amidst contemporary concerns over serial rape, stalking and intimate partner violence, what has a vampire like Lord Ruthven become: a licensed misogynist or an intolerable, unwelcome rapist?

We can empathize with the horror of Miss Aubrey's murder because maybe we wish we were murdered by our spouse, or maybe we wish, somewhere in the dark id of our unconscious, just once, just once, to murder the ones we love. It would be worth eternal damnation, wouldn't it?

If we have the need to have the vampire dominate us, hurt us, use it as a tool to validate and express our anxieties, is this need being fulfilled by today's wraiths of Byron?

Brad Pitt and Tom Cruise, two of the most handsome men in the film industry. Louis and Lestat -- despite Anne Rice's protest to the contrary, do you know what androgyny means? It means they are not interested in us. Whereas Lord Ruthven invested much time and attention to the rather homely Miss Aubrey, today's vampires rarely linger over their meal. We went from being fine cuisine to fast food, the victims of random drive-by bitings. Lestat yells at Louis, "Vampires are killers! They don't want you or your sensibility!" (83-84). They are so involved in the narcissistic angst of their dental masturbation that we do not matter anymore.

Our demon lovers have abandoned us. We are only numbers in their black book. We demand like children the attention of these creatures, their savage hierarchy, and they deny us. We can only watch as voyeurs as our demon lovers abandon us for the open fangs of each other; we must find solace in some rationalization of the vampire's presence. Was Lord Ruthven an androgynous figure or a deified masculine construct? Does vampirism depend upon the hierarchy of heteroeroticism or is the vampire erotic in its ultimate androgyny. Lord Ruthven was a man's vampire: ruthless, sadistic, cunning, invulnerable. Was he a woman's vampire? Or an homoerotic icon?

Regardless or perhaps because of their androgyny, Louis and Lestat are still vicious and powerful figures and we can still pray that they go straight for our throat. But what happens when the vampire loses his bite? When gender deconstruction goes too far and the vampire becomes completely asexual, as Anne Rice claims, incapable of having sex?

As we venture on to Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, let us reconsider the importance of the running commentary on the vampire's deconstructive ability. Our attraction to Louis and Lestat: does it come from the surreal, perhaps effeminate beauty of their androgynous, china doll handsomeness? Our attention to Angel: does it come from his androgynous sensitivity that pronounces itself with the poetry of a pastoral shepherd?

But could youth last and love still breed
Had joys no date nor age nor need
Then these delights my mind might move
To live with thee and be thy love.

(Sir Walter Raleigh, "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd")

But youth can last and in immortality joys have no date nor age nor need. *Carpe noctem* -- seize the night. But we cannot.

Jonathan Harker writes as he is entrapped in Dracula's castle, "If I could only get into his room! But there is no possible way. The door is always locked, no way for me" (48). A voice in my memory responded to Harker, "John dear! The key is down by the front steps, under a plantain leaf!" (53). Do we recognize the voice of Gilman's narrator in "The Yellow Wall-Paper"? The various arguments about Jonathan Harker's deconstructed masculinity have been posited; instead I

would refocus not on the deconstruction of his gender but the reintegration of a more androgynous fear of spectatorship and abject longing towards narration as a means of exploration and expression of voyeuristic passivity.

In the reflexivity of his narration, Harker explores where we shall never go. Dracula invites him in, "Welcome to my house! Enter freely and of your own will!" but the vampire warns, "You may go anywhere you wish in the castle, except where the doors are locked, where of course you will not wish to go. There is reason that all things are as they are, and did you see with my eyes and know with my knowledge, you would perhaps better understand" (21). Naturally, when one tells someone where not to go, he goes directly there, wandering through the vaginal labyrinth of Dracula's castle to the barren womb below. Allegorically, Harker opens up Pandora's Box, unveiling Dracula in his coffin, and pays the price. If Harker had not been so curious, would Lucy Westenra have become the Bloofer Lady? Would Mina have nearly died? Would Quincey have been killed?

The vampire is a caveat of a child's cliché that all parents warn us about: "Look but do not touch!" But we still long to place ourselves within the danger of Transylvania, or New Orleans; even if we cannot touch, we can watch, aroused in the possibility of some potency, of some possible interaction.

But think again about Angel, the perfect gentleman, the perfect man. He believes in communication: "If you want to know what I'm thinking," he tells Buffy, "just ask me. There's no need to play games." He would never hurt you, never put a pillow over your face and smother you. No more sexual tension, no more fear of being raped. Remember, unlike Louis or Lestat, he does want us, and we want him, but we are never going to get it from him. Lilith Fair singer Sarah McLachlan asks in her song "Possession," "Would I spend forever here and not be satisfied?" Would you? Our demon lovers do not want to hurt us anymore. Do we still want them to?

And Spike (the irony of his phallic name) is the poster boy of vampire Viagra. Need I say more? Our demon lovers cannot even love us anymore.

Do we still want these pathetic creatures, or do we want them even more because we can never have them, even in the furthest reaches of our galactic imagination? Do we want them more because they tease us so much as we watch them, immortal, untouchable? The vampire stands behind the dark glass of the text for us to window-shop and press our cold faces against the glass to look closer but never touch. But do we really want to? The image of the vampire may be far more appealing than his reality.

The danger Jonathan Harker faces thrills him even as it terrifies him but without the danger of the vampire's curse, how worthy is the vampire's treasure? What happens when the vampire can no longer harm us or love us? When there is no danger or thrill in even watching?

The immortal constant within vampire metaphor is the core of Byronism, the desperate over-reaching unto self-destruction for the most precious of hidden knowledge -- the key to paradise. We'd like to believe that the vampire holds the key to some incredible knowledge, and perhaps it does, but this knowledge becomes confused with angst, that the key to knowledge is suffering. Is it? Perhaps. But what if the true intellect of the vampire's knowledge was at its simplest warning us that there are some things that one does not want to know. The vampire responds to a statement that rang out through the roots of Romanticism long ago: it is not better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heaven.

Can change ever be negative? When elements of sadomasochism and submission, of threatening gender deconstruction, of Faustian knowledge are removed from the vampire folktales, do we lose our love for them, do we find new love, or do we cling to the phantoms of the past?

I deliberately omitted the bi-polarity of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* Angel. No, he is not really impotent, only self-reserved for fear of the consequences of his own defloration. Should Angel experience one moment of happiness, the ones close to him shall suffer, just like Jonathan Harker's friends after his Transylvanian bachelor party. And what happens when Spike -- Pavlov's dog conditioned by circuitry -- breaks his chains again?

It shall be glorious, for the vampire shall return to us at last.

In the rise of the slayer, perhaps the vampire will return to its Gothic roots as the sadistic, inhuman mystery that we knew and loved, or thought we loved. The vampire will be our Other again, our demon lover again, and he will thrill us because he can hurt us and love us, both in one bite.

In the meantime, I tremble in terror that I have Lestat teeth, as I ask, "Why do you love vampires?"

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