

Spring 2017

# Femme Fatales and the Shifting Gender Norms of the 19th Century

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# FEMME FATALES AND THE SHIFTING GENDER NORMS OF THE 19TH CENTURY

by

ESTHER M. STUART

(Under the Direction of Douglass Thomson)

## ABSTRACT

This project seeks to explore female monstrosity, specifically the *femme fatale*, in Gothic literature and its reflection of the shifting gender norms of the nineteenth century. The late 1790s experienced a distinct narrowing of female gender roles. While authors like Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays published during the eighteenth century, a backlash against such feminist voices took hold as a resurgence of spheres ideology and more traditional gender norms came into vogue. This particular shift in attitudes towards female gender norms is reflected in Scottish poet Anne Bannerman's work as well as English novelist Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya*. Both authors' works exhibit early inquiries into female gender roles and express anxiety about the negative impact they had upon society as a whole. Their *femme fatales* demonstrate the contradictory and destructive nature of gender roles at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but neither author appears able to articulate any solution to those issues. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* at the close of the nineteenth century utilizes the same *femme fatale* trope, yet Mina Harker exhibits more constructive capabilities than her terrifying predecessors.

INDEX WORDS: Gothic, Nineteenth century, Female monstrosity, Femme fatales, Feminism, Anne Bannerman, Charlotte Dacre, Bram Stoker

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B.A., University of North Georgia, 2015

M.A., Georgia Southern University, 2017

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

STATESBORO, GEORGIA

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Electronic Version Approved:

May 2016

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER	
1 Introduction.....	3
2 Obfuscation, Spectral Voices, and the Problem of Female Agency.....	11
3 The Whisperings of the Infernal in Charlotte Dacre’s <i>Zofloya</i> .....	25
4 Femmes, Fangs, and Feminine Power in Bram Stoker’s <i>Dracula</i> .....	35
5 Conclusion.....	47
Works Cited.....	49

## CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Female monsters arise within a variety of texts across the Gothic genre from the ghostly apparitions haunting Edgar Allan Poe's works to the predatory Draculinas of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. While the manifestation of monstrosity may vary, these female monsters share some overarching similarities, such as the emphasis placed upon bodily transformation. Surreally pale skin and inhuman voices are the hallmarks of female monstrosity in the Gothic. In "The Dark Ladie" (1802), Scottish Gothic poet Anne Bannerman (1765-1829) embraces this dark spectre, exaggerating feminine beauty and ideal to a monstrous extreme. Female monsters often exhibit ambiguous relationships to men, and their transformations into the monstrous prove fatal to these relationships. Sir Guyon appears haunted by the Dark Ladie and the poem alludes to a history of the two together when she was still mortal; yet Bannerman refuses to reveal whether her monstrous transformation was due to his actions or her own innate willfulness, and this uncertainty leaves their relationship obscure yet doomed. This exemplifies an important pattern found in Gothic tales about female monstrosity: a conventionally beautiful woman pushed into monstrous transformation by a male counterpart, subsequently leading to the destruction or demise of both.

Adrianna Craciun focuses on some of the similarities in how female monsters are portrayed in Gothic fiction, particularly in Bannerman's work. She asserts that these *femme fatales* are revolutionary figures of female power and act as a distinct departure from the more typically powerless Gothic heroine. Passive and idealistic, these traditional heroines often are defenseless victims. For example, Mathew Lewis's virginal Antonia in *The Monk* is the prey of

the villainous Lorenzo's lusty schemes and cannot avoid her victimization and death at the conclusion of the novel. In contrast, *femme fatales* function as the harbingers of doom and typically victimize men. Their power and agency set them apart from other female figures in the Gothic genre, and Craciun is validated in assuming their importance to female writers and readers in the Romantic era. However, while their revolutionary expression of agency and power cannot be questioned, Craciun's work fails to address the problematic issues of these tales.

Though these female monsters exhibit great power and agency, they serve more as warnings than as role models. They are monstrous figures whose example women should avoid. They conquer and destroy their male counterparts in the loss of their humanity. In addition, the male victims of monstrous attack like Sir Guyon are not clear enemies of women and their subsequent deaths usually elicit sympathy from readers rather than any sort of satisfaction. To simply conclude that the Dark Ladie is an embodiment of female power ignores the concern of why such power connotes terror and tragedy. *Femme fatales* subvert weak female stereotypes and resist patriarchal interpretation, but this subversive power is problematic in how it is rooted in oppressive patriarchal fantasy.

While female monsters may share certain patterns of behavior, a further interrogation of them requires a discussion of monstrosity itself. Jeffrey Cohen's book *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* provides an apt venue for discussing monsters and their cultural significance. He defines the monster as "that uncertain cultural body in which is condensed an intriguing simultaneity or doubleness," that "introjects the disturbing, repressed, but formative traumas of 'pre-' into the sensory moment of 'post-,' binding the one irrevocably to the other" (Cohen ix). By the "cultural body," Cohen suggests the monster's body reflects cultural fears, anxieties, and taboo desires.



When he discusses the traumas of the “pre” and “post,” the critic elaborates on how literary monsters seek to take the trauma of the past and translate it to the present. The author takes the cultural anxiety of his time and manifests it in the monster. These cultural fears are then condensed into the monster’s body, leading to a doubleness that makes the monster irresistibly compelling. Cohen discusses this “doubleness” of the body in the third tenet<sup>1</sup> of *Monster Theory* which states that “the monster is the harbinger of category crisis” (6). He states that monsters “are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration . . . a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions” (6). Cohen suggests that these monsters introduce past cultural trauma to the present moment.

Cohen’s discussion of monstrosity and its basis in category crisis seems particularly apt when analyzing Gothic fiction and the fluctuating gender roles of the nineteenth century. While radical authors such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Hays boldly advocated feminist principles, such voices wane at the close of the eighteenth century, eventually giving way to a resurgence of spheres ideology.<sup>2</sup> Margaret Ezell notes this distinct shift in attitudes towards female writers from the early half of the eighteenth century, when women enjoyed commercial success competing with their male counterparts, to the latter half of the century when writing

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<sup>1</sup> Cohen establishes seven theses that define major characteristics of cultural monsters:

1) The monster’s body is a cultural body; 2) the monster always escapes; 3) the monster is the harbinger of category crisis; 4) the monster dwells at the gates of difference; 5) the monster polices the borders of the possible; 6) fear of the monster is a kind of a desire; and 7) the monster stands at the threshold of becoming.

<sup>2</sup> Spheres ideology refers to the philosophy that men and women operate within separate spheres. Men exist within the public sphere—the world of business, economy, and politics—while women exist in the domestic sphere—the world of domesticity, motherhood, and virtue.

became increasingly designated to the public sphere—a man’s domain.<sup>3</sup> As Craciun notes, “fatal women played an important role in the development of women’s poetic identities in the Romantic period,” and this desire to seek power functions as a reaction to the narrowing scope of female gender roles at the beginning of the nineteenth century (Craciun xxi). *Femme fatales*, as Craciun describes them, exist within the doubleness and hybridity that Cohen describes as essential features of female monsters. Both feminine and dangerous, the *femme fatale* archetype demonstrates how these female monsters both submit to and subvert traditional models of femininity, revealing the illogical nature of those gender expectations. Furthermore, they demonstrate the negative consequences of these convoluted expectations on both men and women.

Although only recently receiving critical attention, Anne Bannerman provides an apt example with which to talk about the Gothic genre and its resistance to the nineteenth century feminine ideal. Her use of obscurity deliberately denies the reader absolute resolution or truth. This resists popular Romantic notions of art providing the ideal unveiled (139). The bodies of her monsters such as the Dark Ladie also exemplify Cohen’s notions of the monstrous body reflecting cultural anxieties. Bannerman’s work utilizes exaggerated forms of feminine beauty to manifest the monstrous. The result is a figure that both intrigues and terrifies the men in her poems. While female monsters in her work do exhibit power and agency, they also seem inarticulate and isolated. The Dark Ladie’s fate appears no more appealing or less doomed than Sir Guyon’s at the conclusion of the poem. Bannerman’s obscurity resists ideal classifications, but it also introduces questions about gender and relationships. The poet refuses to illuminate the

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<sup>3</sup> A more detailed and comprehensive narrative of this shift can be found in Ezell’s critical work *Writing Women’s Literary History*.

nature of Sir Guyon and the Dark Ladie's relationship. There is no clarification on how the Dark Ladie descended into monstrosity or why she haunts Sir Guyon. In some ways, this revolutionary *femme fatale* appears just as controlled and oppressed by patriarchal forces as the conventional damsel in distress. Despite being the most powerful figure in the poem, the Dark Ladie has no name and only speaks in an unintelligible, inhuman voice. Her narrative is related to the reader by a man. While Bannerman's spectre resists male oppression, "The Dark Ladie" also seems to embody a confusion about the most effective way to mitigate the negative consequences of confining gender roles.

Fellow Romantic writer Charlotte Dacre (1771-1825) also seems to echo Bannerman's confusion over the confining nature of female gender norms in the Romantic period. Her work *Zofloya* operates on ambiguity rather than obscurity but raises similar questions. There is no question of Victoria's malicious and evil nature in the novel, yet its origin seems constantly in question. Dacre often cites Victoria's morally failing mother as evidence of her descent into vice, yet at other times, Victoria appears inherently wicked. Her relationships with male characters, good and bad alike, also raise questions about gender roles. Victoria submits to traditional femininity as often as she defies it, and her defiance of those gender roles is often an attempt to champion and further identify herself with the very roles she subverts. Victoria acts as antagonist to both men and women in *Zofloya*. Her reign of terror ends only when she seemingly has no more to offer Satan. Again, though Victoria possesses incredible agency and power, Dacre paints her as unsympathetic. Like Bannerman, Dacre creates powerful female figures, yet they are associated with doom and monstrosity, fatally effecting all those they encounter. Both authors

offer criticism of the contradictory natures of female gender roles and their negative consequences on men and women, yet neither depicts a positive expression of female agency.

While female gender roles were narrowing at the end of the nineteenth century, the end of the century showed yet another shift in gender norms as women pushed for suffrage. As a result, feminist advocacy resurfaced in Victorian England. Writing in the same pulp Gothic tradition, Bram Stoker employs many of the same archetypes and patterns so apparent in the writing of Bannerman and Dacre. The Draculinas and Lucy Westenra embody the *femme fatale* archetype seen in the earlier Romantic Gothic works. Their bodies embody exaggerated female features of beauty and sexuality, and their presence interrogates and complicates gender norms. Lucy's transformation reflects the same doomed gender interaction seen in Bannerman's poetry and *Zofloya*. However, unlike his predecessors, Stoker offers a successful alternative to the problem of female power and monstrosity in the character of Mina Harker. While victimized and transformed into monstrosity, Mina transcends monstrosity and breaks the pattern so common to female characters of her genre.

Perspective and history seem integral in Stoker's interrogation of the gender question within *Dracula*. Stoker faithfully imitates the *femme fatale* archetype in his work, but he departs from the ambiguity of their monstrous transformations in important ways. Dracula is associated with patriarchal aristocracy and plays a central role in transforming women into monsters. Unlike Bannerman and Dacre's female monsters, Lucy's transformation has a clear cause in a governing patriarchal force. Her relationship to the men—whether doctors, suitors, or lovers—also appears ambiguous, but her monstrous transformation and its root in Dracula present a new perspective on those relationships and why they ultimately fail. In contrast, Mina appears to express feminine

power and agency in a positive manner unavailable to Lucy. Mina Harker's foray into the monstrous proves far more interesting than Lucy's due to her eventual escape from it, begging an inquiry into why she successfully battles against monstrosity and Lucy does not.

Several factors contribute to Mina's success. Mina's most stark difference from Lucy is her ability to separate herself from the stringent gender norms dictated by the ideology of separate spheres. While Mina seeks to complement and aid her husband, she pursues this goal in nontraditional ways, such as learning shorthand and making records. She exhibits intelligence and an initiative that is often characterized as masculine by other characters. In addition, Mina's communication and networking skills help her evoke a social change in the community around her in a way seemingly impossible for Lucy. In other words, Mina is able to inspire the men in her community to combat the vampire threat. While it is easy to read Mina as a damsel in distress dependent upon her male counterparts, the active role Mina plays in destroying Dracula complicates this interpretation. Writing records, opening lines of communication, and effectively spying, Mina acts much more like an ally among equals than a dependent in the fight against evil.

Examining Bannerman, Dacre, and Stoker's work together shows important developments in questions surrounding female gender roles and female agency across the nineteenth century. The works of Bannerman and Dacre exhibit early inquiries into female gender roles and express anxiety about the negative impact they had upon society as a whole. Their *femme fatales* demonstrate the conflicting and destructive nature of confining female gender norms at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but neither author presents a positive depiction of female agency. Gender norms and how they influence relationships are influential

on the appearance of female monstrosity and appear fatal in these earlier works. Though Bannerman and Dacre create female figures with great power and agency, they are ultimately monstrous figures, abhorrent to the reader. In contrast, the perspective granted to Stoker at the close of the nineteenth century seems integral to his proposed alternative to the issues surrounding female monstrosity and agency. Mina expresses power and agency in positive ways that benefit the people around her, and the society in which she lives. This is not to say that the works of Bannerman and Dacre fail feminism because they lack transcendent figures like Mina. An examination of the authors and their works reveals a recognition and resistance to the narrowing of female gender roles in the nineteenth century and a continually evolving understanding and response to those issues.

## CHAPTER 2

## OBFUSCATION, SPECTRAL VOICES, AND THE PROBLEM OF FEMALE AGENCY

A Gothic poet, Anne Bannerman and her work have been lost in critical obscurity for a multitude of reasons, yet her work and its use of female monstrosity explores important issues of gender interaction and the role of women in society. Her first volume of work *Poems* (1800) received great praise unlike her later volume of Gothic poetry *Tales of Superstition and Chivalry* (1802). Craciun cites many reasons for Bannerman's subsequent fall into literary obscurity including "the material circumstances of her books' production; their critical (mis)timing and reception; her precarious position in an important (and masculine) Edinburgh literary circle . . . and, last but not least, as Bannerman herself put it to her publisher, her poems' 'peculiarity of subject' . . . refer[ing] both to the gender and the genre of her subjects" (157). The critic also blames the close association of Bannerman's novel with Matthew Lewis's *Tales of Wonder* and the obscurity of her ballads. Yet the stylistic choices Bannerman makes within the genre and its emphasis on gender make her work a fascinating analysis of female monstrosity and how it reflects cultural values.

Although the Gothic genre was often associated with explicit sensationalism, Bannerman's work revels in the obscure and reflects Edmund Burke's notions of terror and obscurity. Burke most famously developed his concept of the sublime in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756), but he also elaborated on the importance of obscurity in creating terror, a fundamental component of Burkean sublimity. He states "[t]o make any thing very terrible, obscurity seems in general to be necessary. When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a

great deal of the apprehension vanishes” (Burke 57). Sublimity, by Burke’s definition, must inspire awe and terror, but it also inspires curiosity. He most notably points out the simultaneous revulsion and attraction of the terrible. Obscurity inspires fear of the unknown and also creates curiosity for mystery. Bannerman’s poems revel in the obscure as she often refuses to clarify characters’s identities, relationships, or pasts, and for Burke, her obscurity affects a much greater emotional response for the reader than explicit sensationalism. Burke asserts that images are unnecessary and even counterintuitive to the creation of terror since human emotion and passion “may be considerably operated upon without presenting any image at all” (59). Bannerman’s ballads clearly reflect Burke’s concept of the sublime in her reliance on obfuscation to affect her readers.

Bannerman’s life placed her in a challenging position. Born in 1765 and living roughly around the same time as radical feminists like Wollstonecraft and Hays, Bannerman would have witnessed the narrowing of female gender roles and the gradual backlash against feminist advocacy at the turn of the century when she wrote. Her letters with Dr. Robert Anderson demonstrate this backlash; he grew more disapproving of Bannerman’s attempts at self-education. Despite admiring her poetry and even aiding in its publication, he repeatedly advised her to abandon any hope of professional writing. Following the death of her mother, Bannerman lost her income and was homeless in 1804, dependent on the goodwill of her social circles. The loss of income and decrease in volume sales eventually pushed Bannerman to officially stop writing and become a governess in 1807. Her experience provides a stark contrast to the male members of her literary circle, like Thomas Campbell and John Leyden, who enjoyed lengthy and celebrated literary careers. This gendered success is also reflected in the waning prevalence



of female communities such as the Bluestockings<sup>4</sup> so prevalent within the mid-eighteenth century. The preoccupation with female figures and gender in her poetic work is no doubt related to the time period in which she lived.

Craciun describes the female figures within Bannerman's works as *femme fatales*, women that exploit male fantasy to their own advantage. Such figures conform to Cohen's tenet that monsters act as harbingers of category crisis since the very nature of *femme fatales* is duplicitous (Cohen 6). In *Fatal Women of Romanticism*, Craciun demonstrates how these figures are not mere imitations of misogynist fantasy, but real expressions of female agency. Certainly, *femme fatales* act with their own agency, but their manipulation of male fantasy also shows the importance of male perception and its effect on women. Although she focuses on cinema, Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze is applicable to this aspect of Bannerman's work. Mulvey sets up a dichotomy of women as images and men as observers. She explains that the "determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact" (Mulvey 62). The female reflection of male fantasy can be seen in many films that emphasize feminine beauty and traditional female gender roles, and *femme fatales* reflect male fantasy in the same way. The strategy and horror behind *femme fatales* exists in its subversion of male fantasy and expectation, so understanding masculine fantasy and perceptions surrounding women is critical to deciphering how *femme fatales* subvert that perception. Male perception of women and its dictation of gender roles becomes paramount when analyzing these works. While many of Bannerman's poems wrestle

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<sup>4</sup> The Bluestocking Society is a feminist group and movement within the mid-eighteenth century that emphasized intellectual dialogue and education for women.

with these issues, “The Mermaid” and “The Dark Ladie” deal with *femme fatales* and male perception most obviously.

Published in 1800 in her first collection *Poems*, Bannerman’s “The Mermaid” most obviously embraces the *femme fatale* trope. The mythical creature that lures sailors to their deaths harkens back to ancient myths of sirens, one of the oldest iterations of the *femme fatale*. Craciun emphasizes the Mermaid’s agency and control over men in the poem. The Mermaid boldly proclaims “Mine was the choice, in this terrific form” (Bannerman 21). The particular form of mermaids is interesting in its complete exploitation of the male gaze. The mermaid in Bannerman’s poem aptly compares herself to a siren, implying both her physical beauty and the power of her voice and song. The combinations of these features allow her to lure her victims to a watery grave, yet the strategy would be ineffective without a knowledge of the male gaze and its perception of women. Cohen’s discussion of the monster’s body as a cultural body is particularly helpful when looking at these poems. The Mermaid is beautiful, but her sleepless nature seems eerie and combined with her icy person is suggestive of a corpse. Her voice seems inextricably linked with death despite its apparent beauty since its only use is to destroy men. While it is true that the Mermaid actively chooses this role, her monstrosity and how it emerges largely functions as a response to male desire. Like other *femme fatales*, the Mermaid is monstrous because of her ability to both embody and subvert male fantasy.

While the Mermaid expresses female agency and power, this power is closely associated with sorrow and pain for the figure. After declaring her choice to embody this “terrific form,” the Mermaid laments “I am chang’d—My heart, my soul,/Retain no more their former glow” (21-22). Power is gained at the expense of the Mermaid’s humanity. In addition,

Bannerman repeatedly characterizes the fate of the monstrous Mermaid as lonely. The continual references to solitary vigils on the cold and harsh ocean indicate that she makes the choice to assume her monstrous form, but only to “brave the icy surge, to shiver in the storm” alone (21). The words “icy” and “shiver” communicate an inhospitable existence where the Mermaid fails to find any sanctuary. She even characterizes her most potent feature—her voice—with sadness, saying “I pour the syren-song of woe” (22). While her later revels in vengeance seem to mitigate her lonely existence, the Mermaid still connotes her ultimate destiny negatively:

My soul within this icy sea  
 Fulfils her fearful destiny.  
 Thro’ Time’s long ages I shall wait  
 To lead the victims to their fate;  
 With callous heart, to hidden rocks decoy,  
 And lure, in seraph-strains, unpitying, to destroy. (24)

The Mermaid exercises her own agency and wields power over men, yet this conclusion does not make such power appealing. Her existence is cold, fearful, and unending. She exists to destroy without mercy or empathy. Her power and agency seem to rob her of humanity, making her ultimately unsympathetic to the reader. The poem seems to function as a warning that such agency comes at the price of isolation.

In addition to Bannerman’s ambiguous attitudes towards feminine power and agency in her works, “The Mermaid” also highlights how this expression of female agency influences relationships between men and women. The Mermaid’s primary act of agency and monstrosity is luring sailors to their death, perverting feminine ideals of beauty. While the Mermaid effectively

entraps men in this manner, her own feelings about the action seem complex. She concludes the poem discussing her “callous” and unpitiful nature, yet earlier in the poem, she appears to sympathize with her victims:

I watch the bark . . .  
 To lure the sailor to his doom;  
 Soft from some frozen pile of snow  
 I pour the syren-song of woe;  
 Like the sad mariner’s expiring cry,  
 As, faint and worn with toil, he lays him down to die. (22)

She acts as the predator yet empathizes with her victim, comparing her siren song to his “expiring cry” (22). It is evident that the Mermaid takes no joy from her task and refers to the sailors specifically as “victims.” She recognizes the monstrosity of her own actions and regrets her destructive powers.

Further developing the theme of failed gender interaction is the unknown origins of the Mermaid’s transformation into monstrosity. While Bannerman leaves many of the details obscure, the reader can infer that the Mermaid was once human by her statement that “Mine was the choice” to embrace her monstrous form and that she is “chang’d,” assumedly from some other form (22). The poet hints that a drowned lover and a quest for vengeance influence the Mermaid’s choice to assume her monstrous form, but the poet refuses to elaborate on these details. While the poet obscures the details, these clues indicate that the Mermaid’s transformation was probably a response to her lover’s death. Considering the importance of marriage and romantic relationships to the economic survival and public respectability of women

in the nineteenth century, this eternal separation of lovers seems an apt venue to female monstrosity. The monstrous transformation into the siren-like Mermaid is the woman's choice, but a choice that is connected with a lover, assumedly a man. Without her lover, the Mermaid willingly chooses to become inhuman and callous, eagerly awaiting for "Avenging ministers of wrath" whose spell "wakes the sleep of death" (23). Despite her fantastic expression of female power, she does not represent a positive expression of female agency and exists largely as a reaction to male desire.

Published in 1802, Bannerman's "The Dark Ladie" narrates the appearance of a mysterious, veiled specter and her continual torment of Sir Guyon, a knight seemingly connected to her past. Bannerman emphasizes the male role in creating female monstrosity by focusing on the male perspective in "The Dark Ladie." The centrality of the male gaze in this poem demonstrates the pivotal way in which men define women's roles and the negative way in which this power impacts them. Sir Guyon is a strangely sympathetic character due to the dominance of his viewpoint and the tragic impact of feminine loss haunting him. While he seems connected to the creation of monstrosity, Bannerman makes her protagonist respond to the reader through their shared fear of the female monster and the grief caused by her. Bannerman describes Sir Guyon's fright upon seeing the Dark Ladie's sepulcher, saying he "Grew pale and trembled then" (144). The later revelation that Sir Guyon removed the Dark Ladie from her house implies a prior relationship that has been replaced by the specter, further emphasizing his loss and subsequent torment.

Similar to “The Mermaid,” male perspective plays a key role in the demonization of woman in “The Dark Ladie.” Sir Guyon’s kidnapping of the Dark Ladie demonstrates this aspect of male fantasy through his fixation with her veil:

He brought her in that frightful veil

That ever hides her face.

And many a time, he said, he tried

That ne’er-uncover’d face to see: (146)

The act of removing her veil betrays the male psyche’s fascination to know and to possess the woman, yet, upon finally seeing the Dark Ladie’s face, Sir Guyon sees “that glaring eye” and “It dried [his] life-blood” from him (146). The removal of the Dark Ladie’s veil appears to transform her into the apparition Sir Guyon comes to fear. The way in which Bannerman obfuscates the story makes it difficult to judge exactly when and how the Dark Ladie became a spectre—or even if she is one— but the poet’s clear portrayal of Sir Guyon and his role in separating the Dark Ladie from her previous domestic space invites speculation as to why she haunts him. The reader’s inability to decipher her complicity in the act further obscures whether she went willingly or by force. The reader is made to understand Sir Guyon’s role in creating the specter that haunts him only in the vaguest terms.

Sir Guyon demonstrates how the male gaze and its mystification of woman helps create female monstrosity. Sir Guyon’s interaction with the Dark Ladie’s veil and his abduction of the woman show his fascination with her. Craciun asserts that Sir Guyon’s attraction to the Dark Ladie resides in “the myth of pure (feminine) presence beyond the veil” (142). His frustrated

attempts at removing the veil further excite his feverish curiosity until his gaze is presented with an image of woman he cannot witness without fear and trembling. Craciun also discusses the double nature of the Dark Ladie, describing her as “a veiled female figure who can never be unveiled, ostensibly the embodiment of Romantic idealism, yet her destructive influence and her resistance to this very role subvert the idealist tradition she embodies” (145). The Dark Ladie, as a *femme fatale*, straddles the line between ideal woman and horrific nightmare. Sir Guyon’s romanticization of her leaves him unprepared to deal with the reality of woman and, upon finally possessing her features by removing the veil, he can only interpret her as monstrous. The inability to accept woman after possessing her demonstrates an overly exalted romanticism that eventually ruins all interactions between men and women.

No explicit physical threat is made towards the Dark Ladie in Bannerman’s work, but the dominant presence of knights and Sir Guyon’s reputation for being battle ready imply the presence of male aggression. Sir Guyon’s attempts to remove her veil demonstrate his desire to possess her. The veil functions not only as a symbol of her impenetrability but as a symbol of female beauty and ideal femininity. In addition, the relation of veils to wedding ceremonies also calls forth the idea of female possession. Marriage would mark his total possession of the Dark Ladie in nineteenth century society. The reader can interpret the veil as a physical representation of an abstract concept that the male wishes to preserve and propagate. Likewise, Sir Guyon’s obscure kidnapping of the Dark Ladie, an act transforming her into a possession, leads to her later appearance as a specter. The transformation of woman into monster upon being possessed explains why Sir Guyon seems incapable of accepting his conquest. In addition, the narration of her story by a man to other men also suggests her legend is a kind of possession. While the Dark

Ladie functions as a possession, her monstrous nature does not leave her totally helpless against her oppressors.

Bannerman expresses female monstrosity primarily through the body, and these bodily articulations of horror greatly reflect the position of women in the early nineteenth century. The Dark Ladie's expression of monstrosity is characterized by a pale, sickly complexion, an inhuman voice, and haunting eyes. These features broadly reflect the perversion of typical feminine charms in the nineteenth century. Pale skin, demure and quiet natures, and beautiful eyes are usually positive qualities displayed in women, yet in Bannerman's poetry, they function as aspects of terror. The extreme perversion of feminine features attributed to a male source shows the male gaze romanticizing, objectifying, and eventually demonizing women. By transforming the feminine ideal into an object of horror, the Dark Ladie manages to subvert male fantasy and perception, manipulating it in order to haunt her male oppressor. The Dark Ladie continuously torments her male counterpart. She turns the desired act of possession into Guyon's living nightmare.

However, despite the power attained through monstrosity, the bodily expression of it finally conforms to notions of traditional femininity, and the power to haunt the Dark Ladie's oppressors comes at the price of her humanity. The romanticization of women denies the reality of womanhood and replaces it with a feminine ideal impossible to fulfill. Bannerman's poem ties the dehumanization surrounding female monstrosity to these male fantasies of romanticized women. The perverted manifestation of femininity in their monstrous forms embodies the dichotomous and often conflicting male expectations of women. Bannerman also describes contradictory views of women when the Dark Ladie is described as both being voiceless and



having an inhumane voice. The male narrator states that “No breath was heard, no voice, no sound,/ And in a tone, so deadly deep,/ She pledged them all around” (Bannerman 142). The contradictions communicated through the male perspective illustrate an inherent confusion about women within male fantasy. The Dark Ladie cannot be heard while simultaneously pledging in a tone unnaturally deep. The statement makes her seem more eerie and monstrous, yet it is a fundamentally flawed observation that demonstrates the contradictory nature of male perception. The spectre is monstrous both when she is silent and when she speaks, and ultimately, the Dark Ladie’s fails to make any sort of meaningful communication and only communicates death to those around her, specifically the knights in whom “no pulses could be found” (142).

While their ghostly features may be perversions of feminine beauty and expressions of their subversive ability to terrify man with his own desires, these *femme fatales* are ultimately manifestations of death. Pale, beautiful skin becomes corpse-like, and the mysterious veil acts like a burial shroud. Furthermore, the narrator describes the Dark Ladie as having “No breath . . . no voice, no sound” further identifying her with the dead (142). Craciun interprets the ambiguous nature of the Dark Ladie’s voice as resistance to male dictation and interpretation of femininity, saying Bannerman’s *femmes fatales* “inhabit the acultural space beyond language” who “offer only destruction” (142-143). Craciun valorizes Bannerman’s obfuscation of language and its lethal consequences on men in her poetry as it shows “the consequence of objectifying women as absent ideals” (143). Certainly, Bannerman’s poems function as a critique of the male gaze and the unrealistic expectations it set for women in the nineteenth century. The power expressed by both the Mermaid and the Dark Ladie through their obfuscated voices palpably flouts these notions through subversion, ultimately destroying the source of romanticized femininity—the

men. While the voice of these figures acts in a destructive capacity, the lack of constructive voices described in both “The Mermaid” and “The Dark Ladie” implies an inability to articulate female concerns. While their monstrosity allows them to haunt their male oppressors, their inability to speak bars any meaningful communication that would resolve the issues introduced in either piece.

Bannerman seems to link traditional femininity, even in the *femme fatales*'s subversive expression of it, with death and a loss in constructive voice. Craciun admits that “Bannerman does not offer a tidy solution to this long-standing problem of women and language” (142). While the obvious commentary on gender norms and their negative consequences appears blatant in Bannerman’s poetry, the ambiguity and obscurity dominating them implies an inability to resolve the issue of female agency. Bannerman so obscures the events of “The Dark Ladie” that the reader can never be sure of the Dark Ladie’s role in her domestic exodus with Sir Guyon, the advent of her monstrosity, or even the ultimate fates of both she and Sir Guyon. The unresolved nature of their interaction lingers with the reader at the end of the poem. The failure of their relationship coupled with Bannerman’s refusal to offer solutions transmits the immediacy and gravity of the issue. Craciun states that “these dark ladies mercilessly disabuse their readers of any faith in language as redemptive” (142). While Bannerman’s resistance to patriarchal interpretation and the male gaze is subversive and undeniably powerful, the inability for language to act constructively seems especially tragic in her poems.

Both the Mermaid and the Dark Ladie share many similarities, especially in their bodily characterization and power over men. Bannerman describes both with exaggerated features of feminine beauty and links the use of their voices with death. Although both exert power over the

men that would objectify them, the reader's fascination with the *femme fatales* is counterbalanced with sympathy for their male victims. These women seem tragic rather than positive emblems of empowerment. However, it is interesting that the earlier poem, "The Mermaid," features a protagonist that seems to express agency more successfully than the Dark Ladie. The Mermaid has control over her own narrative, and her voice is a powerful force that destroys men. In contrast, the Dark Ladie's tale is told by a man, and her voice, though powerful, is confused and obfuscated. Even the reason for monstrous transformation appears clearer in "The Mermaid." Her lover dies, and she chooses to live as a monstrous creature. The Dark Ladie's existence seems tied to Sir Guyon, but the mystery surrounding their relationship and her removal from her previous home make it impossible to objectively decipher how and why the incident led to her becoming a specter—or even if she has become one. While both poems seem to link gender interaction as a forerunner to female monstrosity, the obscurity surrounding those issues indicates a confusion about gender interaction, female gender roles, and the expression of female agency.

Certainly, Bannerman appears interested in the detrimental effects of gender interaction in her Gothic works. By linking these fatal interchanges with the *femme fatale*, the poet makes a criticism about the contrary nature of female gender roles, specifically in how men dictate them based on idealistic, romanticized notions of womanhood. She renders such idealizations monstrous, yet she does not seem to paint the men in her poems as wholly antagonistic. Living and writing at the turn of the century, Bannerman likely witnessed the narrowing of female gender roles. It seems no surprise that "The Dark Ladie" expresses much more anxiety about femininity and the male perceptions of it in comparison to her earlier work, "The Mermaid."

These poems seem to be a response to the shifting expectations for women in the nineteenth century and acknowledge the negative consequences of romanticizing women. Her works demonstrate the global impact of rigid gender roles and their negative impact on early nineteenth century society.

The poems depict the fatal consequences for both women and men subject to strict gender norms and their inevitable creation of difference and alienation. While Bannerman wrestles admirably with these issues, she seems to find no positive solution in her poetry. Craciun asserts that these *femme fatales* are revolutionary figures of feminine power and agency; however, both the endings of “The Mermaid” and “The Dark Ladie” are stark and hopeless, emphasizing the doom and tragedy inevitable for all the characters involved. While these figures express immense power, they are not figures Bannerman seems to endorse as new or liberating models of the feminine. More disturbingly, her female monsters’s propensity to speak or express themselves seems stunted. The expression of feminine power and voice appears consistently linked to monstrosity and death. The mysterious and haunting female characters in Bannerman’s poetry are definitely subversive, but they are ultimately contained. Bannerman certainly recognizes an issue involving failed gender interaction and its connection to the increasingly idealized woman, but she fails to offer or see any solution to that problem.

## CHAPTER 3

THE WHISPERINGS OF THE INFERNAL IN CHARLOTTE DACRE'S *ZOFLOYA*

Writing approximately the same time as Bannerman, Charlotte Dacre serves as another potent example of women exploring gender expectation through the Gothic genre.

Differentiating herself from other female authors of the era, Dacre situated her work alongside such male authors as the infamous Matthew “Monk” Lewis, author of *The Monk* in creating aggressive female characters. Unlike Bannerman, Dacre experienced commercial success, especially upon publishing her best known novel *Zoyfloya* in 1806. Her work fell into critical obscurity over time despite its influence over Romantic authors like Percy Bysshe Shelley who communicated his indebtedness to Dacre for both *Zastrossi* and *St. Irvyne*. Bannerman and Dacre differ in many ways but most starkly in technique. In her poetry, Bannerman primarily uses obscurity to heighten the dread personified by her female monsters. In contrast, Dacre uses explicit violence to create revulsion for the protagonist of *Zoyfloya*, Victoria. However, both authors evidence anxiety about the expression of female power and agency in its connection to the monstrous. Dacre particularly uses the *femme fatale* to explore the environmental catalysts within patriarchal society that push women into the monstrous.

However, Dacre builds her *femme fatale* quite differently from Bannerman in *Zoyfloya*. *Femme fatales* operate as subversions of male fantasy, and Bannerman creates these frightening creatures using primarily mythical female figures such as the Mermaid and the Dark Ladie. The Dark Ladie does not operate in an overtly mythical element, yet she clearly is surreal, exhibited in the narrative of the poem as a ghost. In contrast, Dacre creates Victoria as a real woman and not an iteration of mythic monstrosity such as a ghost or a mermaid. Her monstrosity is

expressed primarily through her actions. Over the course of the novel, Victoria exhibits intense ambitions in sexual markets, resorting to deceit, violence, and sorcery to achieve her ends. Victoria's physical beauty distracts from her true character and often allows her to carry out her vicious schemes. In addition, Victoria's ambitions largely reflect traditional cultural expectations of the nineteenth century such as romance and marriage. Victoria's desire to fulfill traditional female gender norms proves subversive in how it makes her actions appear even more monstrous. She engages in kidnapping, deceit, torture, and murder to pursue romantic partners, and it is this desire to reflect traditional femininity and pursue rather ordinary romance that contrasts starkly with the horrific methods she employs to achieve those things.

Victoria embodies Cohen's notion of the monster harboring category crisis. Indeed, Victoria, her desires, and her tendency towards wickedness seem immersed in ambiguity and confusion as to their natures and causes. Often, Victoria's pursuits seem romantic, such as her pursuit of marriage or love, but the actions she takes in pursuing those things are horrifying and transgressive. For example, in her initial romantic forays with Berenza, Victoria appears ardent, escaping confinement and overcoming distance to be reunited with him. Her desire for marriage could easily be read as the natural culmination of these romantic feelings, yet her constant deception and eventual disdain for Berenza make her both heroine and villain in the novel. Dacre implies her indulgent childhood seems in some part to blame for penchant for evil, yet in other sections of the text, the author also hints that Victoria is inherently monstrous. At the opening of chapter twenty-seven, the author notes both that "the curse of Laurina [Victoria's mother] were [sic] entailed upon her daughter" and that "unhappy Victoria was destitute of a single actuating principle" (143).

Dacre also explores the fatalistic relationships Victoria has with other women such as her mother and her romantic rivals. The author extends this query of inherent evil to other women, namely Victoria's mother Laurina. Laurina's moral failing initiates the events of the novel and foreshadows Victoria's own moral abjectness. At the beginning of the novel, she acts virtuous only because "it required, then, no effort to be virtuous" (39). Her subsequent corruption illustrates her weakness. She falls prey to sin, not because she desires to, but because she is too weak to resist. Her seduction by Count Ardolph is marked by its predatory nature. He employs artifice and design in order to win her love, and her acquiescence seems to affirm male guidance and seemingly inherent weakness. Most of the blame for Victoria's behavior rests squarely on her mother, and rarely does the text mention the father's role in Victoria's devious character. Laurina is interesting in that her defiance of the female norm (being virtuous) stems directly from her submission to traditional female weakness. This contradiction captures what Craciun states about that instability of gender roles and illustrates the impossibility of ideal womanhood.

Marriage and sexual relationships were exalted as the epitome of female existence. Dacre shows how the marriage market becomes more than the simple avenue for female fulfillment, but a marketplace where women must compete for that fulfillment. Victoria views most other women within the novel as rivals, specifically within the marriage market, and they, too, also take this competitive stance. Megalena Strozzi, for instance, is particularly violent and Megalena's and Victoria's behaviors and attitudes toward each other as sexual rivals for Berenza are almost identical. Both demonstrate extreme vanity and a gift for manipulating men into doing their will. Megalena convinces Leonardo, her lover and Victoria's brother, to kill Berenza to assuage her wounded vanity after being cast off for Victoria. But Victoria saves Berenza from the blow. It is

important to note how Berenza's perceptions of these events impact his judgement of Megalena and Victoria, confirming Megalena's jealousy and Victoria's superiority. Victoria attempts to play upon these heightened romantic perceptions, and does not tell Berenza that the would-be assassin is her own brother. Megalena's presence and similarities to Victoria easily illustrate the competitive nature of women in the nineteenth century.

In contrast to Megalena, Lilla acts as Victoria's romantic rival for Henriquez but exists as Victoria's complete opposite, fully embodying the idealized woman of the nineteenth century. She is quiet, demure, and pious. She is passionately faithful to Henriquez in a way that Megalena and Victoria seem incapable of. Her love, beauty, and piety directly contrasts with Victoria, specifically in her attitude towards her parents. While Victoria disregards her promise to her dying father to remain pious, the first detail given about Lilla regard her filial piety to her deceased father's wishes that she should observe a year grieving period before marrying Henriquez, Berenza's brother. Lilla expresses that

it was her idea a sacred and religious obligation in her to fulfil a promise to the dying; nay, she would have deemed it horrible sacrilege even to hesitate or waver respecting its performance; and all the entreaties of her lover to make her forego adherence to what he considered an arbitrary and most unjust command, were not only vain, but tended almost to shake him in her long and deep-rooted sentiments of esteem, by giving her doubts of his moral character. (141)

The religious language surrounding Lilla and her dedication to filial piety emphasizes her virtuous and submissive nature, but also characterizes her subservience to domestic patriarchal values. In her freedom from sexual feeling, Lilla exists as a rival to Victoria for Henriquez.



Victoria exists as everything Lilla is not. She is wicked, promiscuous, and disloyal. Lilla presents the closest representation of a proper woman in the novel, yet she dies tortured and unrewarded for her good behavior at the hands of Victoria. Her piety, generosity, and submissiveness only allow Victoria the motive and means to destroy her. Her feminine qualities allow Lilla no means with which to defend herself against her persecutor. Like “The Dark Ladie” and “The Mermaid,” *Zofloya* leaves us with the implication that an empowered woman is evil and a proper one dependent upon other’s sometimes non-existent mercy. Both characters demonstrate subversively the problematic nature of societal expectations for women. Victoria, Megalena, and Lilla present ideal womanhood as impossible.

Berenza’s standards for womanhood also emphasize the convoluted nature of female gender roles, and, in many ways, Dacre further explores the ambiguity surrounding male perception and gender interaction that Bannerman investigates in her poetry. Berenza clearly declares his expectations for his mistress:

She whom Berenza can love must tower above her sex; she must have nothing of the tittering coquet, the fastidious prude, or the affected idiot: she must abound in the graces of *mind* as well as of *body*; for I prize not the woman who can yield only to my arms a lovely insipid *form*, which the veriest boor in nature can enjoy in as much perfection as myself. *My* mistress, too, must be *mine* exclusively, heart and soul: others may gaze and sigh for her, but must not dare approach. It is she too, who, while her beauty attracts, must have dignity sufficient to repel them. If she forfeit for a moment her self-possession, I cast her forever from my bosom.

(95)

Berenza's standards for women are almost impossibly high. They must be intelligent and faithful as well as merely beautiful. Considering Berenza's past mistress Megalena, he does not apparently hold himself to the same standard of exclusivity or steadfastness. As a *femme fatale*, Victoria affects horror by her ability to subvert male expectation and fantasy. Her initial relationship with Berenza perfectly illustrates her deliberate manipulation of perception. While she submits to being his mistress, Victoria aims to become his wife, carefully employing artifice and cunning observation to achieve her means. Berenza continues to hold off on marrying Victoria despite his feelings, wishing to validate the sincerity of her love. Victoria takes advantage of Berenza's desire by pretending to sleep when he returns to her room one night. In her affected sleep, she deceives Berenza into thinking she is dreaming of him, saying "Why wilt thou not love me Berenza?" (98). The phrase has a visceral effect on Berenza that Victoria senses and then capitalizes on, thinking "One more word" (98). At her profession of love, Berenza repeated declares "Thou art mine!" thinking he has finally won her affection (98). The exchange is ironic due to the cold, calculating power Victoria clearly holds over her lover. Of course, this power is directly dependent upon her manipulation of his perception:

Proud of her achievement, it was Victoria's care that her lover should not recover from his delusion: well did she support the character she had assumed; and the tender refined Berenza became *convinced*, that he possessed the first pure and genuine affections of an innocent and lovely girl! (99)

Berenza completely believes in Victoria's deception that reaffirms the ideal woman he wishes to see. His inability to see through Victoria and her monstrosity lead to his eventual demise.

Victoria seduces Berenza only to poison him later in favor of pursuing his brother Henriquez. Her lustful pursuit eventually leads her to imprison the innocent Lilla and enact sorcery to fool her hesitant lover. This particular incident displays Victoria's need to submit to gender expectations despite her aggressive actions. When it becomes apparent Henriquez will not yield to her due to his love for Lilla, Zofloya conveniently offers Victoria a drug that will induce a madness to fool Henriquez into thinking Victoria is Lilla. The deception of Henriquez is particularly fascinating as it so tangibly hinges on male perception. Despite the reappearance of Lilla and their subsequent marriage not making logical sense, Henriquez eagerly embraces the illusion. On seeing Victoria disguised as Lilla, he exclaims "Wife of my soul!—my beloved—my darling Lilla!—have I then at length recovered the pride of my life? the darling of my bosom! — her form whom alone existence is worthy the bearing!" (214). Like his brother, Henriquez fails to recognize the realities surrounding the women in his life, easily being duped into exchanging Lilla for Victoria. The deception also showcases how Lilla's superior qualities are easily imitated and reproduced through artifice. His desire for the ideal and his inability to see past it directly results in his death. Once he finally is able to see through the illusion, Henriquez, horrified, descends into madness and commits suicide. The scene also complicates our view of Victoria's monstrosity. Victoria purposely adopts Lilla's ideal form despite hating it just to achieve her goal. While she may subvert gender norms in being aggressive and dishonorable, she only does so in order to pursue this ideal femininity so apparent in her rival. Her goal seems absurdly romantic and ordinary in comparison with the acts she commits to achieve it. Victoria desires marriage with the man she loves, but she engages torture, murder, and rape to attain that union.

Dacre characterizes Victoria's desire for the feminine ideal as monstrous, but acknowledges that desire's root in male fantasy and Victoria's place in the marriage market.

Although Victoria expresses agency and power, Dacre clearly aligns that power with a male figure in Satan. Victoria's despicable actions pursue domestic goals, and they are ultimately impossible without the intervening of Satan in the form of Zofloya. The poison she uses to murder Berenza, the drug used to dupe Henriquez, and the abduction of Lilla are all due to Zofloya's intervention. While Victoria clearly exhibits *femme fatale* behavior and is able to commit terrible deeds in her manipulation of men, her most horrific acts are tied directly to Zofloya's power. Over the course of the novel, the reader can witness Victoria's increasing dependency on Zofloya. Although Zofloya goads her romantic pursuits and equips her with the tools necessary to acquire them, her plans are eventually dashed, forcing her back under his care. Towards the end of the novel, the once independent and controlling heroine seems completely at Zofloya's mercy. Victoria herself declares "Oh, Zofloya! I perceive too clearly, how much, how completely, I am in your power!" (227). Indeed, this dependency reaches its crescendo when Zofloya reveals his identity as Satan and destroys her. Although she acts as the protagonist of the novel, it is significant that Dacre chose to name the novel after Zofloya, who effectively tames the wild Victoria, keeping her as a sort of mistress amongst bandits at the end of the novel. While Dacre and Bannerman wrestle with the connection between female power and monstrosity, Dacre appears to clearly link it with a distinctly evil patriarchal force.

Victoria's death seems especially strange regarding her monstrous actions as Dacre ties them continually to Zofloya. Upon revealing himself to be Satan, Zofloya holds a guilty Victoria by the throat over an abyss, saying "Few venture far as thou hast ventured in the alarming paths

of sin — thy loose and evil thoughts first pointed thee out to my keen, my searching view, and attracted me towards thee, in eager hope of prey!” (254). Indeed, Victoria’s romantic motives to be a lover and wife make Zofloya’s declaration particularly shocking. All of Victoria’s horrific acts have been to secure male affection in her life. The continual facade she employs to fool Berenza into marrying her involves her adopting behavior that follows traditional female gender norms. Dacre seems to critique the society that insists on these standards for women by depicting Satan taking advantage of Victoria’s desire to fulfill such domestic roles. In addition, while Victoria can only mimic the ideal femininity exhibited in Lilla, her ultimate demise is eerily similar to her victim’s. Victoria, like Lilla, is physically assaulted and then cast into an abyss. Despite exhibiting incredible agency and wielding power, Victoria fares no better than her victim.

Like Bannerman, Dacre creates female characters who express power and agency, yet the reader should clearly not look to this figure as a successful image of the new woman. Victoria’s acts are too despicable and horribly explicit for the reader to excuse them, and her motivations appear far too petty to invite sympathy. In addition, female power seems inextricably linked with monstrosity and evil within the novel. Laurina’s actions appear to foreshadow Victoria’s forays into evil, and Megalena certainly matches that potential for evil. The only ideal woman, Lilla, is defenseless to stop Victoria or prevent the death of her lover and herself, and the portrait of her perfection continually verges on caricature. Yet despite these warped expressions of female will and desire, Dacre ends her novel with the most perfunctory of morals:

The progress of vice is gradual and imperceptible, and the arch enemy ever waits to take advantage of the failings of mankind, whose destruction is his glory! That

his seductions may prevail, we dare not doubt; for can we otherwise account for those crimes, dreadful and repugnant to nature, which human beings are sometimes tempted to commit? Either we must suppose that the love of evil is born with us (which would be an insult to the Deity), or we must attribute them (as appears more consonant with reason) to the suggestions of infernal influence. (254-255)

While Dacre explores in great depth the personal motivation and psychology of Victoria's great monstrosity, her conclusion globalizes Victoria's temptation into Satanic evils. She suggests that the true origin of evil roots itself in "the suggestions of infernal influence" rather than within the individual self (255). In other words, the author implicates the society that created Victoria's desires rather than just Victoria herself. While Dacre offers no solution to the problem of expressing female agency in a positive way, she does clearly link its monstrosity with a desire to fulfill traditional gender norms and, in the figure of Zofloya, a patriarchal force that exacerbates such desire.

## CHAPTER 4

FEMMES, FANGS, AND FEMININE POWER IN BRAM STOKER'S *DRACULA*

Writing at the end of the nineteenth century, Bram Stoker seems far removed in time and place to Bannerman and Dacre, yet *Dracula* also features female monsters that wrestle with the negative consequences of female gender norms in the nineteenth century within his most famous novel *Dracula*. Stoker also seems to employ similar methods for exploring such topics as the gothic genre, female monstrosity, and the *femme fatale* archetype. While he may seem imitative of earlier authors, Stoker does differentiate himself in an important way from his predecessors. While Bannerman and Dacre never seem to solve the problem of expressing female agency without their heroines descending into monstrosity, Stoker appears to offer a solution to expressing female power within the character of Mina Harker. Bannerman and Dacre were both uniquely positioned to see the narrowing of female gender roles, but Stoker would have seen such gender norms as common place. Spheres ideology and complementarianism, the doctrine that men and women function as complements of one another, reached popular heights within the midpoint of the century when Stoker lived. While this might lead one to expect his views on women to be traditional, Stoker is uniquely placed to see the broadening of female gender norms. At the end of the century, a feminist resurgence occurred exemplified by the push for women's suffrage and the rise of the New Woman. The author even makes a point of referencing this new radical woman within the text of *Dracula*. Stoker's attempts to offer a definite solution certainly set him apart from Dacre and Bannerman, and this solution is, perhaps, possible due to his position within the century.

Like previous Romantic gothic authors, Stoker utilizes the *femme fatale* archetype in the Draculinas and Lucy Westenra and their manipulation of male fantasy and expectation. The female monsters in the novel appear overtly sexual. Jonathan Harker gives his infamous description of the Draculinas and their erotic nature: “the fair girl went on her knees, and bent over me, fairly gloating. There was a deliberate voluptuousness which was both thrilling and repulsive, and as she arched her neck she actually licked her lips like an animal” (Stoker 42). The suggestive nature of the Draculina’s position appears obvious, and Jonathan’s ecstasy and revulsion emphasize her sexuality as dangerous and monstrous. In addition, they clearly violate expectations through their promiscuity and murderous nature. Perhaps, nothing so disturbs the reader as the Draculinas’ consumption of the child wriggling in the burlap sack, quite obviously perverting the feminine ideal of motherhood. Like Bannerman and Dacre, the monstrosity associated with promiscuity and the consumption of children highlight the contradictory nature of female gender roles in the nineteenth century. Women consistently straddled the line between sexualized objects and saintly mothers. Stoker’s choice to deal directly with two traditional aspects of femininity, beauty and motherhood, and embed them into the monstrous seems like a perfect iteration of the *femme fatale* archetype as Craciun describes it.

Although the *femme fatale* archetype clearly manifests in Stoker’s work, his usage of the archetype much more obviously explores its patriarchal roots than earlier works. Craciun argues that the *femme fatale* is not a mere iteration of male fantasy, but a powerful subversion of it. However, it is a power rooted in male perception. Stoker emphasizes this connection by tying the *femme fatale* inextricably to Dracula. Dacre also makes this connection within *Zofloya* when she further demonizes Victoria by having her fall prey to Satan, yet Victoria’s character is debatably



abhorrent and monstrous before Zofloya further corrupts her. In contrast, Stoker paints the Draculinas as victims, transformed by Dracula and seemingly powerless to stop their monstrous transformation. The Draculinas reflect his fantasies and are created after his likeness. While the female monsters in *Dracula* exhibit superhuman power, it is notably a power given by and inferior to its patriarchal root. Stoker seems to find a clarity surrounding the issue of female monstrosity not present in Bannerman or Dacre's works. Bannerman's obfuscation of the issues make it impossible to determine a cause of the appearance of monstrosity in her poems, and Dacre's ambiguity makes it impossible to determine the root of Victoria's evil nature. Stoker makes a more definitive statement about the problem of female agency and monstrosity by using the *femme fatale* archetype and directly tying it to its root in patriarchal fantasy.

Stoker provides two cases of female monstrosity that seem to parallel one another in the transformation of Lucy Westenra and of Mina Harker. The former follows the more classical pattern of the *femme fatale* seen in works like "The Dark Ladie" and *Zofloya*. The beautiful young woman falls into monstrosity and proceeds to haunt the men in her life, pushing them to drastic actions and often heralding fatal consequences for them. Her exaggerated features such as the reddened lips and pale skin are reminiscent of the spectres found in Bannerman's poems while the explicit violence she enacts on children recalls the dastardly Victoria. In contrast, Mina Harker's foray into the monstrous does not follow the same fatalistic pattern. Despite being exposed to the same process, Mina's social connections and personal endeavors lead her to transcend the monstrous. Examining these two cases together yields insight into Stoker's own observations about the negative consequences of spheres ideology and possible solutions to problems presented by such strict gender norms.

The classic tale of vampiric menace features Lucy Westenra, Dracula's first victim. After being bitten, Lucy grows ill and bed-ridden until her death, at which time she transforms into a vampire. Although predominantly surrounded by men, Lucy often contrasts with her close friend, Mina Harker. Stoker characterizes Lucy as silly, immature, and generally girlish while Mina exudes practicality and common sense. The narrative surrounding Lucy's three proposals of marriage characterize her as coquettish. She laments of this occurrence in a letter to Mina, crying

why are men so noble when we women are so little worthy of them? . . . Here was I almost making fun of this great-hearted, true gentleman [Quincey]. I burst into tears—I am afraid, my dear, you will think this a very sloppy letter in more ways than one—and I really felt very badly. Why can't they let a girl marry three men, or as many as want her, and save all this trouble?" (60)

Lucy's remarks seem flippant and coquettish, but they are particularly revealing in how they emphasize her place in the marriage market. Lucy exists as a commodity within this sphere and clearly views herself this way, lamenting she cannot let three men purchase her. Although some readers may view this as a simple morality tale on proper female behavior, it is important to note that "Lucy is far more reminiscent of the traditional feminine, defenseless, and frivolous Victorian lady" than Mina. Lucy's position as the traditional feminine lady is also marked by her acquiescent attitude towards the marriage market (Eltis 457). Her preoccupation with marriage, romance, and trivialities reflect nineteenth century education in regards to women.

Her illness also functions to reinforce proper gender behavior. Stoker describes Lucy as energetic and outgoing before the fatal bite. Illness and decay subdue her, making her much more passive and permanently fixing her in the domestic sphere of the house. Stoker implies that

Lucy's fate may have been avoidable. Dracula only first bites her when she is sleepwalking in the park gardens alone. Similarly, Lucy's illness only escalates when her mother fails to heed Dr. Van Helsing's instructions to keep the garlic flowers on the mantle. Although none of the characters implicate her and her mother, Lucy's descent into monstrosity occurs due to improper withdrawal from the domestic sphere and failure to submit to male authority. While this interpretation of the illness reinforces spheres ideology, it is also forcibly placed onto Lucy and contrary to her previously lively nature. She acts more submissive and domestic during illness, yet she is also the least like herself. Despite the men who care for her deeply witnessing this awful change in Lucy, they seem powerless to stop the terrible transformation. Four blood transfusions from Arthur, Seward, Van Helsing, and Quincy all fail to procure any lasting effect on Lucy's descent into monstrosity, resisting patriarchal stereotype by denying the heroine a knight to save her. Stoker undeniably sets Lucy up as a victim as she does not willingly yield to any temptation like Victoria, but instead, is continually preyed upon by an unseen monster.

Stoker also explores a monster-victim dichotomy. Lucy's story concludes by justifying male aggression as a response to female monstrosity. Although Lucy cannot help her illness or her transformation, the male characters in the novel must deal with the manifestations of her monstrosity. Lucy is subjected to male violence and aggression. Arthur Holmwood, assisted by many other male characters, disturbs her grave, shoves a crucifix in her mouth, removes her heart, and finally decapitates her. Stoker seemingly justifies male violence as a legitimate response to Lucy's monstrosity. Her monstrosity exemplifies unacceptable female behavior. As a vampire, Lucy feeds on children, grotesquely reversing the image of motherhood. Lucy also only awakens to prowl the city at night, an action only engaged in by unscrupulous women. Stoker

utilizes this behavior to vindicate the violent male response. Van Helsing even says that “the soul of the poor lady whom we love shall again be free” upon the conclusion of their actions (Stoker 191). Many critics note that *Dracula* seems to “invite the reader to accept the victimizing of women” (Riquelme 416). While the men acknowledge that the tragedy is due to Dracula, a monstrous male, and by their own neglect, they still feel the expedient urge to destroy Lucy before going after Dracula. In this way, Lucy presents almost a more potent threat than the main antagonist. Paradoxically, though monstrosity lends power to an individual, vampiric transformation objectifies Lucy into an object to be slain and conquered. Sos Eltis declares Arthur Holmwood as “the embodiment of determined, self-controlled masculinities” and asserts that he and the other men restore “the proper order of things” (457). Even Mina Harker is also saved from her experience of semi-monstrosity due to her masculine characteristics. Van Helsing tells us that Mina “has a man’s brain--a brain that a man should have were he much gifted” (Stoker 207). Although critics debate whether Stoker’s *Dracula* propagates a misogynist viewpoint or a new understanding of gender, it is impossible to deny Lucy’s punishment for being traditionally feminine.

Of course, one could read Lucy’s case as an affirmation of traditional gender roles, yet her transformation’s clear tie to Dracula complicate this interpretation as it argues her innocence and victimization. Looking at Mina Harker’s transformation further emphasizes this point that Stoker is likely critiquing female gender norms and their effects on women and society rather than affirming them as part of the natural order. Lucy and Mina serve largely as contrasts to one another. While Lucy appears vain and romantic, Mina embodies practicality and sincerity. Lucy’s flirtations, though reflective of her place in the marriage market and her upper class economic

standing, seem especially shallow when compared to the ardent dedication Mina exhibits for her husband, Jonathan Harker. Mina repeatedly expresses her desire to be of service to Jonathan. On the surface level, this desire, again, seems to affirm traditional spheres ideology, yet the way Mina develops herself and her skills to help Jonathan is fairly unconventional for a gentry woman like herself. She quickly develops a proficiency in typing and shorthand, memorizes train schedules across Europe, and exhibits a basic knowledge of Jonathan's work and its functions. All these developments are directed at the public sphere rather than the domestic. If Lucy serves to teach the reader unacceptable feminine behavior and Mina to display positive femininity, then Stoker's choice for her to participate in the public sphere must function as a critique of the strict gender roles in spheres ideology. Mina's ability to exist liminally within the private and public spheres is integral to her success at inspiring the social change necessary to save herself from transforming into a monster.

After the death of Lucy and through the course of the novel, Mina becomes essential to the group, not only through her skill set but as an emotional support. Mina's centrality to the group is exemplified most prominently when she comforts Arthur Holmwood in his grief over Lucy. He weeps before Mina who then encourages him to give himself wholly to the emotion. Holmwood effectively breaks and is described as hysterical during the scene with Mina patiently observing. She describes the scene, saying "With a sob, he laid his head on my shoulder, and cried like a wearied child, whilst he shook with emotion. We women have something of the mother in us that makes us rise above smaller matters when the mother-spirit is invoked" (203). While Mina effectively embraces the traditional role of mother here, she does so only to allow Holmwood a temporary relief from his emotions. His grief is repeatedly put in terms of childish,

but it is a temporary moment that passes. It is clear Mina allows him to indulge in this moment so that he may be more effective as an individual later by venting his grief rather than repressing it. Mina effectively has moments similar to this with most of the men in the novel, continually acting as an emotional support and ally. One can interpret the emotional sanctuary she provides for the men in her life as an affirmation of spheres ideology in its emphasis on feminine emotion and domesticity, yet Mina's departure from spheres ideology complicates this interpretation through her active role in defeating Dracula. If anything, this typical femininity combined with her departures from it showcase Mina's ability to navigate gender roles successfully to the benefit of the society around her.

Mina's social place and value to the group proves vital in the fight against Dracula, specifically in how it mobilizes the men against the vampire. Lucy's death fails to push the men in the novel to defeat Dracula. It is only when Mina becomes corrupted that the men resolutely decide to destroy Dracula. Mina's effect on the men in her life and its differentiation from Lucy's demonstrate a positive social change primarily available to Mina due to her relationships with other men and the visibility it affords her as an individual. In addition, her interactions emphasize the camaraderie experienced between her and the others rather than representing her as only a marriage commodity. This sense of camaraderie that heightens the horror in the scene in which her corruption is finally seen.

Kneeling on the near edge of the bed facing outwards was the white-clad figure of his [Jonathan's] wife. By her stood a tall, thin man, clad in black. His face was turned from us, but the instant we saw we all recognized the Count—in every way, even the scar on his forehead. With his left hand he held both Mrs. Harker's

hands, keeping them away with her arms at full tension; his right hand gripped her by the back of the neck, forcing her face down on his bosom. Her white nightdress was smeared with blood, and a thin stream trickled down the man's bare breast which was shown by his torn-open dress. (246-247)

The first striking thing about this scene is the similar position that Mina takes towards the Count that the earlier Dracula takes towards Jonathan. Of course, Mina is forcibly put into this position, but it demonstrates a clear connection between this behavior and Dracula's actions. His malicious and predatory actions cannot be questioned in this scene as the way he restrains her and forces her to drink the blood evoke imagery of sexual assault. While Arthur, Seward, Quincy, and Van Helsing observe Lucy fading in sickness, they never directly see Dracula attack her. They see insurmountable evidence of it which Seward chooses to ignore and Van Helsing largely suppresses despite knowing the truth. Even Jonathan refuses to remember or reflect on his traumatic experience with Dracula. The visual image and proof of Mina's transformation leave no doubts as to her victimization and its cause. They do not think to enact violence upon Mina in the same manner that was enacted on Lucy, deciding to attack the root. Mina's previous relationship to these men as an ally rather than a sexual commodity combined with the visibility of her victimization mobilize the men within her society to act in their ultimate best interests and defeat the monster.

Significantly, Mina's writing and communication skills become invaluable when combatting Dracula. In addition, Van Helsing repeatedly praises Mina for her intellect, determination, and dedication. While he ascribes many of these positive characteristics as masculine, Mina does not act overtly masculine. Unlike Lucy, Mina's skill set does not leave her

defenseless in the fight against patriarchal evil. Writing and communication effectively become her weapons in the fight against Dracula. Like Bannerman's *femme fatales*, Mina obscures language most notably through her proficiency in shorthand which Dracula cannot read, yet Mina also successfully communicates with the men in her life who can help her produce the change needed to prevent her descent into the monstrosity. Lucy's descent into monstrosity is marked by a distinct fragmentation of experience and information evidenced by the very epistolary form Stoker writes in. Lucy's own ignorance about her transformation is exaggerated by Seward's inability to diagnose to her ailment. Exacerbating the situation further, Van Helsing only ambiguously hints at his vampiric suspicions to Seward, and the doctor's failure to communicate the necessity of the garlic flowers to the mother effectively doom Lucy to vampirism. Mina avoids this fate largely by piecing everyone's experiences together. She virtually initiates the research, information networking, and planning surrounding Dracula by collecting, compiling, and recording all the characters's separate narratives of the events surrounding Lucy's transformation. These skills repeatedly aid in the group's efforts to understand and eventually eradicate the vampiric menace. Mina's flexibility within gender norms proves a positive force in the novel as it directly leads to the destruction of the villain. Her manipulation of language and ability to communicate enable her to mitigate the problems of female romanticization and transcend patriarchal limitations placed on her.

While Lucy's descent into monstrosity is marked by her increased domesticity and submissiveness, Mina's reflects quite the opposite. She quickly guards the information the men gather from herself to foil Dracula's plans to create a telepathic link between herself and the vampire. Mina quickly inverts this relationship, effectively using it to spy on the vampire's



whereabouts. While *femme fatale* characters exist as subversions of male fantasy, figures like Lucy subverted general values relevant to their culture. Mina, on the other hand, subverts Dracula's specific expectations and fantasies. Earlier in the novel, Lucy's moments of weakness towards Dracula are marked by a trance-like states. In this trance state, Lucy seems much more amicable to Dracula's will. Like Lucy, Mina also experience these trance states, but she subverts them by purposely inducing the trance in attempts at espionage. The success of this endeavor is, again, largely due to Mina's communication skills. Unlike Lucy, Mina is able to express what is happening to her and to supply a plan with how they might use her position to gain leverage over the enemy. While the men seem hesitant at times to induce Mina into this state, she dogmatically insists on it, and the knowledge garnered from these episodes does provide the group with invaluable information that leads to the monster's demise.

Mina functions as one of the most complex characters of *Dracula* in her seemingly simultaneous engagement in submissiveness and agency. Remarkably like Victoria, all of Mina's motivations appear driven by traditional complementarianism. The distinct difference between the two lies in Mina's willingness to openly defy gender norms instead of chasing an absent feminine ideal. Within the novel, Mina seems openly critical about the radical New Woman, yet Stoker sets up distinct parallels between Mina and this feminist concept. She is intelligent, capable, and unafraid to enter the public sphere for the sake of helping Jonathan. She educates herself in his profession and takes up suitable skills like shorthand and typing to achieve these goals. Humorously when describing a meal she and Lucy shared, Mina states that the two women ate enough to shock the New Woman, meaning they ate more than socially acceptable. The jovial anecdote implies a parallel between Mina and the New Woman and shows how Mina

disregards arbitrary feminine expectations when they seem impractical. Although she avoids their fate, Mina functions largely like a traditional *femme fatale*. Her submissive demeanor and domestic interests are undermined by her disregard for impractical gender norms and her willful expression of agency.

## CHAPTER 5

## CONCLUSION

*Femme fatales* exist within a doubleness and elicit terror due to the duplicity of their subversive nature. These female monsters exist as harbingers of category crisis, and the crisis consists in the contradictory and often arbitrary nature of female gender norms. They are both the reflection and the perversion of male fantasy and function as an important archetype due to their resistance toward arbitrary gender norms established by patriarchal society. Craciun is correct to valorize these figures in the early part of the nineteenth century as revolutionary in how they subvert patriarchal values and resist male interpretation. Bannerman shows the destructive power wielded by these female monsters and their ability to destroy men by their manipulation of the male gaze. Yet it is a destructive power. The obfuscation of language in her poetry provides a means for women to resist interpretation but also bars any articulation to protest or forbid the circumstances that led to monstrous transformation. Dacre seems to build on this paradox as she more clearly builds the connection between Victoria's monstrous behavior to her desire to fulfill traditional female gender roles and the patriarchal force that exacerbates that desire. While Dacre does not seek to make Victoria sympathetic, her attribution of evil to the "suggestions of infernal influence" makes a subtle but visceral connection between Victoria's behavior and societal expectations for women in the early nineteenth century (255). Both authors highlight the negative consequences of female gender norms on men and women, but they struggle to offer a definite solution to this struggle.

Writing almost a century later, Stoker finds a positive way of mitigating the harmful effects of stringent gender norms in the nineteenth century. The Draculinas and Lucy fulfill the

typical *femme fatale* archetype, but the author takes care to tie their monstrosity to a patriarchal figure in Dracula. It is apparent to the reader that Dracula functions as the ultimate evil and that these female monsters exist as products of his presence. Lucy tragically descends into monstrosity through a process over which she has no control. In contrast, Mina effectively subverts and transcends monstrosity. Her writing and communications skills lend her the ability to become a unifying force in the novel. She mobilizes her community to actively neutralize Dracula. Her usage of language and manipulation of the vampire's telepathic state enable her to take an active and necessary role in saving herself and preventing further victimization in the story. Mina's success is largely due to the flexible way she navigates gender norms.

Simultaneously, she is the dutiful wife and emotional support structure of the house while also the active recorder of information and daring spy. Contrasting Lucy and Mina's experiences with the monstrous, Stoker suggests that victimization and demonization can be prevented by not adhering to the strict and arbitrary gender roles of the Victorian era.

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