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Dracula: The Anti-Vaccination Movement and Urban Life in Victorian England

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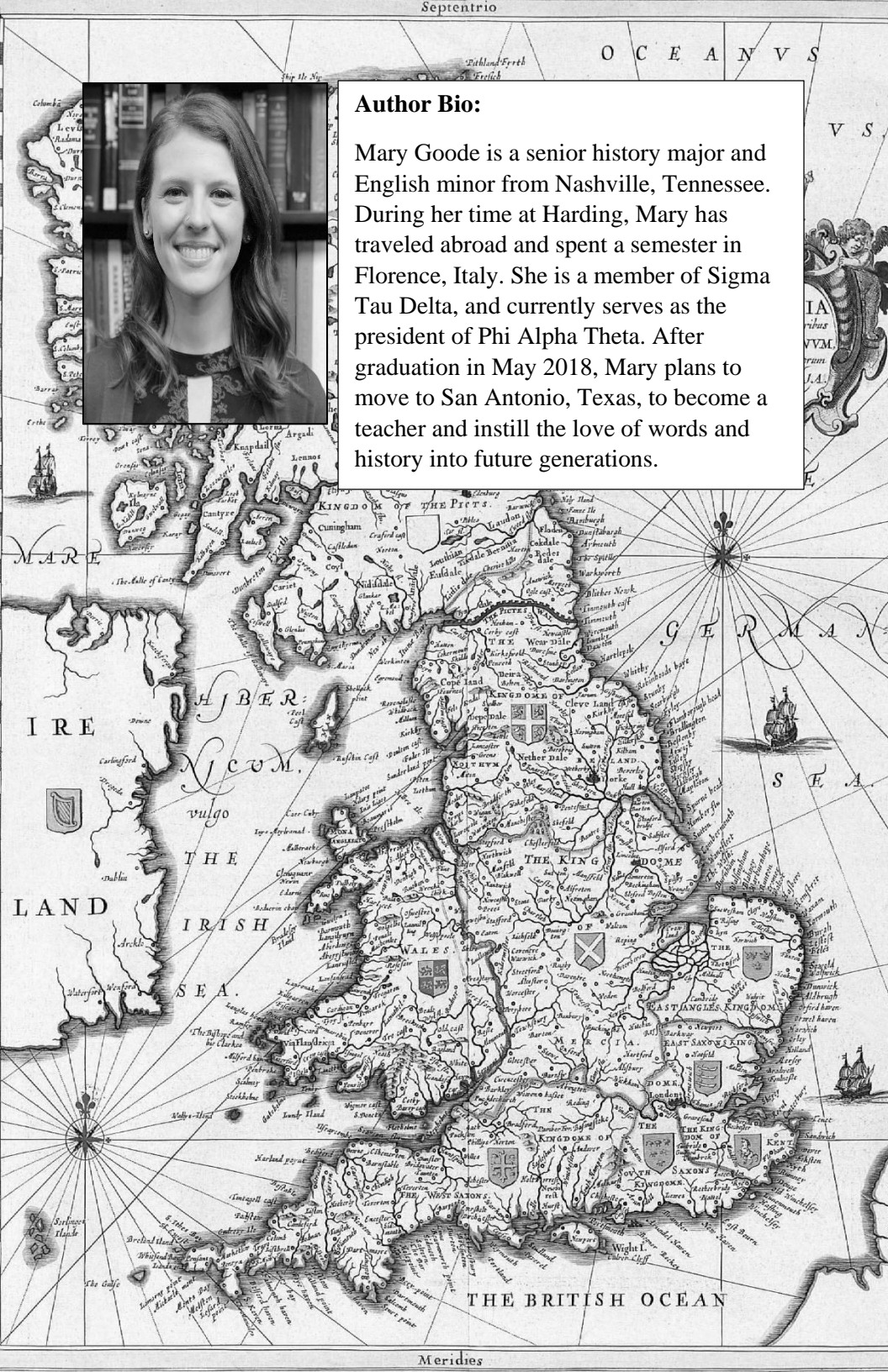




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THE BRITISH OCEAN

DRACULA: THE ANTI-VACCINATION MOVEMENT AND URBAN LIFE IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND

By Mary Goode

Scholars often analyze Bram Stoker's terrifying yet celebrated gothic novel, *Dracula*, through the lens of hidden sexuality and sexual dangers. Although such research is valid, there is an overlooked concept of the story that begs further scrutiny. *Dracula* was published in Victorian England—an era entrenched in rampant diseases, urbanization, and new scientific marvels. In the seven years that it took Stoker to write and publish his most famous work¹, Victorian England witnessed “The Great Stink,” the evolution of scientific thought concerning how disease was spread, the controversy of vaccinations, and the religious uproar that followed the Compulsory Vaccination Act. Throughout *Dracula*, the symbolic use of the vampire furthered the claims of those opposed to compulsory vaccination—later dubbed the anti-vaccinators. The anti-vaccinators' fears of compulsory vaccination included the loss of blood purity, the infliction of bodily harm and loss of innocence; as well as the degradation of religious moral. Stoker's use of words, imagery, and symbols combine to create a commentary of not only urban life in the Victorian era, but also the anti-vaccination campaign.

Published in 1897, *Dracula* became Stoker's legend. *Dracula* centered on the diaries, letters, and dialogue of the novel's characters and brought the anti-vaccinators' vampire to the forefront of Victorian society. Stoker's setting for his macabre tale was that of Transylvania—a far-off and distant place for many of *Dracula's* readers. In Transylvania, the culture was so starkly different that many readers would not immediately connect Stoker's criticism to England. Count Dracula, Stoker's vampire, stated as much:

We are in Transylvania; and Transylvania is not England. Our ways are not your ways and there shall be to you many strange

¹ Stephanie Moss, “Bram Stoker,” *Dictionary of Literary Biography* 178 (1997): 232.

things. Nay, from what you have told me of your experiences already, you know something of what strange things may be.²

Since Transylvania was a removed place from the Victorian setting, Stoker had the ability to critique Victorian England without receiving direct backlash. However, the readers of *Dracula* certainly noticed the similarities between Count Dracula and the vampire imagery used by the anti-vaccination campaign.

Named after Queen Victoria, the Victorian Era of England began in 1837 and lasted until the Queen's death in 1901.³ As a whole, the English people were better off in 1901 than they were beforehand. They had already survived the societal shift from farming to industry, and from countryside living to town life. In 1840, Thomson, a Lancashire cotton-printer who was "accustomed to travel a good deal on business," spoke of the "superior persevering energy of the English workman, whose untiring, savage industry surpasses that of every other country I have visited, Belgium, Germany and Switzerland not excepted."⁴ Victorian England witnessed the implementation of public health reforms under Edwin Chadwick, the spread of democracy among the working class, and the growth of leisurely pursuits. Despite the attempts to systematically clean the state of urban living, the creation of universal suffrage for all men (regardless of their socioeconomic status,) and the economic freedom to vacation with family and friends, some remained discontented.⁵

Contrary to Thomson, a later account by Henry James in 1876, painted a less glowing picture of Victorian England. He found that the city was not a "pleasant place [nor] agreeable, or cheerful, or easy, or exempt from reproach..."⁶ The England that James came in contact with

² Stoker, *Dracula* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1897), 20.

³ George P. Landow, "Victoria and Victorianism," The Victorian Web, last modified August 2, 2009, accessed April 17, 2017, <http://www.victorianweb.org/vn/victor4.html>.

⁴ Reader, 1.

⁵ "Victorian Britain: A Brief History," The Historical Association, last modified January 27, 2017, accessed March 23, 2018, <https://www.history.org.uk/primary/resource/3871/victorian-britain-a-brief-history>.

⁶ Henry James, "London," in *Essays in London and Elsewhere*, (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries, 1922 [first pub. 1893]) p.27,32, quoted in Judith R. Walkowitz, *City*

was one of strict religious surface values, but with an escapade of unseemly sexual behavior lying below the surface. Such scandalous behavior was flying in the face of highly regarded religious values. Religion was at the center of middle-class lifestyles, and frequently permeated the thoughts and actions of many Victorian citizens. Often, there were two or three services each Sunday, and to not attend them would be “scandalous or bohemian.”⁷ The ideal Christian family during this time “enshrined piety, chastity, sobriety, filial obedience, and charity, and shunned displays of luxury, sexual transgressions, and all diversions which were not improving or uplifting.”⁸ The religious Victorian family placed high emphasis on the purity and innocence of their minds and bodies, thus resulting in a major contention upon the arrival of the compulsory vaccination acts.

The fear that vaccinations would corrupt their bodily purity was not the only concern of religious anti-vaccinators. Also known as a “streetwalker,” the prostitute embedded a sense of anxiety in the people of Victorian England. To the people of England, “she had become both an object of pity and a dangerous source of contagion.”⁹ Yet, it was not just the prostitutes that invoked a sense of fear into the populace. The home, where women spent most of their lives, was a breeding ground for bacteria and disease. Women in the Victorian Era were more susceptible to “numer[ous] life-threatening illness, the most dangerous being respiratory diseases, the greatest cause of death.”¹⁰ For middle-class children, the most fatal diseases included scarlet fever, measles, whooping cough, smallpox, and diphtheria.¹¹ The spread of viral infections among the lower classes was even more widespread than that of the middle and upper classes.

of Dreadful Delight: Narrative of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 15.

⁷ F.M.L. Thompson, *The Rise of Respectable Society: Social History of Victorian Britain 1830-1900*, (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 251.

⁸ Thompson, 251.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁰ Yaffa Draznin, *Victorian London's Middle-Class Housewife: What She Did All Day*, (London: Greenwood Press, 2001), 109.

¹¹ Draznin, 112.

The spread of such diseases sparked panic, and in 1848, the dispute over how these illnesses spread were vastly divided between the “contagionists” and the “miasmatisists.”¹² The contagionists believed that cholera and smallpox, for instance, were transferred from person to person. The contagion theory first gained followers when cholera breached British soil in the 1830s. Members of the contagionist clan believed they could “only suppose the existence of a poison which progresses independently of the wind, of the soil, of all conditions of the air, and of the barrier of the sea.” However, many physicians and scientists believed that cholera was a “disease spread via poisoned atmosphere, not personal contact”—thus supporting the miasmatisists’ position. Much to the chagrin of modern scientists and physicians, by the late 1840s the miasma theory had established a wider, more prestigious following. Several members included Edwin Chadwick, the sanitation commissioner; William Farr, the city’s main demographer; and several other public officials and members of Parliament. The miasma theory held that disease spread through the atmosphere, and the folklore and the superstition of Victorian England were on the miasmatisists’ side for “the foul inner-city air was widely believed to be the source of most disease.”¹³ This particular theory lent its hand to fear. Believing that diseases such as cholera and smallpox were spread through the air meant that the “disease was both invisible and everywhere; seeping out of gully holes.”¹⁴ The fear that the unseen could invoke pain and result in death was terrifying not only to the general Victorian populace, but also to the readers of *Dracula*. Stoker’s fisherman, Mr. Swales, oozed the foreshadowing of the novel when he said, “Look! Look! [...] There’s something in that wind and in the hoast beyond that sounds, and looks, and tastes, and smells like death. It’s in the air; I feel it comin.”¹⁵ Stoker foreshadowed not only death, but also Count Dracula through language that represented the view of the miasmatisists.

However, the strength of the miasmatisists could not last forever. In June 1858, an unyielding heat wave constructed a “stench of epic

¹² Steven Johnson, *The Ghost Map*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 2006), 69.

¹³ Johnson, 69.

¹⁴ Johnson, 86.

¹⁵ Stoker, 70.

proportions” on the banks of the litter-filled Thames. The stench was quickly dubbed the “Great Stink” by the collective press, and one *City Press* writer observed, “Whoso once inhales the stink can never forget it, and can count himself lucky if he live to remember it.”¹⁶ While Stoker did not explicitly mention the Great Stink in *Dracula*, one particular passage exuded the same opinion as the *City Press* writer:

There was an earthy smell, as of some dry miasma, which came through the fouler air. But as to the odour itself, how shall I describe it? It was not alone that it was composed of all the ills of mortality and with the pungent, acrid smell of blood, but it seemed as though corruption had become itself corrupt. Faugh! it sickens me to think of it. Every breath exhaled by that monster seemed to have clung to the place and intensified its loathsomeness.¹⁷

Again, Stoker used the vernacular of the miasmatists; however, this time he was describing the dwellings and characteristics of Count Dracula. In doing so, Stoker perpetuated the anti-vaccinators use of the vampire for their campaigns against compulsory vaccination.

Stoker adopted the anti-vaccinators’ symbol of the vampire for his novel, *Dracula*. The anti-vaccinators used the vampire to depict pro-vaccinators and the medical officers who performed vaccinations. For the anti-vaccinators, the vampire’s teeth were representative of the surgical instruments that were used to vaccinate their children. Stemming back to the early and mid-1800s, the controversy over piercing the skin became first, a religious issue, and secondly, a legal one. The debate over vaccinations is present in a multitude of sources. However, more essential to the thesis of this paper, the footprints of said debates are found within the pages of *Dracula*.

The religious view of the body in relation to vaccinations was a colossal issue in the Victorian Era. By this time in history, the previously believed conception that the child was tainted by original sin was

¹⁶ Johnson, 205.

¹⁷ Stoker, 234.

replaced by the “romantic” notion that the child was inherently innocent.”¹⁸ Evangelical writings emphasized both the “fragility of the child” as well as its “redemptive powers.”¹⁹ For this reason, the child represented an important symbol of “purity and grace.” Anti-vaccinators believed that tampering with a child’s body was “doubly transgressive” because it “defiled the individual in its purest state and threatened the soul, forestalling the child’s redemptive possibilities.”²⁰ In addition, they also maintained that vaccination was “sacrilege” because it obstructed the body of the child “just after God has given it you.”²¹ Such anti-vaccinators implied that the “late-night” Parliament session that passed the Compulsory Vaccination Act of 1853 was sinister even comparing it to a black Sabbath:

[I]n the dark midnight hour, when evil spirits were abroad, when nearly all slept save for a few doctors, who were rather awake, whose dictum or nostrum carried the night, this Act was passed, this deed was done. It was a deed worthy of the night, dark as the night. No light shone on it, the blackness of darkness hovered around it. It was a deed that can but lie in the night; light is fatal to its being.²²

Many anti-vaccinators were strongly opposed to the Compulsory Vaccination Act of 1853. This particular legislative act made vaccination for infants up to three years old mandatory, and a following vaccination act in 1867 extended the requirement to fourteen years of age.²³ The citizens who demanded control over their bodies, or their children’s, faced penalties for refusing vaccination. For instance, Mr. Pearce, a

¹⁸ Nadja Durbach, *Bodily Matters: The Anti-Vaccination Movement in England, 1853-1907*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 118.

¹⁹ Julie Melnyk, *Victorian Religion: Faith and Life in Britain* (London: Praeger, 2008), 1.

²⁰ Durbach, 118.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 118-119.

²² Halket, *Compulsory Vaccination!*, 13, quoted in Nadja Durbach, *Bodily Matters: The Anti-Vaccination Movement in England, 1853-1907*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 118.

²³ The College of Physicians of Philadelphia, “History of Anti-Vaccination Movements,” History of Vaccines, last updated March 15, 2017, accessed April 18, 2017, <https://www.historyofvaccines.org/content/articles/history-anti-vaccination-movements>.

member of the anti-vaccination movement, received twenty-two separate fines for refusal. Supposedly, the Anti-Vaccination Society paid off his fines.²⁴ Joseph Abel was another victim of the penalties enforced from these acts. He was fined five times because he refused to have his child vaccinated.²⁵ In both cases it was speculated that the Society paid their fines—suggesting that the Anti-Vaccination Society had enough members paying to cover their penalties.²⁶

To emphasize the dangers of vaccination, anti-vaccinators incorporated language from the Book of Revelation. They warned that compulsory vaccination fulfilled “an apocalyptic prophesy.” Revelation 16:2 forewarned that “foul and evil sores came upon the men who bore the mark of the beast.” Anti-vaccinators believed that vaccination scars were a “mark of the beast” and a symbol “of the damned and a sign of the apocalypse.” This type of “spiritual perversion” spread the discourse of “monstrous physical transformation.” Both found their roots in the Victorians’ anxieties about “bodily violation” and “blood purity.”²⁷ Likewise, their fears of “monstrous physical transformation[s]” and “foul [...] evil sores” were epitomized in Stoker’s *Count Dracula*.

The Victorian beliefs about bodily violation and blood purity and the commentary on the body and blood found in Stoker’s *Dracula* are almost identical, and due to the overlapping similarities they are extremely hard to dismiss as coincidental. In the 1881 handbill, *The Vaccination Vampire*, James Wilkinson “drew on a number of related metaphors to construct vaccination as vampiric.” The vampire’s primary concern was with the blood, but Wilkinson maintained that “vaccination disrupted the entire fluid economy of the body. The ‘Vaccination Vampire’ polluted the ‘pure babe’ precisely at the point of its ‘suckling.’”²⁸ Wilkinson’s *Vaccination Vampire* introduced a “literary

²⁴ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, “Questions,” HC 25 July 1876, v. 203: col 1883-4. <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com>.

²⁵ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, “Questions,” HC 12 August 1876, v. 231: col 1115-6.

²⁶ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, “Questions,” HC 25 July 1876, v. 203: col 1883-4; and *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, “Questions,” HC 12 August 1876, v. 231: col 1115-6.

²⁷ Durbach, 119.

²⁸ Durbach, 138.

trope that was not yet a century old, for the vampire was a distinctly nineteenth-century phenomenon.”²⁹ By the time *Dracula* hit the scene in 1897, anti-vaccination pamphlets and handbills already “heavily exploited the symbolic value of the vampire.” Published right after the Royal Commission on Vaccination had reached its conclusions, *Dracula* arrived on bookshelves at a high point in the anti-vaccination campaign.

Since *Dracula* took Stoker seven years to scheme, write, and publish, it may be assumed that Stoker was aware of the relationship between vampires and vaccines. While anti-vaccinators never explicitly referred to Stoker’s work, *Dracula* cemented many of the perpetuations of the anti-vaccinators’ anxieties. *Dracula* sealed the relationship between the vaccinator and the vampire by narrowing its associations with blood, bodily purity, degeneration, and sexual immorality.³⁰ Specifically, the pressing fear of bodily violation was cloaked with concerns over the purity of the blood. Throughout the Victorian Era, physicians and common folk alike believed that “blood is the life...and pure blood is healthy life.”³¹ This particular belief is overwhelmingly present in *Dracula*. Count Dracula feasted on the pure and innocent for their blood. Once Dracula’s sharp teeth (perhaps symbolic of the surgical equipment that delivered vaccines) pierced the skin, the once virginal qualities of their characters turned into monstrous “marks of the beast”—exactly what the anti-vaccinators believed would happen once their own or their child’s, “pure” body was pierced with the needle of vaccination. Dracula’s bite punctured his victims’ protective shroud of purity much like the doctor’s needle pierced the skin of the compelled.

Stoker’s 1897 Gothic masterpiece reinforced the claims of the anti-vaccinators. Count Dracula epitomized the anti-vaccinators’ concern over the loss of innocence, contamination of blood, and degradation of the body. The similarities of the anti-vaccinators use and portrayal of the vampire are almost identical to the characteristics and mannerism of Count Dracula—once aware of them they are extremely difficult to dismiss as coincidental. Not only did *Dracula* support the anti-vaccination campaign’s symbolic use of the vampire, it also furthered the

²⁹ Durbach, 139.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 142.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

association between the two. *Dracula* would not have received such attention, such critical acclaim, if a portion of society, the anti-vaccinators, had not previously popularized the trope of the vampire. Within the pages of *Dracula*, a vampire feasted on pure bodies and blood while the victims remained unaware of their compelled fate. Similarly, the anti-vaccinators felt as if their pure bodies and blood were being preyed upon by the legislative acts of Parliament: creating beastly marks on their God-given skin and tainting their innocent blood. While many critics' dissection of *Dracula* aims heavily on the overt sexual themes, it would be unwise to dismiss the underlying themes of hygiene, medicine, and legislation present throughout the captivating pages of *Dracula*.