

‘And then we be cannibals ... or vampires’: From Vampires to Vegetarianism in J.M. Rymer’s Penny Bloods

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It is commonplace that in horror fiction, film, and television, vampires are categorically defined by what they drink: human blood. In the estimation of Nick Groom, the title character of John William Polidori’s short story ‘The Vampyre’ (1819) constitutes ‘an enthralling outrage of sexual bloodlust’ (2018: 110). Jack Halberstam and other critics have observed how Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) and various adaptations of it exploit the anti-Semitic ‘blood libel’ canard, with its hackneyed imagery of gustatory ‘blood-lust’ (Halberstam 333, discussed in Bale 1997: 106). Anne Rice’s late-twentieth-century *Interview with the Vampire* series features vampires who meticulously self-fashion in relation not only to drinking blood, but their efforts to resist drinking human blood; Sandra Tomc persuasively reads these efforts as ‘dieting’, and in them she locates ‘all the signal features of the diet narrative’ of late-twentieth-century American culture (1997: 97). In the early Victorian era, however, the notion of the vampire was popularized by a horror writer intrigued by outrage about a different kind of bloodlust: human consumption of animal meat.

James Malcolm Rymer (1814-84), one of the most prolific and widely read authors of Victorian popular fiction, was almost entirely neglected by critics for most of the twentieth century. His work is now undergoing a critical recovery, spearheaded largely by Louis James’s groundbreaking monograph, *Fiction for the Working Man, 1830-50*, and aided by the identification of many of his works by biographers such as Helen R. Smith (2002) and Marie Léger-St. Jean (*Price One Penny*, 2002-present). Rymer excelled at writing what late Victorians

retrospectively termed ‘penny bloods’, and later, slightly less lurid ‘dreadfuls’: serials for a variety of newspapers and magazines as well as standalone ‘parts’ (installment pamphlets, similar to comic books). In composing these horror serials, Rymer’s intention was never to merely horrify or shock; rather, twenty-first-century scholars have revealed liberal politics woven into Rymer’s bloods, finding that he was particularly concerned by the various ways in which nineteenth-century industrial society disenfranchised and dehumanized the industrial subject.¹

This essay will argue that Rymer’s penny blood *Varney, the Vampyre, or the Feast of Blood* (1845-7) enlists the notion of the vampire to speculatively raise questions about the ethics of meat consumption in an industrial age. In *Varney*, Rymer conceptualizes his vampire in ways that promote abstention from animal meat, a practice that had recently garnered the name ‘vegetarianism’. In a discourse reminiscent to that of the burgeoning 1840s vegetarian movement, *Varney*’s human characters repeatedly define vampirism as consuming the blood of ‘others’ — the species tantalizingly unspecified. They worry about what their identification of unidentifiable consumables says about their ethical status and consider that they might unwittingly be ‘vampires’ and ‘cannibals’. Rymer’s slightly later masterpiece *The String of Pearls* (1846-7, revised 1850) furthers *Varney*’s hints of vegetarian polemic into a full-blown attack on meat-eating. In *Pearls*, upper-middle-class London lawyers and law-clerks, immoderately hungry for animal meat, are horrified when they develop the culinary taste of cannibalism. *Reynolds’s Miscellany*, a periodical to which Rymer later vigorously contributed, explicitly promoting vegetarianism at the height of *Pearls*’ popularity suggests that Rymer’s rhetoric was understood as a vegetarian polemic by his intended audience. In short, by blurring the boundaries between outlandish ‘vampire’ and ‘cannibal’ monstrosity and quotidian English

carnivorism, Rymer's two most successful penny bloods innovatively created space in Victorian popular culture for the promotion of vegetarianism.

Why would Rymer's imagination lead him to consider a vampire story in the popular penny blood genre as an appropriate vehicle for vegetarian rhetoric? To begin with, the vampire is a product and signifier of modernity. The vampire emerged in published European literature during the Enlightenment, forged in early contentions between folk superstition and empirical inquiry (Groom 2018: 4). British vampire literature's adolescence, as it were, was therefore synchronous with the Industrial Revolution. 'The most popular vampire' story of the early nineteenth century was Rymer's *Varney*; '[b]y any standards', this mammoth two-hundred-twenty-chapter serial 'was a publishing sensation and a runaway success', and decades later it was still vividly recalled and imitated (Groom 2018: 138). *Varney* was a more complex text than its genre's reputation suggests. Groom credits Rymer with 'occasional moments of veiled social politics' (139). A major target for his political rhetoric was the food culture of the 'Hungry Forties'; indeed, the Great Famine (1845-9) killed over a million Irish people and induced 1.2 million more to emigrate (Mokyr 2020: np). Across Britain, starving people and their sympathizers agitated against the Corn Law, which was repealed in 1846. In literature, examples of the ascendant 'Christmas Tale' periodical genre often reveal 'dread of famine' (Moore 2008: 489) and advocate for middle-class charitable alleviation of working-class hunger and malnutrition (495). An entire country starves in Henry Mayhew's 1847 Christmas book *The Good Genius that Turned Everything into Gold* (496), and even *Punch* depicted famine stalking the British Isles (495). Food scarcity was both the reality and the preoccupation of the latter part of the decade.

This preoccupation easily found its way into popular fiction. While, as Robert Mack observes, early ‘popular fiction seemed inadvertently to reflect the country’s growing interest in cooks and cooking’ (2007: 7), it also reflected concerns about starvation. This literary phenomenon is exemplified by some of the 1840’s most canonical novels, including Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. *Varney* is equally concerned with alimentary sociology; in *Varney*, the vampire appears not only as a blood-drinker, but a monstrous *eater*, too, who makes feasting seem tyrannical and perverse. The notion of the feast pervades the serial’s full title: *Varney the Vampyre, or the Feast of Blood*. Amidst the famine, food insecurity, and food anxiety of 1845-7, any kind of ‘feast’ might seem an inherently revolting elite indulgence. Rymer’s narration and dialogue reinforces this image of the revolting blood ‘feast’ or ‘meal’ as more than mere drink. Early on, the ‘vampire’ is defined as a person ‘whose blood has formed a horrible *repast*’ and ‘after death... visits others in the same way’ (Bleiler Vol. 1: 48, *emphasis mine*). The blood is a meal, not a drink.

Rymer establishes the vampire-hunting plot in the same alimentary, well, vein. *Varney* consistently defines vampires as monstrous eaters — including, potentially, eaters of nonhuman victims. A vampire is ‘one of those beings, who clings to existence, by *feeding* on the life-blood of others’ (Bleiler 1970-2: 1:55, *emphasis mine*). The Bannerworth family fears that heroine Flora Bannerworth, having apparently been ‘visited’ by the vampire *Varney*, will reverse the anatomy of pregnancy, wherein the mother feeds her child with her bodily composition, by consuming the blood of her children (1:55). Offering another definition of the vampire, one apparently informed by the latest research and rumor, the physician Dr. Chillingworth states that ‘the hideous *repast* of blood has to be taken very frequently, and if the vampyre gets it not he wastes away’ (1:12, *emphasis mine*). *Varney* himself confirms that vampires do not drink blood

for the taste or any other experiential aspect, but to sustain their lives. ‘I am a vampire’, Varney tells Flora, ‘[the] sustenance that supports this frame must be drawn from the life-blood of others’ (1:155). That is, of course, also true of those Britons who feasted while others, including their own tenants or other workers, starved. *Varney* also displays outrage at the notion of some creatures directly eating, as we have seen Rymer repeatedly put it, ‘others’. The implication is that these ‘others’ are human, but in several instances that distinction is not explicitly stated, leaving open the possibility that what is really horrifying is that one sentient being might be sustained by ‘the life-blood of others’: i.e., the horror that underpins the ideological abstention from meat-eating, or vegetarianism.

The vagueness of Rymer’s vampire definition (‘of others’) is worth noting because he was almost certainly exposed to the idea of vegetarianism by the early 1840s. By October 1840, and possibly until 1850, Rymer lived with his wife and child at no. 42 Burton Street (Collins 2000: 3). In 1837, a house down the road, no. 49 Burton Street, was the residence of eccentric pedagogue, vegetarian and promoter of vegetarianism, James Pierrepont Greaves (1777-1842). As J. E. Latham (Greaves’s biographer) explains, Greaves moved to Burton Street because it was ‘both middle-class and artistic’ — qualities that may also have appealed to Rymer. At no. 49, Greaves ‘established his Aesthetic Institution, a weekly meeting of all who wished to discuss openly and freely the questions proposed by Greaves, who, immobile with a hernia, sat in his grey dressing coat’ (Latham 1999: 80). An artistic and debating salon probably would have proved interesting to Rymer, who attended the Mechanics’ Institute (James 2017: 42) and whose father, the very obscure Regency writer Malcolm Rymer (1775-1835), participated in mutual improvement society activities (Nesvet 2017: 115). Greaves’s eccentricity also proved a draw among less artistic neighbors. ‘Greaves’s salon attracted a wide range of people’, Latham

observes, and some attended ‘out of curiosity’ (1999: 80). In the years immediately following Greaves’s death, when Rymer saw through the serial publication of both *Varney* and the two variant texts of *Pearls*, Greaves’s disciples abandoned Burton Street and, in the April 1842 number of their journal *The Healthian*, printed the word ‘vegetarian’ for the first time in publication history. It seems likely that even if in 1840-2 Rymer did not attend Greaves’s salon, he would have known of its presence in his neighborhood. Surely, Rymer would have heard of his death.

As *The Healthian*’s title suggests, the Concordium promoted vegetarianism for its health benefits and also on grounds of compassion for animals. Both these arguments represent vegetarianism as a primeval, natural practice, and meat-eating conversely as unnatural, monstrous, and an outcome of corrupt modernity. This ideological paradigm is traceable to the earliest prominent promoters of vegetarianism in English letters, the Romantic radicals Joseph Ritson (1752-1803) and Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822). Ritson argues in *An Essay on Abstinence from Animal Food as a Moral Duty* (1802) that abstention from animal food brings the consumer back to some approximation of a Rousseauvian state of nature, which he unquestioningly admired. To Ritson, carnivorousness is literally monstrous; he considers it a halfway house *en route* to cannibalism. ‘Those accustomed to eat the brute would not long abstain from the man’, as ‘both would taste the same’ cooked (Ritson 1803: 124; discussed in C. Jones 2001: 127). Like Ritson, Shelley consistently ‘perceived the choice and consumption of food as political activities, conditioned by the culture in which they are located’ (C. Jones 2001: 111). His works, including *A Vindication of Natural Diet* (1813), *Queen Mab* (1813), ‘On the Vegetable System of Diet’ (ca. 1813-15), and *Laon and Cythna, or, the Revolution of the Golden City* (1816), directly advocate for abstention from meat-eating on ethical grounds, ‘represent[ing]

the consumption of food as an element of the social structure', just as it was for Ritson (Morton 1994: 11). Shelley advanced what Michael Owen Jones terms an 'ecotopian vision involving a harmonious relationship with nature' achieved via vegetarianism (M. Jones 2016: 9). As Timothy Morton shows, Shelley envisions a 'vegetarian utopia' in which neither meat-eating nor socio-economic disparity exists, and crime, supposedly caused in part by meat-eating, has become rare (Morton 1994: 15). 'The depravity of the [. . .] moral nature of man originated in his' adoption of 'unnatural habits', Shelley claims, including meat-eating (Shelley 1884: 9).

This rhetoric resurfaces in the first vegetarian cookbook, Martha Brotherton's *Vegetable Cookery: by a Lady* (1832), which proved popular enough to go through at least four editions within two years. 'A vegetable diet', Brotherton theorizes, 'is more favorable to *health, humanity, and religion*' (Brotherton 1833: 1). 'In the first ages of the world', she insists, following Ritson and Shelley, 'mankind lived wholly upon the vegetable productions of the earth' (1). Brotherton maintains that vegetarianism protects consumers from the positive 'dangers' of meat adulteration (3), which was rife in the 1840s (as was adulteration of bread and other commercially processed foodstuffs). Brotherton adds that carnivorism is a moral hazard because 'slaughtering and devouring animals' tends 'to strengthen in us a murderous disposition, making us insensible to pity', while vegetable-only eating 'preserves innocency' and 'increase[s] love' (4). As humans feel 'by nature a repugnance to the spilling of blood', vegetarianism constitutes a partial return to the natural state of mankind (4). She goes so far as to assert that God could not have intended for people to eat animals; to 'purchase' their dinners 'with a pang' and 'remorse' for animal-murders necessarily committed (4). Sensationally, Brotherton sees no difference between a socially acceptable English carnivore and that most outlandish of European-imagined monsters, the cannibal. 'Because nature has furnished man with the capacity

to devour human flesh’, she proposes, ‘will anyone pretend that he was made to feed on his fellow men?’ (6). In all these arguments, Brotherton echoes Shelley and Ritson’s nostalgia for an imaginary ideal of pre-industrial life.

Victorian vegetarianism recycles these claims. In a seminal monograph on the literary resonances of Smithfield Market, Ted Geier, informed by historian Robyn Metcalfe’s study of Smithfield’s role in London’s evolution, demonstrates that early nineteenth-century controversy over whether slaughter should be banned incorporated anxieties about the practical and moral perils of modern industrial living. For some Romantic and Victorian writers, Smithfield’s slaughterhouses signified ‘the excruciating totality and inarticulate nothing[ness] [. . .] of modern life’ (Geier 2016: 23). Vegetarianism constitutes an escape from this dismal modernity in Fanny E. Lacy’s short story ‘The Vegetarian, or a Visit to Aunt Primitive’ (1847). In this didactic sketch, the hero’s sympathetic vegetarian aunt disdains ‘flesh-foods’ as ‘strange unnatural compounds’ (Lacy 1847: 406), has moved to the country, and she imagines a literally utopian pastoral future facilitated by vegetarianism. Similar anxieties about modern industrial life contributed to vegetarianism’s popularity in the *de facto* capital of British industry, Manchester. In April 1848, 232 vegetarians attended the Vegetarian Society’s first public banquet (‘Physiological Puritanism’, 1852: 219). Held in an opulent hotel, this banquet appears to have been at least in part the Mancunian socio-economic elite’s attempt to reconnect with the natural world from which they were far more alienated than their recent ancestors were.

At the same time, vegetarians were themselves widely considered strange, alien, unnatural, and socially destructive, and had been for some time. Eighteenth-century caricaturists William Hogarth and James Gillray both employed the image of the roast beef feast as a sign of British patriotism and prosperity, while a Victorian tradition maintained that roast beef and plum

pudding defined a British Christmas lunch (Durbach 2013: 969). In the 1830s, ‘radicals’ arguing for working-class political self-determination numbered among the essential rights of working-class Britons the right to a regular supply of beef. Such arguments often invoked a supposed ideal past in which the English yeoman regularly ate beef for dinner (969). It was probably in keeping with this tradition that the London radical William Lovett, author of the People’s Charter, protested ‘the great hardship of being denied animal food’ while imprisoned in Warwick Gaol in 1839-40 (Lovett 1876: 236). In 1852, at the height of the debate over Smithfield’s future, the *Westminster Review* railed against organized vegetarians: ‘[s]ome of the physiological reformers are fond of urging home the consideration that it is ungentle, cruel, ferocious, to sacrifice other creatures’ lives in order to support our own’, the *Review* reports (‘Physiological Puritanism’ 1852: 229). But the vegetarians, a ‘sect that endeavors to seduce the nation from its time-honoured ways of living’ (230), threatens to sacrifice to animal welfare not only ‘Smithfield and all butchers’ but British society, from ‘every present cook’ to ‘farmers’ wives, licensed sportsmen, and regular poulterers’, all of whom, due to vegetarianism’s upsurge, ‘stand in jeopardy of their very existence’ (218-19). Half a century after the Jacobin ‘Citizen’ Ritson promoted vegetarianism, it continued to seem alien, radical, or both.

In *Varney, the Vampyre*, Rymer wades into this cultural controversy with intermittently interpolated but memorable imagery that disparages meat-eating, thereby making vegetarianism seem reasonable. Varney, accused by the humans of vampirism, responds by questioning the safety and ethics of human consumption of meat. ‘I suppose you eat raw pork at supper, and so had the night-mare?’ he asks his accusers (Bleiler 1970-2: 1:80). A lengthier episode equates butchers with vampires and human remains with (animal) meat (Bleiler 1970-2: 1:229). Blurring the boundaries between animal and human remains, Rymer depicts a mob exhuming a local man,

Mr. Miles, because they suspect him of having been a vampire. The late Mr. Miles was the village butcher, which associates butchery of animals for human consumption with vampiric predation upon humans. Further conflating animal and human matter(s), the mob refers to Miles's body euphemistically as 'the cold meat' (1:208). If humans are 'meat' and a butcher is a vampire, there is little difference between the 'repasts' of vampires and of quotidian human carnivores. In a slightly later episode of *Varney*, Rymer asks a rhetorical question that makes the consumption of unidentified food products, like nearly all early Victorian urban meat, seem to imperil the consumer's claim to being human. The mob that has exhumed Miles's coffin — finding it empty excepting for a brick — move on to attack the home of Sir Francis Varney, aiming to rout that 'vampire'. They pillage his wine cellar, then experience a horrifying epiphany, which is worth quoting at length on account of its arresting pacing and its centrality to the further development of Rymer's vegetarian polemicism.

"Excellent!"

"Very good!"

"Capital wine this?"

"I say, Huggins?"

"Well," said Huggins.

"What are you drinking?"

"Wine."

"What wine?"

"Danged if I know," was the reply. "It's wine, I suppose; for I know it ain't beer or spirits; so it must be wine."

“Are you sure it ain’t bottled men’s blood?”

“Eh?”

“Bottled blood, man! Who knows what a vampyre drinks? It may be his wine. He may feast upon that before he goes to bed of a night, drink anybody’s health, and make himself cheerful on bottled blood!”

“Oh, danged! I’m so sick; I wish I hadn’t taken the stuff. It may be as you say, neighbour, and then we be cannibals.”

“Or vampyres.”

“There’s a pretty thing to think of”. (Bleiler 1970-2: 1:229)

Not having seen the wine bottled, and suspecting its owner of vampirism, they consider that it could be human blood. If they have consumed blood, though not *deliberately*, are they ‘cannibals’ or ‘vampires’, both monsters outside humanity? In the 1840s, a decade rife with starvation and food adulteration, this was not a theoretical question. As urban populations grew and the countryside emptied, alienating people from the scenes of their food’s production, how can people know what they consume and how it might change them if they cannot determine firsthand their food’s origin or composition?

This question directly informs Rymer’s major exploration of vegetarian ethics through penny horror: *The String of Pearls*, or, as it is often known today, ‘Sweeney Todd’. In *Pearls*, Todd controls both his murderous barber-shop and the cannibal pie-shop round the corner that nominally belongs to his secret employee, Mrs. Lovett. If, as the *Varney* mob considers, consuming human remains that one believed were some other substance makes one a ‘vampire’ or a ‘cannibal’, that is what Todd’s pie-shop customers become, on account for their overzealous demand for veal and pork pies. Their behavior perfectly accords with Brotherton’s depiction of

crazed, violent human carnivores. ‘What a scampering of feet is there, what a laughing and talking, what a jostling to be first’ (Rymer 1850: 25). They exhibit a ‘species of madness’, finding in the cannibal pies:

a flavour never surpassed, and rarely equalled [. . .] meat [. . .] so tender, and the fat and the lean so artistically mixed up, that to eat one [. . .] was such a provocative to eat another, that many persons who came to lunch stayed to dine. (25)

These customers bring Lovett’s famous pies out to friends and family in London’s ‘suburbs’ (25), turning scores of people into ‘cannibals’ — just as vampires reproduce exponentially. Dracula could not have more efficiently created an army of human-eating monsters. In the 1850 expanded text, Rymer makes it clearer that the cannibal pie customers see themselves as connoisseurs of animal meat. ‘A pork with a nob of veal in it to give it a relish’, one gourmand demands (Rymer 1850: 442). That he cannot tell that the pie he subsequently receives is human certainly raises the possibility that in matters of taste, there is no difference between a pork pie fan and a cannibal.

In *Pearls*, as in the vegetarian polemics of Lacy, Brotherton, Greaves, Shelley and Ritson, meat-eating is a symptom of urbanization and industrialism’s degeneration of the human species. As Christine Kenyon Jones explains, ‘the Cartesian idea of animal as a mere machine had been developed in works such as Julien-Offray de la Mettrie’s *L’Homme-Machine* (1747-8) to suggest that humans as well as animals were machine-like’ (C. Jones 2001: 59). They certainly are in industrial society, Rymer insinuates. As Ted Geier’s reading shows, *Pearls* radiates ‘an alluring association’ between Todd’s activities and ‘the meat industry’, suggesting that his shop is an urban abattoir, not unlike pre-1853 Smithfield Market (Geier 2017: 158). Todd treats his victims like livestock, processing them mechanically, without emotion and

outside the public's view. His industrial process signifies 'the London malaise': the metaphorical processing, homogenization, and dehumanization of Londoners by modern industrial life (161).

Pearls also hints that the slaughter of animals for food might be as morally outrageous as Todd's cannibal slaughter. Relationships between humans and other animals take up a good deal of the wordcount of the 1846-7 serial and are expanded considerably in the 1850 text. One trans-species relationship is the virtuous Lieutenant Thornhill's close bond with his large Newfoundland dog, Hector. Consistently loyal to Thornhill, Hector is the only witness to Thornhill's disappearance in Todd's shop during a busy afternoon. Rymer depicts him in remarkably human terms, endowing him with intelligence and empathy. 'Dogs are great physiognomists', Rymer maintains, 'and as the creature looked into [Todd's innocent servant] Tobias's face he seemed to draw a favourable conclusion regarding him, for he submitted to a caress' (Mack 2007: 33). Hector tries to alert other humans to Thornhill's disappearance and bring them to Todd's door. His attempts to attack Todd cause the latter first to hide from the dog, and then to try to poison him. Hector continues to hector Todd until the characters investigating various men's disappearances arrive at the hypothesis that Todd is responsible. Hector's heroism calls into question whether animals have less humanity than humans. If animals are capable of Hector's sympathy and virtue — and some humans, such as Todd, are not — then should carnivorousness not horrify just as cannibalism does?

In the 1850 expanded text, Rymer reiterates this point via a minor character, heroine Johanna Oakley's father's cousin, Big Ben the Beefeater, a keeper of the great cats and other predatory animals in the Royal Menagerie at the Tower of London. After Todd is apprehended, Ben treats Johanna and other characters involved in his capture with a tour of the Menagerie. During this dramaturgically superfluous episode, Ben treats his animal charges like respected

humans. He speaks of them by their proper names, such as ‘Nancy, a very beautiful lioness’ and ‘Miss Sally, a very beautiful leopardess’, and ‘Sir Robert, a fine leopard’, who are ‘the principal inhabitants of what was called the Lion’s Tower’ (Rymer 1850: 535). Ben’s menagerie also blurs the boundaries between animal and human by crediting the animals with greater humanity than the humans. ‘Lions and tigers is [sic] generally much more reasonable than human beings’, he opines (534). His nickname ‘Beef-Eater’, while a factual description of his occupation as a Tower guard, draws him into the discourse on meat-eating. In the world of *Pearls*, therefore, animals have the capacity for sympathy, virtue, self-sacrifice, and heroism; not all people do; a person behaves like an animal and respects animals as people; and Todd’s customers cannot tell if they are conditioned to crave animal meat or the flesh of fellow humans.

Ben drives home the vegetarian polemic of the Menagerie interlude by reacting to his animal wards’ consumption of humans in the way that non-vegetarians typically approach human carnivorousness. “‘Have no accidents ever happened?’” at the Tower menagerie, Johanna asks Ben. “‘Lord bless you, no’”, he responds:

“To be sure one of the warders, who was rather a new hands, would put his hand n between the bars of the lion’s den and get it snapped off; and once a leopard we had here broke loose, and jumped on the back of a sentinel, and half eat him up; but we haven’t had any accidents.”

“Why, what do you call them, Ben?”

“Oh, nothing at all.”

“I dare say,” said Sir Richard Blunt, “that the poor warder and the sentinel would have called those little incidents something.”

“Well, perhaps they might,” said Ben. “In [sic] course people will think of themselves before anybody else, but [. . .] if any of the beastesses was to get out, always recollect that easy does it, and it’s no use making a fuss”. (Rymer 1850: 534)

In Ben’s philosophy, an animal eating a human is no more an ‘accident’, much less an atrocity, than a human eating an animal; ‘people’ only react to the killing of other ‘people’ out of anthropocentric self-interest; and if one is imminently to become a metropolitan lion’s dinner, there is ‘no use making a fuss’ (534). Rymer advances these points through Ben nonchalantly relating stories about his beloved ‘beastesses’ devouring human repasts. When one predator ‘got out’ of the Tower, Ben chased him ‘into a court where there was no thoroughfare’, and then ‘nabbed him’ (718).

““And he did not mischief?””

““None to signify. He settled a couple of old women and five or six children, that was all”” (718).

This horrific lampooning of the logic of meat-eating implicitly promotes vegetarian ethical thought, as does *Pearls*, generally. To the question asked by the village thief of Varney’s wine, ‘be we then vampires, or cannibals?’, *Pearls* responds that humans that eat the life-blood of ‘others’, even without fully understanding how it was processed or of what it consists, are indeed either ‘cannibals’ or else as bestial as lions and tigers.

While neither *Varney* nor *Pearls* explicitly announces promotion of vegetarianism as a rhetorical aim, the latter’s expanded edition was published in a culture increasingly attuned to the controversy over vegetarianism. In January of 1850, the most popular penny periodical, *Reynolds’s Miscellany*, whose proprietor G.W.M. Reynolds was shortly to hire Rymer as a prominent regular contributor, stridently endorsed the vegetarian diet by publishing an

unattributed editorial titled ‘Vegetarianism’. The article begins by unequivocally promoting vegetarianism, initially on the grounds of health alone. ‘It is a prevailing, but fallacious, opinion, in this country’, the editorialist declares, ‘that vegetable food is insufficient for the maintainance [sic] of health, and that it fails to impart to the human frame sufficient muscular power and energy’ (‘Vegetarianism’, 1850: 396). The article goes on to claim that the physiological effects of regular meat-eating are comparable to alcoholic mania. ‘Like a man influenced by drink,’ the meat-eater’s ‘spirits are elevated and his thoughts are joyous, but [. . .] depression ensues’ (396). This diagnosis recalls the meat-pie-eaters of *Pearls*, manic in their ‘rush’ for the pies and subsequently depressed — in one case, suicidally so — by belated discovery of the contents. The vegetarian rhetoric of Rymer’s *Varney* and *Pearls* also anticipates ‘Vegetarianism’s’ affective aim. The editorial concludes that ‘[s]uch is the overwhelming powers of habit over men that it completely blinds them to every true principle. That which is at first offensive and disagreeable often becomes necessary and palatable’, so that, should children be raised from birth as vegetarians, they ‘would reject flesh in horror and spit it from their mouths in disgust’ (397). Disgust is precisely how Rymer’s characters react to vampirism in *Varney* and, in *Pearls*, to the belated discovery that they might be cannibals. Reynolds’s nonfiction prose vindication of vegetarianism provides clarifying context for *Pearls*’s ethical interrogation of meat-eating.

It was bold of Reynolds and Rymer to imagine that vegetarianism, a dietary practice mainly promoted in English print by elite Romantic radicals and still associated with well-off eccentrics, might appeal to the penny papers target audience, the working-class public. However, Reynolds and Rymer’s endeavors were visionary. Vegetarianism is on the rise in twenty-first-century Britain, as is ‘flexitarianism’, or mostly-vegetarian eating (Delaney 2017). In 2019, business journalists reported that the fast-food bakery chain Gregg’s introduction to its menu of

‘vegan sausage rolls’ caused the company’s annual sales to ‘surge’ by nearly 10%, topping £1 billion for the first time in its eighty-year history (BBC News 2019). According to a rather smug *Guardian* report on the vegan sausage surge, Gregg’s is emphatically a part of mass culture, purveying ‘greasy, stodgy foods to those who want, and need, to fill up quickly for very little cost’, and its CEO defines it as definitely ‘not posh’ nor aspiring to poshness (Whiteside quoted in Cooke 2019). Over a century earlier, Rymer had enlisted the mass junk food of literary culture — serial tales of canny vampires and unwitting cannibals — to promote vegetarian thought to the British public. If he succeeded in making any of his millions of readers think more critically about the ethics of meat-eating, he invested the nascent literary figure of the vampire with a paradoxically bloodless subtext.

Notes

¹ Recent criticism that recognizes Rymer’s political subtexts includes Sara Hackenberg’s discovery that *Varney* functions as a ‘radical narrative force’ (2009: 65) and Rob Breton’s reading of Rymer in general as more opportunistic in his use of working-class political idiom. Breton argues that *Varney* “reject[s] Chartism” but offers an “appeal to individual members of the Chartist audience” (2021: 116). In *Varney* and other Rymer penny bloods, ‘history recurs, and yet offers the possibility — or threat — of radical change’ (Hackenberg 2009: 73). *The String of Pearls* and the Sweeney Todd myth that it inaugurated parallel Sweeney Todd’s ‘homogenous pie filling’ with the ‘democratic ideal’ of the undifferentiated masses (Mack 2007: 11), while for ‘Marxist critics ... the focus of the story is on exploitative capitalism itself’, with Todd’s activities exposing ‘the real nature of society and its institutions’ (2007: 63). To Anna Gasperini, ‘the penny romances of the 1840s’, including Rymer’s *Varney*, ‘attempt to [acknowledge] their readers’ “sound judgment” [. . .] and “more discerning reason”’ (2019: 82). Rohan McWilliam contends that Edward Lloyd’s Salisbury Square fiction factory’s house authors, among whom Rymer was perhaps the most prolific and prominent, ‘never developed the didactic political tone of’ the radical penny novelist and editor G.W.M. Reynolds’s work (2019: 200). I contend that sometimes Rymer did resort to didacticism, including when writing for Lloyd, particularly in the well-hidden later installments of the gargantuan 1850 penny blood *Mazeppa* (Nesvet 2018).

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