Playing Vampire Games: Rules and Play in *Varney the Vampire* and *Dracula*

Lindsay Katzir, Antioch University New England

 "Great Scott! Is this a game?"

"It is." – (Stoker [1897] 2011: 95)

Created in 1897, Count Dracula descended from the vampires of nineteenth-century fiction. His ancestors arose 'in Victorian literature and society, where [they] easily lent [themselves] both to romantic Gothic fiction and to a culture morbidly fascinated by death, the funereal and the supernatural' (Day 2006: x). According to James B. Twitchell, the vampire 'is probably the most enduring and prolific mythic figure we have' (Twitchell 1981: ix), perhaps because vampires have historically lived according to rules meant to ensure their survival. They tend to avoid garlic, crucifixes, and wooden stakes, live eternally on human blood, conceive new vampires from their victims, and thus outlive generations of men.[1] Vampirism's rules were canonized in Victorian novels such as James Malcolm Rymer's *Varney the Vampire* (1847) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). Readers usually assume that Stoker established the conventions of vampire fiction, but as Twitchell claims, 'Much of the credit we give Stoker really belongs to [Rymer]' (1981: 124). Nevertheless, scholars tend to dismiss *Varney* as lowbrow, overlooking Rymer's influence on vampire lore.

Rymer's sprawling serial about an ancient vampire's attempts to function in modern society is certainly not without comedic elements, but moments of levity and farce should not discount the fact that Rymer created many of the rules of vampirism. In addition to 'rules' such

as strengths and weaknesses, clothing and creation, 'what makes a vampire a vampire is [. . .] appetite and the act of sucking. This can be the crude consumption of blood or the metaphorical draining of energy or life-force' (Weinstock 2012: 128). Some scholars argue that 'the sexual terrorism of the vampire trope is indisputable' (Luckhurst 2011: xxiv), seeing consumption as symbolic of sexuality, while others have read vampirism as a metaphor for consumerism, with renegade vampires resisting the consumption of human blood.[2] But almost no scholarship sees the rules themselves as acts of consumption. So, this article explores the evolution of Victorian vampires alongside the metaphorical notion of texts consuming their predecessors. It argues that later vampires were created through the consumption of earlier conventions, thus offering a unique contribution to scholarship by focusing on the rules of vampirism, both literal and literary.

Inventing the Vampire

Vampires lived in folklore long before they appeared in literature. From coastal Egypt to northern India to the Eurasian Steppe and, finally, to the Mediterranean region, revenants were part of almost every ancient culture (Twitchell 1981: 7). According to Professor Van Helsing, the principal vampire hunter of *Dracula*, the vampire

> "is known everywhere that men have been. In old Greece, in old Rome; he
> flourish in Germany all over, in France, in India, even in the Chersonese; and in
> China, so far from us in all ways, there even he is, and the peoples fear him at this
> day. He have follow the wake of the berserker Icelander, the devil-begotten Hun,
> the Slav, the Saxon, the Magyar". (Stoker 2011: 222)

Henry Bannerworth and Robert Marchdale, two of Varney's antagonists, associate vampire legends with the religions of Scandinavia and the Levant (Rymer [1847] 2008: 38), and Laura, the protagonist of Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's novella *Carmilla* (1872), places them in 'Upper and Lower Styria, in Moravia, Silesia, in Turkish Serbia, in Poland, even in Russia' (Le Fanu [1872] 2013: 91). The word *vampire* originated in the folklore of central and Eastern Europe, first appearing as *upir* in medieval Russian and Serbian manuscripts and later as *vampire* in a Slavic manuscript.[3] And in 1732 it entered the English language through widely circulated reports of vampire sightings in Serbia and Austria.[4]

Medieval clerics told stories of revived cadavers that haunted the living and fed upon the blood of the faithful. European folklore expanded this basic concept into what was, by the eighteenth century, an informed mythology.[5] For instance, it was commonly believed that vampires were repelled by Christian icons such as crosses, holy water, Bibles, and rosaries.[6] These red-complexioned creatures, which were said to be active in the daylight, sprang from the accursed after they died.[7] In contrast to the revenants of the medieval world, vampires could be destroyed, not merely held in place, by wooden stakes. An account of the 1746 case of Arnold Paole is illustrative: Paole was a suspected vampire from Serbia, and after his death, his body was exhumed, then 'a very sharp stake [was] driven into [his] heart [. . .] which pierced his body through and through, which made him, as they say, utter a frightful shriek as if he had been alive' (Miller 2006: 4). Elizabeth Miller explains that 'other techniques [of destruction] included decapitation, drenching the body in garlic or holy water, extracting and burning the heart, or burning the entire corpse' (2002: np). Britain inherited a figure that had been bound by more than the consumption of human blood, 'not simply a ghost or wraith [or corpse] but the devil's

spirit which had possessed the body and trapped the soul of a dead sinner' (Twitchell 1981: 8). All these myths underpin the current image of the vampire as a vengeful, draining demon.

But if the modern vampire's roots stem from eighteenth-century folklore, its modern traits were refined by nineteenth-century authors. Peter Day claims that 'while for many *Dracula* would seem to be the archetypal vampire novel, in reality many literary vampires preceded Stoker's renowned Transylvanian Count' (Day 2006: x). M. M. Carlson identifies Goethe's 'Die Braut von Korinth' (1797), 'an extremely popular and influential ballad about a young woman who returns from the tomb to suck the heart's blood of her former betrothed', as the first modern vampire tale (1977: 26). Robert Southey brought Goethe's tale to Britain with *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801), an epic poem featuring a female vampire. Nevertheless, it was Dr. John Polidori's novella *The Vampyre* (1819) that infected Britain with vampire mania.[8] In 1816, Polidori traveled with Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, and Mary Shelley to Lake Geneva, where both Frankenstein's creature and Lord Ruthven, the vampire, were born.[9]

More than a reanimated corpse, Polidori's Lord Ruthven is 'a tall, gaunt, and pale aristocrat dressed in black, whose distinguishing feature is his seductive power', which he uses to entrap innocent young women (Miller 2006: 7). He frequents castle ruins, exhibits great physical strength, drinks the blood of his victims, and, through his desire to corrupt innocence, personifies evil. Because of this overall portrait, Carlson calls Ruthven 'the prototype of male vampires in European fiction' (1977: 26-27). Miller describes Ruthven's predilection for throats as 'now commonplace', but she also points out that, unlike later writers, Polidori offers no instructions for the destruction of the vampire (2006: 7). Although Ruthven is wounded and appears to die, he is later revived by moonlight. Carlson observes that 'Polidori plays fast and loose with actual vampire lore' (1977: 27). According to Polidori, vampires supposedly drink from one woman per

103

year, but Ruthven preys on several; vampires are said to be powerful only at night, but he is also active during the day; and though Ruthven kills with frequency, his victims never become vampires themselves. Ruthven does not appear to follow a specific set of rules, but 'the possibilities suggested by Polidori's tale did not escape the more creative artists [like Rymer] who followed him' (1977: 31).

Breaking the Rules

Varney the Vampire seems endless. Not only does it span 868 double-column pages, but the popular serial, or penny dreadful, ran for almost two years, which was unprecedented at the time.[10] Developed by cultural innovator Edward Lloyd in 1843, 'dreadfuls borrowed tropes from Gothic and sensational fiction and often followed a very formulaic structure. [. . .] Supernatural creatures and mystical happenings were common and most followed the plight of a vulnerable protagonist as they rose to overthrow a powerful antagonist' (Lill and McWilliam 2019: 9). Typically, they covered topics considered too gruesome for 'serious' literature.[11] *Varney* was composed with scant attention to detail, 'written for the first of the mass-market audiences [. . .] episodically and in a hurry, printed on the first of the great steam presses, typeset on assembly line, hawked in the streets, then read into scraps' (Twitchell 1981: 123). Lloyd's writers produced stories 'at breakneck speed for an unsophisticated literary audience that was apparently more interested in fast pace and galloping suspense than in coherence or subtle character development' (Senf 1988: 42). Readers craved sensational stories, and Varney's endless exploits were so popular that, after the serial ended in 1847, it was published as a novel.

Despite *Varney*'s popularity with Victorian readers, many modern scholars dismiss its literary significance. As Carol A. Senf asserts, '*Varney the Vampyre* is read today as an example

of mid-Victorian popular culture rather than for any intrinsic literary merit' (1988: 48). Michael Sims refers to it as 'unintentionally hilarious' (2010: 168). Leonard Wolf insists 'there is nothing in *Varney*, nothing at all, that is capable of sounding anything like the chords of dark understanding that reverberate in page after page of Stoker's *Dracula*' (1972: 170), and Bette B. Roberts agrees that '*Varney*'s contributions to the [vampire] myth are superficial and physical rather than substantial and psychological' (1987: 4). But the possibility that *Varney* was a basis for *Dracula* should alone merit its analysis as an important work of literature.[12] Curt Herr suggests that 'one of the major flaws in *Varney* scholarship has been the fact that many critics mistakenly hold Rymer's serial to the same standards they would apply to a novel', which is 'a great disservice to [. . .] its contribution to vampire literature' (2008: 17). E. F. Bleiler contends that Rymer 'offered, for possibly the first time, many of the standard incidents of the vampire story' (1972: xv).[13] According to Tony Fonseca, *Varney* is 'an extremely influential work in the vampire subgenre of the horror genre, for it introduced many of its motifs and formulae' (2011: 388). In fact, *Varney* is the most significant transitional work between Polidori's *The Vampyre* and Stoker's *Dracula*.

When crafting the now-familiar conventions of vampire fiction, Rymer borrowed from Polidori but also used his own imagination. A tall aristocrat, gaunt and spectral, Varney is brooding, both self-absorbed and draining, and violent and obsessive though charming. He cannot enter a home without an invitation. Revived by moonlight and most powerful at midnight, Varney is preternaturally strong with prominent, 'fang-like teeth, lips smeared with blood and face flushed with color' (Miller 2006: 7). His 'hideous repast of blood has to be taken very frequently', and if he 'gets it not he wastes away' (Rymer [1847] 2008: 51). Varney lives on the

105

blood of innocent young women and uses his hypnotic powers to obtain it, leaving bloody bite

marks on the necks of his victims, who become vampires in turn (49).[14] According to Miller,

> other motifs in *Varney the Vampyre* will ring familiar to any reader of Stoker's
> novel: the mixed reactions of desire and fear, the vampire hunt, sleepwalking, use
> of science to defeat the monster, a midnight vigil at the tomb of a suspected
> vampire, a chase to the creature's lair, and the staking of the vampire. (2006: 7)

Indeed, Rymer established key elements that would be used in countless later texts, including

'the reluctant vampire character [and] the use of the posthumous epistle as a narrative device'

(Fonseca 2011: 388). Like *Dracula*, *Varney* is prefaced with assertions of authenticity, that

'nothing has been omitted in the life of the unhappy Varney, which could tend to throw a light

upon his most extraordinary career, and the fact of his death just as it is here related, made a

great noise at the time through Europe, and is to be found in the public prints for the year 1713'

(Rymer [1847] 2008: 34).[15] But Rymer's own consumption of previous texts is most evident in

Varney's overall 'degeneration of the well-known vampire myth' (Roberts 1987: 1).

Unlike Polidori (and later, Le Fanu and Stoker), who keeps the existence of vampires a

secret until the end, Rymer informs his reader at the beginning that Flora Bannerworth 'has

swooned, and the vampyre is at his hideous repast' (Rymer [1847] 2008: 38). While some of

Varney's characters do not believe in vampires, others never doubt that a vampire attacked Flora.

Once her family accepts this possibility, they attempt to locate him. Their cadaverous new

neighbor Sir Francis Varney becomes their primary suspect when they realize he resembles their

ancient ancestor, Marmaduke Bannerworth. Senf claims that 'Varney is a character who might

have come straight from folklore. However, in other scenes, there is even a question whether

Varney *is* a vampire' (1988: 45). As Bleiler notes,

> Varney is identified at various places in the novel as a supernatural being who has lived since the days of Henry IV; as a turncoat from the days of the Commonwealth, sentenced to be a vampire because he had killed his son in a moment of rage; or as a modern criminal, not at all supernatural, who had been revived after being hanged. (1972: xv)

But despite Rymer's initial proclamation about the existence of vampires, he leaves his readers to discover the truth about Varney for themselves.

In fact, Varney seems to play the part of a vampire more than he seems to be a literal bloodsucker. Flora's brother, Henry; her fiancé, Charles; and Charles' uncle, Admiral Bell, are all convinced that Varney is a vampire upon meeting him because of his appearance. When Charles mentions that Varney is identical to the Bannerworth ancestor, Varney coolly remarks, '[i]t's a most singular coincidence' (Rymer [1847] 2008: 101). Varney then refers to 'the supposed appearance of the supposed vampyre in this family', and he even observes that, when standing next to the portrait of Marmaduke Bannerworth,

> I dare say you will be more struck with the likeness than before. [. . .] Perhaps, then, that accounts for [Flora] thinking that I am the vampyre, because I bear a strong resemblance to the portrait. [. . .] I am rather amused than otherwise. The idea of being a vampyre. Ha! ha! If ever I go to a masquerade again, I shall certainly assume the character of a vampyre. (103)

Charles sees Varney's rejoinder as 'the very height and acme of impudence, and yet what could he do? What could he say? He was foiled by the downright coolness of Varney' (103). Serious vampires usually avoid drawing attention to themselves *as vampires*, whereas Varney self-

consciously plays the role as if he were taking part in a farce, a common trope of contemporary vampire serials.

Robert Marchdale explains that, as a rule, vampires do not eat or drink, and so when Henry offers Varney refreshments and he refuses, claiming to be 'under a strict [dietary] regimen', Henry concludes that he must be a vampire because he follows their rules (105). But as Twitchell points out, '[i]n one chapter we are told that he cannot eat meat; then a few pages later he is seen having a steak dinner' (1981: 123).[16] Varney is also caught drinking a glass of wine, so he quips that if Flora were present, then he 'could then drink on, on, on', making light of his own murderousness in order to distract from his mistake (Rymer [1847] 2008: 105). Moreover, Varney cannot be burned by sunlight, but he (theatrically) avoids sun exposure. When Henry first meets Varney, he is resting in a room with all the curtains drawn, and he subsequently appears to the family only when the sun is obscured by clouds. Varney is not repelled by crucifixes or garlic, and he cannot transform into animals. As a result, he uses mortal guile to deceive his acquaintances.

Not doctrinaire about the rules of vampirism, Rymer instead shows the characters navigating the elaborate proscriptions of polite society. Because the aristocratic Varney is exceedingly polite, the characters reveal their suspicions about him indirectly rather than confront him directly. Marchdale reminds Henry that 'it is scarcely civil to tell Sir Francis to his face, that he resembles a vampyre' (88). Varney is 'cadaverous-looking [. . .] even when he is in the guise of the gentlemanly Sir Francis' (Hackenberg 2019: 151). Nevertheless, Charles remarks that approaching 'a well-bred, gentlemanly man, and saying, "Sir, we believe you to be a vampire"', would be impolite:

> Charles felt himself compelled to behave with courtesy, although his mind was so
> full of conflicting feelings as regarded Varney; but there was no avoiding, without
> such brutal rudeness as was inconsistent with all his pursuits and habits, replying
> in something like the same strain to the extreme courtly politeness of the
> supposed vampyre. (Rymer [1847] 2008: 102).

In fact, they all feel unnerved by the disparity between 'Varney's incessant hideousness and his performance of well-mannered aristocracy' (Hackenberg 2019: 151). As Sara Hackenberg asserts, 'Varney's hideousness slides from his person to the question of how an attractive, courtly, talented, educated gentleman can also be ugly, violent, and vampiric', a common theme of modern tales where vampires seem more emotionally and psychologically complex than their predecessors (152).

Most scholars blame Lloyd's haphazard business model for these 'mistakes', but they are not necessarily the product of simple oversight. By humanizing Varney, Rymer invented the modern, sympathetic vampire who lives among people but feels guilty that he cannot fully adapt to human norms. Although Varney is mortally wounded several times, he never dies. Each time, he is revived by the light of the moon, continuing his misadventures indefinitely and prolonging his emotional misery. Ultimately, he must be consumed by fire to relieve his eternal torment. Roberts, who upholds the villainous Dracula as the quintessential vampire, insists, '[t]he Varney we see at the end, sheltered from community vengeance once again, is worn out and conscience-stricken, hardly the rebellious and indestructible symbol of evil' (1987: 4). A contradictory character, Varney seeks human fellowship and regrets his unsavory actions, yet breaks human laws and eludes community punishment. Nina Auerbach suggests that Varney's humanity 'enhances the vampire's perplexing amorphousness [. . .] [he could be] spirit or goblin,

gentleman or fiend, human or creature, predator or friend' (1995: 28-29). Stoker's *Dracula* is psychologically complex, certainly, but the titular character himself is straightforwardly villainous. In that regard, *Dracula* is not as groundbreaking as *Varney*. More of a paradox than a parasite, Varney himself is continually consumed by modern texts that foreground the complicated vampire-hero.

Playing by the Rules

Vampires are created through the literal, metaphorical, and textual consumption of other bodies, and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is no exception. Rebecca A. Pope argues that, '[a]s a discourse that lives off other discourses, *Dracula* represents the novel as a parasitic and appropriating genre and offers vampirism as a model' (1990: 199). In the same vein as *The Vampyre*, *Varney*, and *Carmilla*, *Dracula* consumes, and thus transforms, the rules of vampirism.

In *Carmilla*, Le Fanu revamped the vampire myth 'according to [his own] ascertained and ghostly law' (Le Fanu [1872] 2013: 95). Published in 1872 and presented as part of a medical casebook, *Carmilla* features a female vampire, a relatively unique concept for the nineteenth century. It also simplifies the role of the detective, replacing *Varney*'s series of amateurs with one expert, Baron Vordenburg, the descendent of a well-known vampire slayer.[17] A prototype of Van Helsing, Vordenburg 'had at his fingers' ends all the great and little works upon the subject [. . .] from which he had extracted a system of principles that appear to govern — some always, and others occasionally only — the condition of the vampire' (93). Building upon the conventions of vampirism, Le Fanu explains, 'the vampire is, apparently, subject, in certain situations, to *special* conditions' (94). For example, all are afraid of Christian iconography, but Carmilla is also repulsed by the singing of Christian hymns. And though

110

Carmilla is destroyed according to folkloric tradition, Vordenburg dispels the myth of the vampire's deadly pallor, claiming 'they present, in the grave, and when they show themselves in human society, the appearance of healthy life', not unlike the sanguine specter of Lucy Westenra, whose beauty increases as she consumes more and more blood (93-94). Exceeding Varney's great physical strength, Carmilla's hand 'leaves a numbness in the limb it seizes, which is slowly, if ever, recovered from' (96). Strangely, Carmilla is bound to adopt only anagrams of her original name, Mircalla (94).

Finally, Carmilla is 'fascinated with an engrossing vehemence, resembling the passion of love', by Laura, a young woman (94). Carmilla's obsessive love for her victims is common to all vampires, and, like Varney, she sometimes 'seems to yearn for something like sympathy and consent', though Carmilla appears to be the first lesbian vampire in literary history (94). In *Carmilla*, the consumption of blood is graphic and sexual, another point of connection with *Varney* and *Dracula*. Upon waking from Carmilla's trance, Laura recalls

> having been in a place very nearly dark, and of having spoken to people whom I
> could not see; and especially of one clear voice, of a female's. [. . .] Sometimes
> there came a sensation as if a hand was drawn softly along my cheek and neck.
> Sometimes it was as if warm lips kissed me, and longer and longer and more
> lovingly as they reached my throat, but there the caress fixed itself. My heart beat
> faster, my breathing rose and fell rapidly and full drawn; a sobbing, that rose into
> a sense of strangulation, supervened, and turned into a dreadful convulsion, in
> which my senses left me and I became unconscious. (72)

Stoker sexualizes the act of drinking blood in some of *Dracula*'s most prominent scenes, including Jonathan Harker's encounter with the brides, Lucy's attempts to feed off her fiancé,

and Mina's tasting of Dracula's blood.[18] Importantly, *Carmilla* is one of the first stories to revolve around a romance between a vampire and a young woman, a trope later worn out by countless modern vampire tales but touched upon by Rymer through Varney's obsession with Flora.

Some scholars have dismissed Le Fanu's work 'because Stoker's later text purportedly better exemplifies what one typically seeks in a vampire tale', whereas Kathleen Costello-Sullivan calls *Carmilla* an 'acknowledged influence on the later text' (213: xvii). But almost all overlook the fact that *Varney* first influenced *Carmilla*. *Varney* centered an aristocratic vampire long before *Carmilla* or *Dracula*, and the novel's scenes of 'sexual initiation of the heroine by the vampire' reoccur in both later texts (Senf 1988: 44).[19] But for several scholars of occult fiction, *Carmilla* and *Dracula* are 'intensely serious book[s]', whereas *Varney* is 'more silly than serious' (Roberts 1987: 4). For instance, Stoker's characters use grave words when discussing vampirism. Following his first examination of Lucy Westenra, Van Helsing reports that her health is 'no jest' but a matter of 'life and death' (Stoker [1897] 2011: 107). When Jonathan Harker reunites with his fiancée (and later, wife), Mina, he 'very solemnly' and in 'deadly earnest' asks her to hide his journal, which contains crucial information on vampires, and they characterize their hunt for Dracula as a 'solemn [. . .] stern duty' (99-100). Roberts praises Stoker's seriously terrifying creation, arguing that only Carmilla rivals Dracula in villainy (1987: 1-2).

Although *Carmilla* is mostly known today as a teen web series, Roberts claims that it, along with *Dracula*, perfected many of the deadly conventions now associated with vampire literature.[20] Like *Varney* and *Carmilla*, *Dracula* purports to be a record of actual events; in this case, taken from personal diaries, journals, letters, and telegrams. According to Pope, *Dracula* is,

'to use the characters'' own term, '"knitted together"', and to piece together, as in patchwork, is to '"vamp"' (1990: 199). In other words, there is a clear relationship between structure and subject. In the preface, Stoker declares, '[h]ow these papers have been placed in sequence will be made manifest in the reading of them' ([1897] 2011: 4). *Dracula* underscores 'the writing and reading of texts as a way of producing knowledge' (Pope 1990: 199). After consuming these seemingly disparate but intentionally arranged texts, the characters (and readers) are schooled in the rules of vampirism.

As shown in earlier texts, secrecy is one of the most common conventions of vampire narratives. While imprisoned in Dracula's castle, Jonathan documents Dracula's strange and secretive behavior, which is, at first, concealed beneath a façade of polite gentility, much like Varney's when he is initially confronted by Flora's family. For instance, Dracula claims to have servants, but then as Jonathan discovers, his host alone does all the cooking and cleaning, serving but not eating or drinking, himself. Dracula becomes increasingly menacing, threatening his prisoner, kidnapping local children, and impersonating Jonathan around town. Senf observes that 'it takes Harker, who — like most of the other characters in the novel — is a rationalist and a sceptic, some time to realize the truth about Dracula' (1988: 31). Indeed, it is assumed that Varney is a vampire, but the truth of that supposition is not made absolutely clear. Similarly, the deadly truth of *Dracula* is kept from the reader for most of the novel.

Because 'Stoker doesn't reveal his character's supernatural abilities until the novel is well established', Van Helsing waits until after Lucy's death to disclose the cause of her illness to his former student, Dr. John Seward (Senf 1988: 58). At first, he refuses to 'give [Seward] any further clue' about it, promising to 'unfold [the secret] to him', eventually (Stoker [1897] 2011: 107,112). He assures Seward and his friends that they 'shall know and understand it all in good

time; but it will be later', and that 'there are things that [they] know not, but that [they] shall know' (140, 154). Jean Marigny argues that 'the narrative framework of *Dracula* is meant to confuse and puzzle the reader' (2000: np). Some of the information, events, and characters of *Dracula* 'have no link whatsoever with the main plot', and, without an omniscient narrator, the reader is unable to understand connections between them (2000: np). Certainly, the reader might not *at first* see the connections between Transylvania, Mr. Swales, the *Demeter*, the wolves, Renfield, and Lucy, but as Twitchell claims, '[a]ll the pieces [of *Dracula*] are used and all the pieces fit' (1981: 134). When Van Helsing finally reveals that there are 'such beings as vampires', he shows how all these seemingly disparate pieces of the narrative have come together to form a rulebook, one that was clearly influenced by previously published texts (Stoker 2011: 220).

First, Van Helsing lists Dracula's powers: he is immortal and 'strong in person as twenty men' (223); he can instantly appear or disappear and take the form of animals; and he can also command animals and control the elements. Then, he lists Dracula's weaknesses: he 'cannot flourish without this diet [human blood]; he eats not as others'; he does not have a shadow or a reflection and is afflicted by garlic, crucifixes, and other Christian symbols; he cannot enter a home unless invited, but 'afterwards he can come as he please'; finally, his 'power ceases, as does that of all evil things, at the coming of the day' (223). Neither Varney nor Dracula is allergic to daylight, but both are stronger at night, and each author offers a single method for destroying a vampire: burning (Rymer) and staking (Stoker).[21]

Van Helsing even teaches from the figurative vampire rulebook. For instance, he shows his 'students' how to supernaturally seal a vampire's tomb using communion wafers. Van Helsing's focus on rules causes Quincey Morris to liken the circumstances to a game, and Mark

114

Knight and Emma Mason suggest that Stoker treats Catholicism as 'a "game", consisting of a set of arbitrary rules capable being endlessly reworked and reinterpreted' (Knight and Mason 2006: 193). But Stoker shows how *Dracula* has played by the vampire rules all along. At various points, Lucy, Mina and others see Dracula take the form of a bat. He commands Berserker the wolf to rampage through Whitby, and later calls upon rats to swarm Carfax Abbey. The characters eventually realize that Dracula had devastated the *Demeter* and preyed upon Lucy. Several characters experience Dracula's power over the weather, and Jonathan sees him abstain from food while playing human. Even Dr. Seward notes these connections, becoming 'darkly suspicious' when he realizes that the behavior of his patient Renfield is 'in some way linked with the proximity of the Count' (Stoker [1897] 2011: 210). Van Helsing's rules provide *Dracula* with logic and stability, but more importantly, they provide means to end Dracula's evildoing. Whereas Rymer's characters are obsessed with following social rules, and even Varney sometimes ignores the vampire rules, Stoker's characters break social and professional norms (and even human laws) in their hunt for vampires. Instead, they play by supernatural rules, and thus they are *seemingly* able to defeat Dracula at his own game.

Comparisons of Varney and Dracula tend to argue that Rymer's storytelling is slipshod, whereas Stoker's is more precise, offering a carefully crafted narrative that builds to a thrilling, if expected, conclusion. Still, *Dracula* 'seems to depend on its very inexplicableness, its nonsensibleness, to generate a kind of tension that is unrelieved and ultimately unexplained' (Twitchell 1981: 133). Dracula only alludes to his vampirism, avowing, 'My revenge is just begun! I spread it over centuries, and time is on my side. [. . .] You and others shall yet be mine — my creatures, to do my bidding and to be my jackals when I want to feed' (Stoker [1897] 2011: 285). In fact, several scholars point to discrepancies in *Dracula*: Van Helsing stresses the

115

importance of following the rules of the vampire game, so the protracted slaying of Lucy is performed according to ritual, but Dracula's death is quick and haphazard, leaving readers to question the truth of his demise. In this way, both *Varney* and *Dracula* anticipate popular trends in later vampire texts, almost all of which revolve around the subject of certainty.

Conclusion

If Rymer wrote the vampire rulebook, Stoker canonized it. Drawing from folkloric and Romantic sources, *Varney* introduced many of the conventions of modern vampire fiction, and it clearly influenced the writing of *Carmilla* and *Dracula*. Concepts like the nocturnal vampire, the vampire hunter, and secrecy and authenticity — all common plot elements of modern vampire stories — derive from Rymer's tale. But whereas *Dracula* seems to adhere more closely to these conventions and, thus, has been more frequently identified as the foundational text of the genre, *Varney* overturns many of those same conventions by foregrounding the vampire's humanity instead of his monstrosity. Fonseca argues that 'Rymer's creation of the sympathetic vampire is also highly influential' on later vampire tales (2011: 390). Roberts prefers the villainy of Carmilla and Dracula to the humanity of Varney, claiming,

> Varney is capable of a vampire's awesome power but is, at the same time, vulnerable to human weaknesses uncommon in his counterparts. His acts of destruction are certainly sensationalized but fail to elevate his stature or imbue him with the mystique of a Dracula. Varney appears to be the embodiment of evil yet instills no fear or dread in the reader. (1987: 1)

For Roberts, vampires' malevolence is their most attractive characteristic, but Varney's humanity is his greatest strength, at least in terms of his legacy. Almost all contemporary

116

vampire stories grapple with the concept of the sympathetic vampire, and even recent adaptations of *Dracula* endow the Count with sympathetic qualities.

Rymer changed the rules as his series wore on, another formula that is common today, with television programs changing vampire rules to suit plot points. If the rules for dispatching Varney do not hold, then his antagonists cannot ensure his death. Indeed, Varney chooses to end his own life, an act that reflects a kind of introspection not possessed by Dracula, who survives by instinct. And since *Varney* was a popular serial, there were no assurances of a conclusive ending. Like modern television programs, it had the potential to be endless, and 'the longevity of the series afforded the author(s) time to round out his tragic character, resulting in reader sympathy' (Fonseca 2011: 390). Rymer's *Varney* is self-consciously comical in much the same way as Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2001) and Alan Ball's *True Blood* (2008–2014). These authors play upon the 'serious' vampire tale conventions, but more significantly, like Whedon's Angel and Ball's Bill Compton, Varney is a figure of redemption. And not unlike Barnabas Collins from *Dark Shadows* (1966–1971) and Stefan Salvatore from *The Vampire Diaries* (2009–2017), Varney's recourse to human friendship unsettles the idea of the villainous vampire. These and many other modern vampire tales, including Anne Rice's *The Vampire Chronicles* and Stephenie Meyers's *The Twilight Saga*, take from Rymer the concept of the alluring and genteel bloodsucker.

The 'rules' of the vampire game center on the concept of consumption, from consuming blood to consuming texts. Lorna Piatti-Farnell claims that, 'in spite of contemporary efforts to humanise the vampire by making it a creature more akin to our human selves, the most essential point remains: vampires must drink human blood to thrive' (2014: 27-28). However, most modern narratives have circumvented the need for human blood, offering vampires a variety of

alternatives. Unlike many of their ancestors, modern vampires may choose a 'bloodless' diet, and so 'the refusal to 'feed' has become an intrinsic development in the sub-genre of sympathetic vampire fiction' (Schott 2015: 46). According to Felicitas Schott, 'In the same way as vampires refusing drinking human blood, they represent a less frightening and bad creature, as the blood drinking can be viewed as the source of their evil' (Schott 2015: 42), making Varney, who feeds only once in hundreds of pages, a more sympathetic protagonist. Varney lacks Dracula's limitations, giving readers a unique chance to sympathize with the devil. Although Stoker adheres more closely to the rules of the vampire game, even *Dracula* replicates the ambiguity of *Varney* in many ways, blurring lines between human and vampire, friend and foe, life and death.

Notes

[1] See Proctor (2009: 3, 12, 19, 21, 35, 42).
[2] See also Latham (2007: 35–37).
[3] See Miller (2002: np).
[4] See Oldridge (2006: 81) and Miller (2006: 3).
[5] See Oldridge (2006: 81).
[6] See Twitchell (1981: 7).
[7] See Oldridge (2006: 81) and Miller (2002: np).
[8] See Carlson (1977: 26).
[9] See Day (2006: x).
[10] See Roberts (1987: 1) and Auerbach (1995: 27).
[11] Fonseca (2011: 388).
[12] See Senf (1988: 4).
[13] See also Twitchell (1981: 122).
[14] See also Miller (2006: 7).
[15] See also Marigny (2000: np) and Senf (1988: 42).
[16] See also Fonseca (2011: 390).
[17] Like Van Helsing, Vordenburg also consults medical experts and priests.
[18] See Bosky (1999: 217).
[19] See Lill and McWilliam (2019: 9).
[20] *Carmilla* (2014–16) is a Canadian web series co-created by Jordan Hall, Steph Ouknine, and Jay Bennett. The series stars Elise Bauman and Natasha Negovanlis and is loosely based on Le Fanu's novella.

---

[21] One of *Varney's* other vampire characters, Clara Croftin, is staked, but Varney himself is destroyed only by fire.

List of References

Auerbach, Nina, *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Bleiler, E. F., 'Introduction', *Varney the Vampyre, or, The Feast of Blood*, (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1971), pp. v-xv.

Bosky, Bernadette Lynn, 'Making the Implicit, Explicit: Vampire Erotica and Pornography', *The Blood is the Life: Vampires in Literature*, eds. Leonard G. Heldreth and Mary Pharr (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999), pp. 217-33.

Carlson, M. M., 'What Stoker Saw: An Introduction to the History of the Literary Vampire', *Folklore Forum,* Vol. 10, (1977), pp. 26-32.

Costello-Sullivan, Kathleen, 'Introduction: Meet Carmilla', in *Carmilla: A Critical Edition*, ed. Kathleen Costello-Sullivan (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2013), pp. xvii-xxvi.

Day, Peter, 'Introduction', in *Vampires: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil*, (New York: Rodopi, 2006), pp. ix–xiv.

Fonseca, Tony, 'Varney the Vampire', in *Encyclopedia of the Vampire: The Living Dead in Myth, Legend, and Popular Culture*, ed. S. T. Joshi (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2011), pp. 388-90.

Hackenberg, Sara, 'Romanticism Bites: Quixotic Historicism in Rymer and Reynolds', in *Edward Lloyd and His World: Popular Fiction, Politics and the Press in Victorian Britain*, eds. Sarah Louise Lill and Rohan McWilliam (New York: Routledge, 2019), 147-59.

Herr, Curt, 'Introduction', in *Varney the Vampire; or, the Feast of Blood* (Crestline, CA: Zittaw Press, 2008), pp. 9-27.

Knight, Mark, and Emma Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Latham, Robert, *Consuming Youth: Vampires, Cyborgs, and the Culture of Consumption*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Le Fanu, Joseph Sheridan, *Carmilla: A Critical Edition*, ed. Kathleen Costello-Sullivan, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2013.

Lill, Sarah Louise and Rohan McWilliam, ed., 'Introduction', *Edward Lloyd and His World: Popular Fiction, Politics and the Press in Victorian Britain*, New York: Routledge, 2019.

Luckhurst, Roger, ed., 'Introduction', in *Dracula*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. vii–xxxii.

Marigny, Jean, 'Secrecy as Strategy in *Dracula*', *Journal of Dracula Studies*, Vol. 2, (2000), np.

Miller, Elizabeth, 'Getting to Know the Undead: Bram Stoker, Vampires and *Dracula*', in *Vampires: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil*, ed. Peter Day (New York: Rodopi, 2006), pp. 3-20.

---. 'The Question of Immortality: Vampires, Count Dracula, and Vlad the Impaler', *Journal of Dracula Studies*, Vol. 4, (2002), np.

Oldridge, Darren, '"Dead Man Walking": The Historical Context of Vampire Beliefs', in *Vampires: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil*, ed. Peter Day (New York: Rodopi, 2006), 81-92.

Piatti-Farnell, Lorna, *The Vampire in Contemporary Popular Literature*, New York: Routledge, 2014.

Pope, Rebecca A., 'Writing and Biting in *Dracula*', *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory*, Vo. 1, (1990), pp. 199-216.

Roberts, Bette B., 'Varney, the Vampire; or rather, Varney, the Victim', *Gothic*, Vol. 2, (1987), pp. 1-5.

Rymer, James Malcolm, *Varney the Vampire: or, The Feast of Blood*, ed. Curt Herr, Crestline, CA: Zittaw Press, 2008.

Schott, Felicitas, *The Undead Among Us*, Hamburg, DE: Anchor Academic Publishing, 2015.

Senf, Carol A., *The Vampire in Nineteenth-Century English Literature*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988.

Sims, Michael, ed., 'James Malcolm Rymer (1814–1844)', in *Dracula's Guest: A Connoisseur's Collection of Victorian Vampire Stories*, (New York: Walker, 2010), p. 168.

Stoker, Bram, *Dracula*, ed. Roger Luckhurst, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Twitchell, James B., *The Living Dead: A Study of the Vampire in Romantic Literature*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1981.

Weinstock, Jeffrey, *The Vampire Film: Undead Cinema*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.

Wolf, Leonard, *A Dream of Dracula*, Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1972.