

‘Come!’: *Dracula*’s Bawdy

[ASHLEY CHANTLER](#) (University of Chester English Literature and Creative Writing lecturer) considers whether Bram Stoker’s famous novel is intentionally bawdy.

A lot of thought-provoking work has been written about desire, sex, gender, and subversion in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), from Ernest Jones’s Freudian reading in *On the Nightmare* (1929) to Christopher Bentley’s ‘The Monster in the Bedroom’ (1972), which identifies the novel’s taboo violations (from child abuse to necrophilia). Building on these are, among other essays, Christopher Craft’s “‘Kiss Me with Those Red Lips’”: Gender and Inversion in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*’ (1984) and Talia Schaffer’s “‘A Wilde Desire Took Me’”: The Homoerotic History of *Dracula*’ (1994).

What these studies don’t do is acknowledge the novel’s bawdiness. *Dracula* contains much humorous innuendo, centring mainly on penetration, ejaculation, and, specifically, the word ‘come’ [ref. 1].

When Jonathan Harker eventually arrives at Dracula’s castle, for example, the fearful suspense has been given many turns of the screw: by the landlady at Bistritz warning Harker about Saint George’s Day – ‘when the clock strikes midnight, all the evil things in the world will have full sway’ [ref. 2] – and by her giving him a crucifix to wear; by the references to ‘Satan’, ‘hell’, and ‘witch’ (p. 36); the detailed descriptions of the sublime landscape; the enigmatic ‘flickering blue flame’ (p. 43); the howling wolves; and Harker’s question: ‘What sort of grim adventure was it on which I had embarked?’ (p. 45). After all this, Harker gets to the castle door and Dracula opens and says:

‘Welcome to my house! Enter freely and of your own will! [...] Welcome to my house. Come freely. Go safely; and leave something of the happiness you bring! [...] I am Dracula; and I bid you welcome, Mr Harker, to my house. Come in’ (p. 46).

The novel is full of this type of humour, which wouldn’t look out of place in a *Carry On* film or an episode of the television series [Dr. Terrible’s House of Horrible](#).

In London, after the virgin Lucy has been bitten and become ‘voluptuous’, she lies in bed and is looked after by the quirky triumvirate of Arthur, Van Helsing, and Dr Seward. Seward writes in his diary:

At six o’clock Van Helsing came to relieve me. [...] ‘Draw up the blind; I want light!’ Then he bent down, and, with his face almost touching Lucy’s, examined her carefully. He removed the flowers and lifted the silk handkerchief from her throat. As he did so he started back, and I could hear his ejaculation, ‘Mein Gott!’ as it was smothered in his throat. I bent over and looked too, and as I noticed some queer chill came over me. (p. 196)

There is a coupling here (and elsewhere) of hetero- and homosexual bawdiness.

Seward then gets Arthur from the dining room:

When we came into the room [Lucy] opened her eyes, and seeing him, whispered softly: –

‘Arthur! Oh, my love, I am so glad you have come!’

[...]

‘Arthur! Oh, my love, I am so glad you have come! Kiss me!’ Arthur bent eagerly over to kiss her; but at that instant Van Helsing, who, like me, had been startled by her voice, swooped upon him, and catching him by the neck with both hands, dragged him back with a fury of strength which I never thought he could have possessed, and actually hurled him across the room. (pp. 197-8)

This scene carries obvious echoes of when Harker describes being seduced by the three women at the Count’s castle: as he lies ‘in languorous ecstasy’ (p. 70) waiting to be bitten by them, Dracula rushes in:

As my eyes opened involuntarily I saw his strong hand grasp the slender neck of the fair woman and with giant’s power draw it back, the blue eyes transformed with fury, the white teeth champing with rage, and the fair cheeks blazing red with passion. But the Count! Never did I imagine such wrath and fury, even to the demons of the pit. [...] With a fierce sweep of his arm, he hurled the woman from him [...].

‘How dare you touch him, any of you? How dare you cast eyes on him when I had forbidden it? Back, I tell you all! This man belongs to me! (p. 70)

The connection between the two passages offers the possibility that the Count-like Van Helsing is jealous that Arthur has sexual feelings for Lucy instead of him. That Seward comes into the room with Arthur seems also to make overt Seward’s lust for Lucy.

Lucy then dies and Seward tells us that the next day Arthur ‘took her dead hand in his and kissed it, and bent over and kissed her forehead. He came away, fondly looking back over his shoulder at her as he came’ (p. 206). Even in this tender moment there’s an odd mixture of grief and innuendo.

During the following day, Mina says that she and Jonathan were walking down Piccadilly when suddenly:

he said under his breath: ‘My God! [...] I believe it is the Count, but he has grown young. My God, if this be so! Oh, my God! my God! If I only knew! If I only knew!’ He was distressing himself so much that I feared to keep his mind on the subject by asking him any questions, so I remained silent. I drew him away quietly, and he, holding my arm, came easily. (pp. 209-10)

Later in the novel, Mina describes her encounter with the Count. She says that he tells her:

‘You have aided in thwarting me; now you shall come to my call. When my brain says “Come” to you, you shall cross land or sea to do my bidding; and to that end this!’ With that he pulled open his shirt, and with his long sharp nails opened a vein in his breast. When the blood began to spurt out, he took my neck and

pressed my mouth to the wound, so that I must either suffocate or swallow some of the – Oh my God! my God! (p. 328)

The question all these (and other) passages in the novel prompt is: Was the bawdiness intentional?

In her online article [‘Coitus Interruptus: Sex, Bram Stoker, and *Dracula*’](#) (2006), Elizabeth Miller gives a useful summary:

If we take Bram Stoker at his word, we must assume he did not deliberately intend his novel to be concerned with sex. We need only recall his comment to William Gladstone in 1897 that ‘There is nothing base in this book’ (Letter 48) [...]. Scholars disagree on whether the author of *Dracula* was aware of any sexual subtext of his novel. On the one hand, Maurice Richardson doubts that Stoker had any inkling of the erotic content of the vampire superstition (420). But Barbara Belford is certain that Stoker not only was fully aware of it but deliberately developed a ‘coded eroticism’ (8), while H.L. Malchow is convinced that ‘Stoker was no prude, and the world of the theater in which he was immersed was full of the sexually unconventional and ambiguous’ (136).

Malchow’s observation, in his *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (1996), is an interesting and important one. Stoker must surely have known of the bawdiness in Shakespeare’s plays [ref. 3]. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, for example:

Margaret: Will you then write me a sonnet in praise of my beauty?

Benedick: In so high a style, Margaret, that no man living shall come over it, for in most comely truth, thou deserves it.

Margaret: To have no man come over me – why, shall I always keep below stairs? [5.2.3-9]

In *Troilus and Cressida*:

**Cressida: My lord, come you again into my chamber.
You smile and mock me, as if I meant naughtily.**

Troilus: Ha ha!

Cressida: Come, you are deceived, I think of no such thing. (4.2.39-42) [ref. 4]

In his 1908 essay [‘The Censorship of Fiction’](#), Stoker observed:

Truly even the plays of the Restoration period and after, when Congreve, Wycherley, Farquhar and Mrs. Aphra Behn flourished, were written to suit a debased public taste. (p. 483)

Stoker must have been aware, for example, of this joke in William Wycherley’s *The Country Wife* (1675):

Sir Jasper: Wife, my Lady Fidget, wife, he [Horner] is coming into you the back way. [ref. 5]

But perhaps Stoker was ignorant of innuendo. Perhaps he really didn't know that he had written something that would 'suit a debased public taste'. Perhaps he really believed that 'There is nothing base' in *Dracula*. Perhaps it is me who is making the novel bawdy. As Frank Kermode has written:

We bring ourselves and our conflicts to words, to poems and pictures [...] and thus we change the poems and the pictures [...]. [ref. 6]

For lowering the tone of *Dracula*, I should perhaps, then, apologise to Stoker, who might be tossing in his grave. (He isn't. Come on.)

References:

- [1] The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists examples of 'come' ('To experience sexual orgasm; (of a man) to ejaculate') from 1604 onwards.
- [2] Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, ed. Glennis Brown (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2000), p. 35.
- [3] See Eric Partridge, *Shakespeare's Bawdy* (London: Routledge, 2001).
- [4] Quotations from William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works*, gen. eds Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).
- [5] William Wycherley, *The Country Wife*, ed. David Cook and John Swannell (London: Methuen, 1975), 4.3.37-8.
- [6] Frank Kermode, *The Uses of Error* (London: Collins, 1991), p. 432.

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