

UCLA

Thinking Gender Papers

Title

“Penetrating Knowledge and Attacking Mysteries: The Cases of Dracula and Dora”

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8h256323>

Author

Gottlieb, Christine

Publication Date

2008-02-01

Christine Gottlieb

Penetrating Knowledge and Attacking Mysteries:

The Cases of *Dracula* and *Dora*

[T]he solidity, the obscurity, the density of things closed in upon themselves, have powers of truth that they owe not to light, but to the slowness of the gaze that passes over them, around them, and gradually into them, bringing them nothing more than its own light.

—Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, xiii-xiv

A hysterical girl is ... a vampire who sucks the blood of the healthy people about her.

—Silas Weir Mitchell qtd. in Ussher, 76

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Sigmund Freud's *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* are two works of the *fin de siècle* that illustrate a gynecologically-influenced desire to penetrate the mysteries of female sexuality. Penetration in *Dracula* ranges from vampiric biting to the sexually charged blood transfusions and extravagantly violent stakings that Dr. Van Helsing commands. Freud's penetration of *Dora* is a subtler, yet equally antagonistic attempt to combat the mystery hysteria poses by combating the woman who represents it. The production of knowledge is shown as a form of penetration: a thrusting of one's ideology into the body of the mystery, through the gaze, psychological examination, or physical probing. In both texts, this penetration uncovers still more penetration, as the pathologized sexualities represented by hysteria and vampirism are traced to male influences such as Herr K. and Count Dracula. Doctors in both texts create spaces in which they are sanctioned to penetrate or attack mysteries through penetrating or attacking female bodies, and their methods are analogous to those of the predatory male forces. This results in a complex construction of female bodies as open or closed spaces to be penetrated or protected, depending on the situation and the man who desires access.

John Ireland describes the pervasive *fin de siècle* desire to penetrate the mystery of female sexuality as primarily focused on prostitutes and hysterics. Ireland writes, “Prostitutes both alive and dead (the cadavers of prostitutes were privileged objects for dissection) were probed and examined by medical science in the hope of establishing physiological differences that would separate them from ‘honest’ women” (1094). He explains Charcot’s practice of theatricalizing and photographing hysterics as having gynecological resonances. Ireland writes, “[Charcot’s] characterization of hysteria on one occasion as a ‘sphinx that defies even the most penetrating anatomy’ bears witness to the pervasiveness of his era’s obsessive scrutiny of female sexuality, his camera lens a telling variant of the speculum used concurrently by dispensary doctors in their gynaecological examination of prostitutes” (1094-5). He describes Freud’s earlier work, *Studies in Hysteria*, as “launching an investigation of female sexuality according to an epistemological model whose origins are clearly gynaecological” (1095). In *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, Freud facilitates this association in his Prefatory Remarks, writing, “I will simply claim for myself the rights of the gynaecologist—or rather much more modest ones” (3).

The “rights of the gynaecologist” are the rights to penetrate, with impunity, the mystery posed by female sexuality. In a footnote to the first dream of Dora’s that he analyses, Freud writes:

‘*Zimmer*’ [‘room’] in dreams stands very frequently for ‘*Frauenzimmer*’ [a slightly derogatory word for ‘woman’; literally, ‘woman’s apartments’]. The question whether a woman is ‘open’ or ‘shut’ can naturally not be a matter of indifference. It is well known, too, what sort of ‘key’ effects the

opening in such a case. (59, editor's notes)

However, the “question of whether a woman is ‘open’ or ‘shut’” depends less on the woman than on the man who desires access. The question of who is allowed to penetrate *Frauenzimmer*, in both senses of the word, is hence not a matter of indifference. Freud makes it clear that the doctor, whether he is a psychoanalyst or gynecologist, must be allowed complete access. Early in the course of the treatment, Freud's confidence in his ability to penetrate the Dora case is indicated in his comment in a letter to Fliess: “the case has opened smoothly to my collection of picklocks” (qtd. in Marcus 61). Freud traces Dora's hysteria through delineating instances of her being “open” or “shut” inappropriately. He considers her hysterical for not being “open” with Herr K.—for rejecting his sexual advances and feeling disgust rather than pleasure when he forcibly kissed her. He considers her vindictive for being “open” to her parents, and telling them of Herr K.'s assault. Although Freud believes silence would have been more appropriate, she must be incredibly “open” with Freud concerning the same information. Her ultimate silence, becoming “shut” to Freud by discontinuing her treatment, is portrayed as masochistic, and more importantly, “an unmistakable act of vengeance” (100) towards Freud.

In *Dracula*, when desiring access to Mina's bedroom, Quincey asks, “Should we disturb her?” Dr Van Helsing replies, “We must [...] If the door be locked, I shall break it in.” When Quincey remarks, “It is unusual to break into a lady's room,” Van Helsing's answer is, “All chambers are alike to the doctor” (300). His M. D. status is a key, allowing him access to both women's rooms and women's bodies. His power in this sense is more potent than Dracula, who cannot enter a domestic space unless he is first

invited. Lucy's bedroom is accessible to Dracula only after she went out to meet him; her tomb is kept "open for him" (335) only when she is Un-Dead. But the men, led by Dr Van Helsing, break into bedrooms and tombs alike.

Van Helsing decides that Arthur, as Lucy's fiancé, has the "better right" (229) to penetrate Lucy—to deliver the stake through the heart that will simultaneously destroy and "save" her. The gruesome staking, in which Arthur "driv[es] deeper and deeper the mercy-bearing stake" (230), functions as the macabre sexual consummation of their marriage and is even sealed with Van Helsing's command, "And now [...] you may kiss her. Kiss her dead lips" (231). Dr Van Helsing and Dr Seward then send the other men out, and as the tomb is converted from a chapel/boudoir into an operating room, the doctors become the men with the "better right" to penetrate. Seward describes, "I sawed off the top of the stake, leaving the point of it in her body. Then we cut off the head and filled the mouth with garlic. We soldered up the leaden coffin, screwed on the coffin-lid, and gathering up our belongings, came away. When the Professor locked the door he gave the key to Arthur" (232). Lucy's case is entirely shut; the doctors in *Dracula* leave no gap unfilled. Freud has the same aim. He writes in his analysis of Dora's first dream: "I unfortunately left a gap [...] I ought to have made inquiries as to the actual source of the speech. The results of my inquiry would have shown that the structure of the dream was more complicated, but would at the same time have made it easier to penetrate" (84). His ultimate desire is to penetrate all gaps in Dora's story, and to insert his "facts" into these spaces. He writes, "It will be remembered that Dora had a lively feeling of disgust after being kissed by Herr K., and that we saw grounds for completing her story of the scene of the kiss by supposing that, while she was being embraced, she noticed the

pressure of the man's erect member against her body" (76). Freud believes to solve the mystery by filling the textual gap with an erect phallus.

Freud defends his talking to Dora about sexually explicit matters and counsels other members of the medical community, writing:

It is possible for a man to talk to girls and women upon sexual matters of every kind [...] so long as, in the first place, he adopts a particular way of doing it, and, in the second place, can make them feel convinced that it is unavoidable. A gynaecologist, after all, under the same conditions, does not hesitate to make them submit to uncovering every possible part of their body. (41)

Forcing a woman to *open her mouth properly*¹ is analogous to gynecological examination: both can allow the doctor to penetrate "every possible part" of female sexuality.

By proclaiming, "there is no such thing at all as an unconscious 'No'" (50), Freud creates a region of Dora that is infinitely penetrable. When Dora denies being in love with Herr K., Freud writes, "My expectations were by no means disappointed when this explanation of mine was met by Dora with a most emphatic negative [...] If this 'No' [...] is ignored, and if work is continued, the first evidence soon begins to appear that in such a case 'No' signifies the desired 'Yes'" (51). Freud passes this information on to other doctors as a key for unlocking cases, and wishes he could pass it on to Herr K. The same "key" that can be used to probe the unconscious could also have allowed Herr K. to achieve sexual gratification. Freud writes:

Nor do I know whether Herr K. would have done any better if it had been

¹ This phrase is from *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 143.

revealed to him that the slap Dora gave him by no means signified a final ‘No’ on her part [...] If he had disregarded that first ‘No,’ and had continued to press his suit with a passion which left room for no doubts, the result might very well have been a triumph of the girl’s affection for him over all her internal difficulties. (101)

In other words, if Herr K. had used the “key” Freud writes for other doctors, he could have penetrated Dora’s “case,” simultaneously gratifying his sexual desires and triumphing over her hysteria. We are led to believe that Herr K.’s phallus, like a stake in *Dracula*, is the key that can enter the woman and end the mystery simultaneously. The “triumph [...] over all her internal difficulties” is the same triumph and satisfaction that Freud desires in his pursuit, and that he scorns Dora for denying him.

Freud’s identification with Herr K. is more than a mechanism to facilitate transference; it proceeds from the conflation of sexual desire and the desire to penetrate the mystery of hysteria—the pleasure of “curing” by inserting his thoughts into the unknown. In *Dracula*, Van Helsing initially treats Lucy’s vampirism with blood transfusions. Throughout the transfusions, the men believe that their blood will act as “keys,” solving the mystery and saving Lucy. The men, like Dracula, are also glutting their own sexual desires, using needles rather than teeth to penetrate Lucy’s body. Dr Seward, whose marriage proposal was rejected by Lucy, is allowed to medically marry her through a blood transfusion. He describes his pleasure, saying, “No man knows till he experiences it, what it is to feel his own life-blood drawn away into the veins of the woman he loves” (138).

Freud viewed the *Dora* case as a continuation of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which includes his pivotal dream of Irma's injection. As in waking life, he reproaches a hysterical patient, Irma, for not accepting his "solution" (139). He then must overcome her recalcitrance in order to look down her throat—an examination tantamount to a gynecological one, as what he sees is the horror of the female sex. Lacan writes, "Everything blends in and becomes associated in this image, from the mouth to the female sexual organ [...] There's a horrendous discovery here, that of the flesh one never sees, the foundation of things [...] the flesh from which everything exudes, at the very heart of the mystery" (154). The horrifying appearance of her mouth is attributed to an injection of trimethylamin solution—an "immensely powerful factor of sexuality" (150)—with an unclean syringe. The penetration that caused the illness is analogous to Freud's "solution," but he asserts in his interpretation, "*I* never did any harm with my injections" (152). The riddle of female sexuality is solved as a cycle of good and bad penetrations—and women suffer either because they are "open" to harmful penetrations or "shut" to beneficial ones: medical treatment and marriage. *Dracula* ends with Mina as no more than her husband's description of her as a mother and wife. Freud attempts to end his case history on a similar note, writing, "In the meantime the girl has married" and has "been reclaimed once more by the realities of life" (112). However, the continued quest to attack the mystery that she represents is documented in Dr Felix Deutsch's "A Footnote to Freud's 'Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria'." He explains that marriage and additional treatments, both psychological and gynecological, ultimately did not cure her. He concludes, "Her death [...] seemed a blessing to those who were close to her. She had been, as my informant phrased it, 'one of the most repulsive hysterics' he

had ever met" (43). This quote illustrates that her death was not simply a "blessing" to those close to her, but to the medical community. While Mina can become a mother and other hysterics can be conquered by marriage, in the cases of Dracula and Dora only death can put an end to the "repulsive" creature.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Craft, Christopher. "Kiss Me with Those Red Lips': Gender and Inversion in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*." *Dracula*. Ed. Glennis Byron. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999. 93-118.
- Deutsch, Felix. "A Footnote to Freud's 'Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria.'" *In Dora's Case: Freud—Hysteria—Feminism*. Ed. Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985. 56-91.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*. Trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.
- . *The History of Sexuality*. Trans. Robert Hurley. Vol. 1. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*. Ed. Philip Rieff. New York: Macmillan, 1963.
- . *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Ed. James Strachey. New York: Avon, 1998.
- Gallop, Jane. "Keys to Dora." *In Dora's Case: Freud—Hysteria—Feminism*. Ed. Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985. 56-91.
- Ireland, John. "A Speculum in the Text: Freud's 'Katharina' and Maupassant's 'Le Signe.'" *MLN* 113:5 (1998): 1089-1110.
- Lacan, Jacques. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. New York: Norton, 1991.
- Marcus, Steven. "Freud and Dora: Story, History, Case History." *In Dora's Case:*

- Freud—Hysteria—Feminism*. Ed. Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985. 56-91.
- Moi, Toril. "Representation and Patriarchy: Sexuality and Epistemology in Freud's Dora." *In Dora's Case: Freud—Hysteria—Feminism*. Ed. Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985. 56-91.
- Pope, Rebecca A. "Writing and Biting in Dracula." *Dracula*. Ed. Glennis Byron. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999. 68-92.
- Roth, Phyllis A. "Suddenly Sexual Women in Bram Stoker's Dracula." *Dracula*. Ed. Glennis Byron. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999. 30-41.
- Showalter, Elaine. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985.
- Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*. New York: Penguin, 2003.
- Ussher, Jane M. *Women's Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness?* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992.