

1996

Lesbian Vampires, Goddess Traditions, and the Reclamation of Lesbian Herstory

Anne Heath

Denison University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Heath, Anne (1996) "Lesbian Vampires, Goddess Traditions, and the Reclamation of Lesbian Herstory," *Articulāte*: Vol. 1 , Article 5.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/articulate/vol1/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Articulāte by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.

Lesbian Vampires, Goddess Traditions, and the
Reclamation of Lesbian Herstory
by Anne Heath, '98

Lesbian vampire lore is closely associated with Goddess-based religious traditions. As Pam Keesey explains in the introduction to *Dark Angels*, her anthology of lesbian vampire stories: "The roots of the vampire can be found in early images of the Goddess. Vampires, like the Goddess, are associated with blood, life, death, and rebirth" (11-12). The three representations of the Goddess, "the young woman, the life-giving mother, and the aging wisewoman" (12) are all evident in lesbian vampire lore. To facilitate the examination of the appearances of Goddess traditions in lesbian vampire stories, it will first help to explain the Goddess traditions and how they have been repressed and misrepresented. Second, the use of vampire imagery as a metaphor for lesbianism will be explored. Once these explanations have laid the groundwork, then the appearances of the three aspects of the Goddess in lesbian vampire lore will be examined. Finally, I will discuss how the legends of lesbian vampires and Goddess-based concepts have been reappropriated by a feminist and/or lesbian audience.

With the rise of Judeo-Christian beliefs Goddess traditions and all that they espoused were repressed and misrepresented. The importance of women, their sexuality, and the lunar-based cycles of life and death were replaced with a very male-centric perspective of the world. Everything previously associated with Goddess traditions was demonized. In the introduction of another anthology of lesbian vampire stories, *Daughters of Darkness*, Pam Keesey explains this phenomenon: "Goddesses embody all that is evil in Judeo-Christian philosophy: they are female, sexual, pagan, and embrace death as a part of the cycle of life. These women are not holy; these women are monsters" (8).

Also repressed and misrepresented in the contemporary world are lesbian women. Their sexual autonomy directly threatens supposed male prerogatives. Lesbian women threaten to subvert all that the patriarchal society holds dear--male dominance based on the possession and subjugation of female sexuality for the purpose of ensuring proper lineage. Lesbian women have often been presented as either masculine-looking mutants or (possibly to the titillation of heterosexual men) as excessively sexual, lustful creatures who prey on innocent, naive young women.

This latter image of lesbian women is that which can be associated with female vampires. In *Vampires and Violets*, her book about lesbians in film, Andrea Weiss explains some of the cultural attitudes surrounding the equating of female vampires with lesbians:

Merging two kinds of sexual outlaws, the lesbian vampire is more than simply a negative stereotype. She is a complex and ambiguous figure, at once an image of death and an object of desire, drawing on profound subconscious fears that the living have toward the dead, that men have toward women [and that mainstream society has toward homosexuals], while serving as a focus for repressed fantasies (84).

In light of this cultural baggage, lesbian vampires have a particularly interesting history. Female vampires have traditionally been presented as lustful, destructive, wanton women obsessed with blood, lust, and sexuality. It is with this negative image of the female vampire that lesbian women have been conveniently demonized. The vampire metaphor makes it clear that sexual relations between women are inherently destructive. Lesbian vampire stories depict "a consensual relationship between two women as inherently pathological, with the self-preservation of the one appealing to the self-destructiveness of the other. One woman's survival is always at the other's expense" (Weiss 104).

Pam Keesey clearly explains how the female vampire came to represent popular beliefs about lesbian women: the female vampire "is so closely associated with women's sexual and social improprieties, it's no wonder that the female vampire came to be equated with the lesbian in the sexually repressive atmosphere of nineteenth century Europe" (*Daughters of Darkness* 8-9). Weiss extends this statement when she explains a theory forwarded by Lillian Faderman in *Surpassing the Love of Men*. As Weiss explains it, Faderman connects the emergence of the female vampire as a metaphor for lesbianism with the pathologizing of women's romantic friendships in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. "The vampire metaphor, Faderman asserts, served to enforce the transition from socially accepted close female friendships to the redefinition of such relationships as deviant" (87).

The use of female vampires as a convenient tool to demonize lesbian women reveals a deep social fear--that of women's ability to penetrate. The female vampire *penetrates* her victims with her teeth, thus confusing the gender-based boundaries of inserter and receptor.

Medical case histories in the early twentieth century reveal deep anxieties about the possibility of female penetration. In the lesbian vampire story, this anxiety has been displaced and refocused on the mouth, another "feminine" sexual orifice which combines the "masculine" ability to penetrate, via the teeth. Thus the vampire embodies age-old popular fears of women which have been expressed through the image of the "vagina dentata," the vagina with teeth, the penetrating woman (Weiss 91).

The association of female vampires with lesbian women clearly demonstrates deep cultural anxieties concerning women's sexuality. Women who possess sexual desire or aggressiveness are perceived as

threatening to the patriarchal, heterosexist paradigm. Lesbian women not only offend deep-rooted anxieties regarding the sexual appetites of women, but they also offend deep-rooted social fears of same-sex relations. As a result of such fears, the dominant culture has found it useful to demonize lesbian women and cast them as abnormal and outside of usual and acceptable human experience. Therefore it is fitting that female vampirism acts as a metaphor for lesbianism.

As has been established, lesbian vampire lore is closely associated with Goddess traditions. Both Goddess-based religions and lesbian vampires are concerned with the cycles of life and death. An important element in the cycles of life and death is blood. "Blood, of course, is the very essence of life. Along with water and oxygen, it is one of the most important fluids that make life on this planet possible. Blood always had an important symbolic power" (Keesey, *Dark Angels* 11). Blood embodies very important symbolic, as well as literal, powers for both the Goddess and lesbian vampire. For the Goddess, blood, especially menstrual blood, represents life. As Pam Keesey explains:

Menstrual blood, also known as lunar blood, was considered to be especially powerful because it gave life, not only by coursing through the veins of the living, but also through the miracle of birth. Many believed that blood contained the life-essence: the soul. That women could shed blood without injury contributed to this mysterious and sacred essence (*Dark Angels* 11).

Blood for the vampire also represents life--the vampire must rely on the blood of the living in order to remain in their realm. "Vampires are most often thought of as revenants--those who come back from the dead--and therefore need the blood of the living to maintain their undead state" (Keesey, *Dark Angels* 10).

The Goddess has been honored in her three countenances: the young woman whose sexuality was held sacred and for whom sex was a form of divine union; the life-giving, middle-aged woman who took the dead into her womb and prepared them for rebirth; and the aging wisewoman who was seen as a devouring mother (Keesey, *Dark Angels* 12). Accordingly, many of the representations of lesbian vampires included in both of Pam Keesey's anthologies fall into one of these three categories. The stories that fall into the first category, that of the young virgin, are the most non-traditional of all. They present the lesbian-oriented vampire as a gentle, caring woman who participates in sex and blood-letting only as an act of love and reciprocity. The stories which can be grouped into the second category honor women's regenerative power; these women help each other become healthy and revitalized through blood-letting and blood-sharing (*Dark Angels* 17). Their blood-sharing is a covenant offering "protection, purification, and salvation" (*Dark Angels* 11). The third and final image of the Goddess is

the easiest to cast as the lustful, destructive lesbian vampire. She is a woman obsessed with blood, lust, and sexuality. She is a "wanton woman whose sexuality brings destruction, the cruel and terrifying woman as death personified, the woman whose need leads to a wasting away of those around her" (*Dark Angels* 15).

"Lilith," written by Robbi Sommers and included in *Daughters of Darkness* is a lesbian vampire story which represents this third aspect of the Goddess. It is a story of the traditional evil vampire. "Set in the dark streets and mythic underside of New Orleans," (Keesey 16) "Lilith" is the story of a happy lesbian couple torn apart by a demonical and destructive vampire. Lovers Kay and Francine happen upon a tarot-card reader named Miss Mattie while wandering Burton Street, on which they had been accidentally delivered by the taxi-driver who misunderstood Francine's pronunciation of Bourbon Street. Miss Mattie warns them of impending doom--their relationship is soon to be destroyed when Francine is lured away by an incredibly captivating woman. Miss Mattie tells Kay that when Francine returns she will be an altered woman and warns her not to look into her former lover's eyes. To prevent this catastrophe altogether Miss Mattie advises them to leave New Orleans at once.

Dismissing Miss Mattie's advice as merely tourist-baiting mysticism, Kay and Francine successfully make their way to Bourbon Street where they enjoy a fun night of music, dancing, and drinking. Later that night they end up relaxing in the lounge of their hotel. Francine soon finds herself mesmerized by an auburn-haired, creamy-skinned woman clad in a black silk dress.

Francine felt hypnotized. It was almost as if the woman had been waiting--waiting for Francine's eyes to finally find her--patiently sitting alone and waiting for that very moment. And although Francine could vaguely see her eyes through the net, it seemed as if they were imploring Francine to meet her gaze. Francine felt somewhat dizzy. She could hear a faint humming somewhere, perhaps in the very heart of her soul. A tingling, a warmth, an excitement overcame her. Without turning away, the woman carefully lifted the veil--exposing first the full lips, then the chiseled nose, and finally, those burning, deep eyes (140).

Kay, unable to see what had Francine so captivated, angrily goes up to bed while leaving her lover in the lounge alone. Immediately after Kay's departure, the mysterious woman approaches Francine and introduces herself as Lilith. Francine unsuccessfully tries to break Lilith's hypnotizing gaze. Although she feels a strange nagging that she is forgetting something, someone who is waiting for her, Francine accepts the enchantress's invitation to leave the lounge. Up in a strange hotel room, Francine is seduced by Lilith's intense sexuality. Francine is drawn into passionate lovemaking. At the point of her climax, Francine feels Lilith's sharp teeth pierce her neck. Although initially terrified, as the pain in her neck

begins to ebb, Francine experiences a sense of bliss and gratification. She is "starting to embrace oneness with Lilith" (145).

The newly pale and languid Francine then goes to get her lover--to have Kay join her in this deathless journey. Kay soon understands that the woman standing opposite her is no longer the same woman she had loved. While Francine tries to get Kay to look her in the eyes, Kay knows that she must send the woman she loves away.

The story ends on a vague note with Kay trying to send her lover away--knowing that Francine has been somehow changed--while Francine tries to make Kay meet her captivating gaze. While the reader is left unsure of Kay's fate, it is clearly understood that the evil, destructive Lilith is the cause of all of this pain. It was the forceful, captivating lesbian vampire who seduced the innocent and weak woman. Lilith is, indeed, the death-giver, the creator of Francine's undead state. Her vampirism is not presented to be in any way healthy or rejuvenating. Her destructive activities are only perpetuated because her victim is sent to find someone else to convert. Lilith is a woman obsessed with blood, lust, and sexuality. She is a "wanton woman whose sexuality brings destruction, the cruel and terrifying woman as death personified, the woman whose need leads to a wasting away of those around her" (*Dark Angels* 15).

Representative of the second aspect of the Goddess--the generous and caring middle-aged mother who, through bloodsharing, regenerates other women, is the story entitled "Medea," written by Carol Leonard and found in *Dark Angels*. This story is quite non-traditional in that the vampire Medea is by no means interested in bringing about death. Rather, she is concerned with revitalizing women's bodies and souls.

It is a story of a woman named Hannah who is joining her old college friends for their annual vacation at an island retreat. While taking a rest from her activities with her friends, Hannah meets a woman, a "vampira" (58), about whom she has literally dreamed since she was a small girl. As they begin to converse they get to know much about each other.

The middle-aged woman, the "vampira," is named Medea. She is a midwife who has spent her life honoring the life-giving powers of women's blood. She is approaching menopause, but she knows that Hannah is in her "fullness right now" (62). Medea explains her knowledge of Hannah's fertility by saying:

I could smell you as soon as you entered the building. I was a midwife for many, many years. Somehow I was always drenched in the blood from births and I loved it. I loved everything about birth: the smells, the sounds, the great mystery of life coming back in.

I had tremendous respect and awe for the process and for women's power in the moment. Birth blood to me was joyous and sacred (62).

Medea then informs Hannah that, since her own fertile years are coming to an end, she wants and needs to initiate a younger woman into vampirism. As Medea is aging, she knows that the time has come to pass the torch onto someone younger and more able to continue the tradition of blood-drinking and blood-sharing. At the same time, Hannah knows that the wise-woman is hungry and in need of her blood. With their blood-sharing, Hannah will be "born anew into the mysteries and wisdom of the Mother" (Keesey, *Dark Angels* 17), and Medea's hunger will be sated and her body and soul refreshed.

The blood-sharing takes place during passionate lovemaking when Medea reaches deep inside Hannah and makes her bleed. As Medea reaches deep within her, "Hannah [feels] an indescribable power surge through her and [feels] as though Medea [is] searching, grasping for her very soul" (66). This is, indeed, a life-giving exercise, for each is helping to regenerate the other.

The next morning, after the blood-drinking, Medea appears radiant and glowing, fully healthy again. Although Hannah appears rather pale and tired, her young body will certainly return her to normal in a matter of days. As Medea leaves, vowing to return during Hannah's next "moon cycle" (68), each woman is eternally grateful to the other for enriching her with the blood-born gift of renewed life.

"Louisiana: 1850," written by Jewelle Gomez and included in *Daughters of Darkness*, is a lesbian vampire story which represents the first aspect of the Goddess. It is definitely one of the least traditional of all the lesbian vampire stories included in Keesey's two anthologies. It is an incredibly calm, gentle, and relaxing story.

The story begins when a young slave girl, simply called "the Girl," is rescued by a kind, older woman known as Gilda. Gilda runs a brothel with her lesbian vampire partner, Bird, employing eight girls. The Girl is brought under Gilda's care not to work as a prostitute but rather to perform regular household chores. Although a little uneasy about Gilda's and Bird's mysterious behavior--they never eat and always move around in shadows or at night--the Girl knows that these two women love her and are providing her with a home and a sense of place.

Gilda and Bird are, indeed, not typical women. Nor are they typical vampires. When they take blood they do not take life. They believe that there is no need for such destructiveness. Gilda explains:

There are those of our kind who kill every time they go out into the night. They say they need this exhilaration in order to live this life. They are simply murderers. They have no special need; they are rabid children. In our life, we who live by sharing the life blood of others have no need to kill. It is through our connections with life, not death, that we

live. There is a joy in the exchange we make. We draw life into ourselves, yet we give life as well (130).

Gilda has been alive for three hundred years. Bird has lived as Gilda's partner for a good portion of a normal human lifetime. But now Gilda is tired. She loves Bird with all her heart and is afraid to leave her, but she is tired of this life. She is tired of trying to understand people's destructiveness--she knows a great war is coming and she believes that she simply cannot endure anymore. Gilda wants to be free from this life and finally rest.

Gilda decides to initiate the Girl as a new partner for Bird. This initiation consists of reciprocal blood-taking. After sharing blood with Gilda, the Girl, feeling sick and tired, sleeps, only to awake to find Gilda gone and Bird standing over her. Gilda has left--she has gone out into the ocean, into the sun that will strip her body of its flesh and its life--but she will finally be able to rest, for she has lived a long and full life. Although hurt and scared, Bird must be strong and accept Gilda's departure. Now that Gilda is gone, Bird is left with the Girl as her partner in life. Everything occurs in cycles--Gilda had lived her long cycle of life and now she finds freedom in death. Bird and the Girl (now known as Gilda) are finding freedom in their new life together.

The young Gilda is a virgin girl, newly initiated into the life of blood-sharing. She is gentle and caring and views sex and blood-letting as an act of love and reciprocity. She is anything but destructive and never takes more than she gives. Lesbian vampires such as Gilda are very far from the traditional notion of the lustful, destructive female vampire.

The lesbian vampire stories described here are associated with the three aspects of the Goddess. Such a chronicling of lesbian vampire stories (from the most traditional to the most non-traditional) traces the progression of lesbian vampire lore that has allowed for the reappropriation of lesbian herstory. Stories of female vampires, intricately woven with images of the Goddess and lesbianism, have traditionally demonized both lesbians and the Goddess. In recent years, with raised feminist and lesbian consciousnesses, lesbians have begun to reclaim and reinvent these stories. With the reclamation of lesbian vampire stories, women, lesbians, and the Goddess are glorified. Pam Keesey describes this reclamation of lesbian herstory well:

We revision the dark angel, embrace the aspects of sexuality, blood, death--all that we are taught to deny and fear. We look death in the eye, we see not the horrific figure of death that we are taught to expect, but the beauty of death when it comes to us in its natural form (*Dark Angels* 15).

With such redefinition we are able to create a world around us that does not fear, hate, or repress the

aspects of sexuality, life, and death that are intrinsic parts of our lives. We create a community that is dedicated to our lives, our empowerment, and our regeneration.

Works Cited

Keesey, Pam, ed. *Dark Angels: Lesbian Vampire Stories*. Pittsburgh: Cleis Press, 1995.

---, ed. *Daughters of Darkness: Lesbian Vampire Stories*. Pittsburgh: Cleis Press, 1993.

Weiss, Andrea. *Vampires and Violets: Lesbians in Film*. New York: Penguin Books, 1992.