



Domestic Plots and Class Reform in *Varney the Vampire*

Brooke Cameron

Abstract

First published serially 1845–7, James Malcolm Rymer’s *Varney the Vampire* taps into the emergent class tensions of its period. The novel’s running focus on marriage reads as a critical response to recent Sanitation Acts and, specifically, social reformers’ preoccupation with rewriting working-class domestic plots and spaces. However, in *Varney*, such domestic plots remain elusive as the eponymous vampire repeatedly fails to find true love (“companionate marriage”) as a cure for his monstrous condition; instead, time and again, *Varney*’s romantic adventures uncover the real monsters to be the middle- and upper-class humans who seek to profit, vampire-like, by pushing their daughters into mercenary marriages (“kinship marriage”). While, in typical Gothic fashion, Rymer’s penny dreadful imagines how the past informs the present, *Varney* is also astonishingly forward-looking with its critique of domestic plots haunted by structures of kinship. At the same time, *Varney* implicitly acknowledges that the working class had its own marriage model – one built upon working wives’ equal economic contribution – and thereby encourages these same readers to question, if not reject, middle-class domestic models as a solution to their social problems.

Keywords

Varney the Vampire; sanitation reform; marriage plots; middle-class domesticity; Chartism; Penny Blood; Gothic; class

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Domestic Plots and Class Reform in *Varney the Vampire*

Brooke Cameron

Introduction

“If, in the face of Heaven, you will consent to be mine, you will snatch me from a continuance of my frightful doom, and for your pure sake, and on your merits, shall I yet know heavenly happiness. Will you be mine?”

(Rymer [1845] 1972: 156)

When we discuss modern vampire rules, the idea of true love as a cure for this undead state does not usually enter the conversation. Charlotte Booth’s *History of the Undead* (2021) does not include true love among its vampire rules, for example, nor does *The New Vampire’s Handbook* (2009) mention this romantic cure under its many helpful subheadings for the newly turned – chapter headings that include everything from “Health and Welfare” to “Vampire-Human Relations” and “Society and Culture” (Garden and others). Yet love is the goal of James Malcolm Rymer’s eponymous villain in *Varney the Vampire* (originally serialised in pamphlets, 1845–7). Flora Bannerworth, of course, refuses Varney’s proposal (excerpted in the epigraph above), but the vampire will persist in seeking other such brides/victims. The majority are undesirable matches forced onto a reticent or naïve girl by her scheming parents. By linking vampirism with the marriage plot, Rymer implicitly asks, who is the real predator in this story? Is it the blood-sucking vampire, or the parents who sell their daughters on the marriage market? The answer is both. Or rather, the real vampire acts as a catalyst by which his romantic adventures ultimately expose the story’s real monsters: the human parents who traffic in daughters to form profitable kinship alliances. There are earlier texts in which the vampire is presented as a seductive predator with a penchant for bride-victims, such as Southey’s *Thalaba* (1801) and Polidori’s *The Vampyre* (1819, discussed below), but Rymer’s penny blood is the first to look to romantic love as a cure for vampirism. By linking marriage with blood predation, *Varney* implicitly critiques the classed terms of marriage at the midcentury, a time when many middle-class Victorian reformers looked to this institution as an answer to socioeconomic problems.

Analysis of vampirism and the marriage market in *Varney* is certainly not new. Earlier critics Carol Senf (1988) and Nina Auerbach (1995) both astutely note the way in which Varney is equal victim of, and thus calls attention to, the daughters' scheming parents. Amanda Raye De Wees's 1998 doctoral dissertation, "Blood Lines: Domestic and Family Anxieties in Nineteenth-Century Vampire Literature," offers one of the most thorough investigations of this thesis in each of the serial's many marriage plots. More recently Rebecca Nesvet (2023) encourages us to think of Varney's vegetarian ethic through an analysis of the metaphorical consumption of bodies (not meat) via the marriage market. The present article builds upon this rich conversation by repositioning the serial's representation of marriage as a response to the sanitation and social reform movements in the early 1840s. Sara Hackenberg (2009) and Jarlath Killeen (2019) have already explained how Rymer's penny gothic novel taps into mid-century class antagonisms after such reforms exacerbated the mistreatment – or vampiric exploitation – of the poor.¹ This latter body of criticism, however, has yet to consider the role of the marriage plot in, or as the working-class readers' critical response to, these reform writings.

Because of its affordable price tag, the early penny fiction serial's readers would have included working-class individuals of both genders (Dunae 1979; Springhall 1998).² Many of those working-class readers would have been subjected to the emergent domestic ideology promoted by Victorian urban reformist movements. Edwin Chadwick's 1842 Sanitary Report, for example, notoriously downplayed unsafe working conditions to promote the middle-class's domestic model as a solution to the high rates of disease and death among urban labourers. *Varney's* working-class target readership would have recognised the vulnerable and trafficked daughters as victims of these same domestic plots which promised to deliver them from their suffering. These working-class readers would have, in other words, been invited to question – if not outright reject as monstrous – social reformers' domestic ideology and its promise to solve social problems.

Varney the Vampire on the Marriage Market

In his first appearance (and attack on Flora), Varney is described in terms that are intended to evoke readers' revulsion. He is described as having a "white – perfectly bloodless" face (Rymer [1845] 1972: 3), which later exhibits a "savage and remarkable lustre" after feeding (6). His "fang-like," "fearful looking teeth" are "like those of some wild animal" and thus flag his non-human Otherness (3). In later scenes, however, Varney begins to take on a much more human-like and even pathetic form. He admits to Flora that he is indeed a vampire, but then explains how true love will set him free (156). When his proposal is declined by Flora, Varney

¹ In addition to these readings, Troy Boone asserts that *Varney* encourages its working-class readers to see how non-violence might lead to "an alternative, and more powerful working-class role within the English nation" (2005: 55), while Rob Breton argues that such penny bloods in fact draw from Chartists' radical (i.e. revolutionary) discourse (2021: 4).

² See Christopher Hilliard (2014: 248) for more on scholars' growing recognition of women (and children) as key readers of this popular literature.

shows compassion by urging her to “leave this place” and “avoid a doom as terrific as that which I endure” (157). The rest of the novel shows how his continued quest for love motivates the serial novel’s plot and humanises the vampire in the eyes of other characters (and thus readers). Later, for example, Flora reflects that “the interview had tended to show her that about him [Varney] there was yet something human,” and she even tells her brother Henry, “I could almost pity Sir Frances Varney, rather than condemn him” (136).

The question this article considers is what type of marriage or family bond – what kind of “true love” – Varney seeks. Varney’s origins and the source of his wealth can be traced back to the English civil wars when Varney “enriched himself parasitically on the disorder besetting his country,” without committing to any political loyalties (Butler 2010: 101). Varney’s status as a member of a venal new bourgeoisie encourages readers to recall, rather than repress, England’s violent and repressive past (Hackenberg 2009: 63). *Varney* was the first mass hit since Polidori’s 1819 novella *The Vampyre* (see below), and it is no accident, Hackenberg explains, that the vampire is resurrected precisely at that moment in history when political reforms targeted at the working classes were gaining momentum on the heels of the Poor Law Amendment Act (1834) (70). Hackenberg cites Karl Marx to explain how this vampire represents both an old world of inherited bloodlines as well the rise of modern capitalism in so far as both are essentially predatory social structures; the vampire is then a kind of “evil-genius” who sabotages the wealthy classes from inside “by robbing them of their modes of entitlement and exchange (their assets and their daughters)” (70). In a similar gesture, De Wees explains how Varney’s wealth makes him a coveted target for the text’s real villains: the human parents-as-predators who force their daughters into unwanted marriages for material gain (1998: 150-1). In both accounts, the vampire conjures up images of an older world of kinship marriage in which women are defined through, and conduits of, patrilineal descent of property and blood bonds.

At the time of *Varney*’s publication, a new middle-class model of marriage – a “companionate” union based on mutually agreed informal contracts between two consenting subjects, a characteristic of liberal individualism, and very different from the older ideas of women as objects traded between (usually patriarchal) families to create alliances – was already well on its way to displacing these older aristocratic models.³ With its version of marriage based on mutual affection, precisely that “true love” that Varney seeks, the new middle class attempted set itself apart from the old aristocracy and its traffic in women’s bodies. At the same time, the middle-class’s companionate model relied upon an ideology of the separate gendered spheres. The middle-class man spent most of his day in the public sphere of paid employment; the feminine domestic sphere, in turn, provided respite by “allow[ing] workhorses and calculating machines to become men again, by exposing them to human rhythms and human affections” (Tosh 2007: 6). The rise of this domestic ideal also marked a shift away from men’s associational bonds within the public sphere. “During the 18th century, men participated in a

³ As Jennifer Phegley explains, in *Courtship and Marriage in Victorian England*, “during the Victorian period the aspiration to achieve companionate marriage based on mutual affection, respect, and love was pervasive” (2). This “union of companions” is redefined as into “contract” (121) in debates leading to the Matrimonial Causes Act 1857.

lively network of masculine activities outside of the home, frequenting public houses and men's clubs after work," explains Jennifer Phegley, adding that "[m]iddle-class Victorian men, on the other hand, were expected to spend time in the evenings around the hearth reading and talking to their wives and children" (2012: 6).⁴

The middle-class domestic ideal was quickly introduced to the working classes and often framed as a cure for vice. As Anna Clark explains, it was in the early 1830s that the working class was first defined "not by its own volition, but through a process of exclusion from the privileges of participation in the state" (1992: 66). Clark lists several examples of such exclusions, from the 1832 Reform Act to the 1834 Poor Law, but she is most interested in the Malthusian arguments underpinning such political exclusion. One such category of arguments, Clark explains,

provided a more theoretical justification for these prejudices by claiming that working people brought their misery on themselves by overbreeding and by warning that working men were wrong to marry unless they could support a family on their own wages – an impossible goal for most. (66)

In order to counter such political prejudice, many working-class political activists embraced the middle-class domestic model as a way to prove good character (Phegley 2012: 9). But as Hammerton argues, knowing about, and being able to live up to, this ideal are two separate matters (1992: 25), and while the domestic ideal might have promised greater happiness for the world-weary husband, "its stress on male dominance and female dependence contained within it the seeds of continuing family violence" (Clark 1997: 249). In *The Struggle for the Breeches*, Clark explains how this marriage model gradually eroded the workingwoman's socioeconomic independence and thus threatened to exacerbate problems with domestic violence (1997: 263).

To read *Varney* within this context of competing marriage models, one must also therefore consider the penny blood's classed readership. In many ways, Rymer's vampire — like so many Gothic tales in these penny magazines — is a response to new literary tastes in tandem with (or as response to) a newly literate working class. While some Victorians believed the working classes were illiterate,⁵ most could not deny that the working classes were consuming periodical literature in some form, especially the increasingly popular penny bloods. With regards to the latter, Victorian journalist Henry Mayhew ([1851] 2017) claimed in his interviews with London's labourers that usually such stories were read aloud and distributed orally.⁶ Modern historians estimate nineteenth-century working-class literacy rates to be much higher than contemporaries supposed; drawing upon "evidence found in court records, marriage registers, regional and occupational surveys," among other sources. Murphy (1994:7), for example, estimated that around two thirds to three-quarters of Victorian labourers

⁴ A. James Hammerton claims this "domestic idyll" was also meant to garner respect for women's familial contribution (1992: 150), while Elizabeth Foyster adds that this domestic ideal also enabled middle- and upper-class women to demand better treatment from their husbands (205: 77).

⁵ Engels, for example, in reviewing the 1842 reports of the Children's Employment Commission, concludes that 'few can read and still fewer write' (1892: 250).

⁶ See for example Mayhew's chapter on "The Literature of Costermongers" ([1851] 2017: 26).

were literate. Scholars working in the field are the first to note the limit of such methods, including the fact that a signature in a marriage registry is not necessarily proof of reading ability. After all, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, reading and writing were treated and taught as separate skills and, as a result, partial literacy was fairly common (Mitch 1992: xvii). Despite such flaws, these statistics nonetheless confirm that, by the early nineteenth century, working-class readers were indeed becoming a “*potential* reading public” (Webb 1955: 23, emphasis in original).⁷ Whether reading for themselves or being reading aloud to, the working classes were accessing literary content in these early decades of the nineteenth century.

There was also increased interest among early Victorian publishers in this newly literate working class as a potential audience and it was in this context that penny magazines such as “*Lloyd’s Weekly* (and the *News of the World*) captured the imaginations of the working-class reader in their hard-earned leisure time” (Lill and McWilliam 2019: 11). In competition for this readership, many of the new cheap periodicals tailored content to suit working-class interests. Murphy makes this point in citing the example of “two ‘useful knowledge’ periodicals, the *Penny Magazine* and *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*, which in 1832 achieved circulations of at the very least 100,000 and 50,000 respectively” (1994: 9). However, this article is more interested in the penny blood’s promotion of horror or what McWilliam describes as the “Chartist Gothic,” a special brand of “horror fiction that filled the streets of the mid-1840s” and that “was the product of an age of anxiety” – anxiety around the spread of disease as well as crime and other public health crises suffered disproportionately by the poor (2019: 204). In defining this specific brand of Gothic and its link to such social politics, McWilliam notes the dual ingredients of a clear working-class identity and/as defined against Old Corruption; as a result, “both Lloyd’s fiction as well as his periodicals and newspapers presented a world under siege from crime” and both adopted an “anti-aristocratic tone” (203).

At the same time, the vampire-figure tapped into these readers’ frustrations with political disenfranchisement and similar social resentments that fuelled much of the class antagonism throughout the century. Use of the vampire as allegory for class antagonism can be traced back at least to John William Polidori’s *The Vampire* (1819), which Christopher Frayling identifies as the first English work focused entirely on the modern vampire (1992: 108). Polidori’s Lord Ruthven (loosely based on Lord Byron) established an image of the modern vampire as an upper-class or aristocratic figure, thus signalling status as one of the (four) key features defining this predatory figure, the other three features being human-like appearance, greater mobility, and powers of seduction or compulsion (Macdonald and Scherf 2008: 11-14). Indeed, a subsequent review in the *Monthly Review* identifies Polidori as part of a longer tradition of European writers who use the vampire as “political allegory” – citing, for example, Byron’s epigram “Windsor Poetics” (1813), which presents the Prince Regent as a “royal vampire” in whom “the double tyrant starts to life” (quoted in Macdonald and Scherf 2008: 11-12).

⁷ At the same time, most working-class individuals inclined to do so, could learn some basic reading skills. “While education was not yet systematised or universally available in England and Wales,” explains Murphy, “most of the working class has the opportunity to attend dame and other day school, Sunday schools, mechanics’ institutes, and other adult schools” (1994: 8).

Moreover, some of the popular publishers of penny bloods, like G.W.M. Reynolds, actively supported working-class politics and encouraged readers to draw political meaning from their fiction (Rosenman 2018: 96). More generally, penny fiction's frequent stories of usurpation, predatory landlords, and plot twists in which the poor discover a long-lost aristocratic family would have especially appealed to such an audience (Rosenman 2018: 96). Examples include Reynolds's *Mary Price* (1852-53), in which a working-class character discovers they are descended from the aristocracy), Reynolds' *Joseph Wilmot* (1854), in which a servant turned aristocratic landowner is able, with his new property, to satisfy the voting requirements and eventually becomes an MP, as well as Rymer's *The Dark Woman, or the Days of the Prince Regent* (1861-62), in which Allan Fearon is eventually bestowed with an Earldom in honour of the fact that he is a prince of royal blood (even if an illegitimate son of the Prince Regent). While the Chartists in particular looked mostly to poetry and newspapers in order to disseminate their political message (Haywood 2004; Sanders 2009), I want to highlight how Gothic penny fiction also appealed to working-class readers who saw themselves in similar stories of disenfranchisement and exploitation – stories looking all the way back to the Norman Conquest (in which the labourer as original Anglo-Saxon was turned off the land and subjugated to the foreign elite) through the enclosure acts (Vanden Bossche (2014), failed Chartist petitions, and ongoing petitions for suffrage up to 1918.⁸

Varney's role as vampire on the marriage market is equal parts backward and forward looking. On the one hand, this figure allows readers to revisit a history of class injustice. Varney's uncanny resemblance to the portrait of "Sir Runnagate Bannerworth, an ancestor of [the Bannerworth's], who first, by his vices, gave the great blow to the family prosperity" (Rymer [1845] 1972: 10), signals a return to, or haunting from, the past. Varney's later proposal to Flora in this context reads like a version of historical restitution. On the other hand, Varney's search for "a human heart to love [him]" (156), as a cure for his monstrous state, looks forward to the rise of companionate marriage. As Chris Vanden Bossche explains, many Chartist novels cite such newer models of marriage as political metaphor:

Characteristically, they portray a situation in which kin, most often a parent or guardian, promote a marriage as a means of obtaining or preserving wealth and status, while the hero and heroine seek to form a union on the basis of affection that arises from the encounter between two interiorities.⁹

(2014: 14)

The difference between these two marriage plots is essentially the difference in historical construction of class governance: while the former seeks to replicate structures of hierarchical power (the patrilineal kinship model), the latter attempts mutual exchange between social equals (the contract model). The fact that Varney encourages Flora to flee therefore signals his commitment to love (or mutual interiorities) as opposed to former, forceful attacks (hierarchical

⁸ Rosenmann (2018) cites this century-long struggle by labour as an example of what Lauren Berlant calls cruel optimism: "a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that this time, nearness to this thing will help you or the world to become different in just the right way" (quoted 2018: 97; Berlant 2011: 2)

⁹ Citing Katie Trumpener and Ina Ferris, Vanden Bossche also notes how much of this narrative strategy is drawn from the National Tales of Maria Edgeworth and Walter Scott (2014: 14-15).

power). This ability to invoke both the past and future forms of marriage would have thus made Rymer's penny blood all the more fascinating to working-class readers, given they too were pressed to consider such domestic plots on the heels of sanitation and social reform movements.

Victorian Social Reform and Domestic Plots

The early decades of the nineteenth century were ravaged by a wave of epidemics, including cholera, typhus and influenza. Those hardest hit were, of course, the working-class and poor, especially in urban centres such as London and northern manufacturing cities like Manchester. Social reformer and former secretary to the Poor Law Commissions, Edwin Chadwick, convinced the Poor Law Board to carry out a national survey, conducted by medical experts, into the conditions of the epidemics. The subsequent investigation, begun in 1839 and published in 1842 as *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain*, was the first Britain to use statistical methods to document the living conditions of the working poor and since it has not been used for purposes such as mine before,¹⁰ it is worth pausing on its findings because it shows us a lot about the value system that penny fiction such as *Varney* needed to explore if it was to be welcomed into working-class leisure reading.

Chadwick and his fellow commissioners were particularly struck by the conditions of domestic overcrowding among the lower classes and firmly believed that better sanitation in the home would decrease the high mortality rates among the poor, with the added bonus of decreasing the number of people on relief (Poovey 1995: 117-18). As a result, much of the report focusses on the domestic sphere rather than the workplace as the site of contagion (118). The report also assumed that women provided the best indication of mortality rates because women spent most of their time in the home. It thus overlooked (men's) infection and death rates in the workplace (118). The report used strong moralising language to show how domestic overcrowding led to other vices, including sexual sins such as promiscuity, adultery, and incest, and even implied that such sexual lapses were linked with, if not the cause of, disease and death (Chadwick 1842: 170).

The report's emphasis on "principle" (250) as somehow acting as a check against vice immediately conjures Malthusian prejudices against the working class. Indeed, one part of the report claimed that "a prominent feature in the midst of this mass of physical and moral evils is the extraordinary number of illegitimate children" (170), adding that parents in general think marriage "a superfluous ceremony, not worth the payment of the necessary fees" (170). The picture is one of the working classes as incapable of the kind of bodily discipline that Malthusians promoted. Yet the report does not stop there, adding drink to the list of working-class vices. "It would hardly be an hyperbole to say that there is less water consumed than beer," wrote an inspector (170), while a later interview with Mr. Fairbairn, a mechanist at Leeds who employed between 500-600 men, attributed all of the labourers' problems to drink and hinted at a problem with moral education (or dissemination of "principle" (250)). Fairbairn described how, if left to their own, most of his workers would get drunk over the weekend, leading to

¹⁰ Neither the groundbreaking Altick (1998) nor the comprehensive Rose (2002) make use of Chadwick. It was Poovey (1995) which alerted me to its potential.

as many as 30% absent on a Monday morning and “full 10 per cent. absent until the Tuesday morning” (250). In true Malthusian fashion, Fairbairn suggested that any educational intervention “[was] of very little avail” against such a deeply ingrained and intemperate character (250).

Chadwick was not the only social reformer of the time to take a particular interest in the domestic lives of the poor. Manchester pamphleteer Joseph Adshead also looked to the labourer’s private spaces in search of answers to social problems such as poverty, disease, and overcrowding. His *Distress in Manchester* (1842) drew attention to the “indiscriminate” gendered composition of such private spaces:

Six or eight persons have I witnessed inhabiting a damp cellar, males and females congregated together, with a line hung along the hovel for the use of the inmates, upon which were suspended, indiscriminately, their torn and dirty apparel.

(Adshead 1842: n.p.)

Other social reformers of this period betrayed their middle-class bias in their concern for women within the workforce. Ralph Barnes Grindrod’s *Slaves of the Needle* (1844), for example, suggested that women were especially burdened by (if not unsuited for) work in sewing factories. His pamphlet was forceful in its critique of “extremely hot and oppressive” working conditions (in Gaskell [1848] 2000: 540), which often caused the seamstresses to faint and led to other forms of physiological stress. Lean Faucher’s *Manchester in 1844* was even more explicit in its claim that factory women are unsexed by “gross” and “often obscene” language from their colleagues, and that the public commute to work exposed women to other forms of “illicit connexions” (in Gaskell [1848] 2000: 540). In each report, the reformer revealed an underlying classed assumption of the public sphere of labour as a threat to ideal femininity; these reformers, instead align women with the domestic sphere as the place to protect or preserve this (middle-class) gender type.

Still, Chadwick’s report stands out within this history because it was both larger in its scope (facilitated by the national Poor Law Board) and in its socio-cultural impact. The report’s section on “Employers’ or Owners’ Influence on the Improvement of Habitations” described the moral power that this feminised domestic sphere might have upon the working man:

A man who comes home to a poor, comfortless hovel after his day’s labour, and sees all miserable around him, has his spirits more often depressed than excited by it. He feels that, do his best, he shall be miserable still, and is too apt to fly for a temporary refuge to the alehouse or beer-shop. But give him the means of making himself comfortable by his own industry, and I am convinced by experience that, in many cases, he will avail himself of it.

(Chadwick 1842: 262)

By “comfortable,” the report meant one couple per a household, a sphere that is then overseen by that emergent icon, “the angel of the house” (as the figure was later named by Coventry Patmore’s 1854 poem). The hope was that, by moving the wife from the public sphere (of employment) into the (unpaid) domestic space, the working man’s ego would be bolstered so that he would strive all the harder to keep his family supported in a respectable station: “The man sees his wife and family more comfortable than formerly; he has a better cottage and garden: he is stimulated to industry, and as he rises in respectability of station, he *becomes aware* that he has a character to lose” (262).

Chadwick's promotion of middle-class domesticity had a devastating impact upon the developing labour movement and especially on Chartism (Poovey 1995: 126). Chadwick and his team implemented measures that effectively shifted working-class identity formation away from all-male associations or class bonds, which were once a critical aspect of middle-class masculinity, to the private bond between husband and wife (126). Chadwick's report in short undercut the homosocial class alliances driving the labour movement and instead promoted a model of separate-spheres domesticity that was unattainable for most working-class families.

Critics such as Malcolm Chase have since demonstrated how the Chartist movement did not end, but rather evolved after the 1840s (2007: 336-40).¹¹ Lisa Surridge, citing testimonies from the petitions, also convincingly argues how domesticity (like the right to care for family) was always there at the heart of, and not a threat to, the Chartist movement (2000: 232-3). But Poovey's observation about Chadwick enables me to consider how working-class readers were – thanks to penny bloods like *Varney* – invited to critique (rather than accept without question) middle-class domestic plots.

In most mid-century working-class homes, both women and men (as well as children) contributed to the family income. Indeed, the aforementioned studies by Adshead and Foucher show how women were already a large presence in the public workforce as well as the private world of domestic service. While new forms of factory work became the norm for women in the northern manufacturing cities, in the older cities like London women contributed to the family economy through piecemeal or contract work ("Home Industry"). Among the upper ranks of the respectable working class (or "Labour Aristocracy" as Hobsbawm called it [1984: 355]) the wife sometimes did not work for a wage but instead assumed responsibility for the domestic economy through her allowance out of the husband's weekly earnings (Ross 1982: 584). In some homes, then, workingwomen contributed equally to the family income, while in other or respectable working-class homes, wives were forced to argue with, or hold accountable, husbands who sometimes "returned home missing 'an undue portion of their week's wages'" (582).¹² Still, in both cases, the power afforded to working-class wives was not necessarily undercut by the domestic plot. Wives were, it seems, often the members of the household who were capable of ensuring a decent level of family comfort on low wages as they often had an aptitude for bargaining with pawnshops, shopkeepers, the school board visitor, and the landlady. These skills were "worth solid cash" and provided wives with leverage against their husbands (576).

Workingwomen's role as economic manager extended horizontally to budgeting their husbands' earnings as well as vertically down to managing children as both wards and family earners (Ross 1982: 576). All of this, from their financial contribution to unique bargaining or management skills, gave working-class women real social and financial power within the family, making them a force to be reckoned with. It was only later that workingwomen were stripped of such power, especially after 1870 Education Act, which also somewhat reduced

¹¹ See also Ian Haywood (1997) for more on the legacy of Chartism and the subsequent reform bills (13) as well as its influence on the various socialist organisations after the 1870s depression (14).

¹² See also Razzell and Wainwright (1973), especially pages 241 and 253.

the incidence of child labour (578). The introduction of compulsory accessible public education meant that these domestic managers could no longer contract out their children aged between 5 and 12. “Thus from the 1870s,” Ross writes, “mothers with young children became more dependent on husbands’ earnings, and on their own poorly paid employment” (578). Still, at the time of Chadwick’s Sanitary Report, the English working classes already had their own domestic models that both recognised, and depended upon, the wife’s socioeconomic bargaining power.¹³ Published three years later, Rymer’s penny blood implicitly acknowledges this cultural distinction by inviting its working-class readers to critique middle-class domestic plots.

Varney and the Gothic Hauntings of Kinship Marriage

After Flora Bannerworth rejects Varney, he launches himself into the marriage market as if his very life depended upon it (or rather, because his salvation depends upon it). Unfortunately for the vampire, his next romantic entanglement is revealed to be mercenary. In this section of the story, Varney adopts a new identity as Baron Stolzmyer of Saltzberg and befriends a Mr. Leek, who attempts to broker a marriage for his new friend. The corrupt Mr. Leek sets his sights on Helen Williams, one of the many daughters of the widow Mrs. Williams, who is “comparatively poor, and not too much troubled with compunction, or any absurd notion of delicacy upon [the] matter [of marrying off her daughters]” (Rymer [1845] 1972: 456). In terms of actual status, the widow is presented as “a lady” with “something very much like a genteel independence,” by which the narrator means “one of those things that enables people to flit about, apparently comfortable in circumstances, with genteel clothes and fingers on which no markers of toil are observable” (456-7). While not as wealthy as her friends, then, Mrs. Williams is nonetheless a woman of rank and eager to see her daughters married well in order to secure, if not elevate, their social standing. Indeed, the widow is described as someone

whose accommodating disposition, and whose desire to see her daughters well provided for, would cause her to bargain about matters that many would think too serious and too much a matter of the affections to be permitted to be looked upon in the light of a mere affair of pounds, shillings, and pence.

(456)

The widow quickly cuts Mr. Leek out of the “bargaining” process and begins spying and paying servants to intercept her daughter’s mail. The widow also, importantly, accepts Varney’s payment in exchange for accelerating the engagement, laying bare her mercenary motives in pushing the match, even though she knows Helen looks upon the engagement with “hatred and horror” because she is in love with James Anderson (485). As the wedding draws close, the widow reminds her “depressed” daughter that one day “you will find that it is, after all, the possession of ample means that is the most important thing to look to” (500). In case financial self-interest is not sufficient motivation, the widow also reminds Helen of how she might use her new husband’s money to save her mother from debtor’s prison (“and in so doing, absolutely sav[e] my life” [500]). While certainly melodramatic, the mother’s final touch in aligning her

¹³ This article thus challenges what Hilliard (2014) describes as early criticism’s assumption of such plots as wishful escapism from the drudgery of labour (256).

daughter's marriage with the family is Gothic fiction at its finest, looking backward at those spectres which continue to haunt (if not terrorise) the present. This marriage for money is indeed a throwback to the past, or those older structures of kinship – a far cry from the forward-looking companionate matches between two interiors.

Through such critical representations of the marriage market, *Varney* also reminds us of how the paradoxical turn to liberal (contractual) individualism came to define much working-class Gothic literature from this period and after. In the past, radical traditions often relied upon a combination of satire and sentimental melodrama when critiquing power, but by the Victorian period an emergent Chartist movement recognised the liberal potential within new strains of Gothic horror. Earlier Gothics of the Romantic period tended to present “an essentially organic society in which people were interconnected” and often therefore “traded in the language of enchantment but also of social duties, networks and obligations” (McWilliam 2019: 212). With its critique of kinship marriages and the mercenary motives such matches typically engender, *Varney* clearly pushes back against such notions of obligation and, instead, aligns itself with a new Gothic. Indeed, *Varney*'s search for true love (companionate marriage) would suggest that the story is better read as an example of what McWilliam describes as the Chartist Gothic, which typically privileged underlying assumptions of individual choice and rights. Looking back to the political writings of Thomas Paine, Chartists saw in liberalism “an argument about who should be represented in politics and, crucially, how they should be represented” (212). The Chartist Gothic employs this liberal philosophy in its attack on the aristocracy and the upper classes, loosely grouped together as Old Corruption, who haunt and thereby forestall the rights of labour.

In the case of *Varney*, it is the traffic in women that marks this older order as corrupt. On the one hand, the novel very much signals its participation in the Chartist dissemination of middle-class domesticity, that ideal of companionate love as a meeting between two interiors. The valorisation of this alternative marriage model speaks to the good character of the serial's working-class readership (as per Chartists' larger sociopolitical goals), and it also challenges the morality of the upper classes (Old Corruption) who force unwanted kinship marriages upon its daughters. On the other hand, by repeating over and over again this story of women's victimisation, *Varney* also draws our attention to gender and encourages readers to see how companionate marriage, too, is already compromised by sexual inequality. *Varney*, in other words, encourages equal scepticism toward middle-class marriage plots as a solution to social problems so long as women/daughters are denied truly equal rights to sexual contract.

Varney's critique of such domestic plots can certainly be seen in the many instances of calculating parents ready to trade their daughters to *Varney* in return for financial gain. There are also those instances in the novel where *Varney* must contend with calculating brides themselves who have internalised these same mercenary models of kinship marriage. This is the case with *Varney*'s next match. While disguised as Colonel Deverill, he befriends a landlady, Mrs Meredith (another widow) and her daughter, Margaret. When the latter realises the colonel's wealth, she enlists her mother's help in the marriage scheme. The women are “avaricious and designing” (Rymer [1845] 1972: 582), but their multiple plots fail (thanks largely to an interruption by one of the vampire-hunters, Admiral Bell) and they are finally driven out of town. De Wees reads this episode as another example wherein the vampire exposes the real human monsters by helping us to see the daughter's monstrosity as a product

of poor or “monstrous” parenting: Margaret “has been corrupted by her mother and in effect raised in her image,” explains De Wees, adding that “Mrs. Meredith is clearly culpable for having instilled a morally corrupt attitude toward marriage in her daughter” (1998: 155). However, the monstrosity extends beyond “moral corruption” and, instead, fits within the tradition of Gothic (and later sensation fiction) in turning on the horrors of marital coverture. Though Varney might be the intended victim, the form of the Merediths’ deception reminds us that kinship marriage does not concern itself with women’s interiority and true (liberal individualist) subjecthood. Indeed, this plot’s focus on women who have themselves internalised, and thereby practice, traffic in female bodies underscores the larger argument that the companionate plot is a logical impossibility in this case – for how can Varney contract with a bride who willingly erases her own interiority in place of financial gain?

Varney contains several more examples of predatory marriages, motivated by selfish parents who (attempt to) traffic in daughters. In some cases, as with Lady Annetta, the vampire witnesses the mercenary machinations of such plots; in other cases, as with the Captain and Mrs. Fraser, kinship marriage is redefined as a question of honourable alliances, not purely economic gain.¹⁴ In most of these plots, the daughter is unwilling and/or already in love with another man, but again, the kinship plot is not concerned with, and even violently erases, any such feminine interiority and subjecthood. In her analysis of these later plots, Senf describes the female characters as united by a common “passivity” (1988: 48), while De Wees claims that Rymer’s underlying message is that these “young women must shake off this passivity and wrest control from their guardians or risk becoming victims to real-life parasites and vampires” (1998: 164). The goal here, however, is not to debate its form but rather to suggest how this persistent problem of female agency is symptomatic of the novel’s larger critique of modern marriage plots.

Conclusion

Varney’s adventures are largely restricted to middle- and upper-class marriage plots, with the occasional aristocratic match thrown into the mix. This amalgamation reminds us of what McWilliam describes as “Old Corruption,” or the tendency to lump upper-class and aristocratic characters into one category in order to make legible for working-class readers the villain or main conflict within the story (2019: 69). In *Varney*, the sheer repetition of matches also conveys this image of one general upper class (old Corruption). The story does not feature marriage plots involving working-class characters. In fact, one of the few times such characters do appear is as an angry mob shouting, “Burn, destroy, and kill the vampire! No vampire; burn him out; down with him; kill him” (Rymer [1845] 1972: 185). On the one hand, such a representation would seem insulting to the working class: individual identities are subsumed within this larger group whose sole function in the plot is to derail the emergent resolution between Varney and the Bannerworths. On the other hand, this brief episode nonetheless effectively established the working-class characters as firmly against the vampire. In fact, as the scene ensues, even some of the upper-class characters (even those on seeming opposite ends of the battle) attempt to

¹⁴ There is also the case of Count Pollidori (an obvious allusion to Rymer’s literary predecessor), who pushes his daughter to marry Varney after the vampire saves him from assassins.

deflate the situation by urging the group to “return to your homes” (187) and by calling for “no more violence” (191), but the townspeople will not be dissuaded in their pursuit. Indeed, with this adamant (even violent) rejection of the vampire, the mob transcends into a symbol of the text’s running thesis on working-class readers’ critical response to 1840s reform writings and middle-class marriage plots as a solution to social problems.

To appreciate this critical representation of middle-class domestic ideology we must also remember the penny blood’s target readership and its investment in the Gothic mode as a voice for class dissent. After all, *Varney*’s critique of these monstrous marriage plots works best when we remind ourselves that its largely working-class readership was under similar pressures by contemporary reform writers, like Chadwick, to find domestic solutions to their unhappy social situations. It is also worth remembering that Rymer was at this time under contract with Edward Lloyd’s publishing company that “helped construct a working-class public sphere that was the backbone of the Liberal Party (through the paper was official bound to no party and would break with Gladstone over Home Rule in 1886)” (McWilliam 2019: 211). In *Varney*, however, this political vision is somewhat more complicated. In having the vampire’s search for the companionate union repeatedly thwarted by various forms of Old Corruption, Rymer’s penny blood also mounts a critique of the middle-class domestic plot. Indeed, *Varney* suggests that working-class readers should not look for narrative (or social) resolution in middle-class domestic plots so long as such unions remain bound to old structures of power (like the patriarchal traffic in women) that continue to haunt the present.¹⁵ In this way, then, *Varney* ultimately displays the kind of ambivalent attitude toward modern liberalism (and sexual contract) that would become quite typical among the penny blood’s working-class readership (211). In other words, Rymer’s readers would have recognised these Gothic hauntings of Old Corruption, in which those atop the socioeconomic hierarchy sustain themselves upon the (re)productive labour of those below. These same readers are thus invited to refuse, if not destroy, and “kill” (Rymer [1845] 1972: 185) such domestic plots for being as false or fraudulent as the vampire in whose name they are invoked as a solution.

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¹⁵ See also Groom (2012: 44-53) for more on this trope in Gothic fiction.

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