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Sue Chaplin

‘Daddy, I’m falling for a Monster’: Women, Sex and Sacrifice in Contemporary Paranormal Romance

The rather foreboding lyrics of the all-female band Stooshe’s 2012 hit ‘Black Heart’ seem somewhat at odds with the song’s sweet female vocal and catchy melody: ‘Daddy, I’m falling for a monster! Somehow he’s scaring me to death...’ The singer has fallen in love with the archetypal ‘bad guy’, by the sound of it, and the song takes the form of an address to her father in which she seeks neither advice nor any validation of her choice. She does not attempt to defend herself, or him; she merely asserts, in a confession that is all the more disturbing on account of its banality, that she has ‘fallen for a monster’, that he is ‘scaring her to death’, but that he is nevertheless ‘the best she’s ever had’. In a manner of speaking, this simple pop song manages very economically to summarise the basic plot of many of the more conservative paranormal romances in which a young heroine falls deeply in love (‘unconditionally and irrevocably’ in the words of *Twilight’s* Bella Swan) with a male who is literally monstrous. The romance element of this genre, however, tends to derive at least in part from the condition that the heroine’s relationship with the monster must in some sense ‘redeem’ him: Bella’s love for Edward, for instance, allows him to overcome his almost overwhelming lust for her blood as she continually insists that he is not the monster he takes himself to be. This is what is missing from ‘Black Heart’, in spite of the fact that the song appears to draw upon, or at least allude to the success of contemporary supernatural romance; its primary demographic is no doubt an audience of young women familiar with Bella’s unconditional love for her ‘monster’. Yet unlike even the most conservative paranormal romance, the song contains nothing to alleviate the relentless reiteration of female masochistic desire. On the contrary, the singer not only proclaims her desire for a man who is ‘scaring her to death’, but does so *to her father*. The father is constructed here as ineffectual;

he is simply the passive recipient of the disturbing assertion: 'Daddy, I'm falling for a monster!' This simple lyric, I argue, can be related to a key trope within much contemporary paranormal romance: the absence, or ineffectiveness, of the father. The first part of the essay develops an analysis of this aspect of the genre (in the *Twilight* saga especially) through the work of Girard, Irigaray and Juliet MacCannell. The second section extends this analysis to consider ways in which two best-selling adult paranormal series (Lara Adrian's *Midnight Breed* and J. R. Ward's *Black Dagger Brotherhood*) affirm *and* contest heteronormative, paternalistic models of masculinity and sexual desire.

The absence of the authoritative father figure, which is also a key generic element of the female *Bildungsroman* to which this genre is closely related,[1] establishes the vulnerability of the heroine from the outset through her alienation from traditional patriarchal family structures. The liminal position of the female subject, moreover, renders her especially susceptible to violent victimisation and paranormal romance repeatedly raises questions of scapegoating, sexual shaming and marginalised, traumatised femininity. Of importance here is the extent to which these narratives stage female self-sacrifice as a pre-condition of the redemption of the hero and the restoration of patriarchal bonds initially compromised by some crisis in the effective functioning of paternal authority. In terms of unpacking what might be at issue here in cultural and social terms, a fruitful point of departure is provided firstly by René Girard's theory of sacrifice, marriage and the paternal function, and secondly by feminist studies of the symbolic relation between women and sacrifice which productively re-configure key aspects of Girard's work .

Women and Sacrifice

Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* (2005) considers the relation between women and systems of marriage that he posits as closely tied to regimes of sacrifice:

> Like blood sacrifice, legitimate sexuality (that of matrimonial unions) never chooses its "victims" among those who live together. The regulations governing marriage resemble the regulations governing the choice of sacrificial victims. All these regulations serve to endow both sexuality and violence with the same centrifugal force. In many instances the sacrificial derivations of sexuality and violence are virtually indistinguishable. Marriage vows can be duly attended by ritualized violence analogous to other forms of ritual warfare.[2]

This analysis gestures towards a connection between women and the regulation of what Girard terms 'mimetic violence'; this is a violence to which the regulated exchange of women within and beyond the community serves as a solution along with other sacred rituals. The sacred, for Girard, emerges as a unique mode of violence premised upon ritualised scapegoating which substitutes for cycles of mimetic violence at moments of extreme social rupture. What Girard's account does not consider, however, is the symbolic relation of the feminine to this moment of rupture. In her brief engagement with Girard, and her more sustained analysis of other philosophers within the Western tradition, Luce Irigaray interrogates what she identifies as the unrepresentable truth, or trauma, of the Western symbolic economy, which is also precisely that violent moment of rupture on which it is founded. Irigaray broadly agrees with Girard's account of the origin and function of the sacred, but contends that the originary sacrifice is the symbolic sacrifice of the mother. The normative mode of subjectivity that develops out of this originary violence is a masculine subjectivity that entirely transcends those categories that are constructed in and through this rupture as: materiality, femininity, maternity. The body of the mother comes only to signify a traumatic loss, such that within the field of representation 'all that the mother's body "is", is

loss.' This symbolic effacement of the mother is vividly evident in the Christian Eucharist, about which Irigaray observes:

> No-one must ever see that by means of a male twosome [the Father and Son] it is she (the mother) who is being offered in partial oblation, she who manages the communion between them.[3]

Anne Caldwell points out that this obliteration of difference (one instance of which is the communion between Father and Son that entirely excludes the feminine), 'allows narcissism to be raised to the entire social field'.[4] William Beers and Juliet MacCannell, in analyses of sacrifice that draw from feminist accounts of the symbolic position of woman as signifying 'lack' or 'loss', also consider narcissism as one of the key components of the patriarchal symbolic.[5] For Beers, Freud's theorisation of the primordial violence of the sons against the father, and Girard's account of mimetic desire and violence, misrecognise what is in fact a manifestation of a more fundamental violence directed against the body of woman. What drives sacrificial violence is not oedipal or mimetic rivalry, but narcissistic rage against a feminine 'other' that is perceived as a powerful threat to the singularity and self-sufficiency of the male subject within a patriarchal economy. Beers' study is especially astute in its treatment of cross-cultural male bonding rituals that perform a sacrificial renunciation of the feminine, and of any marginalised group that can be classed alongside woman as 'other':

> In addition to being a function of violence, male bonding is also a cause of violence. This causal relation results from narcissistic identification within the male bond group and separation from the non-male group (i.e. women, children, slaves, captives, and other marginalised people, creatures and self-objects […]). The sacrificial victim,

> then, is a marginal being on which is focused the 'not-me' (narcissistically split-off) parts, which are then destroyed or violently cut off from the group's culture.[6]

MacCannell's work further emphasises the significance of individual and collective narcissism to sacrificial processes, whilst adding a crucial insight to post-Freudian theorisations of subjectivity and the symbolic order. Late-modernity, she argues, has witnessed a shift from the order of the father to what she terms 'the regime of the brother'. Although MacCannell's analysis is not Girardian, it illuminates and expands Girard's conceptualisation of the 'collapse of the paternal function' with the advent of Western modernity. Girard contends that the Freudian Oedipal model of subjectivity could only have arisen at the moment at which the paternal function was actually beginning to disintegrate within modern societies. MacCannell also insists that the Freudian model misreads culturally and historically specific symbolisations of the role of the father. The Oedipal complex articulated the phantasmic omnipotence of the father at the very moment when this paternal authority was starting to decay as the structuring principle of the symbolic order. The transition towards modernity replaces the principle of paternity with that of fraternity: power is democratised and dispersed among 'brothers'. The 'brother' becomes the universal citizen in whom civic rights and responsibilities are vested. This democratic, egalitarian ideal, however, masks the fact that the regime of the brother rests upon ritualised forms of group bonding that repudiate difference in order to maintain a sexually and racially homogenous regime of the Same; no second term, no 'other' subject, is allowed to fragment this homogeneity. For MacCannell, this is an economy governed not by Oedipus, not by an identification with the paternal principle, but by Narcissus, by an identification with the self-same subject – the 'brother'. The fraternal principle becomes a means 'for enforcing identicality and identification'; it is marked by a rigid conformity to the homogenous group and underscored by 'an unlimited, aggressive narcisissm'.[7]

MacCannell argues that for this fraternal regime to function, it must assert the ideological importance of equal rights and liberal tolerance. Nevertheless, marginalised communities within this regime remain deeply vulnerable to outbreaks of violence designed to assert the supremacy of the dominant group against the 'other' whose difference cannot be articulated or accepted on its own terms. Within this regime, MacCannell contends that the older, Oedipal model of paternal rule might start to look attractive to and protective of women compared to a culture which insists upon the value of tolerance and equality whilst often continuing to deny, or at least to problematize, the status and security of historically disenfranchised groups. This insight offers a valuable point of access, I argue, into a form of fiction written and consumed predominantly by women which often seems to display an intense nostalgia for a patriarchal order perceived as benevolent and protective.

Brothers, Mothers, Lovers, Scapegoats

In Meyer's *Breaking Dawn*, Bella Swan becomes pregnant following the consummation of her marriage to Edward. Her first experience of sex results in a pregnancy that is first of all so rare as to be virtually miraculous, and secondly so dangerous that it will almost certainly result in Bella's death during pregnancy or childbirth. Sure enough, the rapidly developing foetus violently assaults Bella's body from within and she does indeed die giving birth; what saves her is Edward's bite and the injection of blood that completes her vampiric transformation. Several critics have argued that what the *Twilight* saga articulates, here and elsewhere, is a profound cultural anxiety pertaining to the female body, female sexuality and autonomy. Margaret Kramar contends that Twilight valorises the 'trope of being whisked away by protective masculine arms, so universal in popular culture, which some women carry to the extreme of abdication of their own will', and that 'what is disturbing is the somnolence that smothers resistance to formulaic gender behaviours'.[8] The symbolic importance of blood in the novels is linked repeatedly to violence against and the regulation of Bella's body; she

emerges time and time again as, ‘mangled, battered and broken […] her flesh ripped apart’.[9] Anne Silver and Merinne Whitton associate Bella’s maternity explicitly with the feminine sacrifice demanded by a patriarchal economy of salvation instanced in these texts through the ‘God-like’ Edward, the patriarch Carlisle and various ‘martyred mothers’ including Esme (wife of Carlisle), Emily (of the La Push pack) and ultimately Bella herself.[10]

In the film adaptation of Meyer’s first novel, the significance of sacrifice to the symbolic economy of the narrative is made plain in the opening sequence. A faun is grazing in a forest when its ears prick up and it gazes straight to camera. It then takes flight, pursued by some predator hidden from sight. A series of blurred, disjointed shots chart the pursuit before the sequence closes with a fleeting image of the silhouette of a male figure capturing the animal. Viewers familiar with the narrative will understand the visual metaphor: the faun is Bella and the predator is Edward Cullan. The sequence reinforces this with a voice-over by Bella in which she makes clear her own status as sacrificial victim; she asserts that, ‘Dying in the place of someone that I love seems like a good way to go’. She is referring here to her willingness at the end of the narrative to die in place of her mother at the hands of a psychopathic vampire seeking vengeance against the Cullan family. Bella walks into what she suspects is a trap in order to divert the violence of the warring vampire covens on to her body. She becomes (as the opening sequence indicates) the surrogate victim who absorbs into herself a potentially catastrophic cycle of mimetic violence. Bella’s body, ‘mangled, battered and broken’, averts sacrificial crisis and restores order to the ostensibly peaceful, ‘vegetarian’, Cullan family.

What is especially interesting about the film’s opening sequence, however, is that the metaphor it deploys works against the fantasy of the Cullans as peace-loving, vegetarian vampires. Bella’s voice-over, pertaining to her own self-sacrifice, avers to a threat that appears to come from outside of the Cullan family. The visual narrative nevertheless clearly

aligns this threat with Edward himself. The viewer familiar with Meyer's novels will know that the Cullan family hunt animals for food and do not feed from humans. The figure hunting the deer in the wood must be a member of the Cullan family, and although the predator's face is not revealed the viewer knows it is meant to be taken as Edward, who repeatedly refers to himself as predator and Bella (the 'faun' whose voice-over directs the narrative) as prey. Working with the knowledge and expectations of its audience of *Twilight* fans, the opening sequence establishes Edward as the primary threat to Bella and places her assertion regarding her capacity for self-sacrifice within the context of her relationship with the Cullan family. In so doing, it refutes the notion that the Cullans' vegetarianism separates them from the bloodlust that characterises the behaviour of other vampire covens. Meyer's novels never directly describe the hunting and killing of prey by the Cullans; their hunting trips are presented as wholesome outdoor pursuits, somewhat similar to their base ball matches, which confirm them as civilised American citizens. The film's opening shots, by contrast, dwell on the violent predation and killing that guarantees the Cullans' existence, re-inscribing their vegetarianism within an economy of sacrificial violence that puts Bella to use as surrogate victim.

For Anne Silver, and many other feminist critics of *Twilight*, 'the novel's gender ideology is unapologetically patriarchal'.[11] The model of subjectivity the series offers to Bella is resolutely self-sacrificing and although she is by no means entirely passive her choices tend to work to confirm her dependency on Edward. In the first book, for instance, Bella finds herself surrounded by a violent gang of rapacious men whilst walking alone through Port Angeles in search of a book store. Edward's car speeds up and he orders her to get in. Having read the minds and the violent sexual intent of these men, he is furious and he takes his anger out on Bella as if she is to blame for making herself vulnerable by exercising her right of free movement around this city. Later, her insistence on experiencing sex with Edward whilst she

is still human results in her fatal pregnancy and the fact she achieves her dream of vampiric transformation does not alter the fact that it is the 'God-like' Edward's blood that must confer eternal life upon a female subject whose attempts at self-determination would otherwise have destroyed her; he is her 'perpetual savior', 'terrible and glorious' as 'a young God'.[12] What I want to suggest, though, is that these novels do not so much re-affirm the power of an *existing* system of strong patriarchal rule, but rather invest in a nostalgic fantasy of the paternal order as constituting a safe place for women in a culture increasingly unable to sustain the authority of the father. What the *Twilight Saga* negotiates, and this is true of much contemporary paranormal romance, is the collapse of what MacCannell terms 'the regime of the father'. For MacCannell, the fraternal order that replaces traditional patriarchy has liberatory potential for woman and men in so far as it challenges and progressively undermines oppressive paternal rule. Like Irigaray, however, MacCannell contends that this potential has been compromised by the emergence of new modes of domination:

> The Enlightenment (at least its narratives) made clear that, like it or not, the patriarchal household was to be made subject to a political state shaped by a new, non-patriarchal egalitarian norm – fraternity […] The construction of a state around liberty, equality and fraternity is indeed the very essence, the real hope and glory of modernity, the heart of democracy, They free us from irrational hierarchies (equality), from arbitrary repression by a despot (liberty), and permit us to recognise the common humanity of all members of the species (fraternity). Had it fulfilled all its promises a democracy so founded might have provided a new form of human community, and definitely displaced the Oedipal model and its malevolent clones. It did not. Instead, it retained the Oedipal form, but not its substance (to moderate the ego-centred passions, to civilise and foster communal aims, to support sexuality through difference). Under

> the "name" of the father another and sadistic Other – unconscious, superego, *It* – has begun its reign of pleasure and terror. The regime of the brother begins.[13]

MacCannell makes the point that the survival of remnants of the Oedipal model ('the form, but not its content') at times obscures this shift in power from 'father' to 'brother'. The narcissism that underscores the new regime, for instance, might be understood as another variation of patriarchy within a global capitalist context. This is *not* the case, she argues; the old 'oedipal patriarchy we so often imagine we oppose' is no longer 'the dominant form of contemporary social relations'.[14] The new forms of group violence that characterise this order might indeed engender nostalgia for 'the familiar bourgeois-Oedipal household' and it is this desire for a return to the father that *Twilight* narrates. The Oedipal household, re-imagined as the vampire family safely under the protection of the benevolent patriarch, is set against a fraternal regime that renders Bella a sacrificial object of exchange between brothers.

Traditional paternal authority, the authority of the father within the conventional bourgeois nuclear family, is shown as compromised, and at times entirely ineffectual, throughout *Twilight*. Bella begins the narrative as a marginalised figure moving to a new community into which she never fully integrates. She leaves her mother in Arizona to live with an ineffectual father who seems incapable of looking after himself, let alone his teenage daughter. Bella becomes a surrogate wife to the man she invariably refers to as Charlie. The attention she receives from groups of men in and around Forks is posited as unwanted (in the case of her male class mates), or as dangerous (in the case of the gang that nearly attacks her in Port Angeles). Indeed, whilst the approaches of the various young men who compete for her attention at Forks high school are well-meaning enough, it is clear that Bella finds them irritating and at times intimidating, and the implicit threat posed by these young men is made real when one of them, Tyler, loses control of his van and nearly kills her. It is Edward whose supernatural strength saves her; he becomes a surrogate father to Bella in the absence of any

other effective paternal authority. A similar complication of the role and rule of the father emerges through Bella's growing involvement with the Quileute werewolves at La Push. This is a hyper-masculine environment in which the power of the leader, Billy, is respected, but in practical terms relatively limited; he is quite elderly, diabetic, and uses a wheelchair. He can offer little protection to Bella against the aggression of his volatile adolescent 'sons'. As these young men make their transition, they rapidly acquire extraordinary height and musculature; the shift from boyhood to manhood is translated here into a change from human pre-pubescence to a supernatural hyper-masculinity that causes Jacob and his brothers initially to shun Bella. Whilst Jacob's hostility to his friend is primarily due to her growing relationship with Edward, Bella's very presence at La Push appears to trigger conflict once the brothers have bonded through their werewolf transformation, and this conflict is something for which Bella herself is blamed. Jacob's volatile outbursts of temper are something for which she is implicitly held responsible and Jacob's shows of aggression towards her continue long after his initial transitional phase in the first book. He repeatedly scolds her for loving Edward instead of him; he insists that Edward is and always will be a predator, and yet Bella tends to suffer more direct violence from Jacob than the vampire. In *Eclipse*, for instance, a struggle over Bella ensues between Edward and Jacob during which Jacob forcibly kisses Bella; she strikes out to defend herself and breaks her hand on his jaw. Her attempt to defend herself physically, like her attempts elsewhere to elude Edward's controlling behaviour and assert her own autonomy, backfires and appears to consolidate her status as a passive victim of violence between men and against her.

It is also La Push that presents to Bella perhaps most vividly the model of female subjectivity that Bella rapidly internalises. Emily is Billy's wife and the 'mother' of the pack. Her face bears a long scar from top to bottom, the result of a momentary loss of control by her husband who lashed out and seriously injured her. Billy's burden of guilt over this episode is

emphasised, but what is stressed even more is the self-sacrificing, forgiving response of the mutilated wife. Bella admires Emily and regards her stoic acceptance of the dangers of living amongst the pack as a sign of profound feminine strength. A similar lesson is offered to Bella by the Quileute legend of the 'third wife'. This nameless woman is honoured in Quileute tradition for her courage in sacrificing herself to save her community from vampire attack; during the fighting, she stabs herself fatally in order to distract the vampire with the scent of her blood. She takes on to herself the violence embodied by the vampire – the 'bad' violence, in Girard's terms, that threatens the disintegration of a community at moments of sacrificial crisis. Bella follows the example of the third wife during Edward's battle with Victoria in *Eclipse*; as a distraction, she makes herself bleed. In so doing, she re-enacts the earlier moment of sacrifice and anticipates the sacrifice of her maternal body in *Breaking Dawn*. As Whitton puts it, 'Bella's admiration for and emulation of the third wife's sacrifice symbolises the perpetuation of an ideal where good motherhood entails ultimate sacrifice – in effect, the only good mother is a dead mother'.[15]

The narrative establishes early on an opposition between the Quileute werewolves and the Cullan vampires and whilst the novels generate considerable sympathy for the marginalised La Push community, it is the Cullan family that is ideologically privileged throughout and whose values ultimately prevail. The werewolf community is also racially 'othered' in a manner that reflects wider racial tensions and inequalities without necessarily interrogating the structures of power that generate and perpetuate these injustices. The Quileutes are a first nation American community and as such are set in opposition to the Cullan family which descends vampirically from Carlisle – a seventeenth-century Puritan settler who represents a kind of 'founding father' to an enlightened community of rehabilitated vampires. The barely contained animal aggression of the werewolves, of which Emily's deep scar is a constant

reminder, is given a disturbing racial inflection as it appears to be defined against the self-restraint exercised by the wealthy, white family led by Carlisle Cullan.

The opposition between the Quileutes and the Cullans, however, never quite obscures the similarities between werewolf and vampire that emerge out of folklore tradition and which Meyer reproduces. As Margaret Kramar observes, Meyer repeatedly attributes to Edward qualities of the vampire and the werewolf: 'The imagery that surrounds [Edward] is often lupine [and] Edward is able comfortably to exist as vampire and werewolf because in mythic legend the vampire and the werewolf are inexorably intertwined'.[16] If Jacob and Edward are antagonists, then this analysis suggests that it might be best to regard them as *fraternal* antagonists. The conflict between them, moreover, is mediated and ultimately resolved through the body of Bella as sacrificial object. The child she 'dies' giving birth to is destined to be the soul mate of Jacob, who recognises her as such ('imprinting' her as his future mate) at the moment of her birth. The child unites the La Push pack and the Cullan coven, and Bella's resurrection as vampire wife and mother confirms this fantasy of family union. Jacob, the wayward brother, is absorbed into the patriarchal, bourgeois household. Bella's 'happy ever after' is a nostalgic evocation of white, male governance.

Sex, Shame, Masculinities

The supernatural hero of paranormal romance invariably possesses a supernaturally enhanced masculinity: he is the uber-alpha male. Like the female *Bildungsroman* narrative (*Twilight* cites *Jane Eyre* as a model text, for instance),[17] paranormal romance displays a concern not only with female self-development, but with versions of masculinity that are simultaneously compelling, yet threatening. Indeed, the most popular vampire romances of the last decade appear to have as their *primary* focus the often traumatic formation and transformation of highly problematised masculine identities. Series such as Lara Adrian's *Midnight Breed* and

J. R. Ward's *Black Dagger Brotherhood* oscillate between the narrative point of view of the heroine and the vampire lover. The heroine is invariably capable and independent, yet is rendered vulnerable through her encounter with the vampire. Similarly, the hyper-masculine vampire is made vulnerable and opened to suffering and otherness through his encounter with the woman. Indeed, it is more often than not the vampire and not the heroine who undergoes radical dislocation and trauma as he confronts what these narratives posit as the problematics of a fractured masculine subjectivity. Whilst these novels to some extent share the gender conservatism of *Twilight* (they often invest considerably in the fantasy of benevolent paternal rule as affording a safe place for women, for instance), they are arguably somewhat more radical in their representations and negotiations of masculine identities and this is apparent especially in the texts' treatment of sex, shame and male trauma.

The *Black Dagger* and *Midnight Breed* series are similar in terms of plot, structure and characterisation to much paranormal romance written for an adult readership. The novels focus on a group of vampire warriors united under the leadership of an ancient male whose rule is absolute, though benevolent. The group exists apart from a 'civilian' community of vampires that the brotherhood is pledged to protect. In Ward's series, supernatural 'living-dead' creatures named Lessers are committed to the annihilation of all vampires. In Adrian's, the threat against which the warriors struggle is posed by 'Rogues' – vampires who are entirely given over to savage blood lust. The novels, especially Ward's, devote considerable space to violence and political intrigues that would not be out of place in the hard-boiled thriller genre. The romantic relationships that develop in these texts take shape against a backdrop of extreme, chaotic violence, personal and political betrayals and complex Machiavellian manoeuvres; the romance element is thus expanded to incorporate not only the personal dramas of the protagonists, but the traumas of communities in a state of almost perpetual crisis. It is within the context of these crises, which form multiple plot strands

throughout the series, that each vampire protagonist must re-negotiate his sexual identity in order to become gradually capable of emotional intimacy and, in traditional romance style, worthy of the woman or (significantly in Ward's case) the man he loves. In Adrians first *Midnight Breed* novel, for instance, the warrior leader Lucan is on the verge of succumbing to Rogue bloodlust. The susceptibility to bloodlust, especially amongst 'Ancients' such as Lucan, is posited as a dangerous aspect of basic vampire nature and at the same time as the key component of the vampire's problematic, potentially destructive, heightened masculinity (vampires in Adrian's work, for instance, can only ever be male). Heather Schell suggests that the emergence of this hyper-masculine supernatural hero in a wide variety of cultural contexts reflects a disturbing contemporary view of the 'alpha male' as conforming to a genetically determined evolutionary model of the male as 'pack animal'. Her study focuses on the figure of the werewolf in a range of contemporary narratives:

> [The 1994 film] *Wolf* is one of many examples of popular culture's rehabilitation of the werewolf in the past fifteen years and it demonstrates not so much a shift in horror as a new ideal of masculinity. Evolutionary psychology has popularised the notion that men's everyday behaviour can be better understood by comparison to the habits of large mammals – most especially the more aggressive of the primates – living in patriarchal, aggressive societies. What links us to these other animals is our genes, which carry the atavistic behavioural impulses of our remote ancestors, also patriarchal, aggressive and social. Our cultural fictions have embraced this narrative wholeheartedly but changed the comparison to more charismatic megafauna: dogs and wolves. […] genes have become the foundation for rehabilitating predatory sexuality and competition and for transforming the werewolf [or vampire] from a villainous victim to a sexy role model: the alpha male.[18]

Even Edward Cullan in *Twilight*, who is a fairly domesticated vampire by the standards of adult paranormal romance, is frequently described in savage, animalistic terms. In Adrian's and Ward's novels, vampires are often represented as 'pure male animal' or some variation thereof. Vampire masculinity is animal masculinity and this may reflect, as Schell puts it, 'a consensus belief that men are born to be hierarchical, predatory, pack animals'.[19] Adrian and Ward's vampires to a large extent conform to this model, and yet the novels do not necessarily celebrate the pack animal/vampire as a romantic ideal. The physical form of the vampire is certainly celebrated in these often highly erotic texts, but predatory violence, and especially sexual violence, is overtly and repeatedly condemned. The novels repudiate what is frequently a disturbing corollary of the alpha male ideal: that male violence against women is somehow an unalterable fact of male biology. This notion of the near inevitability of masculine aggression is often accompanied by codes of male entitlement and sexual double standards that are catastrophic for women. These novels interrogate the consequences for women and men of ideological legitimisations of male violence, and prioritise questions of sexual consent, sexual trauma and shame. Whilst they do undoubtedly invest in the typical romance fantasy of the powerful and protective male, they persistently undermine masculinist ideologies of male sexual power, female submission, female sacrifice and shaming.

In Ward's *Black Dagger* series, vampires undergo a transition in their early twenties through which they become fully vampire. Before this, they are known as 'pre-transition', or 'pretrans', and they can pass as human easily. Whilst vampires in Ward's novels can be either male or female, it is male transition that is especially dramatic and traumatic. The vampire transformation becomes a metaphor for the acquisition of adult masculinity and whilst the transition confirms the young male as a member of the Brotherhood, it is also an exceptionally painful process emotionally and physically. The trauma of transformation is most vividly narrated in the early novels of the series with reference to the character of John

Matthew. John is introduced as a pre-transition vampire who initially lives alone in a squalid bed sit amongst humans. He is, like all pretrans vampires, a diminutive figure who looks much younger than he is. His transition tortuously transforms him into a massive male whose post-transition body is monstrous and alien to him, and for some time almost impossible to inhabit as he has to re-learn the most basic physical gestures.

John Matthew is also one of several male vampires in Ward's series who have suffered sexual trauma and shame. Ward frequently attributes generically 'feminine' narratives of suffering to her romance heroes which is a bold gesture given the gender conservatism that often characterises this genre. The rape survivor is hardly, in conventional terms, a likely candidate for an alpha male vampire protagonist. It is this that often distinguishes Ward most markedly from other writers in the genre. Adrian's vampires, for instance, certainly suffer, but they suffer in more traditionally masculine terms. They are scarred on the field of battle, or perhaps haunted by their perceived failure to protect their family. Ward's John Matthew, by contrast, was raped in a stairwell whilst still a small, physically vulnerable pretrans. Like many female victims of sexual violence, he blames himself and is overwhelmed by feelings of sexual shame. This narrative reaches a painful conclusion when an obnoxious and psychopathically violent vampire, Lash, finds out about John's past and resolves to humiliate him not only by revealing it to the Brotherhood, but by re-enacting the rape in front of two of John's best friends. John is by this point an immensely powerful post-transition vampire, the strongest of his peers by some measure, but as he finds himself pinned against the wall of a locker room facing a second sexual assault, he is unable to fight back. The trauma of the prospect of violent sexual attack immobilises him:

> Lash reached around to the front of John's pants.

> ‘How about a replay, John-boy?’ the guy rasped. ‘Or do you only like humans in your ass?’
>
> The feel of a big body pressing into his from behind froze John solid.
>
> It should have energised him. It should have sent him wild. Instead, he became the frail boy he’d been, helpless and terrified and at the mercy of someone much, much bigger. He was instantly where he’d been in that decrepit stair-well, pushed against the wall, trapped, overpowered.
>
> Tears sprang to his eyes. No, not this… not this again – .[20]

John’s reaction here is, in traditional terms, a ‘feminine’ response: his body becomes ‘frail’ as he feels himself ‘trapped, over-powered’ by a male body ‘much, much bigger’. And yet the outcome of this ‘feminisation’ of the male body is not shame; the attack is averted by John’s friend, Qhuinn, and in the aftermath the Brotherhood unequivocally supports and nurtures John. The ostracisation he had feared should his past become known does not happen and the revelation of his secret enables him finally to begin to recover.

Several other members of the Brotherhood and their network of allies have histories of trauma and are posited as outcast from a civilian vampire community that relies on them for protection, but that regards them as savage and ‘other’. The warrior Zsadist, whose history unfolds in books five and six of the series, underwent decades of ‘blood slavery’ as a young post-transition vampire which included sexual assault by men, but primarily by a sadistic female aristocrat who used supernatural means to ensure that Zsadist was able to perform penetrative sex against his will. These episodes, graphically narrated by means of flashbacks during book six, entail a radical reversal of conventional gender roles and a significant

complication of the traditional *Bildunsgroman* element of vampire romance. The male vampire here is a victim of heterosexual rape and experiences his penetration of his assailant as a profound violation of *his* mind and body. These flashback narratives undermine notions of the phallus as weapon and of the woman as the only possible victim of heterosexual aggression. Using the supernatural possibilities of the genre, Ward creates a scenario in which masculinity is exposed to vulnerabilities and traumas ordinarily coded 'feminine'. The consequences for Zsadist of this violent sexual abuse are severe and long-lasting, as they are for Zsadist's 'brother', the young John Matthew, to whom Zsadist becomes a mentor in book seven. Zsadist hates his own body and in spite of his reputation for savage sexual promiscuity, he can not in fact have sex with women. His relationship with the vampire Bella slowly and painfully enables him to overcome his trauma, but even this conventional 'redemption' trope is complicated by numerous reversals of conventional gender positioning and also by wry observations regarding the generic expectations that are being confounded here. The following extract follows Bella and Zsadist's first sexual embrace; Zsadist is overwhelmed with shame, flees the scene and breaks down. Bella then becomes the tender 'male' lover gently coaxing and nurturing her partner towards intimacy:

> 'Are you OK?'
>
> "Yeah, this is just loads of fun..."
>
> […] In the blink of an eye, Zsadist was up on his feet and facing her.
>
> She swallowed a gasp.
>
> Though clearly powerful, his muscles stood out in stark relief, the individual fibres striated and visible. For a warrior, for any male, he was thin, too thin. Frankly he was

close to starving […] But none of that was what stunned her. The thick black bands tattooed around his neck and wrists were the shocker.

“Why do you bear the markings of a blood slave?” […]

“Back off”, he snapped. He opened his mouth, his fangs elongating to the size of a tiger’s.

That gave her some pause.

“But maybe I can –“

“Save me or some shit? Oh, right. In your fantasy, this is the part where I’m supposed to be transfixed by your eyes. Give my beastly self up into the arms of a virgin.”

“I’m not a virgin.”

“Well, good for you.”

She reached out her hand, wanting to put it on his chest. Right over his heart.

He shrank from her, flattening himself against the marble. As sweat broke out all over him, he craned his neck away, and his face squeezed into a wince. His chest pumped up and down, nipple rings flashing silver.

His voice thinned out until it was barely a sound.

“Don’t touch me. I can’t…I can’t stand to be touched, okay? It hurts.”

Bella stopped.

“Why?” she said softly. “Why does it?” (Ward, 2006, pp. 373-5)[21]

Whilst Ward's texts do at times offer a fantasy of paternalistic protection for women that might, as MacCannell argues, serve as a defensive response to a hyper-aggressive, masculinist culture, her novels also in various ways interrogate this culture, allowing different models of subjectivity and sexuality to develop and flourish. From book seven onwards, a romantic relationship begins to grow tentatively between two young members of the Brotherhood – Qhuinn and Blaylock. The eleventh novel (2013) makes this couple the centre of its romance narrative. Like all the earlier texts, this work explores the emotional vulnerability of subjects set within highly conflicted, often traumatising environments. A key concern of this narrative is the ethics of sexual intimacy; it prioritises questions of trust, consent, and privileges openness to and affirmations of difference. Whilst this is true of all the novels in the series to a degree (and also to certain other examples of this genre), the narration of a queer love story in a paranormal romance intended to be marketed to a heterosexual female readership is not generically normative. Whilst other paranormal romances do include gay male and female characters, they invariably centre the romance plot upon a heterosexual couple in a manner that appears to represent the romantic aspirations of the readership. Judging by the reception of Ward's *Lovers at Last*, however, it would appear that for Ward's many fans the heterosexual coupling is entirely dispensable to the romance element of the text. The developing relationship between Qhuinn and Blay has been closely followed on the various fan sites devoted the series and the story of these lovers in book eleven, which was widely publicised in advance, was eagerly anticipated and enthusiastically received by readers.[22] In this novel, Ward does not simply map the dynamics of conventional heterosexual romance on to a same-sex couple; she does not 'feminise' one of the male characters to the extent that he effectively becomes the 'female' object of identification for the reader. In a series that is often broadly conservative in terms of its sexual politics,

therefore, sexualities in Ward's work nevertheless appear at least to some extent to be cut free of the cultural and generic restraints of conventional gender formations.

Conclusion

It has perhaps become something of a critical commonplace to regard the contemporary vampire as a domesticated travesty of its former self. Vampire romance has divested the dangerously sexual predator of his dark charisma and replaced him with a lover/protector/father who allows the heroine to accommodate herself safely within the oedipal structure of the traditional heteronormative, patriarchal family. The void left by this transition has arguably been filled by the werewolf male who continues to function as feral sexual predator. When Bella observes, for instance, that Jacob kisses her with 'an eagerness that was not far from violence' she posits his werewolf sexuality as the opposite of the self-disciplined, chaste courtship practiced by her vampire lover.[23] Nevertheless, it is possible to detect in *Twilight* an affinity between vampire and werewolf that disrupts the easy binary between domesticated vampire and untamed wolf in contemporary paranormal romance. As Kramar observes, Edward has distinctly 'lupine' qualities and the relationship that emerges between vampire and werewolf is a fraternal antagonism resolved ultimately through the body of Bella and her daughter (who is destined from birth to be Jacob's mate). In other paranormal sagas, the vampire is in certain respects almost indistinguishable from the werewolf: he is a pack animal; his sexuality is violent and predatory; he undergoes a genetic transition into vampire that resembles the point of transformation of the 'human' male into werewolf. Here, both vampire and werewolf may be read according to Schell's analysis as constituting a disturbing romanticisation of the violent human-animal alpha male. This validation of a reactionary biological determinism constructs biology as destiny, and biology as sexy – the monster is 'the best I've ever had!' There is a tense dialectic at work here, though. The monster-hero is a highly conflicted cultural construction that shifts in response to

the fluid expectations of the genre's readership. The re-configuring of forms of vampire masculinity in Ward's work, for instance, suggest the potential of the genre to open up even the most conservative models of identity to difference and transformation.

Notes

[1] See Jones, 'Contemporary Bildungsroman and the Prosumer Girl'.

[2] Girard, *Violence and the Sacred,* p. 231.

[3] Irigaray, *Belief Itself,* p. 46.

[4] Caldwell, 'Transforming Sacrifice', p. 22.

[5] Beers, *Women and Sacrifice,* MacCannell, *The Regime of the Brother.*

[6] Beers, p. 145.

[7] MacCannell, p. 34.

[8] Kramar, 'The Wolf in the Woods' in Anatol (ed.), *Bringing Light to Twilight,* p. 22.

[9] Kramar, p. 25.

[10] Silver, 'Twilight is not good for Maidens'; Whitton, 'One is not Born a Vampire, but Becomes One', in Anatol (ed.).

[11] Silver, p. 122.

[12] Meyer, *Twilight,* pp. 246, 166, 343.

[13] MacCannell, p. 12.

[14] MacCannell, p. 15.

[15] Whitton in Anatol (ed.) p. 127.

[16] Kramar, p. 17.

[17] See further, Jones, 'Contemporary Bildungsroman and the Prosumer Girl'.

[18] Schell, 'The Big, Bad Wolf: Masculinity and Genetics in Popular Culture', p. 109.

[19] Schell, p. 112.

[20] Ward, p. 208.

[21] Ward, pp. 373-5.

[22] See the online fan sites devoted to the series: www.fanpop.com/clubs/the-black-dagger-brotherhood; www.goodreads.com/group/show/1898-j-r-ward-black-dagger

[23] Meyer, *Eclipse*, p. 526.

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