

ANNIVERSARY COLLECTION - POSITION PIECE

Maternal Impulses in 'The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire'

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In this article, I examine Arthur Conan Doyle's treatment of motherhood in 'The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire' (1924) and, in so doing, argue for the insights that it imparts on the mature writer's creative vision. The story advocates better communication amongst the Fergusons, between husband and wife, and between parents and children, for the family's regeneration. In its exploration of the maternal experience, parent-child relationships, and sibling relations, Conan Doyle's story is at home in the Mapping Maternal Subjectivities, Identities and Ethics network, a project on which I am proud to have worked as an intern while completing my Ph.D. in English Language and Literature at University College London. Victorian literature, the area of my expertise, is replete with examples of troubled maternal figures, and they tell us much about nineteenth-century social and cultural life. Over the past decade, *Studies in the Maternal*, the network's peer-reviewed journal, has championed pioneering scholarship on motherhood, operating as an important forum for academics, writers, and creative artists internationally, and expanding the critical and theoretical vocabulary with which we approach characters such as Mrs Ferguson.

Arthur Conan Doyle's 'The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire' (1924) has commanded neither substantial critical attention nor many advocates amongst Sherlock Holmes aficionados. An extensive survey completed in 1999 for the best stories—'the largest and most comprehensive Sherlock Holmes rating effort ever conducted'—ranked 'The Sussex Vampire' 46th out of the canon's 56 stories (Stock 1999, p. 5, p. 11). Nevertheless, the story is particularly revealing of the mature Conan Doyle's creative vision. In its exploration of the maternal experience, parent-child relationships, and sibling relations, it resonates closely with the concerns of the Mapping Maternal Subjectivities, Identities and Ethics network, a project on which I am proud to have worked as an intern while completing my Ph.D. in English Language and Literature at University College London. In the story, Robert Ferguson, a tea broker, appeals to Holmes, ostensibly on a friend's behalf but really out of his own desperate needs. The relation of his story through a letter written in the third person serves the dual function of concealing his domestic troubles and, paradoxically, enabling him to speak more candidly and subjectively about them. Ferguson 'married some five years ago a Peruvian lady, the daughter of a Peruvian merchant, whom he had met in connection with the importation of nitrates' (Conan Doyle 1924, p. 4). His insistence on his wife's South American roots anticipates his subsequent claims: that her foreign birth and religion are responsible for their diverging interests and feelings. The couple has grown emotionally detached: 'He felt there were sides of her character which he could never explore or understand. This was the more painful as she was as loving a wife as a man could have—to all appearance absolutely devoted' (Conan Doyle 1924, p. 4).

This troubled marriage gives a partial explanation for Mrs Ferguson's reticence about her erratic behaviour. According to Ferguson, she had an 'ordinarily sweet and gentle disposition' but for her treatment of Jack, his son from his first marriage:

The boy was now fifteen, a very charming and affectionate youth, though unhappily injured through an accident in childhood. Twice the wife was caught in the act of assaulting this poor lad in the most unprovoked way. Once she struck him with a stick and left a great weal on his arm. (Conan Doyle 1924, p. 4)

Mrs Ferguson has also become violent towards her infant son. On one occasion, the child's nurse had witnessed 'the lady, leaning over the baby and apparently biting his neck' (Conan Doyle 1924, p. 4). If the qualification of 'apparently' casts doubt over her narrative, then this is dissipated, some time later, when Ferguson catches his wife, red-handed, feasting on their child's blood. He writes, in the third person:

Imagine his feelings, Mr. Holmes, as he saw his wife rise from a kneeling position beside the cot, and saw blood upon the child's exposed neck and upon the sheet. With a cry of horror, he turned his wife's face to the light and saw blood all round her lips. It was she—she beyond all question—who had drunk the poor baby's blood. (Conan Doyle 1924, pp. 5–6)

The repetition of 'she' foregrounds Ferguson's reluctant acceptance of his wife's vampirism, yet her behaviour to *both* children remains incomprehensible to him. Conan Doyle is drawing on some of the maternal metaphors popularized in his friend Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), which he read and admired. Shortly after its publication, Conan Doyle enthuses to Stoker (20 August 1897): 'I think it is the very best story of diablerie which I have read for many years. It is really wonderful how with so much exciting interest over so long a book there is never an anticlimax. It holds you from the very start and grows more and more engrossing until it is quite painfully vivid.'

Readers will recall Jonathan Harker watching in horror as Dracula's sisters close in on a bag containing a child (Stoker 2011, p. 40), and the infant's mother falling prey to their wolves when she reproaches the monster pages later (Stoker 2011, p. 46). When Dracula targets Lucy, she receives puncture wounds on her throat and becomes weakened physically. Returning as a vampire, she will inflict a similar injury on her young victims. Professor Van Helsing explains that this is part of Lucy the vampire's system of reproduction and that the only way to contain and reverse it would be to exterminate her:

Those children whose blood she suck are not as yet so much the worse; but if she live on, Un-Dead, more and more they lose their blood, and by her power

over them they come to her; and so she draw their blood with that so wicked mouth. But if she die in truth, then all cease; the tiny wounds of the throats disappear, and they go back to their plays unknowing ever of what has been. But of the most blessed of all, when this now Un-Dead be made to rest as true dead, then the soul of the poor lady whom we love shall again be free. (Stoker 2011, p. 200)

In Conan Doyle's earlier works, such as the short story 'Jonathan Barrington Cowles' (1884) and the novella *The Parasite* (1894), he incorporates cruel, female characters who abuse their supernatural powers by controlling their victims' minds. In the former, Miss Northcott remains a crux, and as Catherine Wynne observes, the narrative's interest revolves around the character's very opacity:

Northcott is an ambiguous figure whose powers extend beyond mesmeric boundaries to occupy an occultist space associated with a military uncle who was rumoured to have been a "devil-worshipper" in India. She is described as a "devil" and a "fiend" with a "vampire soul behind a lovely face" as she saps the life energy from the men with whom she becomes involved and renders them insane. (Wynne 2006, p. 229)

In *The Parasite*, Miss Penclosa's propensity for destruction is curbed only by her death. Adam Zanzie capitalises on this aspect of her character in his 2015 short-film adaptation. In it, she (Heidi Berg) had struck a deal with the devil to collect the souls of men in exchange for eternal beauty and immortality. Howard K. Elcock's illustration of Mrs Ferguson, for 'The Sussex Vampire' in *The Strand Magazine*, harks back to *Dracula* (**Figure 1**). In contrast to the 'pair of frightened but beautiful eyes [that] glared at [Watson] in apprehension' (Conan Doyle 1924, p. 9), Elcock shows a frail and seemingly dying Mrs Ferguson, who resembles the cadaverous Lucy.

Scholarship has treated Mrs Ferguson's differences from her husband extensively: Michael O'Toole reads the Fergusons as foils of each other (O'Toole 2018, pp. 61–62); Cyndy Hendershot examines her otherness in terms of her female and ethnic subjectivities (Hendershot 1996, p. 11); and Andrew Glazzard has remarked on her close



Figure 1: Howard K. Elcock evokes *Dracula* in his depiction of Mrs Ferguson.

resemblance to 'th[e] stereotype of the Latin-American femme fatale' (Glazzard 2018, p. 150). Mrs Ferguson does not belong to Conan Doyle's company of female mesmerists, and as O'Toole, Hendershot, and Glazzard suggest, she ultimately distracts us from her stepson Jack, the story's real culprit. In the tale, Mrs Ferguson is trying to draw poison from her child's wound after Jack had pricked him with an arrow dipped in curate or another drug: she is not a vampire, as Holmes knew from the first. As Hendershot writes,

Like ["The Speckled Band", "Sussex Vampire" exposes British mistrust and misuse of the foreign as evil rather than naturalizing evil at the level of the foreign. Just as Roylott misuses the Indian swamp adder, Jack misuses Mrs. Ferguson's "South American utensils", poisoning one of her decorative arrows. (Hendershot 1996, p. 13)

Holmes reassures his client that his spouse's loyalty has never wavered: 'Your wife is a very good, a very loving, and a very ill-used woman' (Conan Doyle 1924, pp. 12–13). Jack's actions, he surmises, arose out of his love for his father and/or his deceased mother, and his jealousy over his sibling, whose health and beauty contrast so prominently with his own. Watson had interpreted Jack's 'curious, shambling gait' as a symptom of a weak spine, and Conan Doyle characteristically juxtaposes the two children by describing, in the same paragraph, Jack and Mrs Ferguson's 'very beautiful child, dark-eyed, golden-haired, a wonderful mixture of the Saxon and the Latin' (Conan Doyle 1924, p. 12). Accordingly, Glazzard emphasises Mrs Ferguson's role in replenishing the English bloodline, the stock of which 'had become so degenerate as to produce an overindulgent father and a jealous, physically weakened son' (Glazzard 2018, p. 152).

Where Hendershot argues that the valorisation of Mrs Ferguson as devoted wife and mother deprives her of her sexuality and independence (Hendershot 1996, p. 13), my reading concentrates more on her heroic qualities. Mrs Ferguson keeps silent, confines herself in her room, and is separated from both her husband and her child: 'She would not even speak. She gave no answer to my reproaches, save to gaze at me with a sort of wild, despairing look in her eyes. Then she rushed to her room and locked herself in. Since then she has refused to see me' (Conan Doyle 1924, p. 6). These actions accentuate both the priority that she attaches to her husband's feelings and her agency as she takes matters into her own hands. As Holmes confides to his client, following his explanation of her actions, 'Your wife feared such an attack. She saw it made and saved the child's life, and yet she shrank from telling you all the truth, for she knew how you loved the boy and feared lest it break your heart' (Conan Doyle 1924, p. 13). The Fergusons have become so distant that she no longer feels at ease with confiding to her husband. By the end of the story, she confirms Holmes' theories, and the detective and Watson help to remove the maid Dolores, leaving

the Fergusons to themselves: 'Ferguson was standing by the bed, choking, his hands outstretched and quivering' (Conan Doyle 1924, p. 13). In his structural analysis of the story, O'Toole usefully organizes its epilogue in terms of the Specific, that is, 'the immediate future,' and the General, 'the longer term future':

Ferguson and his wife are left embracing, Holmes and Watson tiptoe out of the bedroom with the ever-faithful maid, Dolores, and Jacky, we presume, will soon be packed off to the Merchant Navy for a spot of discipline. Finally (General Epilogue), back at the famous apartment, Holmes writes a letter in answer to the enquiry with which the story opened—a nice gratuitously circular touch, restoring the reassuring inertia of life with its 'feet firmly on the ground' as lived in the Edwardian image of London. Meanwhile, Watson, we presume, sits down to write up his latest case for the famous Case-Book. (O'Toole 2018, p. 59)

The General Epilogue, the story's long-term resolution, demands a reconfiguration of the Fergusons' relationship: things cannot progress as they had prior to Jack's crime. The couple's reconciliation involves accepting that Jack had tried to harm his younger brother, that he is capable, in Holmes' terms, of 'such jealousy, such cruel hatred, as I have seldom seen in a human face' (Conan Doyle 1924, p. 13). Some of my own work has suggested how, in 'The Adventure of the Priory School' (1904), Conan Doyle employs an abduction plot to raise questions about inheritance narratives. That earlier story sees James, the Duke of Holderness's illegitimate firstborn, orchestrating his younger brother's kidnap to blackmail his father into breaking his entailment. I have argued that 'The Priory School' exposes James' inability to imagine a system in which inheritance and opportunity would be more equitably distributed (Ue 2019, p. 44). In 'The Sussex Vampire,' by contrast, Jack has at least equal claims to his father's affection and wealth. The necessary changes to the Ferguson household manifest well beyond the disciplining of Jack. Domestic peace, as Holmes intimates, can be restored—but not without significant effort, and not by returning to the Fergusons' previously distanced relationship. Conan Doyle's story advocates better communication, between husband and wife, and between parents and children,

for the family's regeneration. His invocation of the 'other', in terms of gender and culture, foregrounds the importance of rereading and revising how we understand and approach those who seem so different from ourselves.

'The Sussex Vampire,' for all its nods to configurations of otherness, is located in familiar grounds: Mrs Ferguson is divided between her love for her husband and her eagerness to protect their child, between her maternal duties towards her stepson and her own biological child. Victorian literature, the area of my expertise, is replete with examples of troubled maternal figures, and they provide us with particular insight into nineteenth-century social and cultural life. Over the past decade, *Studies in the Maternal*, the peer-reviewed journal of the Mapping Maternal Subjectivities, Identities and Ethics network, has championed pioneering scholarship on motherhood, operating as an important forum for academics, writers, and creative artists internationally, and expanding the critical and theoretical vocabulary with which we approach characters such as Mrs Ferguson. This journal has revolutionized how we conceive of 'research': its open-access format encourages wider public access and participation, and its incorporation of visual and audio materials speaks to the multi-sensory nature of studies in the humanities and social sciences. I am grateful to Lisa Baraitser and Sigal Spigel, whose support and encouragement have been instrumental to my intellectual and professional growth. Not only did this internship enable me to work at close hand with scholars in the development of their projects, but it also sharpened my editorial skills and deepened my expertise in interdisciplinary and collaborative scholarship. I can only aspire to Lisa's and Sigal's example as scholars and mentors now that I am in a supervisory role. As I proudly reflect on our achievements, I look forward to contributing to the journal's next decade and to watching it go from strength to strength.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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