

Vampiric Hymenoplasty: *True Blood's* Jessica Hamby as Undead Maiden

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The relationship between vampires and virgins in the Western vampire canon is a long and illustrious one, second only to the creature's unbreakable affiliation with death. From as early as 1748 the vampire has appeared in literary works alongside the maiden, with later forays into the theme, featuring vampires who were themselves virgins. HBO television's *True Blood* has put a unique spin on that representation of the revenant with its character, Jessica Hamby, who experiences what I have termed 'vampiric hymenoplasty'. Each time she has sexual intercourse, her hymen grows back, leaving her in a state of perpetual maidenhood. This state will form the topic of this paper, which will reference two early virgin vampires from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Bride of Corinth* (1797) and Henry Liddell's *The Vampire Bride* (1833) to foreground the investigation.

The relationship between vampires and virgins and its implied sexuality in the Western vampire canon is a long and illustrious one, second only to the creature's unbreakable affiliation with death. The popular vampire of literature, film and television, featured in horror, gothic and fantasy, that preys on virgins for their precious blood is a common occurrence, and acts as the codification of the vampire as sexual menace and as the threat of overt or unfettered

sexuality, often fatally so for the maiden. Whether depicted as male or female, this revenant and its associations with virginity is the devourer of innocence and the harbinger of rampant desires, and has featured in the literature of the West in poems from as early as 1748. *Der Vampir* (1748) by Heinrich August Ossenfelder and *The Bride of Corinth* (1797) by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe are amongst the earliest Western depictions of the vampire in literature, and also the earliest links to his or her relationship to virginity. Such lascivious attentions toward the maiden are common and well researched in the field of vampire studies.

However, not all of these early vampires are sexually experienced plunderers of chastity – some are themselves virgins. For example, in *The Bride of Corinth* the female antagonist died “in virgin guise” (23) before being reborn a vampire. As a result, she rises to avenge her lost opportunities in the marital and sexual spheres. An almost identical story takes shape in Henry Liddell’s *The Vampire Bride* (1833), where the word “virgin” is used as a synonym for the term “bride” (32, 51). These tales equally offer the opposing but not unrelated prospects of sexual corruption and sexual awakening, both for the ill-fated victims and the maiden vampires. These works speak to the dual aspects of punishment through retribution, of life through death and of sexuality through maidenhood.

The curious character of the virgin vampire persists in Anglo lore today, most notably in the guise of *Twilight*’s (book 2005, film 2008) Edward Cullen, who abstains from sexual intercourse for more than a century until he meets his soul mate. However, quite another example of the virgin vampire is the figure of Jessica Hamby (Deborah Ann Woll) from HBO’s *True Blood* series. Based on Charlaine Harris’ Southern Vampire Mysteries novels, *True Blood* is set in the contemporary American South where supernatural creatures such as vampires, werewolves, shapeshifters and fairies live alongside ordinary humans. Jessica is set apart from others of her kind in the sexually charged vampire community because she was a virgin when she became a vampire. She still carries the *True Blood* vampire’s insatiable lust for sex; however, she is now an eternal maiden owing to the fact that a vampire’s body remains unchanged

from the point of its human death and continuing into its transformation into a supernatural being. This form of physical stasis occurs due to a combination of the vampire’s ability to heal physical wounds and their unaging immortality. Thus, whenever Jessica has sexual intercourse, she painfully loses her virginity, and once the act is complete, her hymen grows back in what I have termed as “vampiric hymenoplasty”.¹ This and Jessica’s status as undead maiden will be the subject of this paper, using the virgin vampires of *The Bride of Corinth* and *The Vampire Bride* as a basis for the investigation. Furthermore, the paper will discuss the creation of this case of vampiric hymenoplasty alongside the facets of its manifestation in terms of the associated monstrous feminine, the vampire and current critical research.

Like her poetic counterparts, Jessica became a vampire whilst in the virgin state. While there is no information in either *The Bride of Corinth* or *The Vampire Bride* about how the condition of vampirism came about for these women, Jessica’s transformation is rendered in great detail in the *True Blood* episode called “I Don’t Wanna Know” (2008 1.10). It offers an insight into her genesis as a vampire and into her hymenoplasty, which can be read as a direct consequence of her transformation. Since Jessica does not feature in the Southern Vampire Mysteries books, the HBO series forms the only reference for the narration of her life. In this episode, vampire Bill Compton (Stephen Moyer) is forced to ‘turn’ Jessica during a vampire court hearing in restitution for killing a fellow vampire. In scenes reminiscent of a rape, the struggling and crying girl lies on the ground as a crowd of jeering vampires look on. Bill holds her down as she screams and bites into her neck. The watching vampires are visibly aroused by the scene and show their fangs as blood drips from Jessica’s wound and Bill groans loudly. This scene reads as a thinly disguised rape of a virgin, complete with dripping blood and, as Anke Bernau remarks in *Virgins* (2007), “[t]he levels of violence accompanying deflorations may differ, depending on context or genre, but pain and blood are required nonetheless” (103). Rather than adhering to the traditional, consensual creation of a new vampire – usually in the cloistered and intimate setting of a bedroom with a vampire lover – this creation more closely resembles the violence of the scene

from *Dracula* (1897) where female vampire Lucy Westenra is staked in her tomb. Critics have often likened this staking to the group rape of a virgin, with the wooden stake hammered into her body as she lies surrounded by men. Whilst these men are shown as attending for duty's sake, the vampire mob at Jessica's turning are very much there as spectators to a sexual crime, especially as the previous court verdict punished a male vampire with castration by having his phallic fangs torn out. After Jessica is "made vampire"² ritual dictates that the vampire sire is buried in the ground, wrapped in a foetal position around his new charge. This demonstrates a rather disturbing parallel with the idea of vampire creation as a loving act, except rather than the newly mated couple sharing a bed, here the vampire coils around Jessica as she lies interred, unconscious and on the edge of death.

In this respect Jessica's enforced virginity can be read as a direct reaction to and a product of her violent, enforced vampiric becoming. Due to the physical restrictions now placed upon her body, she will heal every time she is penetrated and will therefore return to her maiden state each time she has sexual intercourse. As such, this can be read as Jessica's body rebelling against such physical contact in its determination to return to a pre-sexual state and, by extension, to return itself to its pre-vampiric, unviolated existence in life. Since there is no evidence of such bodily conditions being imposed on the virgin vampires of the aforementioned poems, no correlation can be made with Jessica here since these earlier works would not have shared *True Blood's* "explicit levels of sex and nudity" (Cherry 9). However, it can be argued that these earlier incarnations of the vampire maiden utilize their male victims in a similar fashion to the way Jessica's body utilizes its vampiric hymenoplasty – that is to say that both of these acts refer back to a loss which must be replaced. In the case of the brides, they strive for the husband and the sexuality they were denied. For unmarried women at the turn of the eighteenth century, marriage was the only option for a life outside of the parental home and the only possible future open to them. It meant admittance to adult life and an allowable degree of sexuality. Thus, the vampire brides try to regain their future and their sexuality through the capture of a husband, and

victim, in order to correct their chaste condition. Correspondingly, Jessica's body strives to correct itself to the natural state of virginity it was never able to forego willingly when it was alive. As such, any kind of sexual act disrupts that condition and, therefore, causes damage to the body. This leads to the concept of the sexual act as damaging and, in turn, to Jessica's metaphorical rape when she was made vampire.

Having established how and why Jessica's vampiric hymenoplasty came into being, this paper will now consider two prominent elements relating to its existence. The first of these concerns Jessica's virginity and linked childlike nature. Throughout history female virginity has been prized and idealized, so much so that there are now a huge number of medical clinics performing hymenoplasty surgeries which "attests to the persistence of a virginal ideal in Western culture" (Bernau 26). Utilizing this trope, then Jessica becomes chaste, uncorrupted and incorruptible, the very opposite image of the vampire. The inevitable links to innocence and childhood surface in relation to her perpetual virginity. She is indeed portrayed as childlike and impetuous; she has emotional outbursts akin to tantrums and her maker Bill has such trouble with her behaviour that he asks his superior to take charge of her. In one such outburst following her creation, Bill informs Jessica that they slept in the ground together as part of the process to make a new vampire. She responds: "Ewww!" To clarify the matter Bill states that they did not have intercourse, to which Jessica responds, disgusted: "You just said intercourse!" (*True Blood* 2008, 1.10). She is often referred to as a "baby vamp," a phrase coined for newly made vampires, and even HBO's online blog for her character is called *Babyvamp Jessica*. She is shown as the young vampire, the one who is weaker than the older members of her kind, less experienced, and more naïve. This is particular to her and her maiden state. When another character, Tara (Rutina Wesley), is turned into a vampire in season six of the show, she is superior to Jessica in strength, cunning and sexual skills, even though she is her junior in years and therefore theoretically in abilities.

The second salient element of Jessica's hymenoplasty relates to the classic

vampiric paradigm, included in the makeup of the *True Blood* vampires, of the need to be invited into a home. These particular vampires can also be uninvited. This means that their bodies, acting under their own agency, must immediately remove themselves from the abode. The tradition of inviting a vampire into the home can be viewed as a form of sexual consent, particularly in older vampire narratives, for example *Varney the Vampire* (1845), where the revenant would tap at the bedroom window of maidens begging admittance. If this is the case, then the ability to rescind the invitation in the same manner must equate to a denial or protection from sex and creates an interesting precedence for Jessica's condition. This ability to be invited in and forced out, corresponds on a more personal level to Jessica's body. While she, as a vampire, can be admitted or forced out of a human's home, she also has the ability to invite human men into her body through the act of sexual intercourse and then her body automatically rescinds that invitation via her vampiric hymenoplasty. Hence the invitation trope acts both as literal protection for the home and its inhabitants, and in Jessica's case, literal protection for the body and its genitalia and reveals itself as an extension of her hymenoplasty. It also represents the idea of the body acting under its own agency. The same theory applies to Jessica's body, no matter how much she may wish to "do it every single night," her body's vampiric hymenoplasty will not allow it, as she comments: "My... it fucking [grows] back. I should have known, I mean everything heals when you're a goddamn vampire." (*True Blood* 2009 2.8)

Interestingly, even though for *True Blood's* vampires "the act of feeding is indistinguishable from the act of sex" (Clements 2011, 90), Jessica does not have any issues regarding drinking blood from humans. Susannah Clements adds: "There is consistently an overlap in the way [Charlaine] Harris imposes these two lusts on her vampires"(2011, 90). Perhaps this apparent inconsistency could be answered by the fact that Jessica is not one of Harris' vampires, as she was created by the television show's writers rather than by Harris herself.

The vampire mouth has often been written as a metaphor for the sexual parts of women. This metaphor has clear links with the manifestation of vampiric

hymenoplasty under discussion with reference to the symbolism of the Vagina Dentata. Here the vagina-as-mouth metaphor moves into the realm of lore and urban myth and materializes as the Vagina Dentata, or the vagina with teeth. This topic is dealt with summarily in the film *Teeth* (2007), where a teenage girl realizes she has the condition following two unconsensual sexual acts. In the first attack, the girl's vagina castrates a boy as he rapes her, and in the second, it bites off the finger of a gynaecologist with dubious intentions. Other films to loosely follow this theme include British offering *Penetration Angst* (2003) where the female protagonist's genitalia literally consumes her partners during intercourse. The Vagina Dentata can be seen to mirror Jessica's vampiric hymenoplasty in that both afford the same kind of protection from the outside world; they represent the threat of female sexuality and also share the common concept of converting the female sex from something receptive and with the potential to be violated into something aggressive. In both cases a relocation takes place from the traditional site of passive physical receptacle to a sex organ with an active role (Wilkinson and Braun 2001, 21) more akin to the penis. Sex and death are united even further with the notion of the Vagina Dentata because this kind of sex predominantly results in the death of the male. Jessica is the exception to this rule because she is already imbued with the ability to bring death via her literal fangs and mouth, and as a vampire she belongs to the category of predator, rather than prey. As such, there is no need for her vagina to act as the predatory male castrator (Creed 1993, 105) because she is more than able to defend herself without additional help.

In continuation of the concept of the Vagina Dentata, Barbara Creed describes the associated motif of "the barred and dangerous entrance" (1993, 107), which Christopher Craft applies to the vampire mouth as an "inviting orifice, a promise of red softness" but also as a space which gives "a lie to the easy separation between the masculine and the feminine" (1984, 109) and instead offers penetrating fangs where feminine softness is expected. Craft explains "With its soft flesh barred by hard bone, its red crossed by white, this mouth compels opposites and contrasts into a frightening unity, and it asks some disturbing questions. Are we male or are we female? Do we have penetrators or orifices?"

And if both, what does that mean? (1984, 109)

In the case of Jessica Hamby, being both orally masculine and feminine aligns her more closely with her vampiric counterparts and brings her closer to the “norm” of her species. However, due to what she calls her “deformity of nature” (*True Blood* 1.10), it could be argued that rather than her mouth acting as a metaphor for her vagina, her vagina acts as a metaphor for her vampiric mouth. It, too, is constructed of soft flesh with a barred entry and thus adheres to Craft’s definition of the vampire’s mouth; it is both inviting and restrictive in its admittance. When sexually aroused and during intercourse, the vampires of *True Blood* sprout fangs, effectively forming a barrier or defence mechanism for their mouths. This kind of sexual triggering is also true of Jessica’s vampiric hymenoplasty, which is provoked following sexual contact. It can be argued that the hymen must be penetrated in order to open, whilst teeth open at will. I would counter, rather, that it comes down to a matter of natural physical responses. Just as the appearance of vampiric fangs marks the beginning of arousal, so the hymenoplasty marks its end. Where this theory departs from Craft’s delineation of “feminine demons equipped with masculine devices” (1984, 111) is that, rather than categorising her as feminine with masculine aspects, the attribution of permanent virginity actually ascribes her with a form of hyper-femininity. She is eternally a virgin, maiden and, to use Liddell’s synonym, a bride, and also sexually active as a girlfriend, lover and seducer. Furthermore, Craft insists that the mouths of male and female vampires fit his metaphorical model (1984, 109), whereas Jessica’s unique physical position is one applicable to the female only.

Jessica’s hyper-femininity might lack the gender threat of the male/female confusion proffered by the previously discussed mouth-as-vagina metaphor, but the vagina-as-mouth metaphor affords its own danger in the form of the threat of the monstrous feminine, hyper-femininity, and female sexuality. As both virgin and whore, to use a well-known binary, (Bernau 2007, 88) Jessica equally embodies the roles of innocent and transgressor. In socio-cultural terms she is both potential victim and menace, in need of protection and co-ordinately

a thing to be protected against. She is both living virgin and undead vampire. Her sexuality is doubly troubling as it is at once embryonic and fully formed, simultaneously representing rampant female sexual desire and its potentiality.

Any elements of masculinity that the aforementioned aggression may introduce into this particular female vampire via her hymenoplasty are cancelled out by the hyper-femininity associated with her enduring virginity. Of course, the debate regarding masculinity as it relates to her general existence as a vampire falls outside of this argument. Looking to the historical associations of the virgin or maiden and the victim, actually brings Jessica’s oscillating position within the vampire community of Bon Temps closer to that of her vampiric contemporaries. In this narrative, vampire blood is used by humans as a drug, which, as Gavin Baddeley points out in *Vampire Lovers* (2010), turns the tables on the vampires and has humans feeding on them (192). He argues: “Perhaps *True Blood*’s boldest innovation is in casting the vampires as potential victims” (192). The conformity to the role of victim is assumed automatically by the body due to the narcotic properties of its blood; hence, all vampires are potentially victims. Jessica has this in common with her community; of course, she also has the additional victim association forced upon her by her body from her vampiric hymenoplasty. This is the factor that separates her from the other vampires around her. She is “othered” by this doubling of her status as victim. In discussing the role of abstinence in *Twilight*, Baddeley offers the argument that, since “Vampirism is all about sex,”(7) then:

You could argue that, in focusing on the erotic anticipation of lust deferred, *Twilight* has successfully uncovered an unspoken modern sexual taboo. In our age of increasingly commodified sexuality, is a high-school student who gets off on abstinence a more radical interpretation than foreign vampires, Victorian vampires, libertine vampires, or even gay vampires? (191)

If seventeen-year-old Jessica’s perpetual virginity is viewed in this sense, then she is a more radical version of the vampire than any of her libertine fellows, a more marginalized figure amongst her undead compatriots, who are already

themselves outcasts. In being created with permanent virginity, Jessica becomes unwittingly aligned with the abstinence movement currently popular in the USA, where intercourse outside of marriage is forbidden. Whilst she may wish to have sex, her body rebels against it and she is forced into the position of born-again virgin after each sexual act to fulfil the “modern sexual taboo”. She has much in common with Andrea Weiss’ analysis of the lesbian vampire as:

...a complex and ambiguous figure, at once an image of death and an object of desire, drawing on profound subconscious fears that the living have toward the dead and that men have towards women, whilst serving as a focus for repressed fantasies. (1992, 84)

This description is extremely apt; it could have been written for *True Blood* screenwriter Alan Ball’s depiction of his virgin vampire. Weiss even labels the lesbian vampire as embodying the fear of women as found in stories of the Vagina Dentata (1992, 91). This fear, according to Creed, stems from visual associations, which she says are particularly common in films featuring lesbian vampires, and which centre on images of a “woman’s open mouth, pointed fangs and bloodied lips” (1993, 107) as a direct representation of the danger from the vagina with teeth. Tellingly, these images also feature in the opening credits of *True Blood* and on the cover artwork of some of Harris’ books.

The beauty, or monstrosity, of *True Blood* is that it reveals a television vampire who “is all the more monstrous and frightening because it is represented as both ‘other’ and just like us” (Abbott 2012, 37). Jessica is depicted as like and unlike the other vampires in the show, just as she is shown as being the same as viewers and something Other. According to Stacey Abbott, the viewer is lured into feeling sympathy for Jessica before the moral ambiguities associated with vampires appear to cloud our opinion of her (2012, 37). This sympathy is mainly grounded in her violent creation and her vampiric hymenoplasty, added to the sense of loneliness she feels due to her Othered condition. Talking about future sexual encounters, Jessica says: “It’ll hurt like hell. I’m a fucking deformity of nature. I’m gonna be a virgin forever” (*True Blood* 2.8). In

the following episode where the scene continues, she adds forlornly: “Maybe I’ll get used to it. Or maybe there’s an operation. I can’t be the only vampire virgin” (*True Blood* 2.9). Although Jessica is not the only vampire virgin as the work of Liddell and Goethe reveal, she is certainly the only vampire virgin in *Bon Temps* and possibly the only vampire cursed with vampiric hymenoplasty as a side effect of her maiden reawakening from death.

In later seasons of *True Blood*, Jessica’s vampiric hymenoplasty becomes a non-issue. She enjoys sex with her human partner and is never again shown as experiencing pain due to her ever-present hymen, as the writers move away from it as the focus of the storyline. Of course, in real terms she is not a virgin because she has had sexual relations numerous times, but in physical terms her hymen is intact. Therefore, she retains her virginity in that respect.

To conclude, a kind of pseudo, non-consensual sex may have led to Jessica’s death, but her life as a sexually active young woman begins once she is made vampire. This is the point where actual sexual intercourse occurs as opposed to the metaphorical rape she is subjected to, albeit in cyclical fashion, whereby the maiden condition is reinstated after each coupling due to the body’s independent agency. Thus, she is forced to relive the pain she was subjected to prior to death as the pain of virgin intercourse. Just as the vampire is reincarnated following his human death, so does Jessica’s virginity experience the same kind of reincarnation; however, this is a virginity and a sexuality which is cyclical and ever-renewable. The vampire hymenoplasty can be said to represent life in the same way that vampiric rebirth does, with the rejuvenation of cells and the restoration of an earlier condition of life. If this corollary is the case, then the action which triggers that rebirth must also be similar in nature. Death leads to the vampire’s rebirth, whilst sexual intercourse leads to Jessica’s vampiric hymenoplasty. Thus, from this view point, death and sex stand on an equal footing. In the case of the modern vampire, and more particularly Jessica Hamby, the notional concept of sex leading to death as some form of cautionary socio-cultural insistence is distorted and subverted, and instead becomes death leading to sex as a release from the norms of contemporary life.

Notes

1. The name given to the surgical procedure to reconstruct the hymen. Also called hymen reconstruction surgery or hymenorrhaphy.
2. The phrase used in the *True Blood* lexicon to refer to a person being turned into a vampire.

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