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“Fusion is Appropriation: Gothic Fear in Representations of Eastern Food in Victorian Literature”

Cameron Dodworth  
Methodist University  
Fayetteville, NC  
cdodworth@methodist.edu

Early on in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897)—a novel that is heavily influenced by British conceptions of Eastern-European vampire mythology involving the consumption of human flesh and blood—the main character, Jonathan Harker, seems to go out of his way to specifically describe his dinner in his journal, while traveling through the Carpathians towards his first meeting with Count Dracula. Harker writes of “chicken done up some way with red pepper, which was very good but thirsty.” He mentions this “red pepper”—paprika—three times in the opening five paragraphs of a novel that otherwise spends very little time specifically focusing on food fit for human consumption.

Using *Dracula* and Harker’s culinary observations of Transylvania as an entry point to the East, from a nineteenth-century British perspective, this paper focuses on the relationship between food and the Gothic—particularly in terms of Eastern exoticism—in Victorian food as well as in selected literary and culinary examples, such as: *Dracula*, William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* (1847), Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” (1862), Eliza Acton’s *Modern Cookery for Private Families* (1845), Charles Elmé Francatelli’s *The Modern Cook* (1846), and Isabella Beeton’s *Household Management* (1861). This paper discusses the food-Other as a representation of Gothic and exotic foreign fear, as well as the darker side of exoticism, with particular focus on Victorian Britain’s literary and cultural relationship with Indian food. April Bullock notes that “the term ‘exotic’ is often associated with racist and bigoted imperialist attitudes,” and that “some scholars have interpreted the impulse to eat the foods of colonial Others as a hegemonic act or an attempt to display capitalist mastery.” After all, no matter how thoroughly foreign foods were progressively fused or appropriated into British cuisine, the status of those foods and foreign cultures was inevitably that of the Other, and entwined in the fear of the Other (and food-Other) is not just a fear of the unknown, but also a fear of that which is a no less than Gothic threat to one’s comfort zone, and even domesticity. These culinary representations in Victorian fiction, as well as in Victorian cookery books, reveal much of Victorian Britain’s worldview in relation to food. Along with Gothic fear—related to xenophobia—and conceptions of the exotic, this paper likewise explores how Indian food and culture also became fundamental to Victorian cuisine.