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By Eivor K. Lein

As Andrea Weiss remarks in the epilogue to her essay in *Dracula's Daughters*, the vampire in fiction experienced a resurgence in the interim between her publication of *Vampires and Violets* (1992) and *Dracula's Daughters (*2013*)*. She mentions *Twilight, True Blood*, and *The Vampire Diaries* among others as examples of the newer rebirth of the vampire on screen. Weiss questions their curiously aggressive heterosexuality despite a higher degree of acceptance within society of lesbianism and queer people in general in 2013, than when her article was first published in 1987. The resurgence of vampire media in the beginning of the 21st century is perhaps the main reason she predicted the lesbian vampire's return, and now she has. With its long history as the source material for these and many of the earlier versions of the lesbian vampire figure, *Carmilla* is the natural adaptation choice to re*vamp* her image.

Part I: Context

All roads lead to *Carmilla*

As the most significant point of origin for the lesbian vampire figure in the public consciousness[1], J. Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* has become a baseline that other lesbian vampire literature and media either reference or is compared to. *Carmilla* is referenced in *True Blood*'s Hotel Carmilla and other Gothic-inspired stories such as *The Moth Diaries* (2011), the Netflix animated series *Castlevania*, and the *Vampirella* comic books. Like *Dracula*, *Carmilla* is an original symbol of the Gothic monster. Le Fanu's *Carmilla* reads almost formulaic and derivative because the novella has inspired the enduring lesbian vampire figure and other vampire stories. The original *Carmilla* (1872) sees the titular vampire Carmilla stranded and a guest at the Gothic schloss that is Laura's home after a presumably staged carriage accident. Soon after Carmilla's arrival, Laura starts experiencing strange dreams and a mysterious fatigue while her relationship with Carmilla deepens

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[1] Both Sneha Kumar, and Andrea Weiss, also credit the myths surrounding countess Elisabeth Bathory as a secondary inspiration. *Carmilla* is still the most significant *fictional* figure.

quickly. The characters slowly uncover clues that lead them to determine that Carmilla is a vampire, and she is eventually killed by Baron Vordenberg and the other men.

Carmilla **and repression**

William Veeder names *Carmilla* as Le Fanu's "greatest work"[2] and puts it in the same bracket as what he considers to be great Victorian masterpieces such as *Wuthering Heights* and *Rappaccini's Daughter.* Veeder also laments the lack of recognition and status of the author and *Carmilla* despite its longevity and contemporary success, citing Le Fanu's status as an entertainer instead of *auteur*. Veeder claims that "like other gothic masters, Le Fanu converts the discovery of the "monster" into a revelation of human nature itself."[3] He emphasises repression as the ultimate theme of *Carmilla*. Veeder claims that the choice of female protagonists is because "[...Le Fanu] agrees with clear-sighted Victorians that woman in particular is stunted emotionally."[4], commenting on the ways in which women are repressed, though the repression of male characters is also present in the novella. He brings up classic imagery of snakes, fangs, and Cleopatra in association with the vampire Carmilla. He connects them with Carmilla's dual victimhood and quotes a passage in the novella where Carmilla tells Laura about the event that presumably turned her into a vampire. Carmilla's physical beauty and attractiveness is highlighted and connected to an ideal of "Victorian True Womanhood".[5] The different stages of a woman's (and vampire's) expected life in three phases, child, mother, and the witch, are also significant in Veeder's reading of *Carmilla*.

Goddess imagery

Like Weiss and Veeder, Anne Heath also connects the lesbian vampire with images of death and desire[6], also associating her with Goddess-based religious imagery. She quotes Pam Keesey when mentioning specifically the vampire in reference to the Goddess; "blood, life, death, and rebirth"[7]. The three female figures in Goddess imagery are also reflected in *Carmilla*, William Veeder bringing up Carmilla's desire to enter "true womanhood" and become a mother figure to Laura[8], as well as referencing the dark-clad crone or witch figure

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[2] Veeder, William. "Carmilla: The Arts of Repression." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language, vol. 22, no. 2*, University of Texas Press, 1980, pp. 197

[3] Veeder, 1980.pp. 197

[4] Veeder, 1980. pp. 198

[5] Veeder, 1980 pp. 213

[6] Heath, 1998. pp.30

[7] Keesey, Pam. *Dark Angels: Lesbian Vampire Stories.* 1995. Quoted in Heath, 1998. pp. 30

[8] Veeder, 1980. pp. 213

that represents the last stage of the vampire's life cycle. Heath, along with Weiss, bring up the conflation between the vampiric and the lesbian and how this fictional[9] connection between them has changed societal perspectives of women who love women. She writes that the lesbian vampire has been used as a tool to demonize lesbians, revealing a deep-seated fear of women's ability to penetrate sexually - thus upsetting the societal and sexual hierarchy. Both Heath and Weiss write about the "vagina dentata", the vagina with teeth and the mouth as the penetrating sexual organ[10]. Heath focusses on the painful, violent nature of death and sexuality and the harmful nature of the lesbian vampire/monster trope when writing about the lesbian vampire.

The lesbian vampire film

The lesbian vampire has lived many lives (and deaths) on the silver screen through this past century. Andrea Weiss writes in her article in *Dracula's Daughters* that the lesbian vampire represents a threat that is both violent and sexual in nature as a figure in these films. She is "[...]destructive, hypersexualized, [and is] constructed for the male gaze and [expresses] male fears of women". Weiss also writes of the repetitive nature of the lesbian vampire film's plot and conclusion. The return to a 'natural order', with the heterosexual man vanquishing the lesbian vampire. Good wins over evil, and Christian morality wins over the depraved sexual lesbian monster. This kind of conclusion also acts as a punishment for the lesbian vampire for expressing her sexuality according to Weiss. Weiss emphasises the duality of the lesbian vampire as both monster and sex object, symbolising both death and desire. Weiss points out Carmilla as the most important literary point of origin of the lesbian vampire figure, and that *Carmilla* predates Bram Stoker's *Dracula* by some 25 years. The part of *Carmilla* Weiss claims to have survived into 20th century cinema is "[...] its muted expression of lesbianism, no longer sympathetically portrayed but now reworked into a male pornographic fantasy." Weiss also remarks that Carmilla's actions were originally portrayed as taken out of compulsion instead of malice, interpreting the original Carmilla as a sympathetic antagonist instead of the one-dimensional lesbian vampires in most films.

Camp

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[9] Fictional as in popularised through fiction, as well as fictional as in not factual.
[10] Weiss, 2013. Pp. 31 and Heath, 1998, pp.31

Andrea Weiss also writes about the distinct relationship the lesbian viewer has with the lesbian vampire figure because of camp. The lesbian spectator can vicariously enjoy the lesbian vampire's power without fear, transforming the horror film into a burlesque[11]. Camp is generally associated with gay male culture, but it also permeates lesbian fandom and media, with its use of irony, aestheticism, theatricality, and humour[12]. Weiss concludes that "Camp creates the space for an identification with the vampire's secret, forbidden sexuality that doesn't also demand participation in one's own victimization as a requisite for cinematic pleasure."[13]. Carmilla the web-series utilises camp aesthetics and theatricality to great effect. The narrative and setting itself is over the top in its absurdity and scope. Camp has a lot in common with *farce*, both storytelling techniques characterised by slapstick and humorously unlikely events. Camp can in one way be defined as queer farce, but camp is defined by its queerness in a way that farce is not.

The 21st century vampire

Horror movies reflect the society they were created in, and newer vampires in media are no different. The vampire itself represents something different than it did when *Carmilla* was first published. The vampires in *Twilight* are not horribly repressed isolationists living in old European castles like *Dracula*, but noble people at odds with their capability for violence. The vampires in *True Blood* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* represent societal anxieties about hedonism, HIV, and their sexuality and desire are made explicit, almost pornographic. The vampire as an expression of societal fears of sexual exploration and hedonism is not a 21st century invention, but an extension of the same anxieties that sparked *Dracula* and *Carmilla* made explicit on the screen. Weiss' epilogue in *Dracula's Daughters* questions most of these newer vampires' aggressive heterosexuality because the media landscape is more accepting now than it used to be. The early 21st century supernatural romance genre is popular with young female readers and viewers, making the lack of lesbian vampire stories in this genre even more curious.

Engaging with the period film

Both Andrea Weiss and Cath Clarke mention movie trends related to *Carmilla* and/or the lesbian vampire. *Carmilla* (2019) also belongs to a different subgenre of lesbian movies, the

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[11] Weiss, 2013. Pp. 33
[12] Jack Babuscio's definition as paraphrased in Weiss, 2013. Pp.33
[13] Weiss, 2013. Pp. 34

lesbian period film. These artistic representations of queer women in a period setting emphasise the *forbidden* part of queer love in the past, using prolonged eye contact and coy glances in lieu of displaying physical intimacy. Other examples of the lesbian period films are *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019), *Carol* (2015), *Dickinson* (2019-2021), and Francis Lee's *Ammonite* (2020). These modern lesbian period films break away from the lesbian vampire film tradition, but do not necessarily interrogate the repressive society of their setting.

Part II: Re-contextualising the lesbian vampire

Carmilla (2014-2016) dir. Spencer Maybee

Both adaptations explored in this text re-contextualise the lesbian vampire in their own ways. Spencer Maybee's web-series adaptations drags the lesbian vampire into the 21st century, expanding its mythos and the relativity of the former black and white moral lessons from much of the preceding vampire media. The short format YouTube videos give this adaptation a wide reach and accessibility, with few barriers to entry. The college setting and ensemble cast story also caters to a young adult and teenage audience, who would be more likely to stumble over the series on YouTube.

This adaptation is very different from Le Fanu's novella in many ways. The web series *could* act as a sequel to the original novella, because of its similarity to the tale Carmilla recounts in the twentieth episode of the first season. The series starts as a one-camera setup in a set of Laura Hollis' dorm room at Silas University in Styria, Austria. The inciting incident is the disappearance of Laura's roommate Betty[14]. Laura, a journalism student, decides to investigate the disappearance for her journalism project. In the beginning of her vlog-style documentation of her investigation, she is assigned a new roommate, Carmilla. Laura starts to experience strange dreams, and Carmilla gives her a charm to ward them off. Upon discovering Carmilla's vampirism, Laura and her friends capture her to press her for information on the disappearances, assuming she was involved. Eventually, Carmilla's love for Laura and desire to avenge her dead lover Elle, drive her to fetch a magical weapon and oppose the Dean, presumably sacrificing herself in the process. After this cliff-hanger ending,

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[14] Reference to Bertha, whose death/illness eventually leads them to identify Carmilla as her killer in the novella.

she is discovered unconscious in the next episode and wakes up to share her first on-screen kiss with Laura in the final episode of the first season.

In "*Contextualizing Carmilla: Bridging the gap between the gothic, the lesbian vampire, and fanfiction*"[15], Sneha Kumar investigates the relationship between the lesbian vampire figure and her origin, *Carmilla* as well as putting it in a contemporary context. Sneha Kumar refers to Weiss' understanding of the lesbian vampire figure, and how the heroes in *Carmilla* (1872) are all men. She proposes that the web-series is an answer to the question of what would happen should lesbian writers use the Gothic to their own ends[16]. She also separates the "female gothic" from the "male gothic", situating the original *Carmilla* novella into the "male gothic" tradition, where the male character is in control of their female victim.

Villain or victim? *Carmilla* (2019) dir. Emily Harris

I would argue that Emily Harris' adaptation a tragedy more than it is a horror movie. *Carmilla* (2019) changes the monstrous aspect of Carmilla's character. She is neither the antagonist nor necessarily a vampire in this adaptation, turning the classic predator-prey dynamic on its head. The supernatural aspects in this adaptation are deliberately kept ambiguous, emphasising the relationships between morality, innocence, and judgement. Ms Fontaine's conviction regarding Carmilla's monstrousness is unjustified *because* she is not explicitly a vampire. In this reframing of the familiar *Carmilla* narrative, Carmilla is innocent, and her death is a tragedy instead of the result of a morally justified vanquishing of a 'monster'. A secondary tragedy is Lara's inevitable trauma after watching her mother figure hammer the wooden stake through Carmilla's chest. This film adaptation interacts very little with the lesbian vampire film and brings *Carmilla* back to her Gothic literary origins. Writer-director Emily Harris has expressed that her interest in *Carmilla* was at least partly piqued by the novella's role in establishing the lesbian vampire figure, and that the patterns of exclusion and xenophobia became her angle to the new piece[17]. This atmospheric take on the original lesbian vampire story re-interrogates her Gothic past, conscious of her problematic predecessors.

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[15] Kumar, *Render*, vol 8, 2020

[16] Kumar quotes Sarah Parker's question from "'*The Darkness is the Closet in Which Your Lover Roots Her Heart*,'" in Kumar (2020) pp. 3.

[17] Stewart, Sophia. "EIFF 2019 Women Directors: Meet Emily Harris – 'Carmilla.'" Women and Hollywood, 27 June 2019, womenandhollywood.com/eiff-2019-women-directors-meet-emily-harris-carmilla

And all will be well

Fifteen minutes into the film, [18]Miss Fontaine says to Lara that if she keeps to her rules, "all will be well" and that she wouldn't let the Devil into the house. She then tells Lara not to worry and that she'd always be cared for. The patronising reassurance coupled with her possessive embrace and stern visual presentation undercuts any sense of comfort and reassurance as a part of this exchange. Miss Fontaine's fear of the devil and insistence on keeping 'him' (Carmilla) away from Lara comes back later in the film. In most eighteenth-century narratives, the governess' austere manner and insistence on following the Christian moral ideals would have given her the moral high ground, but she and Doctor Renquist are clearly framed as villains in this adaptation. Dr Renquist calls Carmilla a 'devil', and Ms Fontaine names her 'luck of the devil' at surviving the carriage wreck[19].

Ms Fontaine and Doctor Renquist also engage in a horror movie tradition. Immediately after identifying Carmilla as the root cause of Lara's illness, the two of them have sex in the study [20]. Because of Ms Fontaine's judgement of Lara and Carmilla's tentative romance, her *relations* with Doctor Renquist communicates the character's hypocritical superstitions regarding sexuality. Another aspect of this scene is their *hetero*sexuality. Contrasted with the fetishist images associated with most lesbian vampire films, the decision to make the most explicit scene in the movie a *heterosexual* sex scene is remarkable. Moreover, the sex scene questions Ms Fontaine's devotion to her own superstitious religious morality because having pre-marital sex would presumably go against it. Ms Fontaine's superstitions and hypocrisy are reinforced narratively when Lara calls her left-handedness a dark secret because Ms Fontaine told her it "calls the Devil"[21]. Ms Fontaine is a complicated villain, sympathetic because her actions are clearly motivated by her love for Lara, but clearly villainous because of her jealousy, hypocrisy, and xenophobia.

Part III: Transformative work, feminism, and the Gothic

Fidelity, pastiche, and revisionism

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[18] *Carmilla*, (2019), [00:15:30-00:15:42]
[19] *Carmilla*, (2019) [00:28:52-00:29:43]
[20] Carmilla, (2019). [01:18:50-01:19:38]
[21] *Carmilla*, (2019) [1:09:32-1:09:55]

Neither adaptation can claim "fidelity" to the original *Carmilla* novella. I will use Brian McFarlane's definition of "fidelity" as a "notion that purportedly measures the extent to which a work of literature has been accurately rendered (or not) as a movie"[22]. I will not discuss the merit of fidelity as a concept but make it clear that both adaptations stray from the source material deliberately. Peter Brooker expands on intertextuality and the changes an adaptation can make in *Literature on Screen*[23]. He makes use of Frederick Jameson's definition of pastiche as "[…] the practice of neutral and humorless imitation: "speech in a dead language" at best "blank parody""[24]. Jameson's definition of a "nostalgia mode" as "[…] superficial reproduction or re-styling" is used in reference to movies like *American Graffiti (1973), Star Wars (1977)* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981)*[25]. Brooker infers this nostalgia mode to apply to several other movies, adaptations, and re-makes. Most of the lesbian vampire movies that Weiss discusses in *Dracula's Daughters* are content with reproducing and perpetuating the same fetishist images and stories but neither of these *Carmilla* adaptations do.

"Revisionist" adaptation

Cath Clarke called the 2019 film adaptation a "revisionist adaptation" and refers to the film's "bloodless intimacy" in her review for The Guardian [26]. As Peter Brooker argues in *Literature on Screen,* adaptations "[…] can be informed by a committed re-reading, interested in more than an unmotivated recycling of existing stories"[27]. Brooker includes several examples of adaptations that have highlighted some of the more problematic elements of the stories they originate from, such as the exposure of the sexual abuse of enslaved people on the sugar plantation in Antigua in *Mansfield Park* (1999), dir. Patricia Rozema. Like *Mansfield Park, Carmilla* (1872) has similar problematic elements that a self-aware adaptation can use consciously in just such a re-reading.

To understand why *Carmilla* (2019) can be called revisionist, we need to understand what the adaptation has done with the source material. I would argue that the difference between a re-reading and a revisionist adaptation is how much of the source material has been changed, or

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[22] Mcfarlane, Brian. (2007) "*Reading Film and Literature"*
[23] Brooker, 2007, p. 108-110
[24] Jameson, 1983 and 1984, quoted in Brooker, 2007, p. 110
[25] Jameson, 1983 and 1984, quoted and paraphrased in Brooker, 2007 p. 110
[26] Clarke, Cath (2020)
[27] Brooker, 2007 «Postmodern adaptation: pastiche, intertextuality and re-functioning", in Cartmell et al pp. 109

whether it has been *reframed*. The web series adaptation would therefore be revisionist in several senses, while *Carmilla* (2019) straddles the line between revisionist adaptation and feminist re-framing. The main cycle of events is relatively unchanged, but the audience's perception of the same narrative and characters *has* been changed. The superstitions and fear of the other that permeate Le Fanu's novella is spun as the acts of true horror in Emily Harris' film adaptation, transforming the horror story into a tragedy. I would therefore argue that though it is indeed a *subversive* adaptation, *Carmilla* (2019) is not necessarily a *revisionist* one.

Carmilla (2019) interrogates the repressive society within the Gothic instead of the novella and lesbian vampire film's pastiche portrayal of the dangers of female sexuality. I would argue that this adaptation changes the *story* without changing the *narrative*. The interrogation of repression is conveyed visually more than it is textually. In a scene in the beginning of the film, Lara is laced into a pair of stays by Ms Fontaine, the governess. A few minutes later, Ms Fontaine restricts Lara's movement further by tying her left hand behind her back. The moment is intimate but practised and suggests that this act is a normal occurrence in Lara's life. Later in the movie Lara explains to Carmilla that Ms Fontaine believed her left-handedness would invite the Devil into their house, further emphasising Ms Fontaine's superstitions to the audience. The external pressure placed on restriction in terms of dress and behaviour visually communicates a sense of claustrophobia to the audience. Lara's intense isolation from the outside world is emphasised by her restrictive clothing and Ms Fontaine's overbearing superstitions.

Carmilla (2019) is a committed reinterpretation of Le Fanu's novella. Writer-director Emily Harris explains that when she "stripped back" the "layers of vampirism" the two characters and their love in the face of adversity compelled her[28]. Her re-reading of Carmilla as the original lesbian vampire story unearthed a modern feminist story. Cath Clarke aligns *Carmilla* (2019) with William Oldroyd's *Lady MacBeth* (2016) and *Wuthering Heights* (2011) directed by Andrea Arnold in the way this adaptation relates to its dated source material. She calls them "[…] bonnet-free literary adaptations: modern-feeling period films abandoning coy glances for earthy passions and marriage fantasy fulfilment for a harsher

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[28] Stewart, 2019, *EIFF 2019 Women Directors: Meet Emily Harris – "Carmilla"*

portrait of domestic life for women in the past"[29]. The scenes between Lara and Carmilla belong more in the "coy glances" category than the "earthly passions" one that Clarke mentions, but the adaptation feels modern despite its devotion to period aesthetics. It certainly portrays a harsher environment for Lara and Carmilla.

Carmilla (2014-2016) as a transformative work

Both adaptations explored in this text re-contextualise the lesbian vampire in some way. Spencer Maybee's web-series adaptations drags the lesbian vampire into the 21st century with its modern format, building a collegiate setting steeped in supernatural mysteries for the heroes to explore. On the surface, *Carmilla* (2014-2018) seems to be a completely different story than *Carmilla* (1872), but the similarities are there under the surface. The vlog-format videos in *Carmilla* (2014-2018) keep the intradiegetic storytelling from the original novella intact, the camera acting as Laura's medium of choice and the equivalent to the Narrator's letters to Doctor Hesselius. The characters' names are also directly referencing *Carmilla* (1872). There is also reason to suspect that the woman claiming to be Carmilla's mother in Le Fanu's novella has a similar scheme to implant Carmilla into a home to prey on the family that hosts her. Logic dictates that she would be aware of Carmilla's vampirism, and possibly be one herself.

Kumar argues that this adaptation exists in a "[…] a liminal space between fanfiction and industrial product." I would argue that it also exists in a similar liminal space between fanfiction, adaptation, and sequel. I refer to the way this iteration of *Carmilla* interacts with Le Fanu's original work. If one disregards Carmilla's death, the web series could act as a sequel to the events of the *Carmilla* novella. Carmilla recounts to Laura in the story of her "Mother's" scheme to lure out young female victims for the ritual sacrifice every twenty years in the twentieth episode, titled "*Sock Puppets and European History*". Following the scheme, Carmilla would befriend a young girl following a carriage wreck or otherwise come into the care of the young girl's family to lure her away. In 1872 this same pattern happened with a girl named Elle, but this time Carmilla fell in love with her. Her "Mother", the Dean, foiled Carmilla's plans to escape with Elle, revealing Carmilla's vampirism to her and taking her away to the ritual. She also imprisoned Carmilla in a coffin filled with blood and buried. Carmilla escaped her imprisonment in WWII and resumed her role as reluctant lure. She also

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[29] Clarke, 2020

explains that she would help some of the victims escape if she could, telling Laura that "There can be great satisfaction in small revenges"[30].

The carriage wreck that led Carmilla to Elle happened in 1872, a clear reference to the publication year of the original *Carmilla* novella, validating the interpretation that the web-series is a sequel. The narrator in the novella is never named and could be the character Elle in this interpretation of *Carmilla*. Still, the web-series has many references and parallels to the novella for it to be *only* a sequel. Laura's friends LaFontaine and Perry are parallels to Madame Perrodon and Mademoiselle de Lafontaine, the narrator's governesses in *Carmilla* (1872). In the second season the characters encounter Baron Vordenberg, the distant heir to a vampire hunter family, and Matska Belmonde who introduces herself as Carmilla's sister. Both characters are also referenced in the novella, Baron Vordenberg being the man who kills Carmilla and Matska as the Black character in the carriage, named by the addled Carmilla as she wakes up from unconsciousness. Coupled with the intradiegetic storytelling, the names and narrative role of these characters support the interpretation that the Carmilla web series is an adaptation instead of a sequel. I would argue along Kumar's lines that Carmilla (2014-2018) straddles the line between adaptation and sequel, existing in the liminal space as both or either, depending on the viewer.

Sneha Kumar, like Heath, Weiss and Veeder brings up *Carmilla's* duality as both insider and outsider, and her ability to exist simultaneously as an intelligent and philosophical creature as well as giving into "base" sexual and violent urges[31]. Kumar also brings up one of the places where the web-series deviates from the formulaic lesbian vampire film, in the love triangle. Both of Laura's possible romantic interests are women, eradicating the aspect of the film trope where the male heterosexual character removes the (somewhat bisexual) female character's opportunity to pursue lesbian love by killing the vampire[32].

Feminism and the Gothic

Catherine Spooner writes that "Gothic has always provided both problems and opportunities for feminism."[33]. She explains that female writers and readers have been associated with the

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[30] *Carmilla*, season 1 episode 20 "Sock Puppets and European History", [05.35-05.40]
[31] Kumar, 2020. pp. 4
[32] Paraphrased from Kumar, 2020 pp. 6
[33] Spooner, Catherine. *Unsettling Feminism: The Savagery of Gothic*, 2019, pp. 129

Gothic since the late eighteenth century and is well-suited to representing female struggles and anxieties. She also brings up a contrasting idea that muddies the feminist waters with the Gothic because of the "[…] sado-masochistic dynamic that appears to enjoy the spectacle of violence against women and the reaffirmation of cultural stereotypes projecting women as either victims, monsters, or femmes fatales."[34]. The original *Carmilla* novella has this "sado-masochistic dynamic" Spooner explains, perhaps doubly so because both Laura and Carmilla are victims of violence. The vampire femme fatale that Carmilla represents is both monster and sexual object, and the character Carmilla could therefore belong to either or all three categories that she mentions.

Additionally, Spooner brings up feminism's difficulties with and within the Gothic. She claims that "Gothic acts as an unsettling force within contemporary feminism, revealing its aporias and rubbing against the grain of political correctness."[35]. Spooner explains that Western feminism finds its grand narrative within the Gothic; specifically in stories where "[…] the female subject flees the house of patriarchy."[36]. She also problematises this narrative because it stages 'victim feminism' and the idea within feminism that the woman should find her strength from a position of weakness, both politically and socially.

Connecting feminism and the Gothic as Enlightenment projects, Spooner quotes Fred Bottling: "the definition of Enlightenment and reason […] requires carefully constructed antitheses, the obscurity of figures of feudal darkness and barbarism providing the negative against which it can assume 'positive value"[37]. She reasons that in feminist terms, this feminism's progress is dependent on a rejection of past oppression[38]. This Gothic feminism is not intersectional. Spooner refers to it as "a distinctively white, middle-class and disembodied kind of feminism"[39], and points out its exclusion of several cultural others. I will get back to these cultural others in the third section of this paper.

Spooner also presents an opportunity within the Gothic to display a different feminism, one that is harder to swallow, and far more subversive. Contrasting the fleeing heroine with the

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[34] Spooner, Catherine. *Unsettling Feminism: The Savagery of Gothic*, 2019, pp. 129
[35] Sponer, 2019. Pp. 129
[36] Spooner, 2019. pp.131
[37] Bottling, 2014. pp. 3, quoted in Spooner, 2019. Pp. 130
[38] Spooner, 2014. pp. 130-131
[39] Spooner, 2014. pp. 133

monster, a figure that *Carmilla* can easily produce. Jay Daniel Thompson calls the lesbian vampire one of the most controversial monsters, referring to the duality between her identification both as a feminist icon, or as the embodiment of societal anxieties regarding sexuality and women's sexual freedom[40]. Rosi Braidotti argues that women have always been allied to the monstrous in Western culture, referring to how the monster is difficult to taxonomically and logically define or identify[41]. This perceived alliance between the woman and the monstrous could conflate the two, contradicting the strength that the monster metaphor can embody in its opposition to the status quo. The monster is therefore, like the fleeing Gothic heroine, a difficult symbol of feminist identification because of its internal contradictions. Another element of the monster figure it its association with disability and disabled bodies[42], further complicating the monster as a modern feminist symbol.

Part IV: Intertextuality and impact

Liberating the lesbian, but not the vampire

Because Carmilla is effectively not a vampire in Emily Harris' 2019 film, this adaptation seemingly aligns itself with 'victim feminism'. Both Lara and Carmilla are the innocent victims of oppressive forces, and their decision to flee suggests the fleeing Gothic heroine, attempting to physically escape the house of abuse. Carmilla's ambiguous vampirism does little to reclaim the lesbian *vampire* figure, but this reframing of the familiar *Carmilla* story de-sensationalises lesbian sexuality and identity, divorcing the categories of lesbian and monstrous.

The monstrous Mother

The monstrous mother is a fixture in Gothic fiction. Kumar juxtaposes the web-series redemption of the lesbian vampire with its portrayal of the mother figure. The young, attractive (white) lesbian vampire is sympathetic, but her "Mother", the Dean, is not. The monstrous mother figure is equally present in Emily Harris' adaptation. Lara's governess, Ms Fontaine, is the oppressive mother figure the protagonists face. Ms Fontaine is the driving

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[40] Thomas, Jay Daniel. "Revenge Is a Dish Best Served Sapphic: The Lesbian Vampire Film as Revenge Fantasy." *Text Theory Critique*, vol. 31, 2016. *COLLOQUY*

[41] Braidotti, Rosi (2011), *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, 2nd edn, New York: Columbia University Press. pp. 216

[42] Spooner, 2019. pp. 138

force of the plot in this adaptation, and her actions drive the story forwards. While the film adaptation completely removes Baron Vordenberg from the equation, Carmilla and Lara are still victims of the Gothic's violence against women.

Only moments before rallying the other members of the Bauer household to hunt down and kill Carmilla, Ms Fontaine and Doctor Renquist have sex. When drawing on tropes and expectations from both the Gothic and horror movies, this clearly brands them as immoral people, *particularly* Ms Fontaine. While this might seem like a clever turnaround of the trope, it still draws on a very anti-women's-sexuality sentiment from which those tropes originate. The scene goes over well as a viewer, it is only in retrospect and on a close viewing that this inconsistency, or deliberate ambiguity, is made clear. I would argue that it could be a both intentional and unintentional. The scene likely intends to convey Ms Fontaine's hypocritical moral standards, but also relies on the same kinds of visual language that horror movies use to convey immorality regarding the lesbian vampire figure – through her sexuality.

We need to talk about Mattie

In Le Fanu's *Carmilla*, Matska Belmonde is described as "[…] a hideous black woman, with a sort of colored turban on her head […] nodding and grinning derisively towards the ladies, with gleaming eyes and large white eyeballs, and her teeth set as if in fury"[43]. She is described with animalistic features, like gleaming eyes and sharp, long teeth. Unlike Carmilla, the very picture of poise, she is described in a very unflattering light. A modern reader might balk the blatant racism in Le Fanu's novella, but unintentional racism in modern adaptations can be equally damaging.

Matska is interpreted as Carmilla's vampiric sister and second-in-command to the Dean in the 2014 web-series. She is a morally grey character, several times expressing a lax attitude to violence or murder, but she is not a true antagonistic force in the narrative. Kumar also brings up how the fandom forgives Carmilla for her complicity in the ritual the Dean performs, but do not extend the same curtesy to her sister Mattie. While Mattie is not the only character of colour in this adaptation, she is the only character played by a dark-skinned Black actor. Matska Belmonde is not a character in *Carmilla* (2019), but the movie features

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[43] Le Fanu, 1872, pp. 20

Margaret, a servant in the Bauer household. Margaret is played by Lorna Gayle and is the only character of colour in the entire film.

Jordan Hall, the writer behind the web series, has expressed that part of their decision to include Mattie in their work was to "fix" her racist representation in Le Fanu's novella[44], and in many senses, they did. Mattie in *Carmilla* (2014-2016) is not a racist stereotype in the same way Carmilla is not a homophobic one. Mattie and Carmilla have a close relationship with each other, and Mattie clearly has good motivations to act "against" Laura and her friends. Princess Weekes writes about what the character has meant for her and other Black fans in her article for The Mary Sue, "Mattie Belmonde: the Dark Horse of Carmilla"[45]. Weekes emphasises that the character Mattie was *loved*, by the creators, the characters, and the audience. Her death at the hands of Danny, a white character, is problematised in Kumar's thesis, citing certain white fans' dogged defence of Danny's actions. There is contention within the fandom of whether Danny killed Mattie in self-defence according to Kumar[46] . Margaret is a servant to a White family in an 18th century European setting. Because this movie does not discuss slavery, the feminist message in it is slightly weakened. I believe this is an oversight with the casting rather than a conscious decision, but it nevertheless influences the overall impression of the film.

Does the lesbian die? Meeting the queer audience

Queer audiences have a unique relationship with the Gothic and horror. Horror movies and the Gothic have been uniquely suited to representing queer characters, mostly as villains. The characters that allude to homosexuality or challenge gender roles have historically been limited to be antagonists and monsters. One of the key aspects of this kind of representation is that Christian religious morality has been superimposed onto the characters, leading to formulaic tropes and clichés. Unpacking the trauma within the relationship between the queer audience and these characters is a bigger project than I can write about in this paper, but trauma is nevertheless a part of it. Mair Rigby identifies the vampire and the ghost as "sites of

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[44] "Creators Panel" 00:33:57-00:34:09

[45] Weekes, Princess. "Mattie Belmonde: The Dark Horse of Carmilla." *The Mary Sue*, 24 Oct. 2017, www.themarysue.com/mattie-belmonde-the-dark-horse-of-carmilla.

[46] Kumar, 2020. Pp. 59-65

ambivalent identification" because they play a role in perpetuating homophobic narratives, but also provide opportunities to explore the queer (lesbian) experience through fiction[47].

The feminism in Emily Harris' *Carmilla* is in the subtext of the film. As Kumar claims the *Carmilla* web series is, I would claim that Emily Harris' *Carmilla* is another result of queer people using the Gothic for their own ends. On the surface, *Carmilla* (2019) is as formulaic as the lesbian vampire stories from the late 60's through the 80's. The story still hits the same beats, and the 'lesbian vampire' ends up killed for her perceived transgressions. But like the *Carmilla* web series creators, the team behind this film also confront the Gothic's heterosexual hegemony, highlighting xenophobia and a lack of compassion within it. As mentioned earlier, this adaptation reframes the *Carmilla* narrative in a feminist way, but the narrative itself is unchanged.

Intent

Emily Harris said this when asked what she wished people thought about after seeing her movie:

> "I would like people to feel more than think when they leave the cinema. To be reminded of first love and future hope. To see how this story reflects the absurdity and tragedy of many of the behaviors and attitudes being played out in the world right now, and how it resonates in a time when borders are going up again and nationalism is once more on the rise. But most of all, I hope the film stays with them beyond leaving the cinema because for me a real test of a film is when it lingers for a while.[48]

While authorial intent is only a small part of a reading, Emily Harris' reinterpretation of *Carmilla* is steeped in modern feminism and intentional symbolism that is different from Le Fanu's novella. Skimming through the reviews of this film, I found that many reviewers and audience members expected to see a different film, and I was no difference in my first viewing. Clarke calls the film 'bloodless', and if *Carmilla* (2019) had been a horror movie, I would agree. But *Carmilla* (2019) is a Gothic tragedy, as haunting and cathartic as only they

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[47] Rigby, Mair. 2009 «Uncanny Recognition: Queer Theory's Debt to the Gothic" p.49
[48] Stewart, Sophia. *EIFF 2019 Women Directors: Meet Emily Harris – "Carmilla",* 29th June, 2019

can be. What resonated the most with me was the banality of Dr Renquist and Ms Fontaine's violence and the tragedy of Lara and Carmilla's circumstances. A lingering grief on behalf of the two lovers remains after the outrage has faded. Watching *Carmilla* during a global pandemic, after years of quarantines and real-life tragedies, was hard. The violence and hatred that this movie depict strike a dissonant tone in comparison with the heroism on display in the web-series. Carmilla's death struck me hard, invoking a trauma response that near blinded me to the actual message of this movie, and I would assume to other viewers as well. Only in subsequent viewings of the film did the feminist subtext of it reveal itself. After working through the trauma of seeing another lesbian character killed, *Carmilla* (2019) opened my eyes to its quieter feminism. While still reminiscent of victim feminism, the *movie's* feminism is a refusal and disposal of the secrecy, judgement, and xenophobia that the *characters* employ. Separating the violent visual language from its subtext is the challenge this movie gives you, and it *is* a challenge. One I would hope other viewers of the film accomplish as well.

The Queer Joy of *Carmilla* (2014-2016)

In the process to reclaim the lesbian vampire on screen, the two adaptations use very different means. One of Kumar's concluding statements on *Carmilla*'s relationship with vampire media is that the "[…] connection between queerness and monstrousness can be severed by centering queer and non-binary identities and freely expressing queer love". Instead of the textual separation of Carmilla and her vampirism in the 2019 movie, *Carmilla* (2014-2016) uses camp and humour to revisit the original lesbian vampire and tell a new story. The web series is free to watch on YouTube and has the potential to reach anybody with an internet connection and a little time on their hands. Carmilla is a queer production both in front of, and behind the camera[49], resulting in a collaborative story that embraces queerness explicitly and implicitly. The creators behind the show expressed have their awareness of queer identities and desire to create a light-hearted supernatural romantic series, without the characters having to explain their queerness[50]. In the same convention panel, they also talk about the difficulties they had in displaying queerness as explicitly as they have, campaigning extensively to be able to film and release the kiss in the 36th episode of the first season.

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[49] Kumar, 2020, pp. 2
[50] Creators panel, Carmillacon, 2018. [00:10:30-

The web series' light tone and heroic narrative gives the lesbian vampire the opportunity to live a somewhat normal life with her girlfriend, without getting rid of an important aspect of her character – her vampirism. Carmilla is, like other 21st century depictions of vampires, capable of experiencing love and emotions in the same way the humans can. Carmilla and Mattie are defined in part by their own humanity, their vampirism another unquestioned part of their identities in the same way the series represents queerness as unambiguous. The lesbian vampire figure is a romantic lead in this adaptation, and the series can grant her a happy ending.

Conclusion:

As one of the first lesbian figures that entered the public consciousness, J. Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* is an important reference point for the lesbian vampire figure. *Carmilla* operates as some sort of benchmark to which other lesbian characters and stories are compared to. One of the primary features of Carmilla and the lesbian vampire figure is her duality. The complexity of this duality between the desirable and dangerous, and her position as both perpetrator and victim of violence have been well documented, but neither aspect of her identity has been separated from the other until more recent *Carmilla* adaptations and other queer vampire appearances. At once an object of (male, heterosexual) desire and instrument of death, the lesbian vampire figure has been a symbol of societal fears surrounding female sexuality and as a threat to the heteronormative, sex-based hegemony. One of the enduring impacts of this duality is the conflation between her queer desire for other women and her nature as a predator as equally dangerous and deviant. These adaptations converse with both their origin in Victorian gothic literature and the lesbian vampire film, confronting their past.

The lesbian vampire figure defies easy definition and characterisation. Regardless of the intention behind her origins, queer audiences have connected with her both despite and because of her monstrousness. She is dually a site of lesbian identification and representation as well as a symbol of homophobia and fetishist idealisation, and these adaptation of her originating appearance work toward her reclamation. Reclaiming the lesbian vampire figure is a long process, wherein directors grapple with their own nebulous relationship with her, the Gothic literary genre, and her horror film representations. Deconstructing the relationship between lesbian attraction and Christian ideas of sin and sexuality proves to be a difficult challenge to overcome, leaving them still somewhat entangled with each other.

The adaptations reclaim different aspects of the lesbian vampire figure. Emily Harris' innocent teenagers face a tragic end at the hands of the oppressive and jealous Ms Fontaine in *Carmilla* (2019), but the movie emphasises the banality of the violence it depicts. The tragedy in this is the lengths Ms Fontaine and the other adult characters in the movie go to, to protect Lara from the foreign Carmilla. Because this adaptation distances itself from the supernatural, the vampire is not dealt with as a concept or character, but nor does it have to. Expanding the understanding of lesbians on screen, this *Carmilla* reconciles with her past by abjecting its superstitious morality and xenophobia.

Spencer Maybee's web series adaptation takes possession of the vampiric and immortal in their *Carmilla*. Revenge, abuse, and redemption are key themes in this heroic narrative, and the lesbian vampire is as much a victim as she is the hero of her story. Spencer Maybee's *Carmilla* is allowed the freedom to exist outside of her potential for pain and suffering, giving her a happy ending with Laura. The web series looks to other vampire media like *Buffy*, *Twilight*, and *Dracula*, recklessly representing the character's queerness as a part of daily life, neither innocent nor damning. The important aspects of this narrative and characters are that they are not defined by their queerness, but it informs how the characters interact. The bold web-series represents a broad spectrum of queer identities in terms of both gender and sexuality, allowing the viewer to see themselves as heroes of a fantastical story.

The creators behind both adaptations have expressed a deep understanding of the source material and a pointed intent to contest its portrayal of lesbian desire. The modern adaptations are therefore subversive and at least somewhat revisionist in their treatment of the Gothic novella. The lesbian vampire still inhabits a liminal space, the spectre of her Gothic origins shining through to these modern iterations. These very different presentations together reflect a wider understanding of what the lesbian vampire is, has been and could be. Both adaptations reflect the personal relationships the creators have with the media they present, in all their messy glory. With these two adaptations, a newer generation of queer creators have revisited the lesbian vampire figure and overhauled her image.

Epilogue

The lesbian vampire has now experienced a resurgence, after most of the supernatural romance trend had run its course through *Twilight*, *True Blood,* and *The Vampire Diaries*.

With multiple attempts to re*vamp* her image and abject the most problematic elements of her history, These *Carmilla* adaptations are two steps in the journey to reclaim the lesbian vampire figure, using the Gothic to their own ends. There will be more opportunities to see the lesbian vampire on screen with Netflix's release of First Kill on the 10th of June 2022, based on the short story of the same name by Victoria E. Schwab. Following these adaptations of the original lesbian vampire story, I will also predict that the lesbian vampire will eventually avenge or surpass her predecessors – and hope that the newest iteration is up to the task.

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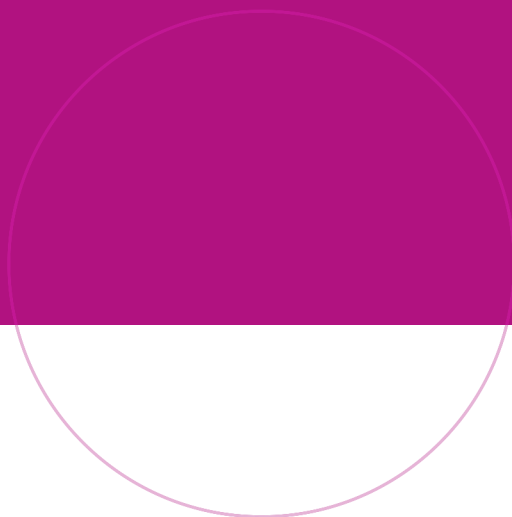
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