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Ambiguous Alternations: The Gothic, *Carmilla*, and Transgressive Desire

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Introduction

It is generally accepted that the Gothic, being a mode that concerns itself primarily with themes such as repressed desire and the monstrous other, has a tradition of dealing with what one might refer to as transgressive expressions of desire, and along with that, transgressions of gender and gender roles. It is also well-observed that the Gothic follows very specific patterns and formulations; there is a structure for the genre that most Gothic literature adheres to. Gothic paradigms for handling matters of gender presentation and sexual desire can be seen in paragons of Gothic literature such as *The Monk* and *Vathek*, as well as fundamental vampire narratives, such as *Dracula* and *The Vampyre*. Such works have a traceable method of dealing with these topics, whatever the details of the specific work in question, that relies on the inevitability that, while clearly defined categories of desire and gender may be blurred or breached in the course of the narrative, this monstrous deviation is condemned as exactly that by the narrative itself, and someone, generally the protagonist, attempts to re-establish the “natural” order of things. Sheridan le Fanu’s *Carmilla*, on the other hand, is a vampire narrative that displays a complete lack of regard for its predecessors by embracing Gothic themes while purposefully maintaining ambiguity and uncertainty regarding the themes of illicit desire and women’s roles, in place of the expected moralizing or clear-cut narrative.

It is hardly the only text to not perfectly align with convention. However, *Carmilla* stands out as a work that does not perform the same role as something like Charlotte Dacre’s *Zofloya* – that is, a work that actively seeks to interact with and invert conventions set up in other works,

rather than going around them entirely. It also, despite having been published decades after the majority of the other aforementioned works, does not represent a shift between old and new. This is evidenced by the fact that Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, a vampire narrative that adheres to and even further develops every convention that *Carmilla* appears to completely brush to the side, was published over twenty years after *Carmilla*. This absence of a shift can also be seen by examining continued handling and adaptation of *Carmilla*, all the way into the 21st century, many of which do not follow in the footsteps of the text's deviation from Gothic norms. What *Carmilla* does instead, and what makes it so worthy of note, is that it adheres to many themes of the Gothic mode while simultaneously existing completely outside of its established conventions for handling these specific subject matters. As a result, *Carmilla* represents an ambiguity and freedom from convention that not only goes beyond the already notable ability in the Gothic to incorporate otherwise taboo themes, but also goes beyond even what much more modern creators and audiences are comfortable with.

I. Broad Gothic Treatment of Illicit Desire and Women's Roles

William Beckford's *Vathek* was one of the first novels to establish conventions for the handling of transgressive gender norms in Gothic fiction, being published in 1786, the earliest of any texts treated here. *Vathek* contains many of the trappings of the Gothic that will be cemented as common themes – exoticized locale, power and damnation, illicit desire of some variety. The handling of Nouronihar, the princess Vathek falls in lust at first sight with, and the cousin to whom she is betrothed, Gulchenrouz, are the most useful aspects of *Vathek* for my purposes. Nouronihar is noted as enchantingly beautiful, but Gulchenrouz, from the moment of

his introduction, is lengthily described as equally lovely. In fact, the similarity between the two of them is repeatedly emphasized, even going so far as “when Gulchenrouz appeared in the dress of his cousin, he seemed to be more feminine than even herself” (Beckford 155). By emphasizing these traits and the similarities between Gulchenrouz and Nouronihar, while simultaneously describing the almost absurd lengths to which Vathek is willing to go in order to secure a marriage to Nouronihar now that he has decided he wants her, Beckford presents his audience with a character whose desire seems to have no limit. The implied homoerotic attraction is paired with an attraction that is heterosexual but still transgressive, as it is desire for one who is already betrothed to another and whose father forbids the union. Thus the acceptable boundaries in which desire might fall are pushed beyond their limit.

Vathek desires to marry Nouronihar, who is inarguably a woman, but also has to contend with her male counterpart who is described as equally appealing and, in many ways, identical to his cousin. Despite the implied attraction, Vathek himself mocks Gulchenrouz’s femininity and calls to his transgression of gender norms in order to dismiss him as an unfit husband for Nouronihar: “would you surrender this divine beauty to a husband more womanish than herself?” (Beckford 161). Vathek creates a distance between himself and Gulchenrouz, as the transgression of Gulchenrouz’s character cannot be ignored. In Vathek’s argument, traits that were otherwise described as desirable or endearing become insults or proof of inferiority: “And can you imagine that I will suffer her charms to decay in hands so inefficient and nerveless?”. The transgression of gender norms is then both emphasized and belittled by Vathek as a character; Gulchenrouz is delegitimized as a rival in his unstoppable desire, as a result; more importantly, though, Beckford is able to hint at transgressive desire without

actually erasing the line between normative and Other. Vathek himself is ultimately punished for his desire and immorality, trapped in hell at the end of the story. Thus the force that represents dangerous desire and transgression is punished, and the world set right.

Matthew Lewis' *The Monk*, published in 1796, is a paragon of Gothic fiction and establishes some key conventions regarding portrayals of female characters and how those characters handle desire and power. Ambrosio's feelings toward Matilda undergo a massive change throughout the course of the novel. When she is still disguised, Ambrosio is quite drawn to Rosario. They seek out each other's company, and it is said that "no voice sounded as sweet to him as Rosario's" and that Ambrosio was "every day more charmed" by her. When Rosario reveals herself to be Matilda, Ambrosio's lust is fully realized, though transgression has been already hinted at.

He is initially enthralled by Matilda, but as their relationship progresses, quickly grows less enamored and more disgusted with her. As he loses interest in Matilda, Ambrosio begins to note traits and behaviors in her that do not align with traditional femininity. He notices what he refers to as "a sort of courage and manliness" in her (Lewis 231) and, soon after, he claims that he cannot forgive her for being without pity, as pity is a necessity for women, and thus he is disgusted her "unfeminine" emotions (Lewis 232). Thus, Ambrosio's break with Matilda, which coincides with the gradual revelation of the strength of her power, is directly linked to her deviation from expected gender norms. Antonia and Agnes, the only other prominent women in the novel, play the roles of innocent, helpless maiden and repentant fallen women respectively, staying well within assigned roles for female characters; thus, they are never compared to masculine figures or maligned in the same way as Matilda. It is true that Ambrosio

maligns and condemns Agnes as well, but she is never accused of straying from her feminine role, and does not have the same adjectives or comparisons applied to her that one finds with regards to Matilda. More importantly, even if she is cruelly condemned by Ambrosio, she is redeemed by the narrative itself and the protagonist characters who attempt to help her, despite the mistake she has made. Her death is framed as a tragic consequence of the cruelty and mercilessness shown to her, while Ambrosio's disgust for Matilda is legitimized by the narrative, as she reveals herself to be a literal servant of Satan. Ambrosio is, much like Vathek, damned for his transgressions and dragged to hell.

John Polidori's publication of *The Vampyre* in 1819 did much to establish narrative tropes for the Gothic vampire story in particular. In it, we see the vampire as a creature of seduction, albeit indirectly. Aubrey tells the reader that Ruthven possessed "irresistible powers of seduction (Polidori 269), but there is no direct representation of any seduction; it all happens off-screen. Still, Ruthven takes up the archetypal role of the conniving, cruel, seductive vampire. He is not only a murderer, but enacts unnecessary cruelty by killing the girl that Aubrey loves and then tormenting him with the engagement to his sister before killing her as well. This manipulation and excessive cruelty become key traits of literary vampires, and they continue to be strongly linked with seduction and illicit desire. *The Vampyre* is told exclusively through the lens of Aubrey's point of view, and female characters are paid very little attention but as extensions of the male narrator. They are not unique or important, and their deaths come about only for the sake of torturing Aubrey. Polidori's work differs from the two previously discussed in that Ruthven is not, the audience's knowledge, condemned for his actions and sufficiently punished. However, also unlike the two previous discussed works, Ruthven himself

is not the focus character, and therefore such a denouement is not necessary to ensure that what suggested transgressive desire there was is re-established as monstrous and unallowable; our protagonists' horror and attempts to circumvent Ruthven's plans play that part sufficiently enough for this work, which is shorter and less developed than *The Monk* or *Vathek*.

II. Treatment of the Same Issues in *Carmilla*

Carmilla is undeniably working in the Gothic mode, and is clearly in conversation with other Gothic works. It adheres to many Gothic conventions and is in keeping with themes addressed in earlier works. The focus on sleep and dream-like visions are a staple of the Gothic, and Carmilla being bound by her promise to disclose nothing about herself calls back to the vow of silence suffered by the protagonist of *The Vampyre*, to name only a couple examples. What is significant about these observations is that Le Fanu does not attempt to distance himself from the mode as a whole. He uses and interacts with established narrative points and themes previously established, for the most part. This makes the departure from pre-established handling of women and transgressive desire all the more noticeable.

Carmilla's surface-level character archetype, that of the mysterious but charming young stranger who makes a sudden appearance, is a common Gothic trope. However, the nuances of Carmilla's role in the narrative are less so. While women in antagonist roles are not at all unheard of in the Gothic, women who embody the monstrous are typically cast as evil seductresses, and if they step into a more aggressive or domineering role, they are compared to men. This can most easily be seen in *The Monk's* Matilda, as previously discussed. *Zofloya*

does feature female characters in less traditional roles for a Gothic, but Dacre is making a pointed decision to flip expected gender roles, and while Victoria, as a purposefully genderswapped Ambrosio, makes departures from expectations for female characters, and as a result, her less feminine characteristics are constantly emphasized by the narrator. Victoria is, in a way, the exception that proves the rule; her natural cruelty, her ambition, and her analytical thinking are focuses of attention, because she defies the expectations for female roles in the Gothic. This draws attention to gendered roles present in the Gothic, and emphasizes the artificiality of said roles, but then the work, by necessity, must maintain those clearly defined roles in order to achieve this. Carmilla, however, is never compared to a masculine figure like the monstrous Matilda, her traits are never categorized as expected or unexpected for a woman like Victoria's, and the only time language relating to the word "feminine" is employed is when Laura is entranced by her physical beauty. Therefore, while *Zofloya* places women in the masculine roles and vice versa, *Carmilla* exists in a space in which distinctive roles are blurry at best, and male characters seem to be of little to no importance in the face of the women in the center of the narrative and their desire.

Some scholars, such as Renee Fox, argue that contemporary readers and critics are perhaps too hasty to use words such as "lesbian" when describing the intimacy and desire apparent between Carmilla and Laura. There is, however, much to support an explicitly romantic or erotic reading of the two. For example, Laura's after-the-fact reflections, in which she states that the vampire's fascination resembles "the passion of love" which results in "the gradual approaches of an artful courtship," uses language that directly parallels the relationship between Laura and Carmilla to one of a romantic courtship, which may then further emphasize

earlier passages of the book in which the two girls discuss their lack of romantic male interests, such as when Carmilla says “I have been in love with no one...unless it should be with you” (p. 40). While words such as “passion” and “lover” are applied repeatedly by Carmilla and thus directed at Laura, Laura herself regularly comments on how moved she is by Carmilla’s beauty, and her narrative transforms what could seem to be platonic gestures of affection such as a kiss on the cheek into something intimate and erotic by means of descriptive and focused language, such as “her hot lips traveled along my cheek in kisses.” (p. 30). These word choices, and especially the direct comparison to Carmilla’s interactions with Laura as a courtship, signifies intense emotion that is meant to go beyond a sense of friendship or companionship.

Though Le Fanu does not directly depict any sexual acts between Carmilla and Laura, their dynamic is nonetheless brimming with eroticism. The question is not whether or not they had a sexual relationship as such, but if desire is being expressed not only through Carmilla’s dialogue and the metaphor of courtship, but also through the vampiric narrative – Carmilla’s late night visits to Laura’s room and the bite to Laura’s breast, all of which is clearly present. During one of her dream-state experiences, she feels a pain “as if two large needles darted, an inch or two apart, deep into my breast” (p. 46). The experience is more frightening and painful than erotic, but the two are hardly unconnected, especially in the Gothic mode. A similar instance can be seen in another dream experience later recounted, in which Laura hears a female voice in her bedroom and that “it was as if warm lips kissed me...longer and more lovingly as I reached my throat” (p. 52). Laura’s reaction is a quickened heart rate and rapid breathing, which she attributes to fear, but which can easily also be signals of excitement or arousal. This uncertain distinction between fear and passion or pain and arousal gains validity

due to the later explicit comparison between a vampire finding their prey and a courtship ritual. Overall, to shy away from terms such as “lesbian” for the sake of avoiding any anachronism runs the risk of undermining or negating the romantic and erotic undertones present throughout Laura and Carmilla’s interactions.

If we can agree, then, that the relationship between the two is steeped in eroticism, it is necessary to look further into the framing of their dynamic. One of the most intriguing aspects is the undeniable mutuality. In order for Carmilla to be a narrative about a sexually predatory vampire taking advantage of a helpless, isolated girl, which would be the expected route, one would have to ignore Laura’s clear and repeated reciprocations of Carmilla’s desires and affection. We see this expressed continuously throughout the novella, such as Laura’s excessive use of the adjective “pretty” when referring to almost any feature of Carmilla’s, or the fact that she is not only the recipient strong emotional and physical, but expresses it as well, such as when they find Carmilla after her night of being missing and Laura expresses such strong emotions at having found her: “I ran to her in an ecstasy of joy; I kissed and embraced her again and again”. Laura is at times perturbed by or uncomfortable with Carmilla, but it does not follow anything resembling the arc laid out in the Monk; rather than slowly shifting her perspective from admiration to repulsion, Laura wavers in-between the two, and the narrative notably never connects it to whether or not Carmilla’s behavior is appropriate for her gender.

Laura’s vacillation between extreme attraction and repulsion is consistent throughout the novel, not abating even after Carmilla has been revealed as a vampire and subsequently killed. Even knowing the truth of what Carmilla was, Laura continues to remember her with “ambiguous alternations” (96). This complicates a more straightforward reading of *Carmilla* as a

story of simply an insidious predator who was revealed for what she truly was and subsequently destroyed. Were that the case, there would be no reason for Laura's lingering ambivalences. Laura, even at the end, cannot forget her more pleasant, favorable memories of Carmilla, and continues to hesitate in how she remembers her. Even the very last line of the book holds certain ambiguities. "Fancying I heard the light steps of Carmilla at the drawing room door" gives the reader the impression of a narrator who is haunted, but it's impossible to extrapolate based on the words themselves whether she fears that she hears Carmilla's footsteps, or wishes that she does. There's an aspect of her continued hesitation that indicates that she both misses Carmilla and is terrified of her at the same time. She is very hesitant to condemn Carmilla as a monster, or is perhaps even incapable of doing so, even after what she has both been told and has seen herself; though, in fact, the matter of what she does and does not see firsthand is worthy of note. Laura is significantly distanced from Carmilla as a monstrous figure and experiences her defeat through only a secondhand retelling. While the vague and distanced account of Carmilla's death could be interpreted as then lending doubt to whether or not Carmilla was truly defeated, and thus causing Laura to fear her return, Nina Auerbach takes a very different approach in *Our Vampires, Ourselves*: "Carmilla's ritual decapitation is an abstract anticlimax to the vividness of her seduction" (p. 46). Auerbach is arguing here that we can read this surprisingly anticlimactic action as serving to reinforce the way in which Carmilla is viewed inherently differently by the patriarchal males she threatens than by the young girl who shares her desires, and her reading also serves to emphasize the importance of Carmilla and Laura's dynamic, their interactions and attraction to one another, rather than the defeat of the vampire, which would conventionally be the grand climax of the story. Earlier in the novel,

Laura describes her feelings as “a love growing into adoration, and also of abhorrence”, acknowledging that “this I know is a paradox.” (p. 29). Were these feelings of love or attraction the result of some sort of vampiric influence or hypnosis, they would presumably dissipate after the defeat of Carmilla. However, Laura does not appear to experience any sudden, or even gradual, clarity. She is still hesitant to deem her experiences as wholly monstrous or wholly pleasurable, allowing the novella to end with a continued sense of ambiguous unease, rather than re-establishing the rightful state of things, as one would expect.

It is also useful to consider when and why Laura’s fascination and attraction becomes fear or discomfort. It would be difficult to argue that she fears violence on the part of Carmilla. When she is warned of an assassin in her sleep and sees the vision of Carmilla stained with blood, she does not entertain for a moment that Carmilla is the assassin, only fears that she might be in danger (p. 53). In the same section in which Laura refers to her feelings toward Carmilla as “love growing into adoration, and also of abhorrence,” she relays multiple instances of intimate touches or words spoken by Carmilla, and her primary complaint, and therefore source of discomfort, relies on words such as “unintelligible” or “confused”. When Carmilla speaks passionately to her, she replies “you must not...I don’t know myself when you look so and talk so” (p. 30). Thus, Laura’s discomfort and fear is always linked to confusion and uncertainty. She attempts to understand it, asking Carmilla if they might in fact be related, and briefly theorizing that Carmilla is perhaps a young male suitor in disguise before immediately concluding that she is indeed a girl. Laura’s discomfort is not centered on Carmilla herself, or an inherent lack of interest in the intimacy Carmilla is instigating, but instead on her own inability to categorize and conceptualize the nature of their relationship and the desire being expressed.

She can only attempt to comprehend it within acceptable normative limits, i.e. as either platonic, familial affection, or as romantic and exotic desire that can somehow fit a heterosexual mold. When she fails in this, as no categorization available to her fits the situation with which she is being presented, her ambivalency bubbles to the surface, and she demonstrates distress and confusion.

Carmilla defies easy categorization not only because of Laura's ambiguous feelings toward her, but by merit of the fact that there is evidence supporting a reading of her as an inherently ambivalent archetype – a sympathetic antagonist. The role of the vampire, especially the vampire as seducer, is traditionally associated with extreme cruelty, and Gothic monsters overall are irredeemably evil. However, what little we have of Carmilla's origins implies something more complicated, as does her behavior within the duration of the narrative. She says little regarding her past, and what information she does give is vague, but when she tells Laura, "I was all but assassinated in my bed...and was never the same again" (p. 45), the reader can infer that this injury was the attack that turned her into a vampire, and that it had at least some similarity to the night time attacks that Laura is experiencing at this point in the novella. The context of her transformation means that before Carmilla was ever the aggressor, she was the victim. Because of this, there's a cyclical nature to the violence being enacted. Carmilla did not choose this life, and there is no indication that she relishes it in any way. She is no Dracula or Ruthven, savoring her own cruelty or enacting elaborate, torturous plans to the horror of protagonist and audience. The only plan that seems to have been set in place, the supposed carriage accident that led Carmilla to stay with Laura's family in the first place, seems to have been arranged by the mysterious figure of Carmilla's supposed "mother," about whom very

little information is given. Carmilla acts as if she entirely under this woman's control, as evidenced both by the carriage accident and by how firmly she holds to the promise she made not to share certain details or answer certain questions. There is also the very odd occurrence in which Carmilla says to Laura's father, "I have been thinking of leaving you...I have given you an infinity of trouble, and I should wish to take a carriage to-morrow" (p. 43). There is no apparent reason for Carmilla to desire to leave at the moment, and the fact that she would be departing on her own, without the presence of her mother or any communication from her, in what seems to be in direct defiance of what she was told to do, is very striking given how much she seems to be governed by the mysterious older woman. Not much else is said regarding this request, and Carmilla's father refuses immediately without questioning her much regarding her reasons for desiring to depart so soon, but there is no evident reason for this request to be included, except as evidence that Carmilla, aware of the effect that her presence is having on Laura, as she grows sicker and sicker, wishes to remove herself before any further damage is wrought. Her implied desire to remove herself from the situation as Laura worsens would then imply that Carmilla is not in control of her actions as a vampire. Indeed, there is no textual evidence to suggest that she is. Laura experiences her nightly visits in a dream-like state of confusion, and given the consistent mirroring between the two characters, and especially the shared dream or vision they supposedly had years beforehand, one could conclude that Carmilla experiences them in a dream or trance-like state as well, rather than being actively in control of the situation.

Not only is Carmilla's role as antagonist challenged by these aspects of the narrative, but Laura, rather than being a consistent passive victim, challenges their dynamic by sometimes

portraying herself as in the role of an aggressor. When she describes her attempts to learn any of Carmilla's secrets or the details of her life, she uses language akin to that of military strategy, saying that she "watched opportunity" and that "once or twice, I did attack more directly", even referring to her methods of wheedling information out of Carmilla as "tactics" (28). She says that both "reproaches and caresses" were ineffective. While the term "caresses" is vague and not inherently sexual or romantic, it does have a very intimate and affectionate connotation that leaves room for the reader to, if only momentarily, place Laura herself in the position of the seducer, rather than Carmilla. This disrupts any notions of Laura as innocent or passive victim, contributing to the complication of a patriarchal narrative of sexual deviance being unleashed on a hapless victim and then ultimately circumvented.

Overall, *Carmilla* represents a rupture in the development of a mode that is known for being consistently structured and predictable in its narrative arc and themes. Most importantly, it does so not by adhering to and utilizing most Gothic conventions, as it could otherwise be considered a complete outlier, perhaps something experimental or an attempt by Le Fanu to create something distanced from expectations for Gothic works. Rather, the novella carries on themes that are well-observed in earlier Gothic works and explores the transgression of acceptable forms of desire, while refusing to a clear distinction between seductress and victim, or between the desiring and the desired and ending the novella with the protagonist haunted by her own ambivalence. It therefore simultaneously breaks and does not break from established Gothic tradition, making the narrative devices of the Gothic mode an apparent mirror to the personal ambivalence and duality present in the novella itself. As Sedgwick notes in *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, some scholars attempt to divide Gothic literature into

New and Old Gothic, but *Carmilla* does not represent the beginning of a New Gothic, both because of this foothold in Gothic tradition and because of what we see in later works in the following section, though some of the unusual aspects of *Carmilla*, such as the sympathetic monster, do become more popular in later iterations of the genre. What the novella represents instead is a completely separate method of blurring gender lines and treating illicit desire, wherein instead of blurring the lines between man and woman or expressly transgressing expectations of masculinity or femininity, these categories are primarily ignored. There are various pros and cons to each of these methods, and the end effects of each can be debated, but *Carmilla*'s departure is notable regardless of that, as is the apparent discomfort with this method, as is apparent by subsequent Gothic works and even far more modern writing.

III. Post-*Carmilla* Treatment

The Gothic has a lifespan that extends far beyond the publishing of *Carmilla*, including some of its most iconic masterpieces, such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, published at the tail end of the 19th century, over two decades after *Carmilla*. *Dracula* furthers the development of the vampire narrative, and in it we see the return of earlier handling of women in the Gothic. Even beyond the 19th century, several 20th and 21st century works of various media types attempt to adapt *Carmilla*. There are varying degrees of experimentation and of attempts at faithfulness, but one thing these works share is a continuing inability to leave the ambiguity of *Carmilla* and Laura's relationship as it stood in the original text. Works after *Carmilla* that ignore or reject lack of categorization and refusal to adhere to binaries or impose any value judgements underlines the abnormality of *Carmilla*'s handling of female roles and desire.

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* solidified many tropes of the vampire genre, and even those already firmly established, such as the vampire's role as cruel seducer and the link between blood and sex, reached new heights of fame. Count Dracula's role is easily traced back to Polidori's Ruthven, and his pursuit of first Lucy and then Mina parallels Ruthven's careful planning and murder of first Aubrey's beloved and then his sister. *Dracula* furthers the establishment of Gothic tropes with no attention paid to Carmilla. Instead, the focus is returned to male desire, despite the arguable improvement of increased prominence for the female characters when compared to a work like *The Vampyre*. *Dracula* stalks Lucy and then Mina as part of his fixation on Jonathan Harker, in an attempt to torment him that, again, is clearly indebted to Polidori. In both cases, the suffering of Lucy and Mina are predicated on the Count's focus on Harper. The ways in which *Dracula* continues these conventions emphasizes the anomaly of Carmilla.

The gender dynamics displayed in the differences between *Dracula* and Lucy as a vampire further cements the well-established roles being played. *Dracula* attacks his victims in a way that is akin to the role of seducer, and the imagery of him sneaking in at night and ravishing women in their beds is hardly lost. After he has turned Lucy into a vampire, however, she does not pursue a similar route. Instead, she entices children, something that requires far less sexual aggression. She is still sexual; when the group finally see her in vampiric form for the first time, it is observed that her "purity" has become "voluptuous wantonness." (p. 180). Thus, she descends from the status of the Virgin to that of the Whore. Words such as wanton and voluptuous – i.e., descriptive words that are inherently gendered and contain implicit judgement values – are repeatedly applied to vampiric Lucy. Even as she uses the same powers

as Dracula, she is playing a feminine seduction role, not a masculine one. She makes a show of adopting a vulnerable position, opening her arms to Arthur, and begs him to come to her. It appears to put Arthur under the same trance that Dracula had put her in, and yet the approach plays at passivity rather than taking a more active role. The only other female vampires seen in the novel, the three women who live in Dracula's castle, do take a more active role, by comparison. However, they serve the purpose of putting Jonathan Harker into the passive role as a result, useful for Dracula's intervention in which he asserts power over the three women and possession over Harker, who remains in a passive position as the object of Dracula's designs, as further exemplified when Harker awakes the next morning to the realization that Dracula must have carried him back to his bed (p. 34). Mina, as the second prominent female character, has far more agency and active involvement in the plot, but the narrative makes a point of emphasizing this irregularity. The men that surround Mina praise her for her manly mind, highlighting the ways in which she is not a standard woman, much like characters such as Dacre's Victoria.

Moving forward to the 20th and 21st century, *Carmilla*, pegged as a novelty "lesbian vampire story," received quite a bit of interest and adaptation through various mediums. Most attempts to adapt, reinterpret or use the material in *Carmilla* play up the undertones of eroticism, sensationalizing the lesbian elements and turning the work into something far more voyeuristic than the original. The 1960 film *Et Mourir De Plaisir*, released in English as *Blood and Roses*, is one of the most prominent examples of this tendency. This was a heavily erotic horror film, in which *Carmilla* is very much the wicked seductress luring in innocent girls. A handful of other horror movies over the decades have drawn inspiration from *Carmilla*, primarily for the

purposes of sensationalized lesbian eroticism, as well as a farcical comedy film in 2009, *Lesbian Vampire Killers*, that situated Carmilla as the head antagonist. The boiling down of Carmilla to the single takeaway of 'lesbian vampire' is, as one can see, particularly common in film, in which the visual medium easily allows sensational eroticism between the women onscreen to titillate or shock viewers. It is present in literary adaptation as well, such as in Kyle Marffin's *Carmilla: The Return*, a sequel situated in the 1990's, which features its first sexually explicit scene exactly eight pages in, and continues to regularly feature sex between Carmilla and her victims throughout the rest of the novel. This repeated emphasis of eroticism when drawing inspiration from *Carmilla* directly correlates to reinforcement of the seductress/victim dichotomy that is so heavily complicated in the original, and erases the moral complexity and ambiguity of the dynamic.

Some adaptations, though few, de-emphasize the homoerotic themes rather than sensationalize them. The 1932 film *Vampyr* is considered a somewhat loose adaptation of the novella, but lacks any suggestion of desire between women. "Ruin: The Rise of the House of Karnstein", a story by Ro McNulty published in an anthology in 2014, is meant as a sequel, much like Marffin's novel, but this image of Carmilla's future features her feeding on babies rather than seducing young women. These works fail to capture the significance of *Carmilla* just as much as the first category, as they remove a key aspect of the novella.

There have been a few works, all released in the 21st century, that have attempted to maintain the ambiguity and complexity of the homoerotic relationship present in *Carmilla*. Rachel Klein's novel, *The Moth Diaries*, works with many of the same themes as *Carmilla* and attempts to leave readers with a similar level of uncertainty and ambivalence regarding the

protagonist's romantic interest. The book was published in 2002, but the subsequent film adaptation was released several years later and neither sensationalizes nor ignores the lesbian themes. The 2014 film *The Curse of Styria*, which transposes the time and setting to late 20th century but otherwise maintains many plot elements of the original, also attempts to maintain a level of ambiguity regarding Carmilla's role as antagonist and toward Laura's relationship with her. The fact that these adaptations are so few, and that they have only come about quite recently, demonstrates the continued discomfort with Carmilla's failure to maintain clear categorization in the face of provocative themes.

Conclusion

The Gothic, from its beginning, allowed a way path for handling transgression while maintaining familiar categories and often distancing potentially threatening or alarming themes through the creation of a monstrous Other. *Carmilla*, however, is dangerous in its lack of attempts to use the pre-established Gothic means of controlling or categorizing the deviations from accepted gender roles and accepted desire that are present within the narrative. It instead allows these aspects of the plot to steep in the ambivalence that is present throughout the narrative. At the same time, it allows the divide between protagonist and Other to be broken down, due to the mutuality of the relationship between Laura and Carmilla, as well as the potential for sympathizing with or at least pitying Carmilla. This foregrounding of ambivalence and blurring of roles was not only something not seen in earlier Gothic publications, but remained an anomaly as the Gothic continued to develop as a genre after the publication of

Carmilla. Even 20th and 21st century works tend to reframe *Carmilla* in order to more easily categorize the relationship and character roles of the two women. This long-term reluctance to embody such departure from established roles is not only enlightening with regards to the cultural anxieties that first gave birth to the Gothic, but to more contemporary cultural anxieties and continued need for categorization. Though *Carmilla* is nominally defeated by the end of the novella, her death is distant and abstract, and seems almost of little consequence to Laura. While *Carmilla* herself has been vanquished, the lines she blurred refuse to right themselves.