

# NINETEENTH CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

ISSUE 16.3 (Winter 2020)

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## “Artful Courtship,” “Cruel Love,” and the Language of Consent in *Carmilla*

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<1>In his 1872 novella *Carmilla*, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu reimagines the myth of the vampire to introduce a being who perversely desires a consenting partner. According to lore collected by the story’s vampire expert, Baron Vordenburg, the vampire is a creature:

prone to be fascinated with an engrossing vehemence, resembling the passion of love, by particular persons. In pursuit of these it will exercise inexhaustible patience and stratagem, for access to a particular object may be obstructed in a hundred ways. It will never desist until it has satiated its passion, and drained the very life of its coveted victim. But it will, in these cases, husband and protract its murderous enjoyment with the refinement of an epicure, and heighten it by the gradual approaches of an artful courtship. In these cases it seems to yearn for something like sympathy and consent. In ordinary ones it goes direct to its object, overpowers with violence, and strangles and exhausts often at a single feast. (Le Fanu 94)

While ordinarily more “direct” in the way it “overpowers with violence,” Le Fanu’s insidious vampire yearns for “something *like* sympathy and consent” in its “artful courtship” (emphasis added). This paper traces Le Fanu’s representation of this vampiric yearning, exposing a narrative about consent, queer desire, and trauma voiced by the often forgotten or silenced narrator, Laura, who vampirically haunts readings of the novella.

<2>The plot of *Carmilla* centers on Laura and her courtship by an alleged vampire, the eponymous Carmilla. Confessing her story through a long epistle to an unnamed female interlocutor, a “town lady” (30), Laura divulges how she first meets Carmilla in the flesh following a carriage accident that deposited the young woman among Laura’s family circle. She intimates the uncanniness of this meeting in recounting her belief that she has seen the bewitchingly beautiful Carmilla earlier in life, during an eerie childhood dream where a lookalike “caressed me with her hands, and lay down beside me on the bed, and drew me towards her, smiling” until Laura was “wakened by a sensation as if two needles ran into my breast” (7). Despite the lingering traumas of this early erotic dream, Laura becomes increasingly enthralled by Carmilla’s present-day charms, as the other girl “would press [Laura] more closely in her trembling embrace,” causing Laura to feel “a love growing into adoration, and also of abhorrence” (29). Their love affair continues until Laura begins to sicken under a “strange melancholy” that resembles the symptoms of a mysterious pandemic taking hold of the local peasantry (50). Only the return of Laura’s neighbor, General Spielsdorf, brings about the startling explanation for Laura’s decline: readers learn that Carmilla may actually be the reanimated vampire Countess Mircalla Karnstein, who haunts the Styrian lands in which Laura’s

family now live. Prior to her arrival in Laura's home, Carmilla allegedly appeared in the guise of a young woman named Mircalla and killed the General's niece, Bertha Rheinfeldt. Carmilla flees but is ultimately captured and brutally annihilated by a troop of patriarchs including the General, Laura's father, Baron Vordenburg, and Laura's medical practitioner, Doctor Spielsberg. Laura concludes her letter by reflecting on the "ambiguous alternations" in her memories about Carmilla as "sometimes the playful, languid beautiful girl; sometimes the writhing fiend I saw in the ruined church" whose image haunts her well into her adult life (96).

<3>Critical attention has primarily focused on the figure of Carmilla as the irresistible queer vampire who dominates the tale. Many scholars understand the "ambiguous alternations" of Laura's story in terms of the narrative's positive representation of Carmilla as she reveals a liberatingly transgressive queer sexuality. Notably, Sue-Ellen Case calls Le Fanu's *Carmilla* "the most important work in the dominant tradition" of queer—and specifically lesbian—literature (Case 7), with Nina Auerbach proclaiming that Carmilla stands out as "one of the few self-accepting homosexuals in Victorian or any literature" (Auerbach 41).<sup>1</sup> Adrienne Antrim Major, Paulina Palmer, and Elizabeth Signorotti all suggest that the male author, Le Fanu, encourages sympathy for Carmilla. In their persuasive analyses, Carmilla is the embodiment of thrillingly queer and transgressive desire—a liberative force working against the dangerous suppressions of a stifling patriarchal society.<sup>2</sup> Yet equally as many critics have contested Le Fanu's degree of investment in this idealized vision of Carmilla. Nancy Welter, for example, has argued that the novel "presents intensely conservative views of Laura and Carmilla's relationship" (Welter 138). After all, despite whatever liberation Carmilla offers Laura, the titular character is ultimately punished for her vampirism, queerness, and for, as James Walton argues, "appropriating the aggressive male's role in sexual encounters by penetrating the victims' flesh and drawing their blood" (Walton 70).<sup>3</sup> Robert Tracy suggests that Carmilla primarily represents aspects of Le Fanu's personal anxiety, guilt, and even fear of female sexuality,<sup>4</sup> while Ardel Thomas recognizes that the novella "does not necessarily cast a sympathetic eye on the queer situation," despite Carmilla's relative appeal (148).

<4>In contrast, when Laura is examined in literary critical works, if at all, she often gets read as a blank slate to be shaped by the powerful Carmilla's hand. She is seen as a cypher for the late-Victorian woman, or any woman without a voice, and read as an "everywoman," to use Carol A. Senf's term. Senf states that "almost everything in Laura's character suggests her typicality," from her namelessness throughout the first part of the story to her lack of education and interests to her ignorance of more fantastical possibilities, so that "[t]he only part of her life that makes Laura the least bit unique is her perverse relationship with Carmilla" (Senf 51). In the critical literature, then, Laura assumes the role of a quiet and passive figure, the text's amanuensis and not its protagonist. Her voice as a queer woman, and as equally an important part of a complex relationship between queer women, is often forgotten or denied so that critical attention remains on the more active and violent agents of the narrative who entertain and titillate readers: Carmilla and the men who hunt her.

<5>Though often read in terms of her "typicality" for failing to be as transgressive as she should or could be, Laura is no normative late-Victorian woman. I resist the tendency to emphasize Laura's normativity as linked to the difficulty of reading her "ambiguous alternations" over Carmilla and, moreover, the critical unwillingness to address the ways Laura's would-be partner

hurts or frightens her. As the bearer of bad news about Carmilla, Laura often comes to be understood as endorsing, voluntarily or not, the actions of the homophobic patriarchal figures, and thus carrying an internalized homophobia that marks her an equal antagonist alongside the patriarchs who stake, decapitate, and burn Carmilla. My reading looks to what Laura specifically says about her “artful courtship” in order to expose Laura’s arguments about a desire for consent and the trauma of sexual violence that underlie the central plot of Le Fanu’s novella. I challenge an absolute assertion that Laura is a tool of the normative social world, only understood as a certain type of quieted nineteenth-century woman. Simply reading Laura as a tool of those in power limits the exploration of queer voices and perspectives in the text, silencing her voice and everything that haunts her telling of the tale.

<6>To that end, I write about the narrative of consent, intimate partner violence, and sexual assault—presentist terms that describe what the novella calls “artful courtship” and “cruel love.” I argue for reading into Laura’s protracted discussion of this narrative precisely because it articulates a social problem for critique in ways important from queer perspectives and voices. To trace the narrative of “artful courtship”, “cruel love”, and the language of consent that shape *Carmilla*, I first consider the ways readers are encouraged to doubt Laura’s queer voice and then the kinds of doubts Laura herself expresses about Carmilla’s more disconcerting behaviors. My reading thereafter traces how “cruel love” becomes a way for the novella’s female characters to talk openly about intimate partner violence. I conclude by considering the effect of producing such a negative queer story about “cruel love,” considering the ideas of feminist and queer theorists who articulate the place of unproductive, unassimilable “queer” perspectives in Gothic tales.

### **Queer Doubts**

<7>Critical works often position *Carmilla*’s readers to doubt the narrator Laura from the text’s beginnings in order to emphasize the transgressive role of Carmilla. In William Veeder’s influential work on *Carmilla*, for example, Veeder frankly directs readers to read against Laura’s words in order to understand significant aspects of her suppressed lesbian desire for Carmilla. Veeder argues that “Laura’s repressions are our challenge. Her repeated protestations of ignorance—‘I can make no attempt to explain the feeling’ (p. 292), ‘an obstinacy which now seems to me unaccountable’ (p. 308), ‘unaccountable’ (p. 275), ‘utterly inexplicable’ (p. 320), ‘I really don’t see how’ (p. 337)—prompt us to learn what she cannot” (Veeder 201). Though Veeder argues that “LeFanu’s point in ‘Carmilla’ is not that Laura necessarily succumb to her lesbian tendencies, but that she succeed in knowing herself,” he nevertheless implies that Laura can never know herself, as “she is too much her father’s girl to become Carmilla’s” (199, 216). This idea that the reader must work against Laura is echoed in the close-readings of Major, whose articulation of Carmilla’s transgressive sexuality necessitates arguments that:

[Laura’s] narrative voice records “horrible sufferings” (308) but what she actually describes has been narrated in far more complicitous language. Despite the adjectival iteration of “dreadful,” the primary color of her remarks is found in such adverbs as “softly” and “lovingly.” Indeed, her inclination, during the weeks that elapse, is to deny any “suffering” at all, and to refuse to recognize her newly found sexuality as an illness: “My father asked me often whether I was ill; but ... I persisted in assuring him that I was quite well... In a sense this was true” (308). (158)

In Major's reading, as with other critics', the reader is encouraged to forego the many negative representations of the interactions with Carmilla in Laura's conspicuously repeated protestations and to focus on those instances where Laura defends Carmilla. To that end, the reader has to overlook Laura's statements about her "horrible sufferings," for "[d]espite the adjectival iteration of 'dreadful'," the supposed real feeling inculcated by the textual material can be found in Laura's silence and the interpretation of "her [Laura's] inclination" to always "deny any 'suffering' at all." Laura's protestations in these terms are read as part of an effort to hide from herself and the world the underlying truth behind her "horrible sufferings": that Laura holds a forbidden queer desire for Carmilla and thus wishes to protect Carmilla (and herself) from the homophobia present in her family circle. In both Major and Veeder's analysis of the novel, the critic asserts that the lady doth protest too much, that she actually likes Carmilla in spite of or because of these "horrible sufferings." Laura might be inclined to utter her "repeated protestations of ignorance" under some form of maidenly sexual naïveté at best or some form of internalized homophobia and out of shame for her sexual kinks at worst. In either case, Laura must always be understood as either self-deceived or a liar, for good and ill, and thus incapable of expressing herself.

<8>Reading Carmilla as Laura's subconsciously desired love object alone, however, overlooks the starkly direct confessions made in Laura's reflections about her relationship with Carmilla. Undoubtedly, Laura is an equal partner in this queer relationship and evinces in plain terms and actions her erotic desires for Carmilla. She hungrily pursues Carmilla: she takes Carmilla's hand in her own boldly; plays endlessly with Carmilla's hair and wishes "If I had but known all!"; and runs to Carmilla when the lost Carmilla is found after a mysterious disappearance in order to shower her with kisses and embraces "again and again" (23, 27, 56). Still, Laura evinces "horrible sufferings" in her relationship with Carmilla. Perhaps we can discount the nightmares that Laura speaks of where she dreams of being attacked by "a sooty-black animal that resembled a monstrous cat" or ignore the vague dream-woman who puts her hand around Laura's cheek and neck that suggest Carmilla has been visiting Laura in her sleep as mere dreams (46, 51).<sup>5</sup> Yet even aside from these nocturnal encounters, Laura's waking experiences with Carmilla leave much to provoke doubt about the relationship's romantic nature.

<9>As often as Laura willingly acquiesces to Carmilla's "trembling embrace" and "soft kisses," Laura also rejects these caresses and relates her discomfort, even pain, when she is with Carmilla in direct and clear terms. Laura informs the unnamed "town lady" to whom she writes that:

From these foolish embraces, which were not of very frequent occurrence, I must allow, I used to wish to extricate myself; but my energies seemed to fail me. Her murmured words sounded like a lullaby in my ear, and soothed my resistance into a trance, from which I only seemed to recover myself when she withdrew her arms.

In these mysterious moods I did not like her. I experienced a strange tumultuous excitement that was pleasurable, ever and anon, mingled with a vague sense of fear and disgust. I had no distinct thoughts about her while such scenes lasted, but I was conscious of a love growing into adoration, and also of abhorrence. This I know is a paradox, but I can make no other attempt to explain it. (29)

In the description of these “foolish embraces,” Laura suggests her discomfort with the physical side of their relationship through her “wish to extricate myself.” When Carmilla puts her into “foolish embraces,” she resists and wants to withdraw. Sedated “into a trance” as “my energies seemed to fail me” when around Carmilla, Laura also informs her confidante that even if she finds the experiences exciting and pleasurable, she cannot consent to the attentions now lavished on her. Though Laura has long been conceived as “too implicated emotionally to understand and explain events fully,” her language cannot be more clear (Veeder 200). Laura is decisive about her understanding of this “paradox,” as she accurately calls it: while she easily admits that she appreciates and desires Carmilla’s sexual attentions, Laura also finds her lover’s language and her unaccountable actions when Laura is under these spells frightening. Such a “paradox” could be read as an admission of pleasure in the erotic charge of masochism, but the telling of the tale centers on the inability to consent and the speaker’s open distaste for the experience. “In these mysterious moods,” she plainly tells her reader, “I did not like her,” and Laura even admits her fear of as much as pleasure in these encounters by stating that Carmilla’s attentions involve “crazy talk and looks, which embarrassed, and even frightened me” (Le Fanu 42).

<10> Laura articulates how she recognizes the pleasure to be felt in such encounters, but in “these mysterious moods”—these specific instances—she feels objectified and belittled. During those moments when Carmilla would “take [Laura’s hand and hold it with a fond pressure, renewed again and again,” Laura notes that Carmilla’s “ardor of a lover” is something “hateful and yet over-powering” as Carmilla casts her “gloating eyes” on Laura’s form and tells her “You are mine, you *shall* be mine, you and I are one for ever” (29-30). Laura’s aversion to Carmilla in these instances focuses on the other woman’s dominance over herself, over Laura’s own body, and Carmilla’s tendency to “gloat” about that form of ownership. The word “gloat,” in particular, is emphasized by repetition in the text. As Laura becomes more feeble with illness, “Carmilla became more devoted to [her] than ever” and again Laura notes her discomfort with Carmilla’s self-satisfied ownership: “She used to gloat on me with increasing ardor the more my strength and spirits waned. This always shocked me like a momentary glare of insanity” (51). Laura deliberately expresses her distaste for the way Carmilla dominates her and sees her in these scenes. Unlike the more passive witness or object of love that Laura is imagined to be in the critical literature, Laura in the text expresses relative clarity regarding her feelings and thoughts about her erotic encounters with Carmilla—it just happens that her clarity comes in the form of a “paradox,” in the unrecognized trauma of intimate partner violence.

### “Cruel Love”

<11> Laura’s queer desire for Carmilla is defined by the lasting effects it ultimately leaves. As Laura notes, “after an interval of more than ten years,” she remains haunted by memories of Carmilla; she writes “with a trembling hand, with a confused and horrible recollection of certain occurrences and situations, in the ordeal through which I was unconsciously passing” that evokes the language of unwanted sexual contact and rape (29). Within these terms, then, the suppression central to Laura’s plot is not her desire for Carmilla that lies at the surface of their relationship, but the suppression of a painful experience with a lover whose sedating influence disallows her the means to consent fully to these “ordeals” that she now narrates (if only in an occluded fashion). Her feelings of “abhorrence” alongside “adoration,” her equal “fear and disgust” (29), implies not simply a socially constructed and internally accepted homophobia, but the possibility of some bodily and conscious experience more complex than the desire to forget a transgressive

love that cannot be. Rather, the experience Laura recounts is one of a deeply engrained, embodied reaction to a troubling “paradox”: a relationship to an intimate and loved partner who, despite pronouncing that she loves Laura, also hurts her. Readers need to negotiate between the good that Carmilla’s embodiment of queer desire does in challenging nineteenth-century heteronormative mores and the more troubling implication of Carmilla’s overpowering actions. Reading through *Carmilla*’s negotiation of this complex queer plot allows us to accomplish several tasks: we recenter Laura, the queer voice who so often must be denied; attend to the more complex representation of her antagonist and lover, Carmilla; and consider the underlying critique of the social world that Le Fanu embeds into the text as the queer narrative exposes the origins of such violent relations.

<12>The specter of unwanted sexual experience and the power dynamics that underlie it pervades Le Fanu’s text in ways that illuminate its prevalence in the everyday as much as the queerly supernatural or gothic. Carmilla gives a name to this kind of experience when she describes to Laura an “assassination” she experienced on the night of her first ball. Asked to confide fully in Laura about her personal history and feelings, Carmilla tells Laura a brief anecdote from an earlier life that seems to recapitulate Laura’s own recounting of intimate or sexual violence. Carmilla states: “ ‘I remember everything about it—with an effort. I see it all, as divers see what is going on above them, through a medium, dense, rippling, but transparent. There occurred that night what has confused the picture, and made its colours faint. I was all but assassinated in my bed, wounded *here*,’ she touched her breast, ‘and never was the same since’ ” (45). Carmilla’s description of the night as “confused” and “faint” except for the sharp experience of an “assassination in my bed” that leaves her with a wound on her breast and completely changed evokes the language of a physical or sexual assault. Much like Laura, who describes being rendered “into a trance,” Carmilla also alludes to her unwilling sedation during the events of the night that would have prevented her from consenting or denying the encounter with her assassin. Carmilla’s would be attacker is neither gendered nor mentioned in detail; like Laura’s dream visitants, the being who attacks Carmilla is represented as transparent and mercurial. Laura’s only response is to inquire as to whether this assassination was literal by asking “Were you near dying?”, to which Carmilla responds “Yes”, that she did nearly die from her experiences of “a cruel love—strange love, that would have taken my life” (45).<sup>6</sup> Without reproducing the tired and discriminatory arguments that victims and queer people become predators that would suggest Carmilla’s identity as a victim and queer woman has made her into an abuser, Carmilla’s recounting of her own early life lays bare a horrific fact. By naming the experience a “cruel love,” Carmilla defines what cannot be openly spoken of or articulated in the text: the experience of intimate violence, of rape.

<13>Moreover, Carmilla suggests both its lasting impact and the experience’s relative ubiquity in other moments in the text. As Carmilla notes, she “never was the same since” her attack (45). The text hints at how her past experiences have shaped her bodily responses and thinking in ways that echo Laura’s continued reference to her own experiences and inability to forget her history with Carmilla described as her “ambiguous alternations.” In an earlier chapter, as Laura and Carmilla witness the funeral procession of a local peasant girl who has supposedly died of the *oupire*, Carmilla expresses a surprising visceral reaction. While Laura feels sympathy for the deceased girl, Carmilla initially seems annoyed at the funeral proceedings and becomes increasingly reactive as Laura speaks of how “the poor girl” had “fancied she saw a ghost a

fortnight ago, and has been dying ever since.” To this, Carmilla responds “Tell me nothing about ghosts” and becomes even angrier at Laura’s continued discussion of the supposed attacks of “ghosts” after Laura reveals that “[t]he swineherd’s young wife died only a week ago, and she thought something seized her by the throat as she lay in her bed, and nearly strangled her.” In the moment, Laura notes how Carmilla undergoes a visible and terrifying affective response:

Her face underwent a change that alarmed and even terrified me for a moment. It darkened, and became horribly livid; her teeth and hands were clenched, and she frowned and compressed her lips, while she stared down upon the ground at her feet, and trembled all over with a continued shudder as irrepressible as ague. All her energies seemed strained to suppress a fit, with which she was then breathlessly tugging; and at length a low convulsive cry of suffering broke from her, and gradually the hysteria subsided. (32)

In her detailed observations, Laura marks Carmilla’s “temper” as symptom of the hysteric (32). She witnesses the same kind of temper again only one other time: when a traveling mountebank comes to call and offers the two women charms to ward off the *oupire*, but also his services in filing down Carmilla’s “sharpest tooth,—long thin, pointed, like an awl, like a needle” with “my file, my punch, my nippers; I will make it round and blunt, if her ladyship pleases” (35). Carmilla’s response to these incidents can clearly be read, on one hand, as evidence of her vampiric nature. Her unwillingness to hear about the girls who have died or been attacked and her anger at the mountebank’s comment about her sharp tooth leads Laura to change the subject and avoid speaking more about the possible *oupire* attacks.

<14>On the other hand, Carmilla’s reluctance to hear more about the kinds of ghosts that prey on women suggests her reticence to relive or remember the kind of “assassination” she herself experienced. In the story of a woman who died after being mysteriously strangled in her bed by a force unnamed and unnamable, a conspicuous detail that the woman in question is “the swineherd’s young wife,” and thus newly married, suggests a narrative that cannot be otherwise articulated in Laura’s world. In plain terms, the supernatural story about a possible ghost could also be understood to mask the reality of domestic violence and a newly-wed husband’s attack on his wife that is repeated until her death. During a period when the ability to interpret or even see marital violence was determined by “a web of Victorian issues surrounding marital power—coverture, married women’s property law, divorce law, conjugal rights,” as Lisa SurrIDGE notes, there are repeated instances of “the public’s misreading or failing to read” the physical signs of violence (SurrIDGE 4). In the case of the swineherd’s wife, the possible reality of domestic violence or marital rape is neatly papered over by a supernatural story, transforming the account of intimate violence into the unaccountable. Carmilla’s reticence to allow the mountebank to file down her tooth—in literal terms, to put his fingers in her mouth, to then “file”, “punch”, and “nip” her into the desired form—reveals the young woman’s resistance to having an unwelcome body invade her own in ways that evoke the actions of forced oral intercourse and a violent beating. The mountebank’s teasing remark that Carmilla might enjoy the experience of being nipped by his tools serves more than an “insult,” as Carmilla labels it; it is a reminder of the kind of violence that men could and do enact upon women in the course of the tale. The fact that Laura calls into question Carmilla’s reactions as evidence of “hysteria,” a gendered female disorder of the mind and body, also speaks to a different history of “cruel love.” Florence Rush’s early theory of “the Freudian coverup,” which has been expanded upon by scholars such as

Charles Bernheimer, Claire Kahane, and others, argued that Sigmund Freud's studies of hysterical patients included the intentional occlusion of evidence that his patients were sexually abused—most often by their fathers. Rush's work has been formative for shaping a nineteenth-century studies reevaluation of hysteria as represented in literary and historical works. For readings of *Carmilla*, this discussion of Carmilla's hysterical reaction to Laura's gossip allows readers another way to recognize the underlying story of domestic violence and sexual abuse.

<15>A surface truth about the prevalence of sexual violence and its place in interpersonal relationships becomes the monster that men like Laura's father and the other patriarchal figures—doctors, scientific experts, military men—must vanquish forever. However, these men fail both in destroying this plot and eradicating Carmilla's vampiric influence in Laura's life. The fact that Carmilla is later punished “in accordance with the ancient practice” of being penetrated by a “sharp stake” that causes her to “utter[] a piercing shriek at the moment, in all respects such as might escape from a living person in the last agony” recapitulates the subject of rape or sexual violence at novel's end (92). For Le Fanu, the subject may have been unconquerable, as the subject of “cruel love” was one he continuously returned to in other works, including the notable early short story “Schalken the Painter” (1839), which, as Jack Sullivan argues, is a story that tells of the “abduction, rape, and final seduction of a young woman by a living corpse” that Le Fanu handled “with a new anti-Gothic restraint. As if reluctant to reveal its sordid and marvelous secret” (Sullivan 269).

<16>With the repetitions of narratives of sexual and sexualized violence in *Carmilla*, the threat of Carmilla is transformed into some more common truth. Queer love, desire, and erotics are all there at the surface of Le Fanu's novella as principle facets of narrative, but so too is a much more nuanced perspective on the ubiquity of intimate or sexual violence, even in the most supposedly liberating nineteenth-century visions of queer romance. Laura's story of “cruel love” punctures an optimistic fantasy of sex and the liberation of sexuality as a site to recuperate from the ills of society, just as it undermines the possibility of seeing the vampire as a liberative figure.

### **Queer Ends**

<17>As a work of Gothic fiction, as well as what Tzvetan Todorov would have called “the fantastic,” *Carmilla* has long been affiliated with genres that question the sanctity of empiricist secularism and narrative clarity in their explorations of the uncanny facets of lived experience. As William Hughes and Andrew Smith have established, “Gothic has, in a sense, always been queer,” as the genre poises readers to evaluate “the uneasy cultural boundary that separates the acceptable and familiar from the troubling and different” (1). As the literary critical work has primarily shown, *Carmilla* is most often recognized as the queer voice of the text because she reinforces accepted tropes about the queer figure: someone who is marked by a dangerous Otherness, someone who is ultimately punished. However, Steven Bruhm argues that this kind of “search and rescue mission of detecting gays and lesbians” like Carmilla “as victims of homophobia in the Gothic has left us trapped in a hermeneutic circle that can only assuredly provide us with what we have been looking for: evidence of phobic persecution” at the expense of freedoms that queer perspectives and particularly a queer critique can provide (Bruhm 284).



<18>If the “cruel love” that Carmilla speaks of reveals an underlying problem of the continuous and inescapable specter of sexual violence that haunts even her, a powerful vampire, it exposes a violence that continually pervades the fabric of the social world itself as opposed to or as much as embedded specifically in the figure of the vampire or queer woman. Before Carmilla shares the history of her first ball where she was “assassinated,” Carmilla tells Laura “The time is very near when you shall know everything. You will think me cruel, very selfish, but love is always selfish; the more ardent the more selfish. How jealous I am you cannot know. You must come with me, loving me, to death; or else hate me and still come with me, and *hating* me through death and after” (44). Carmilla’s statement about what her love for Laura entails emphasizes the “selfish” desires to possess that underlie both the “cruel love” that she expresses and the “cruel love” she has experienced. What marks Carmilla as dangerous is this overt desire to engage in an erotic relationship that is entirely fulfilling to Carmilla at the expense of harming her partner, Laura, who is told that she will *hate* her lover “through death and after.”

<19>In these terms, Carmilla echoes the kind of possessive logic that defines the relationship between any of the men of the text and the women in their lives: General Spielsdorf’s relationship to his niece and ward, Bertha Reinfeldt, whom he cannot let go even after her death despite the way it makes Laura and her father worry about his own sanity, as well as Laura’s father’s relationship to his own daughter given his disinclination to bring Laura into society that results in her growing up in a “solitary loneliness” (65, 5-6). Notably, it is these men who also take up the language of consent, if only in terms of denial. Laura’s father refuses “consent” to Carmilla multiple times. When she asks to leave after living with Laura’s family a few months, he states:

“We can't afford to lose you so, and I won't consent to your leaving us, except under the care of your mother, who was so good as to consent to your remaining with us till she should herself return. I should be quite happy if I knew that you heard from her: but this evening the accounts of the progress of the mysterious disease that has invaded our neighborhood, grow even more alarming; and my beautiful guest, I do feel the responsibility, unaided by advice from your mother, very much. But I shall do my best; and one thing is certain, that you must not think of leaving us without her distinct direction to that effect. We should suffer too much in parting from you to consent to it easily.” (Le Fanu 43-44)

In his speech to Carmilla, he denies her consent twice directly in stating “I won’t consent to your leaving us” and “We should suffer too much in parting from you to consent to it easily” in terms that expose his reluctance to let her go knowing Carmilla’s usefulness to the family circle. His other use of the term consent, in speaking about Carmilla’s mother “who was so good as to consent to your remaining with us,” casts the concept of consent as something that girls like Carmilla—and Laura—do not own and cannot easily give to others. This possessive logic, as Senf writes, is linked to “the arrogance of a born aristocrat” (Senf 51) like Carmilla herself, as Carmilla often feels comfortable telling Laura that “[m]y father would have had the wretch tied up to the pump, and flogged with a cartwhip, and burnt to the bones with the castle brand” (Le Fanu 35) when met with an insult. Yet this arrogance is also evinced by Laura’s father, who sees the local peasantry as “poor people” who “infect one another with their superstitions” (Le Fanu 36), as well as Laura when she “casually reveals her indifference to people outside her circle and

her class... who apparently don't even exist as humans to her" (Senf 50). The danger to be associated with Carmilla, then, is this recognizable cruelty of the upper classes.

<20>My reading of *Carmilla* in these terms is influenced by thinking about queer negativity in the works of Lee Edelman and Jack Halberstam, among others, who question the need to reinscribe a re/productive narrative over queer narratives of negativity and failure. For Edelman, "queerness attains its ethical value precisely insofar as it accedes to that place [of negativity], accepting its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social while insisting on the inextricability of such resistance from every social structure" (3). Edelman raises a central point about the way that negativity resists and denies the social world's power to always define a particular "stable and positive *form*," a productive form, that queer bodies should take (4). He links together capitalistic narratives of re/productivity centered around the futurity of the Child as a normative figure pitted against the radical alterity of the unproductive queer, like Laura, who embodies no future, no possible productive path. In many ways, Edelman's arguments resonate with Case's influential "Tracking the Vampire." Case has most often been quoted for defining the work of queer theory as metaphorically represented by the figure of the vampire, a figure who evokes continually the idea of "the queer as the taboo-breaker, the monstrous, the uncanny" (3). Yet the second half of Case's argument in "Tracking the Vampire" also anticipates Edelman's points about where queer transgression lies. For Case, the figure of the vampire is the "sterile" queer (9–10), who is un- or even anti-productive in order to reject an emphasis on the productivity of queer narratives that offer an edifying point about queer identity that often reifies heteronormative relational structures. Carmilla as an undead woman who cannot literally reproduce is Case's champion, but I argue for reading Laura as the other "sterile" queer, who fails to create a productive message, offer a clear narrative, or teach any edifying points about queer identity or paths to a transgressive freedom in her social reality. Halberstam's position in speaking to the specifically queer art of failure is to note how "[u]nder certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (2–3). While I make no arguments for how much more creative, cooperative, and surprising Laura may be (though she is surprising when taken at her word), Laura's failure to articulate the romantic possibilities of an "artful courtship" over the negative story of "cruel love" does offer a different way of being in the world by becoming the voice that refuses to forget or elide that negative plot.

<21>The narrative of consent exists in *Carmilla* as a critique of "cruel love"—a story that seems impossible to tell, impossible to voice. While consent seems a particularly presentist subject matter, given the early twenty-first century eruption of the #MeToo movement, the subject of consent has always been tied into the discourse of erotics. As Michel Foucault wrote in *The Use of Pleasure*, "through the praise of love, of its power and its divinity, the question of consent comes up again and again" in a classical Grecian discourse of erotics "conceived as an art of give and take between the one who courts and the one who is courted" that still inflects contemporary Western notions of love and desire (Foucault 231). In *Carmilla*, this story of consent is told by its most supposedly suppressed voice who speaks of the harm she has faced directly and in terms of the multiple violences that make up everyday life.

<22>Much is still to be said about such "cruel love." The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has determined that intimate partner violence is as an epidemic disproportionately

affecting women in the United States (Breiding et al.). A 2010 CDC survey on intimate partner violence specifically focused on victimization by sexual orientation found that some 44% of lesbians, 35% of heterosexual women, and 61% of bisexual women in the nation had reported assault, stalking, or rape by an intimate partner (Walters et al.), with 51.7% of reported intimate partner violence among trans-identified individuals found in two other major studies conducted in 2014 and 2012 respectively (Langenderfer-Magruder et al.; *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and HIV-Affected Intimate Partner Violence*). However, as the World Health Organization critically reflects in a parallel 2010 survey to the CDC's, occurrences and impacts of such violence are markedly and often "hidden" to data collection efforts ("Preventing Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence against Women" 11).<sup>7</sup> I have argued for reading the narrative of "artful courtship," "cruel love," and consent in *Carmilla*, then, to show how such violence is never entirely "hidden."

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> According to Major, "lesbian Gothic" is recognized as a subgenre that includes "the work of women who are lesbian, and who use Gothic as a way to explore and celebrate 'transgressive' sexuality, while at the same time honoring the victimization and sacrifice (what Terry Castle terms 'ghosting' in *The Apparitional Gothic* [read: *The Apparitional Lesbian*]) suffered by lesbians" (152). *Carmilla* is not a work by a woman, but it does explore the kind of transgressive sexualities pertinent to Major's analysis.

<sup>2</sup> *Carmilla* is "a paradigm of feminine power and lesbian love that might well create terror in the hearts of his contemporaries" (Major 151) because she represents a "refusal to become entrapped in the conventional domestic role" (Palmer 205) and offers Laura a relationship that is "sexually liberating and for [Carmilla and Laura] highly desirable" (Signorotti 607).

<sup>3</sup> The same narrative is repeated in Bram Stoker's later *Dracula* (1897), where a group of men brutally punish the newly-turned Lucy. Stoker was inspired by Le Fanu's work, which can be seen in overt references to the Countess Mircalla Karnstein and the mirrored scene of vampire disposal, where Regenia Gagnier argues the men of *Dracula* enact a "metaphorical gang-rape vengeance, presumably, for [Lucy] wanting three men at once" (Gagnier 145).

<sup>4</sup> Tracy points to the author's fraught relationship with his wife, Susanna Le Fanu, who died at 35 from a nervous disorder for which Le Fanu felt partly responsible as the origin of the author's more conservative views on female sexuality (Tracy 71). The biographer Gary William Crawford notes that Le Fanu revealed he feared Susanna's health was impacted by her inability to believe in Le Fanu's own love for her in his diaries: "yet she was always doubting & sometimes actually disbelieving my love—although I was there both declaring & showing it—Day & night" (Le Fanu qtd. in Crawford 7).

<sup>5</sup> A reason to discount the dreams as evidence of *Carmilla*'s attacks on Laura lies in the arguments presented by Valerie Guyant, who suggests that the culprit who bites Laura at night is actually the mysterious "Matska," in which case "then *Carmilla* may be innocent of the crimes for which she is executed, offering a unique possibility for critical analysis" (Guyant 187). I find Guyant's close-reading persuasive in elucidating the slippages of the text around the identity of the supernatural force that seems to attack Laura in her dreams.

<sup>6</sup> Later, Laura's subconscious mind brings forward that language of "assassination" *Carmilla* once used to describe her own experience with "cruel love" when she dreams of a "sweet and tender, and at the same time terrible" voice that tells her "Your mother warns you to beware of the assassin," only for Laura to suddenly see "*Carmilla*, standing, near the foot of my bed, in her white nightdress, bathed, from her chin to her feet, in one great stain of blood" (52). We learn that Laura then truly "wakened with a shriek," having been asleep the whole time, so that her nightmare involving *Carmilla* covered in blood and a voice warning of an "assassin" becomes another part of the text's fragmented approach to speaking about sexual violence.

<sup>7</sup> Major studies of intimate partner violence conducted by the CDC and WHO are conducted every decade, more recent data for 2020 has not yet been released as of the publication of this essay.

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