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University of Nevada, Reno

**‘Our Infatuated Hospitality’: Heteronormative (Un)Development in ‘Carmilla’**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts in English Literature and the Honors Program

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We recommend that the thesis  
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requirements for the degree of

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Jen Hill, Ph.D., Thesis Advisor

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## I. Introduction

When a carriage accident early in Sheridan Le Fanu's 1872 vampire novella "Carmilla" leaves the title character unconscious and her mysterious mother needing to continue onward, Laura and her father, residents of a nearby schloss, come to her aid: Laura's father offers the solution of entrusting Carmilla to "the care of my daughter... to confer upon us a very great kindness at the moment when we most need it" (253; 254). As Laura has recently lost the possibility of a visit from Bertha, the neighbor Baron Spielsdorf's ward, due to the girl's untimely death, Carmilla's feminine company appears as the ideal "distinction and obligation" that will allow Laura's womanly "care and devotion" to develop (Le Fanu 254). The text makes plain the fact that Laura and her father consider themselves the recipients, and not the donors, of a favor, thus foregrounding the significance of homosocial interaction in the develop of young women, what Sharon Marcus calls a "celebration of women's friendships show[ing] that femininity was defined... through bonds between women" (Marcus 63). However, the truth, unbeknownst to Laura and her father but soon made plain to readers, is that Carmilla is the cause of young Bertha's death. Carmilla thus doubly prevents maturation into femininity: intimacy with Bertha was to have helped Laura mature into womanhood by learning sociability; when Carmilla kills Bertha, she ensures that the friendless Laura will be vulnerable to her as well. In place of the friendship Laura is expecting, one that would, in Marcus's words, "not simply tether [her] to the gender system but also afford [her] a degree of play within it," her intimacy with Carmilla effectively obstructs Laura's heteronormative development: at the end of Laura's narrative, she reveals that Carmilla's

victims “almost invariably, in the grave, *develop* into vampires” (62; Le Fanu 318, emphasis mine). The text makes it clear that Carmilla’s position as a queer figure has not helped Laura “develop” into the heterosexual woman that homosocial intimacy can create, but rather has permanently queered Laura’s future.

Sharon Marcus argues in her book *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* that female intimacy in England between 1830 and 1880 was not, as many critics have posited, a direct opposition to heterosexual norms, nor was it sidelined as socially radical, misfit behavior, but rather female friendship in that time period was “both a technology of gender and an enactment of the play in the gender system” (56). Marcus’s “play of the system... conceptualizes the yield built *into* systems,” and regarding friendship specifically, it signifies for her the experimentation and “latitude” that allow some freedoms without straying from “the normative rules governing gender difference” (27). However, “Carmilla” complicates Marcus’s argument with its depiction of “play” that strays from the path of development into heterosexual maturity—play that is first invited by its system, only to bring that system down with the very feminine intimacy that is meant to support it: Carmilla, as a queer figure,<sup>1</sup> presents a different kind of intimacy. Marcus’s “play of the system” allows for only so much intimacy of a certain type before that elasticity becomes a point of entry that is necessary for heteronormative development but could just as likely mean its disruption.

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<sup>1</sup> For an interesting take on Carmilla’s ambiguous position, see Joseph Andriano, who describes her as “a pleasure-giving lover-friend and a ‘writhing fiend’” (101). Though he picks up on Carmilla’s blurring of the distinction between lover and friend, Andriano perhaps overlooks the importance of her movement from one to the other, a transition which the text highlights to bring forward that moment of divergence in the system of heteronormative development.

To fully contextualize my argument, I will break down the text's interconnected argument around patriarchy, aristocracy, medicine, and futurity, beginning in section two with Carmilla's welcome as homosocial companion—and aide in heterosexual development—to Laura and Bertha. The “technology” of Laura's heterosexuality, engineered by patriarchs and channeled through ardent friendship, comes out in her initial reaction to Carmilla's arrival. However, as I will discuss in section three, the text demonstrates how this development is diverted into female/female desire around and by Carmilla as queer figure.

Section four will unpack the ways in which the text exposes weaknesses in the English aristocratic system, depicting it as parallel to that of heteronormativity, posing in the comparison the argument that a moment of necessity in the development of both also acts as a point of weakness that could bring down either one, thus solidifying its presentation of Carmilla's queerly powerful influence within and against the heteronormative gender structure of Victorian England. Carmilla, as a distant relative of Laura, is the queer figure that connects both arguments: an incestuous woman whose relations with Bertha and Laura, her relatives, keep them from rather than introduce them to the aristocratic, heteronormative system for which their male relatives were hoping to prime them.

In section five, I will discuss the ways in which the text draws on similarities between Carmilla and 19<sup>th</sup> century male-midwives to elucidate that Carmilla, acting as a midwife over Laura's birth (or lack thereof) into heteronormative society, troubles the male disciplining that was occurring on the Victorian medical scene, revealing the potential to disrupt male control over systems of heterosexuality, patriarchy, and



reproduction. Carmilla's position as a vampire, a creature for whom blood is a vital life force and who takes only females as her prey, parallels Victorian descriptions of bedside blood transfusion, a process that was so innovative and dangerous as to be itself Gothic in nature.<sup>2</sup> The nature of blood as a vital life force was an implicit aspect of male-midwifery, as much as it is at the root of vampirism, and the link between the two opens up Le Fanu's arguments about male gender play and (lack of) control in 19<sup>th</sup> century English medicine.

Finally, I will show how Le Fanu's depiction of Carmilla's subversion and disruption of heterosexual development does not withhold maturity, but instead offers an alternative that, in contrast to past arguments in queer criticism, still allows for maturity, reproduction, continuity, and, indeed, eternal life. "Carmilla" does away with criticism that equates maturity with heterosexuality, offering an alternative futurity that still has a place for same-sex desire.

## **II. Female Intimacy and Heterosexual Development**

The text asserts that Carmilla, welcomed as a female companion for Laura and Bertha—one who would guide them to the femininity required in the reigning heterosexual system—is in fact given access via that welcome to a queer intimacy that alters the heteronormative future of the girls. What begins as or at least mimics the standard homosocial relationship that allows some play but ultimately is meant to uphold heteronormativity – according to Sharon Marcus' study – in "Carmilla," represents a

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Charles Egerton Jennings's thoughts on the process of blood transfusion in 1888: "Is [the procedure] one that can always be performed when most needed—under urgent circumstances and at a moment's notice, often in the night, at Land's End, John O'Groat's House, or Ratcliff Highway, and by an unaided operator, with everything against him?" (3).

moment of weakness that can bring down the heteronormative system that underpins and perpetuates both patriarchy and the aristocracy. If we understand “play” as flexibility or movement in the system, we might see that flexibility in this case refusing to firm up into heterosexuality when it must; if we understand “play” in the sense of *jouissance*, then this is play that becomes far more serious and, as a result, has serious social implications in its challenges to systems of heterosexuality, aristocracy, and patriarchy.

The idea that Carmilla is welcomed into the lives of Laura, and, earlier, of Bertha, as an arbiter of “sentimental friendships legitimated in terms of affection, attraction, and pleasure and federated into marriage and family ties” is made clear in the text’s descriptions of reactions to her arrival—both male and female ones (Marcus 28). General Spielsdorf writes that he “never saw anyone more taken with another at first sight” than his ward Bertha was with Carmilla, and “after a time they had grown very good friends” (Le Fanu 298). The compliments they exchange about each other’s dress, beauty, and wit coincide with Marcus’s acknowledgement that “women took note of other women’s attractions not only as models to emulate but as pleasurable objects to consume” (61). Already beginning the normative path to friendship that will encourage the feminine traits of beauty and good manners—those traits most admired by future husbands—Bertha and Carmilla’s relationship and its benefits for heteronormative development are solidified when General Spielsdorf notes that he “was only too happy, after all, to have secured so charming a companion for my dear girl” (Le Fanu 304). The blessing of Bertha and Carmilla’s friendship by the patriarch for whom Bertha’s development into heteronormative womanhood is a chief concern is an obvious sign that such a friendship is precisely the sort of intimacy understood as essential to social development. Simply the

idea of female companionship of any sort changes a “solitude” into a veritable “great...event” upon which all of Laura’s future hopes are momentarily placed, as Laura makes clear when she observes, “you who live in towns, can have no idea how great an event the introduction of a new *friend* is, in such a solitude as surrounded us” (Le Fanu 258, emphasis mine). Even Carmilla herself acknowledges her usefulness as Laura’s midwife into heterosexuality: ““As I draw near to you, you, in your turn, will draw near to others, and learn the rapture of that cruelty, which yet is love,”” she tells Laura (Le Fanu 263). That Carmilla’s prophetic words do *not*, in fact, come true reveals that Carmilla’s access through endorsed and encouraged female/female intimacy changes, into unregulated and harmful (to Laura’s life as well as to society) same-sex desire.

### III. Laura’s Heteronormative (Un)Development

That friendship, so quickly welcomed by Laura, Bertha, and their patriarchs with the presupposition that it will lead to—indeed, in *necessary* for—a blissful, heterosexual existence for both young women involved, in fact, the text makes plain, acts as an entry point for exposure to same-sex desire that diverts and precludes development into the heteronormative system. Though Marcus writes of the difficulties of differentiating between “women’s ardent friendships” and “the sexual relationships they also formed with one another,” almost all criticism surrounding “Carmilla” comments on the same-sex desire between Carmilla and Laura (54).<sup>3</sup> The question of how such a relationship

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Emma Donoghue’s take on the novella: “This is a lushly romantic novel in which, even after Carmilla has finally been laid to rest with a stake in her heart, Laura is haunted by memories of her seductive friend” (138). In an interesting juxtaposition, Donoghue’s description of a romantic relationship ends with the word “friend,” conflating the two ideas in just the way that Marcus is troubling in *Between Women*. But Donoghue is not alone in her belief that Carmilla and Laura share more than,

appears obvious to earlier criticism is of course complicated by the knowledge that, prior to Marcus's book, not much investigation into the possibility and workings of ardent friendships lacking same-sex desire in Victorian England had taken place.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, criticism perhaps did not, or could not, acknowledge anything *other* than desire between Carmilla and Laura. However, even viewed through the lens of Marcus's work, the text makes plain the idea that Laura's and Carmilla's friendship develops from ardent, heteronormative friendship into an intimacy based upon same-sex desire through Laura's expressions of confusion and regret.

Marcus writes of "how often Victorian friends... used the language of physical attraction to describe their feelings for women whom a larger context shows were friends,

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as Marcus terms it, an "ardent friendship": Saler and Ziegler describe Carmilla as "too romantically ethereal, and too appealingly erotic," believing readers "may pity and perhaps even feel some liking or sympathy for Carmilla, as well as a physical attraction to her" (Marcus 54; Saler and Ziegler 221). Though there may be some fantasy-fulfillment written into such an assessment, Saler and Ziegler's reaction has its roots in a text that has clearly tipped the balance between passionate friendship and same-sex desire, "an erotically charged tale of lesbian love and seduction," according to Tammi Elise Thomas (43). Importantly, Thomas goes on to point out the "interrelated and ultimately inseparable secrets: the secret of Carmilla's vampiric identity and the secret of her same-sex desire" (43). Taking that desire as a given like her fellow critics have done, Thomas still links it irrefutably with vampirism in a way that hints at the textual purpose behind the linking of the two: to highlight Carmilla as threat to both life and heterosexuality.

<sup>4</sup> I see Sharon Marcus as a helpful entry point for "Carmilla," as her study deals with the complexity of same-sex relationships in a way that is new for the field of queer theory. She sets out to address the "focus on secrecy, shame, oppression, and transgression in queer studies" that "has led theorists, historians, and literary critics alike to downplay or refuse the equally powerful ways that same-sex bonds have been acknowledged by the bourgeois liberal public sphere" (Marcus 13). Her study falls in the context of a field eagerly searching for the radicalism of same-sex relationships. Marcus's theories about how those relationships work to uphold the patriarchal system holds true in "Carmilla," yet I see the moment when those relationships are meant to form being diverted through the figure of Carmilla, vampire and female lover, and it is useful to take Marcus as a jumping-off point for further examination of this moment that both upholds and subverts heterosexual, aristocratic, and patriarchal systems.

not lovers,” sharing examples from the lifewriting of various Victorian women, including one Ethel Smyth, whose “autobiography discussed her own sexual affairs with women in coded terms” but freely described the passion between her mother and her mother’s female friends (Marcus 54-55; 55). Stressing the importance of context, Marcus unpacks how the very openness of the passionate language exchanged between female friends in an era when even the most remotely scandalizing diary entry or letter was often burned reveals how that passion was not demonstrative of a sexual relationship, but instead showed its *lack*, fitting within the heteronormative system that allowed it.

“Carmilla” is full of such passionate language that should denote friendship, but it deals with a confusion—using vampirism as its parallel—that would not be present if the friendship between Carmilla and Laura were simply an ardent but platonic one: Laura describes “something of repulsion” in the way she is drawn to Carmilla, an “ambiguous feeling” from the beginning of their friendship (Le Fanu 261). This discomfort in the friendship grows under Carmilla’s “foolish embraces” and attention that is “like the ardour of a lover” (Le Fanu 265). As Marcus makes clear, expressing the passion of friendship in the language of love was not uncommon between women in Victorian England, nor was physical contact between female friends: therefore, Laura’s reaction is a clear indicator in its very discomfort that her interactions with Carmilla push friendship to another level (55; 57). Most importantly, the text makes it clear that the desire is not unrequited on Laura’s part: she exclaims to Carmilla, “I hate it; I don’t know you—I don’t know myself when you look so and talk so,” and her inadvertent slippage between a judgment on Carmilla and a judgment on herself indicates that the feelings of the two

are the same, a collapse of two into “one” that echoes female/female desire (Le Fanu 265).

The text highlights the weak points in the heteronormative system specifically with Laura’s failed attempt to place her relationship with Carmilla in heterosexual terms—“was there here a disguise and a romance? ... What if a boyish lover had found his way into the house...? But there were many things against the hypothesis”—that indicates the desire commonly found between a young suitor and the female in whom he is interested exists here between Carmilla and Laura, yet between women (Le Fanu 265). But the importance of these moments hinges not on the recognition of same-sex desire between Carmilla and Laura—an idea that is not at all new in a critical view of “Carmilla”—but in the way that desire develops: invited into the home of her female lovers as a friend, Carmilla’s presence as a kind of midwife to heteronormativity in fact allows her access to alter Laura’s transition to heteronormative maturity. The anticipated rerouting of Laura’s desire to a male object through an ardent friendship with a peer does not arrive.

Carmilla functions not only as a disruption to Laura’s heterosexual development, but also to her moral, religious one, diverting her from becoming a dutiful Christian wife (with an unquestionably Christian eternity) and therefore removing her from yet another type of futurity offered by the existing patriarchal, heteronormative, bourgeois system. Linda Ruth Williams writes that, “rather than being the termination and negation of all the good things in life, death [in ‘Carmilla’] is the fulfillment of life’s pleasures, but in a radically un-Christian way – death is a woman’s summer” (163). The “radically un-Christian” aspects of Carmilla’s version of death and futurity that Williams brings up

seem to be more than just a rejection of the Christian afterlife, for they present that afterlife as the sole possibility for heteronormative futurity, whereas Carmilla's eternal life, the text reveals, disrupts and, indeed, outlasts such a possibility. Yet Le Fanu's depiction of the approval of General Spielsdorf and Laura's father—and even the hopeful anticipation of Bertha and Laura—all indicate a criticism of that kind of homosocial intimacy that is a crucial point of necessity for development in the heteronormative system that simultaneously threatens the establishments—patriarchal, religious, reproductive, aristocratic—that allow that system to perpetuate itself.<sup>5</sup>

#### **IV. 'The great and titled dead'**

Le Fanu presents the continuity of culture and values as a medical condition, describing the aristocracy as diseased and weak: the patriarchs of "Carmilla" are, in fact, old men, widowers who place all their hopes on their single children who themselves begin to waste away under the effects of Carmilla's vampirism. Laura's father has been "rather an invalid for some time" by the time Carmilla enters his life (Le Fanu 279). The medical language in the text draws attention to the crumbling class system, which itself is so closely tied to systems of patriarchy and heteronormativity.

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<sup>5</sup> Drawing the connection between the gender flexibility in "Carmilla" and the freedom in masquerade, Thomas writes that "the masquerade enabled women to usurp the powers of male privilege, the masked assembly pos[ing] a profound (if temporary) threat to patriarchal structures," equating Carmilla's "masked" role as vampire and lesbian with the sexually liberating masquerade party. Her analysis is interesting viewed in comparison with my argument, for it offers a lens over Carmilla's entry into Laura's life—lesbian lover masked by the standards of intimate female friendship—but I see that role as posing a threat to the heteronormative, patriarchal system that is not "temporary" at all, as evidenced by Laura's permanently altered future (and, presumably, Bertha's, and other female victims as well, as per the reproductive terms of the vampire in the text).

Yet Le Fanu presents Carmilla as the figure—vampire and therefore instigator of the wasting disease that plagues the area around Laura’s schloss—who brings these medical terms to the foreground. In his examination of disease and the presentation of the Irish other in “Carmilla,” Martin Willis points out that “it would be commonplace to state that ‘Carmilla’ is a narrative of infection” considering how most criticism of narratives like Le Fanu’s brings up the connections between vampirism and disease (111). The thorough investigation that follows in Willis’ argument allows that common aspect of criticism to take on new meaning, linking contagion and miasma with English views of Irish otherness. His argument, however, by focusing specifically on how “the evolution of the story’s vampirism is littered with both medical terminology and specific medical images” that are connected with Irishness (Willis 112), stops short of linking vampirism and disease in the novel to its declining aristocracy. Le Fanu is careful to assign *both* vampirism and aristocracy characteristics of weakness and disease and in doing so reveals Carmilla’s position as the connection between and interruption of these two networks of blood, the physical and the genealogical. In her interaction with Laura, her aristocratic relative as well as her prey, Carmilla effectively queers Laura’s future from its heterosexual path in a moment that is crucial to systems of aristocracy and heteronormativity, and Le Fanu’s metaphorical argument around the discourse of medicine makes that moment visible in the text.

The novella begins with a description of the old schloss where Laura and her father live, emphasizing its isolation and disuse in language that both indicates its impending dilapidation and also has echoes in the Gothic language of vampirism. The narrator, Laura describes a “very old and narrow” road leading to a “drawbridge, never



raised in my time” and a “Gothic chapel,” emphasizing ancient mystery as well as a sense of fading life and vigor—qualities of the vampire Carmilla as well (Le Fanu 244). When Laura moves on to mention the ruins of castle Karnstein and its surrounding village, the language links decay and the aristocracy even more obviously:

...There is, only three miles westward... a ruined village, with its quaint little church, now roofless, in the aisle of which are the mouldering tombs of the proud family of Karnstein, now extinct, who once owned the equally desolate chateau which, in the thick of the forest, overlooks the silent ruins of the town. (Le Fanu 244-245)

The detail and repetition in such a description works to highlight the disease and decline of the old aristocracy, and it comes among the first paragraphs of the text, even before language of infection is used in reference to vampirism. This foregrounding of a fading aristocracy highlights disease as, significantly, equally as important for its workings within an aristocratic system as for its evident metaphors with life-draining monsters. In fact, the very currency of both types of disease—blood, the indicator of aristocratic lineage as well as the vampire’s greatest desire—links the two definitively together within the text.

The text moves into an unpacking of authenticity in aristocracy to highlight the homosocial intimacy that Carmilla uses as a cover for her vampirism, revealing how, in both systems, the coded signals that are necessary for the perpetuation of aristocratic relationships and, indeed, of the system itself can be easily turned against their participants. The system’s insularity enables it to perpetuate its privileges, but also functions as a weakness. When Laura’s father first proposes to Carmilla’s mother that Carmilla stay at the schloss following the carriage accident, his lengthy dialogue is followed by the remark that “there was something in this lady’s air and appearance so

distinguished, and even imposing, and in her manner so engaging, as to impress one, quite apart from the dignity of her equipage, that she was a person of consequence” (Le Fanu 254). As if qualifying the suddenness of Laura’s father’s offer, the confirmation that Carmilla’s mother is of noble blood comes as a reminder that she can, therefore, be trusted. But the text points out signs of her aristocracy that can just as easily be faked: a “manner” and “air” can be acted with as little effort as an “equipage” can be bought.<sup>6</sup> A moment later, the text emphasizes this lack of authenticity when the lady gives “a glance which [Laura] fancied was not quite so affectionate as one might have anticipated from the beginning of the scene” (La Fanu 254). Laura’s perception of this sudden change in behavior remarks on how easily counterfeited that behavior was to begin with, pointing out a basis of aristocratic authenticity that at its root is not authentic at all.

This incipient instability relayed in the symbolic system that ensures the future of the aristocracy and its values—how can the aristocracy continue to be important without symbols of its importance?—anticipates a later moment in which the text transfers its concerns from the outward signs of class to the threat from within the aristocracy itself. Carmilla has aristocratic blood, but her demonstration of that blood—one that allows her access to Laura as a homosocial companion and an object of desire—hides her other relationship to blood, the more monstrous one of vampirism. The internal threat is brought to the forefront of the exchange between Laura’s father and Carmilla’s mother when, though the woman’s lack of authenticity becomes plain in the text, it is

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<sup>6</sup> Laura and her father stand as clear examples of the ease with which the line between aristocracy and bourgeoisie can be blurred: “My father...retired upon a pension and his patrimony, and purchased this feudal residence, and the small estate on which it stands, a bargain” (Le Fanu 244). The value they place on the rank of others is already complicated by the text’s foregrounding of their own ambiguous position.

unrecognizable to Laura's father: he "did not seem to perceive the change" in her behavior (Le Fanu 254). Highlighting his mistake allows the text to bring forward the links between a misreading of aristocratic authenticity and a dismissal of its internal threat: Carmilla as a "monster" from within both systems of aristocracy and heterosexuality threatens the young female—Laura—who, through reproduction, is necessary for those system's perpetuation. In a scene during which Laura's father unpacks his collection of recently-cleaned family paintings, he uncovers "a wonderful likeness" of Carmilla—literally wonderful, we discover, because it is the immortal Carmilla painted in 1698 when she called herself the Countess Mircalla Karnstein (Le Fanu 271; 272). When Laura points out the "absolute miracle" of the similarities between the painting and Carmilla, however, her father "seemed but little struck by it, and went on talking to the picture cleaner" (Le Fanu 272). In an exact repetition of his earlier failure to understand the weaknesses within the aristocratic system, Laura's father fails to recognize the monster that Carmilla is, even when the proof is literally right before his eyes.

Yet there is more happening in this scene apart from the potential uncovering of Carmilla as a threat to Laura's life: the threat she poses to Laura's heteronormative development—one that her invitation to the schloss implies that she can complete—is also laid bare and ignored. Laura asks, "Will you let me hang this picture in my room, papa?" and his acquiescence comes with equally as little notice as before, a "pretty speech" about Carmilla's beauty and that is all (Le Fanu 272). Carmilla's reaction to Laura's question, however, tells more: "She was leaning back in her seat, her fine eyes under their long lashes gazing on me in contemplation, and she smiled in a kind of

rapture” (Le Fanu 272). The text highlights not only Carmilla’s inspection of Laura in this moment—her “rapture” at Laura’s request—but also Laura’s notice of it, her admiring gaze that takes in Carmilla’s “fine eyes” and “long lashes” as they share the intimate knowledge that Laura wants those eyes, in painted form, hanging upon her wall. Laura’s request later provokes Carmilla to “let her pretty head sink upon [Laura’s] shoulder,” and Carmilla even “kissed [her] silently,” until Laura asks if the other girl has “an affair of the heart going on,” an idea that connects the same-sex desire between the two young women (a metaphorical affair of the heart) with the lust for blood associated with vampirism (a desire focused around the physical heart, the center of blood activity in the body) (Le Fanu 273). The intimacy that Laura’s father hoped to promote by inviting Carmilla into his home, an intimacy meant to help Laura reach heteronormative maturity, changes in this moment: Laura’s recognition of Carmilla’s desire as “an affair of the heart” indicates that Laura is maturing into sexual desire, but her relationship with Carmilla places the moment of her sexual awakening outside of heteronormativity. Laura’s father fails to notice the change, just as he failed to notice the necessary moment in the aristocratic system gone wrong and similarly failed to remark upon the painting’s revelation that Carmilla has an inhuman ability not to age—exactly as he fails to recognize the “play” of his daughter’s female friendship becoming something else entirely. His blindness to anything but the future as an extension of patriarchal vision — made manifest in the paintings he can now proudly display in his schloss, the physical demonstration of his perpetuating aristocratic line—mirrors his blindness to anything but a heterosexual, patriarchal, aristocratic futurity for Laura, his investment in continuing reproduction within those systems.

## V. 'No sacrifice without blood'

Carmilla's role as presiding midwife over Laura's heterosexuality gives her entry into Laura's life, for she is welcomed by patriarchy like Laura's oblivious father. However, her lack of fulfillment in that role, due in part to vampirism and in part to her same-sex desire, functions to display the gender play that is essential to that heterosexual midwifery, all surrounding a discourse of blood, life/death, intimacy, and reproduction. Carmilla's place as both midwife and vampire parallels descriptions of Le Fanu's contemporary male-midwives, medical men who were pioneering blood transfusion in order to make a place for themselves in the birthing chamber. In an examination of the discourse surrounding both practices—literal midwifery in 19<sup>th</sup> century England and Carmilla's figurative midwifery over heterosexual birth—Le Fanu's criticism of male attempts at control over a previously female space comes to the surface.

In his 1832 book *An Introduction to the Practice of Midwifery*, Thomas Denman described the effects of post-birth uterine hemorrhage on a young mother:

She was lying on her back, with the most perfect death-like countenance, the extremities were of a marble coldness, and the surface of the body generally cold; respiration excessively laborious; the eyelids closed; the eyes perfectly insensible to light; the jaw dropped. No pulsation could be felt... in fact there was not the slightest appearance of life excepting the breathing... There could be no hesitation as to the propriety of performing transfusion in this instance; it being the only remedy which afforded the slightest chance of success. (415)

Compare such a description to Laura's sufferings under Carmilla's vampiric draining of her blood: "I had grown pale, my eyes were dilated and darkened underneath, and the languor which I had long felt began to display itself in my countenance" (Le Fanu 282). Stillness, inability to react to light, and lack of blood in the veins are all similar

symptoms, not to mention the obvious connection of blood as a vital life force—in Denman’s case, for reanimating the hemorrhaging mother; in Le Fanu’s, for reanimating the long-dead Carmilla, and, in a sense, for reanimating Laura, too, by preparing her for eternal life as a vampire. Denman’s writing, though medical in nature, takes on a sinister, Gothic tone:

It frequently happens, in the more desperate forms of uterine haemorrhage, that the female is brought into a dangerous state of exhaustion, so that her life becomes placed in the utmost peril... and if nothing were done for her relief beyond the usual methods, she would certainly though perhaps slowly sink into the grave. (409)

Denman builds up a suspenseful narrative of “the utmost peril” and ends with the gothic image of the “grave”—just as Le Fanu does in his fiction, although, critically, Le Fanu ends “Carmilla” by following up the affirmation of her death with the evocation of a continuing immortal “light step of Carmilla at the drawing-room door” (319). Le Fanu’s final depiction of Carmilla as midwife – albeit a queer one, for she at once fills the roles of giver of life and predator, roles which are important not only for their connection to re-animation and queer futures – reaffirms the text’s previous depictions of Carmilla as a midwife of sorts: one who (unsuccessfully) presides, as a formative female companion, over Laura’s “birth” into heteronormative society. Querying and queering Carmilla’s vampirism-as-midwifery allows us to understand the failures inherent in a system built on female intimacy-as-midwifery: just as her role as the queer figure of the vampire alters her symmetry with givers of life through blood transfusion, it is her position as Laura’s midwife into heteronormalcy that allows Carmilla an entry point to setting Laura on a path to a non-heteronormative future—and therefore for subverting the system of patriarchal control playing out through midwifery in Victorian England.

In her essay “Transfusion, with Teeth,” Kim Pelis draws connections between the Romantic idolization of the lone scientific (male) genius and the radical process of blood transfusion as pioneered by male-midwife James Blundell, noting most importantly that the procedure allowed medical men of the time access to a new role in “a teeming ‘marketplace’ of healers” (Pelis 12). The amateur medical interest against which 19<sup>th</sup> century medical men would be competing and to which Pelis alludes comes forward in “Carmilla” when Laura’s father is described as having “piqued himself on being something of a physician” (Le Fanu 253). The link between Pelis’s article and the gender concerns of Le Fanu’s text become clear in drawing the comparison between the two textual moments: 19<sup>th</sup> century medicine was a stage upon which a struggle for discipline, control, and authenticity was taking place. For Pelis, this stage lay more specifically in the birthing chamber, where trained medical men, with the help of blood transfusion, were wresting control of the birthing process from untrained, often female, midwives, asserting patriarchal control over an otherwise female space. Le Fanu’s mention of amateur medicine shows Laura’s father attempting the same control—the ability to physically examine and manipulate as well as, in a god-like way, give (or, at least, preserve) life—over Carmilla. Yet Le Fanu specifically presents Carmilla as a queer figure who interferes with and exposes this patriarchal gender play, for as much as she mirrors the male-midwife position, she clearly represents its antithesis as a vampire and predator. Rather than give life (or lives: the mother’s as well as the child’s) as 19<sup>th</sup> century male-midwives did, Carmilla feeds on life, sucking it away until a new creature is born after death. For Le Fanu to draw parallels between two such opposing figures is to expose the problems in the presumably “good” contemporary practice of male-

midwifery. The male interloper in the female space of the birthing chamber, asserting his control over blood, the body, and the very line between life and death, is as much an interference in a previously intimately female space as Carmilla is a disruption in the lives of her female victims.

Le Fanu's warning about the limits of patriarchal control is evident in the text's comparisons between the medical procedure of blood transfusion—the process that allowed male control over the birthing chamber—and Carmilla's vampirism. Pelis writes that Blundell “became convinced that the procedure [of blood transfusion] should be limited to women on the verge of death from uterine haemorrhage”—a decision that, quite conveniently, “legitimated, even necessitated, a male practitioner's place in the birthing chamber” (1; 18). Blood transfusion offered medical men of 19<sup>th</sup> century England a chance to fill a position previously monopolized by female midwives, and such a patriarchal re-structuralizing of the birth process was reflected in the procedure of transfusion itself: “Blundell's transfusion recipient... lies, passive, chaste, and near death, on the bed,” while a man prepares to reanimate her with his life-giving fluids (the donor blood was “preferably from a male of the species, as men ‘bleed more freely and are less liable to faint’”) (Pelis 22; 6). Blood transfusion becomes a perverse mirror of the heterosexual sex act, with blood as the fluid exchanged, not semen, and yet the process of transfusion involves an even *more* gendered distribution of power and control than heterosexual sex itself does: for 19<sup>th</sup> century medicine, the process meant exchange between an active man and a passive, often not even lifelike woman, all in the space of woman's bed. Rather than create life in a mutually productive coming-together as through heterosexual reproduction, men *control* the life of the woman.



Just as blood transfusion can act as a displacement of heterosexual sex, “Carmilla” takes the exchange of blood between Carmilla and Laura as a mirror of the heterosexual sex act, and while Carmilla is slowly killing Laura, she is also offering her immortality after death, a reversal of the gendered power dynamics inherent in discourse surrounding 19<sup>th</sup> century blood transfusion. The metaphorical “blood” between Carmilla and Laura helps to reveal Carmilla’s position as one subverting the heterosexuality inherent in male-midwifery and blood transfusion: Carmilla would “draw [Laura] to her” and tell her, ““If your dear heart is wounded, my wild heart bleeds with yours”” (Le Fanu 263). This exchange of blood, even if imaginary, recalls the flow of blood between donor and recipient in blood transfusion, and while the male midwife was never a donor, the sympathy Carmilla expresses fits with the emotions of medical men: according to Pelis, Blundell “often commented on how it was sympathy that had first compelled him to use transfused blood in an effort to restore life to women sinking under uterine haemorrhage” (6). However, importantly, rather than “restor[ing] life” to Laura, Carmilla’s language and embrace leave Laura “wish[ing] to extricate [her]self; but [Laura’s] energies [seem] to fail” (Le Fanu 264). Carmilla’s linguistic echoes of male-midwifing and blood transfusion clearly oppose the 19<sup>th</sup> century procedure in their effects, causing Laura to lose energy rather than be re-animated. The text brings this moment forward to present Carmilla as the problematic midwife—both acting as one through her parallels to Le Fanu’s contemporary medical men and also failing at the role—to reveal that, in the same way that she threatens Laura’s health and blood, she threatens Laura’s pathway to heteronormativity, despite Carmilla’s role as midwife (through homosocial exposure) into such a system. At the same time, Carmilla’s position as corrupt midwife exposes the

similarities between Carmilla and real male-midwives of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, men who were meant to be acting to protect women's lives and reproduction. That there are such parallels between Carmilla, vampire and predator, and those men reveals the threat male-midwifery posed to the intimate female space of the birthing chamber—a space meant to be sacred to heterosexual reproduction and the heteronormative system itself. While Carmilla's midwifing of Laura into heterosexuality becomes diverted into a disruption of the medicinal patriarchal disciplining that Laura's father attempts, their exchanges of blood undermine the heterosexual parallels inherent in the process of blood transfusion in a way that exposes how the entire scientific, sanitized, male protection of heterosexuality is subverted by the very female intimacy patriarchs seek to control as a means to heterosexual initiation.

### **VI. Carmilla's Queer Futurity**

Rather than paint Carmilla and Laura's subversive intimacy as a point of interruption that offers no hope of futurity—an idea that would equate heterosexuality with maturity as many critics have argued in the past—the text then shows how Laura's same-sex desire, though it has routed her off the path to heteronormativity, has, in fact, granted her an *endless* futurity, as well as the ability to reproduce outside of the heterosexual system, offering an alternative to the structure that used to contain her.<sup>7</sup> We learn first of her lack of engagement, even after Carmilla's supposed destruction via stake

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Nicholas Rance, who writes that “if Gothic metaphor comfortingly insists that what is apprehended as all too natural is not in the course of nature, *Carmilla* would tend to reverse the process by suggesting the naturalness of what conventionally may be labeled ‘unnatural’” (57). Though he seems to take for granted that Carmilla is “lesbian first and a vampire second,” Rance is picking up on the text's unique Gothic staging of futurity outside heteronormality (57).

and decapitation, in the heterosexual system: she admits that the task of writing her narrative has “unstrung [her] nerves for months to come, and reintroduced a shadow of the unspeakable horror which years after [her] deliverance continued to make [her] days and nights dreadful, and solitude insupportably terrific” (Le Fanu 316). That Laura’s “solitude” continues for years after Carmilla’s vampire death indicates she has not entered the heterosexual system of Victorian England—she has not married a man or solidified her futurity through heterosexual reproduction—and in the prologue of her narrative, written by the compiler of Dr. Hesselius’s notes, we learn that “she had died in the interval” between writing her story and seeing it published (Le Fanu 243). The deliberate lack of mention of a heterosexual futurity—of anyone left behind her after her unfortunate, and presumably early, death—fits with the text’s argument that, via her relationship with Carmilla, Laura’s desire developed outside of heteronormativity.

Yet Laura has a futurity all the same, one even more lasting and eternal than the one granted her by the heterosexual futurity of children via heterosexual reproduction: she has the eternal life of the vampire, in more ways than one, for not only will she, as victim of a vampire, potentially develop into a vampire herself after her death, but it is also her experiences with a vampire that gave her agency and opportunity to write her own—eternal—story. The text expresses the seduction of the vampire for its prey in terms that mirror those that preempt heterosexual reproduction, writing that “the vampire is prone to... engrossing vehemence, resembling the passion of love,” and it will “husband and protract its murderous enjoyment with the refinement of an epicure, and heighten it by the gradual approaches of an artful courtship” (Le Fanu 317). Such vocabulary makes clear the parallels between the heterosexual futurity Laura would have had in the

heteronormative system and that which vampirism—synonymous, in the text, with Carmilla’s same-sex desire for her<sup>8</sup>--offers her. But later evidence moves beyond the offerings of a heterosexual futurity, making it clear that, indeed, the non-heteronormative world of the vampire (and same-sex desire) actually offers a *longer-lasting* sense of life and reproduction: “it is the nature of vampires to increase and multiply, but according to an ascertained and ghostly law” (Le Fanu 318).<sup>9</sup> The “ghostly law” of this non-heteronormative reproduction means a development into eternal life beyond the grave. The lasting nature of this vampiric re-animation is emphasized repeatedly throughout the text, not only in conversations between Carmilla and Laura, but even by General Spielsdorf, who asks himself, “Into what quackeries will not people rush for a last chance, where all accustomed means have failed, and the life of a beloved object is *at stake*?” Here, Spielsdorf means “at risk,” but he also evokes not only “the stakes” in the struggle with the vampire—the systems of aristocracy, patriarchy, and heterosexuality—but also a literal stake, since Bertha will likely develop into a vampire and need to have “a sharp stake driven through [her] heart” to be killed (Le Fanu 310, emphasis mine;

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<sup>8</sup> See Donoghue again: “It is hardly a stretch to draw an analogy between same-sex desire and the vampire’s thirst for blood: a secret craving for the exchange of fluids by mouth, a nonreproductive melding of bodies, associated with disease, sterility, and death” (137). One important difference in “Carmilla”—a difference that forms the basis of my argument—is that, in this text, vampirism is hardly connected with sterility. Instead, it offers a form of reproduction through same-sex desire: the production of more vampires.

<sup>9</sup> For a different reading of the end of “Carmilla,” see Thomas: “the violent destruction of Carmilla and concomitant restoration of heterosexist order coalesce as a tragic ending of loss that prevents Laura from enjoying the sexual pleasures of Carmilla’s nightly visitations” (60). Seeing this “loss” as a “last word” is Thomas’s attempt to privilege a queer reading of the text, but such a reading also disavows any chance at nonheteronormative futurity—a futurity that the text makes possible by emphasizing not loss at the end but rather, in addition to “the nature of vampires to increase and multiply,” Carmilla’s continuing ability to evade death (Thomas 60; Le Fanu 318-319).

315). Bertha's eternal life through vampirism offers her the possibility of life after death, a possibility denied to her by the heteronormative futurity of marriage and childbearing—a futurity that in itself is not guaranteed, as evidenced by General Spielsdorf's position as a childless widower.

Laura, too, as a victim of Carmilla, is at risk to develop into a vampire upon her death, and the text highlights the eternal life made available by that reanimation through conversations between Laura and Carmilla—conversations that make clear how much more lasting is Carmilla's queer futurity than what would have been Laura's heteronormative one. “You and I are one *for ever*,” Carmilla tells Laura, and that such access to eternal life can come only through the vampirism-as-desire that Carmilla and Laura share is clear (Le Fanu 264). “To die as lovers may—to die together, so that they may live together,” Carmilla proposes to Laura, and the suggestion that death is a pathway to a new kind of life is one that firmly ties their queer desire to a futurity otherwise unavailable to them (Le Fanu 270). The obvious argument that this futurity offers more than one available via heterosexuality comes at the very end: although Carmilla's would-be slayer and former lover cannot return to kill her because “death prevented him,” “the light step of Carmilla” persists beyond even her second death (Le Fanu 319). Ultimately, the novella ends with the revelation that the heterosexual futurity manifest in Carmilla's heterosexual lover is inferior to the endless future attainable only through vampirism and same-sex desire.

## **VII. Conclusion: ‘The glorious hope of a blessed futurity’**

While the future of patriarchy, heterosexuality, and aristocracy are threatened by the insistent insertion of the female vampire into old networks of relationships (she is

Laura's ancestor, after all), rather than signaling the end of these systems in an evolutionary dying out, "Carmilla" presents as the result of this intimate play the alternative of a queer future that, existing outside heteronormative structures, still allows for reproduction and eternal life. Sharon Marcus's work in *Between Women* seeks to counteract preceding critical work that "equated maturity with heterosexuality" and "made it almost inevitable that same-sex friendships would come to be defined as antithetical to the family and the married couple" by examining those same-sex friendships more closely to determine how they functioned without sexual desire to uphold, with some play, the heteronormative system (Marcus 29). She teases out relationships between women that are not necessarily radical or transgressive, nor are they fundamentally "lesbian." However, "Carmilla" examines the space between ardent friendships and female/female desire with its argument that those same female friendships necessary for development into heterosexuality act as a point of entry, encouraging an intimacy that could just as easily turn into same-sex desire, thereby midwifing young women into a non-heteronormative futurity. This argument both refutes and complicates both Marcus' claims about the ways in which female intimacy upheld the heterosexual system despite the play they afforded women within it *and* the critical work that came before Marcus by positing that a non-heteronormative future need not be automatically equated with lack of maturity, sexual or otherwise. Carmilla is, in some way, a figure within yet antithetical to both: she is one of Marcus' ardent friends who ends up diverting Laura's heterosexuality, and at the same time, she counteracts "heterosexuality-as-maturity" by offering the objects of her same-sex desire eternal life and a form of reproduction that allows for continuation without heterosexuality.

In his detailed analysis of “Carmilla,” *Dracula*, and Freud’s concept of the uncanny, Ken Gelder notes that Le Fanu’s “‘paternal figures’... form a kind of bureaucracy which signifies Carmilla *as* a vampire precisely in order to manage the threat – and, eventually, to destroy it” (49). By considering the text’s foregrounding of how that same patriarchal guidance allowed Carmilla into Laura’s life in the first place—indeed, that those “paternal figures” encouraged, invited, and allowed intimacy between the two young women at first in order to perpetuate their own investments in the development of female adolescents—in addition to the fact that their success at completely and irrevocably having destroyed Carmilla is questionable by the end of the novella, we see that Gelder’s discussion that follows about the patriarchal tendency in both “Carmilla” and *Dracula* to believe that “illusion is ideology itself” (the vampire is illusion, but it must become ideology; in other words, it must be believed in order to be destroyed) becomes fitting for my discussion here, in a new way (54). The “illusion” of the vampire’s existence mirrors the “illusion” of Laura and Carmilla’s same-sex desire: it must be believed in to be seen, and the “paternal figures” who seek out homosocial interaction for their daughters no more anticipate the lesbian desire that comes of that intimacy than they do the vampirism. On another level, however, the very myth of Carmilla’s vampirism is illusion itself: believing ideologically that after their intervention “that territory [of Styria] has never since been plagued by the visits of a vampire,” the men in the text overlook that vampire’s lasting effect upon Laura, to whom “the image of Carmilla returns to memory with ambiguous alternations” (Le Fanu 316; 319). The illusion, then, “Carmilla” argues, is not in vampirism and lesbianism, but, in fact, in the systems that seek to prevent and divert them, for it is in the process of that prevention—

encouraging homosocial contact to develop young woman into heteronormativity—that the opposite becomes true, and a queer future becomes a possibility, and more than that, a longer lasting (literally eternal) alternative.

This “play” between illusion and ideology, one giving the lie to the other, makes “Carmilla” meaningful for queer criticism today. Yes, as Marcus astutely points out, Victorian “ardent friendships” often operated to uphold a system of heterosexual marriage and childbearing. But what happens when that homosocial intimacy, so crucially important for the heterosexual system, gives access to same-sex desires that exist outside the system? What about the moment when the illusion of female-female desire is embedded in the structural ideology of the heterosexual system—turning ideology into illusion and illusion into reality? That moment, otherwise invisible, surfaces in “Carmilla,” made visible through metaphors of vampirism, medicine, and class, and the interrupted development into heterosexuality is diverted into a rebirth, a reanimation, a queer future that can reproduce itself outside heteronormativity for decades—centuries—to come.



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