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Damsels and Demons: Transgressive Females from Clarissa to Carmilla

Abstract: Stories featuring female vampires transgress moral boundaries and subvert the cultural allocation of gender. The purpose of this paper is to look at the first Victorian example of such a story, "Carmilla" by J. S. Le Fanu, and see its ambiguous presentation of female characters and sexuality from the perspective of the literary delineation of women in the early eighteenth-century and later gothic novels, thus demonstrating their continuity in the depiction of both female subjugation and self-assertion, but also inadequacy of gender distinctiveness. Defoe's and Richardson's novels feature strong, assertive women who subvert moral, class and gender codes. Their "unfeminine" resourcefulness, obduracy and determination to follow their own will clash with patriarchal expectations of subservience and ultimately lead to their victimisation. Distressed, but not defeated, these characters anticipate the arrival of gothic "damsels in distress" who move in a world similarly populated by villains who similarly prevail and transgress conventional representations of gender. "Carmilla" likewise features controlled female characters juxtaposed with the empowered ones. The strength and twist of the story lie in the presentation of women who, bowing to patriarchy, deceive and subvert its solidity by acknowledging female sexuality and demonstrating its endurance, permeating the crust of Victorian male respectability.

Biologically impossible, morally offensive and aesthetically dichotomous, vampires epitomise transgression. They are life and death; repulsion and magnetic attraction in one. Over the past two centuries they have permeated western art: literature, film, iconography. Originating in folklore, appropriated by both high and popular art, they have re-entered collective consciousness, constituting one of the most potent myths in western culture (Janion 7–9). Because their survival depends on close physical contact, reading vampires is also to read the most personal human relations, such as that of parent and child, often interpreted through Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalysis, or adult erotic relations of various configurations, which, in the last decades, feminist and gender studies have made their domain. Because of their notorious transgression of moral boundaries, tampering with taboo, class consciousness and gender certainties, vampire stories are rich ground for exploration of social, cultural, psychological and ethical issues. Though creeping into collective English consciousness gradually from the beginning of the nineteenth century

with Polidori and Byron, they grabbed popular attention in Victorian times, especially with *Varney the Vampire* and, later, with Le Fanu's "Carmilla" and Stoker's *Dracula*.

This paper proposes that the presentation of female literary vampires and their victims is better understood if situated in relation to the role of female characters in the English novel from its critically acknowledged launch at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The presentation of female characters reflects the social and cultural positioning of gender which, despite the considerable span of time encompassing these novels, is change-resistant: the authorial management of female characters always, and often unknowingly, splinters the solid orthodoxy of gender dualism and stages a clash between a female character and her imposed familial, social and economic conditions. To a large extent, female presence in the male-dominated canonical English novel of the eighteenth century is both a continued story of repression and subjugation and a hopeless cry for self-assertion. The portrayal of female characters in these novels is often echoed in the representation of women in gothic novels, and this reverberates in a transmuted form in Victorian vampire stories. This paper explores factors that shaped female characters before the arrival of vampires and that, in metamorphosed form, produced what is only seemingly a contradiction in terms, that is, a demonic damsel, a transgressor, a female vampire.

In many eighteenth-century novels, women are either relegated to the background where they simply do not matter in the all-for-men world of adventure and exploration, as in *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719), or become a muted, yet favourably beautiful, presence in the background, as in Smollett's picaresques. But when they do come further forward, they can be sharply depicted characters who subvert expected subjugation and powerlessness by vigorously marking their presence in the patriarchal web, yet not effectively undermining it. The early stages of the English novel abound in fascinating representations of strong, level-headed heroines who demonstrate that this new-fangled genre is the artistic locus to expose the crudity and inadequacy of imposed gender distinction.

In his first novelistic attempts, Daniel Defoe demonstrates that single women are damsels in distress in the harsh reality of the early eighteenth century. The eponymous heroine of *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders* (1722) soon discovers that without the financial shield of her family and her father's purse, she needs a male protector to stay alive. Marriage is the best solution and offers lasting stability, so with the demise of her bread-winning husband, she must look for another male sponsor. However, the world in which Defoe's female protagonists move is paved not by "real men," gentlemen-protectors, but by life-draining, unsupportive villains, ill

advisors, unscrupulous creditors, dishonest debtors, egoistic suitors, unfaithful and irresponsible lovers. In procession these men come and go, dying or dumping their women, leaving them prey to the urban jungle. The women can either conform to patriarchal streaming and wither, waiting passively for protection, or transgress the boundaries of their sex and take on the male roles of initiators, suitors, trades(wo)men, investors. Operating within the constraints of a patriarchal, pre-industrial, pre-Pill world, Defoe's women refuse to be victims. Labelled as bad unfeeling mothers who abandon their children and as incontinently passionate lovers, they refuse to conform and strip off their damsels' corsets, yet seldom achieving wholly untrammelled independence in the process. Sexually liberated, they select their partners and, tainted by hard lessons, drain, if not their men's blood yet, then certainly their purses.

Moll Flanders relates the end of her first loveless marriage of convenience, in a crude, matter-of-fact way: "It concerns the story in hand very little to enter into the further particulars of the family . . . only to observe that I had two children by him, and that at the end of five years he died" (Defoe, *Moll Flanders* 63). She quickly discovers that "marriages were . . . the consequence of politic schemes for forming interests, and carrying on business" and that "money only made a woman agreeable" (72–73). Whenever possible, both Moll and Roxana in Defoe's 1724 novel choose husbands who are rich, abandon those who turn out to be impoverished and resort to theft and prostitution in order to survive when they happen to be on their own. For her disintegrated morality, Moll Flanders is branded by her own author in the Preface as anti-hero, not an exemplar to follow (2). A transgressor of conventional boundaries of gender and respectability, she is associated with "folly and wickedness," and "levity and looseness" (3), features acceptable in men only, as opposed to the classically feminine virtues of penitence and inner beauty that she lacks. It is no accident that Daniel Defoe chooses a male, Robinson Crusoe, to illustrate the precepts of a good Christian life and hard-earned conversion. His "wickedness" is never bodily; Robinson remains a sexual embryo throughout the major part of the narrative. Unlike those of his female counterparts, his urges throughout the two-decade stay on the island are never sexual. It seems that just as the death of a beautiful woman is the most poetic subject, moral degeneration is similarly best illustrated with the use of a female body. It must be remembered that the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are still an era when "religion and literature were primary and interdependent vehicles of apprehension" (Auerbach 219). A female sinner is more abhorrent, especially when sinning involves the management of her own body.

Richardson's heroines are likewise equipped with emotional endurance and determination to have their own way, all within the limits of their inferior social

position. *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740–41) begins with the Preface by the Editor, in which he declares that the purpose of the work is to "improve the Minds of the Youth of both Sexes. . . . to inculcate Religion and Morality. . . . to give practical examples" (*Pamela* 3). Similarly, *Clarissa: or The History of a Young Lady* (1748–49) offers a character who is declared to be "an exemplar to her sex" (Richardson, *Clarissa* 1: xiv). Richardson's heroines are not morally transgressive the way Defoe's women are. On the contrary, sex is out of the question for each of them, therefore in the end they each get their reward. There is much more inwardness in Richardson's epistolary narratives, self-preoccupation and pinpoint presentation of fluctuation of emotions. In both these novels psychological and sociological acuity is intriguing. The first part of *Pamela* depicts the eponymous character's entrapment by her puritan upbringing which clashes with her awakening sexuality; her book-fed expectations of encounter with a gentle-man conflict with the reality offered by a vulgar libertine. Pamela's first meetings with Mr B are loaded with conflicting emotion and gender and class concerns. "Who would have you otherwise, you foolish slut," "D–n you! . . . for a little Witch; I have no Patience with you," is what Pamela gets from him (40). Is Mr B, Justice of the Peace, not a transgressor of decorum and propriety here? These streams of invective manifest his frustration at being unable to discipline and possess his double inferior: a servant and a woman. Pamela cannot resort to the same vulgarity: she may not swear to her master as a housemaid. But she can use the weapons of her innate sensitivity and innocence, and, above these, her intellect. Whenever Mr B offends her, she stands up for herself. In this respect, in the promiscuous reality of Richardson's aristocratic villains, Pamela (and later Clarissa) is a transgressive character: she dares to oppose his libertine expectations of female subservience. In their verbal clashes, her inferior, conventionally-belittled femininity wins, founded on the only available resources of reason and logic. Whenever he resorts to emotion and loses his temper in an "unmanly" fashion, she summons her "manly" intellect and erudition, and disables him.

Pamela earned volleys of criticism for celebrating a cunning hypocrite who cleverly engineers her master plan. Condemnation came mainly from male readers, Fielding among them (Watt). But perhaps Pamela should be read as another instance of an undefeated, though distressed, survivor. Even though she is designed to epitomise orthodox femininity, she is more than mere victimised passivity. Left at the mercy of her master – her own father's support no more than a couple of inflated letters and impractical maxims – she is literally trapped on Mr B's estate and later imprisoned in his country house. The elements of imprisonment – seclusion and the presence of a villain – leave us only a step

away from the gothic underworld. Yet, in a pre-gothic way, Pamela wins the heart of her villain, thus securing her own future by his aristocratic side.

Clarissa paves the way towards gothic novels' enactment of female social disability even more solidly. Though gothic imagery and blood-and-bone paraphernalia are missing, all the other gothic ingredients are at play here: property, unwanted marriage, enslavement and a villain. Clarissa subverts patriarchal hierarchy and refuses to be a hushed, submissive daughter when, driven by jealousy over her inherited property, the family want to punish her by imposing marriage to a paragon of stupidity, Mr Solmes. As a consequence, she is disciplined, imprisoned by the father and labelled mad by the mother. Her escape with Lovelace, who treats her according to his libertine maxims: "[I]f once subdued, be always subdued" (*Clarissa* 2: 41), is a plunge into enslavement and rape. The story is an exemplar of excess: excessive emotional torture, prolonged imprisonment and criminal acts by the family and Lovelace leave Clarissa with no choice but an excessive solution. She refuses to be defeated and determines to stage her own death, a rite of passage which remains the only sphere of her life where she can have control. Clarissa is the first literary example of an ambiguous blend of angelic purity in a fallen body and opens the way for a Victorian relishing of the pure and the fallen combined, later taken up in new ways by the vampire genre. Apart from an un-feminine obduracy and lack of subservience, also manifested in her triumphant procession to death, Clarissa transgresses femininity in one more way, namely, in her yearning to depart from a conventional marriage-bound existence. All she wants is to be left alone, to live unaccompanied in the property inherited from her grandfather. But this desire, viewed in the moral light of the novel, is merely meant to enhance her saintly righteousness and chastity, a fact sharpened by her hysterical fear of sex channelled into a truly horror gothic dream.

Distressed but not defeated, Clarissa is a clear antecedent of the heroines of gothic fiction, where a victimised yet victorious pageant of female characters prevails. Ann Radcliffe's romances and Mattew G. Lewis's only novel, *The Monk* (1796), are all populated by male villains, ineffective or absent fathers, vaporous lovers, and heroines who have to move through architectural and social labyrinths. This pattern has its congruencies with the early eighteenth-century novels mentioned above, though circumstances and imagery change. Sedgwick notes that gothic fiction classically presents "an individual fictional 'self' . . . massively blocked off from something to which it ought normally to have access" (12). In both pre-gothic and gothic fiction it is always the female character who is exposed to the malignity of being "blocked off" and deprived.

However, what is new at this stage of the genre's development is the introduction of otherness in the form of foreign unfamiliarity, an alien factor that

had not appeared with such intensity in the English novel before. Radcliffe and Lewis take their readers to continental Catholic countries, where monasteries with their monks, nuns and abbots, long gone in Britain, are so alien to the average English reader that unprecedented violence and supernatural mystery slip in with ease. Unfamiliarity and strangeness of ritual feed into unparalleled cruelty and hypocrisy, and an English phobia of both Catholicism and revolution (Whitlark). Sedgwick proposes that all gothic novels work "within a narrow set of conventions narrowly defined" (11). Thus we see the same choreography repeated later by Mary Shelley in *Frankenstein* (1818), John Polidori in "The Vampyre" (1819) and in Victorian vampire stories, such as "Carmilla" and *Dracula*; they all replicate the pattern of evil implemented or conducted on the Continent, always instigated by the alien Other.

Miall suggests that Radcliffe's novels "play out the implications of the regressive, semi-childlike state which was enforced on women by the prevailing culture" and that they "capture the borderline status of women, neither child, nor adult." This infantilisation of heroines is connected with a denial of their sexuality and is a pattern also found in exemplary characters of earlier fiction: the fifteen-year-old Pamela, who stays chaste until her wedding day, Clarissa and her vision of single adulthood or Sophia Western in Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749) enact the same scenario. Gothic women: Isabella and Matilda in Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Radcliffe's Emily in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and Ellena in *The Italian* (1797), are also all strong and undefeated, yet infantilisation and asexuality are inscribed in their social being. As becomes real damsels, they stay virginal throughout.

Yet, women survivors in these novels do not conform to the mould of the submissive female. Both *Pamela* and *Clarissa* are "truly extraordinary tributes to female intelligence and articulateness," and Richardson makes his heroines display features transgressing the traditional ideals of their sex's subordination, although in both cases this period of subversive behaviour lasts as long as they are "single and oppressed" (Beasley 37). Similarly in gothic fiction, Walpole's Isabella, Radcliffe's Emily and Ellena or Lewis's Agnes and Matilda are all undefeated and persevering. None of these novels, however, closes with final subversion of the imposed patriarchal domestic ideology. In the end, each in her own way, these women bend to patriarchal orthodoxy: Pamela by becoming a compliant wife, successful in the moral reformation of her husband and Clarissa by succumbing to the authority of the heavenly Father. Richardson's both novels end with "the heroine's total submission" which "marks the end of all stresses and conflicts, as equilibrium at last prevails" (Beasley 37). Gothic heroines marry their sweethearts, marking the end of the transgressive rule of the gothic underworld which provoked them to rail against the norms of femininity. Once

villainy is ruled out, order is restored. But is it patriarchal order? At this point arises also a question that goes beyond the authorial management of these texts and norms they profess. Namely, will these undefeated damsels in gothic novels ever fully return to subjection and succumb to the will of their ineffective "effeminate" men?

What female gothic texts certainly do is explicitly transgress conventional gender representations, as illustrated especially in the depiction of Ellena and Vivaldi in *The Italian,* or of Victor Frankenstein. Ellis speaks of the "considerable economic power of Radcliffian women" (123), which certainly also pertains to Clarissa and her insistence on keeping her grandfather's inheritance. Much has been said about the way Shelley looks at the problems of "cultural orthodoxy of masculinity" and how, by representing a "male hysteric," she shows that "despite a culture's artificial division of emotions by gender, the male body can, if need be, speak in a 'feminine' voice" (Hobbs 156). Earlier than Shelley, Radcliffe illustrated the same problem by sketching the conflict between reason and emotion. In crucial scenes in *The Italian,* Vivaldi is the one governed by passion, whereas Ellena becomes the "embodiment of fortitude, stoic calm, and patience, virtues associated with rational self-control" (Kelly 59), an opposition which has been touched on in Richardson's novel half a century before.

As suggested at the beginning of this essay, all the features of female characters from the early realistic and the later gothic stage of the novel analysed above merge to produce a female vampire: an unnatural blend of contradictory traits generating ambiguous, often polarised, emotions and revealing anxieties under the sugary coating of respectability. To an unprecedented extent in Victorian times, notorious for their moral rigidity and glorification of familial respectability, vampire stories feature in profusion, becoming a locus for expression of the era's repressions.

Like gothic novels, Le Fanu's "Carmilla" (1872) and Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) reveal anxieties connected with the Other. Victorian ghost stories are characterised by "the domestication of gothic figures, spaces and themes" (Punter and Byron 26). Though domestic elements – recognisable topography of one's own bedroom – and contemporary times feature in vampire tales, Le Fanu and Stoker still draw on overtly alien geography associated with the vampire who is an alien, a foreigner, or a woman, or a foreign woman. The source of evil is thus safely distanced from the nucleus of patriarchy, the domestic hearth and propriety personified by an English-man. In this respect, Carmilla effectively becomes an amalgam of two in one: a woman and a foreigner, who additionally appears in the company of "a hideous black woman, with a sort of coloured turban on her head" (Le Fanu 257), a virgin who died prematurely and after death became a lecherous seducer, an epitome of wistful femininity and

conventionally masculine forcefulness. Seen from the perspective of the previously analysed novels, Carmilla-the-vampire is a kaleidoscope of strong, self-assertive femininity, melancholic helplessness, infantile innocence, virginity and whorish licence. There is also a matrix of recognisable male figures at play in Le Fanu's story: as in gothic novels, male protectiveness proves a myth and masculinity falters when most needed. Just as Valancourt in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Vivaldi in *The Italian*, and Victor in *Frankenstein* fail, so do men in "Carmilla" and *Dracula* fail as guards, giving way for evil to creep in.

Additionally, while Laura, Carmilla's victim, epitomises the ideals of a woman to a puritan mind, female vampires enact Victorian male anxieties about femininity. On a social level, the Victorian era is the beginning of the legal emancipation of women, visible in the struggles for universal suffrage and equality in divorce and property rights. The image of a powerful, clever, enduring woman, here additionally clustered in authoritative sisterhood, embodies a threat to "existing patriarchal kinship structures" (Signorotti). On a more personal level, in their dichotomous nature and ambiguous reactions, vampire women embody both the angelic purity a man would want to keep at home and a fantasy female, a whore he dreams about but dares not touch, a transgressor of everything Victorian domestic respectability stood for. As Auerbach notices, they are exaggerated versions of other fallen angels: Clarissa, Tess or Hetty Sorrell (150–68). In this sense, with the exception of Clarissa, they are a product of Victorian times when painting, literature and numerous philanthropic undertakings demonstrated sensitivity to the fate of the fallen woman, thus largely contributing to the creation of yet another potent myth (Auerbach 150–68).

In this Victorian myth, "a woman's fall ends in death" (Auerbach 155). She is usually depicted as "a mute, enigmatic icon," her sexual practices, the reason for her fall, take place off stage, or are merely hinted at, and she is coloured or dressed aptly for her status as victim (Auerbach 155). Her death elevates her. Killing a victimised woman makes one a murderer and a criminal whereas she becomes a martyr. In vampire stories, the murder of a sinful woman makes the killer a hero, a saviour and a restorer of stability. And it is always a man, a specialist, who possesses the know-how: a sharp stake is driven through the heart of the vampire to the sounds of her piercing shriek; she is decapitated, the remains then burnt and the ashes scattered.

In Le Fanu's "Carmilla," Laura and Bertha, the General's niece, are examples of fully controlled, disempowered women, practically enslaved in remote schlosses by their male guardians. Laura's papa always adopts a superior tone in conversations with her or Carmilla. He acts as the sole possessor of knowledge and guards Laura's access to it by giving her information pertaining to her health, the visitors, in small doses (Signorotti). Her world is spun by male

specialists: doctors, priests and, later on, experts on vampires. The only figure of female authority is Carmilla's alleged mother, who subverts the conventional, patriarchal pattern enacted in both Laura's and Bertha's household. She is an empowered woman, surrounded by male servants, and can bring both Laura's father and the General to a bow, according to her design. She enters into the "big boys' game" and, introducing herself as a Countess, she uses their readiness to venerate a figure of authority and to perform as chivalrous protector for a woman in need. She dupes both of them easily, and by doing so, she remains intact (Signorotti).

"Carmilla" transgresses social conventions in one more way: homoeroticism. The lesbian magnetism between the women is, however, of a highly ambiguous nature. The "vampire's polymorphous sexuality" (Gelder 69) in "Carmilla" and later in *Dracula* is largely fostered by the subjective first person narrative technique: Laura's accounts of Carmilla's lesbian practices are never verified and take the form of innocent whispers and nudges during the day. The only account of night activities comes from a retold story of General Spielsdorf, who enters his niece's bedroom to discover "a large black object, very ill-defined" crawl at the foot of the bed and then "swiftly spread itself up to the poor girl's throat, where it swelled, in a moment, into a great, palpitating mass" (Le Fanu 311), the shape of which is far from phallic. Laura's eroticism may be a projection of her repressed awakening sexuality but it also combines a girlish longing for a friend, a sister, a mother, so often stressed throughout the story.

Carmilla is executed by a congregation of exclusively male figures, a vignette, as Signorotti observes, repeated by Stoker's "Crew of Light." The gentlemen's actions, however, are futile, even if they end with the demise of "the fiend." The story closes with Laura admitting: "[T]o this hour the image of Carmilla returns to memory with ambiguous alternations . . . and often from a reverie I have started, fancying I heard the light step of Carmilla at the drawing room door" (Le Fanu 319). One of Carmilla's executioners proclaims that her victims "almost invariably, in the grave, develop into vampires" (318). Carmilla has whispered to Laura: "[Y]ou in your turn will draw near to others, and learn the rupture of that cruelty, which yet is love" (263). The extermination of one of them is but a one-day victory. Carmilla is killed but the myth prevails and rears up in other vampire stories: in *Dracula*, for example, and in so many film adaptations that it is even in the bloodstream of those unfamiliar with the literary originals.

Vampirism was in nineteenth-century fiction a crevice which allowed writers to comment on the otherwise socially condemned female objection to subjugation, most notoriously enacted by means of sexual liberation. Because of

their associations with unbridled sexuality female vampires were by definition transgressive creatures. But it seems that reading female vampires as literary constructs has interesting implications when they are read as a continuation – if in a subversive form – of a tradition initiated by the fathers of the English novel and enriched by female gothic writers and authors of vampire stories. Using different vehicles, these writers seem to have gone along the same trajectory of representation of female social frustration, and agency thwarted by expected immobility. However, whereas the writes of female gothic novels, such as Ann Radcliffe or Charlotte Brontë, in the end offer what Hoeveler has termed as "gothic feminism," or "female-created fantasy" whereby a blameless heroine "triumphs over the patriarchy by creating alternative companionate family, marrying a 'feminised' man" (7), male writers offer no such reward for their either virtuous or promiscuous heroines. Female non-conformers in their novels analysed above either convert (Moll Flanders), conform (Pamela), end up living in an emotional void (Laura), or else retain their integrity by staging a hyperbolic escape from patriarchal corruption – their own death. Literary subversion does not always manoeuvre in novel and unexpected ways but perhaps by acknowledging transgressive undercurrents, it paves the way for representing subversion of constructions of established power in the future.

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