

# **Writing the Vampire: Constitutions of Gender in Carmilla, Dracula, and Buffy the Vampire Slayer**

Writing the Vampire:  
Constitutions of Gender in *Carmilla*, *Dracula*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

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## **Dedication**

For my parents, Norbert and Rebecca, and my sister, Mary Ellen.

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## **Sex, Gender and the Vampire: An Introduction**

Vampires have simultaneously fascinated, reviled, and seduced their human victims for centuries. Like its subject, the literature of these fictional creatures is ambiguous and disjointed. Nonetheless, the major works of vampire literature provide a fascinating playground for sex and gender studies – the texts seem almost universally to invite discussions of these issues, whether by the obviously sexual nature of the vampire’s bite or by the violent, sexual nature of their demise (the use of the stake as a phallic symbol encourages this interpretation). Vampires, as a social, cultural and *physical* other, provide a means for authors to play out sexual and gender-related issues; moreover, they provide a canvas on which potentially deviant characteristics or activities can be enacted. More importantly, the existence of vampires creates a context in which these deviant characteristics, which frequently include political or sexual awareness of women as well as homosexual tendencies of either sex, may be enacted by or on humans in a safe, because fictional, space.

Perhaps the most obvious reason vampires enable such freedom is the nature of their bodies – though they appear physically human, their bodies do not operate as human bodies do. Vampires require blood, not food, for sustenance. Indeed, their sustenance actually seems to be predicated on a sexual encounter (not the first time sex has been figured as hunger). More important, however, is the meaning of this sexual encounter. Judith Butler writes that “...various requirements have instated sexual reproduction within the confines of a heterosexually-based system of marriage which requires the reproduction of human beings in certain gendered modes which, in effect, guarantee the eventual reproduction of that kinship system” (524). Vampires complicate this picture of human sexual encounters – while vampires use their quasi-sexual act as a means of reproduction, the sex of the other individual is irrelevant to the proceedings; a male

vampire need not have a female victim, and vice versa. Furthermore, without the need for heterosexually-based marriage systems, vampires need not reproduce gender in the way that humans must – a female vampire need not be feminine in order to attract a victim, etc. This brings up the point that there is no physical dichotomy of vampires – there is no physiological difference between male and female vampires. While it is true that they possess the bodies of their formerly human selves (and therefore the human physical binary), they are no longer dependent upon the sex of their bodies to perpetuate their ‘species’. Moreover, as many critics<sup>1</sup> have suggested, the nature of their shared “sex” – by which I mean the means of reproduction, the vampiric mouth, which is both orifice and penetrator – means possession of both male and female sexual organs, suggesting that vampires exist in a liminal space, where they are both male and female.

The lack of dichotomous sex organs in vampires to serve as gender determinants leads back to Butler’s essay: implicit in Butler’s statement (and, in fact, explicit in the rest of her essay) is the suggestion that gender is culturally defined, rather than innate. Thus, the “feminine” gender is *assigned* to the female body – it is not inherently a part of it, though some characteristics of it may be. This gender assignment plays out in interesting ways in vampire literature. That vampires are often presented as sexualized creatures is important for this discussion, because desire and sexuality are the primary loci of gender difference in vampire literature, in addition to periphery differences such as possession of knowledge and confinement. For female vampires in particular, this highlights the plasticity of gender, because to appear sexually aware and aggressive is to seem masculine, while the body, in the context of culture, proclaims the vampire to be feminine. For male vampires it is somewhat less obvious, but the homosexual undertones that tend to accompany any male vampire’s advances on a male victim

reinforce this fluidity of gender. More importantly, male victims are implicitly feminized, as they are the receivers of the advances of either a male or female vampire. Ultimately, because vampires possess no firm sex or gender, it is possible to inscribe on them aspects of either gender and in so doing, reflect on the culture that produces such an inscription.

Vampire texts abound in which such issues may be profitably explored, but a comparison of late Victorian texts, in which femininity and masculinity are rigidly defined by the dominant patriarchal culture, with late twentieth-century television, a medium whose very existence proclaims change and difference and thus facilitates new understandings of gender, is the method of exploration I have chosen to pursue. The novella *Carmilla* (1872) and the novel *Dracula* (1897) represent the Victorian era, while *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) represents the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. These three texts use the metaphor of vampirism in order to destabilize gender conventions, but the outcome of this destabilization varies among the texts. In *Carmilla*, the dominant gender conventions appear to be reinstated at the end of the text, having been forcibly corrected by male agency, but the text suggests a lingering ambiguity in gender relations. *Dracula*, in contrast, concludes with a decisive reassertion of gender norms, perhaps finishing the task *Carmilla* began, but with a more definitive reinstatement of Victorian values. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, however, does what neither of the Victorian texts can: though it too begins by destabilizing gender conventions, it concludes by defining *new* gender conventions – offering an alternative conclusion to the problem of gender instability than either *Dracula* or *Carmilla* can produce. Although each text pursues a different project, these projects are only enabled by the use of vampirism – without vampires as the means for the subversion of gender conventions, these texts could neither reinforce old nor produce new understandings of gender and sexuality.



## **“Ambiguous Alternations”: Gender Duality and Reconstitution in *Carmilla***

*Carmilla*, a novella published in 1872, is in some ways representative of author Sheridan Le Fanu’s work. As critic Ivan Melada puts it, “Like several of his works, ‘Carmilla’ is one of a kind, an aberration in the scheme of his total activity” (99). Though much of Le Fanu’s work is supernatural in nature, *Carmilla* is the only example of vampire literature in his repertoire. Other stories feature ghosts, demons, and other monsters, particularly those of Irish origin. Though he also wrote the occasional historical novel, his preference seems to have been ghost stories: from childhood Le Fanu enjoyed these tales, and he purchased them regularly until his death in 1873. (Melada 1-12)

Born Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu to Protestant Irish parents in 1814, Le Fanu grew up amid the rising discontent of the Irish Catholic majority surrounding his family<sup>1</sup>. After the untimely death of his wife Susanna in 1858, Le Fanu increasingly sequestered himself in his home. His seclusion was such that he became known as “The Invisible Prince,” though he continued to receive visitors at least through the 1860s. His writing apparently took place mostly at night, in bed “...in that eerie period of the night when human vitality is at its lowest ebb and the Powers of Darkness rampant and terrifying” (S. M. Ellis, qtd. in Melada 12). Le Fanu thus arranged the circumstances of his writing to correspond to the mood he attempted to create in his fiction: a frightening, supernatural world inhabited by vampires, ghosts, and demons. (Melada 1-12)

Thus we have *Carmilla*. This gothic tale, narrated by the vampire Carmilla’s near-victim Laura, takes place in the usual vague location, a place in Austria known as Styria. Though Laura and her father are both originally English, they have been living in their Styrian Schloss (castle) as long as Laura can remember. The novel begins as a carriage crashes outside of the home Laura and her father share, injuring the young female occupant, Carmilla. A woman claiming to

be Carmilla's mother (the actual nature of her relationship to Carmilla is never revealed) cleverly convinces Laura's father to take Carmilla in, as she has pressing business to attend to somewhere in the vague 'West' and awaiting Carmilla's recovery would require too much delay. From this point on, the mysterious Carmilla quietly wreaks havoc on the lives of her hosts, initially without their knowledge. Because Carmilla is a female vampire, her gender is already complicated, as she possesses both those features which are typically figured as feminine for a Victorian audience – beauty, a weakness in her manner, and a general languor – as well as those which are typically figured as masculine – sexual desire, strength, and power over others.

The mysterious nature of Carmilla's origins serves as one of the novella's first presentations of the duality of Carmilla's nature, and therefore of the gender destabilization this duality facilitates. Laura explains that when she would press Carmilla for information about her past and family, Carmilla would put her arms around Laura's neck, pull her close, and whisper, "...think me not cruel because I obey the irresistible law of my strength and weakness..." (587). In this statement, Carmilla points to the dual nature of her masculine and feminine natures – her "strength and weakness", as she puts it. Carmilla herself seems to recognize that although her body may be female, her essential nature (that of a vampire) is neither male nor female, but a combination of the two, or perhaps more appropriately, a full spectrum of both.

This scene also helps to develop perhaps the most important, as well as the most dangerous to the patriarchy she has infiltrated, masculine marker visible in Carmilla: her sexuality. Carmilla tells Laura in the same speech that "...I live in your warm life, and you shall die – die, sweetly die – into mine" (588). The significance of this line is twofold: first, Carmilla's statement, in its very language, represents duality. She juxtaposes the words "live" and "life" with death ("die, sweetly die"), pairing otherwise oppositional elements, which one might

substitute for masculinity and femininity. Second, the use of a pun on orgasm (“sweetly die”) serves as the first representation of Carmilla’s sexuality in the text. Moreover, Carmilla’s claim suggests Laura’s sexuality as well, because the orgasm promised will be that of Laura, not Carmilla. Thus, this single line establishes the sexuality of both characters, while simultaneously revealing a general doubleness inherent in the text.

The female sexuality exposed in this line represents a serious problem for Victorian texts, because women of the period were believed – indeed, expected – to be innocent of such knowledge. Therefore, sexuality is figured in much of Victorian discourse as a distinctly masculine trait. Carmilla’s c/overt sexuality (and her suggestion of its latent existence in Laura) seems, then, to represent the ways in which she defies gender norms – for while her sexuality in and of itself is represented as a masculine trait (suggested by Laura’s suspicion that Carmilla may be a boy in disguise), the ways in which it plays out are rather feminine. Consider, for example, the following scene, in which Laura writes:

“Sometimes...my strange and beautiful companion would take my hand and hold it with a fond pressure, renewed again and again; blushing softly, gazing in my face with languid and burning eyes, and breathing so fast that her dress rose and fell with the tumultuous respiration. It was like the ardour of a lover; it embarrassed me; it was hateful and yet overpowering; and with gloating eyes she drew me to her, and her hot lips travelled along my cheek in kisses; and she would whisper, almost in sobs, ‘You are mine, you *shall* be mine, and you and I are one for ever.’” (588)

Carmilla’s actions manage to be both masculine and feminine – she is masculine in her sexual overtures, in her assertions that she will make Laura *hers*, yet she is feminine in her blush and her near-sobs. Furthermore, the language of this passage suggests the more general duality of the text: Carmilla’s eyes are both “languid” and “burning”, suggesting that she is both weak as well as active. Similarly, Laura finds her overtures both “hateful” and “overpowering”, making Laura both a quasi-active participant in her hatred and a passive participant who is overpowered by

Carmilla. Finally, Carmilla's assertion that she and Laura "are one for ever" suggests a merging of identities, represented in the larger context of the novella as a combination of Victorian ideas of male and female traits.

Laura's participation in these embraces is generally figured as passive. However, as the text progresses, her involvement implicates a certain sexuality of her own. She writes that "[f]rom these foolish embraces...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..." (588). Try as she might, Laura cannot quite escape Carmilla's advances – the vampire's presence has destabilized traditional gender relations, and the humans are powerless to resist.

Laura's inability to resist Carmilla is actually representative of a larger theme inherent in this and other Victorian works, including both literary and scientific texts. Tamar Heller's essay on hysteria and female sexuality serves as an excellent source for understanding this concept. In presenting her argument, Heller traces the development of scientific/medical discourses on hysterical women, quoting American physician Weir Mitchell's 1877 assertion that "[a] hysterical girl is...a vampire who sucks the blood of the healthy people about her; and I may add that pretty surely where there is one hysterical girl there will be soon or late two sick women" (qtd. in Heller 78). Thus, the prevailing wisdom of the age tied the hysterical, or nervous, girl to vampires, both in the sense that these women sucked the life out of those around them and in the sense that their condition tended to be reproduced in other women. Heller then uses this Victorian theory to develop her larger argument regarding female sexuality in "Carmilla".

Figuring Carmilla as a hysteric, she writes:

"...it is...important that the would-be victim's narrative reveals an ambivalent, but still pronounced, awareness of her attraction to the woman who tries to kill her. That Laura

does not fit the most obvious role available to her, and which she tries to write for herself – that of innocent or ignorant victim – transforms the angel in the house into yet another ‘vampire,’ or knowing accomplice in sexual crime” (79).

Thus, Carmilla’s sexuality is contagious: Laura’s latent sexuality is awakened, even produced, by Carmilla’s advances. This is particularly apparent when, after one of Carmilla’s assaults, Laura tells her that she must not do such things, because “...I don’t know you – *I don’t know myself* when you look so and talk so” (Le Fanu 588, emphasis mine). Laura’s sexuality has been awakened, but her traditional upbringing has confused her understanding of what has occurred. She cannot process her sexuality, because her childhood, spent sequestered in the lonely castle with no one but her (apparently exclusively) female servants, has given her no opportunity to recognize or exercise it.

Laura further expresses these conflicting emotions when she writes that she “...was conscious of a love growing into adoration, and also of abhorrence” (588). When with Carmilla, she experiences a “...strange tumultuous excitement that was pleasurable, ever and anon, mingled with a vague sense of fear and disgust” (588). Laura finds that she is falling into a strange sort of love with Carmilla, even as she develops a hatred for her – again, the language of this passage demonstrates the confusion of roles and oppositions in the text. Moreover, Laura finds it difficult to reconcile this sexualized Carmilla with the version she regularly sees – only rarely does Carmilla give in to these expressions of ardour; most of the time, Carmilla’s “ways were girlish” (589). The alternately masculine and feminine Carmilla utterly baffles Laura, who is accustomed to straightforward manifestations of gender in her sheltered life – an authoritative father, a dead mother<sup>2</sup>, and female servants have served to produce in Laura the accepted forms of gender and sexuality. Carmilla – and especially the feelings Carmilla inspires – thus remain inexplicable to Laura.

Laura cannot accept this confusion, however, so she continuously attempts to explain her feelings to her reader and by extension, herself. Her initial theory is that Carmilla is simply playing tricks on her, but this cannot be, for she believes that Carmilla's actions are "unmistakably the momentary breaking out of suppressed instinct and emotion" (589). This description of Carmilla's temperament reinforces the idea of fluid gender – though she is naturally girlish, she is also suppressing her sexual instincts, just as Laura is (unknowingly) suppressing hers in an attempt to fit into a heterosexually-oriented social structure. Carmilla, too, needs to fit into this structure, but only in order to seek her prey – thus she can afford the occasional outburst (particularly if that outburst is in female company), as long as she maintains a general appearance of femininity.

Laura next attempts to explain Carmilla's actions as those of a madwoman, despite the assertions of Carmilla's "mother" to the contrary. This indicates Laura's desire to fit Carmilla into the existing social structure, as well as a desire to make herself less culpable for the feelings Carmilla inspires. If Carmilla is insane, then her actions are the result of an addled mind. This frees Laura of fault as well, because if Carmilla is insane, then Laura can explain her own reactions as simply a confused response to the overtures of an insane person. This possibility tracks nicely with Heller's positioning of Carmilla as a hysteric – insanity, like nervousness, is contagious and ultimately not the victim's fault.

Laura's final attempt to explain her own feelings and the actions of Carmilla involves a rather convoluted theory in which Carmilla is actually a boy in disguise. Laura imagines that "...a boyish lover had found his way into the house, and sought to prosecute his suit in masquerade..." (589). This prospect suggests that Laura already senses an instability of gender – the notion that a male suitor could convincingly *perform* femininity implies that gender is not

inherently related to the sexed body, as Judith Butler has suggested: "...because gender is not a fact [determined by biological sex], the various acts of gender creates [*sic*] the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all" (522). This idea of gender as performance, introduced into the text by the vampire Carmilla, is an important means by which gender constructs are challenged in this text. If gender is performed, as Butler and Le Fanu suggest, then the social codes by which gender is constructed are vulnerable to modification. Gender as performance, therefore, functions in this text to undermine gender conventions, as well as the larger societal conventions attached to them.

Ultimately, however, Laura cannot accept the hypothesis that Carmilla is a male in disguise, because she finds that, as already mentioned, Carmilla's "...ways were girlish..." Moreover, she finds that "...there was always a languor about her, quite incompatible with a masculine system of health" (589). The fact that Laura can envision Carmilla as a boy in disguise, however, says quite a bit about both Laura's opinion of Carmilla's behavior as well as her own responses to it. Laura seems to prefer this version of events, because it would mean first that Carmilla is not acting with any true impropriety (beyond that of the deception involved in such a suitor getting into the home), and second that Laura's reactions are natural, because a woman, for a Victorian audience, ought to be attracted to a man. Her conclusion that Carmilla must not be a man, however, does nothing to lessen the complicated nature of the situation: she still finds Carmilla's actions disturbing, but she cannot seem to escape her own increasingly favorable reactions to them.

Carmilla's hold over Laura persists even after Carmilla has died, staked through the heart by Laura's father and General Spielsdorf. Laura writes, at the conclusion of her tale, that "...to this hour the image of Carmilla returns to memory with ambiguous [*sic*] alternations – sometimes

the playful, languid, beautiful girl; sometimes the writhing fiend I saw in the ruined church...” (628). The feelings Carmilla aroused in Laura are not easily shaken – the duality of her nature (and of her gender, more specifically) continues to intrigue Laura even after Carmilla is dead. Carmilla has awakened Laura’s sexuality, freeing her from the strict gender constraints to which she had previously been tied. Once aware of the possibilities ignoring such gender rules provides, Laura cannot rid herself of them, even as she tries to blend back into the patriarchal society. She travels with her father to Italy, thereby placing herself firmly under the control of a male authority, protected and safe, but she finds nevertheless that “...often from a reverie I have started, fancying I heard the light step of Carmilla at the drawing-room door” (628). She still desires – fancies – Carmilla, though she is ostensibly free from her influence.

Carmilla’s sexuality becomes important in another respect, as well: Carmilla seems to seek only female victims. Laura tells us that she is not the first noblewoman Carmilla has pursued, and her lesser victims (the ones she merely kills, rather than engaging in the prolonged “courtship” she undertakes with Laura) are also women. Granted, only four victims are mentioned in the entirety of the novel, so the statistics are hardly conclusive, but it is nevertheless interesting and deserving of exploration.

The problem becomes a bit more clear when one considers the way in which Carmilla entered Laura’s and her father’s life: her first appearance at the Schloss involves a carriage accident, which leaves her weak and in need of care. Thus, she trades on her female body, and the gender that body entails in this heterosexual society, in order to gain access to the home. She must use the femininity her body implies in order to pursue her victim. Butler notes something similar when she writes that “...gender is a project which has cultural survival as its end,” and she further adds that “...the term strategy...suggests the situation of duress under which gender



performance always and variously occurs” (522). Therefore, gender performance – such as Carmilla’s performance of weakness and injury – is done, whether unconsciously or not, in the interest of survival. Performing femininity for Carmilla means gaining access to the home of her victim, and by extension her survival.

Her choice of victim within the home is still questionable, of course, as she could just as easily have pursued Laura’s father as Laura herself. However, Laura is young and healthy, as opposed to her aged (and presumably less appetizing<sup>3</sup>) father. Moreover, Carmilla, as an apparently young woman, would have much greater access to Laura. Indeed, Victorian literature is littered with examples of extremely close female friendships; this type of relationship would have been neither unusual nor suspicious to either Laura or her father, making it a perfect opportunity for Carmilla to strike. Furthermore, Le Fanu makes a point of explaining that Laura’s father lives a considerable distance away (though still within the castle) when Carmilla goes missing mysteriously one night. Laura writes that “[i]f my father’s room had been at that side of the house, we would have called him up at once to our aid” (602), suggesting that her father is so far away as to be difficult to summon, even in an emergency. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that Carmilla’s decision to pursue Laura may be at least in part due to the considerable distance between herself and Laura’s father.

Another potential explanation for Carmilla’s choice of Laura over her father is that Laura’s youth makes her not only more appetizing, but also more amenable to Carmilla’s advances. Perhaps her youth makes her more likely to respond favorably to Carmilla’s aggressive behavior, because she has not been in the world long enough to fully cement her adherence to Victorian social codes. Furthermore, her isolation from others – particularly from men – means that she has little experience with people outside of her castle, and she is therefore

less likely to be offended or shocked by Carmilla's actions. That Laura is rather naïve is apparent even to her; at least, it is from her vantage point of narration ten years in the future. When describing Carmilla's apparent disdain for religion, Laura writes: "Religion was a subject on which I had never heard her speak a word. *If I had known the world better*, this particular neglect or antipathy would not have so much surprised me" (598, emphasis mine). If Laura is ignorant of differences in religious devotion, then she is certainly ignorant of sexuality. Therefore, Laura provides a perfect victim for Carmilla.

The need to appear feminine in order to enter the Schloss does not make a convincing argument for her choice of other victims, however. While it may have been technically easier to pursue female victims in the noble homes into which Carmilla gained access, the same cannot necessarily be said of the victims outside the Schloss. In fact, in one case, she attacked a woman in bed, presumably next to her sleeping husband. Laura mentions the death to Carmilla at one point, saying, "The 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." (590) While there is no definitive proof in the text to suggest that the woman's husband was in bed at the time, it is likely that he was, or that he was at least nearby, so Carmilla's choice of a female victim was clearly a matter not of opportunity, but of preference.

A further possibility for Carmilla's choice of Laura as victim may be that she – or perhaps the human remnant of her – is a lesbian. Many scholars have certainly read the text in this way, and this theory is not incompatible with the idea of gender fluidity or duality. Rather, the idea that Carmilla is a lesbian reinforces the idea of gender fluidity – while in life she might have been constrained to the male sex for reproductive purposes, as a vampire she faces no such restrictions. Instead, she is able to exercise masculine agency in her choice of victim and in the

pursuit of that victim, for while women were certainly able to refuse a suitor's hand in the Victorian era, they were still expected to be the *pursued*, not the pursuer. This is perhaps best understood by examining a key scene in which Carmilla tells Laura that reproduction will be the ultimate outcome of their relationship, though Laura is unable to perceive it as such at the time. Carmilla tells her, "...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..." (588). Carmilla is explaining the process by which one becomes a vampire (while punning, again, on orgasm as "cruelty, which yet is love"). Thus, she is suggesting a sense of sexual (masculine) freedom of which Laura is as yet unaware: not only will Laura become a vampire like Carmilla, she will then be able to choose her victims as she was chosen. Because Carmilla does not make any suggestions as to the particular victims Laura will be inclined to pursue, she implies that her choice of female victims is hers alone; thus, lesbianism is not an inherent part of (female) vampirism, but a choice on Carmilla's part. What remains important is that, as Heller suggests, Carmilla is spreading this sexual freedom – this masculine agency – to other women. Carmilla reproduces her own gender fluidity in her victim, suggesting a continuing destabilization – and perhaps an eventual dismantling – of Victorian gender conventions.

That Carmilla is grounded in lesbian discourse is interesting, particularly when juxtaposed with certain details of the Victorian era. First, lesbianism was not explicitly pathologized until nearly the end of the century: as Sally Ledger explains in *The New Woman*, "[i]n 1871 women's sexual activities together could be neither pathologized nor criminalized, since they existed neither in law nor in medical textbooks. Lesbians, in the field of discourse, did not exist" (128). Rather, women's relations to one another were more often figured as

friendships, even when these friendships seemed (at least to the modern reader) to be clearly sexual.

In this vein, Sharon Marcus has produced an intriguing study of relationships between women in Victorian England in her book *Between Women*, a work which challenges some critics' assumptions about nineteenth century women's relationships. Through an examination of what she calls "lifewriting," which includes correspondence and (auto)biography, Marcus suggests that lesbian relationships actually more closely resembled heterosexual marriages than they did female friendships, because the lifewriting of known lesbians is considerably less sexual than that of friends who were not involved in actual sexual relationships. (43-54).

The correspondence of women who were otherwise heterosexual is every bit as sexual as Carmilla's advances in Le Fanu's novella. One line in particular, taken from the letter of a married woman, seems eerily to echo Carmilla's speech: "My Katie, you were mine in 1842, and you have been twenty times more mine every year since" (55). Similarly, a line taken from another letter reflects Laura's encounters with Carmilla: "...[Miss Warren] made me sit on her bed, and kissed me many times, and was kinder to me than ever [and] held my hand clasped in hers" (57). Marcus' explanation for these eroticized statements is that in the context of the nineteenth century, before lesbianism became pathologized, intense female friendship was considered not only normal but healthy and necessary for the continuation of the heterosexual culture. The assumption was that female friendship would inevitably lead to conventional femininity, because "...it trained women not to compete with men...it fostered feminine vulnerability...and it reinforced married love by cultivating the sexual differences that fostered men's desire for women" (39). Therefore, because these intense female relationships were the

foundation for their future roles as wives, their sexual nature could be ignored in the larger context.

Despite this perceived innocence, these friendships actually contained a somewhat more sinister component for patriarchy. Marcus notes that some historians have detected a foundation for political action in these female friendships. She further notes, however, that these relationships, even without larger political aims, allowed women to exceed their gendered requirements: “As friends...women were able to exercise a prerogative otherwise associated with men: taking an active stance towards the object of their affection” (56). Similarly, women had “...the opportunity to display affection and experience pleasurable physical contact outside marriage without any loss of respectability” (57). These privileges, normally granted to men, are what politically-minded women spun into a women’s rights movement. This, in turn, led to the end of what Sally Ledger calls “romantic friendships” and the advent of the pathologized lesbian (128). Ledger goes on to describe popular contemporary medical descriptions of lesbians, particularly the description by Krafft-Ebing, whose “...lesbians seem sexually to desire women rather less ardently than they desire men’s social and cultural privileges” (130). Therefore, the pathologization of the lesbian had more to do with the threat to social forms than it did with concerns over sexual deviancy.

This information rather significantly complicates the understanding of *Carmilla*. If, in the context of the nineteenth century, female friendships routinely contained sexual elements, then *Carmilla*’s choice of female victims may simply be an extension of her preference in friends. If, however, *Carmilla* is considered to be an example of the new, pathologized lesbian, then her position in the text may be figured quite differently. To understand the position of *Carmilla* in terms of lesbianism, it is first necessary to turn to Adrienne Rich’s essay “Compulsory

Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”. In this essay, Rich describes what she calls a “lesbian continuum” – a “...range...of women-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman” (27). Further, she states that “[l]esbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life” (27). Therefore, being a lesbian need not mean *sexual* contact with another woman, but simply the state of feeling in some way more emotionally connected or identified with other women over and above men. This would then explain Carmilla’s choice of female victims not as sexual preference necessarily, but as a rejection of patriarchy, which she will demonstrate in other ways throughout the text.

Determining whether Carmilla is simply a typical nineteenth century female friend or a lesbian is ultimately impossible. Le Fanu’s text makes each potentiality equally plausible, both in the context of the time and in the sexually charged language of the text. However, this difficulty reinforces the ideas of destabilization already prevalent in the text: the inability of even the author to police the line between friends and lesbians suggests instability in the text, reflecting the more general gender instability that is constructed. Moreover, it is this inability to regulate the relationships between women that is made monstrous in the text, because it is only with the appearance of Carmilla that such a line is even recognized. Therefore, the determination of Carmilla’s exact motives in seeking only female victims is ultimately irrelevant, because it is precisely the inability to do so that undermines the gender conventions of the Victorian era.

It is this undermining of gender conventions that the male characters in the novel must finally attempt to reverse in order to protect the system of patriarchy. The first method by which the men assert control is in their naming: none of the male characters are regularly named. For example, Laura’s father is never anything other than “Father”; similarly, the father of Carmilla’s

other victim is called only “General”, though he is initially introduced as General Spielsdorf. Doctor Spielsberg, too, is called simply “Doctor”. The men are thus each called only by the names which grant them authority – the names which separate them from women. “Father” implies patriarchy, “General” suggests strength and a prerogative to command, and “Doctor” connotes knowledge and science. These qualities, all attributed to the usual definition of masculinity in Victorian England, are the qualities which ultimately overpower Carmilla. The nature of her demise (which is the stake-through-the-heart typical of vampire tales) reinforces the idea of traditional masculinity (the phallic stake, representative of manhood) correcting the openly sexual, improperly gendered female via forced penetration.

Carmilla produces a challenge to this version of masculine authority, however, because she too takes ownership of her name. She never identifies herself with the same name: in life her name was Mircalla, Countess Karnstein, but with the General and his daughter she called herself Millarca, and with Laura she is Carmilla. In all three instances, the name she gives is simply a rearrangement of the name with which she born. Thus, Carmilla takes responsibility for her own identity. Her refusals to give any information about her past reinforce this fact – she retains complete control over her identity. The fact that she does not similarly rearrange her last name may suggest that she rejects the system of patriarchy which would have her take her father’s name<sup>4</sup>. The ease with which she moves from one name to the other also reflects the fluidity of her gender and sexuality – she changes names as easily as she changes from masculinity to femininity.

Laura’s name represents an intriguing case as well, if Carmilla’s lack of a surname is indeed an indication of rejecting patriarchy: Laura is never given a last name. Some critics<sup>5</sup> have suggested that this is intended to be read as an indication that Laura is an “everywoman”, but it

might also imply that Laura is somehow outside of complete domination by a patriarchal society. This becomes especially important when one considers that Laura is ostensibly the narrator of this tale: it is Laura herself, not an outside narrator, who eschews her last name. Moreover, it is Laura who refuses to name her father at all – though calling him “Father” establishes his representation of patriarchy, a refusal to grant him a last name, either as her own or his, suggests her rejection of that patriarchy. It may be, then, that the awareness engendered by Carmilla enables Laura to exist outside of the patriarchy, even after Carmilla is dead, by rejecting her father’s name. This seems increasingly likely in light of the fact that throughout the novella, Laura routinely associates herself with her *mother’s* family, rather than her father’s. All the reader is told of Laura’s father’s ancestry is that he is from England. By contrast, the reader learns that Laura’s mother was descended from the Karnsteins – Carmilla’s family: “I am descended from the Karnsteins; that is, mamma was” (594). Therefore, Laura seems to identify herself more with the maternal side of the family, the side that includes Carmilla, suggesting a further detachment from her father’s patriarchal control. Though she is willing to claim the name Karnstein as a part of her heritage, she refuses to use her paternally-derived surname.

This sense of detachment from patriarchy is apparent in her father’s attempts to regain control over his daughter, through the use of knowledge, once Carmilla’s true nature becomes known. Throughout the text, sexual desire is figured as knowledge: as Adrienne Major puts it, “Laura’s sexual desire for Carmilla’s person is metonymically transposed into a desire for *truth*. Laura claims to be unsettled by the fact that she does not know [Carmilla’s history]...but it is clear that Laura’s curiosity is an inherently sexual rather than genealogical project...” (163, emphasis mine). Laura wants to *know* about Carmilla, in sexual rather than historical terms. When describing her attempts to ascertain Carmilla’s history, she figures the encounters as



physical: “I...rather insinuated than urged my inquiries. Once or twice, indeed, I did attack her more directly...[but] reproaches and caresses were all lost upon her” (587). Thus, Laura’s desire for knowledge is directly linked to her sexual desire, for she resorts even to intimate “caresses” and “attack[s]” in her search for information. Importantly, both types of desire are dependent upon the presence of Carmilla – Laura had no pressing inquiries before Carmilla’s appearance. By awakening Laura’s sexual desire, Carmilla engenders a more general desire for knowledge, which the male characters must then attempt to remove from her grasp in their efforts to regain control.

Once Laura’s father is aware of the nature of Laura’s condition, he elects to keep all the knowledge he has from her – he and the doctor discuss the matter privately before calling Laura in only to confirm it, providing no details to her as to the nature of her ailment. Indeed, after Laura repeatedly asks her father to divulge what is wrong with her, she notes his response: “‘Nothing; you must not plague me with questions,’ he answered, with more irritation than I ever remember him to have displayed before...” (608). He becomes angry at her desire for knowledge, perhaps because he fears that this knowledge might lead to an understanding of the knowledge she already possesses. Though he does consent to tell her everything “in a day or two,” he makes the statement vague enough to allow him to wait until the danger is past before revealing anything to his daughter.

Just as Laura’s father conspires with her doctor to keep the nature of her illness from her, so too does he conspire with General Spielsdorf to keep the identity and nature of Carmilla from his daughter. The General instructs Laura to flee the scene of the ruined church after Carmilla’s disappearance, while the men stay behind – Laura must not witness what will transpire, which effectively amounts to sex, given the nature of the vampire’s death. Then, for several days, Laura

is kept in the dark about the sudden disappearance of her friend. She writes that “...there were no tidings of Carmilla. Of the scene that had occurred in the ruined chapel, no explanation was offered to me, and it was clear that it was a secret which my father for the present determined to keep from me” (625). In keeping this information from Laura, her father and the General ensure that she is kept innocent of everything that has taken place – she is not to know that she has been sexually exposed until it is certain that she is safe from the danger.

Even more telling than the keeping of information from Laura is the way in which the text itself is presented – Laura’s tale cannot be told on its own. Rather, the story is introduced by an unidentified man of science, in correspondence with a Doctor Hesselius, who procured the tale from Laura. Furthermore, Laura’s description of the death of Carmilla is necessarily second-hand, as she was not allowed to witness the proceedings. Instead, she constructs that portion of her tale using her father’s “...copy of the report of the Imperial Commission...” (626). Thus, Laura’s words are mediated by a male voice, much as Mina Harker’s words will be mediated a quarter-century later in *Dracula*. However, unlike Mina’s tale, Laura’s words are only introduced by a male voice – the conclusion of the tale is in Laura’s own hand. This conclusion reinforces all of the knowledge the men tried so hard to protect: Laura ends her story by describing the ways in which Carmilla continues to haunt her, suggesting that the sexual awakening Carmilla brought about was not so easily destroyed as the men had hoped.

The opening frame of the narrative records that Laura has died since writing this tale, but no suggestion of marriage or surviving children is made, opening the possibility that Laura died alone – perhaps her sexual awakening at the hands of Carmilla made her incapable of entering into a traditional heterosexual relationship, or perhaps her sexuality made her undesirable as a wife. A further possibility is that Laura may have become a vampire after her death<sup>6</sup>, which

would represent the ultimate failing on the part of the men, because it would mean that the awakening of her sexuality and the potential restructuring of gender vampirism enables had not been suppressed by the death of Carmilla.

The violent conclusion of *Carmilla*, which brings about the destruction of said vampire by a group of men, demonstrates the “correction” of her gender ambiguity by staking her through the heart. This action reaffirms the men’s masculinity while simultaneously enforcing femininity on Carmilla<sup>7</sup>, thus restoring the traditional patriarchy of Victorian England. The fact that Carmilla is a vampire is indicative of the mood of the time – patriarchy was losing its grip in the wake of various feminist movements (though these movements did not gain real traction for another twenty or so years after *Carmilla* was published), making it more difficult to enforce traditional gender roles on young women. A vampire, however, as an “other,” is readily inscribed – all things monstrous and evil can be placed upon its head, including sexuality and gender ambiguity. Interesting in this tale, however, is the fact that Carmilla does not actually appear all that monstrous. Indeed, much of the time she is described as beautiful and languid. Until the end of the novella, Carmilla appears to be precisely the type of woman the men in the tale want to perpetuate – weak, obedient, quiet. Carmilla blends perfectly into polite society, and her mysterious nature only serves as reinforcement to her place, as she is merely following her mother’s instructions to remain silent about her origins. Thus, Carmilla represents everything the men believe a woman should be – except in the presence of Laura. With Laura, Carmilla allows her masculine side to seep out, to bleed into the femininity she otherwise exudes. By the end of the novella, the men realize that Carmilla represents precisely the thing they fear – a woman’s secret sexuality, figured as an attack upon the innocent daughters of their homes. Both men seem to conveniently ignore the fact that Laura has not forgotten her encounter with Carmilla, though

Laura is thinking of Carmilla to the very end of the tale. Despite their efforts, Laura's father and the General cannot prevent Laura's sexual awakening or the implications of that awakening. Unlike Carmilla, however, they cannot simply kill Laura. Instead, Laura attempts to blend back into society, traveling with her father and presenting an appearance of normality and cultural adherence, even as she occasionally thinks of Carmilla.

The conclusion, therefore, outwardly corrects the transgressive gender fluidity or instability enacted throughout the text, theoretically reconstituting the gender constructs challenged by Carmilla's vampirism. Yet it does not do so without lingering doubts as to the stability of that correction – Laura, the reader suspects, is never the same again, and perhaps the gender constraints in which she must henceforth operate are likewise altered. This lingering instability is the problem that *Dracula* will address 25 years after *Carmilla*'s publication. In *Dracula*, Stoker offers a more conclusive response to the threat of vampirism: by its conclusion, there are no characters remaining whose heterosexuality or adherence to gender conventions can be questioned.

## Notes

1. Much of Le Fanu's life is unknown, because the chief biography available is actually that of his brother, William Richard Le Fanu, who published a memoir in 1894.
2. Tamar Heller, quoting Paula Marantz Cohen, makes a compelling argument for why dead mothers enable "proper" sexuality in Victorian daughters: "...the mother is absent in much Victorian literature...because a daughter 'physically, emotionally, and intellectually embodies the nineteenth-century ideal of femininity' more than does the mature woman: reassuringly asexual, a childlike and dependent daughter is also more malleable to the father's control" (86).
3. *Carmilla* offers no definitive proof of this, but other vampire texts, including *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, suggest that younger victims are preferable. This is probably, though not certainly, applicable to *Carmilla* as well.
4. See Elizabeth Signorotti.
5. See Adrienne Antrim Major, Tamar Heller.
6. It is possible in the context of the story: in the description of the production of a vampire, all that is said is that "[the vampire] visits living people in their slumbers; they die, and almost invariably, in the grave, develop into vampires" (Le Fanu 627). No mention is made of whether the death of the vampire in question in any way affects the victims, so Laura's fate is uncertain. Some critics seem to think she does become a vampire after her death; see Adrienne Antrim Major.
7. See Christopher Craft's "Kiss Me with Those Red Lips" for a more complete description of the 'correction' implicit in staking.

## **It Might Be Contagious: Gender Circulation and Reconstitution in *Dracula***

Like Sheridan Le Fanu, Abraham (Bram) Stoker was born in Ireland to a Protestant family, though his was not of the ruling elite. During a childhood illness, his mother told him a variety of Irish folk tales and other supernatural myths, stories that would later inform Stoker's own writing. As an adult, Stoker worked for the Irish Civil Service for some time before accepting an invitation from a friend, actor Henry Irving, to work as business manager at the Lyceum Theatre. Once in London, Stoker began the work of managing the theater in conjunction with Irving, work that enabled him to pursue an interest in literature and his own writing. He published several works of fiction, as well as essays and reviews. Of Stoker's works, however, only one gained lasting notoriety: the 1897 novel *Dracula*. Stoker drew on a number of influences, notably Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (Riquelme 8-12) in crafting his tale. In fact, the original first chapter of *Dracula*, cut because the editor requested a shorter manuscript, included a few nearly direct references to its predecessor. Some critics have thus suggested that *Dracula* may be not only influenced by *Carmilla*, but a response to it, born out of his rocky relationship with his wife and his ensuing issues with women and sexuality. (Signorotti 619-21)

Elizabeth Signorotti claims that although some critics assume Stoker's problems with women and sexuality are rooted in his suffering from syphilis – a consequence of consorting with prostitutes – it is more likely Stoker's relationship with his wife, which led to this frequenting of prostitutes, that is the foundation of his difficulties. Signorotti suggests that Stoker's wife Florence "...sexually did not fulfill her part of the marriage contract" (possibly proven by the existence of only one child) and that, as a result, "Stoker was probably...concerned with...asserting control over a whole range of women, who, like his wife...had violated conventional expectations about women's sexuality" (620). As a result of

this desire to control women, Stoker's *Dracula* may be seen, Signorotti argues, as a response to *Carmilla*, which disturbingly "...abolishes male rights over women" (621). Whether or not *Dracula* is a response to *Carmilla*, it is clearly a response to *something*, and its emphasis on the dangers of rampant, monstrous sexuality highlights the confusion of genders occurring at the fin-de-siècle.

*Dracula*, like *Carmilla*, begins in a remote region of Eastern Europe, though it is Transylvania, rather than Styria. However, while *Carmilla* is meant to read like a woman's diary, *Dracula* reads as a collection of documents, among them diary entries, newspaper clippings, and logbooks. Taken together, these documents constitute the story of Dracula's invasion of England, beginning with Jonathan Harker's experiences at Castle Dracula in the first diary entry. Harker has been called to Transylvania by Dracula in order to explain a property acquisition the Count has requested in England. Harker quickly realizes, however, that he is not a guest in Dracula's home – he is a prisoner, and Dracula is no human being, but a monster of some sort, one who can transform into mist and control wolves. Dracula eventually leaves Harker for dead in the castle, intending him to be a victim of the three vampire women lurking there, while he sails for England. Once there, he begins his attack on the young Lucy Westenra, eventually transforming her into a vampire, before preying on Mina Harker (née Murray). It is this choice of victim which ultimately leads to his own destruction at the hands of what Christopher Craft has called the "Crew of Light" (Craft 169), a group of men brought together for the express purpose of destroying Dracula.

*Dracula*, like most vampire tales, has long provided fodder for the study of gender and sexuality. Most useful for this analysis, however, is the subversion of gender roles, introduced into the text by the vampires, that is violently reversed at the novel's end. Both *Dracula* and the

female vampires blur the lines between genders – the “weird sisters” (Stoker 51) are masculine in their ferocity and sexuality, while Dracula himself is figured in some instances as a feminine site of penetration, such as when Mina drinks his blood. This instability of gender roles is then transferred from the vampires to their human victims: Jonathan Harker is likewise described as a feminine receiver when attacked by the three vampire women in Dracula’s castle, who try to penetrate his neck with their teeth. In addition to vampirism, *Dracula* distorts gender in other ways: Lucy, before she ever encounters Dracula, wishes that she could “marry three men, or as many as want her” (60), demonstrating masculine desire in her polygamist statement. The gender fluidity these scenes represent has been aptly described by critic Jasmine Young Hall, who understands the central plot device of this novel to be “circulation” (98), even of gender itself. This circulation of gender is most recognizable, however, in circulations of other sorts – because knowledge, control and desire figure heavily in this text as gendered constructs, their circulation necessarily entails gender circulation. These examples, taken together, create ambiguity and uncertainty as to the actual nature of gender, sexuality, and desire in *Dracula*. That is, until the conclusion of the novel, when Stoker’s viewpoint on these issues becomes quite clear: all the vampires – and, therefore, the rampant sexuality and gender instability they represent and propagate – are killed, after which Jonathan and Mina Harker reproduce a son heterosexually, restoring the gender norms the vampires destabilize.

One site of destabilization in the text is the privileging of depictions of female vampirism over those of males. Although Stoker presents Dracula as the “King Vampire,” he is never actually seen drinking the blood of his victims. The one time he is caught in the act, it is Mina who is drinking *his* blood (though he has clearly already drunk from her). Similarly, his attacks on Lucy are never directly described, and his threatened attack on Harker never takes place. By



contrast, as critic Gail Griffin recognizes, the female vampires are frequently shown actively engaging in vampirism: "...active vampirism, with its dimension of sexuality, is dissociated from Dracula and associated instead with the four female vampires seeking male victims" (138). If *Dracula* is assumed to be a response to *Carmilla*, then this emphasis is logical: *Carmilla* featured only female vampires, so it follows that to correct *Carmilla*'s transgression requires focusing on female vampires as a major site of gender inversion.

Despite this apparent lack of active vampirism, Dracula is nevertheless depicted as a sexualized creature. More importantly, his sexuality is largely predicated on encounters with men – it is only his heterosexual encounters with women that are shadowed. For example, he is clearly interested in Jonathan Harker sexually: when the "weird sisters" attack Harker, Dracula shouts at them, "How dare you touch him, any of you? How dare you cast eyes on him when I had forbidden it? ... This man belongs to me!" (Stoker 43). Dracula claims Harker for himself in a sexualized manner – claims even the right of gaze – much as Carmilla claims Laura. The women are forbidden even to touch Harker, suggesting that Dracula claims Harker's body for his own. He even makes an advance on this body when Harker cuts himself shaving: "When the Count saw my face, his eyes blazed with a sort of demoniac fury, and he suddenly made a grab at my throat" (31). Dracula restrains himself only because Harker's usefulness has yet to be fulfilled, but it is evident that given the opportunity, Dracula will happily take Harker's life – a sexual act, in the context of vampire literature.

By contrast, Dracula's encounters with women are far more shadowed. His primary appearances take place in the earliest section of the novel, during Harker's time at his ancestral castle. After leaving for England, Dracula is seen predominantly as a specter, either a bat flapping its wings at the window, a wolf howling, or a shadowy figure in the distance. Though

there is evidence of his attacks (two puncture wounds evenly spaced on his victims' necks), he is only once caught in the act. Limiting Dracula's active vampirism both to encounters with male victims and to the beginning of the text accomplishes two tasks: first, it highlights the deviant sexuality explored in the text in its exclusive portrayal of his encounters with Harker; and second, it suggests the most dangerous aspect of this novel: the circulation, even contagion, of sexuality brought on by vampirism. By focusing the bulk of the text on the female vampires sired by Dracula, Stoker highlights his movements and activities without explicitly describing them. The reader need not witness Dracula's attacks, because Lucy's death and subsequent rebirth prove he has been there; sexuality is circulated from him to Lucy, right under the men's noses. Van Helsing's admonishment to Dr. Seward to watch over Lucy is telling: "Remember, she is your charge. If you leave her, and harm befall, you shall not sleep easy hereafter!" (116). The danger lies in the covert circulation of sexuality – the men try desperately to keep Lucy safe, but whenever they leave her alone, Dracula attacks. Thus, the novel establishes the fear that without proper monitoring, sexuality can and will circulate in dangerous ways.

Even the structure of the novel serves as a representation of the struggle to define gender codes, and it particularly focuses on reigning in improper feminine agency. To explain: the documents that constitute the novel are purportedly arranged by Mina Harker, in order to assist the men of the "Crew of Light" in defeating Dracula. Yet this point is not established until late in the novel, and Mina's agency is further degraded by the frame structure imposed on her manuscript – the novel is introduced and concluded by Jonathan Harker, as if Mina's own structure could not be allowed to stand alone. To emphasize the point, the conclusion is written seven years after the events of the novel, rather than contemporaneously, suggesting discomfort on the part of the male characters in the female voice concluding the text. Moreover, the very

documents that comprise the text are primarily masculine in nature – ship logs, newspaper clippings, and diaries kept in shorthand all represent masculine efforts – and therefore the influence of a woman’s voice meant the undermining of these texts as primarily male. Thus, the frame structure of the text represents an effort of the male characters to regain control of the narrative, both that of the text and that of society.

The structure of the novel is open to additional interpretations, however. John Ruskin’s lectures on gender and women’s education in the Victorian era provide a useful lens for analyzing the organization of the novel. Ruskin claimed that a woman’s “...intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement and decision. She sees the qualities of things, their claims, and their places” (59). Therefore, Mina’s ordering of the text may be seen not as true agency, but as an iteration of the ideal woman’s role: to organize and arrange. Furthermore, the fact that she performs this task in an effort to assist the “Crew of Light” in their destruction of Dracula demonstrates another common ideal of the “angel in the house”: a woman must guide and help her husband in all his ventures. Ruskin argues that a woman “...must be...infallibly wise...not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fail from his side” (60). Thus, Mina’s assistance and intellect are intended not for her own agency or power, but to aid her husband in his quest. She says herself, before Dracula enters her life, that she has “...been working very hard lately, because I want to keep up with Jonathan’s studies...When we are married I shall be able to be useful to Jonathan” (Stoker 55). Thus, even before the threat of Dracula is imminent, Mina is working only to assist Jonathan, not for her own purposes. However, though this analysis makes it seem as though Mina’s work in organizing the text is sanctioned by contemporary discourse, Stoker nevertheless felt the need to circumscribe Mina’s work within the words of her husband. This circumscription reduces any

potential agency Mina may have had, although she ostensibly (by her own assertions as well as by Ruskin's lectures) had none. Moreover, it suggests that by Stoker's estimation, even this amount of agency might be too dangerous. Together, these ideas emphasize the potential danger of gender fluidity, figured as the circulation of skills, Stoker seeks to eliminate – Mina's agency, even within the confines of contemporary mores, is potentially transgressive and must be contained.

Stoker's novel thus highlights a fundamental problem of the era: if a woman is granted skills or knowledge, even if these are given only to assist men, how can feminine agency then be avoided or contained? Ruskin struggled with this question, even addressing it directly: "But how, you will ask, is the idea of this guiding function of the woman reconcilable with a true wifely subjection?" (58). He answers this question by denying women's agency – a woman's role serves "a *guiding*, not a determining function" (58). Ruskin only skirts the issue, however, and actually contradicts himself later when he writes that "[t]here is a not a war in the world...but you women are answerable for it..." (75) Ruskin reveals, then, the difficulty Stoker struggles to address: women will inevitably possess some agency, but that agency must be tightly controlled in order to maintain a patriarchal system. For, as Stoker's text demonstrates, the consequence of unbridled agency in a woman is inevitably war – in this case, the war fought between the "Crew of Light" and Dracula for the right to define women's sexuality.

Issues of control appear in other aspects of the novel as well, particularly in the circulation and safeguarding of knowledge. From the beginning, knowledge is presented as a privilege, though who is privileged varies depending on the context. For example, in the early part of the novel, Jonathan is initially perceived as the knowledgeable character – he has come to explain a purchase to Dracula, and Dracula requests his assistance in other matters as well,

primarily English custom and language. However, as Hall points out, as a solicitor, Harker is “infinitely replaceable...not only by others who offer a similar service, but also by the client himself” (101). By passing on – circulating – his knowledge to Dracula, Harker makes Dracula the knowledgeable character. This, combined with the knowledge Dracula is already concealing from Harker, grants Dracula all the power in this relationship. Dracula tells Harker that he “may go anywhere [he] wish[es]...except where the doors are locked, where of course [he] will not wish to go” (Stoker 26). In keeping parts of his castle from Harker’s view, Dracula effectively keeps Harker from knowing. Moreover, this comment suggests an attempt to control even Harker’s desires: Dracula assumes that Harker will not “wish to go” into those rooms which are off-limits.

These events not only endanger Harker’s life, but his gender identity as well, because knowledge is typically figured as privileged for men only. For example, Ruskin, though he advocated education for women, tempered his suggestion with the argument that women should know only what it is useful to their husbands for them to know: “All such knowledge should be given her as may enable her to understand, and even to aid, the work of men: and yet it should be given, not as knowledge, - not as if it were, or could be, for her *an object to know*; but only to feel, and to judge” (62, emphasis mine). Women are not expected – or even allowed – to know for the sake of knowing; they must know only for the sake of helping their husbands. Therefore, men are constructed in Victorian discourse as the knowers, and women as the judges. Thus, Harker’s lack of knowledge in his relationship with Dracula produces a sort of femininity in his character, which is further emphasized in his continued presence in the castle. Moreover, Dracula’s assumptions that Harker could not “wish to go” into those places he is not allowed echo Ruskin’s assumptions that women could not wish to know those things unnecessary to their

assistance of their husbands, underscoring the suggestion that Harker's position is essentially one of feminization.

Harker's imprisonment in the castle produces a variety of other feminizations in his character as well. Hall suggests that his role as solicitor is in itself a feminine role: "The solicitor solicits; as a professional, his desire is to be desired, and his passivity places him in an increasingly effeminized role as his stay in the castle progresses" (103). What is perhaps more important, however, is his imprisonment. He is confined to the home, much as his female contemporaries are imagined to be (though they are only figuratively, rather than literally, confined). Harker writes that "[w]hen I found that I was a prisoner a sort of wild feeling came over me" (32). Compared to Florence Nightingale's somewhat polemical essay "Cassandra" (which, though published long after *Dracula* appeared, was written during the period), this statement is reflective of the position of women in their homes. Some, like Nightingale, felt locked up and bored, unable to pursue anything of worth because of social obligation. Nightingale describes this feeling when she writes, "Why have women passion, intellect, moral activity...and a place in society where no one of these three can be exercised?" (Nightingale 396). Nightingale's essay reads like a lament, a desperate cry of a woman who has realized she is trapped by her gender, much like Harker's sudden panic on discovering his imprisonment. Like Nightingale, Harker perceives his "place" in the castle to be one of entrapment, where none of his "passion, intellect [and] moral activity" can be of use. The feminization of Harker by his imprisonment is most obvious, however, when he describes his attempt at escape from the castle, which involves climbing down the wall of the ancient building: "At least...the precipice is steep and high. At its foot a man may sleep – *as a man*" (Stoker 55, emphasis mine). Harker

recognizes that his imprisonment places him in a feminine position, because he would rather die outside of the castle – “as a man” – than inside it, as a prisoner – effeminate and vulnerable.

Harker’s feminization is further realized in the scene in which he is attacked and nearly penetrated by the three vampire women. Having disobeyed Dracula’s warning about falling asleep anywhere in the castle other than his own room, Harker awakes to find himself the intended prey of three female vampires:

There was something about them that made me uneasy, some longing and at the same time some deadly fear. I felt in my heart a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips...The fair girl...bent over me, fairly gloating. There was a deliberate voluptuousness which was both thrilling and repulsive...Lower and lower went her head as the lips...seemed about to fasten on my throat...I could feel the soft, shivering touch of the lips on the supersensitive skin of my throat, and the hard dents of two sharp teeth, just touching and pausing there. I closed my eyes in a languorous ecstasy and waited – waited with beating heart. (Stoker 42-43).

Harker’s position in this scene seems to be that of the female, waiting to be penetrated. He is supine and quite obviously not in control, though he does not seem to fight the vampires at all. Gail Griffin suggests that this scene is “...the first time [in the novel that] vampirism is linked with stifled, obsessive sexuality, all the more urgent because forbidden; and this sexuality is represented as female” (139). Up to this point, Dracula, though an apparent threat to Harker, has not been represented as explicitly sexual, yet these women are depicted as sexual predators. These aggressive women, then, in conjunction with the effeminized Harker, represent a subversion of typical gender conventions. Furthermore, these lines are reminiscent of the duality in Laura’s descriptions of the vampire’s advances in *Carmilla*: Harker feels both “longing” and “fear”; he finds the blond vampire’s voluptuousness “both thrilling and repulsive”; her touch is “soft,” but her teeth are “hard” and “sharp.” The duality inherent in this scene reflects the larger instability produced throughout this text; in describing his encounter with the vampires, Harker

demonstrates not only the physical danger inherent in his situation, but also the social danger of uncontrollable sexuality.

Gender roles are reversed in other ways in the text as well. For example, when Harker first arrives at the castle, Dracula secretly performs all household tasks, thereby reversing gender roles unrelated to sexuality. Although this serves a plot purpose – Harker cannot know that he is alone in the house with Dracula – it also functions to feminize Dracula. The Count prepares food, makes his bed, and performs other tasks typically within the realm of the woman. Thus, Harker enters the home as the masculinized knowledge-bearer, but after contact with the feminized Dracula, both knowledge and gender are exchanged such that Dracula becomes a masculine knowledge-bearer and Harker is feminized. This exchange is repeated later when Dracula produces female vampires: by sexualizing the women, he effectively masculinizes them, thus circulating gender once more.

Dracula's initial feminization is particularly interesting when considering the female vampires with whom he lives. Many critics<sup>1</sup> assume these three women are Dracula's "sisters" or "daughters," implying an incestuous relationship between them. Others<sup>2</sup> refer to them as his "wives," while still others<sup>3</sup> avoid identifying their relationship at all. That the nature of their relationship is never certain is revealing; Dracula's relationship to them is neither incestuous nor conjugal, but some strange combination of the two. Whatever the exact nature of their relationship may be, Dracula acts as father and mother (or brother and sister, husband and wife, etc.) to them. Although they are presumably in the castle while Harker is a guest, they are not required to perform the feminine tasks of cleaning and cooking – they are not even disguised as servants to help sell the façade of humanity Dracula constructs. Moreover, Dracula seems to feed the women – when he prevents them from attacking Harker, he compensates them for the loss



with the gift of a child for dinner. That Dracula can serve a multitude of functions for these women suggests that his identity is likewise nonspecific – the danger, of course, being the potential for destabilizing the identities of the other characters.

The privileging of knowledge which initially leads to Harker's feminization is enacted in other places in the text; however, Harker's experience is the only occasion on which a man is denied knowledge. From this point, it is women only who are denied access to vital information, purportedly for their protection. For example, Dr. Seward and Van Helsing, when treating Lucy after Dracula's attacks, choose to keep the true nature of her condition from her mother because Mrs. Westenra suffers from a heart condition and they fear the knowledge will kill her. Van Helsing cries that "...we must not tell her, we must not even warn her, or she die, and then both die" (Stoker 124). Yet the keeping of knowledge from the mother leads to Lucy's decline – her mother unwittingly removes the garlic flowers from her daughter's bed and opens both the window and the door, thinking that she is helping her daughter regain her strength. Two possible interpretations may be extrapolated from this scene: first, the privileging of knowledge for men only might be interpreted as the cause of Lucy's demise – if her mother had been told that the garlic was necessary for her daughter's well-being, she would not have removed it. However, the alternate explanation is that women cannot be trusted not to endanger one another – Lucy's mother, however unknowingly, makes her daughter vulnerable to Dracula's attack. Thus, like the accounts of hysterics with which *Carmilla* engages, women are not to be trusted alone.

The impossibility of trusting women is most decisively affirmed in the case of Renfield, who, though biologically male, is coded in many ways as feminine. Imprisoned for insanity, Renfield is locked away just as women were perceived to be and as Harker was earlier in the text. Furthermore, Renfield's insanity marks him as one of the hysterical women documented by

Victorian doctors and scientists; indeed, this text is itself a documentation of Renfield's own hysteria. His imprisonment enables him to be the agent of infection – he lets Dracula into the asylum, where he is able to attack Mina. Thus, Renfield, positioned as a hysteric, is the means by which Dracula circulates, just as his vampire women (Lucy in particular, but also the women he plans to vamp later) provide a means for the circulation of his brand of sexuality. However, Renfield's biological maleness is not ignored: unlike Lucy's mother, Renfield eventually recognizes that his transgressions have enabled a dangerous sexuality to affect Mina, and he is able to warn the men in time to stop Dracula from killing her. As the "Crew of Light" has done, Renfield actively reasserts his masculinity by attempting to stop Dracula's circulations and ultimately contributes to the reading of this text as a reassertion of conventional gender constructs.

A further danger inherent in Dracula's attack is that it seems directed not only at his own victims, but at the entire society, and the bulk of the attack seems designed to engender a reconstitution of gender norms. His choice of victims indicates that this may be his endgame: after his initial interest in Harker, Dracula never expresses interest in a male character again<sup>5</sup>. A clue to his choice of victims may be found in the taunt he delivers to the "Crew of Light," when he says that "My revenge is just begun! I spread it over centuries, and time is on my side. Your girls that you all love are mine already; and through them you and others shall yet be mine – my creatures, to do my bidding and to be my jackals when I want to feed" (304). Dracula's plan is to vamp the English women in order to ultimately vamp the English men, and he believes that he will have easier access to the men through their women. Thus, in gaining both men and women, Dracula will overtake the entirety of England, circulating his sexuality throughout the country via its women.

The potentiality that Dracula has come to sire Englishmen through their wives is perhaps best understood by comparing Dracula's actions in England to his actions in Transylvania. When Dracula first encounters Jonathan Harker, he requests that the latter explain the nature of English customs to him. Though Harker's explanations are never explicitly revealed, one can assume that he described social relations as well as business customs. Dracula, who has demonstrated a certain degree of cunning in his manipulation of Harker, may have inferred what many critics have noted; namely, that women in English society function primarily as signifiers of relationships between men – women are exchanged in order to facilitate bonding between men. Dracula, acting in an English system, determines that his access to men will be granted via their women. That this behavior is specific to Dracula's location is demonstrated by his behavior toward his vamped women: in Transylvania, where his "daughters" share a home with him, he provides their dinner and maintains control over them (after denying them access to Harker, he gives them a child to eat). In England, by contrast, his relationship to Lucy seems to cease once she is vamped, and she must procure her own meals. Therefore, it seems that his choice of female victim in England could be tied more to a desire to circulate more easily within an English system of exchange than to a preference for female victims. This is further suggested by his distribution of coffins of earth, which he needs to live, throughout the country, which enables him to circulate through England as much as he wishes. The danger implicit in this possibility is that Dracula is functioning *within* the English social systems; thus, he is effectively destroying it from the inside. He attacks the men and their society from within their own homes, with their own women.

These dangerous circulations begun by Dracula must be stopped, and traditional masculinity and femininity forcibly reconstituted. The most dramatic instance of this is the

killing of the vampire Lucy, discussed in detail by many others<sup>6</sup>. Lucy's death, however, does not eradicate the threat, for Dracula is still circulating. Moreover, Dracula is moving about with the blood of the men in the "Crew of Light" circulating in his own veins: Dracula has inadvertently ingested this blood in draining Lucy, who has had multiple transfusions of the men's blood. Thus, in their attempt to save ("correct") Lucy, the men inadvertently pass their masculinity, through their blood, back to another male. Many have figured this as a homosexual encounter – the men can only come together through the mediating figure of a woman – but this event seems dangerous not only because of the homosexual undertones, but because the men lack control over the circulations of their masculinity. They mean to save Lucy with their masculinity, but instead they provide the means for prolonging the encounter with Dracula, as well as the means to strengthen him.

Eventually, however, the men succeed in tracking and killing Dracula, using Mina as a passive conduit for information on his whereabouts. Their actions are coded as aggressively masculine: the phallic stake symbol aside, the men are also each characterized by their masculine traits. Van Helsing is imminently the knower of the group, coming to them already knowledgeable about vampires and possessing several advanced degrees. Dr. Seward, likewise, possesses an advanced degree and assists Van Helsing in his ministrations to Lucy. Lucy's fiancé, Lord Godalming, is masculine in both his title and in the representation of killing Lucy, in which he "never faltered" and appeared like a "figure of Thor" (192). Another member of their band, the lone American, Quincey Morris<sup>6</sup>, is described as "all man" (285) and "always...the one to arrange the plan of action" (266). Finally, Jonathon Harker is represented in the final battle by his "impetuosity, and the manifest singleness of his purpose" which "seemed to overawe those in front him," as "with a strength which seemed incredible," he succeeds in

killing Dracula by his own hand (324). The men's success depends on the use of Mina as conduit, for in providing information on Dracula's whereabouts, she also provides the means by which the men can control Dracula's circulation. Previously, Dracula's circulation was dependent upon being undetected, as his predations on both Lucy and Mina attest. Here, however, the men are in control of his circulation, because they have direct access to it through Mina. They use this control to track Dracula and finally stop his circulation by killing him. Importantly, this final scene takes place during a chase: Dracula is actually moving (though within his coffin) when the men finally catch up to him. Thus, the death of Dracula is part of a literal cease in movement or circulation, thereby removing the threat of his uncontrolled circulation.

As a whole, Stoker's novel, in its manipulation of the vampire, demonstrates the fluidity and instability of gender by tracing its circulation through a small group of friends. The conclusion of the novel – the death of Dracula – means the end of this circulation, because there is no longer a vampire to circulate either himself or his sexuality. Unlike *Carmilla*, whose ending suggests that gender fluidity has not ceased, *Dracula* produces a much more conclusive ending. Mina is fully reinscribed by traditional femininity, even producing a child, while the masculinity of the men is reaffirmed by their war-like actions against Dracula. However, while Stoker's novel more completely corrects gender destabilization than Le Fanu's novella, *Dracula* also allows far more rampant circulations of gender to occur before correcting them than does *Carmilla*. This is perhaps to establish more clearly what can happen when these circulations are unchecked; where Le Fanu left it to the reader to imagine what might happen to Laura if *Carmilla* had not been killed, Stoker explicitly depicts the monstrous Lucy. This intense response to *Carmilla*, perhaps a result of Stoker's personal life, strictly reinforces Victorian, patriarchal

gender codes. However, just as Stoker reacted to a text that he felt insufficiently enforced these gender codes, so too did Joss Whedon, creator of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, react to this and other vampire texts that he felt overemphasized failing gender codes. In creating this television series, Whedon sought not to sustain gender stereotypes through destabilization, but to redefine gender by producing new forms.

## Notes

1. See Christopher Bentley and Christopher Craft.
2. See Regina Barecca's poem "Dracula's Wives."
3. See Judith Weissman, among others.
4. With the exception of the ship's crew he devours during his trip to England. However, because these men seem to be primarily for food, it is unlikely that they function in his plans.
5. See Christopher Craft in particular.
6. The ultimate proof of Morris' masculinity is the birth and naming of the Harkers' son, produced heterosexually, whose "birthday is the same day as that on which Quincey Morris died...His bundle of names links all our little band together; but we call him Quincey" (Stoker 326).

# **“I may be love’s bitch, but at least I’m man enough to admit it<sup>1</sup>”: Gender Performance and Constitution in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer***

## *Introduction*

“Why don’t we start with: ‘Hi, I’m Buffy.’” – Buffy, “Welcome to the Hellmouth” (1.1)

When released in 1992, the critically panned and poorly performing film *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (*BtVS*) bore little resemblance to the script envisioned by its creator, Joss Whedon. Five years later, television producers approached Whedon, hoping to take his original concept and craft a television series consistent with that vision. The show that resulted, though it retained the title of the movie, is far closer to Whedon’s original concept. *BtVS* followed the title character, Buffy Summers, the “one girl in all the world” (“Welcome to the Hellmouth” 1.1) destined to slay vampires and other forces of darkness on a regular basis. Surrounded by a group of friends frequently referred to as the “Scooby Gang<sup>2</sup>,” Buffy struggled to live a normal life while carrying out her duties as protector of the world. The members of the Scooby Gang varied over the show’s seven seasons, but the core group consisted of Buffy’s closest friends, Willow Rosenberg and Xander Harris, and her Watcher (a person responsible for guiding her), Rupert Giles.

The show, as originally conceived, is a defiance of genre: Whedon, a self-described feminist (Udovich), devised the show as a response to the gender stereotypes typical of the horror genre. In a 2000 interview, he explained his original vision for *BtVS*: “It was pretty much the blond girl in the alley in the horror movie who keeps getting killed... She was fun, she had sex...But then she would get punished for it. ... [Then I thought] what if the girl goes into the dark alley. And the monster follows her. And she destroys him<sup>3</sup>” (Udovich n.pag.). The feminist nature of the show, though a primary project of the series, is supplemented by more general genre subversions. Anthony Stewart Head, the actor who portrays Rupert Giles, expressed this



fact when explaining why *BtVS* would never win any traditional awards: "...they don't know whether we're a comedy or a drama, and you have to be one or the other" (Udovich n.pag.). Further complicating the show's genre identity is an episode in the sixth season, "Once More, with Feeling" (6.7), a musical episode which complicated even its musical genre identity by featuring a pastiche of forms, including modern rock/pop and older ballad forms. The show's continual defiance of a genre identification is reflective of its larger defiance of any sort of identification; rather, the show sought to identify itself by constantly redefining its own – and those of its primary genre, horror – terms and rules. Though *BtVS* clearly owes its existence to those vampire texts which preceded it, including *Carmilla* and *Dracula*, the show sought to subvert, question, and ultimately redefine the traditional rules of vampirism those earlier texts affirmed.

Although the show addressed and redefined a myriad of issues associated with vampirism, it primarily engaged definitions of gender and sexuality, as Whedon's original description attests. Unlike *Dracula* or *Carmilla*, gender and sexuality in *BtVS* are not rigorously defined – the series questions traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity by emphasizing the performance inherent in those definitions. The primary loci of these performances are Buffy herself and the vampire Spike, both of whom actively perform the gender identity that is socially defined as appropriate to their sex (femininity and masculinity, respectively). That this performance is obvious to the audience is not a fault of poor acting; rather, each character appears to be almost essentially the *opposite* gender than that of their body: Buffy's superhuman strength and tendency to fight alone mark her as typically masculine, while Spike's poetry, obsessive love, and identification in female communities mark him as typically feminine. Therefore, Buffy's attempts at femininity (apparent in her fashion and attempt at

cheerleading) and Spike's attempts at masculinity (apparent in his phallic nickname and exaggerated violence) are obviously – and intentionally – performance. The emphasis on these performances suggests an illegitimacy of the stereotypical gender constructs. Moreover, the show provides an alternative understanding of gender: Buffy's best friend, Willow, is initially coded heterosexually, but as the series progressed, Willow engaged in a homosexual relationship with fellow Wiccan Tara. Despite the progression, Willow's gender coding is never altered – she is never obviously performing a gender; only her sexuality evolves. Though she is a powerful witch, she never performs femininity in an effort to disguise the agency that implies. Rather, she is consistently – and to an extent unproblematically – coded as both masculine and feminine, while Buffy's and Spike's double identities are almost always problematic for them.

*Buffy:*

“I'm an old-fashioned gal. I was raised to believe that the men dig up the corpses and the women have the babies.”  
– Buffy, “Some Assembly Required” (2.2)

When the series began, it picked up more or less where the movie left off: having accidentally-on-purpose burned down the gym at her high school in Los Angeles (the official explanation?: “...that gym was full of vampi...asbestos,” 1.1), Buffy is forced to move with her mother to a small town called Sunnydale – which just happens to be atop a Hellmouth, a mystical convergence of power, drawing vampires and other forces of darkness to its nexus. From the beginning, Buffy is depicted as a strong fighter, stronger than her mentor, Giles. One of their earliest exchanges, in which Buffy expresses her frustration and desire to walk away from slaying, is representative of their dynamic:

*Buffy:* Hey, I know! Why don't you kill 'em?

*Giles:* I-I'm a Watcher, I-I haven't the skill...

*Buffy:* Oh, come on, stake through the heart, a little sunlight...It's like falling off a log.

*Giles:* A-a Slayer slays, a Watcher...

*Buffy*: ...watches?

“Welcome to the Hellmouth” (1.1)

Thus, from the very first episode, Buffy is presented as the active person in their relationship, while Giles plays the passive role of Watcher<sup>4</sup>. Although Giles possesses knowledge of demons and is responsible for training Buffy, it is Buffy who is responsible for slaying. This in some ways is in direct opposition to the structure of *Dracula* and *Carmilla*; here, the vampire hunter is female – *must* be female. As the show’s opening voiceover tells us, “In every generation there is a Chosen One. *She* alone will stand against the vampires, the demons and the forces of darkness. *She* is the Slayer” (emphasis mine). Though it is never explained precisely why the Slayer is always female, it is nevertheless certain that she is. Moreover, Giles’ possession of knowledge is not depicted as a privileged state. In fact, just the opposite is true – like Ruskin’s idealized wife, Giles possesses knowledge that he may assist Buffy in her fight, not simply for the sake of knowing.

However, while the relationship between Buffy and Giles is in some ways an inversion of Victorian gender relations, it is not an absolute reversal: Giles works for an organization called the Watcher’s Council, to which both he and Buffy are required to report. Though Buffy possesses the strength and power of the Slayer, she is expected to obey the edicts of the Council, a group staffed predominantly, though not exclusively, by men. Buffy is not a typical Slayer, however, and she does not always follow the rules of the Council. Because Giles recognizes that Buffy will not behave as expected, he ignores some of the more stringent requirements, allowing her to take control. This is made glaringly obvious in the third season, when Giles is fired as Buffy’s Watcher and a replacement is sent in the form of Wesley Wyndham-Pryce, a man as pompous as his name suggests. In his first encounter with Buffy, Wesley attempts unsuccessfully to give her an order, after which he asks, “Are you not used to being given orders?” to which she

sarcastically responds, “Whenever Giles sends me on a mission, he always says ‘please’. And afterwards I get a cookie” (“Bad Girls”, 3.14). Though Buffy does proceed to work with Wesley, she never fully accepts his authority, challenging it at every opportunity and openly privileging Giles’ advice, which is never given as an order, over Wesley’s. This representation of a council formed mostly of men is reminiscent of the “Crew of Light” in *Dracula* and suggests that *BtVS*, however feminist, cannot ignore the precedents – but it can challenge them.

Perhaps the most important articulation of Buffy’s refusal to take orders from the council comes in the fifth season of the series. The Watcher’s Council, after firing Wesley, had given up on Buffy, presumably awaiting the next Slayer to resume their authoritative position. However, in the episode “Checkpoint” (5.12), Buffy needs information only the Watcher’s Council can provide. In order to receive this information, Buffy must pass a series of tests, most of which seem to be designed so that she will fail. Eventually, Buffy reaches a breaking point, and she delivers the following speech to the Council representatives:

*Buffy:* I’ve had a lot of people talking at me the last few days. Everyone just lining up to tell me how unimportant I am. And I’ve finally figured out why. Power. I have it. They don’t. This bothers them... You guys didn’t come all the way from England to determine whether or not I was good enough to be let back in. You came to beg me to let you back in... You’re Watchers. Without a Slayer...[y]ou can’t do anything with the information you have... So here’s how it’s gonna work. You’re gonna tell me everything you know. Then you’re gonna go away.

This scene plays like an attack against patriarchy; although the Council employs female Watchers, the institution in general seems patriarchal, particularly in its treatment of the Slayer. The Council places itself in a privileged position by keeping knowledge from the Slayer, though only she possesses the power to act on that knowledge. The situation is reminiscent in some ways of Mina’s relationship to knowledge in *Dracula*. The Council aims to use Buffy as a tool for defeating vampires, just as the “Crew of Light” uses Mina to find *Dracula*. Unlike Mina,

however, Buffy is an active participant, taking control of the situation and refusing to act merely as a tool, thus challenging the constructions of gender authorized by *Dracula*. Buffy's relationship to the Council throughout the whole of the series implies an agency not present in the Victorian texts, because the gender dynamics of this text are less stabilized than in *Carmilla* or *Dracula*.

Buffy's strength, power, and agency thus mark her as stereotypically masculine, and on the battlefield – typically a cemetery – she generally embraces these attributes. In her daily life, however, Buffy struggles to appear feminine. Her body is her ally in this attempt: physically unimposing, Buffy is diminutive and blonde, looking far more like a cheerleader than a hunter or soldier. She emphasizes her physical build with her fashion choices. When fighting The Master in the first season, she is dressed in a full-length white dress for the Spring Fling dance. When the Master protests that she is supposed to be dead, she responds, “I may be dead, but I'm still pretty” (“Prophecy Girl”, 1.12), thus emphasizing not her strength or power – or even the fact that she has cheated death – but her femininity. Throughout the first two seasons, Buffy is seen primarily in (micro)miniskirts and feminine tops, with low-cut necklines or low backs. She also frequently wears knee-high boots or high heels. In later seasons, her clothing choices are more mature, particularly in the sixth and seventh seasons, when she becomes caretaker of her younger sister after the death of their mother, but her clothing is always feminine.

Buffy is not merely feminine, however – she is also fashionable. As critic Leigh Clemons notes, “Buffy is portrayed as fashion-conscious...She is fashionable enough, at the beginning of the pilot, to merit [the popular] Cordelia's attention” (par. 7). Buffy is thus presented as a character determined to remain current and fashion-forward, even as she befriends Willow and Xander, who are decidedly unpopular. This suggests that her fashion choices are not merely a

reflection of her need to remain *in* the world, rather than simply *of* it, because her friendship and subsequent exile with the Scooby Gang – who are depicted as poor dressers – do not require fashion consciousness for membership. Her friends are not interested in her clothing choices, and even her male love interests are apparently unfazed by her fashion: Clemons notes that “...many of her early romantic encounters occur when she is not fashionably dressed: in her pajamas at the end of ‘Halloween’ (2.6) and soaking wet in ‘Surprise’ (2.13)”. Therefore, her fashion choices do not benefit her relationships with her friends, her social status, or her relationships with her love interests. Rather, her fashion seems to be entirely for her own benefit – her attempt to perform traditional femininity by dressing the part.

The clash of this feminine clothing with her duties as a Slayer is comically noted in the fourth season, when Professor Walsh, commander of a secret government installation that captures and studies vampires and demons, suggests that Buffy “suit up” (in camouflage and combat gear) for patrol. Buffy responds, to the chuckles of the other soldiers, that she has “patrolled in this halter [top] many times” (“The I in Team” 4.13). This scene highlights the unsuitability of much of her wardrobe for her job as a Slayer. Her clothing choices, then, are not related to her duty – they are an attempt to combat the masculinity associated with her duty with a projection of typical femininity. Buffy frequently resorts to such typically feminine activities or clothing when avoiding or denying her identity as the Slayer. In the third season, Buffy campaigns heavily for Homecoming Queen, partly out of anger with high school rival Cordelia, who also wants the crown:

*Buffy:* Sorry, Cordy, but you have no idea who you’re messing with.

*Cordelia:* What? The Slayer?

*Buffy:* I’m not talking about the Slayer. I’m talking about Buffy. You’ve awakened the Prom Queen within.

- “Homecoming” (3.5)

In this scene, Buffy emphasizes that it is Buffy the *girl*, not Buffy the Slayer, who is campaigning. Thus, everything she does thereafter is done as an attempt to be feminine, and she pointedly ignores her Slayer skills in her efforts. She feigns dropping her flyers so that she can flirt with the boys who rush to help her pick them up; she flirts with a group of athletes, marking herself as the typical girl by wearing one of their letterman's jackets; and she offers cupcakes – proof of culinary talent – as well. That her efforts to be feminine are a revolt against her stereotypically masculine duties as the Slayer emphasizes that these are not mere attempts to be a normal person – they are attempts to be a normal *girl*.

That Buffy's attempts at femininity can only be performance is made obvious when the second plot of the episode intersects with the bid for Homecoming Queen: a vampire named Trick has organized what he calls "Slayerfest 1999," a competitive hunt for Buffy and Faith, the other Slayer<sup>4</sup>. This hunt is to be facilitated by the kidnapping of Buffy and Faith, who will then be pursued through the forest. However, Buffy is kidnapped with Cordelia instead of Faith and forced to protect her. Thus, Buffy's frantic bid for Homecoming Queen devolves instead into a fight for her life and the life of her rival – a fight that destroys the spaghetti-strap red dress on which she "spent a year's allowance" (3.5). Her attempts at femininity, in both dress and her attempts to win the crown, are rendered pointless by her duties as the Slayer. When she and Cordelia finally arrive at the dance, it is clear that neither will be winning the crown, yet it is not because of their destroyed dresses. Rather, the school has chosen to vote for the two girls competing against them – girls who are more stereotypically feminine, because they were not aggressive in their campaigns. Buffy and Cordelia, seemingly outdone with the situation, turn and walk away. This episode thus highlights the impossibility of Buffy's performance ever succeeding, because even in her attempts to be feminine she codes herself as masculine (here

meaning the stereotypically male marker of aggression). Yet the series does not suggest this is a problem, though Buffy generally perceives it as such. Rather, the show suggests that this contest is vapid, unworthy of Buffy or even of Cordelia, who is depicted as quite intelligent despite her shallow behavior. Thus, *BtVS* suggests that Buffy's gender is constituted in other ways, by her intelligence and strength, rather than by the femininity she attempts to construct.

Perhaps the most dramatic – and comic – example of the ineffectiveness of Buffy's performance occurs in the fourth season episode "Pangs" (4.8), in which the spirits of a tribe of Native Americans attack the Scooby Gang on Thanksgiving. This is Buffy's first Thanksgiving without her mother and Buffy is determined to make it perfect. Throughout the latter half of the episode, Buffy's attempts to craft the ideal meal are interspersed with the violence of the Native Americans' attack. Though she is supposed to be finding a way to defeat the spirits, she instead repeatedly runs into the kitchen for various utensils or bowls, complains about the lack of a ricer, and chastises Willow, who has spent all day researching the Native American tribe, for purchasing frozen peas instead of fresh ("They're gonna be mushy," she complains). Even her dialogue at times comically reflects her attempts to be domestic while executing her Slayer activities: "[to Willow] Will, you know how bad I feel about this. It's eating me up – [rapidly to Anya, who is cooking] Quarter cup of brandy and let it simmer – [back to Willow] But even though it's hard, we have to end this..." (4.8). Buffy is desperate to accomplish this task – a stereotypically female task – perfectly, but, as always, her Slayer duties interfere. Even when the spirits are silenced and the dinner finished, this episode represents the inability of Buffy to successfully accomplish both her project of femininity and her duties as the Slayer. Moreover, her reduction to nagging and complaining suggests that her inability to perfect the performance is so stressful that she must resort to the most stereotypical depictions of woman – she is both the



hysteric (well-documented by Victorian doctors) and the shrew (of Shakespearean fame) – in her attempts to be feminine amid persistent violence. That such a representation is comic belies her performance, because the audience recognizes the incongruity of this performance with her identity as the Slayer and even with her usual, more subtle performances of femininity.

“Pangs” underscores the impossibility of Buffy achieving a traditional femininity, one marked by domesticity and weakness. What it offers instead – and, indeed, what the series as a whole seems to offer – is an alternative view of gender, one that is not reliant on fashion or domesticity. Rather, *BtVS* suggests that Buffy need not adhere to binary gender codes; she can be a whole person without committing to either masculinity or femininity. The conclusion of “Pangs” is a successful family dinner, prepared predominantly by Buffy, and a defeat of the Native American spirits. Neither has been achieved easily or perfectly, but both are adequate – and while Buffy remains unsatisfied, the rest of the group<sup>6</sup> seems more than content. The episode as a whole suggests that Buffy’s performances of gender are unnecessary; the audience perceives that Buffy’s obsessive cooking and organizing are excessive, because the group would be more than satisfied with lesser quality, particularly given the circumstances of the day (Giles, for one, “like[s] mushy peas”). Moreover, there is no suggestion that a failure to complete this domestic task would somehow render Buffy not a woman – the concern lies far more with the possible failure of defeating the angry spirits. Buffy’s performance of femininity, then, has the potential to be damaging, an inversion of the gender constructions of *Dracula* and *Carmilla*, in which *masculinity* is damaging to a woman. Here, her insistence on traditional constructions of gender nearly prevents her from accomplishing her duty.

This damaging effect of performing femininity is even more apparent in the second season episode “Halloween” (2.6), in which Buffy, in an attempt to attract the more than 200-

year-old vampire-with-a-soul Angel, dresses as an eighteenth-century girl for Halloween. The trouble begins when a spell causes the characters to become their costumes – Buffy is literally transformed into a weeping, defenseless eighteenth-century girl with no recollection of being the Slayer and no superhuman strength. The spell is only broken just in time to save her from Spike. In the final scene, Buffy, now dressed in her pajamas rather than the full-length gown that was her costume, tries to explain her outfit to Angel:

*Buffy:* I just wanted to be a real girl for once. The kind of fancy girl you liked when you were my age.

*Angel:* [laughs]...I hated the girls back then. Especially the noble women...They were just incredibly dull. I always wished I could meet someone [looks meaningfully at Buffy]...exciting.

Not only has Buffy's attempt to be "a real girl" nearly killed her, it is precisely the opposite of what Angel wants. She mistakenly believes that traditional femininity, here depicted as weakness and utter dependency, will be attractive to Angel. Instead, Angel – and the series – suggests that strength need not be masculine. Buffy should not be ashamed of her strength and power, because it is those very qualities that have attracted Angel. Although Buffy does not ever quite realize it, even when Angel (and later boyfriends) tells her, the audience is clear that Buffy's strength and power are precisely those things which make her who she is, and they are not inherently masculine. Her choices in partner reinforce this concept – only with the few men who are equally strong (two vampires, Angel and Spike, and a soldier, Riley Finn) can she make a relationship last; dates with other, more stereotypically gendered men always end badly<sup>7</sup>, because with these men she is forced into her performance of femininity.

*Spike*

*Buffy*: [holding an ax] Do we really need weapons for this?

*Spike*: [holding a pole] I just like them. They make me feel all manly. – “School Hard” (2.3)

Most of the vampires on *BtVS* exist only to be staked. A few, however, play major roles in the overarching plot. One such vampire is William the Bloody, more commonly called Spike, due to his penchant for killing his victims with railroad spikes. When Spike is first introduced, he is depicted as brutal and vicious. While researching Spike, Giles discovers that he “...has fought two Slayers in the last century and...he’s killed them both” (“School Hard” 2.3). Yet in the same episode, Spike demonstrates love and affection for his mad lover Drusilla, injured by an encounter with an angry mob in Prague, by encouraging her to eat for her health. Thus, from his first appearance, it is clear that Spike is not easily coded as either strictly masculine or strictly feminine. As critic Arwen Spicer writes, “Though Spike initially appears as a strongly masculine character, I argue that he crosses the boundaries of conventional gender identifications, enacting a hybridized identity that is simultaneously coded masculine and feminine” (par. 1). Spike’s gender does appear to be hybridized in this way, but his masculinity, represented by extreme violence as well as Drusilla’s complete dependence upon him, is not coded in the same way that his feminine characteristics are. Rather, those aspects of Spike which are conventionally masculine are performed, just as Buffy’s conventional femininity is performed.

That Spike’s masculinity is a performance is not readily acknowledged in the series; through the fourth season, though he is coded feminine as well as masculine, his masculinity seems to be an inherent part of his character. In the fifth season, however, Spike’s past is revealed, just as his attraction to Buffy intensifies. His past is depicted through flashbacks for Buffy’s benefit: having just been stabbed by a vampire, Buffy asks Spike to explain how he managed to kill two Slayers in the past. His description involves tracing his entire history,

beginning with his siring at Drusilla's hand – a siring that occurred in London in 1880, a time and location that place him squarely between the publication of *Carmilla* and *Dracula*, thus establishing his birth as coincident with the vampires in those texts. The first hint that Spike may be performing his masculinity (which, as he perceives it, means brutal and violent) is his very name: when Spike/William the Bloody is originally introduced, the audience is left to assume that “the Bloody” epithet is a consequence of his bloody past as a vampire. However, in “Fool for Love” (5.7), the audience learns that his nickname was devised instead as a term of mocking, because of his “bloody awful poetry.” This poetry he writes in an effort to woo a young woman named Cecily, who would prefer that he left her alone. She tells him, “You're nothing to me, William. You're beneath me” (5.7). Cecily places herself in a position of power over William – he is unworthy of her, perhaps because of social status (though in dress and demeanor William seems to be of equal social standing), but more likely because she considers him effeminate. Just before she delivers this blow, the other men of their group had been avidly discussing a recent rash of murders in the area (which we later learn are the work of vampires), but William would “...prefer not to think of such dark, ugly business...” (5.7). His preference for beauty, found in poetry, marks him as different from the other men, and therefore unworthy of Cecily's hand. Thus, as a human, William is coded as feminine, particularly in relation to the men around him.

William's first encounter with Drusilla reinforces this femininity. Heartbroken by Cecily's rebuff of his advances, William leaves the party, only to end up crying in a stable nearby. Drusilla, desiring a companion, follows him, then proceeds to turn him into a vampire. Before she bites him, however, she asks him, while pulling open the collar of his shirt, “I see what you want. Something glowing and glistening...Do you want it?” William responds, partly frightened and partly aroused, “Oh, yes! God, yes,” at which point Drusilla bites him. William

cries out, but his cries soon subside into something more like moans. The scene plays like a sex scene, with Drusilla advancing and William retreating. When they slide down the wall, it is Drusilla who is on top, William beneath her, just as he was “beneath” Cecily. Like Harker’s encounter with the three vampires in *Dracula*, this scene suggests a feminization of William; unlike *Dracula*, however, this scene suggests that William was already effeminate, for he does not resist in the way that Harker does. He does not find Drusilla “repulsive” (Stoker 42), even when she shifts from her human face to her vampiric “game face,” because he is already accustomed to being effeminate.

William only begins to exhibit typical signs of masculinity after his rebirth as a vampire. His vampirism provides a vehicle through which William – who now wishes to be called Spike, to emphasize his new masculinity – can exact revenge on those who ridiculed him in life. His brutality, which involves driving railroad spikes through his victims’ heads, feels somehow false, however, particularly when compared to Angelus’ calmer violence. Angelus, who is Drusilla’s sire and therefore something of a grandfather (or Yoda, as Spike calls him) to Spike, repeatedly chastises Spike for his overly obvious attacks, which have apparently forced them to hide underground to avoid angry mobs. When Angelus suggests using “a certain amount of finesse”, Spike responds, “Bollocks! That stuff’s for the frilly cuffs-and-collars crowd. I’ll take a good brawl any day” (5.7). Angelus, the older vampire by approximately 100 years, is renowned for his violence, yet even he believes Spike is excessive. Moreover, Spike’s response directly references the group of which he used to be a part – Spike seems to take revenge not only on those who mocked him, but even – or especially – on himself. This scene further reveals Spike’s voice change: as a human, he had a high-bred, genteel voice, but as a vampire, he affects the accent of a street-smart Londoner. Spike’s violence, depicted as revenge, is not, then, an

increased masculinity brought about by his rebirth as a vampire; instead, these scenes mark Spike's brutality as a performance, an attempt to convince those who mocked him in life that he is not effeminate. He changes everything about himself, from his voice to his clothing to his temperament, in order to exact revenge.

That he is not truly changed is evident in his relationship to Drusilla. More importantly, however, it is evident in his relationship to Buffy. In the conclusion of "Fool for Love", Spike, who is falling in love with Buffy, attempts to kiss her. She rebuffs him, knocks him to the ground, then throws his own history back at him: "Say it's true. Say I do want to [die]. It wouldn't be you, Spike. It would never be you. You're beneath me" (5.7). Her words, echoing Cecily's words of more than a century earlier, cause Spike obvious pain. Buffy walks away then, but the camera remains on Spike, still on the ground, as he begins to weep. Just as in life, Spike remains "beneath" those he loves – he is still effeminate, even as a vampire. After this encounter, Spike angrily tries to kill Buffy, attempting to avenge himself in acts of stereotypical masculinity. His words are telling: as he collects weapons with which to kill her, he mutters to himself: "Beneath me...I'll show her. Put her six bloody feet beneath me" (5.7). His recourse is to violence as a representation of masculinity; he wishes to kill her to prove that he is a man, that he is more powerful than she is. Interestingly, though, this scene does not construct masculinity as a response to feminine agency: rather, Spike's attempts to construct his masculinity are a response to the femininity that surfaces within himself. Like Buffy's attempts to prove to herself that she is feminine, Spike tries to prove to himself that he is masculine. Ultimately, though, Spike is unable to kill Buffy – when he arrives at her home, he finds that she is crying. Buffy's crying represents a particular form of femininity – much as Spike's crying earlier in the episode

represented his feminization – and Spike is able to perform his masculinity not by killing her, but by comforting her.

Spike's performance of masculinity is complicated just as Buffy's performance of femininity is complicated: he can never achieve masculinity through his performance of its conventional forms. He is only successfully masculine when he constructs masculinity as part of his femininity; only when the two are hybridized does Spike seem to be a complete individual. Spicer notes that "...it is Spike's ability to relate on friendly terms with women that wins him a place in Buffy's substantially female community" (par. 18). This ability, as Spicer explains, is predicated on conventionally female pursuits – with Buffy's mother, for instance, he watches soap operas (stereotypically women's television) and openly discusses his failed relationship with Drusilla. This female companionship, in exchange, allows him access to Buffy's inner circle, and therefore the opportunity to fight demons<sup>9</sup> (Spicer par. 18). Thus, his female relationships engage him in both masculine- and feminine-coded tasks and enable him to construct his own definitions of gender. As the show progresses, Spike performs masculinity increasingly less; by the show's finale, he is willing to sacrifice himself in the last fight, which means removing him from the field of battle entirely. His masculinity is no longer dependent on violence; instead, he begins to construct his own gender by using both the conventionally masculine need to rescue the damsel in distress and the conventionally feminine self-effacement and self-sacrifice to the cause.

### *Willow*

"I think I'm kinda gay." – Willow, "Doppelgangland" (3.16)

Willow's position in the series is potentially the most subversive, given that she is not only extraordinarily powerful as a witch, but she is also engaged in a sexual relationship with another woman. Yet, despite the subversion inherent in this relationship, Willow is depicted as

perhaps the least dangerous character on the show<sup>9</sup>. The subversions of Buffy and especially of Spike are far more problematic for the series; Willow's subversion is depicted as a natural growth of her character. In the few instances where her sexuality is dangerous, it is dangerous predominantly to herself, rather than to the world at large, as Buffy's and Spike's problems are. Moreover, Willow's personality is largely unchanged after beginning her relationship with Tara – she does grow more confident and powerful, but these changes had begun long before meeting Tara, and thus are part of a larger pattern of growth for Willow. Her general nature – sweet, socially awkward except with close friends, and intelligent – is unchanged, suggesting that this is perhaps her essential nature. Unlike Spike and Buffy, Willow does not appear to be performing either her personality or her gender, and she is portrayed in many ways as the proper model for gender construction.

When the series began, Willow was awkward, geeky, and unpopular. Her only friends were Xander and Jesse<sup>10</sup>, neither of whom viewed her as a potential love interest. Willow was thus presented initially as somehow failing in her representation of femininity. Farah Mendlesohn notes that “[m]uch of what Willow does is essentially gendered ‘male’” (56) – a computer whiz, Willow was indisputably the knowledgeable character in her relationship with Xander and even with Buffy, and was valued as such by Giles, who needed her help in researching various vampires or demons. These abilities do mark her as typically “male,” and Xander's inability to view her as a sexual being reinforces this marking. As the series progressed, however, Willow's “male” pursuits become increasingly female-centered, particularly through the practice of witchcraft.

Mendlesohn suggests that Willow's interest in witchcraft may have been “introduced...as a way to regender Willow and pick up on the association of witchcraft with female sexuality,



with power, and with lesbianism” (56). While Mendlesohn’s observations about the use of witchcraft as a way to emphasize Willow’s femaleness are valid, her suggestion that these are in opposition to the “maleness” of Willow’s other pursuits is problematic, because it suggests that witchcraft is a means of performing femaleness. That this is not the case is apparent in the development of her witchcraft: when Willow first begins to practice, it is in conjunction with her computer skills. Her computer science teacher, Jenny Calendar, is a self-described “technopagan” (“I Robot, You Jane” 1.8), a description which identifies her as skilled both in computers as well as in magic. After her death in the second season, Willow takes over teaching her course, which requires going through all of her computer files. In so doing, Willow discovers her own interest in magic; by the end of the season, she is the person in the best position to restore Angel’s soul, a spell requiring “greater knowledge of the black arts” (“Becoming Pt. 1” 2.21) than even Giles can claim. Willow’s interest in magic, then, is inextricably tied to her interest in computers, the ability that initially marked her as masculine. Thus, the evolution of Willow’s witchcraft does not suggest that Willow must be “regendered” as female, as Mendlesohn suggests, but rather that Willow’s witchcraft enables her to construct femininity through identification with both typically masculine and typically feminine pursuits.

Although Willow’s witchcraft should not be mistaken for a regendering, it is important to note that her increase in power does parallel her evolving sexuality. In the first three seasons, Willow is depicted as heterosexual. Initially, she is in unrequited love with Xander, but by the second season she has found reciprocated love with a werewolf, Oz, a relationship that persists into the fourth season. This relationship only ends when Oz, afraid that he is growing unable to properly control his changes from human to werewolf, decides to leave town. After his departure, Willow attempts to immerse herself in witchcraft to forget him, but she finds that the

university's Wiccan group is populated by girls who Willow calls "a bunch of wanna-blessed-bes" ("Hush" 4.10). However, one of the members of the group, Tara, is an actual witch, and she later finds Willow so that the two can work on spells together. Willow's power grows through her interactions with Tara, with whom she eventually begins a sexual relationship. Therefore, Willow's increase in power correlates with an increase in her association with women, which enables her to construct her identity much as it enables Spike to do the same.

Although Willow's relationship with Tara develops organically and unconsciously, it had been foreshadowed in the previous season. In "Doppelgangland" (3.16), an alternate universe in which Willow is a vampire accidentally crosses into the universe of the show, bringing human Willow face-to-face with her vampiric counterpart. The differences are striking: Vampire Willow is overtly sexual, dressed in black leather pants and a black leather and red lace bustier, in sharp contrast to the fuzzy pink sweater, adorned with flowers and the word "love," worn by human Willow. Moreover, Vampire Willow is explicitly bisexual: in the alternate universe from which she has appeared, she engages in a sexual relationship with Vampire Xander, while in this universe, she preys on female victims (including herself, in the form of human Willow<sup>11</sup>).

After meeting her vampire doppelganger, Willow, discomfited, has this anxious conversation with Buffy:

*Willow:* I'm so evil and...skanky. [aside to Buffy] And I think I'm kinda gay.

*Buffy:* [reassuringly] Willow, just remember, a vampire's personality has nothing to do with the person it was.

*Angel:* Well, actually... [off Buffy's look] That's a good point.

The audience is left to assume that a vampire's personality is in fact related to that of its human counterpart, which suggests that even at this moment, when Willow is coded as heterosexual, she may in fact be "kinda gay." This scene implies that human Willow may be bisexual, as her vampire self is. This suggestion is not unproblematic, however. Some critics have argued that

Vampire Willow's bisexuality is represented as monstrous, particularly in comparison to human Willow, who never has an on-screen sex scene. This bisexuality, then, may be a "...cautionary example of excessive sexuality" (McAvan par. 16). What McAvan ignores, however, is that human Willow never displays such "excessive sexuality," despite a long-term lesbian relationship. Willow's sexuality is not represented on the whole, then, as excessive; only in the context of vampirism is it monstrosized – among human beings it is represented as normal.

What this scene does do, however, is to first try out Willow's homo- or bisexuality in a safe space – excessive sexuality is not a problem in a vampire as it is in a human. Unlike in *Dracula* or *Carmilla*, however, the excessively sexual Vampire Willow is not killed by the Scooby Gang. Instead, she is sent back to her universe, where "...she stands a chance. It's the way it should be, anyway" (3.16). This suggests that the series is not punishing the deviant woman, but putting her in a place where it is safe to be herself – perhaps because this universe is not ready for her. In a way, this parallels the time that must elapse before human Willow is finally coded homosexually, and more importantly, it provides an explanation for the depiction of that homosexuality.

Many critics have suggested that the primarily off-screen depiction of Willow and Tara's relationship on *BtVS* is indicative of a desire to hide supposed deviance, because other sexual relationships have been quite explicitly depicted on the show. However, it is important to remember that this was a network television show, and in the moment that it appeared, the depiction of a nonpathologized lesbian relationship on television at all was a milestone. Moreover, Whedon has argued that this hiding was intentional, as an attempt to avoid its use for marketing, which he felt would illegitimate its honesty (Bodger n.pag.). This is certainly not unproblematic; as Bodger notes, "[c]onfiguring women as witches and/or lesbians is an

inherently politicized act” (n.pag.). However, I argue that the episode “Doppelgangland” – in which Willow’s sexuality is explicitly expressed and even monstrosized, but not punished – is more representative of the arc Whedon tried to establish. This excessive sexuality is explicitly depicted and coded as “wrong,” but in part this is justifiable, because this is not Vampire Willow’s world. Similarly, the sexuality understood to exist between Willow and Tara, though coded as “right,” can only exist off-screen, because this is not their world – a homosexual world – either. By hiding depictions of lesbianism, Whedon is not serving a patriarchal agenda – he is questioning it, questioning the system which would allow a healthy relationship like that of Tara and Willow to exist only behind closed doors, while the extremely violent and sexualized relationship of Buffy and Spike, or the initially loveless relationship of Xander and Anya, can exist in the open. Furthermore, by hiding much of the performance of lesbianism, he removed the temptation for the audience to suggest that this was *merely* performance – to assume that Willow was experimenting, or that the presentation of lesbianism was intended for the male gaze. Here again, Willow is explicitly *not* performing, either gender or sexuality.

What Willow does perform is witchcraft, which serves as the covert representations of her sexuality. Much of what critics find problematic in her relationship with Tara is this very tendency to use magic as a stand-in for sexuality. Gwyneth Bodger demonstrates this argument when she claims that “[a]s a witch [Willow] is portrayed as an exotic female deviant, exciting but ultimately flawed” (n.pag.). Bodger suggests that Willow’s witchcraft marks her as deviant, rather than empowered. However, while Willow’s witchcraft is depicted problematically, first in her addiction to magic and then in her excessive use of dark magic after Tara’s tragic death, it is, in the final analysis, portrayed positively. In the series finale (“Chosen” 7.22), in order to battle the First Evil, which has raised an army of Master Vampires, Willow must extend the power of

the Slayer to all potential Slayers, girls who would ordinarily receive this power only on the death of the previous Slayer. Buffy announces this to the Potentials, describing this extension of power as an essentially feminist act, an attack against patriarchy:

“In every generation, one Slayer is born...because a bunch of men who died thousands of years ago made up that rule...This woman [points to Willow] is more powerful than all of them combined. So I say we change the rule...From now on, every girl in the world who might be a Slayer, will be a Slayer...”

Buffy explicitly equates Willow’s powers as a witch with the positive empowerment of women across the globe. The significance of this moment is underscored by the images that accompany it: as Willow performs the spell, brief images are intercut with the primary images of Willow and Buffy. These images depict oppressed girls becoming empowered – an Asian woman stands up at family dinner; another woman grabs the wrist of the man trying to slap her; and the facial expression of a young girl playing baseball shifts from terrified to confident. Willow’s power, then, is depicted as a direct affront to patriarchy – and it is successful. Unlike Bodger’s assessment of Willow’s magic (which, in fairness, was written before this final episode aired), this episode depicts Willow as a positive source of empowerment. This is further emphasized by Willow’s appearance in this scene: her hair becomes suddenly white, and she is told that she is “a goddess” (7.22). This is in stark contrast to the depiction of Evil Willow, drunk with power after Tara’s death, whose hair was black. Though magic – or at least Willow’s handling of it – is not unproblematic, it is, in the final assessment, empowering, not deviant.

Ultimately, the depiction of Willow in *BtVS* is least – and most – transgressive. The empowering of all of the Potentials places Willow in transgressive opposition to patriarchy, yet this is depicted as positive on the series. Furthermore, Willow need not perform traditional gender roles in the way that Buffy and Spike do, because her performance of magic allows her to constitute her gender outside of these conventional markers. Thus, in the world of the series,

Willow is the most well-adjusted character, and in many ways the most modern. That it is Willow – and Spike, who has overcome his need to perform by series' end – who enables the final victory, and not Buffy, suggests that Willow's method of gender constitution is the project of the series.

## Notes

1. Spike, commenting on Buffy and Angel's relationship in "Lovers Walk" (3.8).
2. Xander is the first to refer to the group as the "Scooby Gang" in the second season episode "What's My Line? Pt. 2" (2.9). The reference is an allusion to the members of Mystery, Inc. on the children's cartoon *Scooby-Doo, Where Are You!* Various characters use the term, and it is sometimes shortened to the "Scoobies".
3. That such a reversal of the horror genre remained necessary five years after the original *BtVS* movie is apparent in two roles undertaken by series star Sarah Michelle Gellar just after the show began: she played a popular blonde stabbed to death (in an alley) in *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997) and a sorority sister stabbed and then thrown from a balcony in *Scream 2* (1997).
4. Although the term suggests a sexual component to this position, Giles is generally positioned as a father figure to Buffy, rather than a potential sexual partner (not that this has stopped fans from imagining such a relationship).
5. Buffy's drowning death in the first season triggers the activation of a second Slayer, Kendra. Apparently, the fact that Buffy was technically dead, despite her subsequent revival, is sufficient to activate the next Slayer. Kendra dies in the second season, resulting in the activation of the next Slayer, Faith, who first appears in the third season episode "Faith, Hope and Trick" (3.4).
6. With the exception of Willow, but her discontent is related to wrongs perpetrated on Native Americans and her complicity in perpetuating them, rather than with the meal or with Buffy's dispatching of the spirits.
7. See "Never Kill a Boy on the First Date" (1.5) and "Reptile Boy" (2.5), among others.

8. This is the only form of violence available to Spike after the fourth season, when a chip is implanted into his head, making it impossible for him to attack a human.
9. With the exception of the end of season six, when Willow resorts to dark magic after the death of her girlfriend, Tara. However, this is represented as being completely out of character. Generally, Willow is depicted as tame and safe.
10. Jesse was turned into a vampire in the pilot episode “Welcome to the Hellmouth” (1.1) and slain by Buffy in the second episode “The Harvest” (1.2).
11. For a discussion of queerness as narcissism, see McAvan.



## **“The battle’s done / And we kinda won”<sup>1</sup>: A Conclusion**

Each of the texts examined here have engaged the myth of the vampire in order to produce a reading of gender, either by reinforcing those stereotypes already in existence or by constructing new forms. That it is still necessary to use vampires to tackle these issues demonstrates that these are still important, unsolved problems. However, the reconstructions of gender offered by *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, more than a hundred years after the publication of *Carmilla*, suggest that vampires are no longer unproblematic in their use as the “other.” Rather, vampires in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries could be used to complicate gender issues, even after their death, in ways that *Carmilla* and *Dracula* could not. Vampires die regularly on *BtVS*; in *Carmilla* and *Dracula*, only one or at most a few deaths are necessary. Thus, the death of a vampire does not represent an end to the story in *BtVS*. Instead, Buffy and the other characters must face the vampires – and the issues they represent or expose – every night.

Given this difference, a closer look at the death scenes in each text may be useful. In both *Carmilla* and *Dracula*, according to Teri Ann Doerkson, “[k]illing the vampire is sex” (143). Along those lines, Christopher Craft notes that Lucy’s staking in *Dracula* is “...the novel’s real – and the woman’s only – climax...[which] clearly punishes Lucy for her transgression of Van Helsing’s gender code” (182). *Carmilla*’s death scenes are similarly represented. In each scene, the (always female) vampire screams – as if in orgasm – then dies. In *Dracula*, the scene is even more explicit – Lucy’s body “shook and quivered and twisted in wild contortions; the sharp white teeth champed together till the lips were cut, and the mouth was smeared with a crimson foam” (Stoker 192). *Carmilla*, of course, has only the one vampire, but *Dracula* has the King Vampire himself to be dispatched as well. Unlike Lucy and the “weird sisters,” however,

Dracula apparently need not be staked. Instead, his head is struck off – the correction of the stake need not be enacted upon him, as it must on the women.

These depictions of vampire death are distinct from those of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. In *BtVS*, staking is not represented as punishment or sex<sup>2</sup>, but as a simple, efficient means of killing vampires. These vampires do not writhe or scream; they generally appear to be confused or annoyed, if they have time to form a facial expression at all before disintegrating. Buffy also makes no distinction between male or female vampires. More importantly, she is not required to seek them in their graves – the characters of *Carmilla* and *Dracula* must kill the vampires while they are incapacitated in their coffins, but Buffy regularly engages vampires in the open, overpowering them by a combination of martial arts and wit, after which she stakes them. The ability of the vampires to fight in the open on *BtVS* suggests a rejection of history; *Dracula* and *Carmilla* are forced to return to the consecrated ground in which they were buried, suggesting a continuity with the past, but the vampires of *BtVS* do not sleep in coffins or return to their burial places. This discontinuity with the past is a reflection of Joss Whedon's attempts to dissociate this vampire text from its predecessors – to craft a new vampire mythos, just as he attempts to craft a new conception of gender.

An even more important distinction to make among the three texts lies in the theories of what happens to the vampire at its death. In *Carmilla*, a vampire, on its death, "...is projected into a far more horrible life" (628). In *Dracula*, by contrast, a vampire's death restores the person. As Van Helsing describes it, "...when this now Un-Dead be made to rest as true dead, then the soul of the poor lady whom we love shall again be free" (191). Thus, *Carmilla*'s death sends her to hell, while Lucy's death, as well as those of the "weird sisters" and *Dracula*, frees her soul and presumably allows it to proceed to heaven. In *BtVS*, however, neither of these things

happen, because the soul of the vampire is no longer present in the body. Angel describes the process in “Angel” (1.7): “When you become a vampire the demon takes your body, but it doesn’t get your soul. That’s gone.” The soul can be recalled, however, as Angel, the ensouled vampire, demonstrates, but in general a vampire’s soul has already moved into heaven.

Therefore, staking a vampire strictly means killing a demon – there is no “look of peace” (Stoker 325) on the faces of *BtVS*’s vampires. Moreover, the demon goes to hell, just as Carmilla does – but the human does not suffer, because the soul is already free.

When these differences are considered together, it becomes apparent that the deaths of the vampires in *Carmilla* and *Dracula* are constructed to coincide with gender conventions. These deaths are both sex and punishment, and although the emphasis varies with the text, both serve to reinstate Victorian gender norms. In *Carmilla*, the sex aspect of Carmilla’s death is downplayed, but the punishment is emphasized – the human Carmilla must suffer for the vampire’s crimes, and in so doing inscribe proper gender conventions on the still-living Laura. In *Dracula*, the sex is stressed, but the punishment is minimized: the “Crew of Light” free Lucy’s soul by a sexual act which reconstitutes her as properly gendered by emphasizing her femaleness as the penetrated party. *BtVS*, by emphasizing neither sex nor punishment in its death scenes, enables a constitution of gender that is not reliant on stereotypical forms. The death of a vampire does not solve the gender dilemmas of the text; these are instead continually and problematically engaged. Only with the conclusion of the series is there any sort of solution, but it does not come in the form of a vampire’s death. Rather, the activation of all potential Slayers in the series finale suggests that vampires might be eradicated once and for all, but not because gender has been reconstituted according to old norms, but rather because gender has been constituted anew – thus eliminating the need for vampires to exist at all.

In comparing these three texts, it is apparent that the usage of the vampire remains unchanged over the past 150 years – it exists primarily to destabilize the preexisting gender conventions – but the outcome of that usage, the way that each text engages with the problems introduced by the vampire, has altered greatly. *Carmilla* punishes the vampire, but leaves open the possibility that its introduction has produced irreparable alterations even while arguing that the conventional gender roles are most appropriate. *Dracula* likewise punishes the vampire, but does so in a way that affirms absolutely the Victorian notions of gender, leaving little or no room for alternative interpretations. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, however, does not punish the vampire, because eradication of the vampire cannot solve the problem. Instead, it engages the difficult questions of gender relations and ultimately establishes new gender codes which are fluid, allowing masculinity to be constructed out of femininity and vice versa. The use of the vampire enables these new constructions, but it is the particular moment in which this text appeared that allows such a use of the vampire. Ultimately, it is the project of *BtVS* that differs: *Dracula* and *Carmilla* each seek to affirm a patriarchal agenda, while *BtVS*'s project is feminist, if problematically so.

## Notes

1. A line taken from the *BtVS* episode “Once More, with Feeling” (6.7). The line is sung by the group in the final song, “Where Do We Go from Here?”
2. Although death in general is frequently portrayed as sex (Spike calls it a “dance”), staking in and of itself is not depicted sexually.

## Episode Guide

Episode Number / Title / Writer / Director / Air Date

### Season 1:

1.1 / "Welcome to the Hellmouth" / Joss Whedon / Charles Martin Smith / 3 Mar. 1997

1.5 / "Never Kill a Boy on the First Date" / Rob Des Hotel and Dean Batali / David Semel / 31  
Mar. 1997

1.7 / "Angel" / David Greenwalt / Scott Brazil / 14 April 1997

1.12 / "Prophecy Girl" / Joss Whedon / Joss Whedon / 2 June 1997

### Season 2:

2.5 / "Reptile Boy" / David Greenwalt / David Greenwalt / 13 Oct. 1997

2.6 / "Halloween" / Carl Ellsworth / Bruce Seth Green / 27 Oct. 1997

2.9 / "What's My Line? Pt. 1" / Howard Gordon and Marti Noxon / David Solomon / 17 Nov.  
1997

2.10 / "What's My Line? Pt. 2" / Marti Noxon / David Semel / 24 Nov. 1997

2.13 / "Surprise" / Marti Noxon / Michael Lange / 19 Jan. 1998

2.21 / "Becoming Pt. 1" / Joss Whedon / Joss Whedon / 12 May 1998

2.22 / "Becoming Pt. 2" / Joss Whedon / Joss Whedon / 19 May 1998

### Season 3:

3.3 / "Faith, Hope & Trick" / David Greenwalt / James A. Contner / 13 Oct. 1998

3.5 / "Homecoming" / David Greenwalt / David Greenwalt / 3 Nov. 1998

3.8 / "Lovers Walk" / Dan Vebber / David Semel / 24 Nov. 1998

3.14 / "Bad Girls" / Douglas Petrie / Michael Lange / 9 Feb 1999

3.16 / "Doppelgangland" / Joss Whedon / Joss Whedon / 23 Feb 1999

**Season 4:**

4.8 / "Pangs" / Jane Espenson / Michael Lange / 23 Nov. 1999

**Season 5:**

5.7 / "Fool for Love" / Douglas Petrie / Nick Marck / 14 Nov. 2000

5.12 / "Checkpoint" / Douglas Petrie and Jane Espenson / Nick Marck / 23 Jan. 2001

**Season 6:**

6.6 / "All the Way" / Steven S. DeKnight / David Solomon / 30 Oct. 2001

6.7 / "Once More, with Feeling" / Joss Whedon / Joss Whedon / 6 Nov. 2001

**Season 7:**

7.22 / "Chosen" / Joss Whedon / Joss Whedon / 20 May 2003

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