

5-2017

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Recommended Citation

Reynolds, Holly E., "Defining Ambiguous: Lesbianism and the Vampire in “Christabel” and Carmilla" (2017). *Undergraduate Honors Theses*. Paper 1054.
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Defining Ambiguous:
Lesbianism and the Vampire in “Christabel” and *Carmilla*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from
The College of William and Mary

by

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Introduction

“Curiosity is a restless and unscrupulous passion, [that] no one girl can endure,” laments Laura, the protagonist of Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s 1872 vampire novella *Carmilla* (Le Fanu 27). “Restless passion” lies at the heart of Le Fanu’s narrative, and at the core of Laura’s anxieties. Throughout the novella, Laura’s thoughts and actions are layered configurations of homosexual, “restless...passion” regarding her new, mysterious, vampiric companion, Carmilla. The “restlessness” of Laura’s passion manifests in her inability to reconcile the attraction and “repulsion” Carmilla evokes from her (Le Fanu 25). As Laura navigates “this ambiguous feeling” that Carmilla sparks, the reader wonders, what is it about Carmilla, “the beautiful stranger,” that inspires such conflicting sensations in our narrator (Le Fanu 25)? Is it that the dark-haired woman with her “mysterious moods” resembles something distant, something other than human (Le Fanu 29)? Is it that she is *too* similar to Laura—that she is, like Laura, “girlish,” and “incompatible with the masculine” (Le Fanu 30)? Or, is it both?

Both Carmilla’s status as the living dead and her possible identity as a homosexual female classify her as “[exciting]” and “[abhorrent]” to Laura (Le Fanu 29). In other words, Carmilla occupies two unique queer identities in Laura’s eyes. Laura, by Victorian social convention, should ultimately resist such a queer temptress. Her failure to do so should be viewed as a tragedy: however, Laura actively engages with Carmilla, and the novel ends, in spite of Carmilla’s death, not with immediate tragedy for Laura, but with Laura “fancying” she hears Carmilla approach her door (Le Fanu 96). Laura retains much of her sexual and social agency in *Carmilla*, despite the patriarchal aversion

to Carmilla's very existence that Le Fanu inserts into the novel through the male authority figures that attempt to destroy her.

Le Fanu colors Laura's sexual exploration with Gothic convention and vampirism, and in so doing, reinforces the close relationship that exists between the Gothic and the queer, a relationship that evokes from both Laura and the reader sensations of "fear" alongside "strange tumultuous excitement" (Le Fanu 29). However, Laura exhibits a willingness to step outside what George Haggerty calls the "Gothic staple" of the "youthful victim" (Haggerty 131) in favor of retaining a sexual agency that both empowers and terrifies her. Laura's agency transforms a text that Le Fanu might mean to serve as a warning against deviant sexuality, or a haunting representation of a broken patriarchy, into an exploration of female adolescent sexual discovery. To a contemporary reader with a modern perspective, it would seem that Laura and Carmilla's tale is easily identifiable as a "lesbian vampire" story.

As a "curious" text that finds its queerness by both pushing against and adhering to Gothic convention, *Carmilla* does not stand alone. Another notable work might belong in this "lesbian vampire" category, a work that also employs Gothic convention to depict the "queer" conflict that exists between the fragility of feminine innocence and the temptation of female sexual freedom: Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 1816 narrative poem, "Christabel." Like its vampiric descendent *Carmilla*, "Christabel" features a not-so-"innocent" (Coleridge 612), motherless victim, Christabel, who invites an unknown woman into her bed chamber, and then experiences conflicting thoughts of "weal and woe" that lead her to watch her mysterious new companion disrobe (Coleridge 233, 239-244). Christabel's companion, Geraldine, like Carmilla, has a supernatural, sinister aspect

to her being: she is unable to cross the threshold into Christabel's home without being carried (Coleridge 127); she seems to be able to communicate with the spirit of Christabel's dead mother (Coleridge 199); and she has a deformity, about which she is able to curse Christabel into silence, as captured by Coleridge in those immortal words: "a sight to dream of, not to tell!" (Coleridge 247). And yet, despite signs of Geraldine's nature—the "moan" of the "mastiff bitch" (Coleridge 143-144), Geraldine's "[weariness]" at Christabel's mention of the Virgin (Coleridge 137), and Geraldine's collapse to the floor due to the light of a lamp "fastened to an angel's feet" (Coleridge 177)—Christabel is not stalled. Like Laura, Christabel has a hand in her own fate.

These two texts share more than a similar use and subversion of female sexual expectation, social convention, and Gothic principles: they share similar plot elements and aesthetic details. "Christabel" and *Carmilla* include strikingly alike narratives. In the aforementioned texts, Christabel and Laura both find themselves mutually pursuing relations with the mystifying Geraldine and Carmilla, whose vampirism (vampirism that is explicit in *Carmilla*, but not so in "Christabel") is the personification of "sexual terror" (Haggerty 2) and anxiety. The shared atmosphere of the two texts also contains echoed aesthetic details. In the worlds that these authors build, similar Gothic imagery thrives: the setting of "Christabel" features a "midnight wood" (Coleridge 29) and "silent" castle (Coleridge 117). Likewise, Le Fanu crafts a "lonely" estate, with a village full of "silent ruins" and an ominous forest with "deep shadow" (Le Fanu 5). Carmilla and Geraldine are both mysterious women in "white" (Coleridge 59) (Le Fanu 52) attempting to prey upon "innocent" blue-eyed victims (Coleridge 612) (Le Fanu 114).

Are these texts—texts that explore alternate sexualities, but texts that use Gothic horror, “sexual terror” (Haggerty 2), othering, and homophobia to explore those sexualities—queer? Certainly, these texts are rife with same-sex desire. But do they belong in a queer canon? Are they examples of early lesbian fiction? How do Carmilla and Geraldine’s depictions as demonic or vampiric other them, and hint at their sexual deviancies? How does the vampire code for, and help guide us through, queerness in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries?

A brief analysis of these texts may cause one to become cautious to paint them as examples of “lesbian vampire” literature: these texts are not the progressive queer vampire narratives modern readers would be familiar with. The relationship between vampirism and homosexuality in these texts often colors same-sex desire negatively. Le Fanu himself had conservative leanings (Fox 112), so it is no surprise that Carmilla, in the end of his novella, is executed by an alliance of patriarchs that includes Laura’s father. Coleridge even seems to incorporate a similar conservative backlash in “Christabel,” as Christabel is punished for her sexual indiscretion with a silencing curse, leaving her unable to warn her father of Geraldine’s true nature while Geraldine wins his sympathies. Additionally, Coleridge’s expressed desire to incorporate “a human interest” in the “supernatural” in his *Lyrical Ballads* works (Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* Vol. II, 6) may leave readers wondering whether in his mind, Christabel and Geraldine’s homosexuality falls under the category of “human interest” or “supernatural.” Regardless, by linking homosexuality with the supernatural, a certain level of othering occurs.

To address the homosexual elements of these texts directly, and to call them lesbian texts, arouses a great debate amongst scholars, some of whom argue that before

the end of the nineteenth century, lesbian identity did not even exist. Haggerty, in *Queer Gothic*, writes that examining the relationship between the Gothic and the queer “is not an attempt to read ourselves into the past” (Haggerty 20). Haggerty, here, is hesitant to apply modern queer identities to older Gothic texts. But as Claude Summers writes in *Homosexuality in Renaissance and Enlightenment England*, hypersensitivity to anachronism can “paralyze” analysis (Summers 3). Exploring *Carmilla* and “Christabel” as “lesbian vampire” texts can liberate these texts from the “tyranny” (Summers 3) of historical context, and allow for new, fresh interpretations of the sexual language and Gothic imagery that appears in both texts. Modern perspectives provide new readings of already heavily analyzed texts: applying a contemporary idea of the vampire to the pre-literary-vampire text “Christabel” and the pre-*Dracula*-vampire-text *Carmilla* allows for a deepened analysis of what a vampire is and what it codes for, and prompts us to reconsider the various roles they occupy in their works. Defining both texts as containing explicitly and specifically lesbian relationships expands the interpretation of these relationships beyond the mother-daughter or the vaguely queer, and opens the door for exploration of how sexual identity is represented in nineteenth century literature. Thus, despite the ambiguity of lesbian identity as well as the ambiguity of vampirism that exists in these two works, there is academic value in labeling them both as “lesbian vampire” texts.

To claim that “Christabel” and *Carmilla* belong to a “lesbian vampire” category is not unfounded in the texts—support for explicit lesbianism can be found in the works’ sexual and sensual language, their evocation of the long association between the queer and the Gothic, and the long history of the vampire as a coded “other.” Just as the

vampire transcends time, queer identities, while evolving, have always existed, and lesbian identities, while operating under different names and in different spheres, have also always been a reality.

In the following pages, an introduction to of the long history of vampire lore, to the immortalized relationship between the queer and the Gothic, and to the publication and reception history of the texts will reveal not only that “Christabel” and *Carmilla* belong to a “lesbian vampire” tradition, but that this “lesbian vampire” tradition is not a recent invention of writers such as Joss Whedon and Anne Rice. By conducting a side-by-side analysis of both the poem and the novella’s queerness in language, narrative, character, and themes, I will explore how a “lesbian vampire” text takes shape, and what a “lesbian vampire” reading of “Christabel” and *Carmilla* can reveal about the texts. In a sense, categorizing these texts as “lesbian vampire” texts and then examining them within that context unearths another piece of the puzzle that is lesbian identity history. This manner of analysis of “Christabel” and *Carmilla* can, thus, expose to modern readers a new historical literary space that validates lesbian identity.

The Vampire: An Overview

The vampire, since its inception, has excavated identities buried beneath cultural norms. In the Western literary tradition, what is oft-considered the first influential English vampire text John Polidori’s *The Vampyre* (1819)¹, a text inspired by “Christabel,” unearths homosexual identities through the homoeroticism that pervades Lord Ruthven and Aubrey’s relationship. Polidori’s work uses Gothic tropes of

¹ Carol A. Senf calls Polidori's Lord Ruthven "the first vampire in English fiction" (Senf 14). However, it is worth noting that Ruthven had vampiric predecessors in poetry. Robert Southey's *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801), John Stagg's "The Vampyre" (1810), and, as I will argue, Coleridge's "Christabel" all feature vampires.

subversion and social anxiety, as well as the vampire's ability to signal the other, to explore homoeroticism.

Like all great Gothic stories, *The Vampyre* opens with a dark and stormy night: Polidori prefaces his narrative with a letter that transports the reader to the Villa Diodati, to a night of "raging" weather (Polidori xiv) in that infamous "Year Without a Summer," where a gathering of Romantic period writers (including Mary Godwin and Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron, and Polidori himself) are sharing ghost stories (Buzwell). The "Letter from Geneva" (initially appearing alongside the short story in *The New Monthly Magazine* [Twitchell 106]) takes us to that moment, according to Polidori, where *The Vampyre* was conceived; after reading the German *Phantasmagoriana*, Lord Byron "[recites] the beginning of 'Christabel,'" published that spring (Polidori xv) (Cochrane 69). Coleridge's poem sparks Percy B. Shelley's "wild imagination," and he leaves the room in a panic after the image of a woman with eyes on her breasts assaults his mind (Polidori xv-xvi). After Shelley's vision, this Romantic society reaches an agreement: "It was afterwards proposed, in the course of conversation, that each of the company present should write a tale depending upon some supernatural agency" (Polidori xvi). From this proposition, according to Polidori, emerges his dark tale. However, Polidori's account here conflates what appears to be two separate nights in his 1816 diary entries. In his 1816 diary, Polidori claims that the ghost stories "proposed" by the "company" were already "begun by all but me" on June 17th (Polidori), and that "Christabel" was actually read aloud the following evening (Rossetti 125-126). Still, in both his diary entries and the "letter," Polidori suggests that Coleridge's poem plays a crucial role in the developing *The Vampyre*, a work so vital to the vampire legacy that some scholars have erroneously

claimed it contains the first vampire in English literature (Allocco 149). From Coleridge's demonic and mysterious Geraldine, the fearsome Lord Ruthven is born.

There exists a long, global history of vampiric figures that appear in folklore, religion, philosophy, and literature that predate *The Vampyre*'s literary mother, "Christabel." Vampiric archetypes appear in ancient and medieval folklore all over the globe, including in North America, Mesoamerica, India, China, and Greece (Doan 142) (Keith 61-62). Northern Europe, too, has a rich history of medieval vampiric folklore: the Norse draugr, the German "after-devourer" or Nachzehrer, the Celtic banshee, and the English revenant are just some of the undead figures in Northern European folklore that return to attack the living (Tiechert 2-13). However, the modern literary vampire in England develops not from Northern European folklore, but, as Alexis M. Milmine suggests, migrates, like Bram Stoker's famous Count, from Eastern Europe (Milmine 33).

The word "vampire" itself has Eastern European roots, derived from the Slavic words "upir" and "vampir" (Wilson 577-578). Western European consciousness of Eastern European folklore can be traced back to the Treaty of Passarowitz in 1718, after which the Austrian military began to occupy its newly-acquired Serbian territory (Berber 5). Austrian forces then were introduced to, and began to record, the details of a "peculiar local practice...of exhuming bodies and 'killing' them" that seemed prevalent in Serbian villages (Berber 5). These reports reached Enlightenment thinkers in France and Germany, sparking a "vampire craze" that Paul Berber calls an early example of a "media event" (Berber 5).² From the ensuing "philosophical and scientific debate" regarding

²Two of these reports, both featuring villagers dying of unknown illnesses and suspiciously well-preserved corpses of suspects and victims, were famously translated by French theologian Dom Augustin Calmet in 1746 (Ruikbie 76). The first of these reports, Austrian Imperial Provisor Frombald's 1725 report on

vampires came German “literary treatments” of the bloodsucking fiend, such as Heinrich August Ossenfelder’s “Der Vampyr” (1748), Gottfried August Bürger’s “Lenore” (1773) and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s “The Bride of Corinth” (1797) (Senf 21).

Senf writes that “English interest in the vampire comes directly from Germany” (Senf 21). The influence of German literature on the legacy of the vampire is undeniable: in her 1847 novel *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë would call the vampire a “foul German spectre” (Brontë 284). The German work that most incited English interest was Bürger’s “Lenore,” which, according to James Twitchell, had been “translated to tatters” during the late eighteenth century, and had become a “familiar” tale to many English poets, including Sir Walter Scott, who himself published an adaptation (Twitchell 33). Charles Lamb even wrote Coleridge enthusiastically about “Lenore” in 1796 (Nethercot 159). Senf cites a reviewer’s comments in the July 1796 edition of *The Monthly Review* as evidence of the poem’s influence:

[“Lenore”]...[has] excited so much attention as to employ the pens of various translators... it must be considered as a proof of the increased relish among us for the modern German school of literature—a school of which the marvelous, the horrid, and the extravagant constitute...prominent features. (Senf 12)

Senf then goes on to claim that “prior to these translations, the vampire had never appeared in English literature” (Senf 12). However, this claim is not necessarily true: in 1762, novelist Oliver Goldsmith used the term “vampyre” as a metaphor in his collection

vampiric activity in Kisilova, Serbia, was published in Vienna newspaper *Wienerisches Diarium*, and in the same year, skeptically analyzed in recent-Leipzig University graduate Ranft’s first book, *Dissertation historico-critica de masticatione mortuorum in tumulis* (Ruikbie 77). Another report, completed in 1732, by Austrian physician Dr. Flückinger was first published in a number of German periodicals, and featured vampire epidemics in the Serbian village Medveda (Ruikbie 81).

of previously published fictional letters entitled *Citizen of the World* (1762): “A corrupt magistrate...sucks blood like a vampyre” (Goldsmith 109). Still, “Lenore’s” influence cannot be denied, and the poem would linger in literary minds for years to come: Charles Dickens would later compare Monsieur Gabelle’s nighttime “gallop” to “a new version of the German ballad Leonora” in *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) (Dickens 127).

This legacy and history of the vampire—from Eastern European folklore, to German reports, to German literature, to English translation—is the legacy that Coleridge would have unearthed, had he gone looking. Arthur Nethercot, in *The Road to Tryermaine* (1939) seems to believe Coleridge had indeed discovered this vampire legacy in his readings. Nethercot suggests that Coleridge’s library holdings and letters indicate that Coleridge may have read certain articles that appeared in journals that had other works that may have referred to vampires. However, most of Nethercot’s arguments are dubious connections expressed through fumbled language; for example, he writes that “[there was] no inherent improbability in Coleridge’s having gotten access to Calmet somehow during this time” (Nethercot, *The Road to Tryermaine*, 67). Regardless of whether Coleridge envisioned his “creature” (Nethercot, *The Road to Tryermaine*, 56) as a vampire or not, “Christabel”’s reception in Geneva, where it implanted horrible visions into the mind of Percy Shelley, and inspired Polidori’s vampire novella, would suggest that it has its place in the legacy of vampire literature.

“Christabel”: Publication History and Reception

Although “Christabel”’s fateful arrival in Geneva was in 1816, Coleridge had begun work on the poem long before then. Nethercot writes, with typical Nethercotian boldness, that “the history” of “Christabel” is just as “mysterious and tantalizing” as the

poem itself (Nethercot 3). The creation of “Christabel” indeed comes with a complex and confused history of contradictory dates. In October 1815, Coleridge claimed, in a letter to Lord Byron, that he had written about three-quarters of “Christabel” in 1797 (Cochran 67). However, Coleridge himself challenges this claim in the 1816 preface to the poem, where he writes that the first part was written in Nether Stowey in 1797, and the second part, in actuality, was written “after my return from Germany, in the year 1800” (Coleridge, *Preface*, 659).

Correspondence with Robert Southey seems to suggest that at the very least, some portion of the poem was finished by 1799. Southey—who, notably, would himself include a vampiric villain in his 1801 epic poem *Thalaba the Destroyer*—requested in 1799 that Coleridge finish “Christabel” for Southey’s 1800 *Annual Anthology*. Coleridge turned him down, worried his poem would be received as “extravagant ravings” (Nethercot 8). The next year, in hopes that “Christabel” would be included in the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge sent a copy of the poem to printers (Wu 659 n. 1). However, “Christabel” was not published until later, as Coleridge continued to struggle to complete the poem, and Wordsworth found the work, in the words of Duncan Wu, “altogether too weird” (Wu 615). Wordsworth himself wrote in a letter to his and Coleridge’s publisher that “Christabel” was “so discordant with my own [work] that it could not be printed along with my poems in any propriety” (Lawder 86). Coleridge would later echo this in a letter to his patron Josiah Wedgewood, writing that the poem was “discordant in its character” (Lawder 89). Although the poem remained unpublished, friends and peers of Coleridge had access to his manuscript and earlier versions (E.H. Coleridge 37) (Nethercot, *The Road to Tryermaine*, 8-16). Coleridge had a habit of

reading “Christabel” aloud to “horrified social gatherings” (Wu 615). Moreover, acquaintances, patrons, and colleagues, including Dr. John Stoddart, Lady Beaumont, and Charles Lamb, were familiar with the poem (Nethercot, *The Road to Tryermaine*, 8-16). Sir Walter Scott’s letters indicate that after being “introduced” to “Christabel” through one of Dr. Stoddart’s recitations, he too became a fan of the work. Scott would later recite Coleridge’s unpublished “wild and wondrous tale” (Scott 221) to none other than Lord Byron in the spring of 1815 (Cochran 74).

“Christabel” received published responses even in its unpublished state. In 1805, Scott published “The Lay of the Last Minstrel,” a work inspired by Coleridge’s poem (Wu 659 n.2). In 1815, a year before “Christabel” was published, *The European Magazine* anonymously published a third part to the poem (E.H. Coleridge 47). William Hazlitt appears to have been familiar with an earlier version of the poem, for his scathing review of the poem made reference to the line “lean and old and foul of hue” that had only appeared in Coleridge’s manuscript (Wu 615). The still unfinished poem, which had become a familiar entity in the literary community (Nethercot 16), was finally published by Byron’s publisher John Murray in April of 1816 (Cochran 69). The poem was published again, with alterations, in 1828, 1829, and 1834 (E.H. Coleridge, 55).

Byron thought “Christabel” was “wild” and “beautiful” (E.H. Coleridge 99), but many reviewers did not share his sentiment. *The Eclectic Review* called the “long-hoarded treasure” a “disappointment” (*The Eclectic Review* 5, [1816], 565). *The Edinburgh Review* referred to it “destitute of value” (*The Edinburgh Review: Or Critical Journal* 27, [1816], 66). Critics also uncovered something about the poem that sickened them, something that, according to *The Champion*, tests the “digestive capabilities of

public taste” (E.H. Coleridge 101). Hazlitt, in his review, wrote that “there is something disgusting at the bottom of [Coleridge’s] subject” (Hazlitt 349). What did these critics find so revolting, so obscene? The answer—to what bothered reviewers so deeply—lies in the public and critical reaction to *Geraldine*. A May 1816 edition of *The Champion* claimed that a number of questions concerning *Geraldine* swarmed, in the words of Robert Lapp, the “clubs, theaters, and drawing rooms of the bourgeois public sphere” (Lapp 25). *The Champion* then shares that among these questions, there were the queries of whether or not *Geraldine* was a “she, he, or it,” whether or not she “was a vampire,” and whether or not she was male (*The Champion* [May 26, 1816], 166-167). One parody, published in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* in 1818, features a pregnant *Christabel*, “nine months after *Geraldine*’s first visit” (Swann 417 n.10). Coleridge claimed in 1819 that a male *Geraldine* was a “wicked rumour” started by Hazlitt (Fulford 105): but the desire to masculinize her, perhaps, is rooted in inherent discomfort with her femininity. As Karen Swann writes, “[Hazlitt’s] scandalous rumor... is a subterfuge masking the real scandal of ‘*Christabel*’—that *Geraldine* is a woman” (Swann 406). While none of these reviewers explicitly comment on the homoerotic elements of the poem, as Terry Castle states in *The Apparitional Lesbian*, “it is difficult...to contemplate passages in... ‘*Christabel*’ without certain ticklish ideas popping into one’s head” and that on some level, “*Christabel*”’s very existence proves some sort of awareness of lesbianism in Western civilization (Castle 9). While Coleridge himself might not have been thinking “lesbian vampire” while crafting “*Christabel*,” certainly *Geraldine*’s reception classifies her as such.

***Carmilla*: Publication History & Reception**

The vampire Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu inherited was not the folk figure that Coleridge might have known. By the time Le Fanu had begun work on *Carmilla*, the vampire had become recognized by the literary world. The vampire was realized as an aristocratic, seductive demon in Polidori's *The Vampyre*, employed as a "stock character" in the serial *Varney the Vampyre*, and alluded to in works by literary greats such as Byron, and Keats, or utilized "mythopoetically" by Charlotte and Emily Brontë (Twitchell 272). James Twitchell believes it is the Brontës' works, which portray the vampire as a powerful, passionate myth, that "set the temper" (Twitchell 272) for Le Fanu's work. By the time Le Fanu wrote *Carmilla*, the vampire had become a corporeal, familiar figure, although perhaps not as established, some critics may argue, as it would be post-*Dracula* (Costello-Sullivan xvii). Still, the fact that *Dracula* has been considered a "direct response" to *Carmilla* (Costello-Sullivan xvii) demonstrates its significance in the vampire canon, and how some of the vampiric conventions it establishes would live on for years to come. Published first as a four-part serial in John Christian Freund's eclectic Oxford magazine *Dark Blue*, the narrative was printed alongside works both "radical" and "conservative," "transgressive" and "middlebrow" (Jones 1-4, 12), before being printed in Le Fanu's collection *In a Glass Darkly* (1872) (Jones 24 n.28). Likewise, *Carmilla* occupies a divided space, between its sexually transgressive elements, and its considerably conservative author.³ The conflict of ambiguity is nothing new to the

³ While reviews of *Carmilla* and *In A Glass Darkly* from the nineteenth century are difficult to find, reactions to Le Fanu's work were at times as divided as Le Fanu's intentions seem to have been: one reviewer, in the same article, called Le Fanu's *Guy Deverell* (1865) "vulgar" with "an element of filth" at the same time he called *Uncle Silas* (1864) and *Wylder's Hand* (1864) "excellent specimens" of sensationalism (*The Albion*, 44.7 [1866], 81).

vampire narrative—and despite Le Fanu’s intentions, *Carmilla* and Laura’s relationship stands as a pinnacle of queer vampirism.

Queering “Christabel” and *Carmilla*

Of course, labeling “Christabel” and *Carmilla* not just as vampire texts, but *queer* vampire texts, cannot be done without considering what makes a “queer” text. Discussing “Christabel” and *Carmilla* within the contexts of queer literature, theory, and criticism is a daunting task for several reasons. To suggest that Le Fanu and Coleridge intended to write texts that liberated the queer experience would be absurd: if anything, these works use cultural anxiety (Haggerty 10) about alternative sexuality and “female power” (Costello-Sullivan xx) to create an additional sense of “terror” and “exoticism” in their Gothic text (Haggerty 2), and exploit societal homophobia rather than fight it. It is unlikely that the conservative Le Fanu, a middle-class Irishman and a clergyman’s son, a devout Protestant who supported British colonialism (Costello-Sullivan xxii), meant for his work to be read as anything other than as a “disapproval of challenges to patriarchal heteronormativity” (Fantina 172 n8). Similarly, it is doubtful that Coleridge, who called Horace Walpole’s *The Mysterious Mother* (1768) “the most disgusting, vile, detestable composition” (Coleridge 293), intended to sexually liberate the female population. However, while both these authors likely intended to use deviant sexualities to add additional anxiety and terror to their works, just by exploring transgressive sexualities, Coleridge and Le Fanu are breathing life into the queerness of their characters. As Haggerty writes in regards to Gothic fiction as a whole, despite homophobic overtones, the queerness of a text does not “merely contribute to the sexual status quo”: to excavate

alternative sexualities and identities is to “militate,” willingly or not, against heteronormativity (Haggerty 19).

While incongruity with authors’ intention may not necessarily preclude a text from being queer, another reason many may hesitate to call these texts queer is that the modern queer identities may not align with “homosexual identity and roles” that “are culturally and historically specific” (Summers 3). However, while the specific identity of the “lesbian” may not have been alive in public consciousness during the eras in which “Christabel” and *Carmilla* were written, this does not mean that they have no value to modern queer readers. Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero articulate this point beautifully in their collection *Premodern Sexualities*:

The joy of finding counterparts in the past...problematic though it may be...is not simply to be dismissed as anachronism...[and] the argument that modern desires and perspectives can and must be set aside if we are to read the past properly is itself revealing, for it suggests that historical knowledge is founded on the renunciation of ‘self’...[and] this renunciation...begs for queer scrutiny.

(Fradenburg and Freccero viii)

To read the central figures of “Christabel” and *Carmilla* as lesbians, then, is not a task that anachronism strips of value. Modern readers have found validation in uncovering “counterparts in the past.” James Jenkins, founder of Valancourt Books, which publishes rare and queer fiction, noted in an interview that much of Valancourt Books’ success comes from contemporary queer readers’ “passionate responses” to older literature (Healey). In *Myth of the Modern Homosexual: Queer History and the Search for Cultural Unity*, Rictor Norton notes that he, as well as historians Martin Duberman and John

D'Emilio, finds “queer survival” in the past as “itself inspiring and empowering” and that this empowerment extends beyond the individual to create “solidarity,” “cultural community,” and to strengthen queer activism (Norton 3).

Scholarly aversion to applying modern queer perspectives to past sexualities may even be rooted in a desire to preserve and validate heteronormativity. Steven Kruger, in “Queer Middle Ages,” notes that attempts to “stabilize” the past as something “other to modernity is a construction analogous to attempts to stabilize and essentialize gender or sexuality”—and that modern queer theory perspectives threaten that stability and demarcation (Kruger 414). Claude Summers references a “scholarly tradition that has denied and obfuscated the homosexual presence in English literature,” that is strengthened by the “anxieties of anachronism” (Summers 3). Fradenburg and Freccero point out that “historical scruples have been hard at work” to preserve one particular historical narrative (viii). That narrative is one of default heterosexuality, a narrative that claims queer identity is a new deviance, a “fabrication of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century male sexologists” such as Krafft-Ebing and Sigmund Freud (Castle 8).

Pre-Twentieth Century Lesbianism

The lesbian, in particular, has suffered from these “anxieties of anachronism.” What Castle calls the “‘no lesbians before 1900’ theory” (Castle 9) has been aggravated by hesitation to explore past sexualities and identities as formative or related to modern ones:

There are always ‘more lesbians’ to be found in the world than one expects...lesbians are indeed ‘everywhere,’ and always have been. For too long our thinking has been dominated by a kind of scarcity model: either there aren’t

any lesbians at all, or too few to matter. It is time, I maintain, to focus on presence instead of absence, plenitude instead of scarcity. (Castle 18).

The idea that lesbianism was largely invisible before the late nineteenth century is not completely unfounded: lesbianism was invisible, at the very least, in the eyes of the law. In 1812, a Scottish case involving two lesbian schoolteachers was dismissed by a judge who believed “the crime alleged here,” lesbianism, “has no existence” (Faderman, *Scotch Verdict: The Real-Life Story that Inspired “the Children’s Hour,”* 279). The infamous Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 (used to convict Oscar Wilde), was meant to target male homosexuality, not female homosexuality (Castle 6). However, in the realm of literature and culture, there exists a rich history of female sexual expression, and a number of different conventions through which female sexuality is portrayed. These expressions of female sexuality stretch all the way from Sappho’s fragments, to seventeenth-century poetry by writers such as Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, Katherine Philips, and Aphra Behn, to eighteenth-century public figures such as the Ladies of Llangollen (who attracted high-profile visitors such as William and Dorothy Wordsworth [Watson 100]). These women used languages such as romantic friendship, feudal hierarchies, pastoral imagery, “courtly love....and hermaphroditic perfection” (Summers 6), and “ventriloquized male [voices] and... verbal cross-dressing” (Andreadis, “Re-Configuring Early Modern Friendship: Katherine Philips and Homoerotic Desire,” 526) to depict female homosexuality, while at the same time keeping the lesbian safely “in the shadows, in the margins” (Castle 2).

Conversely, the lesbian is not so hidden in texts written by men. Male authors who write about lesbianism, as Castle notes, often produce text that is “pornographic or

‘underground’ in nature”—in other words, text that is explicitly obscene (Castle 9).

Likewise, “Christabel” and *Carmilla* are notably explicit texts. The sexuality of its female figures does not hide in the margins. Castle even uses “Christabel” as evidence that Western society, before the late nineteenth century, had “always known on some level about lesbians” (Castle 9). However, although explicit, *Carmilla* and “Christabel” are also notable because they are not “underground” texts. As Andrew Elfenbein notes,

When *Christabel* appeared in 1816, it changed the history of representation.

Previous work had treated sex between women as a matter of pornographic interest, satirical commentary, scandalous exploration, or titillating innuendo.

Christabel, for the first time, made lesbianism sublime. (Elfenbein 177)

By sublime, Elfenbein means that lesbianism, in “Christabel,” was not included to “[shock]” readers, but to introduce them to the “sacred mystery” (Elfenbein 177) of relationship that, freed from “heterosexual framework...exists simply for itself” (Elfenbein 190)⁴. *Carmilla* and “Christabel” are not pornographic: rather, they belong to the history of the Gothic, which George Haggerty notes was a “semi-respectable area of literary endeavor” where “modes of sexual and social transgression were discursively addressed on a regular basis” (Haggerty 3).

⁴ Elfenbein’s argument for lesbianism as “sublime,” found in Chapter 7 of his *Romantic Genius: The Prehistory of a Homosexual Role*, is rooted in the fact that “Christabel” is an “elite” work of “high art,” and its “uniqueness” sets it free from social convention (Elfenbein 177-190). Coleridge does not attempt to heterosexualize his poem with the presence of a male figure or a “phallus,” (Elfenbein 189) and in Elfenbein’s eyes, treats lesbianism in a context never treated before by male authors (Elfenbein 190). Elfenbein also notes that the “mystery” that surrounds Christabel and Geraldine’s relationship is one that “cannot be decrypted for male erotic pleasure”: as such, lesbianism becomes “high art” rather than pornographic (Elfenbein 188-193).

The Queer, The Lesbian and The Gothic

Ironically, neither Coleridge or Le Fanu would have been pleased with a Gothic labeling of their works. Coleridge was highly critical of the Gothic:

The ruined castles, the dungeons, the trap-doors, the skeletons, the flesh-and-blood ghosts...of so-called German drama...[were] denounced, by the best critics in Germany, the mere cramps of weakness...of a sickly imagination on the part of the author, and the lowest provocation of torpid feeling on that of the readers (Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* Vol. II, 211).

Due to Coleridge's detestation of the Gothic, some scholars, such as Andrew Cooper, have perceived Coleridge's heavy Gothic imagery in "Christabel" as an attempt to parody the "conventionally gothic" (Cooper, Andrew, 86). Le Fanu himself additionally "protested against being lumped with the sensational school, preferring, rather, to claim affiliation with 'the legitimate school of tragic English romance. . . of Sir Walter Scott'" (Jones 10)⁵. Still, parody or unintentional, it is certain that these texts, with their own creeping castles and ghosts, fall cleanly into a Gothic category. Furthermore, these texts' place in the tradition of the Gothic, in a way, confirms their queerness, as the Gothic and the queer have a long relationship.

The realm of the Gothic, as Max Fincher points out in his book *Queering Gothic in the Romantic Age*, is brimming with queer figures and themes. Between the often-featured character of the "transgressive outsider" (not uncommonly, the vampire), the "destabilization of sex, gender, and desire," and the threatening of "masculinity," the

⁵ In his "preliminary word" to *Uncle Silas*, Le Fanu writes that Sir Walter Scott's works, too, have elements of "death, crime, and, in some form, mystery," but have escaped the "degrading" label of "sensation" (Le Fanu, *Uncle Silas*, vii-viii). Le Fanu seems to argue that Gothic tropes do not a sensationalist work make.

Gothic employs “conventions” (Fincher 14) that are quintessentially queer. Haggerty claims that the Gothic and the queer are so deeply intertwined, that “gothic fiction [anticipated] the history of sexuality” (Haggerty 5). Haggerty argues that formative sexologists Krafft-Ebing and Freud utilized “conventions of gothic fiction to express the details of their understanding of psychological states” of those with variant sexual orientations (Haggerty 51). The queerness that the Gothic evokes, as discussed before, is often discussed through figurations and expressions of homophobia and social and sexual anxieties (Fincher 8), and thus on the surface do not appear to be liberating. However, despite “[links]... to societal fears” (Fincher 8), Gothic literature provides a stage and a spotlight to non-normative identities, sexualities, and practices—and in providing that stage, may elevate those queer identities, and validates their existence during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

As I dive deeper into analysis of Coleridge’s “Christabel” and Le Fanu’s *Carmilla*, it is important to remain conscious of their belonging to this tradition of queer Gothic. However, my driving objective will be to argue the presence of an identity more specific than the “expansiveness” that both “queer” and Gothic evoke (Fincher 7). These texts belong to a “lesbian vampire” tradition. Moving away from ambiguity and defining this specificity of same-sex desire is not “reductive” (Fincher 8), but rather, liberating, as it frees us to apply a modern perspective that historians and scholars would have been previously too anxious to utilize. Not only does applying modern perspectives liberate analysis, it also validates lesbian experiences before the twentieth century and cements the existence of a lesbian literary history. As Terry Castle says, “when it comes to lesbians...many people have trouble seeing what’s in front of them... when she is there,

in plain view” (Castle 2). For too long, the lesbian “has been ghosted—or made to seem invisible—by culture itself” (Castle 4). Through a fresh, modern take on these two texts, the lesbian’s presence in literature can be made tangible, visible, and even “sublime” (Elfenbein 177).

Part I: Agency, Action, and Identity

As discussed in the introduction, arguments have been made against the idea that modern queer identities may have existed in the past. In Michel Foucault's view, it was not until the publications of medical studies such as Carl Westphal's "Contrary Sexual Feeling" (1870) and Richard von Kraft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886) that homosexuality was "characterized" as a "sensibility" rather than a series of sexual acts and relations (Foucault 43). However, as I investigate "Christabel" and *Carmilla* from a modern queer perspective, I see queer acts as indicative of queer identity. As such, I find Fradenburg and Freccero's conflation of action and identity in *Premodern Sexualities* useful: "identities can be said to be made *by* acts" (Fradenburg and Freccero xx). By Fradenburg and Freccero's logic, in order to establish the queer identity of Coleridge's and Le Fanu's central female characters, I must first examine their queer actions. *Carmilla* and Geraldine, our vampiric villainesses, could be easily be characterized as queer due to their queer actions. However, the actions of these texts' designated victims, Christabel and Laura, transform relations between the women in "Christabel" and *Carmilla* from a predator-prey dynamic into something that could be called a queer relationship. Once I have established these women as having queer identities, I will have opened the door to discovering their lesbianism.

Devictimizing Christabel and Laura: Action and Identity

Before I can discuss how Christabel and Laura defy the role of the victim, I must acknowledge where Coleridge and Le Fanu evoke elements of the traditional vampire-victim relationship in "Christabel" and *Carmilla*. Christabel and Laura are depicted, by the actions of other characters, as innocent children in need of protection from supernatural evils. In *Carmilla*, Le Fanu surrounds Laura with authority figures who not

only infantilize and victimize Laura, but seek to act in Laura's place. The novella's closing "ordeal" involves a patriarchal coalition including Laura's father, vampire-hunter Baron Vordenburg, General Spielsdorf, and some medical officers attempting to protect the "poor child" Laura (Le Fanu 88). By forcing Laura to stay home in the care of a priest while they track down Carmilla's grave and desecrate the body, these men temporarily displace Laura from her role in her own story. In "Christabel," Christabel's attempts to reveal Geraldine's true nature go completely ignored and misunderstood by Sir Leoline, who attributes Christabel's discomfort with Geraldine to "woman's jealousy" (Coleridge 648). Leoline takes matters into his own hand, determining that Geraldine is an endangered maiden in need of "his hospitality," and thus denies Christabel her own agency (Coleridge 646).

However, these authority figures fail to truly displace Christabel and Laura, and fail to negate the weight of the women's actions. Despite overbearing and oblivious patriarchal figures, Christabel and Laura display a remarkable amount of agency in "Christabel" and *Carmilla* respectively. Christabel and Laura's actions allow their identities to transcend the pervasive heteronormativity and the confining sexual roles of the late-eighteenth and mid-to-late-nineteenth centuries.

Carmilla's attraction to Laura is explicit: Laura describes Carmilla being very physically affectionate, embracing Laura and "[drawing her]" near, kissing her cheek, and often making "passionate declarations of her liking of [Laura]" as she did so (Le Fanu 28). Carmilla's "mysterious moods" and advances are so shocking to Laura that she suspects she might be a man in disguise (Le Fanu 30). Carmilla's attraction, however, is not as shocking as Laura's: by identifying Carmilla as a vampire, Le Fanu has already

othered her, already made her deviant. Although Laura is at times “[repulsed]” by Carmilla’s advances, Laura herself determines that her “attraction” to Carmilla “immensely [prevails]” over her hesitation (Le Fanu 24-25). By reciprocating Carmilla’s attraction, Laura acts as a humanizing force in their homosexual relationship, and turns Le Fanu’s tale from a tragedy about a monster pursuing its prey into a tale about a relationship shared between two women.

Laura’s attraction sparks her own pursuit of Carmilla. Upon seeing Carmilla for the first time, after a fateful (and most likely staged) carriage crash, she immediately “[whispers] earnestly” to her father a request to “ask [Carmilla] to... stay with us— it would be so delightful” (Le Fanu 16). While one might characterize a more predatory, “wild [hearted]” (Le Fanu 29) Carmilla as the sole pursuer, Laura here demonstrates that she, too, is willing to pursue. Le Fanu again demonstrates Laura’s eagerness toward Carmilla when Laura describes her “longing to see and talk to [Carmilla]” while she is recovering from the accident (Le Fanu 22). Le Fanu, notably, employs the powerful “longing”: Laura does not merely wish or want to see Carmilla, she *longs* for it, and in that longing expresses a passion and desire that exists before Carmilla even has the opportunity to seduce her. Before Carmilla speaks her first words in the novella, Le Fanu shows us that Laura already desires her companionship. Upon hearing from the doctor that Carmilla has recovered, Laura asks Carmilla for “permission” to “visit...her room”: and then notes that upon receiving such permission, she was quick to take advantage of it (Le Fanu 22). Laura even expresses yearning for female companionship prior to Carmilla’s arrival, as she “tears” up when she discovers that the young girl she intended to befriend, Bertha, has passed away (Le Fanu 12). Laura actively desires female

companionship, and Le Fanu thus crafts Laura not as a resistant victim of Carmilla's desire, but as a fellow architect of desire.

In "Christabel," Coleridge constructs Christabel's desire with an eagerness that is similar to Laura's. Christabel, not Geraldine, facilitates Geraldine's entrance into her castle, and even later, into her room. Upon hearing Geraldine's story, Christabel initiates physical contact and "[stretches] forth her hand," and then offers to take Geraldine "to [her] room" (Coleridge 102-117). Coleridge presents to the reader a Christabel that is assertive and decisive: Christabel tells Geraldine that she "must" sleep with her (Coleridge 117), and when Geraldine struggles to cross the gate to Christabel's estate, Christabel "with might and main/Lifted her up...Over the threshold" (Coleridge 125-127). Christabel is not only instigating her and Geraldine's relationship, but she is determined to ensure its fruition. Of course, Christabel's lack of suspicion may be attributed to the Gothic convention of the innocent, naïve female victim; however, Christabel continues to pursue Geraldine despite obvious warnings. No matter what warnings offer themselves up—including the bark of the "mastiff bitch," the spontaneous "tongue of light" from the hearth when Geraldine passes, and her communication with Christabel's deceased mother (Coleridge 199, 148, 154)—Christabel remains undisturbed, and undeterred in her quest to take Geraldine to her room.

Once Geraldine and Christabel have entered Christabel's chamber, the implications of Christabel's escorting of Geraldine are clear: Christabel states her physical attraction, calling Geraldine "most beautiful to see" (Coleridge 218-219). A rather sensual scene of undressing follows: Geraldine asks Christabel to "unrobe [herself]," and Christabel eagerly obliges (Coleridge 227). Coleridge's language as

Christabel undresses focuses on Christabel's physical beauty, on her "gentle limbs" and "loveliness" allowing him to sexualize the act of undressing (Coleridge 231-232). The narrator's detailed description of both Christabel and Geraldine's physical beauty at this moment is voyeuristic, allowing Coleridge to employ a male gaze onto this queer moment, which in some ways, heterosexualizes the scene. However, despite this male presence, Christabel is not a passive figure. She participates in the sensuality of the scene: unable to fall asleep due to "so many thoughts," she "[reclines] on her elbow" to watch Geraldine undress (Coleridge 234, 237, 238). Infamously, it is only now that Geraldine has undressed that Christabel realizes Geraldine's true nature: for Geraldine's side is marked with something Coleridge calls "a sight to dream of, not to tell!" (Coleridge 247). In other manuscripts, Coleridge is more descriptive of the "sight," saying in his 1800 manuscript that Geraldine's "bosom and...side" is "lean and old and foul of hue" (Wu 665 n.19), and in an 1816 manuscript that Geraldine's side is "dark and rough as the sea-wolf's hide" (Wu 665 n.19).

Now that Christabel has seen Geraldine's mark, Geraldine takes Christabel "in her arms" and curses her to be silent about what she has seen (Coleridge 251). Yet, even though Christabel spends the night in the arms of a monster, and "sheds" a few "tears" (Coleridge 303), the narrator notes that Christabel's "limbs relax," and that "she seems to smile/As infants at a sudden light" (Coleridge 301-306), suggesting that she does find comfort in Geraldine's embrace. The narrator then describes Christabel's blood flow as increasing, and as having a "vision sweet" (Coleridge 311-3120). Coleridge's sensual language, in this moment, where Christabel's blood "tingles" and her "thin lids/Close

o'er her eyes," is highly suggestive of physical pleasure, perhaps even orgasmic pleasure (Coleridge 313, Coleridge 302-303).

When analyzing Christabel's actions and attitudes in regards to Geraldine, it is important to note the fact that by the next morning, Christabel has come to "fear" Geraldine (Coleridge 453). However, Christabel's repulsion is triggered not by the act of Geraldine's undressing or the woman's plan to sleep together, but by the strange appearance of Geraldine's "bosom" (Coleridge 445). Christabel is not deterred by lesbianism, but by Geraldine's lack of humanity, which suggests that the "[sin]" Christabel fears she has committed is not centered around homosexuality, but around Geraldine's inhumanity (Coleridge 381). As such, Christabel's next-day concern about Geraldine's supernatural identity does not negate her active pursuit of Geraldine the night previous.

Le Fanu's depiction of Laura's physical relationship with Carmilla contains a similar conflict between physical pleasure and reluctance. Laura describes Carmilla's embraces as "foolish," and that she felt some "wish to extricate [herself]," but simultaneously,

[Carmilla's] murmured words sounded like a lullaby in my ear, and soothed my resistance into a trance, from which I only seemed to recover myself when she withdrew her arms (Le Fanu 15).

Laura, like Christabel, feels a physical pleasure that stems from her relationship with her vampiric companion.

Laura's and Christabel's pursuits of Carmilla and Geraldine suggest that their desires are not implanted by a corrupting force, but already boiling beneath the surface,

and liberated by Geraldine and Carmilla. Laura and Christabel are liberated from heteronormativity and confining patriarchal sexual roles, as they act of their own accord without the permission of a strong patriarch (as both patriarchs in *Carmilla* and “Christabel” are oblivious), and without the influence of an exemplary female matriarch (as both Laura and Christabel’s mothers are dead). If Fradenburg and Freccero are correct in asserting that “identities can be said to be made *by acts*” (Fradenburg and Freccero xx), certainly, Christabel and Laura’s acts, which demonstrate female homosexual desire, create for them a queer identity.

Narration and Agency

In addition to the formation of queer identity through Laura and Christabel’s actions, “Christabel” and *Carmilla* feature a formation of queer identity through narration. In *Carmilla*, Laura is given the opportunity to narrate her own story. She thus cements herself as an important advocate for her own agency. While Christabel does not narrate “Christabel,” the insufficiency and inadequacy of Coleridge’s narrator force us to pay closer attention to Christabel’s actions, thus reinforcing action as an important construct of identity.

The narration of these works is not always empowering: it often treats Laura and Christabel as helpless children. Laura, who narrates *Carmilla*, notes that although some readers may find the information “trifling,” the first interaction between Laura and the supernatural occurs years before the events of the main narrative, when Laura is six years old (Le Fanu 6). Laura’s nursery is intruded upon by a “young lady” (who the reader later learns is Carmilla) that bites Laura in the breast (Le Fanu 7). By sharing with us the image of a child being penetrated by Carmilla’s “[needle]”-like teeth at a young age,

Laura infantilizes and victimizes herself, and paints Carmilla as a corrupting force (Le Fanu 7). Christabel is treated similarly by the overzealous narrator of “Christabel,” who often expresses his perception that the grown Christabel is a “child” (Coleridge 510) needing to be “[shielded] well” from Geraldine’s evil (Coleridge 570). However, Coleridge’s and Le Fanu’s narration, while problematic in some ways, facilitates agency in others.

Of the two works, Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* has the more empowering narration. Through first person narration, Le Fanu bestows upon Laura the ability to advocate for herself and her feelings toward Carmilla. Laura’s thoughts and actions are not filtered through an oblivious narrator as Christabel’s are. This is not to say that Laura’s narration is entirely unfiltered: it is filtered through the frame narrative created by the novella’s “Prologue,” which presents Laura’s story as a discovery by “Doctor Hessalius.” Le Fanu’s opening with a case study Doctor Hessalius pathologizes Laura to a certain extent (Le Fanu 3). Laura’s narration is also filtered by time, as she is recounting her tale years after it occurred, and the reader is reading her tale “many years” after she has passed away (Le Fanu 3). However, despite these filters, Laura’s ability to narrate her own story still empowers her and allows her to present her own interpretations of her actions and identity. Laura’s narration allows the reader to delve into Laura’s psyche and to gain a working understanding of her self-perception, which in turn gives the reader tools to construct Laura’s identity.

Despite Laura and the frame narrative’s filtering, Le Fanu still allows the reader to take a front seat to Laura’s swinging pendulum of “attraction” and “repulsion.” What can only be assumed in “Christabel” through Christabel’s actions is explicit in *Carmilla*.

The reader hears from Laura herself that she feels “unaccountably towards” Carmilla, who has “interested and won [her]” (Le Fanu 24-25). The power of Laura’s ability to self-advocate is most evident at the end of *Carmilla*, where Laura’s narration “prevails” over the patriarchal forces that threaten her autonomy. While the coalition supposedly defeats Carmilla, Carmilla lives on in Laura’s lingering thoughts. It is Laura’s “fancying” that she “[hears] the light step of Carmilla at the drawing-room door” that closes the novella (Le Fanu 96). Laura retains possession of the final word, and it is her voicing of undeterred desire that echoes last in the reader’s head.

Coleridge does not give Christabel the same voiced agency as Le Fanu gives Laura. While Le Fanu allows Laura to be his first-person narrator, Coleridge inserts a narrator who describes and interprets Christabel’s thoughts, feelings, and actions. One could argue that Laura’s freedom to speak for herself, a freedom Christabel is denied, allows Laura to obtain an agency Christabel does not have. This argument is strengthened by the voyeuristic role that Coleridge’s narrator takes on.

The difference in narration between the novella and the poem relates to their difference in genre. While not always true, prose and poetry’s structural differences can cause the former to be clearer in meaning than the latter. For example, *Carmilla*, a prose piece, is far more explicit and straightforward than “Christabel.” Le Fanu shows us that Carmilla is a vampire, and that Laura is attracted to her, while Coleridge buries Geraldine’s nature and Christabel’s feelings beneath a shroud of poetic tropes. Readers must dig through layers of complicated meter, powerful imagery and flowery language to find meaning in Coleridge’s poem. By choosing poetry as his genre, Coleridge signals to

his readers that they must look beyond the exterior and beyond his structure to interpret his work.

Coleridge's narrator, through his obliviousness and naiveté, pushes readers to interpret Coleridge's poem for themselves. While Geraldine appears suspicious to the reader, the narrator is oblivious to Geraldine's sinister qualities. For example, when Geraldine's presence upsets the "mastiff old" (Coleridge 140), the narrator asks, "for what can ail the mastiff bitch?" (Coleridge 148), demonstrating a lack of understanding of the poem's narrative. When Geraldine spots the spirit of Christabel's mother, the narrator again is slow to realize what is occurring: he asks "why stares [Geraldine] with unsettled eye?" (Coleridge 202-203). When Christabel, affected by the contagion of vampirism, takes on some of Geraldine's supernatural qualities, such as Geraldine's "serpent eyes" (Coleridge 590), the narrator says he "[knows] not how" (Coleridge 588) Christabel's changes occurred. Presumably, the narrator knows what occurred on the night Christabel and Geraldine spent together—and yet, he does not understand its implications.

The narrator's lack of perceptiveness also constructs an interpretation of Christabel that directly conflicts with her actions. The narrator demonstrates a constant obsession with Christabel's purity, maintaining that she is "innocent" and "mild," thus minimalizing the possibility that Christabel is capable of sexually liberated actions (Coleridge 612). This innocence denies Christabel her womanhood, as does the narrator referring to her as a "child" (Coleridge 610). The conclusion to the poem focuses on a relationship between a father and his "little" and "fairy"-like child (Coleridge 644, 646). If readers are to take this conclusion as commentary on Sir Leoline's and Christabel's

relationship, they could take this language as that further treats Christabel as a victim and child. Through through emphasizing her innocence, the narrator attempts to strip Christabel of her autonomy. However, the picture of Christabel the narrator paints, the picture of the “sweet” and “gentle” Christabel, “devoid” of responsibility in her actions, is not the Christabel that the reader witnesses (Coleridge 161, 231, 587).

While the narrator emphasizes Christabel’s purity, Christabel is the agent of her own story. While the narrator insists on Christabel’s frailty and gentleness, Christabel demonstrates impressive “might and main” (Coleridge 125) when she physically lifts Geraldine over the threshold of her home. While the narrator presents Christabel as an oblivious victim, Christabel emphatically responds “So let it be!” when Geraldine asks her to undress (Coleridge 229). When the narrator laments that Christabel is a damsel in distress who needs to be “[shielded]” from harm (Coleridge 570), Christabel attempts to fight for herself, begging her father to send Geraldine away, “hissing” (Coleridge 579) at Geraldine and adopting Geraldine’s fierce glare (Coleridge 588-589). Through the disparity between the narrator’s image of Christabel and Christabel’s actions, Coleridge invites us to question the narrator’s validity, and also to question why Christabel acts in the way that she does.

Coleridge pairs the questionable validity of the narrator with the narrator’s voyeuristic role. As a presumably male, voyeuristic voice, the narrator distorts Geraldine and Christabel’s identities and actions through an objectifying lens. This distortion encourages the reader to draw their own conclusions about the dynamics of Geraldine and Christabel’s relationship. The narrator often focuses on Christabel’s physical characteristics, dissecting her by her “maiden limbs” (Coleridge 376) and her “innocent

and blue” eyes (Coleridge 600). The narrator similarly dismembers Geraldine, often drawing attention to her figure and her “breasts” (Coleridge 378). This blazon-esque deconstruction objectifies Geraldine and Christabel. Thus, Coleridge forces the reader to go beyond the narration to uncover these women’s identities. As such, readers’ interpretations of vampirism, queerness, and lesbianism in “Christabel” are validated by Coleridge’s emphasis on reader scrutiny.

Conclusion to Part I

Laura and Christabel do not fit the Gothic convention of the helpless, female victim. They are empowered individuals whose actions determine the direction of their respective narratives. The agency of Laura and Christabel allows them to assume queer identity. For Geraldine and Carmilla, however, queer identity is manifested not only through agency, but through their vampirism. In the next section of this thesis, I will explore the relationship between queer identity and vampirism.

Part II: Vampirism and the Queer

“Christabel” and *Carmilla* occupy important and influential places in vampire literature. As mentioned before, “Christabel” is the inspiring work behind a number of Gothic texts in the nineteenth century including Polidori’s *The Vampyre*, and *Carmilla* is sometimes considered the inspiring work behind *Dracula* (Signorrotti 607). Because these texts belong to the vampire literary tradition, they inhabit a world that contains the challenging of cultural norms, the managing of social fears, and most importantly, the questioning of one’s identity. As Clemens Ruthner writes in “Undead Feedback: Adaptations and Echoes of Johann Flückinger’s Report, *Visum et Repertum* (1732),” “vampires are perfect examples of fantastic liminality and transgression” (Ruthner 91). Queer identities are also often associated with “fantastic liminality and transgression,” and thus it is no surprise that the vampire can indicate the queer. I will explore how the vampire identities presented in “Christabel” and *Carmilla* queer the texts. However, before I can do that, I must address the reality that Geraldine, though an important character in vampire literary tradition, is never explicitly categorized by Coleridge as a vampire.

“What Else Could Such a Creature Be?”: Defining Geraldine as a Vampire

Nethercot, in *The Road to Tryermaine*, famously promoted the interpretation of Geraldine as a vampire. Nethercot’s argument is based on analysis of Coleridge’s possible intentions and exposure to the vampire myth. Nethercot relies on his belief that “a man of Coleridge’s temperament” would not have “overlooked” essays titled “Of Popular Illusions” and “Medical Demonology” that referenced vampires (Nethercot, *The Road to Tryermaine*, 60-62). So sure that Geraldine is indeed a vampire, Nethercot

emphatically asks, “what else could [Geraldine]... be but a vampire?” (Nethercot, *The Road to Tryermaine*, 56).

However, Nethercot’s obsession with Coleridge’s intentions is unnecessary. Geraldine’s reception and critical interpretation creates her identity, and immortalizes her as a vampire. Nethercot would later claim that the vampiric interpretation of Geraldine he promotes in *The Road to Tryermaine* was a “then novel theory” (Nethercot, “Coleridge’s ‘Christabel’ and LeFanu’s ‘Carmilla’,” 32). However, interpretations of Geraldine as a vampire can be traced back all the way back to the poem’s immediate reception, specifically to a review published a day after “Christabel.” A reviewer in the May 26th, 1816 edition of *The Champion* wrote:

Mr. Coleridge's Poem is at present the standing enigma which puzzles the curiosity of literary circles. What is it all about? What is the idea? Is Lady Geraldine a sorceress? or a vampire? or a man? or what is she, or he, or it? These are questions which we have alternately heard and put; but to which not even those who have thought the subject worth more pains than ourselves, have been so fortunate as to hit upon a satisfactory answer. (*The Champion* [May 26, 1816], 166-167)

The reviewer here sees Geraldine as the intersection of the queer and the vampire. By asking if she is a vampire, and if there is fluidity in her gender, the reviewer queers Geraldine. Geraldine, in this reviewer’s eyes, is a transgressive figure that occupies and bridges multiple identities in the way vampires often do. A vampiric Geraldine had captured readers’ imaginations since the poem’s initial publication. As mentioned earlier,

Polidori even credits “Christabel” as the inspiring work behind his novella *The Vampyre*, a work to which the literary “obsession” with vampires is often attributed (Keith 60).

Nethercot calls “Christabel” “the first and subtlest of [vampire] stories in the English language” (Nethercot, “Coleridge’s ‘Christabel’ and LeFanu’s ‘Carmilla,’” 32). What is it about Geraldine that evokes the vampire? I will examine Geraldine’s exhibition of two key indicators of vampirism: her ability to drain energy or life essence from others, and her identity as the undead.

Coleridge never depicts Geraldine drinking Christabel’s blood. However, the reader is told that the next day that she woke up “fairer” than she had been the day before, and that she had “drunken deep/Of all the blessedness of sleep!” (Coleridge 365). Her withered, decaying bosom has been restored to the point that when Geraldine speaks, her “girded vests/Grew tight beneath her breasts” (Coleridge 367-368).⁶ Coleridge’s word choice here certainly evokes the vampire’s thirst. Not only is Geraldine rejuvenated, but Christabel seems to be proportionally changed: she finds herself falling into a “dizzy trance” (Coleridge 590) and “[imitating]” Geraldine’s behaviors after her night with Geraldine (Coleridge 590, 594). Even if Coleridge did not intend to write Geraldine as a vampire, depicting her as having “drunken deep” to restore an energy and humanity that has been drained from Christabel certainly implants into readers’ heads that Geraldine is a vampiric entity.

Another aspect of Geraldine’s identity that indicates she may be a vampire is that she embodies “the state of undeadness that we identify with vampires” (Gordillo 219).

⁶ Due to Coleridge’s choice of the pronoun “her,” it is possible to also interpret that the “girded vests” are “[growing] tight” beneath Christabel’s breasts, signaling that Christabel is having a physical, sexualized reaction to Geraldine’s restored state (Coleridge 368).

Geraldine, unlike Carmilla, is never explicitly stated to be undead, but as mentioned earlier, Coleridge gives us certain hints that suggest that she could belong to the realm of the dead:

But soon with altered voice said she—
‘Off, wandering mother! Peak and pine!
I have power to bid thee flee.’
Alas! what ails poor Geraldine?
Why stares she with unsettled eye?
Can she the bodiless dead espy? (Coleridge 198-203)

That Geraldine can see “the bodiless dead” identifies her as someone who might exist between the worlds of living and the dead. In other words, she is resurrected bodied dead. Christabel herself finds bodily evidence of Geraldine’s undead state. While the mark on Geraldine’s side is initially left ambiguous, Christabel later remembers that Geraldine had a “bosom old” and a “bosom cold” (Coleridge 445-446). Geraldine’s deformity, and her ability to communicate with spirits identify her as undead, categorize her as a vampire.

Nethercot, in arguing for Geraldine’s vampirism, spends a significant portion of *The Road to Tryermaine* analyzing Geraldine’s serpentine qualities. The myth of the vampire and of the serpent-woman share a history, having developed from the same social fears of empowered, liberated, and masculine women (Tumini 124). Even if Coleridge did not mean to evoke the relationship between the serpent and the vampire, the relationship undoubtedly exists, and could evoke important associations for the reader.

The mythology of the vampire and serpent-woman shares similar associations with menstrual and lunar cycles, similar concerns over the penetrative power of “phallic fangs” (Tumini 124). The serpent-woman from Greek mythology, the Lamia, is often considered an ancestress of the vampire (Milmine, 40). More closely related to “Christabel” than Greek mythology are eighteenth-century Serbian reports of vampire attacks that captivated the German intellectual community, and even among these reports, the relationship between the vampire and her serpentine cousin thrives. Villagers in Possega in 1732 claimed that the vampire terrorizing their village appeared to them “in the shape of a well-known serpent” (Ruthner 95). As Angela Tumini writes, the “lunar-influenced, fanged-vampire” would continue into the nineteenth century (Tumini 130). Worth noting is that the vampire and the serpent represent similar degeneracy in the eyes of Christian mythology: the serpent, and Lilith, an ancestor of vampire mythology, appear as evil forces in Eden (Tumini 122). The serpent has been characterized as the Devil in “Christian iconography,” just as Lilith, considered by a number of scholars (including Tumini and Nancy Schumann) as original vampiress, has been “personified as a licentious demon” (Tumini 122).

Whether or not, as Nethercot claims, Coleridge had this relationship between the vampire and the serpent in mind when he wrote “Christabel,” Nethercot is not wrong in asserting that Geraldine is serpent-like in nature. Bard Bracy refers to Geraldine as “a bright green snake” when he relays the events of his dream to Sir Leoline (Sir Leoline, however, does not understand Bracy’s insinuation, believing the snake to represent Geraldine’s troubles) (Coleridge 539, 559). The narrator also draws attention to

Geraldine's snakelike qualities when he says her eyes "shrunk up to" the size of "a serpent's eye" (Coleridge 573).

Geraldine can also be identified as a vampire due to other identities she occupies. I will explore these identities' relationship to vampirism and how they characterize Geraldine both as a vampire and as queer.

Vampire Identity and Queer Identity

The vampire, as Max Fincher points out in *Queering Gothic in the Romantic Age*, provides a fascinating parallel to queer identities because of the vampire's ability to pass as human. In Fincher's words, the vampire represents "how the queer body is both visible and invisible" (Fincher 141). Fincher, in his book, also claims that there exists a "semantic coupling of monstrosity with homosexuality" and "queer resonances" in "the vampire subgenre" (Fincher 6).

However, the vampire parallels queer identity due its characterization as the other. In literature, vampires have been portrayed as alien, ill, heretical, and sexually deviant. All of these othering categories have been applied to queer identities. Carmilla and Geraldine, as well as Christabel and Laura at certain points, are depicted as the other due to their vampirism. By analyzing intersection of the vampire and the queer in the categories of alienation, disease, religion, and sexual deviancy, I can examine how their vampirism codes for queer identity in *Carmilla* and "Christabel."

Vampires, like the queer population, have been depicted as alien and outsiders to communities. Vampires, in particular, are often alienated from communities through their national, racial, or ethnic origin. Voltaire notes that the popularity of the vampire peaked during the Enlightenment, writing that "nothing was spoken of but Vampires from 1730

to 1735” (Ruickbie 75). As enlightenment thinkers’ pursuit of knowledge resulted in a new understanding of cultures outside of Western Europe, the vampire represented a new “experience” of “foreignness between cultures” (Ruther 91). In many cases, the vampire represented the “miscomprehension” (Ruther 92) and fear of outside ethnicities, cultures, and nationalities. Stoker’s *Dracula*, the most famous of nineteenth-century vampire texts, presents an alienation of and anxiety about the foreign other. Stoker paints Count Dracula painted as racially, ethnically, and nationally other, and conflates the Count’s otherness with his vampiric identity. *Carmilla* and “Christabel” are no different: anxiety about the foreign exists in these texts as well.

While *Carmilla* takes place in Styria, Austria, the lens through which the reader sees the story is notably English. Laura, our narrator, despite her own Austrian roots, takes it upon herself to establish her Englishness early in the first chapter of the novella: “My father is English, and I bear an English name, although I never saw England” (Le Fanu 4). Laura distances herself from her Austrian heritage, and thus tries to de-alienate herself. Carmilla, our vampire, is contrarily very Austrian, coming from the same old Austrian family as Laura’s Austrian mother, the “ancient” Karnsteins (Le Fanu 40). Le Fanu ensures that the moment Carmilla’s relation to the Karnsteins is discovered is also a moment that hints to the reader that Carmilla is a vampire. The painting of Countess Mircalla Karnstein from 1698 is in fact a painting of Carmilla, demonstrating Carmilla’s eternal youth and immortality to the audience (Le Fanu 39). By conflating the vampire

and the foreign⁷ in this moment of dual discovery, Le Fanu reinforces the trope of the outsider vampire.

Coleridge, like Le Fanu does with Carmilla after him, depicts Geraldine as foreign. The ethnic othering of Geraldine indicates that she, too, falls into the mythology of the foreign vampire. When Geraldine first emerges from the woods, Coleridge's narrator hints that there is something different about her: he describes Geraldine's appearance as both "beautiful" and "frightful" and says Geraldine is a "lady strange" (Coleridge 66, 64, 69). The narrator is more explicit about Geraldine's foreign appearance when he says that she appeared, to Christabel, "like a lady of a far countrée" (Coleridge 219). Even Geraldine's lie that she is the daughter of Lord Roland de Vaux others her in the sense of her nationality, as "de Vaux" is a notably French or Norman name (Coleridge 395).

Le Fanu's and Coleridge's vampires, like other vampires, share an aversion to Christian religious authority and iconography. Le Fanu and Coleridge's vampires are repulsed and weakened by religious iconography and ceremony: Carmilla believes the Christian funeral hymn she and Laura overhear to be "discordant" (Le Fanu 51), and Geraldine "sinks" to the floor at the sight of a lamp adorned with a silver angel (Coleridge 184). Historically, vampires have always been outsiders to the church: Pope Benedict XIV in the mid eighteenth century denounced writings about vampires, believing that the "vampire's body" intruded "on the sphere of the saintly through incorruptibility" (Ruickbie 82). The vampire's bodily subversion and corruption of the

⁷ In light of the foreign identity of the vampire, scholars such as René Fox have examined the role of Anglo-Irish identity in *Carmilla*. Fox argues that Carmilla's defiance of "any rigidly binary system" is linked to a "manic...anxiety" about the liminality of Anglo-Irish identity (Fox 112).

sacred threatens religious orthodoxy. Geraldine is shown to have regenerative powers, appearing healthier and “fairer” the next morning than the night previous (Coleridge 365). Similarly, Carmilla is revealed to be the Countess Mircalla, and has not aged since her portrait in 1698 (Le Fanu 39). Le Fanu and Coleridge’s vampires are an affront to religion, profane the human body, the creature made in God’s image (Genesis 1:27) by preserving it through malicious forces.

Queer identity, like vampire identity, shares a historically negative relationship with the church. Even the term “sodomy,” historically often applied to homosexual relations in the nineteenth century, comes from the “wicked and corrupt” Sodom of biblical lore (Sullivan 3). More broadly, however, as Nikki Sullivan writes in *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*, sodomy was used to describe any sexual relation that did not “have procreation as [its] aim,” sinful since procreation is a cornerstone of Christian sexual relations (Sullivan 3). Vampires also avoid procreation, and in the case of *Carmilla* and “Christabel,” even play a mocking, perverted maternal role that accentuates their sexuality and inability to procreate. The “lost mother” is a tradition of Gothic literature, and as such, mother figures are absent in *Carmilla* and “Christabel” (Haggerty 30). Carmilla and Geraldine occupy these empty roles and profane motherhood. In *Carmilla*, Laura mentions that Carmilla first appears to her in her nursery when she is a child (Le Fanu 6). Carmilla draws Laura into a maternal embrace that “delightfully [soothes]” the young Laura (Le Fanu 7). Like Carmilla, Geraldine also occupies and perverts the maternal. In “Christabel,” Geraldine actively “[bids]” the spirit of Christabel’s mother to “flee” (Coleridge 205), and then later fills the maternal role herself when she holds Christabel “as a mother with her child” (Coleridge 301). The vampiric

corruption of the maternal role is an affront to the sacredness of motherhood, procreation, and the human body, a corruption that the queer community has been accused of sharing in.

Le Fanu and Coleridge other their vampires not only ethnically and religiously, but also through their depiction of them as diseased. In *The Universal Vampire*, Edward O. Keith suggests that “vampire...myths developed from a fear of...disease” (Keith 62), and Clemens Ruthner writes that “vampirism is driven by a principle of contagion” (Ruthner 92). The published early-eighteenth century reports of vampire activity in Serbian villages were notably medical in nature: as the Marquis d’Argens wrote in 1739, the “vampire” is rooted in a “pathologically ‘disturbed’ imagination” (Ruthner 95).

“Christabel” and *Carmilla* belong to this “pathologically ‘disturbed’ imagination.” In “Christabel,” the reader sees that Geraldine’s presence affects Christabel’s physical health. After spending the night with Geraldine, Christabel is notably unwell the next morning: twice the narrator describes her as being in a “dizzy trance” (Coleridge 577), and she is depicted as “stumbling on unsteady ground” (Coleridge 578). The unwell Christabel is also the victim of contagion. Christabel, after her night with Geraldine, is depicted as snakelike by the narrator, which is notable considering Bard Bracy explicitly compares Geraldine to a “bright green snake” (Coleridge 537). This contagion of snakelike attributes is embodied in one particular exchange: when Geraldine glances at Christabel with her “serpent’s [eyes]” (Coleridge 573), Christabel “[hisses]” back at her, and “[imitates]” Geraldine’s “look of dull and treacherous hate” (Coleridge 593-594).

Le Fanu weaves contagion and disease into *Carmilla*. Laura immediately compares the death of the women in the village (which are presumably Carmilla's doing) to "a plague or fever" (Le Fanu 33). This plague, according to a hunchbacked villager, is believed to be the doings of the "oupire" (another word for vampire) (Le Fanu 34 n.7). Carmilla then tells Laura that she has had the same "illness" that the women in the village are suffering from (Le Fanu 35). Vampirism is not only associated with illness in *Carmilla*, but also with contagion. As the oft-"languid" (Le Fanu 27) Carmilla spends more time with Laura, Laura begins to emulate some of that "languor" (Le Fanu 52) as she grows more and more ill.

Le Fanu adds an element of sexual passion to Laura's illness: in fact, Laura even describes her earliest symptoms as "agreeable" (Le Fanu 51). In the early stages of her illness, Laura believes she is having erotic hallucinations: she feels the sensation of "pleasant...thrill," followed by the "sensation" of "warm lips [kissing]" her, and then her sensation climaxes with her "rapidly" quickening breath and heartbeat (Le Fanu 52). These erotic, orgasmic hallucinations are, in actuality, not hallucinations at all, but the effects of Carmilla visiting Laura at night. In "Dracula Anticipated," Paul E.H. Davis discusses Le Fanu's mingling of illness and eroticism. Davis writes that "Carmilla's blood is doubly diseased," as "it imparts both death and sexual deviance" (Davis 106).

Sexual deviance is just as, if not more, intrinsic to vampire identity as disease and alienation. In particular, sexual deviance from heterosexual norms shares a long history with the vampire, especially female vampires. In her article "Women with Bite," Nancy Schumann examines how the "alternative [world] and [way] of life" of the "horror and fantasy genres" have allowed for the "vampires" to become an inherently sexually

deviant figure (Schumann 110). In Schumann's eyes, female vampires "[live] beyond social borders" (Schumann 110).

Female vampires and sexual deviancy have been interwoven in a way that can be traced back to history's oldest vampires (Tumini 122). The succubus, thought to be the "[ancestor] of the female vampire," was known for her shirking of feminine submissiveness and rejection of motherhood via infanticide, as seen in Babylonian and Sumerian myths about the monstrous Lilith, who adopted a queer sexuality through the masculine act of penetrating and draining men of their blood and through rejecting feminine maternal instincts by brutally killing infants (Tumini 122) (Schumann 110). In the words of Schumann, Lilith and the succubus represent "the earliest combinations of vampirism and sexuality" (Schumann 112).

The vampires of "Christabel" and *Carmilla* are no different from Lilith in their embracing of sexuality. In particular, Carmilla and Geraldine, our vampiresses, have subversive sexualities intricately woven with their vampire identities, to the point where their sexual and vampiric pursuits overlap.

In "Christabel," Geraldine's sexual appeal to Christabel is what facilitates Geraldine's vampiric pursuit. Even before the reader learns of Geraldine's "[exceeding]" beauty and striking presence (Coleridge 66), Coleridge frames our and Christabel's perception of Geraldine through a sexual lens. Before the readers see Geraldine for the first time, Coleridge establishes Geraldine as an intangible sexual force, as Coleridge's first mention of Geraldine does not indicate she is a person, but describes Geraldine as a disembodied and powerful "[moan]" (Coleridge 41). Even when the reader does see Geraldine for the first time, it is important to note that the details of Geraldine's

presence—her “bare” neck and arms (Coleridge 22), bejeweled hair, and seductive, “faint and sweet” voice— all exude sexual energy (Coleridge 63). Christabel herself seems to absorb this sexual energy when she enthusiastically brings Geraldine to her room, and “[unrobes]” at Geraldine’s request (Coleridge 227). Coleridge crafts his description of Geraldine undressing before Christabel as a deliberate and overtly sensual moment. Everything, from Geraldine’s “bow” under the lamplight, to her “drawing...breath,” to her unbinding of “the cincture from beneath her breast” is meticulously described in a voyeuristic manner (Coleridge 240-244). Coleridge’s purposeful sexualizing of Geraldine’s undressing establishes her as a sexual being.

Carmilla, like Geraldine, has a strong sexuality, specifically homosexuality, that is conflated with her othered, vampire identity. The reader learns that Carmilla’s sexual feelings for Laura are not situational. Le Fanu establishes, through General Spielsdorf’s account of Bertha’s fate, that Carmilla’s homosexual feelings are a part of her greater pattern of vampiric predation, and thus a part of her identity. Spielsdorf recounts how Carmilla, upon meeting Bertha at a masquerade ball, gained Bertha’s affection through homosexual advances. Carmilla, according to Spielsdorf, “[insinuated] very prettily her admiration of [Bertha’s] beauty” and was met with responsive “attraction” from Bertha (Le Fanu 71). Carmilla’s sexuality is not only apparent in her actions. Laura and Le Fanu’s language gives Carmilla a sexual essence, inserting her sexuality into her very being. Laura says that on more than one occasion, Carmilla exudes an “overpowering” “ardour of love” (Le Fanu 30). Laura says Carmilla often “[blushes] softly,” breathes “with tumultuous respiration,” and kisses Laura’s cheek with “hot lips” (Le Fanu 30). Carmilla herself establishes her sexuality as part of her identity when she says to Laura

that she “cannot help” her sexual advances, and through her actions she “obeys [an] irresistible law” (Le Fanu 29). Critic Tamar Heller writes that here, Carmilla is “trying to convince her friend that female sexuality and homoeroticism are natural” (Heller 85). In other words, Carmilla attributes her homosexuality to something instinctual, something in her very nature—which is not unlike how she describes vampirism. Carmilla calls the illness that is affecting the village, which is in fact not illness, but the effects of her own vampire predation, “natural” and “[proceeding] from nature” (Le Fanu 36). Just like her sexuality obeys an “irresistible law,” Carmilla tells Laura that her vampirism has put her “under vows” (Le Fanu 44).

Geraldine and Carmilla’s sexuality is conflated with their vampire identity, as sexuality appears to be as intrinsic to their being as their species. However, Geraldine and Carmilla’s gender is also queered by their vampiric identity. As Max Fincher notes, “androgyny lies in the tradition of the vampiric Incubus-Succubus” (Fincher 94). In *Carmilla*, Laura wonders if Carmilla is a “boyish lover” in disguise, as in her eyes, Carmilla evokes some “masculine gallantry” (Le Fanu 30). As mentioned earlier, critical reactions to “Christabel” often raised the question of whether or not Geraldine was male (Fulford 105).

Geraldine and Carmilla’s sexuality and gender is also queered via their perversion and rejection of motherhood. Motherhood was essential to female identity in the nineteenth century (Signorotti 617), and Geraldine and Carmilla’s rejection of maternal instincts can be seen as an embracing of “transgressive” desires (Signorotti 618). The incestuous sexualization of a mother-daughter relationship is a recurrent theme of the Gothic, and is employed by both Le Fanu and Coleridge to further other their vampires

(Haggerty 15). Carmilla's "attack on Laura's breast" may evoke maternal images of breastfeeding, but as Elizabeth Signorotti points out, in truth the attack is a perversion of motherhood: "the homoerotic overtones of the ensuing attack on Laura's breast eclipse the initial mother/child dynamic" (Signorotti 612). Similarly, although Geraldine and Christabel sleep in an embrace that Coleridge describes as evocative of "a mother with her child" (Coleridge 289), the mother-child implications are overshadowed and perverted by Christabel's physical and sexual pleasure at being in Geraldine's arms (as seen in Christabel's "tingling" blood flow and "vision sweet" [Coleridge 313, 314]).

Fascinatingly, although Geraldine and Carmilla are the vampiric figures of the poem and novella, their vampirism is not static. Their vampirism moves and is shared with Christabel and Laura, who themselves take on some of the qualities of their vampiric outsider. As Fincher writes concerning "Christabel,"

Geraldine's gaze seduces Christabel, but perhaps more tellingly or how we might read same-sex desire in other ways, Christabel imitates [Geraldine]... [and that] imitation...may also be a discrete form of love under the guise of hero-worship or idolizing another. (Fincher 145)

That Christabel takes on some of Geraldine's vampiric qualities indicates that she is sharing in queer identity. In *Carmilla*, Laura takes on some of Carmilla's qualities as well, namely, her "languor" and ill health (Le Fanu 52). Vampire identity, in this sense, is not fixed, but able to move between and be shared by individuals. Thus, vampire identity does not only queer Geraldine and Carmilla, but proto-vampires such as Christabel and Laura as well. Christabel and Laura at times occupy some of the previously discussed facets of vampire identity. For example, Christabel, like the androgenized female

vampire, is masculinized due to her physical “might” (Coleridge 125), and, Laura, like the oft-alienated vampire, is actually an outsider to her community due to her Englishness (Le Fanu 4).

Conclusion to Part II

Vampire identity and the queer identity have been othered in similar ways throughout their history, and their shared history and “semantic coupling” allows one identity to indicate the other (Fincher 6). However, as the relationship between the vampire, the Gothic, and the queer is long established, it is easy to identify the general queerness of *Carmilla* and “Christabel” (Fincher 141). It is far more difficult to demonstrate that these texts are configurations of pre-twentieth century lesbian identities. Now that I have established *Carmilla* and “Christabel” as queer texts, I can examine how these texts are not only queer, but specifically lesbian texts belonging to a greater lesbian literary tradition.

Part III: “Christabel,” Carmilla, and Lesbianism

Throughout this thesis, I have discussed the queer identities of the main female characters in Coleridge’s “Christabel” and Le Fanu’s *Carmilla*. By accepting the existence of queer identities before the twentieth century, I have avoided the “[paralyzing]” effect of supposed anachronism (Summers 3), and I have demonstrated that Christabel, Geraldine, Laura, and Carmilla indeed have queer identities. By discussing the agency afforded to them by the Coleridge and Le Fanu, respectively, I have devictimized Laura and Christabel, establishing them as queer agents rather than victims of queerness. By synthesizing vampirism and queer identity, I have established that Geraldine and Carmilla do not merely act queer, but appear to be queer characters. By pointing out the shared vampirism of these four women, I have established that not only do these women have queer identities, but they participate in queer relationships.

However, I will further fight what Claude Summers calls the “tyranny” of anachronism (Summers 3) by claiming Le Fanu’s and Coleridge’s characters not only can be identified as queer, but specifically as lesbian. As Terry Castle writes in *The Apparitional Lesbian*, despite the prevalence of the aforementioned ““no lesbians before 1900’ theory,” one cannot “assume” that before 1900, women “never had access” to “writing dealing with lesbianism” (Castle 9). Castle, here, is talking about the “satirical” and “pornographic” lesbian texts created by men before the twentieth century (Castle 9). Yet, there did exist, beyond the “flourishing popular tradition” of lesbian pornography, a tradition of lesbian literature written by lesbian authors.

My method in establishing “Christabel” and *Carmilla* as lesbian texts will be two-pronged: I will first explore how “Christabel” and *Carmilla* participate in some of the

tropes of the lesbian literary tradition that came before them. I will then explore current and modern reception of both texts, to demonstrate how these texts, in the eyes of modern audiences, have come to be known as lesbian literature. I hope that my pulling together of historical contextualization and analysis of modern reception will demonstrate that neither critical method must exclude the other.

“Christabel,” *Carmilla*, and the Lesbian Literary Canon

If one were to argue for the existence of a pre-1900 lesbian literary canon, said canon would include the poetry of lesbian writers from all over the globe,⁸ including English writers such as Katherine Philips (1631-1664), Aphra Behn (1640-1689), and Anna Seward (1747-1809).

These writers’ poems comprise the lesbian literary precedent to “Christabel” and *Carmilla*, and utilize a number of similar themes and tropes. These themes and tropes include natural and pastoral imagery, configurations of “hermaphroditic perfection” (Summers 6), and appropriated heterosexual languages of desire through “ventriloquized male [voices] and...verbal cross-dressing” (Andreadis, “Re-Configuring Early Modern Friendship,” 526). Moreover, to familiarize what could be to general audiences at the time as an alienating sort of desire, these authors employ well-known, often gendered social constructions of affection, such as “courtly love” (Summers 6) and romantic friendship.

⁸ Ancient Greek Poet Sappho (c. 630-570 BCE) and Mexican nun Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz (c. 1648-1965) are lesbian writers who employ in their works some of the tropes mentioned in this section, such as the use of natural imagery and the appropriation of masculinity. However, I have chosen to retain my focus on British literature, and thus will be looking at the works of British lesbian writers Katherine Philips, Aphra Behn, and Anna Seward.

Many of these tropes, constructs, and languages are present throughout *Christabel* and *Carmilla*. Specifically, I will focus on how depictions of the natural world and natural imagery, hermaphroditic language and the fluidity of gender identity,⁹ the ineffectuality of male figures, and the romantic friendship trope indicate lesbianism. Lesbian literature employs these specific tropes as a means of communicating lesbianism at a time when lesbianism had no language to describe itself, as lesbianism was “[ghosted] and [occluded]” by society (Castle 104). These aforementioned tropes are not only present in *Carmilla* and “*Christabel*,” but they communicate lesbianism in these texts.

The Natural World as a Familiarizing and Isolating Force

In her analysis of Christina Rossetti’s “*Goblin Market*” (1862) and “*An Apple-Picking*” (1862), Serena Trowbridge argues that the natural world presents a “less controlled” space that “[escapes]” the “confinement” of social expectations for women (Trowbridge 126). This organic sphere, in Trowbridge’s eyes, gives women more “opportunities” than the “domestic sphere” (Trowbridge 125). In lesbian literature, we see nature configured as a place that allows women to be liberated from social constraints. As such, the outdoor space becomes a place where lesbian desire can flourish.

⁹ While today, gender identity and sexual identity are perceived as distinct, they were not perceived as distinct for much of history. The works of sexologists Sigmund Freud and Richard von Kraft-Ebing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries conflate sexuality and gender identity. In Freud’s *The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman* (1920), Freud argues that homosexuality is a manifestation of “psychical hermaphroditism” and that female homosexuality is a “masculine type of love” (Freud 167, 171). Thus, in these pre-twentieth century texts, masculine gender identity can be seen as a tool used to depict female homosexuality. To acknowledge one of the major themes of this thesis, I do not think it would be anachronistic for one to look for a gender fluidity in queer works as an indicator of transgender identities in addition to indicators of homosexual identities. However, for my purposes, I will note that themes of “hermaphroditism” may be able to indicate sexual as well as gender identities.

Romantic-era poet Anna Seward employs nature as a tool to depict lesbian desire in her eighteenth-century love poem “Elegy.” Seward opens her poem with the image herself tracing her beloved’s, Honora’s, name into the “sparkling sand” (Seward 1). By carving her name into nature, she consigns Honora and her lesbian love for her to a natural context. This context allows Seward to isolate her relationship from civilization, and thus the social constructs imposed upon lesbians. Seward emphasizes this isolation from society when she notes that the only forces that affect Honora are those that are natural and divine: “Time” (Seward 9), “Oblivion” (Seward 10), “Nature” (Seward 11), “Love” and “the Muse” (Seward 13). Natural and divine forces, not social expectations and constructs, shape Honora.

While placing her love poem in an outdoor context allows Seward to isolate her love, it is important to note that she is simultaneously placing her lesbian desire in a moral context. As Herbert Walter Piper notes, Seward’s Romantic contemporaries perceived the natural space as divine and “moral” (Piper 9-10). By placing lesbianism in a divine and moral space, Seward de-alienates and legitimizes lesbian desire. Seward even acknowledges “Nature” as some sort of divine force, that made Honora in “her” image by “[writing] her charms upon [her face]” (Seward 5). Thus, Seward moves beyond mere contextualization by allowing nature to claim Honora as its own. Seward highlights this organic ownership of Honora when her name in the sand becomes a “prize” won by the “envious waves” (Seward 4). As the object of Seward’s love is one of divine nature’s cherished creatures, Seward’s attraction to her is divine.

Like Seward does in “Elegy,” Coleridge and Le Fanu draw much attention to the organic worlds of “Christabel” and *Carmilla* in order to simultaneously isolate and exalt

lesbian desire. The forests that surround Coleridge's and Le Fanu's respective isolated castle settings receive detailed descriptions that allow nature to shape readers' perspective of their characters' relationships. Natural imagery is a staple of Gothic literature, so it is no surprise that Le Fanu's Gothic novella and Coleridge's Gothic parody¹⁰ incorporate heavy natural imagery. The Gothic natural space, however, is a setting conducive to sexual liberation. The Gothic "setting," in the words of Piper, represents an "unlocalized world" free of "realism"—essentially, the "less controlled" environment Trowbridge describes (Piper 43, 80).

In *Carmilla*, Le Fanu's descriptions of the "solitary" backdrop and "forest vista" of his world bleed into the narrative, even at crucial points in *Carmilla*'s plot: while Laura is reading Spielsdorf's letter that relays Bertha's death, Le Fanu enchants us with descriptions of the "noble trees" and "fading crimson sky" (Le Fanu 11). Similarly, while Christabel sits beneath a tree, praying for her lover abroad, the narrator goes into great detail about the oak tree, noting the "moss and rarest mistletoe" on its trunk (Coleridge 34). Le Fanu's emphasis on the lonely forest surrounding Laura's castle allows Le Fanu to isolate the characters and the narrative. Laura's "picturesque," overgrown family estate is a "lonely place," "seven...miles" away from "the nearest inhabited village" (Le Fanu 12). This rural space's separation from civilization symbolizes a separation from social expectations and constructions: and, specifically, from the social pressures of heteronormativity. *Carmilla* and Laura's relationship blossoms in a timeless, natural world. Much like in the pastoral world constructed by Katherine Philips, *Carmilla* and

¹⁰ As mentioned in the introduction, Coleridge's detestation of the Gothic has led scholars such as Andrew Cooper in his "Who's Afraid of the Mastiff Bitch? Gothic Parody and Original Sin in *Christabel*," to question whether or not Coleridge's use of Gothic convention was his attempt at "humor" and satire (Cooper, Andrew, 82).

Laura exist in a separated, anarchic space, where they can transcend and defy social configurations of sexuality.

While Le Fanu's focus on the natural world is isolating, it is simultaneously familiar. In many ways, it is the base realm that all humanity is acquainted with. By placing Laura and Carmilla in a known context, Le Fanu makes their relationship more accessible, and even more acceptable. That an organic space is where Carmilla and Laura's relationship can grow may also signify that there is something inherently natural about their relationship. Carmilla is not a perfectly natural creature, however: her languid mannerisms and "exhaustion" during her and Laura's walks through the forest may suggest that at times, nature does not agree with her (Le Fanu 27). However, Carmilla's "state of health" does not always result in a return to the domestic sphere; she is satisfied sitting on "the benches that were placed...among the trees," demonstrating that Carmilla takes no issue with the organic itself (Le Fanu 30). Carmilla even proclaims that she has a "wild heart" in one of her declarations of love to Laura (Le Fanu 29). Thus, Carmilla and Laura's lesbianism is not an affront to nature; rather, it is a part of it.

Coleridge incorporates similarly powerful natural elements into "Christabel." The forest is where Christabel meets Geraldine for the first time. Just as Christabel "kneels beneath the huge oak tree" of the wood a "furlong" from her castle, she hears Geraldine's "[moan]" (Coleridge 25-39), and soon after, Geraldine, the "damsel bright" (Coleridge 58), emerges from the forest. Coleridge, like Le Fanu, draws attention to the rural and organic. Before the reader even meets the titular character, Coleridge describes the coo of the owls, the clouds "spread" in the sky (Coleridge 16), and the full moon (Coleridge 1-20). Christabel mistakes Geraldine's moan for the "wind" (Coleridge 44), identifying her

with a natural element, perhaps even establishing that Geraldine's sexual identity is indeed natural. Coleridge reiterates the dichotomy between the natural and civilized worlds when Geraldine finds herself unable to cross the threshold into Christabel's castle without Christabel's assistance. While Christabel and Geraldine were able to interact freely outside, the interior of Christabel's home represents the society that would reject Geraldine's lesbianism. Bard Bracy's dream, which depicts Christabel and Geraldine as animals (specifically, a dove and a snake) further cements that they belong to a natural world, where they can find acceptance in their isolation from society (Coleridge 533-556). Bard Bracy's dream is not a perfect example of the natural world as a liberating and accepting space: his dream is a violent depiction of nature's more predatory aspects, as it depicts the snake strangling the dove (Coleridge 542). However, Piper notes that Coleridge personally perceived the divine in "the beauty of nature," and as such, the placement of Geraldine and Christabel's meeting in a divine space could indicate that their relationship more than something purely sinful, and may even be something "sublime" (Elfenbein 177). Coleridge's own recognition of the divinity of the natural space breaks through his satirical Gothic, allowing natural imagery to move beyond parody and become the "less controlled" and legitimizing space where lesbianism can occur.

"Hermaphroditic Perfection"

Seventeenth-century lesbian writer Aphra Behn plays with "hermaphroditic perfection" in her short 1688 love poem "To the Fair Clarinda, Who Made Love to Me, Imagin'd More Than Woman." Behn masculinizes the poem's subject, the "lovely Maid" (Behn 1) in order to express her desire. Behn transforms the "lovely Maid" into the less

“Feminine” “Lovely Charming Youth” (Behn 4). The use of the masculine to express lesbian desire is demonstrated when Behn says that while it is the “the Manly part” of her lover that expresses desire and “[pleads],” (Behn 20) it is her lover’s “Image of the Maid,” or feminine appearance, that “tempts” Behn (Behn 22). In the absence of a lesbian language for desire, Behn uses the familiar heterosexual language of the masculine desiring the feminine to express sexual desire; however, she simultaneously asserts that she is attracted to her lover not because she is male, but because she is a “lovely Maid” (Behn 1).

Le Fanu, like Behn, uses androgyny and masculinizing the feminine as tools to depict lesbian desire. Laura is not equipped with a language to express lesbian desire, and thus, must describe her and Carmilla’s relationship in heterosexual terms. Laura achieves this heterosexual framing of her lesbian desire by masculinizing Carmilla. While trying to interpret Carmilla’s behavior (notably, after admitting to the reader that she finds Carmilla’s advances “pleasurable” [Le Fanu 29]), Laura wonders if Carmilla is a “boyish lover” in disguise (Le Fanu 30). However, just as Behn reaffirms the femininity of her androgenized lover, Laura notes that that her “hypothesis” concerning Carmilla’s gender is undermined by Carmilla’s “girlish” “ways” (Le Fanu 30). By asserting Carmilla’s femininity, Le Fanu makes it clear that the masculinizing of Carmilla was merely a tool used by Laura to explain the lesbian attraction that existed between her and the vampire. The discussion of Carmilla’s gender does not make Laura and Carmilla’s relationships less lesbian. Rather, Le Fanu’s masculinizing of Carmilla is used to appropriate heterosexual attraction for the sake of explaining lesbian attraction.

The masculinizing of a female character to explain lesbianism occurs in “Christabel” as well: however, it is Christabel, more than Geraldine, who is masculinized. The most Coleridge gives us in the way of a masculine Geraldine is that she is, at one point, described as “tall” (Coleridge 381). Christabel’s masculinity is much more overt. She is depicted as a knightly hero, in that she finds the “forlorn” “maid” (Coleridge 80) Geraldine, and shelters her from the (most likely fabricated) threat of “warriors” (Coleridge 79). Christabel’s carrying of Geraldine over the threshold puts Christabel in a masculine role, evoking a familiar image of a hero carrying his female lover. Christabel also displays a “might” (Coleridge 125) and a physical strength that would not be attributed to a “gentle maid” (Coleridge 467) such as Christabel. By depicting Christabel as masculine, Coleridge heterosexualizes their relationship, thus giving the reader a language through which to understand the women’s mutual attraction.

While Geraldine, according to Coleridge himself (Fulford 105), is not masculinized in “Christabel,” she was masculinized, as mentioned previously in this thesis, in critical reception of “Christabel.” Critics and writers from publications including *The Champion* and *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* attempted to rationalize the sexual tension of “Christabel” in a familiar heterosexual context, by proposing that Geraldine may have been a male in disguise (Lapp 25). Critical reception of Geraldine represents a real-world application of the heterosexualization of the lesbian. Critics, without a language with which to describe what Hazlitt said was “at the bottom of [Coleridge’s] subject” (Hazlitt 349) resort to a familiar, heterosexual context in which to analyze Christabel and Geraldine’s lesbianism.

Ineffectual Male Figures

A common trope of texts containing male relationships in literature—as pointed out by Eve Sedgwick in *Between Men*—is a prominent female figure, through whom men can express their “male homosocial desire” and sometimes, homosexuality (Sedgwick 2). Sedgwick argues that through triangulating this female figure men can maintain a façade of “obligatory heterosexuality” demanded by “male-dominated kinship systems” (Sedgwick 16, 3).

The triangulation of female figures by homosexual men can be seen in homoerotic vampire literature throughout the nineteenth century. In Polidori’s *The Vampyre*, Aubrey and Lord Ruthven’s homosexual desire is triangulated through not one, but two female figures: the Greek beauty Ianthe and Aubrey’s unnamed sister, both of whom are loved by Aubrey and targeted by Lord Ruthven. In Stoker’s *Dracula*, the homoerotic tension between Dracula and Jonathan Harker is first filtered through the three mysterious women in Dracula’s castle, and then later, through Harker’s wife Mina, whom Dracula intends to make his victim.

However, while Sedgwick emphasizes the importance of female triangulation in homosexual relationships, she insinuates that the triangulation of a male figure would not be needed in lesbian literature. The “obligatory heterosexuality” that exists between men, in her eyes, is absent from “the continuum between ‘women loving women’” (Sedgwick 3). In “Christabel” and *Carmilla*, while prominent male characters do exist, they are absent from the texts’ lesbian relationships, and are not centered in the relationships as triangulating forces.

While men do not triangulate lesbian desire in “Christabel” and *Carmilla*, they facilitate lesbian desire in a different way. The men of these texts are often oblivious, ineffectual, and completely unable to insert themselves into the texts’ lesbian relationship. Their inability to assert their patriarchal dominance to stop the women’s relationships is what facilitates lesbianism. In “Christabel,” Sir Leoline is either absent or oblivious to the nature of Geraldine and Carmilla’s relationship, and his failure to intervene or understand the relationship is what allows it to continue. While the men of *Carmilla* do actively attempt to end Carmilla and Laura’s relationship, they are ineffectual and fail to bring the relationship to a close. They are unable to eliminate Laura’s desire for Carmilla, and unable to entirely eliminate Carmilla herself. Their failures, like Leoline’s, allow Carmilla and Laura’s relationship to thrive.

Aphra Behn employs the ineffectualness of a male figure in her love poem “To My Lady Morland at Tunbridge,” a declaration of love to Lady Morland. Behn focuses a portion of her poem on Amyntas, the man whom she claims was once her “slave” (here meaning her former lover) (Behn 43), but who now belongs to Lady Morland, called Cloris in the poem. Behn emphasizes the unworthiness of Amyntas, calling him a “faithless swain” (Behn 35) not “deserving” (Behn 41) of Cloris’s attentions. Behn not only disparages Amyntas, but depicts Amyntas as a more ambivalent figure, able to “dismiss” the “fetters” of love whenever “he [pleases]” (Behn 44-45). Through her disparagement of Amyntas and her depiction of him as a figure who is hesitant and undecided in love, Behn suggests that he is a transient figure easily removed, and a figure unable to prevent Behn’s own “Heart” and “Soul” from loving Cloris (Behn 49-50).

Thus, while Behn incorporates a male figure prominently into her poem, he is unable to prevent her love for Cloris, and his unworthiness only fuels Behn's lesbian desire.

Like Behn's "To the Lady Morland," "Christabel" contains mention of a male lover, Christabel's "betrothed knight" (Coleridge 28). However, the lover in "Christabel" is said to be "far away" (Coleridge 32) and is notably absent from the poem, and thus, like Amyntas, this lover is unable to prevent lesbian attraction. As "Christabel" is unfinished, it is possible that the knight was planned to return¹¹—however, in the poem's current fragmented state, the knightly lover of Christabel remains ineffectual.

"Christabel" contains a number of ineffectual male figures, including Coleridge's supposedly male narrator, and Sir Leoline. I have already discussed how the obliviousness of Coleridge's male narrator, and how the inadequacy of his perception encourages readers to interpret Geraldine and Christabel's actions for themselves. Sir Leoline's obliviousness to the events of the night previous also forces readers to rely on their own interpretation of Geraldine and Christabel's relationship. Additionally, Leoline's initial absence, much like the knightly lover's absence, is what allows for Geraldine and Christabel's night together to occur. When Sir Leoline does appear in the poem, his obliviousness facilitates Geraldine and Christabel's actions more so than the narrator's obliviousness does. The narrator, fearing for the "innocent" and "mild" (Coleridge 612), feels the need to protect and "shield" Christabel from Geraldine (although he does not understand why he feels this way) (Coleridge 570). However,

¹¹ As Duncan Wu notes in *Romanticism: An Anthology*, Coleridge's "most extensive" account of "Christabel"'s possible ending involves Geraldine taking the form of the knightly lover to seduce Christabel further. The knight himself then returns to defeat Geraldine, which would make him an active and affective male figure (Wu, 675 n.45). However, the poem remains unfinished, and in the poem's published state, the knight remains absent.

Leoline views Geraldine as an unthreatening, “beauteous dove,” and sees her as the revival of his youthful love for Lord Roland (Coleridge 417, 557).¹² Leoline’s obliviousness leaves him unable to detect any sort of unacceptable behavior occurring between Geraldine and Christabel. Due to his ignorance, Leoline makes no attempt to end their interactions or punish them for their sexuality, and thus he facilitates the women’s lesbianism.

Bard Bracy is perhaps “Christabel”’s most aware male figure: but he, too, fails to put a stop to Geraldine and Christabel’s lesbianism. Although he shares his ominous dream about a snake, presumably Geraldine, attacking a dove named Christabel (Coleridge 521), Leoline completely misinterprets the dream and believes Geraldine to be the threatened dove (Coleridge 557). However, Bard Bracy does not attempt to correct Leoline or assert his own interpretation of the dream. His failure to do so perpetuates Leoline’s obliviousness and further permits Christabel and Geraldine’s lesbianism.

In *Carmilla*, Le Fanu’s men appear to be far more active in their attempts to end Carmilla and Laura’s relationship. I have briefly discussed before the failures of the patriarchal coalition in *Carmilla* in their hunt for the vampire. General Spielsdorf, Baron Vordenburg, and Laura’s father ally to protect the “poor child” Laura (Le Fanu 88). On the surface, the coalition appears to succeed: Carmilla’s body is staked and beheaded, and “the horrible enemy” is presumably defeated (Le Fanu 90). However, the novella ends with Laura contemplating Carmilla, and imagining Carmilla’s return into her life (Le Fanu 96). Thus, while Le Fanu’s men intended to end and correct for the lesbianism of

¹² Notably, even Christabel herself is not oblivious to Geraldine’s sinister qualities, and tries (but fails due to Geraldine’s silencing spell) to express concern over Geraldine’s true nature. However, Christabel’s concerns are complicated by her own demonstration of agency and queer identity.

Laura and Carmilla, their failure to end Laura's lingering thoughts allows Laura's lesbian desire to live on.

Romantic Friendships

When I evoke the trope of "romantic friendship," I evoke a tradition of platonic same-sex relations dating back to the ancient Greeks and Romans. In her introduction to *Chloe Plus Olivia*, Lillian Faderman notes that Renaissance thinkers such as Michel de Montaigne would come to see the man-to-man relationships of the Greeks and Romans as more "intimate, important, and passionate" than heterosexual relationships (Faderman, "Introduction," 3). This male construction of platonic relationships would later evolve into female romantic friendship. These passionate, intimate relationships that developed between women remained non-threatening to patriarchal structures and heterosexuality for multiple reasons. For one, romantic friendships were perceived as the "most important relationship" of young women's lives, because they served as an outlet for women's affection. They also served as a tool of the patriarchy in that they were perceived as "rehearsal" for marriage, until women found a suitable husband (Faderman, "Introduction," 4-5).

However, these intimate relationships also served as a safe façade that protected female-to-female affection from being seen in the same light as sodomy. Romantic friendship, as Harriette Andreadis points out, is sometimes used, as a term to describe relations between women before "the historical moment in the twentieth century in which lesbians became self-identified" (Andreadis, "The Sapphic-Platonics of Katherine Philips, 1632-1664," 58). This definition of romantic friendship, however reinforces the erroneous theory that lesbianism did not emerge as an identity until the late nineteenth or

early twentieth century. As Andreadis says, viewing the relationship in this way “defuses” the lesbian “implications” of pre-twentieth century lesbian literature (Andreadis, “The Sapphic-Platonics...,” 58). Andreadis prefers to view romantic friendship as a trope that “allowed the individual and society to evade” labeling “erotic behavior” as an “unnatural vice” (Andreadis, “The Sapphic-Platonics...,” 60). I will analyze the romantic friendship trope in *Carmilla* and “Christabel” as Andreadis defines it: as a trope that indicates lesbianism, rather than replaces it.

Andreadis views Katherine Philips as the earliest female poet to employ romantic friendship in her poetry (Andreadis, “The Sapphic-Platonics...,” 37). Philips’s short love poem, “To Mrs. Mary Awbrey” (1678), serves an example of the romantic friendship literary trope in action. In “To Mrs. Mary Awbrey,” Philips engages in passionate language as she describes Mary Awbrey, whom she refers to in the poem as her “Friend” (Philips 1). Philips’ overzealous declarations of love, in which she emphatically tells her “Friend” that their love is “sublim’d” and that their souls have “grown” together, reflect the “passionate intensity” that Faderman and Andreadis ascribe to this type of female friendship (Philips 3, Philips 19) (Faderman, “Introduction,” 5-6) (Andreadis “The Sapphic-Platonics...,” 39). Faderman also emphasizes that the love of a romantic friendship, while passionate, is still inherently embodying “purity” (Faderman, “Introduction,” 5). Philips incorporates this sense of purity when she claims that her love for her “Friend,” while powerful enough to defy the forces of “Envy” and “Pride,” is still “Innocent” (Philips 17-18). Andreadis’s configuration of romantic friendship includes an “implicit eroticism” (Andreadis, “The Sapphic-Platonics...,” 42). Philips, while maintaining that her love is “innocent,” navigates an erotic physicality in her poem.

Philips's evocation of her and her lover's shared "[sighs]" and "spent" "breath," as well as the claim that between them no "desire" is "conceal'd," connotes the erotic (Philips 12, 8). Philips's "Mrs. Mary Awbrey" demonstrates how intimate female friendship can be used, as Terry Castle says, as an "instrument" to express and understand romantic love (Castle 93). By emphasizing her and her lover's "Friendship" and innocence, Philips is able to safely express her deep, passionate love through a socially accepted construction of female relations (Philips 6).

The romantic friendship trope can be found at work in *Carmilla*. In *Carmilla*, readers first see evidence of the romantic friendship in General Spielsdorf's letter to Laura's father. However, Spielsdorf is distraught, as his perceived "innocence" of romantic friendship has turned out to be a false perception. He writes that although he saw Carmilla as an "innocence, gaiety, a charming companion" for his ward, Bertha, he comes to see Carmilla as a "monster" (Le Fanu 11). The façade of the innocent, non-threatening romantic friendship shatters before Spielsdorf, and what is left is the monstrous lesbian. Le Fanu's construction of romantic friendship does not replace lesbian—rather, it is one of the guises under which lesbianism hides. Carmilla and Laura construct for themselves an intense friendship. Carmilla, when she first meets Laura and her "dark eyes [gaze] passionately on" her, asks if Laura will be her first "friend" (Le Fanu 24). Le Fanu, like Philips, conflates the innocence of friendship with physical eroticism to construct the façade of romantic friendship. Laura also calls Carmilla her "friend" (Le Fanu 22), even though Carmilla presents "extraordinary manifestations" of passionate love (Le Fanu 41). Carmilla and Laura's romance is underscored by moments of eroticism, such as when Carmilla's "hot lips [travel] along [Laura's] cheek" (Le Fanu

29). By creating a dichotomy between language that connotes platonic friendship and the clear attraction and eroticism between the two women, Le Fanu presents romantic friendship as a masking of lesbianism.

“Christabel,” unlike *Carmilla*, does not take place over a long period of time: it describes one night and the following morning. As such, Coleridge does not have the temporal freedom to develop a similar sense of romantic friendship in his poem. The female romantic friendship is absent, and the closest Coleridge comes is a platonic and homoerotic relationship between Sir Leoline and Lord Roland.¹³ Christabel’s hospitality and her offer to let Geraldine sleep in her room could be read as the proper manners of a friendly, affectionate woman. Still, Christabel’s following demand that “tonight [Geraldine] must sleep with me” reads as extreme sexual forwardness, and a complete bypass of social constructions of female-to-female relationships (Coleridge 117). By failing to fully realize any representation of romantic friendship, however, Coleridge makes his lesbianism more explicit. The façade of friendship that falls apart in front of Spiesldorf and slowly before *Carmilla*’s readers is never there in “Christabel.” Coleridge’s poem is fast-paced, and quickly moves from Geraldine’s appearance to Christabel “[lifting] her up” and carrying her into her home (Coleridge 126). Faderman’s definition of romantic friendship as the placeholder for lesbian identity is disproved by Coleridge’s bypassing of this type of relationship. “Christabel” contradicts the idea that a passionate friendship was the most intimate configuration of female-to-female relationships before 1900. If romantic friendship is not the most intimate configuration of

¹³Leoline describes that the memory of Roland as a “youthful Lord” holds a special place in his “heart,” implying a male platonic and homoerotic relationship (Coleridge 417, 418).

female homosexuality an author can portray before 1900, there is a space for lesbian identity in Coleridge's poem and in all pre-1900 literature.

I have shown that there existed a literary space for lesbianism pre-1900. However, the space for lesbian identity has certainly grown since the nineteenth century. Examining *Carmilla* and "Christabel" in a modern context will further reveal the texts' lesbianism.

Modern Reception and Revival

Carmilla and "Christabel" can be contextualized as lesbian texts due to how the historical lesbian languages and tropes discussed above are configured in the respective works. However, even if these tropes did not exist to anchor *Carmilla* and "Christabel" in lesbian literature, the modern reception of these texts certainly has the ability to do so. Modern queer readers have seen *Carmilla* and "Christabel" as lesbian texts and labeled them that way. As Renée Fox notes in "*Carmilla* and the Politics of Indistinguishability," in regards to *Carmilla*, readers of "today quickly use the term *lesbian* to define the relationship between Carmilla and Laura," despite the numerous historical arguments against lesbianism as a "distinct social type" before the twentieth century (Fox 113). Like the vampire, these texts are eternally living documents, immortalized by modern interpretation.

In "Evil, Skanky, and Kinda Gay," an analysis of lesbianism in the 1990s and early 2000s television action-drama *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Alissa Wilts writes *Carmilla* and "Christabel" are crucial to the "history of lesbian representation" (Wilts 42). Wilts, however, also serves as an example of Fox's note about how quick modern readers can be to identify texts from the past as lesbian. Wilts takes for granted that *Carmilla* and "Christabel" are lesbian texts, without exploring the historical contexts of these texts or identifying anything specifically about them that makes them lesbian.

Rather, Wilts simply relies on her own interpretation of the texts to cement their place in lesbian literary history. That Wilts, without hesitation, draws upon these nineteenth-century texts to evoke the legacy that precedes lesbianism in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* implies that they have a place in lesbian literary canon and relevance to modern portrayals of lesbian relationships. Wilts's scholarly analysis of lesbianism in *Buffy*, however, is only one example of how these texts from the past continue to live on in lesbian discourse.

Carmilla, in particular, has received widespread attention as a lesbian text from the queer community. Valancourt Books, publisher of queer and Gothic fiction, noted that in 2014, *Carmilla* was one of its best-selling texts (Healey). While *Carmilla* has sparked a number of film adaptations throughout the twentieth and twenty-first, the novella has most recently inspired a 2014 webseries. With over 55 million viewers, the series has developed a strong "global fan base of gay and queer millennials" that have responded positively to the "voice...and representation" the series has provided (Cooper). *Carmilla*'s popularity has inspired multiple articles that explore the text on queer and feminist blog and news sites. These articles, such as AfterEllen's "The History Behind 'Carmilla,' the Story of a 19th Century Lesbian Vampire," decisively cite *Carmilla* as a "lesbian" (Piccoli 1). *Carmilla*'s fame within the modern queer community as a lesbian text strengthens its place in the legacy of lesbian literature. While "Christabel" has not received the same level of revival or recognition in the community, it has ridden on *Carmilla*'s coattails, often being examined alongside *Carmilla* in blog articles on feminist websites such as *Paper Droids* and *Autostraddle*.

The current enthusiasm about *Carmilla* and consequently, “Christabel,” confirms that *Carmilla* and “Christabel,” and by extension, other texts from the past, can resonate with the modern queer community, and can be revived and reinterpreted in the contexts of modern queer identities. In *Carmilla* and “Christabel”’s case, modern readers and critics are interpreting these texts as lesbian and as belonging to a legacy of lesbian representation in literature and media. Two hundred years ago, *The Champion* asked of the queer female vampire, “what is she, he or it?” (*The Champion* [May 26, 1816], 166-167). Modern readers have finally found the answer: a lesbian.

Conclusion

While *Carmilla* and “Christabel” are by no means perfect representations of lesbianism, they are lesbian texts. Although Coleridge and Le Fanu are male authors with their own agendas, the characters of these works take on lives of their own through their actions, through the mythological and vampiric context in which they exist, and through their relationship with lesbian literary tropes, and through their revival by the modern queer community.

By combining the modern identity of lesbian with an exploration of these texts’ cultural contexts, I have successfully worked passed the walls of anachronism while still respecting the realities of history. These texts are lesbian not merely because modern audiences are “finding counterparts in the past,” but because even under the magnifying glass of historically accurate and “queer scrutiny,” they have demonstrated their value and place in the lesbian literary tradition (Fradenburg and Freccero viii). When reading *Carmilla* and “Christabel,” modern queer readers should not have to “[renounce]” their personal identities, nor should they ignore reflections of their identities that they see in the texts (Fradenburg and Freccero viii). Reader interpretation, after all, can be far more powerful than author intention. Whatever Coleridge intended for “Christabel,” readers will always be enraptured by Christabel “[reclining]” on her “elbow” to watch Geraldine disrobe (Coleridge 237). Whatever Le Fanu meant the moral message of *Carmilla* to be, readers will always be haunted by that memory of the “playful, languid, beautiful” *Carmilla* approaching Laura’s “drawing-room door” (Le Fanu 96).

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