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Article

‘The Vampire Is Prone to Be Fascinated with an Engrossing Vehemence, Resembling the Passion of Love’; Carmilla, Queer Abjection, and Secular and Religious Modes of Patriarchy

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Abstract

Carmilla, by Sheridan Le Fanu, is a classic of lesbian and queer literature, offering a surprisingly explicit (for its day) and shockingly tender (in its way) dark lesbian romance. Underexamined, however, is the way in which Le Fanu, through *Carmilla*’s persecution and ultimate undoing, examines the symbiotic relationship between secular and religious politics as disciplinary arms of patriarchy, who act violently against queer subjects that are made abject by both men of science and men of God. In this article I examine how Le Fanu presents the dual operating of these forces against *Carmilla*, and how his subtle sympathy for both the vampire and Laura probes at the limitations of these forces’ ability to discipline queerness. I do so with reference to how this same symbiotic relationship remains apparent in our own day, especially regarding the anti-transgender moral panic that regularly dominates our headlines, analysing how *Carmilla* relates to our current moment through policy analysis and contemporary feminist theory. With this context in mind, I trace the ancestry of our current moment to the similar patriarchal crackdowns of Le Fanu’s time and before, exploring how *Carmilla* herself prefigures many of the ways these forces operate against transgender people today.

Keywords: Carmilla, queer, Sheridan Le Fanu, abject, transgender, transfeminism

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Introduction

For some time, the question of queer rights was framed as one where the secular is pitched against the religious. Anglophone Christian opposition to equal marriage has often positioned the practice as a ‘desecration of a sacred institution created by God for the purpose [of] procreation’, which reduced marriage to little more than a secular ‘fetish’.¹ In the 2020s, the limitations of this framing have become acutely clear. Christian religious conservatives have co-opted feminist and scientific language to frame their concerns in terms of ‘biological sex’, while secular institutions have frequently participated in, rather than opposing, anti-queer crackdowns. I contend that both secularism and religiosity can function as twin arms of patriarchy, through a process of abjection (defining ‘what human life and culture exclude in order to sustain themselves’) towards queer subjects.² I explore this through a feminist reading of Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla*, a text whose ‘tentative tone’ paints a complex portrait of the way these forces are deployed to discipline queer expression and sexuality.³

Literature Review

Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* examines the process of classifying queerness, while Silvia Federici’s *Caliban and the Witch* also proves insightful; *Carmilla*’s final undoing in the Karnstein crypt overtly evokes a witch hunt. Talia Bhatt’s work elucidates the present focus on these forces on transgender people. *Trans/Rad/Fem* is not peer-reviewed; unfortunately, there is presently a paucity of academic work on transfeminism. To initially build institutional knowledge requires at first utilising sources not within that knowledge, hence why I am citing Bhatt, whose work has itself been noted as an important resource on ‘the epistemicide of trans women’s voices’ in academia.⁴ Furthermore, the points I draw from Bhatt’s work will be supported by referencing Kaitlin Kelly-Thompson and Amber Lusvardi’s analysis of the legal and rhetorical aspects of contemporary transphobia. Finally, Ardel Haefele-Thomas’ work is a useful resource for any reading of *Carmilla*’s queerness.

¹ Austin Cline, ‘Common Arguments Against Gay Marriage’, *ThoughtCo*, <<https://www.learnreligions.com/marriage-is-for-having-children-250076>> [accessed 4 February 2026] (8–9).

² Joseph Childers and Gary Hentzi, ‘Abjection’, *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995). <<https://www.proquest.com/docview/2137894284/1E57AA3455A402FPQ/1?accountid=12860&sourcetype=Encyclopedias%20&%20Reference%20Works>> [accessed 22 May 2026].

³ Ardel Haefele-Thomas, “‘One Does Things Abroad That One Would Not Dream of Doing in England’: Miscegenation and Queer Female Vampirism in J. Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* and Florence Marryat’s *The Blood of the Vampire*”, *Queer Others in Victorian Gothic: Transgressing Monstrosity*, ed. by Ardel Haefele-Thomas (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), pp. 96–119 (p. 96).

⁴ Yanyan Zhu (2025) Talia Bhatt. *Trans/Rad/Fem: Essays on Transfeminism*. 2025, *Women’s Studies*, 54:8, 1015–1018, p. 1018, [doi:10.1080/00497878.2025.2565492](https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2025.2565492)

Theoretical Framework

The patriarchal framework that *Carmilla* portrays poses religious Christian and secular forces not as internally consistent and fundamentally opposed, but as aesthetic and rhetorical modes that can both be employed by patriarchy to discipline queer subjects through a process of abjection against the perceived virtues of God *and* Nature. They are particularly vicious towards Carmilla, whose crossing of sex boundaries and forced degendering allows a reading of her as transfeminised. Le Fanu also probes at the limitations of this system, especially the inability of these forces to re-discipline Laura.

Abjection and Erasure

The nature of Carmilla's affections directly relate to her abjection. Carmilla's attentions were 'like the ardour of a lover... she would whisper, almost in sobs, "You are mine, you shall be mine, you and I are one for ever"'.⁵ The idea of Carmilla and Laura joined as 'one for ever' conjures the image of a lesbian marriage, and evokes Bhatt's argument that lesbophobia is preoccupied by '[t]he specter of the lesbian' as 'a threat to the *family*', seemingly making Carmilla 'the *typical* romanticised [vampire]... identified as a metaphoric symbol of threat to established ideological boundaries' (Le Fanu, p. 30).^{6,7} *Carmilla* superficially appears to follow this typicality when Baron Vordenburg mentions that his ancestor 'had been a passionate and favored lover of the beautiful Mircalla' before her death (Le Fanu, p. 154). In life, Carmilla was sexually available to men; only in monstrous, abject undead does she violate heterosexual ideological boundaries that 'cannot permit reproductive assets any bodily autonomy' because the 'body is a resource for The Nation' (Bhatt, p. 270). If Carmilla cannot serve her biologically ordained function under patriarchy, she may as well be (un)dead. Carmilla's positioning reflects what Michel Foucault has called 'the invention of homosexuality' around the time of *Carmilla*'s publication; 'sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was... the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage ... [T]he sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species'.⁸ Indeed, Carmilla is made a separate species by her love of women, something less than human. Baron Vordenburg's 'voluminous digest' on matters of vampirism implicitly describes Carmilla's affection for Laura as 'an engrossing vehemence, *resembling* the passion of love' [emphasis mine] (Le Fanu, pp. 152–153). Scientific documentation seemingly

⁵ Sheridan Le Fanu, *Carmilla*, (London: Pushkin Press, 2020), p. 48.

⁶ Talia Bhatt, *Trans/Rad/Fem*, (Self-published, 2025), p. 93.

⁷ Ashley Donnelly, 'Denial and Salvation: The *Twilight* Saga and Heteronormative Patriarchy', *Theorising Twilight: Critical Essays on What's at Stake in a Post-Vampire World*, ed. by Maggie Park and Natalie Wilson, (Jefferson: McFarland and Company Inc. Publishers, 2011), pp. 178–193 (p. 180).

⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, (New York: Random House, 1978) p. 43.

reveals the falsity of Carmilla's queer affections. Contemporary politicians echo this sentiment when advancing rhetoric centred on 'protection for cis girls from predatory men in public restrooms'; a Representative in Arkansas claimed that sport segregation prevented 'transgender girls from "intentionally going against the weaker sex" meaning cisgender girls'.⁹ These figures 'coopted the language of feminism' to enforce 'traditional gender norms', appealing to secular morality to enforce conservative Christian values (Kelly-Thompson and Lusvardi, p. 498). The transgender girl who wants to run with the other girls in her class cannot be credited with earnest athletic ambition, or a desire for camaraderie with her peers. She can only ever be an intruder, a cheater, a pervert, something fundamentally abject that must be expelled. Likewise, Carmilla cannot be allowed to have truly loved Laura. We are reassured that what Carmilla expressed was scientifically verified as dishonest, dirty, and lesser than the real/heterosexual love Mircalla shared with her male lover, because Carmilla is made *inherently* dishonest, dirty and lesser by her queerness.

Secularity, Religion, Discipline, and Carmilla as Transsexual

Carmilla's undoing in the Karnstein crypt could be read as the moment where 'Laura's father and General Spielsdorf... [ostensibly] restore the heterosexual, white, patriarchal order by murdering the Styrian queer vampire' (Haefele-Thomas, p. 106). Le Fanu employs clinical language, describing how 'two medical men... attested the marvellous fact, that there was a faint but appreciable respiration, and a corresponding action of the heart' (Le Fanu, p. 148). This language echoes '[t]he violence of the medical diagnosis' that underpinned Victorian 'men of science' seeking to categorise and police queerness (Haefele-Thomas, p. 118). We might similarly consider Katrina Karkazis' argument that the proliferation of a strict 'biological' sex binary in today's political rhetoric is partially because '[b]iological factors hold appeal and power [since reference to "biology" and "science" lends... the appearance of neutrality and thus objectivity]', obfuscating how some 'definitions of sex are at odds with the understanding that sex involves multiple biological and social factors'.¹⁰ Spielsdorf declares that Carmilla's fate will be sealed by 'the Inquisition [which] will be held according to law', and Carmilla's corpse is 'placed on a pile of wood, and reduced to ashes' (Le Fanu, p. 145, p. 148). This language is evocative of witch hunts, and considering the earlier clinical language and Spielsdorf's invoking of the legal system, reflects Federici's argument that the hunts were 'not just a product of

⁹ Kaitlin Kelly-Thomson and Amber Lusvardi, 'Transgender Bodies Are the Battleground: Backlash, Threat, and the Future of Queer Rights in the United States' *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 58 (2025), 496–500, p. 498.

¹⁰ Katrina Karkazis, 'The Misuses of "Biological Sex"', *The Lancet*, 394. 1898–1899, p. 1898.

popish fanaticism’, as ‘the secular courts conducted most of the trials’.¹¹ Federici argues that neither of these forces acted on their own initiative; ‘[r]ationalism and mechanism... were not the *immediate* cause of the persecutions’, and neither was religion; ‘most important... was the need of European elites to eradicate [witchcraft] which... was threatening their political and economic power’, employing secularity and religiosity as means to that end. (Federici, p. 204). Certainly, the way these modes collaborate to execute Carmilla is overtly patriarchal; ‘a sharp stake [was] driven through the heart of the vampire’, the triumph of corrective phallic penetration over her norm-flouting lesbianism (Le Fanu, p. 148).

Carmilla herself also prefigures contemporary transphobic anxieties about transgender people, especially transgender women. Laura describes Carmilla as ‘above the middle height of women’, speculating that perhaps she could be a ‘boyish lover’ in ‘masquerade’ (Le Fanu, p. 43, p. 49). General Spielsdorf describes Millarca in terms that the Arkansas legislature echoes, a ‘fiend who betrayed our infatuated hospitality’, infiltrating by trickery a space where she did not belong, to menace a vulnerable girl with the phallic threat of ‘the penetration of fangs’ despite her feminine appearance, evoking ‘the standard tropes of the glamorized blood/sex/euphoria relationship’ (Le Fanu, p. 20; Donnelly, p. 179). Crucially, when she is disciplined, *Carmilla is denied her sex*, degendered by being treated like a (deviant, abject) man (lacking any kind of male privilege, obviously; she is only a ‘man’ insofar as is necessary to deny her gender). Consider Federici’s criticism of how Foucault’s analysis of the ‘disciplines to which the body has been subjected... has collapsed female and male histories into an undifferentiated whole’; overt legal enforcement of heterosexuality in the period Foucault describes was restricted to those the *state classified as men* (Federici, p. 8). The “‘Labouchere Amendment”... criminalised sex between men (it simply ignored sex between women)’, and the original buggery clauses in the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 solely concern penetrative intercourse.¹² This is echoed in contemporary anti-trans politics; the ‘language of the [sports] bills... does not prohibit children assigned female at birth from participating on boys’ sports teams’ (Kelly-Thompson and Lusvardi, p. 498). Transgender girls are subject to ‘degendering’ as ‘men’ through explicit disciplinary enforcement, while the transgender boy is allowed to run with his classmates only because he is ‘regendered’ into the ‘weaker sex’ (Bhatt, p. 131; Kelly-Thomson and Lusvardi, p. 498). Carmilla’s treatment evokes Foucault’s (abject) male framework; she is degendered and diagnosed by medical men, condemned by holy men and executed brutally by lawmen. Le Fanu created not just a lesbian

¹¹ Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, (New York: Autonomedia, 2004), p. 169.

¹² Andrew Bennet and Nicolas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* 5th edn (Oxon: Routledge, 2016), p. 266.

vampire, but a thoroughly *transfeminised* lesbian vampire. Carmilla's treatment highlights how the boundaries of patriarchy, and the disciplinary methods that enforce them, through a process of abjection enacted by both religious and secular forces together, are *not* a vexing new development of the 2020s. Their contours can be detected in *Carmilla* over a century before the current anti-transgender moral panic.

'Sneaking Sympathy'

Any readings of *Carmilla* as endorsing the righteousness or even effectiveness of heterosexual patriarchy's religious and secular enforcers are complicated by Le Fanu's 'sneaking sympathy' for Carmilla. (Haefele-Thomas, p. 96). Le Fanu never fully commits to 'an external Othering' of Carmilla in a way that would neatly position her as a cautionary threat to patriarchal sexual propriety (Donnelly, p. 180). The authority of Vordenburg and the Inquisition is undermined as 'Carmilla's... interest in women does not definitively mark her as perverse... rather, the homoerotic desire shared by Carmilla and Laura brings their likeness to one another' into focus.¹³ Indeed, Laura frequently gushes about Carmilla, '[h]ow beautiful she looked', 'her fine eyes', the fact that 'she was certainly the most beautiful creature I had ever seen', indicating that attraction to women is not a phenomenon restricted to vampirism (Le Fanu, p. 65, p. 63, p. 42). The revelation of Mircalla's centuries-old portrait as 'the effigy of Carmilla!' is a major hint to the reader about Carmilla's monstrous secret, yet this is also where Laura learns she and Carmilla are both 'descended from the Karnsteins', bonding the pair even closer, through blood (Le Fanu pp. 63–64). Le Fanu actively emphasises Carmilla's similarities to Laura in the moment that should logically most serve to make her an abject outsider.

Le Fanu also gives the reader reason to doubt Vordenburg's assertions that Carmilla does not feel 'real' love; 'I have been in love with no one, and never shall [...] unless it should be with you' (Le Fanu, p. 65). Contrasting Carmilla's deeply romantic moonlit confession to the sterile, dusty, documentation of Mircalla's long-forgotten affair makes a mockery of the latter, with Carmilla even implicitly dismissing her previous heterosexual relationship as loveless. Laura herself never admits aloud the 'love growing into adoration' for Carmilla that she acknowledges internally; even after Carmilla 'kissed [Laura] silently', Laura will only speak of a non-specific 'affair of the heart' (Le Fanu, p. 47, 65). Carmilla, however, makes the unspeakableness of Laura's feelings spoken, makes *real* what Vordenburg claims cannot even be named as love. *Carmilla* leaves significant room to doubt the self-appointed arbiter of who is so inhuman that she cannot feel 'real' love. Certainly, *Laura's* feelings are not mere 'engrossing vehemence', easily dismissed when Carmilla is gone (Le Fanu, p. 153). The

¹³ Renée Fox, 'Carmilla and the Politics of Indistinguishability', *Carmilla: A Critical Edition*, ed. Kathleen Costello Sullivan (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2013), pp. 110–121 (p. 114).

inquisitors ‘are not entirely successful’ in undoing Carmilla; Laura’s account concludes on the tantalisingly ambiguous note that she has often ‘started, fancying I heard the light step of Carmilla at the drawing-room door’ (Haefele-Thomas, p. 106; Le Fanu, p. 156). Furthermore, despite the narrative being framed as Laura’s later recollection, the prologue does not indicate that she left a widower. Seemingly an unmarried spinster at twenty-nine, one of the first things we learn about Laura is that she has ‘died’, a parallel to Carmilla’s vampirism symbolising her own sexual unavailability to men (Le Fanu, p. 8). ‘Le Fanu leaves the reader to wonder whether Laura will join her queer, Eastern European ancestral forces’ in abject undeath, beyond the reach of her father and General Spielsdorf (Haefele-Thomas, p. 114).

Conclusion

My analysis of *Carmilla* builds on previous readings concerning primarily lesbian themes into a more broadly feminist one that focuses on the long-running symbiotic interplay of religious and secular patriarchal forces. Exploring this concept’s relationship with racial politics may prove fruitful. Haefele-Thomas’ paper touches on miscegenation anxieties in *Carmilla*, and Bhatt’s writing explores this intersection at length. As mentioned, there is not presently an established body of academic work on transfeminist theory. There is significant potential for future research employing this theory towards literary analysis, especially synthesis of these concerns with philosophy of science, towards research interrogating the conventional view of the secular/religious binary.

There is a pressing need for such research. If we as academics do not acknowledge and actively resist the exploitation of the worst epistemic tendencies and vulnerabilities within systems of knowledge production, we become complicit in the harms caused by e.g., ‘unacceptable departures from medical law and policy’ such as those observed in the Cass Review, a document ‘invoked frequently’ not because it is well-researched and scientifically rigorous, but because of the epistemic power it grants to ‘police gender’ by virtue of aesthetic association with secular academia.¹⁴

This process is both necessary and possible. The forces whose methods and anxieties Le Fanu channelled have, over a century of discrimination, repression, and murder since the publication of *Carmilla*, failed to snuff out the subjects they routinely abject; instead, the ‘trans moral panic’ is ‘a facet of a wider patriarchal agenda to *retrench* male-supremacy and regulate people’s gendered autonomy’ [emphasis mine] (Bhatt, p. 270). Regardless of her abjection, the world will never be rid of the fluid, ambiguous possibility of Carmilla’s light step, just outside the drawing-room door.

¹⁴ Daniel G. Aaron and Craig Konnoth, ‘The Future of Gender-Affirming Care — A Law and Policy Perspective on the Cass Review’. *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 392(6), 2025, 526–527 (pp. 526–527).

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