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Gothic configurations of gender

Work in Gothic studies over the last twenty-five years has contributed significantly to our understanding of the complexities of gender, the cultural construction of sexual identity. One aim of this essay is to offer a historical perspective on the development of ideas about gender as they have been theorized by cultural and feminist critics. Its main aim, however, is to explore how the Gothic's tendency to interrogate received ideas has resulted in memorable and often disturbing critiques of conventional thinking about gender. Moreover, our readings of some popular Gothic texts reveal that frequently they not only complement and reflect changing ideas about gender, but may also anticipate them. In order to illustrate this, in the second part of our essay we focus on the vampire, an enduring figure that demonstrates the Gothic's capacity both to represent the instability of gender categories and, in its more recent manifestations, to shore them up.

The late nineteenth century witnessed profound cultural shifts that resulted in what feminist critic Elaine Showalter has called "sexual anarchy."[1] In the popular texts of the day, many of which we would now identify as "Gothic," sexual identity and the cultural meaning attached to it appeared unstable, often monstrous, as bodies themselves refused their orthodox boundaries and became what Kelly Hurley has termed "ab-human."[2] Such bodily metamorphosis, an outward sign of the dissolution of the subject, can be found both in late-nineteenth-century works that have had a profound cultural impact and remain well-known, such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), and in those that have been recuperated as a result of academic studies in the Gothic, such as Richard Marsh's *The Beetle* (published in the same year as *Dracula*) and Arthur Machen's story "The Great God Pan" (1890). These novels and short stories demonstrate the instability of bodily identity during the fin de siècle and anticipate what Judith Butler was much later to theorize as its performative rather than

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essential nature. The Gothic's transgressive space provided the fictive theater where such performativity could be brought into the spotlight. Thus fiction anticipated, as is so often the case, insights derived from intellectual argument and theoretical formulation.

The Gothic, for long dismissed as the dark and dissolute underside of Romantic writing or as the popular frippery of "horrid novels" and melodramatic theater, was late in becoming an object of serious study. It is no accident that the rise of Gothic studies in the academy was contemporaneous with the development of feminist literary theory and criticism that emerged from second-wave feminism during the 1960s and 1970s. During these two decades feminist theorists, challenging androcentric assumptions and heterosexuality as a norm, fiercely questioned conventional configurations of gender. Feminism's progeny, over the next twenty years, included both gender studies and queer theory; indeed, the revival of the Gothic in academic circles, marked by the publication of David Punter's *The Literature of Terror* in 1980, coincided with the rise of gender studies in the United States and the United Kingdom. This is not surprising given that the Gothic text's preoccupation with boundaries and their transgression or permeability has always extended to the demarcations of gender identity; the way in which the Gothic text frequently queries the social construction of gender and undermines its certainties resonates exactly with the impulse in gender studies to deconstruct the social "givens" of masculinity and femininity. Both gender theorists and Gothic critics analyze culture in order to query human behavior in relation to concepts of male and female, masculine and feminine, conventional and transgressive. This approach derives from twentieth-century critical thinking that, embracing postmodernism, abandoned the metanarratives enshrined in Christianity, empire, and the supposed fixities of gendered behavior.

Second-wave feminism was an aspect of this irreverent and energetic critique of the status quo. It prompted the publication not only of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970) but also of many Gothic fictions that focus on the configuration of gender, such as Angela Carter's novel *The Magic Toyshop* (1967) and her collection *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), a volume that rewrites traditional tales in order to ask disquieting questions about oppression and female identity. While the work of feminist academics at this time offered intellectual analyses of gender configurations, the Gothic text, by making the normal appear "uncanny," rendered such interrogation in a vivid, disturbing, dislocating manner that still catches the reader's imagination and emotions. Both *The Magic Toyshop* and the title story of *The Bloody Chamber* revive the Gothic tale of Bluebeard. In the first, the Bluebeard

story is played out in a London suburb of the 1950s in a fantastic and operatic vein. Its emphasis on the nature of female desire, on women's economic dependency, and on the home as a place of entrapment seems, in retrospect, to anticipate the work done in the 1980s by feminist theorists both in the United Kingdom and in North America concerning the position of women in Western culture. In "The Bloody Chamber," Carter explores the naive young heroine's complicity with her own oppression; the nameless narrator plays the masochist to her sadistic husband, thereby demonstrating how masochism is culturally associated with the female subject position in a patriarchal society. The narrator's self-abasement before the powerful Marquis includes an element of erotic desire that almost blinds her to her dangerous predicament. However, her exploration of the forbidden room and her discovery of the bodies of Bluebeard's previous wives bring her to her senses. The plot's denouement in Carter's version of the story disturbs conventional expectations of gendered behavior: The heroine is rescued not by her three brothers, as in the traditional folk version of the tale, but by a gun-wielding mother on horseback whose tiger-shooting past in Indo-China stands her in good stead when her daughter is about to be beheaded. Released from an imprisoning marriage, the heroine chooses as her next partner a blind, sensitive, and kind piano-tuner. In tune with the anger women felt during the 1960s and 1970s as they realized their cultural positioning as objects of the male gaze, Carter's story gives us a "new man," a more feminized construction of masculinity, as the perfect partner. The rise and popularity of Gothic fiction by women, from this period onward, perhaps owed something to the fact that the fantastic allowed women writers and readers to go beyond a reality that was both oppressive and depressing. Not surprisingly, the Gothic tale of Bluebeard was reworked by several authors in the following decades, including Margaret Atwood in the title story of *Bluebeard's Egg* (1988) and Alison Lurie in "Ilse's House" (in *Women & Ghosts*, 1994).

Alongside this Gothic creative portrayal of female economic, emotional, and sexual experience, there developed a strong academic impetus to retrieve women writers to form a newly enlarged canon of literature. This agenda, called "gynocritics" (another term coined by Elaine Showalter),[3] included the desire both to add women authors to the list of Gothic writers and to read Gothic fictions by women in new ways. Ellen Moers' *Literary Women* (1976) was a key text in this respect, not only excavating numerous women writers of the past but also containing a chapter entitled "Female Gothic," a term which then entered Gothic critical discourse. Focusing on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, and Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market," Moers offers fresh readings of all

three nineteenth-century works, memorably relating Shelley's novel to the author's experience of her children dying in infancy. Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) followed Moers' agenda in retrieving many female authors lost to history and also in offering fresh readings of work by women, including Gothic texts, by focusing less on biological difference and more on gendered cultural experience. Thus Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, for example, is found to harbor a palimpsest which renders it "a Gothic story as frightening as any told by Mrs. Radcliffe"[4] insofar as it lays bare the severe limits on self-determination suffered by young women in the late eighteenth century. Beneath such surface plots of love and marriage, Gilbert and Gubar argue, can be seen stories of rage and anger, with their readings reflecting something of the anger expressed politically during second-wave feminism.

French feminist theory, however, presented a challenge to such politically inspired Anglo-American criticism by charging it with essentialism. Taking their cue from Simone de Beauvoir's *Le deuxième sexe* [*The Second Sex*] (1949), the second volume of which opens with the memorable sentence "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman,"[5] French feminists queried the cultural and linguistic foundations and categories of gendered identity. Beauvoir had already argued that, in patriarchal societies, the "self" is constructed as male, with the female – representing all that is not known and understood – seen as a mysterious and threatening "Other" that is a shadow or object rather than a full subject. Developing Beauvoir's insights further, French theoretical feminists suggested that "femininity" no longer mapped unproblematically onto female bodies but could be discerned in nonlinear, transgressive modes of writing, what Hélène Cixous called *écriture féminine*, and that it could even be found in the work of some male writers – for example, as Cixous argues, that of James Joyce. During the 1980s, translation made the work of key thinkers such as Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray available to scholars working in English. By the 1990s such thinking had become absorbed into Gothic criticism: Anne Williams, for example, makes use of Kristevan theory in her *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic* (1995) in identifying and contrasting male and female plot structures. Particularly influential for Gothic scholars has been Kristeva's *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* (1980), translated into English as *Powers of Horror* in 1982; her theory of abjection continues to be used creatively by Gothic scholars as a way of understanding how Gothic texts, with their monstrous "others," represent the "throwing off" and "casting down" of fundamental instabilities and multiplicities (such as blurrings of gender boundaries) both at the level of the individual and at that of social and national identity.

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During the 1990s, however, many academics who concentrated on Gothic writing by women critiqued the feminist literary approaches of the 1980s, in particular the tendency to represent female characters as passive and as victims. From the standpoint of the 1990s, such readings were seen as negatively reinforcing both conventional gender stereotypes and the idea that the plot of many women's lives was inevitably one of constraint and incarceration. It had by this time become important to see female characters in Gothic texts as autonomous, powerful, and transgressive. That word "transgressive," carrying a then glamorous resonance from the work of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, gave the term "female Gothic" a new currency in the 1990s. Female Gothic, according to Elaine Showalter in 1991, could be seen as a mode of writing that corresponded to "the feminine, the romantic, the transgressive and the revolutionary."[6] French feminism, then, was an important influence in the development of gender studies which, embracing queer theory and masculinity studies in the 1990s, offered a far more nuanced critical perspective on writing and gender than had second-wave feminism. Much of the political thrust of the women's movement, however, was undermined by such developments, and Helene Meyers, for one, voiced concern that they might return us to "a phallic economy of sameness" in which the diversity of women's writing would be lost. Gothic fiction by women, she argued, is particularly important in that "its aesthetic links to both realism and postmodernism and its thematic emphasis on violence against women" enable a negotiation "between the scripts of 'male vice and female virtue' associated with cultural feminism and the 'gender scepticism' associated with poststructuralist criticism."[7]

Despite such reservations, in the 1980s and 1990s post-structuralism combined with gender studies and queer theory to produce a rejection of essentialism and a vigorous skepticism concerning the term "female Gothic." The result was a shift of focus from feminist readings to theorized readings of masculinity and homosocial/sexual desire. For example, in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985) and *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick offers fresh readings of both Gothic and non-Gothic texts, focusing on their representations of homophobic mechanisms, homosocial bonding, and homosexual panic. In particular, she usefully highlights the frequency of a triangular textual relationship between two men and one woman in which the latter exists only to defuse or to distract from the powerful but socially "unspeakable" homoerotic bond between two men. Taking her cue from Sedgwick's claim that the "male paranoid plot . . . always ends in the tableau of two men chasing one another across a landscape evacuated of alternative life or

interest,"[8] Marilyn Butler points out that, although Frankenstein's love of Elizabeth and the creature's longing for a mate suggest heterosexual desires, these relationships are:

> thwarted by the violent deaths of both females before consummation can take place. The remainder of the third volume can be read as a blackly funny homoerotic mime, with man chasing man through a world where the loved women are all dead or far away, and no new ones appear.[9]

More recently, Damion Clark has analyzed Bram Stoker's *Dracula* in the light of Sedgwick's ideas, suggesting that it can be fruitfully reread in relation to the trial of Oscar Wilde, which took place in 1895, two years before the publication of the novel. As a homosexual Irishman, Wilde was both an outsider and a threat to British ideas of sexual and cultural normality, as indeed is Dracula. In this light, Clark sees the phallic teeth of the vampire as suggesting the threat (or liberation?) of gender reversal: "After the penetrating bite of Dracula, the women become like men in their expressions of sexual desire and the men become like women."[10] By the norms of Victorian conventional morality, this reversal is utterly taboo: The men still desire the (masculinized) women, thus revealing their repressed homosexual longings. Indeed, Clark concludes that the victorious "Crew of Light" represents the necessary closeness between men – or "homosocial bonding," to use Sedgwick's term – that is vital to the survival of patriarchy in the face of "sexual anarchy," to use Showalter's term.[11]

However, perhaps the most influential text of this postfeminist period was Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), which expounded a persuasive theory of gender as performance. Drawing on the thought of Kristeva, Lacan, and Foucault, Butler critiqued the work of feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Joan Rivière, and Luce Irigaray in order to deconstruct the idea that sex and gender can be conceived of as distinct entities: "perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all."[12] Thus Butler argues that gender is performative: there is no essential sexual identity behind the performance itself and gender has to be acted out, even unconsciously to oneself. Her argument presents gender as both fluid and unstable, always open to fresh interpretation. Her title, *Gender Trouble*, suggests that supposedly fixed categories of gender can be "troubled" by varieties of performance, some of them resistant to conventional gender roles. Influenced by Butler, new work in both gender and Gothic studies began in the 1990s to address masculinity. As is often the case, many Gothic fictions of the late 1980s and early 1990s either

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anticipated or coincidentally dramatized gender as performance and exposed the fragility of normative heterosexual masculinity, frequently using a combination of humour, parody, and the monstrous body in order to deconstruct received ideas about gender.

Iain Banks for example, parodically appropriating *Frankenstein* in his novel *The Wasp Factory* (1984), presents masculinity as masquerade and does so in ways that are simultaneously horrifying and comic. Banks' main character, a sadistic young boy, turns out not to have been castrated by the family dog as a child (as he has been led to believe) but to have been born a girl. We learn – but not until the very end of the novel – that a combination of hormone treatments, administered in strong curries cooked by his father, was part of a grotesque gender experiment thought up by a highly disturbed, but clever, parent who had trained as a scientist. This experiment, combined with a cultural expectation that masculinity is founded on misogyny and brutality, results in a comically ghastly character whose identity is validated through extreme acts of violence. Indeed, Frank Cauldhame's deeds include the murder of three children while a child himself. The narration of these deaths is dispassionate, but the bizarre cunning of the murderer's mind gives rise to grotesquely comic effects. The bullying cousin has a poisonous snake slipped into his artificial leg while he sleeps, the innocent younger brother is encouraged to blow himself up with a World War II bomb, and the girl cousin is swept out over the sea entangled in a giant kite, never to be seen again. The wasp factory of the title is an ornate contraption built inside an old clockface that used to hang over the Royal Bank of Scotland in the nearby town. Frank uses it as an elaborate torture chamber and arbitrary dispenser of death to his captured wasps. The desire for power and control that completely dominates him is expressed through a need to predict the future and a propensity for sadism; it also includes hatred of women and of the sea. He defines himself against women, whom he despises, and he loathes elements that are beyond his control and more powerful than he is. Frank may be monstrous in his amorality, yet he operates as a recognizable parody of masculinity. *The Wasp Factory*, a novel that shocked many readers and reviewers upon its publication, is not mere gratuitous Gothic horror. Rather, it uses horror and humor to encourage a detached and ironic perspective on the social construction of gender.

Some of Patrick McGrath's early short stories, collected in *Blood and Water and Other Tales* (1988), also offer parodic Gothic perspectives on performative masculinity. "The Skewer" challenges the phallocentric assumptions of traditional psychoanalysis, eventually revealing its dead victim to have been biologically female; in burlesque mode, "Hand of a Wanker" makes fun of the popular assumption that male sexuality is an

imperative that must be obeyed, as the disembodied hand wreaks havoc in a seedy New York nightclub. In the same decade, Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983) and Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* (1989) highlight the instability of gender boundaries by disrupting received ideas of femininity and womanhood. Thus Weldon's "mannish"-looking Ruth Patchett, once she hugs revenge to her breast, is not only able to burn down her domestic cage and abandon her children but also eventually manages to morph into the body and wealth of her husband's mistress, the novelist Mary Fisher. In Winterson's novel, the Dog Woman is massive, hideous, and filthy, but takes pride in her physical power and her independence. Oblivious to the male gaze, she takes pleasure in rooting out corruption and hypocrisy wherever she finds them, at one point gouging out the eyes and pulling out the teeth of some canting Puritans to make her point. At the heart of the novel lies a serious message, however: Women should not allow traditional configurations of gender to limit their potential for change. In the novel's final phase, the story is continued through the eyes of a late-twentieth-century young woman who feels this seventeenth-century figure as a massive strength inside her. It is her internalization of the Dog Woman's power that enables her to become an eco-warrior. When this present-day heroine burns down a building, it is not a domestic space (as in *The Magic Toyshop* or *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*) but a polluting factory symbolic of global capitalism. Similarly, Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984) presents us with a freakish heroine who is over six feet tall and who has wings growing out of her shoulders. Her body's refusal to confine itself to conventional feminine proportions becomes her strength. She not only rescues men in peril but is also able to fly above conventional expectations concerning what it means to be a woman.

In the rest of this essay we shall focus on a Gothic body that has proved particularly fertile as a repository of fears concerning the instability of gender: that of the vampire, a figure that has proved itself capable of extraordinary transformations since it entered the Western literary tradition at the beginning of the nineteenth century in the wake of reports of vampirism from Eastern Europe dating from the mid-eighteenth century. Early vampire stories provided three templates: that of the grotesque (and decidedly unerotic), resurrected peasant body in Eastern European folklore; that of the handsome, degenerate, unrepentant aristocrat (for example, Lord Ruthven in *The Vampyre* by John Polidori, published in 1819); and that of the reluctant or remorseful vampire who loathes his condition (as in James Malcolm Rymer's populist *Varney the Vampire* [1845–1847]). While the first model is more akin to the now ubiquitous zombie, those of the

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aristocratic seductive vampire and the reluctant vampire have produced enduring fictional progeny.

For complex cultural and historical reasons, the fin de siècle was a key moment in the evolution of the vampire figure. The year 1897 saw the publication not only of *Dracula* by Bram Stoker but also of *The Blood of the Vampire* by Florence Marryat. Both novels present the vampire as an outsider: Dracula is a Transylvanian count and thus connected with what the Victorians considered the regressive superstitious culture of Eastern Europe, while Marryat's vampire, Harriet Brandt, is Jamaican, the daughter of a mad scientist and a mixed-race voodoo priestess. Both vampires eventually make their way to England, Dracula sailing to Whitby concealed in a coffin full of earth, Harriet Brandt traveling to London after staying in a Belgian seaside resort where she has taken refuge following the slaves' revolt on her home island. Whereas *Dracula* has become a canonical text, *The Blood of the Vampire* has only recently received serious critical attention. They are certainly intriguing to compare and contrast. Dracula is an aristocratic and unrepentant vampire who, like Lord Ruthven, sinks his fangs into his victims. As many critics have argued, Stoker's novel clearly articulates anxieties relating to new and threatening gender configurations (including that of the New Woman, who constantly oversteps the boundaries of conventional decorum), and the figure of the homosexual, which had become more prominent during the 1890s. Once bitten, Lucy Westenra becomes openly voluptuous and frank about her sexual desires for her fiancé, Arthur Holmwood; the blood transfusions she receives from three men fail to restore her uncontaminated self while metaphorically suggesting her repressed desire for a promiscuous sexual life. Her violent preying on children at night on Hampstead Heath provides the antithesis to late Victorian sentimentality concerning woman's "natural" gender destiny as that of loving mother. Finally, only a stake through the heart, with all the phallic connotations that carries, can render her dead, rather than undead, and restore her to the quiet passivity far more appropriate to Victorian ideas of femininity. The curious scene in which Dracula forces Mina Harker to suck at the blood oozing from his chest, likened by Stoker "to a child forcing a kitten's nose into a saucer of milk to compel it to drink,"[13] suggests an ingestion of blood and semen in an act in which Mina is both victim and protagonist and Dracula both passive and dominating, thereby thoroughly destabilizing the conventional gender boundaries of the time. It is as if the body, like gender itself, is a leaky vessel prone too easily to dilution and contamination, at least for Victorian sensibilities.

Florence Marryat's vampire female, by contrast, has no fangs and draws no blood; however, her very proximity drains her victims' life force, leaving

them pale and enervated. Beautiful and lively with "lips of a deep blood colour ... her head ... covered with a mass of soft, dull, blue-black hair,"[14] Harriet easily attracts people, but those who become close to her gradually sicken and die. Like Dracula, she represents the racial "Other" but, like Lucy Westenra and Mina Harker, she also suggests the New Woman of the period, since she is financially independent and spirited. Marryat carefully manipulates reader response: When we first meet Harriet she is willful, selfish, and insensitive, oblivious to the fact that she has caused the death of Margaret Pullen's baby by constantly cradling it. An unsuitable liaison with Margaret's brother-in-law, Ralph Pullen, prompts the family doctor to step in, who explains to Harriet that she will always cause the death of those she loves. Horrified by this, she is nevertheless persuaded by the writer Antony Pullen, Ralph's brother, to marry him. Shortly after his death while they are on honeymoon, she takes an overdose of chloral in order to relieve the world of one "unfit to live."[15] By the end of the novel she has become a reluctant vampire, able to empathize with the suffering of others and recognize that she has been cursed by her genetic inheritance. Reflecting contemporary anxieties about miscegenation and the growing interest in eugenics, the novel also relates to the medical pathologizing of women at this time.

Indeed, the famous sexologist Havelock Ellis argued in 1894 that, because of loss of blood during menstruation and the naturally "thinner, more watery" nature of women's blood, they were generally anemic, a condition that led them to crave fresh blood. Hence, invalids and anemic women were encouraged to visit abattoirs during the 1890s in order to drink the blood of newly slain cattle as a tonic.[16] Superstitions about vampirism and emerging medical discourses were also reflected in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's 1896 story "The Good Lady Ducayne," which features an ancient and very rich aristocrat kept alive by her doctor through the progressive draining of the lifeblood of a series of young, penniless, female companions.[17] Given the cultural anxieties of the time concerning atavism and regression, it is not surprising, as Bram Dijkstra notes, that "It began to seem by no means farfetched to suspect the existence of vampires, and especially vampire women."[18] Indeed, Dijkstra records that as late as 1922 a senior and well-respected doctor in the United States suggested that a woman who desired sexual intercourse more than "once in two weeks or ten days" was a danger to her husband: "It is to her that the name vampire can be applied in its literal sense."[19]

This figure of the female "psychic" vampire evolved into the figure of the "vamp" during the 1920s and 1930s, the word often signifying a curious combination of boyishness and female sexual allure that was deadly to the

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male. Rebecca, in Daphne du Maurier's most famous novel (1938), fits this template exactly. Reconstructed through the memories of Mrs. Danvers, Rebecca signifies both femininity and masculinity. On the one hand, the housekeeper emphasizes her beauty, sensuality, and femininity by endowing her fine clothes with a metonymic significance. On the other, she stresses Rebecca's power and masculinity. What she loved in Rebecca, it seems, was her strength, her courage, and her "spirit": "She ought to have been a boy, I often told her that."[20] Indeed, throughout the novel, Rebecca's handwriting is associated with a masculine strength and an indelible authority that runs counter to Maxim's idea of the good wife. In her portrayal of Rebecca, who can be seen as the alter ego of the quietly compliant and shyly awkward nameless second wife, du Maurier draws on both the tradition of the Gothic double and the legacy of the female vampire. In so doing, she reflects widespread cultural ambivalence about the increasing power and sexual freedoms that many women were claiming during the first few decades of the twentieth century. Although Rebecca, like Harriet Brandt, is a "psychic" vampire, her identity is connoted by characteristics traditionally associated with the vampiric body: facial pallor, plentiful dark hair, and a voracious sexual appetite; moreover, like the vampire, she has to be "killed" more than once (she was shot; she had cancer; she drowned). The cultural slippages between the terms "vamp" and "vampire" are reflected not only in the unstable status of Rebecca's body (missing dead body; wrongly identified body; diseased body; erotic ghost) but also in her association with a transgressive, polymorphous activity – for Rebecca is both a heterosexual adulterer and (it is implied through her relationship with Mrs. Danvers) a lesbian. In disrupting the boundaries between masculine and feminine, dead and alive, heterosexual and queer, Rebecca represents the Kristevan abject: that which disturbs "identity, system, order," does not respect "borders, positions, rules," and represents "the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."[21] In short, she challenges then-current definitions of gender.

It is not surprising, therefore, given the taboos that for so long surrounded same-sex desire, that the figure of the vampire has been used to explore nonheterosexual identities. Sheridan Le Fanu's story "Carmilla" (1871–1872), in which the shape-shifting Carmilla/Mircalla/Millarca tries to seduce Laura, a virginal 27-year-old who lives in an Austrian schloss with her widowed father, is generally accepted as the first lesbian vampire story in prose fiction. Laura, who falls into an inexplicable state of languor, anticipates the fate of Harriet Brandt's victims in Marryat's novel, although her ambivalent attitude to Carmilla suggests a repressed desire for a female lover that is absent from *The Blood of the Vampire*. The sense of transgressive love as both disturbing and seductive is conveyed not only through

Laura's dreams, in which Carmilla appears as a beautiful girl or black cat sinking her sharp teeth into Laura's breast, but also through Le Fanu's use of endless replication in the tale, creating a world in which (anticipating Freud's theory of the uncanny) repetition works not to confirm order and system but to unsettle them. Like du Maurier's *Rebecca*, Le Fanu's tale presents the female subject as "split" between an outwardly conforming self, which embodies a conventional respectable femininity, and an inner repressed self, full of erotic and transgressive desire. It is worth noting that, many years later, Rachel Klein was to employ Le Fanu's novella as a key intertext in her novel *The Moth Diaries*, which uses the trope of the vampire in a tale of tortured female adolescence, suggesting that the modern Gothic continues to speak to anxieties about desire and femininity.[22]

With the growth of a more tolerant attitude toward lesbian, homosexual, and transgender identities during the last quarter of the twentieth century, at least in the Western world, the figure of the vampire became a vehicle of celebration rather than abjection. Taking their cue from Sue-Ellen Case's claim that "The vampire is the queer in its lesbian mode,"[23] critics have recently focused on vampiric homoeroticism in contemporary writing in order to explore cultural constructions of gender and same-sex desire. Paulina Palmer's analysis of some Gothic lesbian fictions leads her to conclude that their authors "portray the lesbian vampire as a signifier of an alternative economy of sexual pleasure which is more emotionally intense and fulfilling than its heterosexual counterpart."[24] Nevertheless, despite greater tolerance, the identity of the lesbian and the homosexual as independent loner or member of loosely knit groups is still reflected in the individual isolation and underground networks of the vampire. Indeed in many works – such as Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) – the vampire's existence is used to elicit reader and audience sympathy. In contrast with their literary forbears such as Stoker's Dracula, Rice's vampires no longer represent an enigmatic and dangerous "otherness" but are endowed with a compelling subjectivity. Louis in Rice's *The Vampire Lestat* (1985) tells his story to his interviewer, expressing vividly his conflicted feelings about his vampire existence. His vampiric "father," the charismatic and dandyish Lestat, takes on the identity of a rock star, giving contemporary rein to his performative nature. Their insecurities, as Gina Wisker has pointed out, align them with the complexities of the postmodern world.[25] In them, we see ourselves.

Rice's vampires might also be seen as reflecting late-twentieth-century cultural anxieties about sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS and the changing nature of the family; in both the novel *Interview with the Vampire* and its film version (1994), two male vampires become adoptive fathers to

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Claudia, the female child vampire. Similarly, Poppy Z. Brite's *Lost Souls* (1992) can be read as a critique of the conventional bourgeois American family unit, in which fixed gender roles combine with materialist values to produce emotional dysfunction. In creating a parallel community and an alternative family structure, based on a shared eroticism rather than on genes and inherited wealth held in common, the vampires of Brite's novel aggressively assert social, emotional, and bodily difference.[26] Gay vampire fictions of this period also often use humour to critique contemporary representations and styles of lesbian and homosexual identities, exposing their prescriptiveness and their absurdities, anticipating or reflecting Butler's argument that " 'butch' and 'femme' as historical identities of sexual style" do not reflect original heterosexual identities; instead they expose and throw "into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original."[27]

Since the late twentieth century, the vampire has thus assumed a prominent role in popular culture, often as an object of desire or a fascinating icon of transgression. In *The Lure of the Vampire*, Milly Williamson explores how some girls and women use vampire style as a way of rejecting hegemonic images of femininity. Substituting black for pink, they embrace the identity of outsider, "using black to say to *others* 'I am different', 'I am unapproachable' and 'I am strong.' "[28] *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a highly successful television series in the 1990s, initially cast the strong woman in the role of the vampire's nemesis. In later episodes, however, the relationship has become more complex as Buffy negotiates her way between two vampire lovers: Angel, who in some respects resembles Rice's reluctant vampire Louis, and Spike, who embodies unbridled desire. It is possible to see the *Buffy* series as promoting feminism in its emphasis on community and shared power, and its director, Joss Whedon, has repeatedly said that he aims to change attitudes in the real world, especially attitudes to women.[29] However, a recent critic has pointed to *Buffy*'s Angel as the turning point that made the vampire "romance fodder,"[30] the most notable example of which is perhaps the commercially highly successful *Twilight* series. In these books and their film adaptations, we see the male vampire resurrected as romantic hero with his female counterpart, the Gothic heroine, cast in a more traditional passive mode. This might suggest that the success of the *Twilight* brand in both books and films owes something to a cultural nostalgia that, through a hyper-capitalist appropriation of Gothic devices, retrieves a reactionary agenda for gender. Disturbingly for feminist readers, Bella Swan's reasons for wishing to be transformed into a vampire herself include not only the desire to be with her vampire hero, Edward, for ever but also a terrible fear of aging: Her worst nightmare, described in the

opening pages of *New Moon* (2006), is that she might see "some sign of impending wrinkles in my ivory skin."[31] Bella is a Gothic heroine, it would seem, for the age of *post*feminism, in which "girl power" is accompanied by (and indeed feeds upon) an acute anxiety about becoming an older woman.[32]

In *Twilight* (2005), Bella Swan is 17 and falls in love with Edward Cullen, a stunningly good-looking vampire who sparkles in the sunlight (which he must avoid if his vampire identity is to remain a secret) and who has special powers, such as exceptional strength and speed. The Cullen family are extraordinarily glamorous, living in a state-of-the-art house, wearing designer clothes, driving Mercedes cars, and seeking to "pass" as human. The family represents, in short, all that an adolescent girl brought up in a Western consumer society might find enticing. Indeed, the Cullens are anything but threatening and troubling, representing instead a degree of normality and social conservatism. Far from being transgressive figures, they demonstrate an adherence to conservative values, fixed in their heterosexual gender identities. The three subsequent novels see Bella also involved with Jacob Black, a Native American and a werewolf, who is hot to Edward's cold and to whom Bella is also attracted. Edward's erotic qualities remain ambiguous and Bella's attraction to him in some sense defies the Brontë-esque romance tradition the novel seems to embrace. It is as if Jane Eyre finds the marble-like St. John Rivers irresistible rather than the sensual and dark Mr. Rochester. The last line of *Twilight* indicates a level of masochism in Bella's submission to Edward: "And he leaned down to press his cold lips once more to my throat."[33] Finally (after several battles with other vampire groups), Bella marries Edward and produces, in great agony, a daughter who is half-human and half-vampire.

From the outset, Bella is defined by her relationship with Edward, abandoning career plans, other interests, and her female friends; her choices, in fact, reassert the values of neoconservative middle America, including its traditional configurations of gender. Edward, it may be argued, is an embodiment of patriarchal power and therefore presents a clear and present danger to Bella's autonomy. In the first novel, *Twilight*, he becomes in effect a stalker, indulging in such suspect behavior as entering Bella's bedroom at night and watching her sleep. In the fourth novel of the series, *Breaking Dawn* (2008), they marry, and her first sexual encounter leaves her scarred and bruised. It is her own susceptibility to his charisma that poses the greatest threat to Bella; as the series progresses, it becomes apparent that she needs to be protected from her masochistic sexual desires, which indeed result in a pregnancy that kills her mortal body. The assault upon her body by the hybrid fetus and the subsequent medical intervention

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in an attempt to save her life, followed by Edward's vampiric intervention to "change" her, are graphically described in the novel and also portrayed in the film version. Thus the "conjunction of femininity and death" explored by Elisabeth Bronfen in her 1992 book *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* is overtly displayed and, as Bronfen suggests may happen, "the uncanny convergence of femininity and death" serves "as a displaced signifier for masculinity, survival, presentation and continuation."[34] Bella's subsequent metamorphosis from susceptible human Gothic heroine to vampire, far from a process of "queering," firmly establishes her in the Cullen clan as a proud and traditional maternal figure.

Despite our liberal use of the word "transgressive" throughout this essay, then, it should be clear from this brief survey of modern vampire fiction that it is not always subversive. Some vampire stories daringly reconfigure gender in an imagining of future identities; others seem to challenge conventional configurations of gender only to recuperate normativity through exterminating the vampire and re-establishing heterosexual conventions; others firmly and unambiguously reassert traditional configurations of gender. Like the Gothic mode itself, the vampire is seductive and abject, protean and fluid, a figure that channels our uncertainties and anxieties about ourselves as the world about us – like our ideas about gender – changes from decade to decade.

NOTES

1 See Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (1990; London: Bloomsbury, 1991).
2 Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 3–4.
3 Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," in *The New Feminist Criticism*, ed. E. Showalter (New York: Pantheon, 1985), pp. 243–270.
4 Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 143.
5 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley (London: Picador, 1988), p. 295.
6 Showalter, *Sisters' Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 129.
7 Helene Meyers, *Femicidal Fears* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001), pp. x–xii.
8 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990; London: Penguin, 1994), p. 163.
9 Marilyn Butler, introduction to Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein (1818 text)* (Oxford University Press, 1993), p. xliii.
10 Damion Clark, "Preying on the Pervert: The Uses of Homosexual Panic in Bram Stoker's 'Dracula,' " in *Horrifying Sex: Essays on Sexual Difference in Gothic*

Literature, ed. Ruth Bienstock Anolik (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2007), pp. 167–176, esp. p. 172.

11 Clark, "Preying on the Pervert," pp. 171 and 174.

12 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), p. 7.

13 Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (1897; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), pp. 363 and 371.

14 Florence Marryat, *The Blood of the Vampire* (1897; Brighton: Victorian Secrets Ltd., 2010), p. 4.

15 Marryat, *The Blood of the Vampire*, p. 187.

16 See Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 336–337.

17 See the title story in Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *The Good Lady Ducayne* (1896; Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2004).

18 Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, p. 338.

19 Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, p. 334.

20 Daphne du Maurier, *Rebecca* (1938; London: Pan Books, 1975), p. 253.

21 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 4.

22 See Rachel Klein, *The Moth Diaries* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2002).

23 Sue-Ellen Case, "Tracking the Vampire," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 3 (1991), 1–19, esp. 2, 9.

24 Paulina Palmer, "The Lesbian Vampire: Transgressive Sexuality," in *Horrifying Sex*, ed. Anolik, pp. 203–232, esp. p. 203. See also her *Lesbian Gothic: Transgressive Fictions* (London and New York: Cassell, 1999).

25 Gina Wisker, "Love Bites: Contemporary Women's Vampire Fictions," in *A New Companion to the Gothic*, ed. David Punter (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), pp. 224–328, esp. p. 228.

26 See William Hughes, " 'The Taste of Blood Meant the End of Aloneness': Vampires and Gay Men in Poppy Z. Brite's *Lost Souls*," in *Queering the Gothic*, ed. William Hughes and Andrew Smith (Manchester University Press, 2009), pp. 142–157.

27 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 31.

28 Milly Williamson, *The Lure of the Vampire: Gender, Fiction and Fandom from Bram Stoker to Buffy* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005), p. 153.

29 See Rhonda Wilcox, *Why Buffy Matters* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2005), p. 101.

30 Colette Murphy, "Someday My Vampire Will Come? Society's (and the Media's) Lovesick Infatuation with Prince-Like Vampires," in *Theorizing Twilight: Critical Essays on What's at Stake in a Post-Vampire World*, ed. Maggie Park and Natalie Wilson (Jefferson, NC: Macfarland, 2011), pp. 56–69, esp. p. 57.

31 Stephenie Meyer, *New Moon* (2006; London: Atom, 2007), p. 7.

32 See Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 12.

33 Stephenie Meyer, *Twilight* (2005; London: Atom, 2006), p. 434.

34 Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 433.