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COLERIDGE'S "CHRISTABEL" AND LEFANU'S "CARMILLA"

ARTHUR H. NETHERCOT

SEVERAL years ago in a study of Coleridge's poem "Christabel"¹ I advanced the then novel theory that the unfinished tale is essentially a vampire story, one of the first and by far the subtlest of the many such stories in the English language. The theory was received with considerable interest and general approval, though there were, of course, some partial or complete skeptics. I now wish to suggest that the long prose narrative "Carmilla," published with four other stories in *In a glass darkly* in 1872 by that once famed master of the Gothic, J. Sheridan LeFanu, contains so many strange parallels to "Christabel" that it seems possible that LeFanu had either made the same interpretation of Coleridge's poem as I was to make, and had reflected it, consciously or unconsciously, in his story; or else he had been reading more or less the same sources as Coleridge read, and applied them with often surprisingly similar results. For "Carmilla" is openly and admittedly a vampire story, and its author makes much of the way in which he, or at least one of his characters, Baron Vordenburg, has steeped himself in vampire lore.

First of all, the antagonists in both stories, Geraldine and Carmilla, are female vampires; and female vampires are comparatively rare, at least in the earlier period of vampirology. More than this, the main victims, Christabel and Laura, are women; and such restriction of sex—women to women—is even rarer. Kipling's version of the vampire, with her exclusive-

¹ *The road to Tryermaine: A study of the history, background, and purposes of Coleridge's "Christabel"* (Chicago, 1939).

ly male quarry, is a purely modern refinement.

But there is also in the cases of both Coleridge and LeFanu an incipient attraction of the vampires to older men, the fathers of their main victims. Just as Sir Leoline at the first meeting is strangely drawn to Geraldine, who not only welcomes his fatherly embrace but prolongs it "with joyous look" and who is later the occasion of a violent quarrel between father and daughter because Christabel feels instinctively that there is something corrupt in Geraldine's exertion of her charms, so Laura's unnamed father is obviously allured by Carmilla. He flatters her with compliments, "gallantly" kisses her hand, holds it "very kindly," is solicitous about her health, and protests against her threat of leaving; and she seductively draws him on. Similarly, under her anagrammatic name of Millarca, she has previously fascinated old General Spielsdorf while she is getting his beautiful young daughter Bertha into her fatal toils.

As settings for these triangular relationships, Coleridge and LeFanu, since they are both obviously writing in the Gothic tradition, have chosen the traditionally isolated castle surrounded by woods. Coleridge's, it is true, is in Cumberland, whereas LeFanu's is in Styria—that is, in the notorious vampire district, consisting of Austria, Hungary, Moravia, etc., from which flowed practically all the best-attested vampire tales of the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, LeFanu, like Bram Stoker after him, felt impelled to link his story with England. LeFanu did

so by making Laura's father English, although, as she admits, she herself "never saw England"; Stoker transports his hero, Jonathan Harker, from London to Count Dracula's eerie castle in Transylvania, but at the end takes Harker and Mina back to London again.

LeFanu's castle, than which nothing could "be more picturesque or solitary," "stands on a slight eminence in a forest" and has the regulation equipment of towers, drawbridge, moat, Gothic chapel, three-hundred-year-old furniture, with carved cabinets, gold inlays, tapestries, and all the rest. Coleridge's castle, although described more indirectly through incidental allusions, is sufficiently similar so that the one might be substituted for the other without making any essential changes necessary. More significant, however, is the fact that, within a few miles of each, through wild mountains and woods (somewhat farther in Coleridge than in LeFanu), lies another castle, from which, it is finally revealed, the terrible visitant has sprung or claims to have sprung. Coleridge's is named Tryermaine; LeFanu's Karnstein. Karnstein, it is true, has been in ruins for many years; Tryermaine, so far as Sir Leoline knows, still stands, but actually—according to Dr. James Gillman, Coleridge's physician, who insisted that his patient had confided to him his intended ending to the poem—when Sir Leoline's messenger arrived, he found that the castle had been washed away "by one of those inundations supposed to be common to this country."² Thus the settings and topography of the two stories are surprisingly similar.

Coleridge's Geraldine is first met by Christabel all alone at midnight, at the foot of a huge, ancient oak tree in the middle of a moonlit, but misty and barren,

April forest. LeFanu's Carmilla, it is true, is more gregarious. On a moonlit, but misty, summer evening, as Laura, her father, and her two governesses walk through the beautiful glade before the castle, they hear the sound of carriage wheels and many hoofs on the narrow road near by. The four carriage horses take fright and, too strong to be stopped by the four attendants on horseback, run away and are halted only when, at sight of "an ancient stone cross" on one side of the road, they swerve so that the wheels pass over the projecting roots of "a magnificent lime tree" standing on the other. The carriage is overturned, and thus the slightly injured Carmilla is delivered at her destination, to be left by her mysterious mother, obviously a "lady," to recover with Laura and her family. This entrance is certainly more spectacular than Geraldine's; but Geraldine has an even stranger story to relate to Christabel, of how she comes from "a noble line" and how "five warriors" seized her "yesternorn" without warning or reason, choked her, tied her on a white horse, rode furiously with her for over a day, and then abruptly deposited her under the oak tree, promising soon to return. Except for the claims of ancestry, the moonlit but misty nights, the two great trees, and the equine method of transportation, the circumstances under which the two vampires appear are quite different in detail, but a similar weird and supernatural atmosphere pervades both scenes.

Several elements of common superstition, moreover, are shared by the two stories. Carmilla's horses' fear of the cross is paralleled by Geraldine's fear of Christabel's lamp, which is fastened with a silver chain to "an angel's feet." Carmilla never prays; nor does Geraldine, although she once pretends that she is going to. Moreover, she feigns weariness when

² James Gillman, *The life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London, 1838), p. 301.

Christabel suggests that they thank the Virgin for rescuing her, and says that she cannot speak. Carmilla, in fact, is hysterically upset when she is forced to hear prayers or hymns. Both girls have to be helped into the homes of their intended victims: Geraldine sinks down, "belike through pain," just as Christabel unlocks the postern gate, and Christabel has to carry her over the threshold "with might and main"; whereupon Geraldine quickly rises again and "moved, as she were not in pain." In the same fashion, after the accident, Carmilla has to lean on the governess's arm before she can walk "slowly over the drawbridge and into the castle gate." True to tradition, too, the dogs in the two stories sense the presence of something unnatural and menacing: Coleridge's "mastiff bitch" moans angrily in her sleep as Christabel leads her guest past the kennel; LeFanu's traveling mountebank's "rough spare dog . . . stopped short suspiciously at the drawbridge, and in a little while began to howl dismally." This dog, indeed, persists in howling all through the interview of the mountebank with Laura and Carmilla and does its best to further the efforts of its master to warn the unsuspecting Laura of her danger.

For both authors introduce special characters to alert the perceptive reader to what is going on. The mountebank, with his charms and magic paraphernalia, at once senses what is happening, and arouses Carmilla's great anger by his hints about her vampiric characteristics. He thus corresponds to Coleridge's Bard Bracy, whose vision the night before of the green snake throttling the gentle dove named Christabel should have told the infatuated Sir Leoline that his guest was up to no good. Toward the end of LeFanu's tale General Spielsdorf performs a similar function when he tries to convey the truth about Carmilla to Laura's father by hint-

ing about his own daughter's fate. In both cases, however, the two fathers are too obtuse to understand.

It is noteworthy also that both Coleridge and LeFanu introduce the dead mothers of their heroines in attempts to warn their daughters supernaturally. Christabel's mother, we are told, died in giving birth to her child; Laura's died in her child's "infancy." One of the most eerie scenes in Coleridge's poem involves the ghostly colloquy between Geraldine and Christabel's invisible and inaudible mother. Just after Christabel has conducted Geraldine into her bedchamber she exclaims mournfully, "O mother dear! that thou wert here!" and Geraldine thoughtlessly echoes the wish. Whereupon Coleridge continues:

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?
 And why with hollow voice cries she,
 "Off, woman, off! this hour is mine—
 Though thou her guardian spirit be,
 Off, woman, off! 'tis given to me."³

LeFanu's episode varies somewhat in details, but in essence it is remarkably like Coleridge's. As Laura's illness, with its nightmares and visions, progresses, she begins to hear, again and again, "one clear voice, of a female's, very deep, that spoke as if at a distance, slowly, and producing always the same sensation of indescribable solemnity and fear." One night, however, the experience is varied, and she hears another voice, "sweet and tender, and at the same time terrible, which said, 'Your mother warns you to beware of the assassin.'" Laura awakes with a shriek, to see Carmilla "in her

³ For a full commentary on this scene, see the chapter entitled "The guardian spirit" in *The road to Tryermaine*, pp. 143-52.

white nightdress, bathed . . . in one great stain of blood." Nothing quite so horrible ensues in Christabel's case, except that she is bewildered and tries to quiet Geraldine in what she thinks is the latter's delirium; but the effect of the two scenes is the same.

It is, however, the nature of the relationship between the two pairs of girls that constitutes perhaps the most striking resemblance. Physically, Christabel and Laura seem to have looked much alike. LeFanu's heroine is a conventionally romantic maiden, young (nineteen at the beginning of her account of her adventure), with golden hair and large blue eyes. Coleridge's Christabel is also young and lovely, with ringlet curls and eyes which—the poet reiterates several times—are large and innocently blue. The theatrical contrast between blonde heroine and brunette villainess, however, is drawn more definitely by LeFanu, whose villainess has a rich complexion, small features, large, dark, lustrous eyes (which sometimes become "glittering"), and thick, long, dark-brown hair with a hint of gold in it. Geraldine's skin is very white, her eyes are bright, and she has "gems entangled in her hair." She is described as "tall," "stately," and "lofty." Carmilla, too, is "above middle height," slender and graceful. Geraldine's voice is "faint and sweet"; Carmilla's "very sweet." Carmilla is about the same age as Laura—in appearance, of course, not actuality. Geraldine, too, seems young, since she calls herself the daughter of Sir Leoline's youthful friend Lord Roland, but her dignity makes her seem older than Christabel.

But the remarkable thing about both Geraldine and Carmilla is that, in spite of their horrid intentions and conduct, they are by no means consistently unsympathetic villainesses. Over and over there are

hints that they are not fully responsible for their behavior, and an element of pity and understanding thus enters into the reader's attempt at judgment. It is at once apparent in both cases, of course, that there is something basically sinister in the sweetness and friendliness of Geraldine and Carmilla. They are so desirous of establishing physical contact with their victims that suspicion is immediately aroused. Christabel's fearful dreams as she sleeps in Geraldine's embrace after Geraldine has laid her spell of silence on her as to what she has seen are paralleled by Laura's dreams and frightful nightmares as her intimacy with Carmilla develops. Both victims feel and remember the pain and pangs of the nocturnal attack, and both feel a sense of lassitude and melancholy afterward. Since LeFanu's story covers a period of several months, whereas Coleridge's, being unfinished, extends only over several hours, Laura's symptoms have time to become much more pronounced, but Christabel's immediate future is pretty well indicated. As for the vampires, after the revolting blood transfusions have taken place, Geraldine is so refreshed and revitalized by her "sleep" that the next morning

her girded vests
Grew tight beneath her heaving breasts.

Carmilla also undergoes "delightful" sleep. She looks "charming. Nothing could be more beautiful than her tints." The vampire, of course, always thrives, while the victim goes into a mysterious decline.

But perhaps the main reason for the strange fascination of Coleridge's poem is that Geraldine usurps the place of the heroine in the reader's interest. She seems to be suffering under some strange compulsion. She talks about the unsightly blemish on her breast as "This mark of my

shame, this seal of my sorrow." She struggles against what she has to do. She tells Christabel how "All they who live in the upper sky" love the maid and how

for the good which me befel,
Even I in my degree will try,
Fair maiden, to requite you well.

She echoes Christabel's girlish wish that her mother were there—although she soon thereafter repents her sympathy. Yet Christabel herself feels that "All will yet be well."

Carmilla, too, exercises both repulsion and attraction on the reader as well as on Laura. From the outset, Laura confesses, she was "drawn towards" Carmilla, "but there was also something of repulsion. In this ambiguous feeling, however, the sense of attraction immensely prevailed." But Carmilla's affections and physical fondlings become excessive. They are "like the ardour of a lover." Carmilla, trusting in the other's unsuspecting innocence, describes herself and her condition openly: "In the rapture of my enormous humiliation I live in your warm life, and you shall die—die, sweetly die—into mine. I cannot help it; as I draw near to you, you, in your turn, will draw near to others, and learn the rapture of that cruelty, which yet is love. . . ." She talks of the beauty of dying "as lovers may—to die together so that they may live together." She admits that "every now and then the little strength I have falters," but she still insists, "You must come with me, loving me, to death; or else hate me, and still come with me, and *hating* me through death and after." Over and over she suffers these periods of almost hysterical confession, but nevertheless, LeFanu reminds his readers, "Except in these brief periods of mysterious excitement her ways were girlish." In fact, when Carmilla is viewed in the daytime she is invariably invested

with an aura of half-grudging but sympathetic attraction. It is only during her nocturnal excursions and depredations, in which she takes the form of a monstrous black cat or the "black palpitating mass" of some formless, unidentified creature, or during the final exposure scene, in which the family tomb in the ruins at Karnstein is discovered and its horrible contents destroyed, that her pure repulsiveness is stressed. (Incidentally, just as LeFanu in his portrayal of Carmilla in her vampire state projects her into a vague catlike form and Stoker sets his castle of Dracula in the midst of a region haunted by werewolves, so Coleridge apparently intended to develop a serpent affiliation in Geraldine.)

In both Coleridge and LeFanu, then, the true central characters, the vampires, are paradoxes. They both attract and repel. They are not fully responsible for their actions. Why? LeFanu gives the answer through his expert on vampirology, "that quaint Baron Vordenburg"; it is an answer that Coleridge never explicitly gave but that explains Geraldine's basic motivation. For, as Carmilla inexorably puts it to Laura, "All things proceed from Nature—don't they? All things in heaven, in the earth, and under the earth act as Nature ordains? I think so." The Baron expatiates on this view at the end of the story: "It is the nature of vampires to increase and multiply, but according to an ascertained and ghostly law. . . . A person, more or less wicked, puts an end to himself. A suicide, under certain circumstances, becomes a vampire. That spectre visits living people in their slumbers; *they* die, and almost invariably, in the grave, develop into vampires." Thus innocent persons, through no act or volition of their own, may become vampires.

Early in their acquaintance Carmilla hints to Laura about a serious illness

which attacked her when she was very young. Shortly afterward, when they are gossiping about her first ball, she becomes more pathetically explicit: "I remember everything about it—with an effort. I see it all, as divers see what is going on above them, through a medium dense, rippling, but transparent. There occurred that night what has confused the picture, and made its colours faint. I was all but assassinated in my bed, wounded *here*,"—she touched her breast—"and never was the same since." Though she never puts the charge into words, Vordenburg later makes it clear that at this time she was attacked by a vampire lover. Thus the horrible plague is transmitted until the chain is severed by equally brutal action. Sometimes the vampire, or oupire, attacks people indiscriminately, with quick deaths resulting, as happens in the village near Laura's castle; but at other times it singles out some individual upon whom to prolong its feedings like an epicure—and, it would seem, in its own queer way, to prey upon "with an engrossing vehemence, resembling the passion of love." In these cases it often "seems to yearn for something like sympathy and consent." This sort of tender bloodthirstiness has activated Carmilla, or Millarca, or Mircalla, as she is variously known, until she is ultimately faced with exposure. Then she can give "a glare of skulking ferocity and horror" at her enemy; then "a brutalized change" can come over her features. Just so Geraldine, when Christabel and Bracy are on the verge of unmasking her to Sir Leoline, glowers balefully at Christabel with eyes "Each shrunk up to a serpent's eye," so that the girl stumbles, shudders "with a hissing sound," and falls swooning to the earth. Thus the "true" vampire lore has been exemplified through both Carmilla and Geraldine.

Certain other links between "Carmilla"

and "Christabel" might also be developed, such as the tendency of both authors to introduce moralistic and pious comments on their situations, their emphasis on the theme of friendship and reconciliation after quarrels (through Lord Roland and General Spielsdorf), and their common use of the term "preternatural."⁴ But these are minor matters.

It deserves to be pointed out in conclusion, however, that certain evidence suggests that LeFanu not only knew "Christabel" well but also had followed the controversy about it and was familiar with some of the speculations and interpretations which pursued it.⁵ One aspect of Gillman's continuation has already been referred to—the destruction of Lord Roland's castle. But there were two particularly scandalous explanations of "Christabel" which had been offered in the nineteenth century, both of which are suggested only to be dismissed or tacitly dropped in "Carmilla." Coleridge himself charged William Hazlitt with spreading the report that "Geraldine was a man in disguise" and that therefore "Christabel" had been called "the most obscene Poem in the English Language." To judge from later references, this interpretation evidently made some general impression.⁶ LeFanu is impelled to make Laura herself disclaim this explanation by having her conjecture to herself in chapter iv: "What if a boyish lover had found his way into the house, and sought to prosecute his suit in masquerade, with the assistance of a clever old adventuress? But there were many things against this hypothesis, highly interesting as it was to my vanity." The other scandalous interpretation, also sexu-

⁴ Spielsdorf in chap. x says that he has "been made the dupe of a preternatural conspiracy." For Coleridge's conception of his story see the chapter entitled "A 'romance' of the 'preternatural,'" *Road to Tryermaine*, pp. 185-214.

⁵ See *ibid.*, pp. 28-43.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34, 43.

al, was solidly but equivocally Lesbian. These suggestions are patent all through LeFanu's story, especially in Carmilla's amorous phraseology; a similar interpretation of "Christabel" was obviously in the minds of many of Coleridge's readers and commentators, such as Gillman, but nineteenth-century reticence on such matters was so delicate that one often has to read suspiciously between the lines of the reviews and the continuations to realize what was actually in the minds of the writers. It remained for the twentieth century, in such a book as Roy P. Basler's *Sex, symbolism, and psychology in literature*,⁷ to

⁷ Rutgers University Press, 1949.

expose and discuss openly in scientific terminology the illicit homosexual overtones in the relations between Geraldine and Christabel. A much easier case, of course, though I think not a true one either, could be made from the Carmilla-Laura affair.

Thus this comparison of "Carmilla" and "Christabel" indicates two main conclusions: that LeFanu's story lends some support to the theory that Coleridge's Geraldine was conceived, subtly but essentially, as a vampire, and that the influence of Coleridge's poem was still being felt in Gothic fiction in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

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