

**Western University**

---

**From the Selected Works of Steven Bruhm**

---

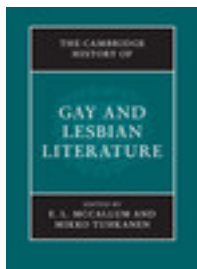
2014

# The Gothic Novel and the Negotiation of Homophobia.pdf

Steven Bruhm

## Cambridge Histories Online

<http://universitypublishingonline.org/cambridge/histories/>



The Cambridge History of Gay and Lesbian Literature

Edited by E. L. McCallum, Mikko Tuhkanen

Book DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CHO9781139547376>

Online ISBN: 9781139547376

Hardback ISBN: 9781107035218

### Chapter

15 - The Gothic Novel and the Negotiation of Homophobia pp. 272-287

Chapter DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CHO9781139547376.019>

Cambridge University Press

## The Gothic Novel and the Negotiation of Homophobia

STEVEN BRUHM

### God Hates Fangs!

– although He does seem partial to puns. The play between “fangs” and “fags” that moves across the opening credits of the HBO television series *True Blood* neatly encapsulates the equation that critics of the “gay and lesbian Gothic” have understood to be present in the genre since its inception in the 1760s: that is, in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s often-quoted assertion that “[t]he Gothic novel crystallized for English audiences the terms of a dialectic between homosexuality and homophobia, in which homophobia appeared thematically in paranoid plots” (92). Locating the rise of that paranoid plot within the narratives of three Gothic novelists who were each “in some significant sense homosexual – Beckford notoriously, Lewis probably, Walpole iffily” (92), Sedgwick’s *Between Men* itself crystallizes a critical tradition that stretches back at least as far as Montague Summers’s reading of Matthew Lewis in *The Gothic Quest* (1938) and that inflects every sustained discussion of homosexuality and the Gothic (at least the male Gothic) of the past three decades. Thus George Haggerty: “The connections between the history of sexuality (and the growth of sexology) and the gothic are not necessarily coincidental. They haunt each other with similarities” (*Queer* 51). Or Paulina Palmer: “The association of the vampire with the period of twilight, since the sunset is supposed to liberate her from her coffin and permit her to venture abroad to stalk her prey, is pertinent in metaphoric terms to the closeted lesbian who, having concealed her sexual orientation during the day, emerges at night to seek romance in the half-lit world of clubs and bars” (102). Or me: “After fifteen years of teaching Gothic literature and queer theory, I have come to regard the phrase ‘Gothic sexualities’ as self-evident, even somewhat redundant. . . . Sexuality, as it comes to us through a history of Freudian, post-Freudian and queer thought, is nothing short of Gothic in its ability to rupture, fragment, and destroy both the coherence of the individual subject and of the culture in which that subject

appears” (Bruhm 93). If Alan Ball’s recent *True Blood* can invoke the language of equal rights, of “coming out of the closet” and “assimilating,” to refer to vampires instead of – or as well as – queer people, that is because *True Blood* is recycling a centuries-old affiliation between the Gothic and the gay; it can only use parodic humor, rather than the heuristics of urgent discovery, to talk about the Gothic and homophobia.

Yet a narrative like *True Blood* also records a fracture in the Gothic-homosexual-homophobia trajectory that it is my purpose in this chapter to consider. As devotees of the series will know, “gay liberation,” along with the American Civil Rights movement, provides the language of the vampires’ legitimacy struggles in a post-George W. Bush America, and works to establish what some critics have recently named “queer liberalism,” the fully assimilated enjoyment of rights and privileges not just *in spite of*, but sometimes *because of*, claiming a homosexual subject position (Eng, Halberstam, and Munoz 10). But as devotees of the series will also know, the liberation of gays *qua* gays, or lesbians *qua* lesbians, is little in evidence. The benevolent gay vampire Eddie Gauthier of Seasons 1–2 is staked into oblivion; the vicious gay vampire Talbot, lover of the even more vicious and unassimilating Russell Edginton, is staked in Season 3 with Russell to follow shortly thereafter; and while Steve Newlin remains undead and well at the end of Season 5, his combination of perfidy and fundamentalist Christian smarminess assures his gay viewers’ disidentification with him and our wish for his death. Things are faring a little better for lesbians: at the end of Season 5 queer vampires Tara and Pam seem to be doing all right, but as we watch their newly found bliss we remember the hypocritical antisex lesbian vampire and head of American Vampire League Nan Flanagan who met the true death in the previous season. What we might see as gay plotlines in *True Blood*, then, are tangential: overall the series built on the rhetoric of gay liberation focuses on heterosexual plots and conventionally straight love triangles in a way that deploys the language of gayness to render gayness irrelevant.

It is this sense of irrelevancy, of occlusion or indirection, by which I want to consider the classic Gothic novel and its negotiations of homophobia. For if homosex is not a central thematic or a representational topos for a twenty-first-century television show, it is even less a representational topos for the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic novel, at least as far as men are concerned. A genre that is notorious for its presentation of verboten sex acts – voyeurism, rape, incest, sexual torture and bondage, adultery, cuckoldry, “illegitimate” pregnancy – the classic British Gothic, to the best of my knowledge, presents *no* scenes of male-male sodomy, no direct homosexuality that might

join the parade of spectacularized perversions or narrative sensationalisms. Nor does it identify a male sodomite as one of myriad religious or judicial transgressors, even though such an identification would make for a graphic and predictable scene of phobic punishment. This, to my mind, is a remarkable lacuna, one that cannot be explained with references to literary history or censorship practices. We had seen male-male sex acts earlier in the century, in John Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1748) and Tobias Smollett's *Adventures of Peregrine Pickle* (1751),<sup>1</sup> and eighteenth-century French pornography did not stint on the spectacle of male homosexual sex – Sade is enough to cite here (see Hanson, Tuite, and Stoddart) – but no British homophobic Gothic depicts its *homophobia* with the object lesson of the *homosexual*. No version of the disgust expressed by Fanny Hill or Peregrine Pickle over the spectacle of the sodomite finds its Gothic equivalent in a genre willing to depict for us the pulverized mass of a Mother Superior's corpse (see Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*) or the teeth marks that lacerate a dead couple's body as, incarcerated and starved, they turn cannibal to prolong their miserable lives (see Robert Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*). The Gothic novel, at least prior to the Stonewall Resistance Riot of 1969, and at least in its male characters, is profoundly reticent about the spectacle of direct homophobia, as reticent as it is about the spectacle of homosexuality. How might we understand this?

### Homophobia: The Gothic's Back Side

To approach the dialogue between the structuring principle of homophobia in the early Gothic novel and the novel's remarkable silence on the topic of male-male sexual relations, we must return to Sedgwick's formative work in *Between Men*. Like the classic Gothic novel itself, Sedgwick's book is less concerned with a "distinctively . . . homosexual experience" than with the "shape of the entire male homosocial spectrum" (90) – although, strangely enough, the "entire homosocial spectrum" here occludes the homosexual in the Gothic, and thus isn't "entire" at all. For Sedgwick, the performative effects of *homophobia* in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century British culture would not find their expression in "a comparable body of *homosexual* thematics" until the late Victorian Gothic (92; emphasis added), in novels such as Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Richard Marsh's *The Beetle*. And even in those novels, or in the equally suggestive *Dracula*, male homoeros remains at the level of innuendo, indirection, or threat.<sup>2</sup> In the criticism that follows Sedgwick, the early Gothic novel becomes a "homosexual" genre not just because it articulates the place of homophobia in panics among

powerful, entitled, fraudtly domesticated white men of the middle classes, but also because it brings together two other richly connotative and resonant forces within readerly practice: the reference to authorial biography where the author's homosexuality appears "only rather sketchily" in the fiction (92) – notoriously, probably, iffily – and the invocation of and transformation by the emerging middle class of a series of tropes (metonyms, to be exact) of what twentieth-century readers will come to regard as unquestionably signifying of homosexuality. I will return momentarily to the question of biography; the metonyms to which I refer are, for Sedgwick as well as for most queer readings of the Gothic, "the feminization of the aristocracy"; the "connoisseurship" and high theatricality of Continental Roman Catholicism (93); the predominance of the "unspeakable" as the crime "'not to be named among Christian men,'" that is, the crime of sodomy (94); the interchangeability or mutual penetration of male psyches; and the geography of the hidden, the rear, the postern, the filthy, the excremental (see Haggerty *Queer*; Showalter). When we would uncover queer men in the classic Gothic novel, we need first beat the metonymic bushes of tropes that conceal them.

The role of metonym as the predominant trope in Gothic representations of homophobia is critically important because, if metonym constitutes the homosexual-homophobic relation in the Gothic, it displaces it at the same time. This constitution via displacement has a material history, and establishes something we might think of as a queer temporality. In *Homographesis* (1994), Lee Edelman returns to Michel Foucault's famous (and now shop-worn) thesis that, in the nineteenth century, the sodomite moved from being the agent of particular religious and juridical behaviors to the status of "homosexual," a subject, a case history, a "species" (Foucault 43). For Edelman, this move is, among other things, the transformation of rhetorical tropes: the homosexual body as Foucault describes it, Edelman argues, becomes "a visible emblem or metaphor for the 'singular nature' that now defines or identifies a specifically homosexual type of person" (8). But the metaphorical stability arising from such an act of identification – an identification following the grammar "this is that," "this body is that sexuality" – can only be constituted retroactively through a reading (or misreading) of metonym, where a certain set of actions, appearances, or affiliations come to mean in a stable and legible way. What for Foucault becomes a "sexuality" in a historical, juridical, and political sense becomes "sexuality" for Jacques Lacan in the psychoanalytic registers of an hypostatized "desire." As Edelman suggests, sexuality as read through Lacan "comes into existence when desire" – whose chief trope is metonymy, a leading toward or affiliation, rather than an identification with – "is misrecognized

or tropologically misinterpreted as a metaphor” (8). Thus, “sexuality cannot be identified with the metonymic without acknowledging that the very act of identification through which it is constituted *as* sexuality is already a positing of its meaning in terms of a metaphoric coherence and necessity” (8). As Lacan would have it, metonymy and its misidentification is what makes possible the stabilizing equations of metaphor, just as for Foucault and Edelman, the metonymic had not only to be in place to produce the metaphoric “homosexual” but it has to be identified in retrospect as having been metonymic, not to the thing itself so much as to an affiliation, an association, a connotation.

What is at stake for Edelman in this rhetorical maneuvering is what I want to bring to the Gothic novel and its alleged negotiations of homophobia. With resounding Foucauldian echoes, Edelman argues that “the historical [nineteenth-century] investiture of sexuality with a metaphoric rather than a metonymic significance made it possible to search for signifiers that would testify to the presence of this newly posited sexual identity or ‘essence’” (9). That “search for signifiers” belongs as much to the literary critic as it does to the nineteenth-century physician, pastor, or pedagogue, and its result, I want to suggest, has been to frame in certain ways a Gothic negotiation of homophobia that we might do well to rethink. For if, as Foucault and Edelman suggest, a certain kind of metaphoric retroactivity redoubles upon nodal points of meaning and turns them into metonyms that make “homosexual Gothic” possible – that is, they make homosexuality legible on the Gothic body – then something might be gained in disentangling the homosexual from the paranoid, the metaphor from the metonym, the notorious from the iffy, and to ask again what interventions the Gothic might make in the spectacle of normative sexual relations.

### *The Monk: Beyond Gay Affirmation*

In what follows, then, I want to return to two Gothic narratives from the long nineteenth-century Anglo-Irish tradition: Lewis’s 1796 novel *The Monk*, and Sheridan Le Fanu’s 1872 novella “Carmilla.” I am foregrounding these two works for a number of reasons. First, each has become a lightning rod for thinking about homosexuality and the Gothic. A critical empire has arisen around each work, an empire whose borders and central administration have helped to determine what homophobia might look like in the Gothic. Second, these works divide along gender lines so that a curious homosexual reticence in *The Monk* contrasts sharply with “Carmilla,” which all but blatantly presents sex between women. *The Monk*, as Clara Tuite writes, “does not uncover, . . .

does *not* present . . . the romance plot of monastic male homoeroticism” (par. 11); “Carmilla,” on the other hand, shares with Coleridge’s Gothic *Christabel* (1797–1800) sites of lesbian sex that are not just to dream of but to tell. If the classic Gothic could occlude the site of male-male sex, whose presence is detectable only through the rhetorical double-speak of metonymy, the Gothic makes women’s same-sex pleasure too legible; it inscribes lesbianism directly on the body. How might this matter in a canon of texts produced in the white, middle-class, Anglo-American tradition that many contemporary queer critics would have us abandon as the work of ethnocentric, Caucasian navel-gazing whose politics can at best be dubious if not downright spurious (see Eng et al.)? I focus on Lewis and Le Fanu here because their critical interplay of metaphor and metonymy produces broader critical practices that we might find useful for thinking about all Gothic texts, all Gothic bodies on display. At a critical moment that has wanted to stabilize and speak from the abjected body and its epistemes, we would do well to remain aware of some dubious metaphoricalities.

Given both *The Monk*’s popularity and its rhizomatic sprawl, any attempt at summarizing the plot of the novel or indexing all its queer moments would prove futile. However, one particular narrative thread does mesmerize queer critics: the Ambrosio-Rosario/Matilda story. Ambrosio, the charismatic and pious head of the Church of the Capuchins in Madrid, has befriended a young novice named Rosario, a youth legible to us at first as a closet case: “A sort of mystery enveloped this youth”; “His hatred of society, his profound melancholy . . . attracted the notice of the whole fraternity”; “He seemed fearful of being recognized” (66); and of course there is his “respect approaching idolatry” of the monk Ambrosio, whose company he sought “with the most attentive assiduity” and into whose favor he “eagerly seized every means to ingratiate himself” (67). To good effect, too: “Ambrosio on his side did not feel less attracted towards the youth; with him alone did he lay aside his habitual severity. When he spoke to him, he insensibly assumed a tone milder than was usual to him; and no voice sounded so sweet to him as did Rosario’s” (67). It is not long, however, before Rosario makes his great confession to his father-confessor: “father! . . . I am a woman!” (79). In short time, the two have sex and Matilda – the now unveiled seductress – facilitates for Ambrosio the sexual access to Antonia, a beautiful but naïve maiden whom the monk rapes, kills, and then discovers is his sister. Ambrosio’s personal shame in all of this is mitigated only by the fact that Lucifer had stage-managed the whole affair, having the “subordinate but crafty spirit” Matilda assume the guise of the Virgin Mary (361), an image of whom Ambrosio had kept in his cell as a spiritual-cum-erotic



aid. At novel's end, Matilda flees the prison of the Inquisition, where she and Ambrosio have been imprisoned (all part of Lucifer's deceptive game) while the monk, having sold his soul to the devil, perishes in a graphic six-day-long torture.

In what remains one of the most sophisticated and enabling readings of this plot trajectory, Tuite argues that it presents, explodes, and then retroactively reconstitutes a homoerotic relationship that is "specifically pedagogical and pederastic, the kind of relationship which Foucault has defined in *The Use of Pleasure* as a characteristic homoerotic relationship between a younger and older man, based on an erotics of restraint, or 'self-denial.' In this erotic economy, whilst desire is repressed or regulated it is still present as a specific form of desire" (par. 11). Living in his all-male paradise of subordinate and adoring monks, Ambrosio has in Rosario his "sexual object . . . safely repressed" (par. 12), so that the youth's "coming out" as a woman "is in fact not an unveiling but a re-veiling in female costume, one step in an ongoing transvestist game by the Devil" (par. 15). The heterosexual excess that ensues is, for Tuite, made possible by the homoerotic energies established before the unveiling, and retroactively makes of that male bond a sexualized, if unacted on, energy that comes to hold the status of a metonymy for the lustful engagements that follow it (par. 16). For Tuite, this metonymizing then comments on the ways homophobia comes to constitute the precarious life of heterosexuality in the late eighteenth century: "This transvestist-crossing instantiates within the text the structural principle of homosexual panic – a denial of and flight from the blackmailability of homosexual implication, into a parodic version of heterosexual relations, a kind of hyper-heterosexuality" (par. 15).<sup>3</sup> For other critics who follow Sedgwick's model of homosexual paranoia, the unveiling establishes a kind of camp excess that displays in microcosm the novel's larger interest in "'camp,' pastiche, role-playing, excess and androgyny – in other words, with a self-dramatizing self-fashioning" that "insists upon the mobility, and provisionality, of identity," as Robert Miles puts it (45, 53). For Max Fincher, such camp has all the earmarks of an early Judith Butler queer strategy, performing the "'failure' and 'confusion' of the readability and intelligibility of gender 'identity'" so that Matilda's supernaturalism "works as a metaphor for exposing the constructedness of the discourse of naturalized behavior, including sex/gender roles and desires" (par. 3, 7).

True to her reading of Sedgwick, Tuite offers a subtle analysis of how an affectionate, erotic relationship between men comes to be circumscribed by the paranoia of blackmailability and the seeming "protective gesture" of heterosexual or "straight" desire (par. 31), a gesture related directly to identity

politics. While such a move has enabled much queer reading of the Gothic, it is, in the case of *The Monk*, a problematic swerve away from what actually happens in the narrative. Tuite's argument that heterosexuality relegates the homosexual to the closet – thus to fears of blackmailability – actually displaces the fear from the site at which it exists: in heterosexual relations. Ambrosio is in danger – of discovery, of disgrace, of immortal perdition – only by virtue of Matilda's presence *as a woman* in the monastery. It is her sex, and not Rosario's purported "sexuality," that renders Ambrosio vulnerable; and his decision to allow Matilda to remain in the convent after she has "come out" is second only in foolishness to his allowing her to inflame his desires for Antonia. The critical sleight-of-hand I'm seeing in such queerings of *The Monk* is further achieved by anachronistic citations of metaphor and metonymy. Writes Tuite: "The text's strategy of Enlightenment exposure and revelation uses heterosexual sex to closet a homosexual metonym," so that the novel enacts "a gesture of *protective* closeting in the wider cultural context of homosexual persecution" (par. 20). Just as the homosexual resonances of all Gothic tropes acquire their homosexual meaning in retrospect – that is, just as homosexuality always comes from behind – so do we see it here, so that homophobia comes to control a scene where it is the destructive force of heterosexuality that is really at stake.<sup>4</sup>

This (mis)reading of homophobia in *The Monk* proceeds from the will to knowledge that critical historicism has produced at least since the 1980s. Miles convincingly notes how biographical concerns have shaped criticism of *The Monk* so that the "open secret" of Lewis's homosexuality compels us to read the novel within the personal and political landscape of sodomy in 1790s Britain. For Miles, this landscape is easy to map, for, like the topology of *Pilgrim's Progress*, it constitutes a series of stable metaphors producing allegory: "For those so minded to read [*The Monk*] as homosexual allegory, Ambrosio's spectacular punishment [in the final pages] takes on the character of a sodomite in the stocks experiencing the rough justice of the crowd" (54). While I agree that the affiliation between this condemned apostate rapist and the persecuted sodomite might tell us something about the public taste for spectacular punishments, I'm less convinced by the ease with which the author's purported "sexuality" anchors the sexual politics of the "homosexual Gothic" as Sedgwick identified it. And there is remarkable ease here: George Haggerty claims that "Lewis's repressed Monk becomes the pretext for both sexual fantasy and social retribution. Lewis too *must be playing out the drama* of his worst fears about himself and his place in society" ("Literature" 349, emphasis added)<sup>5</sup>; Jerrold Hogle argues that, "[a]s [Horace] Walpole does

in thus tracing and erasing his own sexual preference in and from his book [*The Castle of Otranto*], Lewis both acts out and conceals that kind of desire, flirting with but finally resisting any ‘coming out’” (par. 9); William Brewer quotes Lorne Macdonald as arguing that the bloody death of the Prioress is “the revenge fantasy of a man whose sexuality put him a lifelong risk” – the “length” of the “life” in question being a whole nineteen years (qtd. in Brewer 136). There is something seductive and enabling about these conclusions, appearing as they do in the bright epistemological glow of New Historicist, gay-affirmative readings, but there is also something profoundly counterintuitive as well. These critics imagine a Gothic novelist’s negotiation of homophobia as yet another case study in Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*: the confession, the making public of a discursive “truth” about the self, the indulgent pursuit of “*the perpetual spirals of power and pleasure*” in which Lewis teasingly gives us his horrors/fears, his innocence/fantasies, his sufferings, and his damnable desires (Foucault 45). In this reading, Gothic novels are less novels than they are creative autobiographies – and we might pause to wonder whether a subject wishing to confess to a desire that might see him hanged on the morrow would turn to the mode of the Gothic, with its derogatory status of brainless monstrosity, its dubious audience of middle-class women readers, and its laughably formulaic conventions of character appearance and behavior.

### *Carmilla*: Go Forth and Metonymize

If *The Monk* offers its readers a series of anachronistically understood metonyms that can be pressed to cohere in the legible figure of “the homosexual,” Le Fanu’s “Carmilla” offers a very different experience. As many readers will know, “Carmilla” is the narrative of a young woman named Laura, who lives with her father in a remote castle in the Austrian province of Styria. Her mother having died in Laura’s infancy, the protagonist is raised by female attendants, is visited by young ladies from far-neighboring communities, and is only periodically conversant with her benevolent but distant father. At age six, she experiences what she believes is a dream in which a young lady with a “very pretty face” appears at her bedside, places her hands under the coverlet to caress and soothe her, and then crawls into bed with her and pierces her breast before disappearing (277). This dream figure appears to Laura again thirteen years later, as Laura is recovering from the disappointment of learning that the lovely young Bertha Rheinfeldt will not be coming for a visit (because, we will learn, Bertha has been killed by a vampire). The mysterious dream-woman,

now flesh and blood, calls herself Carmilla and is left at the castle by her equally mysterious mother. The story then recounts Carmilla's attempts to seduce Laura – into intimacy, into sex, and into death. Laura writes:

She used to place her pretty arms about my neck, draw me to her, and laying her cheek to mine, murmur with her lips near my ear, "Dearest, your little heart is wounded; think me not cruel because I obey the irresistible law of my strength and weakness; if your dear heart is wounded, my wild heart bleeds with yours. 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; so, for a while, seek to know no more of me and mine, but trust me with all your loving spirit." (291)

This deadly sex-talk, we learn, has been Carmilla's *modus operandi* for destroying other young women, currently and in the historical past. Carmilla is actually the ghostly revenant of Mircalla, countess of the neighboring castle of Karnstein, who, for lo these many, has been performing her lesbian vampiric ways on the young, almost innocent, and almost unwilling women of the land.

As an ur-text of the negotiation of lesbian homophobia in the Anglo-Irish tradition (an honor it shares with *Christabel*), "Carmilla" has a lot to negotiate. The vampire's seductive beauty, her languorous demeanor, her familial vulnerability (like so many Ann Radcliffe heroines, she depends on the kindness of strangers in castles while her parents are either dead or absent) – all these factors have helped us to read Carmilla as a somewhat reluctant villain. As early as 1949, Arthur H. Nethercot argued that Carmilla, like Coleridge's Geraldine, is, "in spite of [her] horrid intentions and conduct, . . . by no means consistently unsympathetic" (35). For every part vampire, Carmilla is also part damsel in distress, and for every part distressed damsel, Carmilla is also, for feminist and antihomophobic readers, an agent of sexual liberation. Elizabeth Signorotti, following Sue-Ellen Case, claims that Le Fanu's text holds out the possibility that lesbianism is "healthy and vital" (611), existing as it does in "a province, far removed from England, where women are free to express their sexuality" (628); and Paulina Palmer, following Nina Auerbach, asserts that Carmilla "has the courage to act on her desires and form a relationship that is overtly sexual" (100). This salubrious freedom, courage, and ennobling vitality not only animate Carmilla but infect (Le Fanu's favorite image) the passive and isolated Laura as well: "Despite her long absence" of thirteen years, Carmilla's initial visit and penetration, argues Signorotti, "introduces Laura to the liberating exchange of female sexuality and begins the process of

Laura's ontological shifting" (612). That shifting, according to William Veeder, is toward the utopian goal of self-knowledge, a "complete understanding" (217) of who Laura is and what she wants.

In my reading of *The Monk* and its critics, lines of desirous flight coalesce into a centralizing identity of a Homosexual Author writing his experiences as code within and against a homophobic culture. Antihomophobic critics have read these lines of flight as metonyms-begetting-metaphors, and thus of identity writ large. Something similar happens in "Carmilla," only in reverse. Despite the praise of Carmilla's queerness quoted earlier, her readers, it seems, are as interested in how she *doesn't* signify as lesbian as they are in how she does. While there is nothing very jaw-dropping in Nethercot's conclusion that a thoroughgoing analysis of the Laura-Carmilla relation as lesbian would not be a "true one" (exactly what is "lesbian truth," one wonders, for this critic in 1949?), for later, more liberal critics, lesbianism only makes sense in a larger signifying chain of social and political meanings. Helen Stoddart, one of the tale's most astute and subtle readers, argues that while Carmilla "represents aristocratic female homosexual desire . . . the physical nature of the relationship between the narrator and the vampire is a far cry from mutual lesbian desire and can more clearly be seen in this light as a masculine fantasy of and about lesbianism" (32). The heart of this fantasy, she says, is the vampire's attack on "the socio-economic exigencies of a particular late-Victorian, British, bourgeois masculinism" (28). Following Gayatri Spivak, Stoddart locates Carmilla's threat in "the crucial connexions between nineteenth-century literature and the discourse of imperialism which it served," so that Carmilla's lesbianism comes metonymically to encode larger Victorian anxieties about Darwinian evolution, primitivism, and imperialism's "drive" to civilize and subjectivate those still on the periphery of the human:

In the haunting and persecution of the living [Carmilla] hauls her victims down the Darwinian ladder and back from the subjectivity, which is the end point of this drive [e.g., the drive to civilize and humanize], to a state slippery with wanton degeneration into pre-evolutionary bestiality. So-called civil society cannot expect compliance or respect from those not in the first place "rational" human beings and must be anxious, therefore, to eliminate such aliens from its map. (31–32)

Like Veeder, who argues that the text's lesbianism is a mere occasion for Victorianism's larger concerns regarding repression *tout court* (198), for Stoddart the lesbian makes most sense when she is about something else, about historical, colonial, masculinist pursuits. In these readings, lesbian pleasure in "Carmilla" exists to take us away from lesbian pleasure in "Carmilla," to

witness tropologically its insignificance to “larger” questions of the national, the political, and the psychological.

Central to this metonymizing reading of lesbianism in “Carmilla” is the figuration of the vampire as “sterile.” In the text’s final paragraphs, Baron Vordenburg describes the “birth” of the vampire as occurring in one of two ways: first, “[a] person, more or less wicked, puts an end to himself. A suicide, under certain circumstances, becomes a vampire”; second, “[t]hat spectre visits living people in their slumbers; *they* die, and almost invariably, in the grave, develop into vampires” (338). Stoddart reads this recipe alongside the story’s emphasis on the Karnsteins’ dead maternal line, Carmilla’s (and later Laura’s) languorous weakness, and Sedgwick’s reflections on the irrelevant, “otiose” quality of the aristocracy, and locates the text’s central homophobia in the vampire’s inability to contribute to the bourgeois project by bearing children. “She is incapable of reproducing,” writes Stoddart: “the vampire’s sterile, disembodied liaisons mimetically spread; sterile because, though they involve multiplication of their own kind, within the theme of contagion this is still a form of infection which may never involve reproductive embodiment” (31, 28). Palmer agrees, and more: “the association of the vampire with sterility and death is also, sad to say, applicable from a homophobic point of view to the figure of the lesbian” (102). Of course, both critics know that the vampire *does* reproduce – she makes other vampires – but in Stoddart’s estimation, there is nothing life-giving or affirmative about such birthing: the story’s lesbianism is “female sexuality, not turned toward itself but turning on itself, and the result is not desire for love but cruelty, possession, contagion, and, potentially, death” (32).<sup>6</sup>

### Driving Stakes, and the Stakes of the Drive

“Never [to] involve reproductive embodiment”: herein lies the tragedy of the lesbian vampire, just as it constitutes the great human tragedy of Dracula who, according to his wives, has never loved and knows not what love is. Herein lies the association with narcissism and death that, sad to say, still haunts lesbians and gay men in the twenty-first century. (Shall we invoke *True Blood* once again?) But why so sad? Before we see such textual and social homophobia as an attack on our dignity, we might also wonder whether to prefer “sterility” if sterility’s opposite – compulsory reproduction – might itself be something that queers want to resist. (Or some do, at any rate.) Indeed, a figure like Carmilla may answer just as richly to Edelman’s call for the “queer” *not* to be a metaphor for “embodied reproduction,” for social and civil belonging,

or for the seamless subjectivity of bourgeois fantasy. Carmilla's purported sterility might instead insist on itself as its own end, or on a figuring of the refusal of reproduction and its attendant normatives – heterosexual monogamy, childbearing, and submission to the call for a better future of civil society. In other words, the sterily reproductive Carmilla might be a figure for what the queer "ought" to do, according to Edelman: "queerness *should* and *must* redefine such notions as 'civil order' through a rupturing of our foundational faith in the reproduction of futurity" (*No Future* 16–17). Indeed, for Edelman this faith includes the identification and eradication of homophobia by "allowing" homosexuals their "full place" within society, as if such a full place were possible, let alone desirable. Instead, for Edelman the death drive that might characterize an anti-maternal vampire like Carmilla "names what the queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability" (9).

The rupturing death drive of which Edelman writes here is similar to that which frames the Gothic's negotiation of homophobia, the same rupturing that might move us beyond "homophobia" – at least provisionally – as the anchoring point for queer readings of the mode. Let us return to Carmilla's pillow talk with Laura, and to that promise of "the rapture of my enormous humiliation" – "the rapture of that cruelty" – "whereby I live in your warm life, and you shall die – die, sweetly die – into mine" (291). This promise that "I would live in you; and you would die for me" comes to Laura as "tumultuous" and death-producing, a seduction into unconsciousness and into "dim thoughts of death" that are "not unwelcome" (300, 292, 307, 307). (And Stoddart ponders long on Laura's attractions to this sexuality and its concomitant refusal of childbearing.) Carmilla's rapture is also a rupture, an "enormous humiliation" of the ego that would otherwise guarantee self-identity and that is here is jubilantly sacrificed in an "unaccountable" jouissance (308). This rapture/rupture is an allegiance to that "irresistible law" of the drive, the drive of sex, which is also the drive of death, the drive to which the queerest of Gothic characters are proudly in thrall. It is the same enthralling drive whose effects Matilda of *The Monk* will describe to Ambrosio as she urges their mutual escape from the prisons of the Inquisition: it is "the power of procuring every bliss which can make [...] life delicious!," the "unrestrained ... gratification of my senses ... indulged even to satiety," the invention of "new pleasures, to revive and stimulate my gluttoned appetites" (Lewis 353). In a world of moral idealism and socially responsible concerns for human dignity, these imagined pleasures are selfish, murderous, suicidal. But in a world of fantasy, in fictions that might engage a queer reader beset by commands to be

otherwise responsible for normative standards, these libidinous promises have more than a little attractiveness. Queer not just for their crossdressing or their lesbian desire, Matilda and Carmilla infect and destroy with the teasing allure of sexuality lived otherwise.

In his analysis of *The Monk*, Peter Brooks notes Tzvetan Todorov's argument that "the fantastic, especially in its diabolical manifestations, is born of the psychological experience of limit situations, extreme moments of desire" (256). That experience of limit situations is, for Brooks, at the heart of Ambrosio's tragedy, as "His tale is one of Eros denied, only to reassert itself with the force of vengeance, to smite him" (257). In his analysis of Sigmund Freud, Leo Bersani argues that such limit situations, such extreme moments of desire, also produce what we call sexuality. For Bersani, sexuality names not an ossified identity or catalogue of preferences but an experience surpassing the boundaries of median stimulation, of shattering the ego that would otherwise delimit us from our sensual surroundings (38–39). It has been my contention in this chapter that the search and rescue mission of detecting gays and lesbians as victims of homophobia in the Gothic has left us trapped in a hermeneutic circle that can only assuredly provide us with what we have been looking for: evidence of phobic persecution. I am suggesting instead that the Gothic propensity to shatter bodies and souls be read alongside the queer propensity to shatter egos and identities that have been sexualized as gay or straight by a culture that fetishizes such identity. In this reading, the "homo" under duress may be less the persecuted or abjected sexual pervert than it is the determined, the stable, the legible self of Western modernity.

#### Notes

1. Here I part from Miles, who reads heterosexual incest in Lewis as "a cipher for a yet more heinous – within the codes of polite writing, a literally unspeakable – desire" (52), the desire for same-sex pleasure. The eighteenth-century novel *has* spoken this desire at length, and the Gothic novel hardly qualifies as "polite writing." For a discussion of the sodomitic episodes in Smollett and Cleland, see Edelman, *Homographesis* ch. 10.
2. In his crucial study of *Dracula*, Craft notes a similar presence of the homoerotic encased by the will not to represent the homoerotic. As Dracula creates females as surrogates to perform his own will – a will that involves penetration and ownership of the men in the novel – he fulfills an otherwise "unfulfilled sexual ambition" (Craft 110). "Always postponed and never directly enacted," "Dracula's desire to fuse with a male . . . finds evasive fulfillment in an important series of heterosexual displacements. . . . The novel, nonetheless, does not



dismiss homoerotic desire and threat; rather, it simply continues to diffuse and displace it" (110–11). As with the earlier Gothic fictions I name, this reticence is explained in terms of "the gender-anxious culture" from which the novel arose.

3. Jones makes a similar argument. For her, all Ambrosio's erotic objects are metonyms whose referent is the mother (134).
4. Tuite is specific about Catholicism's affiliation with the homosexual, what Sedgwick delightfully called "the King James Version" (93; qtd. in Tuite par. 22) as one such telling metonym.
5. Haggerty performs a similar lamination of William Beckford's sexual life onto his fiction. Of Gulchenrouz, the child-figure in *Vathek* who closes the novel as innocent as he began, Haggerty writes: "Beckford's lament for his own lost innocence cannot be far from the surface here, nor need we look much further to explain the impetus behind his notorious pederasty" ("Literature" 347–48). In Haggerty's estimation, "*Vathek* becomes in a sense a testimony to the horror with which he contemplated his own internal paradox of innocent love and damning desire or reacted to the social repulsion that greeted publication of his sexual self" (348). "[T]his novel is an elaborate *metaphor* for Beckford's private suffering" (348; emphasis added).
6. So too for Veeder, who argues of Laura's melancholy that her "sexual incompleteness which makes transcendence impossible makes death inevitable" (216).

#### Works Cited

- Bersani, Leo. *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art*. New York: Columbia UP, 1986. Print.
- Brewer, William D. "Transgendering in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*." *Gothic Studies* 6.2 (2004): 192–209. Print.
- Brooks, Peter. "Virtue and Terror: *The Monk*." *ELH* 40.2 (1973): 249–63. Print.
- Bruhm, Steven. "Gothic Sexualities." *Teaching the Gothic*. Ed. Anna Powell and Andrew Smith. Houndsmills: Palgrave, 2006. 93–106. Print.
- Craft, Christopher. "'Kiss Me with those Red Lips': Gender and Inversion in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*." *Representations* 8 (1984): 107–33. Print.
- Edelman, Lee. *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke UP, 2004. Print.
- Eng, David L., Judith Halberstam, and José Esteban Muñoz. "What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?" *Social Text* 23.3–4 (2005): 1–17. Print.
- Fincher, Max. "The Gothic as Camp: Queer Aesthetics in *The Monk*." *Romanticism on the Net*. 44 (2006): n.pag. *éruudit.org*. Web. 18 November 2012.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, 1990. Print.
- Haggerty, George E. "Literature and Homosexuality in the Late Eighteenth Century: Walpole, Beckford, and Lewis." *Studies in the Novel* 18.4 (1986): 341–52. Print.

## The Gothic Novel and the Negotiation of Homophobia

- Queer Gothic*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2006. Print.
- Hanson, Ellis. "Undead." *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*. Ed. Diana Fuss. New York: Routledge, 1991. 324–40. Print.
- Hogle, Jerrold E. "The Ghost of the Counterfeit – and the Closet – in *The Monk*." 1997. *Romanticism on the Net* 8 (1997): n.pag. *érudit.org*. Web. 18 November 2012.
- Jones, Wendy. "Stories in Desire in *The Monk*." *ELH* 57.1 (1990): 129–50. Print.
- Le Fanu, J. Sheridan. "'Carmilla.'" *Best Ghost Stories of J.S. Le Fanu*. New York: Dover, 1964. 274–339. Print.
- Lewis, Matthew Gregory. *The Monk: A Romance*. Ed. D. L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf. Peterborough: Broadview P, 2004. Print.
- Macdonald, D. Lorne. *Monk Lewis: A Critical Biography*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2000. Print.
- Miles, Robert. "Anne Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis." *A Companion to the Gothic*. Ed. David Punter. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000. 41–57. Print.
- Nethercot, Arthur H. "Coleridge's 'Christabel' and Lefanu's 'Carmilla.'" *Modern Philology* 47.1 (1949): 32–38. Print.
- Palmer, Paulina. *Lesbian Gothic: Transgressive Fictions*. London: Cassell, 1999. Print.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia UP, 1985. Print.
- Showalter, Elaine. "Dr. Jekyll's Closet." *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*. New York: Penguin, 1990. 105–26. Print.
- Signorotti, Elizabeth. "Repossessing the Body: Transgressive Desire in 'Carmilla' and Dracula." *Criticism* 38.4 (1996): 607–32. Print.
- Stoddart, Helen. "'The Precautions of Nervous People Are Infectious': Sherida le Fanu's Symptomatic Gothic." *The Modern Language Review* 86.1 (1991): 19–34. Print.
- True Blood*. Dir. Alan Ball et al. Perf. Stephen Moyer, Alexander Skarsgard, and Anna Paquin. 2008–13. DVD.
- Tuite, Clara. "Cloistered Closets: Enlightenment Pornography, the Confessional State, Homosexual Persecution in *The Monk*." *Romanticism on the Net*. 8 (1997): n.pag. *érudit.org*. Web. 18 November 2012.
- Veeder, William. "Carmilla: The Arts of Repression." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 22.2 (1980): 197–223. Print.