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## REPRESENTATION OF *FEMME FATALES* IN GOTHIC AND ROMANTIC WRITINGS AT THE END OF THE 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

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**Abstract:** This paper analysis two Gothic ballads at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century with respect to the depiction of their female characters: Matthew Lewis’s *The Bleeding Nun* and Anne Bannerman’s *The Dark Ladie*. It focuses on the blending of the *femme fatale* characteristics with vampiric traits, explores the way these have been incorporated in the text and the meaning which they impose on the specific texts. The destruction to the male protagonist, with whom they are usually in a romantic relationship, is the basic idea that underlies these *femme fatales*, which as this paper argues, are imbued with vampiric traits. The paper offers an examination of the role of the vampiric in the respective ballads while tying them to the first Romantic treatment of the *femme fatale* in Coleridge’s *Christabel*, commonly not referred to as a vampire. The vampiric has been depicted here as a transmittable state which creates a new ‘vampire’, a trope that will evolve in vampiric literature a century later.

**Key words:** *vampiric traits, physical death, depletion of life energy, love theme, transgression, sexual connotations.*

### 1. Introduction

In *Die Braut von Korinth* (1797), Goethe has introduced the first female literary vampire based on an ancient Greek tale of the *Lamia*, a ghost story, by transforming it into a vampire story. Although the word vampire is not used overtly in the ballad, it is known that Goethe referred to it in his daily notebook as “Vampyrischen Gedichtes” (as cited in Barkhoff, 2008, p.131). The vampiric nature of the girl in this poem has been blended with the characteristics of the *femme fatale* or the *belle dame sans merci*, a “seductress who destroys the man who loves her” (Leavy, 1988, p. 169). According to Leavy, this character is either mortal or immortal. The first nature is ascribed to the *femme fatal*, whereas the latter to the *belle dame sans merci*. This character has existed in the mythology and folklore of many ancient people, from



the Greek Sirens, Lamia and Harpies, the Celtic fairy Morgaine, to the Jewish Lilith and the Babylonian Talmud. Goethe's type of vampire *femme fatale* will have its subsequent Romantic representatives in Coleridge's *Christabel* and Keats' *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* and *Lamia*. However, before the Romantics started to explore this character it is in the Scottish and English Gothic ballads that the vampire *femme fatale* became to be unveiled. The trend started in Britain with Bishop Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), a collection of folk ballads which set off a "ballad craze" (Hoeveler, 2010, p. 164; Jackson-Houlston, 2012, p. 80-81). These Gothic ballads often featured the supernatural, which as this paper intends to prove, in the specific ballads by Lewis and Bannerman, is a display of vampiric traits, following the European literary proto-vampires and tracing the route for the first Romantic treatment of this figure in *Christabel*.

## **2. *The Bleeding Nun*: A continuation of the German vampire ballads**

In the endeavor to trace vampiric elements in the English ballads of this time, we will concentrate on Matthew Gregory Lewis's ballad "The Bleeding Nun". Although Lewis denied the authorship of "The Bleeding Nun" (*Tales of Wonder* 2: 419), the following interpretation of the ballad accepts Milbank's belief that it must have been Lewis's creation (2009, p. 80). The ballad is based on the fourth chapter of his novel *The Monk* and presents the same characters as in the subplot of the novel, Raymond and Agnes, who are in love but their love is forbidden as Agnes was expected to become a nun. As in Goethe whose bride had died because of religiously forbidden love, Christianity is represented as an obstruction to human love and fecundity in this ballad as well. Her mother had fallen into a terrible illness when she carried Agnes and promised to give the child to serve God. Trying to persuade his beloved to elope with him, Raymond suggests that she disguises as the Bleeding Nun, a folkloric belief in the existence of a ghost who appears at night with a dagger in her hand.

The ballad begins in *media res* following the plot of the novel. At the beginning, we are presented with a scene in which a warrior is waiting on the rocks near a castle. The ballad is based on the traditional courtly love theme, as it is centered on the relationship of an aristocratic couple (see Buchan 76-84). In stanza 3, Agnes explains to Raymond the reasons for her despair: "We must for ever part" (419, 3.4). Her parents have vowed to "devote [her] to the veil" (420, 4.4) in three days. Here, Raymond pledges to eternal love: "For leave thee will I never; / Thou art mine, and I am thine, / Body and soul for ever!". He proposes that she disobeys and leaves her parents, but Agnes considers herself physically incapable of escaping and accepts her miserable state "[she] can but wring [her] hands, and sigh" (420, 7.3). Then, Raymond recollects a story about a spectre "robed in white, and stain'd with gore," (421, 9.3) who walks through the castle gates, "Which, by an ancient solemn rite," (421, 10.3) must open for her. The Bleeding Nun appears every fifth year in the darkest hour of

the night with a torch and a dagger in her hands. The blood on her robe and the dagger indicate a kind of a violence or murder committed in life. The Nun is represented as a transgressive character and according to Cameron it is a “paradoxical portrait of a woman who is both virtuous and ruthless, a representation that can only appear . . . as otherworldly” (2010, p. 153). Lewis does not offer further explanation of the Nun’s background story—we are not given the exact nature of her transgression, it is only evident by the dagger and blood on her robe.

Raymond suggests that Agnes should disguise herself like the Nun and go through the gates at one o’clock to meet him. Persuaded by Raymond’s plan, Agnes agrees and even transfers the responsibility to her father, “it must be done / Father, ’tis your decree” (422, 14.1-2). They carry out the plan as they had agreed. When their horses took them far enough and Raymond entreated that she stops, Agnes remained silent and continued riding, “but madly still she onwards hies / Nor seems his call to heed” (423, 21.3-4). When they reach the banks of the Danube, she addresses him in a formal way, “Say Sir Knight, do’st fear, / With me to stem the tide” (423, 23.3-4). There is an obvious change in the manner she speaks to him and her overall mode, as she used to have a passive and submissive role following Raymond’s suggestions. The strange transformation becomes more apparent when she “seizes” (424, 24.3) Raymond’s hand, while “her grasp . . . freezes his blood” (424, 24.4). As the action moves towards its climax, “a whirling blast from off the stream” (424, 25.1) unveils her face, which enables Raymond to recognize the incarnated folkloric Bleeding Nun in front of him. Raymond’s inability to distinguish his beloved Agnes from the undead woman brings about horrible effects. He had promised Agnes “leave thee will I never / Thou art mine, and I am thine, / Body and soul for ever!” on two occasions, in stanza 5 and 19. The second time he vows his eternal love is actually to the undead Bleeding Nun instead of Agnes. This seals his fate. The frightful sight of her face provokes physical reactions in Raymond’s body—he starts to sweat “down his limbs,” (424, 26.1-2) he shrieks and faints, and “the blood / Runs cold in every vein” (425, 29.1-2). This calls to mind Radcliffe’s idea of horror which “contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates [the faculties]” (“On the Supernatural in Poetry”, 1826, p. 150).

Although the veil has been removed, the Nun’s face is not described in detail. The only characteristics that the author shares with us is it being “ghastly, pale, and dead” and with “livid eyes,” (424, 27.2-3) which looked at the warrior with a fixed gaze. A ghost would not generally be described as either “dead” or at the same time with “livid eyes”. These and the fact that the undead creature touches Raymond’s hand and causes his blood to freeze and brings about death, support an interpretation of this figure as vampiric. It is evident that the creature appears in corporeal form, which is not the ability of ghosts. In addition, her enormous body described as “a form of more than mortal size” implies something which is immortal or in the in-between space of life and death. Vampires, according to folklore and superstition, are creatures more powerful than humans are. Her strength could find a metaphorical

explanation in the Nun's enormous body. The end is also symptomatic of Raymond's state. We are told that he fell in the floods, but nothing has been explained further. With her enormous power, the undead corpse of the Nun might have come to take him as a partner in her eternal undead state. In addition, more importantly for this discussion, the fact that the undead corpse of the Nun comes back among humans in a cursed state is often explained in vampire superstition as the reason for the undead and vampires to return in order to sort out an unresolved issue. Although this characteristic is also true for ghosts, it represents one of the main traits of the vampire from superstition. The reasons usually stated for the vampire's return are some unsettled emotions as love, hate or revenge. However, the author does not offer any reasons for the motives of this revenant. We could make indirect implications based on the episode in *The Monk*, but that would not be accurate for the ballad. Critics have seen in this ballad an example of a "languishing lover . . . defenseless against an aggressive, all-encompassing female force" (Braun, 2012, p. 19). Binias identifies in the Nun the *femme fatale*: "[a] fatal woman is fatal because not only does she aspire to physical but also to spiritual control over her lover-victim" (2007, p. 36). This spiritual draining of energy or life vitality is a vampiric trait that will be employed in vampire renditions in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

The general point of the vampiric trope is obviously based on the exchange of bodily fluids, taking of another person's DNA, and bringing about their transformation. This erotic side is evident in Burger's "Lenore" when talking of the grave as their deathbed, and "The Bleeding Nun" as well. When the Bleeding Nun reiterates Raymond's pledge, "I am thine, and thou art mine, "Body and soul for ever!" which resonates the act of erotic exchange of fluids combined with utter possession of Raymond's soul and his destruction.

### **3. *The Dark Ladie*: Psychological draining of the male's vitality**

Another literary figure who engaged in writing Gothic ballads following the tradition of Mathew Lewis, not so well known during her time, was the Scottish writer Anne Bannerman (1765-1829). In this part of the discussion, this paper will focus on "The Dark Ladie", a ballad that presents another *femme fatale* character with emphasis on the depicted vampiric qualities.

Craciun (2004) explains the publication history of the ballad with its character of a "sister tale" to Coleridge's "Introduction to the Tale of the Dark Ladie," printed a month earlier in the *Edinburgh Magazine*. Bannerman's ballad came out in the same magazine with a footnote pointing to Coleridge's earlier poem (Craciun, 2004, p. 209). This ballad is quite different from Coleridge's, first, because it reverses the roles of the "Dark Ladie": from a passive victim of male seduction she becomes a fatal woman who comes back from the undead to seek revenge.

The beginning of the poem presents the return of a group of crusading knights with Sir Guyon coming in his castle to celebrate their military success. Sir Guyon's character is based on the Knight of Temperance from Spencer's *Faerie Queene*. Sir Guyon's melancholic and anxious mood is stressed in stanza 2, when "None, on Guyon's clouded face, / Ha[s] ever seen a smile" (Bannerman 3, 2.3-4). His physical state gradually decreases—first his "clouded face more dark bec[o]me[s]" (4, 3.2), and then he becomes as "pale as death" (4, 5.2). He repeatedly looks with his "straining eyes" (4, 4.2) to "the banner'd door," (4, 4.1) while he lowers his ear in anticipation of hearing something (4, 5.2-4). The terror that Sir Guyon experiences reaches its climax when the Dark Ladie appears with her "spectacular entrance into this excessively masculine scene emphasizes the power of her gaze and the impotence of her male audience" (Craciun, 2004 p. 210). Despite what her name connotes, the Ladie is dressed in "ghastly white" (Bannerman 5, 6.5) which is again contrasted with a "long black veil that swe[eps] the ground" (5, 8.2). This black and white contrast could be used to explain her ambiguous nature. As white usually symbolizes life, and black is used to denote death, their use together on her garments could be interpreted as life and death at the same time, that is, a life-in-death existence. The Dark Ladie transfixed the knights with her silent gaze: "A light was seen to dart from eyes/ That mortal never own'd." (5, 3-4). The fact that her eyes are described as such that no mortal ever had leads us to assume that this figure has defied natural laws of mortality. It renders interpretation of her vampiric nature as a figure who is bound to roam in the in-between-space of life and death, and compulsively return until an issue between a close mortal is settled, in this case the revenge on Sir Guyon. We are not informed what the reason for the Dark Ladie's entrance and her taking psychological control over the knights is, but Sir Guyon shows physical symptoms, which point to him as the object of her purpose. Her agonizing presence makes Sir Guyon shiver when the "smother'd fury seem[s] to bring / The dew-drops on his brow" (6, 9.3-4). Her otherworldly nature fills the knights with horror: "in a tone, so deadly deep, / She pledg[es] them all around, / That in their hearts, and thro' their limbs, / No pulses c[an] be found" (Bannerman 7, 13.3-6). An old "hoary-headed" man remembered when Sir Guyon brought the Ladie a long time ago "in that frightful veil," which she always wore over her face. Until one day when he saw her face uncovered and "but O! That glaring eye, / It dried the life-blood working here /" (30.3-4). Then Huart relates the story of who the Dark Ladie is, which the old man had heard from an unnamed source. Hence, the story is revealed to us by a narrative technique of a story within a story, within another story, also known as *mise-en-abyme* (Ruppert, 2013, p. 791). Through this story within a story, we discover that the Ladie had been brought from the Crusades in the Holy Land, where she had a husband and a child. The narrator underlines her tender and loving parting when "she clasp'd her little son" (15, 37.1) and "turn'd again to bless / The cradle where he lay," (15, 37.3-4)

which stresses her previous affectionate nature and religious devotion. Although, this sheds some positive light on the mysterious Dark Ladie, we are never clearly told as to whether she left her family on her free will, or was abducted. The development of the character into an avenging figure, nevertheless, implies her suffering because of the separation with her family and that a deadly wrong has been done to her. The ambiguity of her identity is complemented with the uncertainty as to the way she died. Nevertheless, what is evident from the story is that the reason for the vampiric treatment is undoubtedly an unspecified act of transgression on the side of Sir Guyon and the physical sign of her vampiric nature is hinted in the glittering eyes, a trait often associated with the folkloric vampire.

#### **4. *Christabel*: A female vampire expanded by the Romantic spirit**

The following section shall explore how the folkloric vampire-revenant combined with the *femme fatale* became developed by the Romantic spirit of Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The fatal woman developed gradually in gaining its literary status. The trend of fatal females is comprised of only a number of works with female vampires who are represented in a sympathetic way. It is a woman who is disguised under her evil nature and who seems to have real affections towards her victim. One of the most noteworthy representatives of this sympathetic vampire is Keats' *Lamia*. Nevertheless, these sympathetic female vampires were insignificant in number compared with the more ferocious type.

According to its author, *Christabel* represents the most overtly fairy tale among all his tales, and has received various interpretations since its production (Jeanie Watson, 1990). Michael Patrick proposes the existence of three interwoven inferences in the poem—supernatural, sexual and moral (1973). These implications represent an important part of the vampire figure, in addition to Coleridge's ambiguous emphasis of Geraldine's eyes, which is a trait closely related to the vampire myth.

The poem begins on a cold, moonlit evening: "Tis a month before the month of May" (Coleridge, 2001, l. 21). By setting the tale in April, Coleridge reveals an initial clue on the general course of his poem—the evening on April 23 the spirits of the dead are said to wander in the countryside. (Twitchell, 1981) Outside her father's castle, the Baron Leoline, Christabel meets Geraldine, a secretive and beautiful woman, who contends that she has been kidnapped, and then deserted. Upon her first encounter with Christabel, Geraldine looks extremely pale, so pale that made "her white robe wan" (l. 61). Another obvious hint to Geraldine's nature is depicted upon their approaching the castle: "The lady sank . . . and Christabel . . . lifted her up . . . over the threshold of the gate" (ll. 129-132). It is part of the folkloric belief in vampires that they can enter a house only if invited, and so is the case with Christabel who carries the fainting Geraldine into the castle. The indications of her nature continue, as she "cannot speak for weariness" (l. 142) when Christabel starts

to praise the Virgin, for the vampire is known to avoid all things related to religion.

Coleridge provides the most overt sign of Geraldine's vampiric state in Part II of the story. After she shares Christabel's "couch" for the night, Geraldine rises "Nay, fairer yet! And yet more fair!" (l. 374), whereas Christabel becomes exhausted and cannot say what has happened to her. The vampire has drained her vital energy, and as the poem advances, she becomes more enchanted and gradually embraces the serpent characteristics of Geraldine, the female Lamia. In the Lamia myth according to Nethercott, this vampire was endowed with the ability to look as either a snake or a human, and was often denoted as "Lamia the Serpent-Demon" (Tryermaine, 1962, p. 94). Coleridge's overtone of her nature is explicit here, Christabel "drew in her breath with a hissing sound" (l. 459). The most overt sign of Christabel's changing nature under Geraldine's spell are her eyes which "shrunk in her head, / Each shrunk up to a serpent's eye" (ll. 584-585). By skillfully utilizing this vampiric characteristic, Coleridge continues to disclose Geraldine as a vampire and the embodiment of evil, and the basic means he uses to achieve this is through her unnatural glowing eyes. Not only did Christabel's "fair large eyes 'gan glitter bright" (l. 221), but the Lamia has this effect on the Baron as well, for when he kisses her in a fatherly manner "Geraldine in maiden Wise/ Casting down her large bright eyes," (ll. 573-574) she rolls her eyes to captivate her victim. Sir Leoline easily falls under the enchantment of the vampire. Unlike Christabel, he is completely open to the approaching evil, and he determines to take revenge for her supposed abduction, "His eye in lightning rolls!" (l. 444). He unconsciously yields to the evil, and the sympathy he shows to the vampire is contrasted with the anger towards his daughter. When he "turned to Lady Geraldine, /His eyes made up of wonder and love" (ll. 566- 567), whereas, for Christabel "His eyes were wild" (l. 641) with wrath when she beseeches him to send Geraldine away. It is definite that there is presence of vampiric rendering of the character of Geraldine, particularly with reference to the power of her eyes. The folkloric accounts of vampirism represent the supposed vampire often buried facing the ground to prevent their return as an undead. In addition, the vampire from folklore was always seen as a figure who brings torment, illness or death to humans, which corresponds to the effects of Geraldine's transfixing gaze. Just like the vampire from legends, who usually brings destruction to his family, so is Geraldine's destructive power directed towards a family in which she becomes a member, in the role of a step-mother to Christabel.

Christabel is an embodiment of good, light and purity, as opposed to Geraldine's evil vampiric nature. This story can be understood to represent the battle of good and evil, as well as the power of evil forces in the symbolic form of a vampire to perplex and dominate the benevolent capacity in humans. It is a fairy tale of virtue spoilt by evil forces. This has been skillfully incorporated in the meaning of the poem by the symbolic representation of a female vampire, that is, a Lamia figure, who perplexes all human capacities with her "glittering eyes" and subdues them to her will. Marshall

Suther and Virginia Radley have also read it as the battle of good and evil, but Suther (1964) concedes the existence of the supernatural, while Radley maintains that Christabel is overcome by the evil from within the “mind and psyche of man” (1966, pp. 100-101). Laurence Lockridge (1977) also acknowledges Christabel’s uncontrolled change into evil, but Jonas Spatz (1975) describes Geraldine as an illustration of Christabel’s ambivalence toward her own sexuality. These are some of the many conflicting critical approaches to Coleridge’s representation.

We suggest that the poem offers possibility for more than one interpretation. It is a story in which the vampire as a demonic figure, transgressor itself, finds a fertile soil for inciting transgressive behavior in the other characters. Not only are Christabel’s virtue and virginity marred, if the night they spend together is read as a representation of transgressive love, but she becomes a transgressor herself. Her father, mesmerized by Geraldine’s vampiric look, also performs a moral crime against his child by being induced to feel hatred towards Christabel. The vampire here entails the evil, demonic side, which brings destruction to a young girl and a family, and can thus be read as a story about good versus evil.

However, the erotic theme cannot be overlooked here, as it is through eroticism that evil comes to dominate over good. Surrender to the erotic impulse is traditionally one of the great dangers to virtue. Eroticism more or less overt has been presented in the vampire representations of Ossenfelder’s poem featuring the first literary vampire and Goethe’s “Die Braut von Korinth” and will become evident in Sheridan le Fanu’s novella *Carmilla* featuring a female vampire about a century after Coleridge’s *Christabel*. Coleridge’s poem depicts overt erotic scenes and offers ground for lesbian interpretation, as Christabel is the victim of the female vampire’s actions; her virginity and her innocence is spoiled through transgressive sexual behavior. Eroticism is present only in the scene with Christabel and is directed solely to Christabel. It is not the intention here to prove the existence of lesbianism in the poem, as much it is the purpose to point to the erotic side of this character, which is shared with the primal allure of folkloric vampires. Whereas, the folkloric vampire generally aimed at his own family, Geraldine focuses on another family. Geraldine’s seduction of Christabel’s father, Sir Leone, can be interpreted as a way of the vampire’s ability to interrupt and destroy a family, but also perform incestuous crime. Geraldine’s new role as a mother figure, introduces another element of family disruption, as she previously had intimate relationship with the daughter, which makes her a transgressive vampire figure, not only in the sense of unaccepted sex, but also as perpetrator of an act of incest. The demonic and erotic side of the vampire seem to be inextricable here: Geraldine appears as an original sexual vampire, a succubus – a female demon.

In *Christabel*, however, we see the ideology of the vampire figure beginning to form, for the vampire in this early poem obviously has the power to hypnotize its victims, a trait that has continued, as others have been introduced over the years. It moved further away from the walking corpses of folklore, as it is here that the vampire first possesses a rank of nobility.

## 5. Conclusion

Mathew Lewis's Nun is a transgressive character who comes from the dead to seek revenge, as well as Bannerman's *femme fatale* who destroys Sir Guyon by draining his life force, again lead by revenge because of past evils committed to her family. In *Christabel*, the vampire is presented as an evil, erotic noblewoman who mysteriously shows up at the castle of a Baron and his daughter Christabel with machinations to destroy a family.

In conclusion, the female vampire appears in a vast number of works throughout the century, as fascination with the *femme fatale* became the widespread phenomenon. She is frequently represented as a threat to her (usually male) victim, the embodiment of dangerous sexuality, which first enfeebles and then corrupts all that is feminine. Frequently, she produces an inversion of traditional view of sexual roles, so that the male character becomes feminized into a passive victim, while the female vampire appropriates the traditionally masculine quality of sexual aggression. This female vampire figure represents not only a means for revealing taboos referring the intimate, sexual needs of humans, but also questions the socially accepted type of sexuality, which involves two persons of the opposite sex. By introducing an active and assertive female character, who is the seducer and enticer into the sexual world, and endowing it with vampiric traits, Coleridge dared to open up a discussion about the forbidden and challenge society's status quo.

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