

The Vampire, the Queer, and the Girl: Reflections on the Politics and Ethics of Immortality's Gendering

Life is straight (take 1): Linear, developmental, teleological.

Life is straight (take 2): Heterosexual, reproductive, normative.

What makes a life worthy, valuable, purposeful? In the dominant cultural imagination, it is precisely that which makes it straight. Linear time and heteronormativity collapse into each other, their imbrication wholly naturalized. Unfolding along a common horizon, sharing an ideological vocabulary, such understandings of life and time are held together in our sense of mortality by the knowledge that life is, essentially, time. Hence: *lifetime*. The easy slippage between life and time, between linearity and reproduction, translates into an appeal to the worthy life predicated on heteronormativity, and such an orientation asks both life and death to serve productive and reproductive ends. From Samuel Scheffler's philosophical conjecture that it is the "collective afterlife" that gives meaning to our lives (2013, 64) to the discourse of randomized clinical trials that encourages participation as "the opportunity to have one's disease and death stand in the service of a higher goal" (Jain 2010, 103), Western ideas about mortality naturalize heteronormative ideologies that reinforce what Lee Edelman calls "reproductive futurism" (2004, 4). As a result, everything from psychological models of child development to expectations of career trajectories, from cultural investments in progress to an assumed reproduction of society, all insist that the worthy life—whether individual or collective—moves upward, onward, forward.

Enter the vampire.

Figuring a fantastic immortality and a decidedly queer life/time, the vampire confounds assumptions about the worthy life predicated on dominant ideologies of temporality and invites a consideration of other ways of living,

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other ways of being. Constituted by queerness—predominantly by an affiliation fixed through images linking same-sex desire, blood, contamination, and death but also by an unmooring of gender signifiers across a range of polymorphous desires—the vampire finds formal resonance in a tightly formulaic and highly intertextual genre, a genre whose conventions limit its narrative development.¹ The especially recursive production of the vampire narrative parallels the repetition compulsion that defines the vampire’s own immortal life, and together the vampire and the vampire narrative coincide to work against what Elizabeth Freeman calls *chrononormativity*, the part of the hegemonic temporal order that undergirds “genealogies of descent and the mundane workings of domestic life” (2010, xxii) while also “[organizing] individual human bodies toward maximum productivity” (3). In the context of *chrononormativity*, Freeman argues, individuals are subjected to “teleological schemes of events or strategies for living such as marriage, accumulation of health and wealth for the future, reproduction, childrearing, and death and its attendant rituals” (4), and these teleological schemes essentially determine “what it means to have a life at all” (5). Here, then, the vampire narrative’s “denial of teleology” (Edelman 2004, 27)—its recursive as opposed to progressive genealogy—brings a formal dimension to bear on the question of how queerness operates in and through the genre in ways that continually chafe against dominant ideologies of time and power as well as time’s power.²

Within this recursive context, the vampire is forever defined by an open secret, by the genre’s characteristic disjuncture between what the audience always already knows and what the characters fail to see. For those characters and readers/viewers in the know, this open secret also resonates with and condenses questions, codes, and acts of queer recognition across the textual divide. Both the open secret and the cultural recognition of an identity otherwise invisible to dominant society thus also extend the radical potential of the genre’s formal repetition. Attending to the politics of these formal and thematic features of the vampire genre, I offer a reading of Neil Jordan’s 2012 film *Byzantium* as a hinge that connects two seemingly disparate vampire vogues—one nineteenth-century, largely masculinist, and

¹ For an analysis of the affiliation between the vampire and the queer through images of polymorphic desires, see Hanson (1991); for a discussion of the anxieties produced by the vampire’s mobile gender signifiers and polymorphous desires in *Dracula*, see Craft (1984).

² My reading of the vampire as denying the hegemonic straightness of life/time resonates with recent scholarship in queer theory that similarly exposes and contests the cultural logics that elide straight life and straight time. In addition to Freeman (2010), see Edelman (2004), Stockton (2009), and “Queer Temporalities,” a special issue of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (Dinshaw et al. 2007).

marked by queer excess; the other twenty-first century, focalized through the girl, and heterosexualized. *Byzantium*, as an artsy, not-quite-mainstream capstone to the second vogue, plays with both the vampire narrative's reitervative history and the vampire's open secret in ways that simultaneously draw out the gendered limitations of the first vogue's queer resistance to chrononormativity and recuperate the second vogue's purported depoliticization, ultimately challenging the implicit heteronormativity of mortality and encouraging a rethinking of immortality as an ethical project.

Vampire vogue, circa 1819: The queer

The nineteenth-century vampire vogue originates in a set of queerly inflected grand tours. Widely cited as the first English-language vampire narratives, John Polidori's "The Vampyre" ([1819] 2003) and Lord Byron's "Fragment" ([1819] 2003)—tales with a complexly interrelated provenance—are structured around a tacit homoerotic desire, which many critics have read in relation to the authors' personal relationship. In both cases, a young man just coming into society is fascinated by an older man with whom he endeavors to undertake a grand tour of the Continent; only too late and after swearing an oath of silence about the enigmatic older man's "death" does the young man learn his true identity.³ Published just three years after Polidori and Byron shared their own grand tour, which culminated in the now-famous gathering at the Villa Diodati with Percy Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin (soon to be Shelley), and Claire Clairmont, "The Vampyre" and "Fragment" are easy to read within the context of Polidori's and Byron's relationship—perhaps romantic/sexual—and subsequent falling-out, often attributed to Polidori's jealousy (Rigby 2004, sec. 3).⁴ Lending more credence to such a reading is Polidori's description of the

³ Byron's "Fragment" actually ends before the young man learns of his companion's vampiric identity; thus, Ken Gelder rightly points out that Byron's contribution to the ghost story competition discussed just below "may or may not have been about a vampire" (1994, 26). However, in the introduction to his novel *Ernestus Berchtold: or, The Modern Oedipus* (1819), Polidori offers a summary of Byron's outline for the remainder of the story, which includes this resolution: "Two friends were to travel from England to Greece; while there one of them should die, but before his death, should obtain from his friend an oath of secrecy with regard to his decease. Some short time after, the remaining traveler returning to his native country, should be startled at perceiving his former companion moving about in society, and should be horrified at finding that he made love to his former friend's sister" (Polidori 1819, v-vi; see also Skarda 1989, 257).

⁴ Mary Shelley's description of the "ghost writing competition" that took place during this gathering and that provided the inspiration for *Frankenstein*, first published in the 1831 introduction to the novel, is the most well-known account.

vampiric Lord Ruthven, who not only takes on the characteristics of a typical Byronic hero but whose name also references an earlier literary revenge story about Byron penned by Lady Caroline Lamb, one of Byron's forsaken mistresses.

The historical and personal circumstances surrounding the production and publication of these two vampire stories may thus suggest one way of understanding them in relation to an unspoken queer desire, but the queerness of "The Vampyre" and "Fragment" extends well beyond such biographical details. In keeping with the eventual consolidation of the genre, both "The Vampyre" and "Fragment" revolve around an open secret: the vampire's identity—its ontological status—presents a diegetic mystery always already known to readers.⁵ Even these originary English-language vampire narratives are compelled by this structure, as their contemporary readers would very likely have recognized the vampire's identity through references to folkloric beliefs and superstitions, through signs to be read on and around its body, and through intertextual allusions to Byron's "The Giaour." But it is not the open secret alone that makes these stories queer. Rather, it is the fact that the vampire narrative's internal mystery also reverberates with—collapses into, even—the open secret of male homoerotic desire thematized in the young protagonists' epistemological quests to know the older men's "peculiarities" and "singularities" (Polidori [1819] 2003, quoted in Rigby 2004, sec. 4). As Mair Rigby has persuasively argued in her nuanced reading of "The Vampyre" and the "Fragment" as "deeply queer" ghost stories about what "haunts culture" (2004, sec. 2), each protagonist's coded interests in the older man "draw[s] upon culturally embedded 'knowledge' about how the representation of desire between men is made intelligible" as well as the ways this knowledge relies on "the construction of such desire as a peculiar secretive history" (sec. 4).⁶ For Rigby, these entanglements—Polidori and Byron, "The Vampyre" and the "Fragment," the formal and thematic epistemological quests for both the vampire and the

⁵ See Richard Dyer's "Children of the Night: Vampirism as Homosexuality, Homosexuality as Vampirism" (1988) for a general discussion of the vampire narrative as structured by a secret to be discovered.

⁶ Gelder similarly reads the two stories as circling around an open secret that may (or may not) signify male homoerotic desire, depending on the protagonists' strategic reading of the older men: "Darvell himself is a coded figure . . . and this enables the young narrator both to read him accurately (Darvell is therefore 'queer') and to disavow that reading (Darvell is mysterious and nothing accurate can be said about him). Two kinds of sexual identifications are set in motion which are in no way contradictory: firstly, 'it takes one to know one'; and secondly, 'you can't tell who is and who is not.' These are both specific to 'queer' texts" (1994, 58–59).

queer object of desire—hold the two authors together in a “vampire origin myth” that has “contributed to the subsequent analogous, coded relationship between vampires and queer sexual desire” (sec. 14), a claim borne out by the extensive criticism devoted to the queerness of both the vampire and the English-language vampire narrative as they develop over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁷

Although there were many popular vampire publications and theatrical productions throughout nineteenth-century England, France, and Germany, the dominant genealogy of the English-language vampire story tends to move from Polidori and Byron to J. Sheridan Le Fanu’s novella “Carmilla” ([1872] 2003), which features a female vampire who seduces young women into friendship and lesbian intimacy, and then on to Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* ([1897] 2011).⁸ Primarily associated with these canonical works, the first vampire vogue is saturated with queer desire, both implicit and explicit: queerness circulates in and across the vampire’s story—indeed, exceeds all attempts to contain it—and disturbs the social in a number of profound (and profoundly anxiety-producing) ways. It echoes in the vow of silence—of unspeakability—that Lord Ruthven extracts from Aubrey, a vow that privileges their relationship over the ones they have with female love interests in “The Vampyre.” It surfaces in Laura’s enduring desire for Carmilla, even after Carmilla has been destroyed by the forces of patriarchal power. It continues to erupt in *Dracula* despite Stoker’s almost compulsive need to fix the mobile signifiers of sexuality that vampirism unmoors from heteropatriarchal gender paradigms (Craft 1984).

This unruly and irrepressible queer desire is more than simply thematic, however; it reveals itself in its formal recursivity as well. In the language of psychoanalysis, queerness might be understood as the vampire narrative’s surplus, the “excessive, ‘unreal’ remainder that produces an ever-present jouissance” (Edelman 2004, 10) and gives rise to the (death) drive.⁹ Most

⁷ Although many queer theorists have underscored the point that *queer* cannot simply be collapsed into LGBTQI sexual identities, that seems to be its predominant usage in the critical literature about the nineteenth-century vampire; in keeping with the criticism, I am also using *queer* in that way in this section. See, for instance, Craft (1984), Dyer (1988), Howes (1988), Hanson (1991), Halberstam (1993), and Gelder (1994) for some of the most frequently cited works on the topic.

⁸ See Erik Butler’s *Metamorphoses of the Vampire in Literature and Film* (2010) for an excellent overview of the French- and German-language vampire narrative and its literary and cultural genealogies.

⁹ I turn to the language of psychoanalysis here because it is a discourse that not only contributes to the cultural association of vampires and queers (Hanson 1991) but also constitutes one of the dominant approaches to critical interpretation. In addition, it is the theoretical lens

significant in the context of the vampire narrative's form, such surplus also compels repetition, as Edelman's description of the interworkings of queerness, the death drive, and jouissance makes clear: "In a political field whose limit and horizon is reproductive futurism, queerness embodies this death drive, this intransigent jouissance . . . queerness exposes sexuality's inevitable coloring by the drive: the insistence on repetition, its stubborn denial of teleology" (27).

The intrinsic queerness of both the vampire and the vampire narrative responds in concrete—albeit fantastic—fashion to Edelman's perhaps rhetorical question of what it would "signify *not* to be 'fighting for the children'" (2004, 3), *not* to be participating in reproductive futurism. In many ways, the vampire is Edelman's ideal queer: both are antisocial, both participate in nonreproductive sexuality, both value jouissance—the painful pleasure associated with the death drive—over intelligibility in the symbolic.¹⁰ If these vampire traits hint at what it might mean *not* to be on the side of the children, *Dracula* renders that position explicit: Dracula gives the three vampire women a child to feed on, and Lucy preys on children to satiate her hunger. In both of these cases, vampire women feed on children as opposed to feeding them, which is not only a direct inversion of one of femininity's dominant tropes but also, obviously, an example of what it means to take up a position against the children. That the vampire is figured in opposition to the child is further articulated in the biological impossibility of bearing vampire children as well as the proscriptions against creating them through vampiric means.¹¹

The vampire's consistent positioning against the child is fundamental to its identity, to the queer surplus that seeps through narrative attempts at

through which Edelman makes his case for an antisocial queer negativity in opposition to reproductive futurism (2004, 2006). I also add the parenthetical "death" to this claim because "drive" and "death drive" are often used interchangeably in the literature. As Mari Ruti notes, "the drive is always ultimately the death drive" (2012, 22).

¹⁰ Carmilla may be an exception to the antisocial vampire since she explicitly cultivates an intimate friendship with Laura. Indeed, Nina Auerbach (1997) reads *Dracula* as destroying the possibility for female friendship that Le Fanu establishes in "Carmilla." That said, one of the things that most disturbs Laura is Carmilla's extreme possessiveness and her desire to separate Laura from others in her social world, which suggests another type of antisociality.

¹¹ Lestat's creation of the vampire child Claudia, in Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1976), is seen as a transgression of an unspoken vampire ethic, and it becomes the act that most inspires Louis's hatred. In Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series (2005–8), the creation of vampire children is likewise against vampire law, and Bella and Edward's hybrid vampire child (conceived before Bella is transformed into a vampire) is so controversial as to start a war between vampire factions. These exceptions and the diegetic discourse around them reiterate my point about the traditional inability or reluctance to create vampire children.

(en)closure. As such, the vampire's immortality can be read as a possible futurity outside of reproductive futurism, a futurity that resonates with what Edelman identifies as an "ethical register outside the recognizably human" (2004, 101). Sue-Ellen Case's argument for the vampire's centrality to queer theory reiterates this point and anticipates Edelman's critique of reproductive futurism through her analysis of the naturalized equations "hetero = sex = life" and "homo = sex = unlife" (1991, 4). Figuring the vampire through what she calls the "trope" of the lesbian—by which she means a discursive reappropriation of the "doubly inferior" (8), the one whose gender *and* sexuality deviate from the heteromale norm—Case underscores the vampire's power to overturn the life/death binary at the foundation of Western ontology by embracing the supposedly unnatural sexuality that denies reproduction and, thus, life. For Case, the vampire "punctures the life/death and generative/destructive bipolarities that enclose the heterosexist notion of being" (4) through queer desire; especially important here is not simply the vampire's puncturing bite, her capacity for ontological wounding, but also its enduring effects. Again, it is the vampire narrative's surplus of queer desire that facilitates its resistance to closure—its resistance to singular meaning—and that resistance ensures an ongoing, repetitive disturbance of the social.

Such narrative excess is, of course, thematized in the vampire's immortality, which revolves around death and the death drive. While an immortality premised on death may seem ironic or paradoxical, this relationship has been metaphorized throughout the history of psychoanalysis; for instance, Slavoj Žižek (2000, 294) characterizes the Lacanian death drive as "precisely the ultimate Freudian name for the dimension of traditional metaphysics designated as that of *immortality*," which he further sutures to the vampire: "the 'death drive' designates the dimension of what horror fiction calls the 'undead,' a strange, immortal, indestructible life that persists beyond death." In the context of the vampire narrative, this fantastic and queer immortality offers an infinite temporal horizon with no purpose and no value, a refusal of meaning that Edelman finds critical to an antisocial queer ethics (even as it remains somewhat difficult to fathom in both the dominant and progressive cultural imaginations).

Yet despite the rather bleak idea of an immortal life with no purpose and no value, the vampire has been an object of fascination for at least two hundred years. Reading the vampire's immortal purposelessness together with its enduring cultural attraction raises questions about our own living with mortality and suggests that perhaps the hegemonic injunctions to live a meaningful life, a productive life, a valuable life, are worth interrogating. The vampire's constant escape into excess, its life of infinite repetition, sug-

gests a life outside of the teleological narrative that undergirds the worthy life. Contesting the linearity of straight life/time, the vampire offers a queerly sequential life that allows for multiplicities of the self to gather across one's own historical time, and in this sense literalizes what Judith Butler sees as the "value of being beside oneself, of being a porous boundary, given over to others, finding oneself in a trajectory of desire in which one is taken out of oneself, and resituated irreversibly in a field of others in which one is not the presumptive center" (2004, 25). That is, the vampire's fantastic immortality suggests perpetual interruption and renewal as a paradigm for an alternative life/time that invites the cultivation of multiple selves beside whom we might find ourselves in an infinite process of remaking and re-imagination.

To embrace a fantastic, vampiric queer immortality, to queer mortality by trying to think beyond a "meaningful" or (re)productive life, as the vampire urges us to do, is thus to open ourselves to the possibility of living in the face of death in dramatically different ways. My aim here, however, is not to describe or prescribe a specific alternative to straight life/time but rather to foreground the cultural, political, and ethical work implicit in the fantasy of the vampire's immortality. As Butler has so trenchantly argued in relation to gender and sexuality, "fantasy is what reality forecloses, and, as a result, it defines the limits of reality. . . . Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real" (2004, 29). The vampire narrative as simultaneously fantasy literature and cultural fantasy exposes the limits of hegemonic life/time and raises questions about what might be possible if we think creatively and expansively about living "in excess of the real."

Vampire vogue, circa 2005: The girl

While the first vampire vogue highlights the radical potential of queer excess, the second vogue seems to evacuate all such possibility. Epitomized by the wild popularity and phenomenal commercial success of Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series (2005–8), the second vogue focuses on the girl, often mortal, and her dangerous desire for the (hetero)sexy male vampire. Most visible across a number of YA (young adult) book series, television spin-offs, and films—such as L. J. Smith's *The Vampire Diaries* (1991–92 and 2009–11; CW television series, 2009–17), Alex Duval's *Vampire Beach* (2006–7), Rachel Caine's *Morganville Vampires* (2006–14), Richelle Mead's *Vampire Academy* (2007–10; film, 2014), and Mari Mancusi's *Blood Covenant Vampires* (2007–12)—the cultural productions at the heart of this second vampire vogue are anchored by the conventional heterosexual romance

genre.¹² Even HBO's critically acclaimed, adult-oriented, and in some ways emphatically queer *True Blood* (2008–14), based on Charlaine Harris's *Southern Vampire Mysteries* series, revolves around Sookie Stackhouse, a "girl" in the late modern sense of "encompassing no specific age group but rather an idea of mobility preceding the fixity of womanhood and implying an unfinished process of personal development" (Driscoll 2002, 47).

If the girl is central to the narratives of the second vampire vogue, she is perhaps even more so to their critical and cultural denunciation, often resulting in a slippage between character and audience. Reviewers and cultural commentators for a wide range of sources have been vehement and condescending in their dismissal of the second vogue's most popular books and films precisely because of their association with girls, who are assumed to be cultural consumers with "indiscriminate," "insipid," and "banal" tastes and "less discriminating palates" (quoted in Bode 2010, 710). Lisa Bode's survey of *Twilight* film reviews highlights the ways that adolescent girls and their purported viewing habits ground assessments of the film, standing in for more conventional evaluative criteria, even in neutral and positive reviews (Bode 2010; see also Jancovich 2014). Predominantly male fans of vampire horror similarly blame girls for the supposed demise of the genre, assuming that girls' consumer power is responsible for the rise of the "emo" vampire and the subsequent marginalization of the predatory, bloodthirsty "authentic" vampire (Bode 2010, 710–12; Edwards-Behi 2014; Haig 2014). Feminist scholars and critics likewise turn their attention to the girl, although they often write out of an implicit concern for her general well-being and future. As such, they have been quick to excoriate the paradigmatic *Twilight* series for its celebration of heterosexual romance and traditional gender ideals as a girl's primary life goal (Whitton 2011; Taylor 2012); for its romanticization and eroticization of stalking, possessiveness, and other controlling male behaviors (Mann 2009; McClimans and Wisniewski 2009; Michel 2011); and for its glamorization of feminine self-sacrifice (Spieler 2012; Tay-

¹² There are, of course, other popular vampire series and narratives that fall outside of what I am calling the "second vampire vogue." Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) marks a revival of the vampire's popularity in the twentieth century and is widely recognized for introducing two changes to the genre's conventions: first, it encourages a sympathetic view of the vampire by positioning him as the novel's primary focalizer, and, second, it brings to the surface the queer desire at the heart of the vampire narrative. Chronologically situated between the first and second vampire vogues, it also anticipates the importance of the girl (vampire) through the critique implicit in Claudia's eternal infantilization and her associated rage at being locked into such a state. In addition to Rice's extensive series, other popular, often explicitly queer, texts include Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* (1991), Octavia Butler's *Fledgling* (2005), and Laurell K. Hamilton's *Anita Blake: Vampire Hunter* series (beginning 1993).

lor 2012). The girl, it seems, (over)determines the dismissal and depoliticization of the second vampire vogue.

Of course, there's something deeply troubling about the way the girl—as developing adolescent, as cultural consumer—is evoked and invoked in these varied discourses. She is assumed to be ruled by emotion alone, easily swept up in popular trends, incapable of distinguishing fiction from reality, in need of expert judgments about what is appropriate for her. While such assumptions essentially render the girl culturally irrelevant, they also obscure the fact that she has been a vitally important figure for critical cultural theory. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, for instance, identify the girl as the key to all becoming and thus fundamental to their conceptualization of a mobile, molecular subjectivity: “The girl is like the block of becoming that remains contemporaneous to each opposable term, man, woman, child, adult. . . . It is certain that molecular politics proceeds via the girl and the child” (2007, 277). Although many feminist theorists are rightly wary of Deleuze and Guattari's reliance on the girl—sometimes called becoming-woman—as the foundational becoming for other deterritorializations, Catherine Driscoll (2000) points out that the predominant feminist concern over the *woman* in becoming-woman marginalizes the significance of feminine adolescence—theoretically grounded in Deleuze's “little girl”—and its potential for imagining productively paradoxical ways of becoming (a) woman.¹³ This language is nothing if not slippery—Deleuze's little girl, exemplified in Lewis Carroll's Alice, morphs into Deleuze and Guattari's girl, herself a becoming-woman—and part of its slipperiness is due to the fact that dominant understandings of the little girl, the girl, the feminine adolescent, and the woman are always already mapped onto a linear temporal progression. As Driscoll makes clear, however, “becoming for Deleuze is strictly opposed to any linear conception of time” (2000, 80). That is to say: the girl resists and disrupts chrononormativity.

Here, then, a meeting of the girl and the vampire.

Between the vogues: *Byzantium* and immortality's gendering

When the girl and the vampire meet in their subversion of linear time, it is not the girl-meets-vampire trope of the second vogue but rather a girl and a vampire in the form of a vampire girl: Eleanor, the protagonist and focalizer of Neil Jordan's 2012 film, *Byzantium*. While this joining of forces in the character of Eleanor might seem to pose a challenge to the feminist critiques

¹³ See, e.g., Irigaray (1985), Jardine (1985), Grosz (1993, 1994), Braidotti (1994), and Driscoll (2000, 2002).

of the second vogue's mainstream texts, *Byzantium* remains a heteronormative teen romance that simply reverses the conventional gendering of the mortal-vampire romance. Entirely absent is the female vampire's long historical association with lesbianism and, in the cinematic tradition, her potential to reappropriate and redeploy the gaze in ways that invite a "queer narrative pleasure" (Hanson 1999, 219). While many lesbian (and) feminist critics will surely cheer such a disarticulation of the female vampire and the lesbian, there's still something distinctly queer about Eleanor: despite living for centuries as a vampire, her perpetual becomings and the ever-shifting categories of girl and becoming-woman are condensed in the unchanging body of a sixteen-year-old. That is, she animates everything queer in becoming. *Byzantium*'s privileging of the girl amid its slant rehearsal and reproduction of the canonical genealogy of the English-language vampire narrative thus critically inflects the political and ethical dimensions of immortality. As such, she calls attention both to the girl's signification in the film and to the decidedly masculinist nature of the first vampire vogue, raising questions about how gender might add nuance to the idea of living according to a queerly serial life/time, about how gender might foster not only individual ways of living differently with our mortality but also different ways of truly *being* with each other. Jordan's own queer sensibility and his decision to adapt Moira Buffini's explicitly feminist play further suggest that his engagement with these themes is self-aware and consciously sets up broader questions of gendered subjectivity and the politics of social recognition.¹⁴ In other words: what difference does a girl make?

Byzantium follows Clara (Gemma Arterton) and Eleanor (Saoirse Ronan), a mother-and-daughter pair who have been forced into a migratory existence by a secret society of male vampires from whom Clara has stolen the secret of immortality; even more transgressive than the theft, however, is the fact that she shares the knowledge to save her daughter by creating vampire life, a male prerogative. Clara, herself only twenty-four, supports the two of them through sex work—dancing, turning tricks, running a brothel—which conveniently allows her to satiate her vampiric hunger and her need to avenge sexual violence and oppression at the same time. Eleanor, on the other hand, seems to spend her time almost entirely alone, burdened by their story, feeding only on those who are dying, those who seem to ask her for release, at least until she meets Frank (Caleb Landry Jones). Once that occurs, the teen love story overtakes the rest of the narrative and

¹⁴ Jordan's "queer sensibility" is evident from films such as *The Company of Wolves*, *The Crying Game*, and *Interview with the Vampire*. Gina Wisker (2016) includes Buffini's *A Vampire Story* in her analysis of radical feminist vampire narratives.

fractures the parent-child bond: Eleanor ultimately confirms her relationship with Frank by sharing the secret of immortality with him in a gesture that reproduces the hegemonic fantasy of eternal love.

Clara and Eleanor's backstory begins two hundred years earlier when Clara meets Darvell (Sam Riley) and Ruthven (Jonny Lee Miller), two naval officers whose names ensure that Polidori's "The Vampyre" exerts a spectral presence throughout the film. After a brief flirtation, Ruthven invites Clara for "a ride," and when she consents he takes her to his regular brothel, where he rapes and abandons her to the madam with the claim that he has given her a profession.¹⁵ Eventually, she has a child, Eleanor, whom she cannot bring herself to kill, placing her instead at a local orphanage and continuing to provide for her over the years. Much later, Darvell seeks out Ruthven and finds him at the brothel with Clara; both seem to be quite ill, Ruthven probably with syphilis and Clara possibly with tuberculosis. Ruthven is shocked at Darvell's arrival because he had been witness to his friend's "death" years earlier, and it is at this point that Darvell leaves him a set of instructions for attaining immortality, which Clara steals. As revenge for Clara's stealing the secret of immortality from him, Ruthven finds Eleanor and rapes her, infecting her with his disease and prompting Clara to take her to the site of vampiric transformation.¹⁶

In keeping with the second vogue's heterosexualization of the vampire narrative, *Byzantium* diminishes and denies the very thing that makes the vampire so inherently sexual and, essentially, so queer—the act of feeding and creating through the intimacy of the vampire's mouth on the body of the other, the penetration of the fang, the transfer of blood.¹⁷ Instead of fangs, *Byzantium*'s vampires penetrate with an extendable talon-like nail,

¹⁵ Both Clara and Eleanor are raped in the film's historical narrative, and in both cases, the sexual violence serves a plot function as well as an ideological function. Ideologically, rape is a trope that simultaneously and paradoxically distances sexual violence as a quotidian—but historical—fact while also authorizing Clara's revenge killings/feedings as a feminist form of vengeance. For more on rape revenge narratives, see Read (2000), Projansky (2001), and Heller-Nicholas (2011).

¹⁶ Although Ruthven does not appear again in the film as a vampire, the press materials indicate that he has been changed and joins the brethren. This, of course, indicates a breakdown in the plot since Ruthven is obviously transformed without the map that Clara steals.

¹⁷ Dyer (1988) similarly identifies the sexual nature of the vampire's primary act: "Even when the writing does not seem to emphasise the sexual, the act itself is so like a sexual act that it seems almost perverse not to see it as one. Biting itself is after all part of the repertoire of sexual acts . . . it is then by extension obviously analogous to other forms of oral sex acts, all of which (fellatio, cunnilingus, rimming) importantly involve contact not only with orifices but with body fluids as well" (55).

thus obviating any need for an initial oral contact and evacuating the sexuality of the vampire's bite. While feeding obviously still occurs through bodily contact, the jouissance of the first bite—so frequently represented in film by the orgasmic ambiguity of pain and ecstasy on the face of the “victim”—generally gives way to the quotidian practicalities of nourishment. Even more, the sexual resonances of bite and blood that do linger are heterosexualized through the film's visual politics of feeding, a gendered politics that only ever depicts Clara and Eleanor satiating their hunger. In the two main scenes of Eleanor's feeding—one on an older man who pieces together her story and asks her to release him and one on an older woman in a hospital setting who seems to take Eleanor for an angel of mercy—she pierces them with her nail and feeds in an almost reluctant manner, again driven by nutritional need more than sexual desire. Only when she sucks on the cloth soaked with Frank's blood and when she later caresses the tube transfusing him with blood do we glimpse the potential in Eleanor for the vampire's sexual(ized) hunger, and even in this case it is decidedly heterosexual. Images of Clara feeding are more consistent with the conventions of the genre—her feedings might easily be mistaken for sexual acts—but because her story is enfolded in a revenge narrative, these scenes are not only heterosexualized but also lacking in the titillation and pleasure implicit in the traditional vampiric bite.

Perhaps even more significant for *Byzantium*'s heterosexualization of the genre, vampiric transformation does not involve bodily contact of any sort, thus allowing the secret society of male vampires to perpetuate themselves without touching each other. In the film's mythology, vampiric immortality involves a ritual that transpires in a remote sea cave that gushes with blood as the person is born again into vampirism. The metaphors of femininity are obvious here, and the fact that vampirism is the strict domain of men again underscores the film's heterosexualization of the vampire tradition. Through visual and narrative codes of heterosexuality, then, *Byzantium* circumscribes the vampire's queer (i.e., homosexual) potential and incorporates him into a homosocial brotherhood that protects patriarchal interests. Dressed in staid black suits and seemingly only interested in tracking Clara and Eleanor, *Byzantium*'s male vampires are an abstemious lot who forgo the purposeless pleasures and campy style of their long line of literary and filmic predecessors.

On first view, *Byzantium*'s aggressive heterosexualization of the genre seems to function like other vampire narrative strategies that seek to contain the genre's excess queerness, to deny the political dimensions of an immortal life motivated by the death drive, a life of no social value. However, in going to such great lengths to portray Darvell and Ruthven as patently not

queer—that is, as part of a homosocial brotherhood of vampires who work to perpetuate patriarchal privilege, a brotherhood capable of spreading vampirism without touching, a brotherhood whose knowledge is encoded in ancient artifacts as opposed to furtive looking—*Byzantium* exaggerates and parodies what Eve Sedgwick calls the “homosexual panic” so characteristic of the paranoid gothic (1985, 83), while also highlighting its deleterious effects on women. As Sedgwick argues, the paranoid gothic is structured by the trope of the romantic triangle, a geometry of desire that ensures that female characters are present to mediate the border between the male characters’ homosocial and homoerotic desires. While such a structure often results in a heterosexual marriage that masks a displaced queer desire, in Polidori’s “The Vampyre” the two women who mediate the homoerotic relationship between Lord Ruthven and Aubrey—Ianthe and Aubrey’s sister—are both killed, sacrificed to Ruthven’s vampirism. In the context of *Byzantium*, the resurrection of Ruthven and Darvell thus creates a structure that seems to demand the (figurative) sacrifice of the female characters.

It is precisely this sacrifice that reiterates the importance of the girl to the heterosexualized vampire narrative and animates *Byzantium*’s politicized reimagining of both the second vogue’s teen romance and the genre conventions of the first vogue. That is, *Byzantium*’s seemingly conservative politics—not only its heterosexualization of the vampire tradition but also its representations of female sexuality and romantic love—contribute to a feminist critique of the underlying patriarchal ideologies and investments at work in the vampire narratives of both vogues. Thus, for instance, despite their status as vampires, Clara and Eleanor are continually interpellated into narratives and technologies of heteronormative desire, development, and relationality. Clara’s two hundred years of sex work might be understood as a form of feminine agency—the actress who plays her, Gemma Arterton, refers to her as a “feminist icon” (*Byzantium* Press Notes 2012)—but the way she is so very consciously rendered as the sexualized object of the male gaze, both within the film and through the apparatus of the camera, also reminds us that patriarchal narratives of gender and sexuality exceed individual agency. So when Eleanor tells Noel, a lonely john who offers them refuge, that “her [Clara’s] name’s not Ca(r)milla,” she implies that Clara is in a different story, that she lacks the agency that Carmilla so enjoys, the agency to remove herself from male systems of exchange and to live only for her own pleasure.¹⁸ The visual citation of the 1966 Hammer film *Dra-*

¹⁸ Clara has told Noel that her name is Camilla (or perhaps Carmilla; the pronunciation is unclear and, in my reading, evokes Le Fanu’s Carmilla).

cula: Prince of Darkness, one of the studio's eight sequels to its hugely successful 1958 *Dracula*, further reinforces this point: the scene from the Hammer film depicted on the television is that of Helen Kent's (Barbara Shelley's) being staked to death. As a filmic sequel to *Dracula*, *Dracula: Prince of Darkness* necessarily participates in the repetition so critical to the genre, but what is particularly significant here is the subject of the repetition—the violent staking of the female vampire, which recalls Lucy's staking in *Dracula*, itself an echo of Carmilla's earlier staking. This, then, is the legacy into which *Byzantium* projects its two female vampires.

Beyond the specificities of the vampire narrative, Clara and Eleanor are trapped in enduring narratives of hegemonic femininity and heterosexual romantic love that foreclose the possibility of their (narrative) agency. This lack of agency is especially clear in Eleanor's case after she begins attending a writing class with Frank. In response to the teacher's prompt to write their life stories, Eleanor offers her story as a gift to Frank, who characterizes it as brilliant but reminds her that the assignment is to write a true story. Frank's misrecognition of the truth of Eleanor's story, the truth of her identity, attests to the essential impossibility of feminine self-articulation in the context of patriarchy. Later, Frank passes Eleanor's story to Mr. Minton (Tom Hollander), whose name not only calls to mind but is also easily mistaken for the highly symbolic Milton.¹⁹ This aural collapsing of the two names situates Eleanor—and her predicament of narrativity, her predicament of subjectivity—in a long legacy of women whose self-definition is subsumed to patriarchal order: in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Eve's moment of self-articulation, her memory of a solitary origin, initiates her indoctrination into patriarchal orthodoxy as Adam interpellates her into a different origin story that begins with one of his ribs; of course, Milton's Eve is already a reinterpretation of the biblical Eve for whom narrative subjectivity was similarly impossible.

As Christine Froula points out in her persuasive reading of *Paradise Lost*, the patriarchal reframing of Eve's—and other women's—attempts at self-definition reveals a profound fear that women may escape narrative and ideological containment: "Milton's Eve brings the threat of woman's self-articulation into focus: it is the danger posed by her speaking from her body, from an experience that exists outside patriarchal authority" (1983, 335). Given this cultural inheritance, it is no surprise that Mr. Minton cannot

¹⁹ In making final revisions to this essay, I noticed that I had omitted the name of the actor who portrays the teacher; I had always heard his name as Mr. Milton, but in looking for the actor's name, I realized that the character's name is Mr. Minton. I believe my argument remains sound, despite my mistaking "Minton" for "Milton."

believe a girl's act of self-narration. He is blinded to the truth of her story by his investment in reproductive futurism; as a result, he can only read her story metaphorically in a way that reinscribes it in patronizing and paternalistic narratives of feminine victimization and abuse, and this problematic re-inscription—this fundamental refusal of an other's true self—inspires the film's violent dénouement. Here, then, *Byzantium* seems to suggest that women have no option but to be interpellated into lasting patriarchal narratives of submission, victimization, and helplessness, wherein their redemption depends on male heroics and heterosexual love. For both Clara and Eleanor, the dominant narrative of the male savior frames their final relationships: Darvell literally saves Clara from impending decapitation, but their coupling also implies that he has “saved” her from a life of sex work, and Frank “saves” Eleanor from her life under Clara's supposedly oppressive commitment to their code of silence.

Ultimately, it is the dominant form (repetition) and trope (immortality) of the vampire narrative itself that expose the timeless narratives of femininity, narratives that even vampirism cannot escape; at the same time, they also highlight the gendered nature of vampirism itself, the double standard that promises an uncontainable queer surplus for male vampires but a constant return to the patriarchal order for female vampires whose legacies grow out of the canonical English-language vampire narrative. Even more, in carrying forward Darvell and Ruthven's origin story, *Byzantium* similarly calls attention to the highly gendered dynamics of cultural recognition, which are productively elaborated through the figure of the vampire. Although the vampire Ruthven may not be recognized for the reality of his monstrous subjectivity, he nevertheless remains culturally recognizable as a masculine subject, even when he strays from heteronormative behaviors and expectations; his remaining single well into middle age, his lack of children, his reputation for seducing women across Europe never render him suspect, never diminish his status as a subject.

Clara and Eleanor, by contrast, exist beyond the scope of recognizable gendered subjectivity by virtue of their vampirism—they are not, and never will be, “proper” (biological) reproductive subjects and thus remain forever culturally incomprehensible. Even when coupled with male partners, they represent a queer heterosexuality—a union eternally resistant to reproduction, always already positioned against reproductive futurism—and this results in their cultural invisibility. As Juana María Rodríguez so succinctly puts it in her feminist critique and discussion of queer sociality, “Female subjectivity is often simply unintelligible when divorced from cultural logics that define sexuality as either solely reproductive . . . or wholly carnal, unrestrained, and dangerous” (2011, 335–36). While Clara, like female vam-

pires more generally, is figured through the culturally comprehensible trope of exuberant and dangerous sexuality, Eleanor remains much more enigmatic, outside of the dominant cultural logics by which women are defined. Neither reproductive nor dangerously sexual, she seeks a different recognition for a different subjectivity.

Byzantium stages this different recognition as it unfolds across temporal registers, not only moving back and forth across time but also drawing on the visual medium of film to bring distinct temporalities together. In a key—and particularly haunting—scene, Clara and Eleanor arrive in a seaside town where Eleanor encounters a version of her prevampiric self from two hundred years earlier. She is literally beside herself. She is, at this moment in time(s), the quintessential Deleuzian girl, the key to becoming as anti-memory, to becoming “in a sense which is opposed to the stable production of a time which might be remembered, followed in any one direction, or produced in any univocal history” (Driscoll 2000, 80). For Eleanor and her mutual, multiple presences, this is both the beginning and the end, a return to the site of origination that is also the site of death. In acknowledging each other in this moment of conjoined temporalities, Eleanor’s two selves call to mind Jacques Derrida’s reading of the “hauntological” in Marxist thought and, especially, his interpretation of Marx as “[theorizing] an ethics of responsibility toward the other across time—toward the dead or toward that which was impossible in a given historical moment. . . . In this Marx, the present is thereby always split, but split by prior violence and future possibility rather than simply by the nature of signification” (Freeman 2010, 10). Here, then, Eleanor’s multiplicity, her literal splitting, signals a responsibility to her mortal self, her dead self, the self subjected to misogynistic sexual violence, and this responsibility translates into the call she makes for a different future.

Indeed, what transpires here, where Eleanor comes face to face with an other self, dramatically alters the relationship that Clara and Eleanor have shared for over two centuries. That is, this particular self-encounter disrupts the repetitive circularity of her story, her history, and ushers into being that different future: this is the town where Eleanor meets Frank and initiates the romance that propels the rest of the action, including Eleanor’s eventual separation from Clara, Frank’s transformation into a vampire, and Clara’s alliance and perhaps future romance with Darvell. Given its affective power—for Eleanor, for the viewer—the uncanny recognition that Eleanor and her prior self share might best be understood as what Mari Ruti calls a “transcendent moment . . . when the real erupts within the symbolic” (2012, 26). For Ruti, such moments of transcendence “stage a clash of two temporalities: the timeliness of ordinary experience and the timelessness (or untimeliness)

of the extraordinary” (26), and, as she further suggests, when the extraordinary—the timeless—prevails over the ordinary, “we activate the immortal” and “open a sorely needed space for the singularity of being within an otherwise homogenizing landscape” (26). Through the visual copresence of Eleanor and one of her earlier selves, *Byzantium* gestures to the ethical and extraordinary possibilities activated when temporality is freed from its hegemonic moorings, and these possibilities attest to the critical interventions that the film, as a whole, makes.

Byzantium’s most trenchant intervention returns us to the topic of the vampire genre’s temporality as it bears on the gendered politics of recognition. While Eleanor’s inability to narrate herself in a patriarchal culture—her inability to articulate the terms of her own recognition—may be a tired trope, Jordan gives it new life through *Byzantium*’s ironic reimagining of the vampire’s open secret. Eleanor’s desire for recognition is made explicit as she laments the impossibility of sharing her story, a lament that introduces and frames the film. Her initial voice-over begins in the middle of a repetition and reveals what she has written on the crumpled pages she throws to the wind: “My story can never be told. I write it over and over, wherever we find shelter. I write of what I cannot speak—the truth.” Here, the girl vampire—like her story, her genre—seems consigned to the same eternal repetition of her literary predecessors, beholden to a truth she cannot speak, a knowledge she cannot share, but for a key difference: Eleanor *wants* to share her secret. And she does. In the process, she encounters two men who come to know her story—first, the old neighbor who has collected the discarded pages of her story and, later, Frank, who eventually understands that her story is truth, not fiction. Even more, Jordan seems to challenge both the paradox of the vampire’s open secret and the cultural impossibility of the girl’s self-narration by incorporating this male recognition into the plot itself. And yet, each act of recognition is motivated by a self-serving desire: the old neighbor wants Eleanor to end his life, while Frank wants her to immortalize his (whether for his own sake or for their undying love remains ambiguous). In the end, they are not so different from Mr. Minton, all three incapable of the mode of recognition that Lisbeth Lipari calls “listening for the other” (2004, 122).

In her work on listening as an overlooked dimension in the dialogic philosophy of Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas, Lipari situates communication as foundational to recognition, and she argues that “listening, in contrast to hearing, is an enactment of responsibility made manifest through our posture of receptivity, a passivity of receiving the other into oneself, letting them enter into oneself without assimilation or appropriation” (137). According to Lipari, Buber understood the gift of receiving the other’s oth-

erness—of listening by making space for the other within the self—as capable of fostering an intersubjective “between” (136), what Levinas called a “‘dwelling place’ separate from the I of the listener” (137). Such an intersubjective between resonates with Deleuze and Guattari’s claim that girls “slip in everywhere, between orders, acts, ages, sexes,” that they resist the dualisms that constitute hegemonic subjects by “[being]-between, [passing] between, the intermezzo” (2007, 277), although Deleuze and Guattari conceive of subjectivity as process—flow, energy, movement—and thus extend Buber’s intersubjective between and Levinas’s dwelling place, both of which rely on the ethical recognition of autonomous subjects. Regardless, what *Byzantium* makes clear is that Eleanor’s subjectivity—whether as eternal process or as recognized autonomy—depends on (indeed, demands) a certain intersubjective between and a particular girlness on the part of the other.

With a self-aware opening that literally voices Eleanor’s attempt to share her secret, *Byzantium* reimagines the traditional vampire narrative’s reliance on an epistemological quest wherein knowledge and knowing provide a coded language for negotiating the “unspeakability” of queer desire and longing. For Eleanor, however, the unspeakable is the truth of her existence, and her quest is to narrate herself in an epistemological intimacy that doesn’t require the literal death of the other; her quest is to be truly known by an other, to open herself to another immortality.²⁰ As Lipari argues, “communication is a process of opening to the other, which holds the promise of making worlds” (2004, 131). Within such worlds, the possibility of living a dramatically different life is not simply the individual act that the vampire’s queerly sequential life inspires; rather, it is an intersubjective project that also calls for the ethical recognition of the other and, in so doing, expands upon the implicit promise of the vampire’s fantastic immortality, its radically different life/time.

This is the difference a girl makes.

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²⁰ Here I am referencing a plot element—the fact that anyone who learns Eleanor’s story must die—but in many ways this also applies to the canonical vampire narratives as well, since the epistemological quest generally results in the death of the vampire or the protagonist to avoid the actualization of same-sex desire.

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