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Cover Page Footnote

Raymond McNally, a professor of history at Boston College, is well-known for his ground-breaking work on Vlad the Impaler. He has co-authored (with Radu Florescu) *In Search of Dracula*, *Dracula: A Biography of Vlad the Impaler*, *Dracula: Prince of Many Faces*, and *In Search of Dr. Jeekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

In Search of the Lesbian Vampire: Barbara von Cilli, Le Fanu's "Carmilla" and the Dragon Order

Raymond T. McNally

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"We are as ignorant of the meaning of dragons, as we are the meaning of the universe." Jorge Luis Borge

A note by Peter Haining in his work *The Dracula Centenary Book* stimulated this article, which is a preliminary report of current research, as yet not complete. The note reads as follows: "Upper Styria, 1451. At Graz in the mountainous regions of Upper Styria, now a province of Austria lived Barbara von Cilli, a beautiful woman much loved by Sigismund of Hungary. When close to death, she was apparently saved by the use of a secret ritual devised by Abramerlin the Mage, but as result was condemned forever. The woman was the inspiration for *Carmilla*, the masterpiece about a female vampire by the Irish author, Joseph Sheridan Fanu" (143). However, Haining offered no source or documentation for his claim. So, I had to go in search of Barbara von Cilli (yes, the name is pronounced "silly") and a possible connection to Le Fanu's *Carmilla*, and to the Dragon Order. Since there is virtually nothing in English about Barbara von Cilli, I consider it important to present some rather detailed biographical data here.¹

Several important questions plagued me: Why did the Dublin writer Le Fanu set his vampire novel in Styria in Austria, the same setting, which (according to his Notes preserved at the Rosenbach Foundation in Philadelphia) Bram Stoker later initially chose for his vampire Count? How could Le Fanu or his fellow Irishman Stoker know anything about Styria? The usual references to the works of the eighteenth-century biblical scholar Augustin Calmet and others about Vampires did not satisfy me.²

First of all, who was Barbara von Cilli and how is she connected both to *Carmilla* and the Dragon Order? Barbara von Cilli, who was born between 1390 and 1395 and died in 1451, took her last name from her ancestral castle of Cilli once located in Styria, an old province of southern Austria.³ She became popularly known as "The German Messalina", because she was accused of adultery and intrigue.⁴

Barbara came from the once powerful Cilli family, whose ancestral home was in the fortress town of Cilli. The humanist historian Aeneas Silvio Piccolomini, later to be elected Pope Pius II, chronicled her in his *Historia Bohemica* written in 1458. Piccolomini hated the Cilli family in general, and Barbara in

¹ For general information about the Cilli Counts see Franz Krones, *Diezeitgenössischen Quellen zur Geschichte der Grafen von Cilli*. Verlag des Verfassers: Graz, 1871. This work is based on a chronicle written by a monk concerning the history of the Cilli Counts from 1341 to 1461.

² The best book on Le Fanu is W J Mc Cormick, *Sheridan Le Fanu and Victorian Ireland* (Oxford Press, 1980). Ivan Melada's little book *Sheridan Le Fanu* (Boston: Twayne, 1987) is not a definitive biography. A large collection of Le Fanu family papers is available on microfilm from the National Library of Ireland: N. 2973-2988; and P. 2594-2609. For the latter archival information I am indebted to Mr. Brendan A Rapple, Collection Services Librarian, O'Neil Library at Boston College.

³ A limited biographical sketch of Countess Barbara von Cilli is the dissertation by Hans Chilian, "Barbara von Cilli" *Inaugural Dissertation* (Leipzig: Borna, Robert Noske, 1908).

⁴ Valeria Messalina (?-45 A.D.), third wife of the Roman Emperor Claudius, was accused of intrigue and sexual promiscuity. Formally found guilty of the charge of adultery, she was executed.

particular, and so he presented a negative picture of her. There are also the Cilli Chronicles, recorded by a monk detailing their history from 1341 to 1435 and 1435 to 1461, edited by Franz Krones and published in 1871. The Italian humanist Antonius Bonfinius returned to recording a bit of her life in his *Rerum Hungaricum* written between 1485 and 1505.

Count Herman II of Cilli brought his family into prominence during the late fourteenth century. He was an ardent supporter of the King and had married the Hungarian Queen Marie of the powerful Tomay family in 1385. Unfortunately his queen died in 1395 just ten years after their marriage. The infamous defeat of the western Christian army by the Turks at Nicopolis undermined Sigismund's prestige in Hungary. In 1401 he was captured by the Hungarian magnates and held prisoner. His staunch ally Herman II of Cilli freed him towards the end of that year. King Sigismund was then betrothed to Countess Barbara von Cilli in 1401 and they were married in 1408. From then the influential Barbara functioned as ruler during her husband's frequent absences. In 1408 Barbara gave birth to her only child, Elizabeth. However, Sigismund longed for a male heir. The king knew that his kingdom was not secure until he produced a male heir to succeed. In fact, traditionally the rights and property of a woman passed on to her husband or male child. Women were considered inferior to males. Had not God created Adam in his image and likeness, but not Eve? It was even hotly argued by scholars whether a woman would rise from the dead in her female body, or be resurrected in the perfect human form – that of the male. King Sigismund and his wife Barbara von Cilli jointly inaugurated the modern Order of the Dragon on December 12 or 13, 1408 soon after their marriage.⁵ The Dragon Order already had a long history.⁶ No one seems to know the exact origins and meanings of the dragon symbol. Nor is there any agreement among scholars. A common symbol for eternity, according to some scholars, is the dragon devouring its own tail in a pattern of the oriental notion of eternal return. Nothing really dies, but just comes back in another form.

The main point of interest in the founding of the modern Dragon Order is that it was highly unusual at that time to have a woman as co-founder of any Order. This is a testimony to the power and prestige of Countess Barbara von Cilli. Also unusual is that she personally took an active part in the ceremonies and meetings of the Order.⁷ Her marriage to Sigismund cemented the pact between himself and Count Herman II von Cilli, who had a legitimate claim to the throne of Bosnia through his mother.

The Inner Dragon Court, called "Sarkany Rend" in Hungarian, was and still is restricted to twenty four nobles. However, the exterior court was (and is) open to all nobles, who can demonstrate four years of service to the needy. The entire Order was called "Drachenorden" in German and "Societatis Draconistarum" in Latin. From the Latin is derived the word "Draconis" meaning "the dragon." The main purpose of the original Order, according to the document drawn up by Sigismund and signed by twenty one barons and other nobles of his court in 1408, was to secure his position as King of Hungary ("Sigismundus dei gratia rex Hungariae") and to reward those loyal to him. Those accepted into the Order in a solemn ceremony swore to protect Sigismund and his family. Members of the Order also pledged to combat heretics and Islam, and to defend each other against aggression.

As a reward for their allegiance to Sigismund the nobles were also asked to "wear and bear the sign or image of the dragon curled up in the form of a circle" resting on a red cross. The red cross came from the Order of St. George, as stated in the documents, "just in the same way that those who fight under the

⁵ For a traditional view of the Dragon Order based largely on Hungarian sources see Constantin Rezachevici, "From the Order of the Dragon to Dracula," *Journal of Dracula Studies* 1 (1999): 3-7.

⁶ I am grateful to the current Grand Master of the Dragon, His Excellency Nicholas de Vere for information about the Dragon Order and its history.

⁷ See Gyorgy Fejer, *Codex diplomatici Hungarica*. Buda: The Royal University of Hungary Press, 1830-35.

banner of the glorious martyr St. George are accustomed to wear a red cross on a white field” (“The Dragon Sovereignty” 3).

As an example of the bond of mutual defense anticipated among the members of the Dragon Order in 1412, the Duke of Spalatia Hervoja from Bosnia requested aid from Barbara specifically on the basis of his membership in the Dragon Order. He petitioned her, “Advertat Serenitas Vestra quomodo ego existo in Societate Dracorum.” However, the Turks overwhelmed Bosnia by 1413, and Bosnia ceased being under Hungarian control. From that time forward the Bosnian Serbs, who were persecuted as Bogomil heretics by both the Orthodox Serbs and Croatian Catholics, readily converted in large numbers to Islam, a religion that seemed close to their own. Bogomils de-emphasized the role of the priest class and church pageantry and instead put their emphasis on living a life of moral rectitude. (Recently, Orthodox Serbs have attempted to murder South Slavic Moslems as part of so-called “ethnic cleansing.”)

During the spring of the year 1414 Barbara broke off her stay in Hungary, in order to witness the crowning of her husband Sigismund as Holy Roman Emperor. She also journeyed to the small Swiss town of Constance to take part in a church council held there, but returned to Hungary towards the end of 1416. Meanwhile, King Sigismund had had his child from Barbara, Elizabeth, engaged to Count Albrecht of Austria in 1411, and they were married either in 1421 or, more likely, in 1419. Barbara herself resided mostly in Kelmek near Agrani in Hungary.

The main problem facing Christendom during this time of the decline of papal authority due to the Great Western Schism, which found several rival claimants to the throne of St. Peter, was begun by Jan Hus of Bohemia (present-day Czech Republic). During the early fifteenth century Jan Hus was a kind of protestant before Protestantism. He called for a reform of the Church. He challenged both the priest class and secular authority. King Sigismund, as heir to the Bohemian throne, formally invited Hus to attend the Church Council of Constance (1414-1418) and promised him imperial safe conduct. Attempts to persuade Hus to recant his position failed, and he was burned at the stake as a heretic. (So much for imperial safe conduct!). However, Hus became a martyr, and many Czechs continued to oppose both the official Catholic Church and King Sigismund’s civil authority.

Barbara von Cilli took ambivalent positions vis-à-vis the Hussites. She at first attacked the heretics vigorously in a July 1427 manifesto and another in October 1431. Later in life, as we shall see, she changed her mind about the Hussites. Meanwhile in 1428 Barbara’s brother Friedrich II murdered his wife Elizabeth Frankepani, in order to marry a young noble girl named Veronika.

A controversial series of events took place at Christmas time 1419. According to some sources Sigismund accused Barbara of adultery and banished both Barbara and her daughter Elizabeth. However, this seems to have been merely a rumor for two reasons. First, Sigismund himself was a well known philanderer and could hardly expect his wife to be faithful. Even the pro-Sigismund writer Aeneas Silvio Piccolomini had to admit “however, the unfaithful husband made the wife unfaithful.” (“Infidus namque maritus infidam facit uxorem.”) Secondly, Barbara had come to Sigismund’s court as a young girl and had already suffered sufficient indignities at his court. Piccolomini accused Barbara of adultery in his *De viris illustribus*, and the historian Widemann even names the knight Johann von Wallenroth as her illicit lover. However, no one knows this for certain, since one could not enter their bedrooms. King Sigismund appears to have forgiven Barbara with a mere slap on the wrist. What is certain is that Sigismund did not evidently lose trust in his wife Barbara, because he went ahead and confirmed her as Queen of Bohemia.

On 8 February 1431, the year in which the Wallachian prince who later signed his name as “Vlad Dracula” was probably born, King Sigismund bestowed upon Dracula’s father Vlad, prince of Wallachia, official membership in the prestigious Inner Court of the Dragon Order. Henceforth Vlad became known as Dracul, meaning “the one invested with the Order of the Dragon.” Vlad was given two capes, one green (the traditional dragon color) and another black. The green cape was to be worn over a red garment symbolic of the blood of martyrs. The black cape had to be worn on Fridays and especially during ceremonies commemorating Christ’s Passion and Death. The dragon was represented in this case with two wings, jaws half open, tail curled around his head, and the end of the tail in his mouth. The dragon was suspended on a cross accompanied with the words “Oh, how merciful is God” (O, quam misericors est Deus) followed by “Just and Faithful” (Justus et Pius).

When Dracula's father returned from a lengthy stay in the West to his native Wallachia, he came prominently displaying the obligatory dragon medallion which was required of those admitted into the Dragon Order. It is reasonable to assume that when the peasants saw him bearing the dragon symbol, in their ignorance they thought that he had thrown in his lot with the devil. The dragon was a common symbol of the devil, which can be found on countless Romanian church frescoes. Hence, unfortunately, in the popular parlance Vlad became known as Vlad Dracul, meaning "Vlad the Devil," which, of course, he never intended. Similarly his son, also named Vlad, who was duly proud of the fact that his father had been admitted to the select Order of the Dragon, signed his own name as "Vlad Dracula" meaning "son of him who had the Order of the Dragon." There are two surviving documents in the archives of the Transylvanian city of Sibiu, on which one can clearly read his signature. To the common people he became erroneously known as Vlad "Son of the Devil"; later the Turks, his mortal enemies, would name him "Kasiglu Voevoda" meaning "The Impaling Prince," because of his fondness for that form of execution. [Ironically, since he was and is still considered to have been a national heroic fighter for Romanian independence, some Romanians adopted that Turkish pejorative designation and called him Vlad "Tsepesh" meaning "Impaler" in Romanian. One can hardly imagine that Vlad ever would have introduced himself saying "Hello, I'm Vlad the Impaler. What's your name?" Other people might call you "Impaler" but you would never call yourself that!]

Meanwhile in 1419 King Sigismund of Hungary had also become King of Bohemia (the current Czech Republic) upon the death of his half brother Wencelas. The king also journeyed to Rome, in order to become crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 1433 by Pope Eugenius IV. The incumbent Pope also officially approved the statutes of the Dragon Order while Sigismund was visiting Rome in 1433.

Towards the end of the year 1437 there was a turning point in the lives of Sigismund and his queen Barbara von Cilli. When Sigismund returned to Prague on 28 August 1437, the heretical Hussites were causing immense political problems for him. Unfortunately he became too ill to cope and died in December of that year. His heir the Hapsburg Archduke of Austria, Albrecht, who feared the power of queen Barbara, captured her and transferred her to Pressburg (Bratislava in Slovakia today). In retaliation Barbara shifted from criticism of the rebelling Hussites to active support of them, especially their nationalistic aspirations for independence. George Podiebrad emerged as the champion of the Hussite cause and was subsequently condemned by Pope Pius II. Barbara worked behind the scenes to support Podiebrad and oppose Albrecht the Hapsburg from seizing the throne. Barbara failed to stop Albrecht. So, she had Albrecht marry her ambitious daughter Elizabeth.

Albrecht faced an infamous peasant uprising in Transylvania in 1437, which he brutally smashed, but there were smoldering Hussite rebels still in Bohemia, and hefty opposition to his reign by Hungarian magnates. Thus perhaps it is just as well that he died of dysentery in Vienna just two years later, on 17 October 1439.

Albrecht's widow, Elizabeth von Cilli, daughter of Barbara who was still alive, fought for power. Her relative Ulrich, head of the Cilli clan and son-in-law to the despot of Serbia, George Brankovic, gave ardent support. Elizabeth let it be known that Albrecht had already impregnated her with a child. But there were those who doubted her claim. On 23 February 1440 the child was born and was given the appropriate name Ladislav *Posthumous*, since he was born after his father's death. Elizabeth then secretly sent her lady-in-waiting Ilona Kottarenin to steal the sacred Crown of St Stephen of Hungary from the fortress of Visegrad located up the Danube River from Buda. The papal primate of Hungary Denes Széchi officially crowned the young boy Ladislav as king. Barbara von Cilli continued to support the right of Ladislav Posthumous to rule over both Hungary and Bohemia. However, she lost to the Hapsburgs in her bid to set up a separate Hungarian-Polish state free of Hapsburg control.

Barbara von Cilli lived the last ten years of her life in virtual exile at Melnik in Bohemia under the protection of George Podiebrad. When she died in 1451 Podiebrad had her body taken from Melnik to Prague for solemn interment with the kings of Bohemia within the fortress of the St Wencelas Church in Prague. However, in the West she had acquired an unsavory reputation, which led to her being branded a kind of lesbian vampire due to Hapsburg-inspired attempts to besmirch her name.

Aeneas Silvio Piccolomini, who detested the Cilli family, characterized Barbara's brother Count Friedrich as "shameless," "materialistic," and "a blood thirsty wildman" as well as an enemy of the church and state. He declared Ulrich, the head of the Cilli family, as a "hardened sinner" and "demon." As for Barbara herself, Piccolomini claimed that Barbara did not even believe in an after-life. Aeneas also accused Barbara of associating with "heretics" and "abominable Hussites." He claimed that after the death of Albrecht, Barbara and her daughter Elizabeth used to profane Holy Communion by drinking actual human blood during the liturgy. This would, of course, qualify Barbara for the clinical category of "living vampire" meaning, according to medical doctors even today, some one who drinks human blood. Barbara was also accused of maintaining a female harem during her exile at Melnik and staging huge sexual orgies with young girls. However, even Aeneas had to admit that Barbara had a "very elegant body" ("ellegantissimi corporis"). This view is confirmed by the Czech Annals of 1437, which describe Barbara as a "beautiful woman" ("krásne panj"). On that point there appears to have been agreement.

So, how can one evaluate the role of Barbara von Cilli? During a time when royalty in both western and eastern Europe could barely sign their names, Barbara knew German, Hungarian, Czech, Latin, and even a little Polish. She lived a comparatively free life in the manner of the Italian Renaissance with emphasis upon individual freedom. In fact, Barbara appears to have been an early example of an emancipated woman, who probably frightened her male contemporaries and led to her nefarious reputation as a lesbian vampire.

What about the connection to the vampire novel *Carmilla*? Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu (1814-73), Dublin-born master of the macabre, came from an illustrious Protestant Irish family. He was brought up in Phoenix Park and at Abington Co., in Limerick, as the eldest son of a Church of Ireland clergyman. After attending Trinity College in Dublin, he began publishing stories in 1838. In 1844 he married Susan Bennett, and had four children. The death of his beloved wife in 1858 left him desolate. Le Fanu retreated from society and became known as the "Invisible Prince" of Dublin. He became familiar with the works of the mystical Emmanuel Swedenborg, whose influence can be found in Le Fanu's works. In 1872 he issued a book of short stories entitled *In a Glass Darkly*.⁸ Among these tales was *Carmilla*. (I consider Le Fanu's story to be among the best vampire tales ever written, and included the entire text in my anthology *A Clutch of Vampires*, New York: Graphic Society, 1973).

Le Fanu set his tale in Styria, the homeland of Countess Barbara von Cilli. The portrait of Mircalla-Carmilla, Countess of Karnstein (a real place near Cilli), is dated 1698 in the story, which would make the Countess very old indeed by 1872. (A play called *Carmilla* by Lady Longford was performed at the Gate Theatre, Dublin with Coralie Carmichael in the title role and the settings by the renowned Michael Mac Liammoir.)

In the Le Fanu story the heroine Laura, the daughter of an Englishman retired from Austrian service to a small estate in Styria, southern Austria, narrates the tale from her schloss or castle. When she was about six years old Laura had a dream about a young woman who visited her, lay down in her bed, and caressed her. She woke up feeling as if two sharp needles had pierced her breast. A dozen years later a carriage overturns in an accident near Laura's castle-home. From the carriage emerge a mother and her supposedly crippled daughter named Carmilla. Within the carriage is a mysterious black woman who never gets out. The elder woman declares that she must proceed on an important mission and leave her daughter behind. Laura's chivalrous father volunteers to take in her daughter.

Laura reacts in fright, since the daughter resembles the nocturnal visitor from her childhood dream. Carmilla is attracted to Laura. She caresses and embraces her like a lover declaring, "You shall be mine." Carmilla suggests a lesbian relationship of lover and death with Laura; Carmilla says, "love will have its sacrifices. No sacrifice without blood." Naïve Laura thinks that Carmilla is either insane or perhaps a

⁸St. Paul, "For now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then shall I know even as I am known." I Corinthians, 12.

male masquerading as a girl, since she is ignorant of lesbian advances. Laura actually views Carmilla with a mixture of attraction and dread.

Within a few miles of Laura's estate three young peasant girls claim that someone tried to strangle them. Their subsequent deaths are attributed to some strange fever. Laura herself begins feeling very tired and suspects that she too is a victim of the fever. She dreams about Carmilla's kisses on her throat, which leave her with a feeling of strangulation. Carmilla declares that she is of the neighboring Karnstein family. Laura confesses that her deceased Hungarian mother was a descendant of the Karnsteins; hence Carmilla and Laura are related by blood.

General Spielsdorf, a friend of Laura's father, arrives and talks about his dear young niece, who experienced feelings similar to those of Laura after the General had taken under his care a woman named Mircalla. The General, upon seeing Carmilla, is convinced that she is Mircalla and a vampire. He enlists the help of Laura's father in his vampire hunt. They proceed to the Karnstein chapel in a ruined village three miles west of Laura's home. There are "the moldering tombs of the proud family of Karnstein, now extinct" and "the equally desolate chateau."

Carmilla has inexplicably disappeared, and Laura relates, "You have heard, no doubt of the appalling superstition that prevails in Upper and Lower Styria, in Moravia, Silesia, in Turkish Servia, in Poland, even in Russia; the superstition, so we must call it, of the vampire." And Laura concludes that "it is difficult to deny, or even doubt the existence of such a phenomenon as the vampire." She then relates what happened at the Karnstein chapel after the fearless vampire killers found the grave of Mircalla-Carmilla-Millarca, obvious anagrams:

The grave of Countess Mircalla was opened; and the General and my father recognized each his perfidious and beautiful guest, in the face now disclosed to view. The features, though a hundred and fifty years had passed since her funeral, were tinted with the warmth of life. Her eyes were open; no cadaverous smell exhaled from the coffin. The two medical men, one officially present, the other on the part of the promoter of the inquiry, attested the marvelous fact, that there was a faint but appreciable respiration, and a corresponding action of the heart. The limbs were perfectly flexible, the flesh elastic; and the leaden coffin floated with blood, in which to a depth of seven inches, the body lay immersed. Here then were all the admitted signs and proofs of vampirism. The body, therefore, in accordance with the ancient practice, was raised, and a sharp stake driven through the heart of the vampire, who uttered a piercing shriek at the moment, in all respects as might escape from a living person in the last agony. Then the head was struck off, and a torrent of blood flowed from the severed neck. The body and head were next placed on a pile of wood, and reduced to ashes, which were thrown upon the river and borne away, and that territory has never since been plagued by the visits of a vampire. (Le Fanu 150-51)

Professor Arthur H Nethercot, while claiming that female vampires are "comparatively rare" in English literature, several years ago advanced the theory that Geraldine in Coleridge's "Christabel" was, in reality, a vampire. He followed it up with an analysis of Coleridge's "Christabel" and Le Fanu's "Carmilla." Most recently Sharon Russell credits the Roy Ward Baker 1970 Hammer Studio movie *The Vampire Lovers* as exhibiting "relative faithfulness" to the original plot of Le Fanu's "Carmilla." However, she also refers to changes making it into "a pornographic male orientated spectacle." Surely today Le Fanu's tale deserves to inspire a better movie with proper lesbian overtones and undertones.

Have I proved an inexorable connection between Le Fanu's female vampire Countess Carmilla-Mircalla-Millarca and the historical Countess Barbara von Cilli? No, — there is obviously more research to be done; this article is merely a kind of preliminary report designed to stimulate thoughts and perhaps research by others about such matters. In the future I may be able to devote an entire book to Countess-Queen Barbara von Cilli, whether she influenced Le Fanu's "Carmilla" or not, and entitle it "Bloody

Countess Barbara.” I must admit that I have become somewhat obsessed with lovely Carmilla and Babs. In the end I find myself even agreeing with young Laura in the Le Fanu tale. Though she knows that beautiful Carmilla has been technically destroyed, in the end of the tale she admits, “from a reverie I have started, fancying I heard the light step of Carmilla at the drawing room door.”

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