

UNDEATH IN THE MARGINS: THE VAMPIRE IN FOUR WORKS OF CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN WOMEN AUTHORS

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Sommario

In questo articolo intendo esplorare le connessioni tra le opere di Chiara Palazzolo e Giusy De Nicolo – autrici significative per aver introdotto il tema dei non-morti, nello specifico vampiri, presso un pubblico giovanile in attesa di lavori in lingua italiana interni al genere – e altre due storie di vampiri italiani ad opera di Silvana La Spina e Lea Valti, presenti nella silloge I signori della notte (2018) a cura di Luca Raimondi. Utilizzando le mie precedenti ricerche riguardo lo stile e linguaggio di Palazzolo e De Nicolo intendo individuare le caratteristiche specificatamente italiane del romanzo vampirico, che sfrutta la declinazione romantica del tema gotico individuando tale personaggio soprannaturale come portatore di un'alterità irrisolvibile, e di un senso di dolore e di angoscia atto a suscitare l'empatia del lettore; il mio lavoro definisce altresì una linea evolutiva dalle opere di Palazzolo e De Nicolo a quelle di La Spina e Valti, configurando le nuove possibilità offerte dal genere (o sottogenere) vampirico.

Keywords: Chiara Palazzolo, Giusy De Nicolo, Silvana La Spina, Lea Valti, genere vampirico

“La regina dell'horror italiano, l'avevano chiamata. La nostra Anna Rice [*sic*] o Stephenie Meyer [...]. Magari, se l'Italia avesse la stessa capacità di proiezione culturale che hanno gli States, si sarebbe forse detto che era Stephenie Meyer la Chiara Palazzolo americana” [M Stefanini, *Liberal*, 13/09/2012], anche se “in quanto a qualità di scrittura [Chiara] guarda a

Twilig[h]t di Stephenie Meyer come un gigante può guardare una formica.”

(Misserville, G. *societàdelleletterate.it*, 17/05/2014)¹

The first day of the year 2020 began like most New Year's Days: it was a time of hope and possibility. Present readers know how 2020 turned out in reality, so perhaps we took solace in sources of literary escape. But where did some of us take literary refuge before 2020 dawned? It was a year when fictional blood-drinkers – often romantic ones – began to promenade somewhat less silently than in the preceding few years, creeping ever so slowly back to the surface to reclaim their once-prominent space in the literary sphere, most notably amongst women². As in the past, when literary vampires – and other superhuman or preternatural beings, for that matter (Crawford, 2014:45) – drew interest, often in times of socioeconomic and cultural crises, the time may be ripe for the fictional undead to return, as there has perhaps never been a better time for readers to bond, via the page, with the solitary existence of the undead creatures of literature.

In the late 'aughts' to the early 2010s, readers, cinephiles, and television viewers found themselves directed by wanderlust in all directions, so vast was the selection of media (not to mention fan fiction stemming from original works) that featured vampires and their undead brethren in various contexts and guises: the *Twilight* book series by American Stephenie Meyer and the films it spawned; the *True Blood*

¹ “They called her the queen of Italian horror. Our Anne Rice or Stephenie Meyer [...]. Perhaps, if Italy had the same capacity for cultural projection that the States does, maybe we would have said that it was Stephenie Meyer who was the American Chiara Palazzolo,” even though, “with regards to the quality of her writing, [Chiara] looked towards *Twilight* like a giant might look at an ant.” Quoted by Anselmo Terminelli, *Tanto ormai... Ricovero e morte di Chiara Palazzolo* (2015:120). All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

² Amongst the earliest modern causes for a greater proportion of the reading public's being comprised of women is the cultural shift that led to the popularity of the romance novel: “the increased profitability and popularity of the modern romance was at least partly contingent upon another historical development of the period: the entry of large amounts of women into the British and American white-collar workforce” (Crawford, 2014:38). Indeed, coinciding with the dynamite combination of women's increased autonomy, financial independence, and “leisure time that had been largely denied their mothers and grandmothers” and that was now available to them in the post-war era, women “formed a significant market for fiction” (Vani, 2018:7).

television series, based on Charlaine Harris's *Southern Vampire Mysteries* book series; the teen drama *Vampire Diaries*, drawn from and expanding upon L.J. Smith's homonymous series, to name just a few. These all came on the coattails of Rice's literary series of *The Vampire Chronicles*, with its first installment, *Interview with the Vampire*, published in 1976, followed by its cinematic version starring Brad Pitt and Tom Cruise in 1994; Francis Ford Coppola's 1992 film based on Bram Stoker's 1897 work *Dracula*; and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the television show from the 1990s and early 2000s with no preceding literary counterpart, based on Joss Whedon's 1992 film of the same name.

This latest period of enthrallment with creatures of the night fed the mainstream public globally for years with few apparent signs of abating. While the fictional vampiric reign sprang forth in the United States in the early years of the new millennium, audiences all over the world indulged in the romances, adventures, and vulnerabilities of the protagonists in the aforementioned series in languages they could comprehend, thanks to the linguistic adaptation, localisation, and translation of the media on television, on the big screen, and in literature. In Italy, by contrast, writers were inspired to create new literary works exploring the tragic beauty of the vampiric, or, more generally, undead, condition in tandem with appreciating English-language imports in translation. In the case of Chiara Palazzolo, her stylistically unique undead romances – that is, works of fiction with elements of romance that feature the presence of undead or immortal characters – preceded or coincided with the mainstream vampiric resurrection, winning over readers of all ages relatively quietly (in comparison with her American counterparts). While her work flew under the radar in Italy when compared to the translated works of Meyer and Harris, for example, this certainly does not mean that Palazzolo's work and other so-called paraliterary novels (like, for example, the vampire romances of Amabile Giusti) are without merit or are not worth investigating³. Fabio Giovannini, reflecting in 1997 on the fortune (or

³ The term 'paraliterary' derives from Greek: para - "beside" (Petronio 1979:IX) or "quasi, simile a", ma anche 'marginale, inferiore qualitativamente', secondo il GRADIT" (Ricci, 2014:283; "almost, similar to", but also 'marginal, qualitatively inferior', according to the GRADIT dictionary"). The term's origins lie in 1967 and refer to "l'alterità rispetto alla letteratura 'canonica' [che] è spiegata con la priorità assegnata al meccanismo della domanda/offerta, a discapito dell'autorialità e dell'originalità espressiva" (283) / "otherness,

lack thereof) of the fictional vampire in Italy, proposes travelling back to 1993, the “anno di Dracula,” or “Year of Dracula,” as defined by the Italian newspaper *Corriere della sera*, referring to the popularity of the vampire in Italy, which was a result of the 1993 release of Francis Ford Coppola’s cinematic *Bram Stoker’s Dracula*⁴. He explains: “Da allora, nell’editoria si sono moltiplicati i saggi sui vampiri, le antologie di racconti, le ristampe di vecchi testi quasi dimenticati. *E anche la narrativa ha preso a considerare il tema vampirico come un tema ‘nobile’ e presentabile*” (1997:208; italics added)⁵. Indeed, he appears to suggest that, as early as the 1990s, the literary vampire was peering out from behind the shadows of paraliterature and beginning to occupy space in the light of topics and literary genres that were conventionally deemed to be “noble and presentable” – that is, literature and themes whose goals were considered to be those of erudition and cultural refinement (Ricci, 2014:283).

In the early 2000s, *La trilogia di Mirta-Luna* (*The Mirta-Luna Trilogy*, 2005-2007) by Palazzolo and the fan-fiction series *A cena col vampiro* (*Dinner with the Vampire*, 2009-2010) by various authors, amongst which was Giusy De Nicolo’s original work *Porcaccia, un vampiro! (Holy Moly! A Vampire!*⁶, 2010), were introduced to the market, with *Mirta-Luna* backed by Edizioni Piemme, and the others, by an independent publisher of works of *Twilight* fan fiction, Mamma Editori, now Òphiere. A temporal silence fell between that time and the publication of an Italian anthology edited by Luca Raimondi about a decade later: *I signori della notte. Storie di vampiri italiani* (*Masters of the Night: Tales of Italian Vampires*, 2018). Bloodsuckers had,

when compared to ‘canonical’ literature, [that] is explained by the prime importance assigned to the mechanism of supply and demand, at the expense of authoriality and expressive originality.” For more on the paraliterary status of the undead romance, or romances in general, see Petronio (1979:XI); Ricci (2014:283-288); Giovannini (1997:208); Vani (2018:16-17).

⁴ The Hollywood film was released to North-American audiences in 1992 and to Italian audiences the following year.

⁵ “From that point onwards, essays on vampires, anthologies of short stories, reprints of almost-forgotten old texts were published left and right. And even the world of fiction began to consider vampiric themes to be ‘noble’ and presentable.”

⁶ In this case, this title is the suggestion of the author, thanks to a conversation we had on language forum Wordreference.com (Mandarino, 2017).

meanwhile, been silent on the Anglophone front, but Italy was keeping vampires alive and well. What type of language did these works, and their protagonists, employ? Were these works imitative of Rice – featuring refined, well-read, old-world creatures – or did they resemble more closely the foul-mouthed, rough-around-the-edges, but no-less-elegant and attractive vampires of Harris? And a last question comes to mind, as the treatment of vampires in fiction has, as we will see later, transformed over the years: did the undead humanoids in these Italian fictions relate to mortals as a carnivorous mortal relates to livestock, or as a passionate and lovesick individual relates to its paramour? Indeed, Crawford (2014:7) explains that “[t]he transformation of the horror-monsters of classic Gothic fiction from fearsome destroyers to loveable, misunderstood romantic leads” reflects changes in societal values and a new good/evil dichotomy. Clements (2011:2) echoes this: the vampire’s “portrayal in our culture has morphed from monster to lover, from single-minded villain to complex antihero. The vampire was once held up as the embodiment of evil and temptation, but has now become the ultimate romantic alpha-hero.”

In this paper, I aim to connect the undead romances of Palazzolo and De Nicolo – women authors notable in their own right for introducing the undead to the contemporary young-adult audiences thirsty for local (that is, untranslated) vampire works – and the new stories of Italian vampires by two women writers, Silvana La Spina and Lea Valti, in *I signori della notte*. Previous research on the language, style, and reception of Palazzolo’s and De Nicolo’s works will serve as a bridge to exploring La Spina’s and Valti’s stories, opening a window onto changes (or lack thereof) in the critical reception of works normally considered unworthy of critical analysis or literary value. I will begin by presenting each author and providing a summary of her work, after which I will explore the works of La Spina and Valti. Finally, I will conclude by investigating the commonalities and contrasts between the four authors’ works.

1. Palazzolo’s *sopramorti* and De Nicolo’s ‘dangerously bisexual’ Ludovico

Palazzolo’s *La trilogia di Mirta-Luna*, an Italian undead-romance series also possessing notable horror traits, began its adventure just before the

vampire-romance explosion in the 2000s and ended its series (followed, unfortunately, by the untimely death of the author in 2012) at the height of *Twilight* hysteria. *A cena col vampiro*, a seven-book Italian vampire-romance series featuring five works of *Twilight* fan fiction, is now republished as the five-book *La saga della sedicesima notte (The Saga of the Sixteenth Night)*⁷. The series, in its first iteration, features the work of five authors and has links closer to romance than to horror. The books in the *A cena col vampiro* series⁸ were conceived in response to the renewed obsession with vampires across all media; by contrast, the *Trilogia*'s coincident publication with the *Twilight Saga* means that it could not have been influenced by novels produced for the dominant trend. In this article, I will examine only the one original novel in the *A cena col vampiro* series, entitled *Porcaccia, un vampiro!*, by Giusy De Nicolo.

Palazzolo was a horror great in a society – that of Italy – whose horror and undead-romance literature was still underappreciated by the target culture and public. Local authors celebrated the late author's literary triumphs and talents:

“Signora del fantastico italiano” [Bartolini];

“Ha inventato il gotico colto all'italiana” [Milanese];

“Scrittrice pulp più popolare d'Italia” [Gullo];

“Acclamata regina dell'horror made in Italy”
[*Cosmopolitan*];

“Grande maestra dell'horror e del fantasy” [*La Nazione*];

“Fra le più amate scrittrici gotiche italiane” [Lipperini];

⁷ The revamped series (pun not intended) excludes *Porcaccia!* as well as a romantic story of an angel amongst mortals, *Dark angel* by Fanny Goldrose, as neither is a work of *Twilight* fan fiction.

⁸ The books in this series were as follows: *Raining stars* by Michaela Dooley; *La sedicesima notte* by Margaret Gaiottina; *Moonlight rainbow* by Violet Folgorata; *Una gelida rosa* by Violet Folgorata; *L'alba della chimera* by Margaret Gaiottina; *Dark angel* by Fanny Goldrose; and *Porcaccia, un vampiro!* by Giusy De Nicolo. It bears noting that all of these authors, with the exception of De Nicolo, write under a pen name, in accordance with the romance-novel custom of writing under a nom de plume.

“[...] ha innovato il linguaggio horror in Italia, ha sperimentato una forma narrativa moderna e raffinata e ha plasmato contenuti originalissimi nel rigenerare il Mito, nel piegare a proprio piacimento Storia e Fantasia” [Raugei]⁹. (Terminelli, 2015:119-120, 129)

Palazzolo was born in Catania on 31 October 1961; of all days, this writer of gothic, horror, and pulp literature was born on All Hallows' Eve. She spent her formative years in Rome and published her first book, *La casa della festa* (*The House of the Party*), in 2000 with Marsilio, followed three years later by *I bambini sono tornati* (*The Children Have Returned*) with Piemme, with whom the entire *Trilogia di Mirta-Luna* was published. Palazzolo passed away in Rome on 6 August 2012, though her legacy remains strong, especially due to the upcoming release of the first film based on her *Trilogia*, and her books of gothic literature continue to serve as elegant models for Italian gothic writers. Lipperini describes Palazzolo's choice of genre as surprising to some, given her talent – as though horror fiction and literary prowess were somehow mutually exclusive – and reflects on how this statement on its own betrays the unreasonable disdain or lack of seriousness associated with so-called paraliterature:

[Decide] di dedicarsi alla letteratura fantastica [...]. Una scelta che alcuni avevano considerato incomprensibile, da parte di una delle scrittrici più promettenti della scena romana: scelta, peraltro, compiuta in anni dove l'exploit del fantastico era lontano. Eppure, già con il primo libro (*Non mi uccidere* [...]) aveva conquistato i lettori¹⁰. (2012: s.p.)

⁹ “Master of Italian fantasy;” “She invented high-class, Italian-style, gothic literature;” “The most popular female writer of pulp fiction in Italy;” “Acclaimed queen of horror made in Italy;” “Great master of horror and fantasy;” “Amongst the most beloved Italian gothic writers;” “[Chiara] has innovated the language of horror in Italy. She has experimented with a modern and refined narrative form and crafted extremely original content in her rewriting of the Myth, by bending to her will History and Fantasy.”

¹⁰ “[She] decided to dedicate herself to fantasy [...], a choice that many had not understood, made by one of the most promising writers on the Roman scene: a choice, on the other hand, made in a time when the exploit of fantasy was still far away. And yet, already with her first book (*Don't Kill Me* [...]), she had won over her readers.”

The protagonist of Palazzolo's trilogy, Mirta Fossati, is a recently resurrected 19-year-old from Perugia who became infatuated with 29-year-old drug addict Roberto "Robin" De Dominicis. Robin, having purportedly grown weary of his life and the potent hold of his addiction, convinces Mirta that, should she choose to die with him by an overdose, their love would revive them and they would meet again to live without suffering in an amorous afterlife. They would be together "fino alla fine del tempo," until the end of time, as the refrain goes. In the end, Mirta chooses death – or, rather, death chooses her.

Before her death, Mirta was a well-liked, high-achieving student at the University of Perugia and a devoted daughter and older sister (Palazzolo, 2006:43-44). But there was a dark side to her adolescent life: she habitually relinquished friends, family, and her studies to shoot up heroin with Robin. In *Non mi uccidere*, the reader accompanies newly immortal Mirta in her life as a sentient *sopramorto*, a cross between flesh-eating zombie and bloodsucking vampire, as she discovers her powers, limitations, and new desires. The manner in which Mirta becomes a zombie is appropriate to the romantic aspects of this trilogy: Mirta turns into a *sopramorto*, one who has "survived death" ("sopravvissuta alla morte," Palazzolo, 2005:409), by dying with a passionate intention to reunite with her lover and a staunch belief that their shared love would be strong enough to revive them. No disease-spreading bites and no zombie infections are suffered on the way to zombification or immortality in this series. When Mirta awakens undead in her funeral garb and bursts through her interred casket, she is alone: Robin has not been reborn as she has; his burial site, next to hers, is undisturbed despite his promise to reunite with her after death. She waits by his tomb and progressively discovers that she is neither alive nor dead. She feels alone in an absolute way: she thinks she is the only one of her undead kind in the world.

Despite being forced to come to terms with leaving her future with Robin behind, Mirta searches for Robin desperately throughout the three novels, most notably in the first, not comprehending his failure to meet her after their demise. She renames herself Luna and falls in love with Sara, her undead caretaker and benefactor. Like in the vampire lore fashioned by Rice, Sara fulfills the role of 'maker' by guiding adopted 'fledgling' Mirta-Luna and showing her the ropes of undead life. The

story is by no means 'traditional' in either the horror or romance canons; however, this zombie story is founded upon a tragic, lonely love story befitting the *rosa* genre, or Italian romance novel, even as it shows its horror colours.

On the rear cover of the first edition of *Porcaccia, un vampiro!* – now re-titled as *Echi di sangue (Echoes of Blood)*; published by Òphiere, 2019) and featuring minor adjustments to the plot – the only biographical information given on the author, who also goes by the pseudonym J. Tangerine, is “[...] De Nicolo è una scrittrice, ‘punto’”¹¹. Fortunately, I had the opportunity to exchange a few messages with De Nicolo; I also learned from an interview conducted by Shanmei, from *Liberi di scrivere*, that the author frequented bars in the 1990s in Bari, which makes her year of birth likely to fall in the late 1970s to early 1980s. She was born in Puglia and, accordingly, two of her books situated in that region have garnered the series title of *Apulia Vampirica*, or *Vampiric Apulia*, where ‘Apulia’ is used instead of the Italian ‘Puglia’ in order, one can assume, to lend the ancient air of its Latin name (and vampiric inhabitants)¹².

Porcaccia, un vampiro! is set in Bari, where “Andrea ‘Cespuglio’ Magli è uno studente con la sindrome del criceto. Ludovico, dark e fascinoso, sembrerebbe l’ideale per toglierlo dalla gabbia, se non fosse un vampiro pericolosamente bisex e per giunta nel mirino del racket” (De Nicolo, 2010)¹³, as claims the summary on the rear cover. The bisexuality of the vampire is not particularly surprising to anyone familiar with how vampires are represented in art: they are often hypersexualised or androgynous, as can be seen in preceding and contemporary undead literature (including Rice’s sexually fluid vampires, though they cannot have intercourse), and in the vampire’s established imagery of living on the margins of human society in popular culture. The inclusion of this book, however, in a mostly

¹¹ “[...] De Nicolo is a writer, ‘period’.”

¹² Indeed, the region of Puglia has been a fertile ground for the undead for centuries – that is, if we pay any mind to Giuseppe Davanzati’s *Dissertazione sopra i vampiri (Dissertation on Vampires)* from 1789.

¹³ “Andrea ‘Shrub’ Magli is a student who feels like a hamster on a wheel. Dark and charming Ludovico might seem like the ideal person to release him from his cage – that is, if he were not a dangerously bisexual vampire, not to mention a target of the Russian mob.”

conventional series (by paranormal-romance standards) is impressive, not to mention the presence of a *male* human protagonist – whereas young human *women* typically reign in this fictional space – in a series dominated by and written from the point of view of women. Furthermore, this book's insertion in a series of works of fan fiction, despite not explicitly being fanfic itself, seems to be supported by one of the essential functions of this genre: fanfic acts as “a vehicle for marginalized subcultural groups (women, the young, gays, and so on) to pry open space for their cultural concerns within dominant representations,” allowing female readers, both young and mature, to “appropriat[e] media texts and [reread] them in a fashion that serves different interests” (Jenkins, 2006:40). Duffett (2013:171), citing Henry Jenkins (2006:86-87), indicates that part of this “prying open” of spaces and “appropriation” of texts involves the challenging of taboos, which includes featuring anything outside of heteronormative couplings in traditional romance novels in general, and even some undead romances in particular.

Foreshadowing this challenging of taboos, the *A cena col vampiro* series' introduction, present in *Porcaccia*'s introduction, subtly points to the book's intention to expand on current generic heteronormative trends and to span the range of sweet romance, luscious passion, and crude violence: “Nel caso di questo libro in particolare, con sorriso a fior di labbra, il vampiro è metafora sulle tracce di *Carmilla*”¹⁴ (De Nicolo, 2010:2). The vampire, however, is not so much a metaphor as he is a real vampire, but the juxtaposition with *Carmilla* by Sheridan Le Fanu, a story of infatuation between a female vampire and a young mortal lady, is meaningful because *Porcaccia* ends in a potentially happily-(for)ever-after between two men¹⁵, one of whom is a vampire.

¹⁴ “In the case of this book in particular, with a hint of a smile, we propose the vampire as a metaphor on the heels of *Carmilla*.”

¹⁵ Obviously, romance between two men in literature is not unusual at all, though it is notable in the subgenre of undead romance. In *Porcaccia, un vampiro!*, we are dealing with males only: a male protagonist and a male paramour surrounded by male roommates, with a complementary but less important cast of women including Andrea's mother and a few female classmates. In my doctoral thesis (2018:153), I describe the significance of this male-dominated context and explain the origins of slash fiction: “[...] [*Porcaccia*], written by a woman and featuring romance between two men, falls under the influence of slash fiction, the name of which comes from “‘K/S’ [kay slash ess] or ‘Kirk/Spock’ fiction based on Star Trek” (Duffett, 2013:299); that is, slash is “a prominent fanfic genre that usually puts the two main male characters from [a] series into a homoerotic relationship” (172). Still, Elizabeth Woledge

One of these men is Andrea, a 24-year-old *Barese* yearning for something – or someone – to spice up his life. It is a flawless backdrop to allow for Ludovico the vampire to swoop in to liven things up.

De Nicolo presents her innovative take on the contemporary romance novel, creating a love story not just between two males but between a weakened vampire and an overconfident, under-experienced, but physically superior young man, at least according to the final dynamics, with Ludovico healing from extreme torture. The supposedly superior figure, Ludovico, is made inferior and vulnerable by his physical ailments; he is also rejected by Andrea on numerous occasions. De Nicolo's approach, thus, undoes or reverses the imbalance of heteronormative roles in traditional paranormal romance novels: Andrea, the human, has all the power. Ludovico, meanwhile, requires the aid and support of the usually physiologically inferior human, in this case a young man, whom the reader might assume will help the vampire by means of his own blood (De Nicolo, 2010:122). De Nicolo effectively transforms the relationship between the two men and, reaching the romantic climax anticipated by readers of romance, the novel ends with Andrea's reciprocating the love indirectly professed by Ludovico earlier in the novel (72), with incredulous Ludovico believing that Andrea is being facetious:

“[...] Non lo so quando è successo. So che sei la creatura più bella che abbia mai conosciuto e so che non voglio perderti.” [...] [G]li accarezzo la guancia e il livido sullo zigomo. [...] “Andrea, non ho tempo per le sciocchezze, quindi cessa questa scena rivoltante e togliti di mezzo.” [...]

underlines that such a relationship is not purely sexual: “rather than pornography, slash is about explicit *intimacy*” (quoted in Duffett, 2013:172; emphasis added). The men involved usually start as friends or colleagues and a “shift” occurs in their dynamic that has them move “from homosocial friendship to homosexual desire through predictable plot steps” (172). As the original James T. Kirk and Spock come from different planets, the analogy elegantly adapts to the undead romance featuring relationships between mortal and immortal characters, thus “help[ing] fans work through questions of otherness” (172). As we have seen in the authorship of *Porcaccia*, an important trait to underline in slash fiction is that women are typically the creators of these stories, and in them they “marginalize female *characters* and bring ‘female’ *pleasures* into focus instead through the *portrayal* of male characters” (173; emphasis in original).

“Che la situazione sia incasinata l’ho ampiamente capito, ma in qualche modo faremo. Magari mi ripeti come funziona la vampirizzazione.”

“Andrea, ti prego” dice con la faccia ancora girata. “Non sai di che parli.” [...]

“Voglio aver cura di te.”

Adesso è costretto a guardarmi. Quasi mi ci perdo, nel nero lucido dei suoi occhi, e sorrido ancora, perché sto tremando e non me ne vergogno. Desiderio e paura. Mi avvolge la nuca con una mano, si accosta lentissimo e mi sfiora col più delicato dei baci.

“Non andartene” gli soffio sulle labbra.

Mi tiene così, mentre poggia la fronte contro la mia e chiude gli occhi¹⁶. (De Nicolo, 2010:152-153)

The generic classification of this undead romance is reflected straightforwardly by some key moments at the beginning and at the end of the novel, corresponding, respectively, to horror and to romance: for example, Andrea witnesses Ludovico the vampire biting a man’s neck, with “rivoli rossi che gli colavano dalla bocca”¹⁷ (20), and manages to convince this murderer to spare his youthful existence; at the very end of the novel, Andrea and Ludovico run away together, an epic explosion in their wake, intending to flee for as long as time will allow them to explore their love.

This undead romance intermingles humour and drama amongst the backdrop of horror and romance. Its irreverent title, with a light curse in “porcaccia,” immediately alerts potential readers to the tone to be

¹⁶ “[...] I don’t know when it happened. All I know is that you are the most beautiful creature I’ve ever known and I know that I don’t want to lose you’. [...] I caress his cheek and the bruise on his cheekbone. [...] / ‘Andrea, I don’t have time for this, so stop this disgusting display and get out of the way’. [...] / ‘I completely understand that this situation got crazy, but we’ll find a way. Maybe you can remind me how vampirisation works’. / ‘Andrea, please’, he says with his face still turned away from me. ‘You don’t know what you’re talking about’. [...] / ‘I want to take care of you’. / Now he’s forced to look at me. I almost lose myself in the bright black of his eyes and I smile again, because I’m trembling and I’m not ashamed of it. Desire and fear. / He rests a hand on the nape of my neck, he slowly draws nearer, and he brushes my lips with the most delicate of kisses. / ‘Don’t go’, I whisper onto his lips. / He holds me here, while he rests his forehead against mine and closes his eyes.”

¹⁷ “red rivulets that dripped from his mouth.”

expected. This is not Rice and it is hardly Meyer; somehow, it is more real than those two, despite the paranormal traits it features. Andrea's diaristic narrative is colloquial and evokes the tones, cadence, and unpretentiousness of a conversation with a close friend. The reader is involved and is addressed with *tu*; in this way, De Nicolo taps the fourth wall, and in having Andrea narrate, she hints at his surviving the events that would come to pass – whether alive or undead. As he and Ludovico run away together, Andrea is closer to the vampire in many ways, free in his new love but flirting with marginalisation in a two- or even three-fold manner, like Ludovico who is a vampire, is a criminal, and is 'bisex'.

2. La Spina's dreadful dwarves and Valti's cursed children

Amongst the 14 *storie* published in *I signori della notte*, two are short stories composed by Italian women. The first, by La Spina, a Paduan writer, is entitled *Le nane* (*The Dwarves*); her biography in the anthology lists more than 10 works, the first of which is a novel published in 1992 by Bompiani, *L'ultimo treno da Catania* (*The Last Train from Catania*). Her most recent work, excluding the short story examined here, was published in 2015 by Giunti, *L'uomo che veniva da Messina* (*The Man Who Came from Messina*). In addition to publishing novels, she has published in a number of newspapers (Raimondi, 2018:463). The majority of her writings are historical novels set between the year 1000 (in the case of *L'amante del Paradiso*, released in 1997 [*The Lover of Paradise*])¹⁸ and 1500 (*L'uomo che veniva da Messina*), though she has penned a number of novels set in 20th-century Italy (e.g., *La continentale*, published in 2014 [*The Continental Woman*]). The style of *Le nane*, therefore, is in accordance with the author's style and is an appropriate adaptation of the author's mostly normal (as opposed to paranormal or supernatural) literature.

Le nane (La Spina, 2018:148-174) is a somewhat-disturbing epistolary recounting by Frate Gino da Palagonia, a servant of St. Francis, written in 1612 to someone addressed only as 'Illustrissimo' (literally, Most Illustrious One). The reader never learns precisely

¹⁸ This book was published by Mondadori in 1997, for which she was awarded the "Premio Grinzane Cavour" (Raimondi, 2018:370).

whom the recipient is, though it is perhaps a cardinal, bishop, or nobleperson. Despite its imagined writing in 1612, the letter reads as though written by a contemporary of ours in the 20th or 21st century. This linguistic accessibility facilitates contemporary reading, though, arguably, detracts from the 'authenticity' that the author appears to seek in having this missive written by a monk in the 1600s. The incongruence in these styles and the language proper of La Spina's work will be seen to be in marked contrast with Valti's work in this collection.

La Spina's story is one of historical fiction with loose ties to history¹⁹. Early in the story, a piece of gossip starts to spread: it is learned that Princess Giovanna of Austria, wife of Prince Francesco (I de' Medici), had had "una carrettata di nane" ("a cartful of dwarves") brought to her, which is the cause of perverse intrigue on the part of many in the empire, including clergy-people and a certain prior named Don Casimiro Colatesta. Though bemused at their sight and very existence, Don Casimiro's concerns were, so he said, religious and salvific in nature:

"Ma almeno ragionano o sono bestie?"

E in effetti l'indomani subito ha mandato al castello una missiva per la principessa, in cui chiedeva se le sue dame – pardon nane, ma lui tra noi le chiama persino bestie – erano cristiane.

Se battezzate. Se avevano mai conosciuto i Santi Sacramenti. Se insomma si potevano considerare come tutti gli altri esseri umani, ché altrimenti doveva intervenire²⁰. (La Spina, 2018:154)

The work presents the *nane* as foreign, misunderstood, and seemingly harmless creatures; in the princess' words, "gli esseri umani dette nane

¹⁹ While there actually was a Giovanna d'Austria, the existence of this character in this text does not line up with the years of the Princess' actual existence (Tabacchi, 2001).

²⁰ "Do they at least think or are they beasts? / And, indeed, the next day, he sent a missive to the castle for the princess, in which he asked whether her ladies – pardon me, dwarves, but between us, he even called them beasts – were Christian. / If they were baptised. If they had ever been acquainted with the Holy Sacraments. If, in sum, they could be considered like all other human beings, because, otherwise he would have to intervene."

sono esseri come tutti, tranne che di dimensione più piccola, di taglia scarsa diciamo, cosa, ha aggiunto, che così ha voluto il Signore. E che se Lui ha voluto così chi siamo noi per giudicarLo²¹ (154). With such a beginning and readers' knowledge of individuals affected by Dwarfism, the story does not seem all that interesting and appears, rather, to be a tale about difference, about dominating those who are perceived to be inferior and judging or using for one's own wiles that which one does not understand. It is a story of marginalisation and isolation, as we saw earlier with Ludovico, Andrea, and Mirta-Luna. A few moments, however, point to there being more to the story than just a moral lesson; amongst these are Frate Gino's musings, in the letter to his unknown recipient, on whence evil comes:

Ma ormai tutti, anche non volendo, le guardavano come figlie del Demonio, e io non so, illustrissimo, se è così che comincia il male. Pensandolo, immaginandolo, inventandolo.

O se il male esiste già di suo, è alle nostre spalle, è primigenio a tutto il resto.

E in effetti, quando quelle arrivarono la domenica dopo per la funzione, insieme alla principessa Giovanna, pallide, livide, sinistre, tutti le guardammo come Figlie del Serpente.

È così dunque che il male genera male? Dal pensiero del male? Dall'odore del male? Dall'idea stessa che il male esiste?²². (La Spina, 2018:157-158)

²¹ “the human beings, also known as dwarves, are beings like everyone, apart from their smaller dimensions – let's say lacking in size – something, she added, that the Lord wanted as such. And if He wanted it to be so, who are we to judge Him?”

²² “But at this point, everyone, even without wanting to, looked at them as though they were daughters of Satan, and I don't know, Most Illustrious One, if this is how evil begins – by thinking it, imagining it, inventing it. / Or if evil exists already on its own, it is at our backs, it exists before everything else. / And, indeed, when those dwarves arrived the following Sunday after the function, along with Princess Giovanna, they were deathly pale, sinister-looking, and everyone looked at them as though they were Daughters of the Serpent. / Is this how evil begets evil? From thinking about evil? From smelling evil? From the idea itself that evil exists?”

There had not seemed to be anything extra-special – or super-natural – about these *nane* at first, but their sudden change in appearance stirs more gossip, and even the monks, averse to these strange creatures as they were, fall under the women's spells and commit acts defiling their oaths to celibacy. The monks discover bite marks on their bodies and a sense of doom in their hearts; they would be damned because of their semi-conscious misdeeds. The *nane* needed to die so that the monks, and all, could be saved. Thus, the *nane* are buried alive.

Once that horrible piece of that community's history was in the past, there was a quiet, but cold, peacefulness in the town, though “ci sono ancora cattive chiacchiere” (“there is still negative chatter”):

Qualche monaco è ancora pallido come un morto, non vuole entrare in chiesa e rabbrivisce davanti al Cristo Signore. Altri hanno messo nuovi denti, lunghi, più lunghi del solito e preferiscono mangiare la carne cruda nel giorno in cui è stabilita sul piatto la carne.

Altri fanno strani sogni e ululano nella notte.

E anch'io faccio sogni²³. (La Spina, 2018:173)

Our narrator admits to having, “da qualche giorno[,] [...] persino un piccolo segno. Una puntura di bestia sul collo. Che sarà, mi dico. Ma non voglio pensarci, ho spesso una strana arsuria di cui non dico, uno strano bisogno... Mi affido al Signore”²⁴ (173). At the end of the letter, Frate Gino asks his ‘Illustrissimo’ for forgiveness and to be kept in his prayers: “Perdonate noi che restammo e che da allora non siamo più i medesimi, lo so che durante la notte mi alzo e faccio cose... Non so quali cose. Ma sono sicuro che sono maligne. [...] Per questo vi prego

²³ “Some monks are still deathly pale, or they don't want to enter the church and they shiver before Christ the Lord. Others grew new teeth, long ones, longer than normal and they prefer to eat meat raw on the days where meat can be eaten. / Others have strange dreams and they howl in the night. / And I, too, have dreams.”

²⁴ “as of the past few days [...] even a small mark. An animal bite on my neck. What must it be, I ask myself. But I don't want to think about it; I have a strange burning of which I can't say, a strange need... I entrust myself to the Lord.”

di ricordarmi nelle vostre preghiere, ve lo chiedo in ginocchio, a mani giunte”²⁵ (172-173).

Valti's story, entitled *All'ora dei vespri* (*At the Evening Hour*; Valti 2018:358–364), is starkly different. Valti, a lifelong writer born and living in Rome, works as a teacher at a secondary school. She published her first work of fiction in 2014, *Prelude*, a “paranormal fantasy ambientato nella Scozia di fine Ottocento, ricco di suggestioni gotiche e di elementi introspettivi [...]”²⁶ (Raimondi, 2018:377). She graduated with a degree in English and English Literature and was a finalist for “Il Giovane Holden 2016” literary prize. Her most recent work, apart from the work under analysis, is *Interlude*, published by Armando Curcio Editore in 2017, the second installment in a vampire-centred work of fiction about vampire William Druce. She continues to write short stories with gothic themes (378).

Despite its Italian title, *All'ora dei vespri* is a short tale written in the Romanesco dialect. It begins relaying a large amount of information in few words: “Dopo 'na serata de pioggia a catinelle, è finarmente spuntata fòri 'sta luna favolosa, che m'arischiara er core, si se po' di' così, pe' quelli come me che er core nun ce l'hanno. Nun ce l'hanno più”²⁷ (Valti, 2018:358). It becomes clear to the reader that the narrator was once alive, speaking as he does about the heart he once had. We learn about his identity upon his reflecting on his older sister's bossing him around: “Linuccia me comannava come 'n sordatino e me diceva: ‘Mario, tu metti a tavola li piatti’”²⁸ (360). Mario explains that he, his mother, a seamstress, his father, a “borghiciano” (villager, or, given the location of the story, an inhabitant of Borgo); and his two older sisters, Marisella and Linuccia, lived an idyllic life, one in which “se poteva di'

²⁵ “Forgive us who stayed behind and who have not been the same since then. I know that during the night I get up and do things... I know not what things. But I am certain that they are malicious. [...] For this, I pray that you remember me in your prayers; I ask this of you on my knees, hands in prayer.”

²⁶ “paranormal fantasy set in Scotland at the end of the 1800s, brimming with Gothic fascination and with introspective elements [...]”

²⁷ “After an evening of pouring rain, the fabulous moon finally came out, and it brightens my heart, if one can express it this way, for those of us like me who don't have a heart. They don't have one anymore.”

²⁸ “Linuccia ordered me around like a little soldier and she would say to me: ‘Mario, put the plates on the dinner table’.”

che bene stavamo bene, nun ce mancava gnente, nemmeno da magna”²⁹ (359). All was well before their father left them, and before Marisella had disappeared.

The story takes place in the latter half of the 19th century, according to the timeline hinted at by the author: she places the death of Mario’s grandfather in one of the battles in which Giuseppe Garibaldi commanded, though it is difficult to know which one. Nevertheless, the linguistic choice, whether or not this variety of Romanesco accurately reflects the forms used in that time, adds a note of authenticity to the tale that La Spina’s lacks, given that the language used in the text places the reader in that sociocultural, if not chronological, space. Our narrator, Mario, recounts the disappearance of his elder sister, Marisella, one day when she went to fetch water from the well. With Marisella gone, the younger of the two sisters needed to pick up the slack in helping their mother: “Mi’ madre faceva la sarta pe’ li monsignori, che qui, cor Vaticano a du’ passi, abbondaveno come li pitocchi”³⁰ (358). This left Mario to complete the grunt work, like fetching water. We learn more of Mario’s current state in his reflection on this important but banal activity: “la fontanella sta sotto ar piano de la strada, ce l’hanno messa quanno hanno buttato ggiù la chiesa ’ndo stava attaccata, ma nun posso fa’ er nome, mo, che mo nun posso più parlà de cose sacre!”³¹ (361).

On the last occasion of Mario’s fetching water, he slips on a step and all but crashes into a beautiful gentleman: “Arzai l’occhi e me trovai davanti ’sto pezzo d’omo, arto, bello, pettinato tutto liscio [...], co’ l’abbito stirato senza pieghe, nero come la pece [...].”³² (362). The boy and the man, whom Mario calls ‘Eccellenza’ (Excellence) for the man’s demeanour and apparent status, exchange quips, though, despite

²⁹ “one could say that we lived well, we did; we weren’t lacking anything, not even anything to eat.”

³⁰ “My mother was a seamstress for the monsignors, who, around here, with the Vatican just steps away, abounded like lice.”

³¹ “the little fountain is at the bottom of the road. They put it there when they knocked down the church to which it was attached, but I can’t say the name, now, because now I can’t talk about holy things!”

³² “I looked up and found before me this great specimen of a man, tall, beautiful, hair combed straight [...], with his suit, black as pitch, ironed out with no creases [...].”

Mario's insistences that his mother awaited him at home, the man continues to tease Mario, convinced that, if his mother really did care about his well-being, she would not have sent him out into the stormy weather on a darkening day.

This man, we learn, was both the cause of Marisella's disappearance and the vampire who renders immortal the girl and Mario: "nun feci in tempo manco a strillà. Me dette un mozzico sur collo che proprio nun me l'aspettavo; e m'arisucchiò fino ar midollo"³³ (363-364). The story ends abruptly, though not without revealing to the reader Mario's eternal state (and his sister's fate: she roams around Rome, playing tricks on people to pass the time):

Da quella sera nun posso fa antro che passeggià, senz' ariposo, so 'n'anima in pena. Ner vero senza della parola.
[...]

[...] aspetto qui nell'angoletti buij quarche regazzino che vo' ggiocà nell'ombra e me je faccio avanti come amico. Me se so' fatte pure a me du zannette micidiali, basta che m'avvicino e metto bocca, nun me devo manco sforzà, 'na passeggiata!

Mò so' passati cent'anni eppure ancora nun ho trovato pace e pe' le vie de Borgo giro, de sera tardi, poco prima che l'antri amici mia più grossi se buttano de notte sull'intrepidi turisti che gireno pe' Roma affaticati³⁴. (Valti, 2018:364).

One hundred years passed since his human death, which brings Mario's recounting close to the present, a promise that Mario still haunts the streets of Rome, thirsty for blood and a peace that he will never find.

³³ "I didn't have time to even yell. He gave me a bite on my neck that I truly didn't expect; and he sucked my neck right down to the marrow."

³⁴ "From that evening onwards, I can't do anything but wander, without repose; I'm a lost soul. In the real sense of the word. [...] / [...] I'm awaiting, here in dark corners, some little boy who wants to play in the shadows and I present myself as a friend. I've even grown two deadly fangs, and all I have to do is draw close and place my mouth, I don't even have to try – a walk in the park! / Now, 100 years have passed and yet I still have found no peace amongst the streets of Borgo. I roam, late in the evening, shortly before my other larger friends throw themselves at nighttime upon the intrepid and exhausted tourists who wander around Rome."

3. Conclusions

The uniting thread amongst these four stories – *La Trilogia di Mirta-Luna* by Palazzolo, *Porcaccia, un vampiro!* by De Nicolo, *Le nane* by La Spina, and *All'ora dei vespri* by Valti – despite their differences in style, language, and even content, is the theme of otherness, or marginality; by extension, solitude or loneliness permeate their characters' lives.

In the early moments of *Mirta-Luna*'s first book, *Non mi uccidere*, the reader witnesses Mirta's frantic awakening in undeath. Since she had died with a promise to return with her beloved, Robin, her first task upon resurrecting is to find Robin. She believes that they were in a car accident and is perplexed by her solitude. Over time, she learns what she is, and with the aid of the ghost of Wittgenstein (affectionately called 'Witt'), as her superego³⁵, with whom she is in constant dialogue, she remembers what happened and begins her lonely and unsatisfying search for Robin. The girl accepts that she cannot return to her former life, as everyone has moved on from her death and her sudden appearance would do harm only. Still, her painful longing for companionship remains, and the crafting of the spectre Witt, who looks, sounds, speaks, and thinks like Ludwig Wittgenstein, whom Lipperini calls Mirta's "coscienza filosofica" ("philosophical conscience"; Lipperini, 2012: s.p.), succeeds in filling the void that the living humans that Mirta once knew can no longer fill. Thus, the ghost of Wittgenstein keeps Mirta company; he is present only in the first book, when she has no other physical companion. The writer and philosopher keeps Mirta grounded when she might otherwise lose touch with reality and succumb to the margins where she currently resides.

Solitude and isolation are timeless traits not only in the stories examined in this article but also in the vampire story as a genre. Despite their differences, these stories invoke the ennui unique to the preternatural experience. Mirta awakens alone in undeath, searching seemingly endlessly for Robin, yearning for the company of her living loved ones while knowing implicitly that such interactions are forbidden. Although he is never as alone as Mirta in her post-mortem wandering, Andrea never communicates to his friends and family that

³⁵ For further developments, see Vani, 2018:37.

he is longing for Ludovico. He becomes imprisoned in a foreign country, as he must leave Italy in search of his beloved, fearing for his life and Ludovico's well-being, suffering silently and without guarantee of a safe future. He is alone in his torment and, furthermore, his loved ones do not know the truth about his developing identity and the discovery of the liberating vastness of his sexuality. Similarly, Mirta experiences her solitude and isolation; this is not due to her falling in love with a *sopramorto* woman, Sara, but, rather, because it is a while before she learns if there are any others like her. Mirta believes herself to be the only one of her kind and is confused by the changes (or lack thereof) in her body, concerned by this new need to feed on the flesh of live humans, and enraged by and jealous of the life flowing through mortals' veins.

In De Nicolo, our protagonist is not the vampire but someone who *wishes* to become one. Though we never learn about Andrea's ultimate fate, readers might guess that Ludovico turns Andrea into a vampire so that they might be together forever. Andrea casually entertains the idea of being a bloodsucker for eternity, and Ludovico, knowing firsthand the gravity of Andrea's outlandish request, insists that Andrea does not know what he asks. The vampire spurns Andrea's advances, despite his appreciation of the reciprocated sentiments, as a way to protect him; he would suffer eternal solitude rather than impose his depraved existence on his beloved. When Ludovico comes into Andrea's life, it must be noted, it is not to seek romance or any other type of connection with the young man; rather, he threatens to dispose of Andrea, an unwilling and unwitting witness in the wrong place at the wrong time when Ludovico had murdered a man. Ludovico had always lived a life of solitude, employing it as a shield to protect himself from the loss that human relationships necessarily entail, as all mortals die.

Frate Gino, in La Spina's story, confides in his 'Illustrissimo', not in an in-person conversation that would endanger both but in one allowing Frate Gino to feel comfort in the company of one whom he respects and adores. Instead, Frate Gino commits to writing his disturbing experiences and the unsettling events that had befallen him and his community; the space and distance offered by epistle writing impose not only isolation and separation between writer and recipient, but also, as a result of such separation, safety for both parties. The safety of the former – who confesses to bearing the mark of a bite, to having

strange dreams, to feeling foreign, burning urges (La Spina, 2018:173) – saves him from further damnation, perhaps, for sparing the life of his ‘Illustrissimo’ and for confessing the sins that he might have already committed. The safety of the latter is guaranteed by this distance and mutual isolation, which is experienced by both parties in a way that we see repeated in all the stories: glimpses into the lives of those left behind, who believe their loved one to be dead and gone for good, show beings moving on but saddened, deflated, wan. In Palazzolo’s narratives, Mirta’s little brother, Marcolino, for instance, develops a speech impediment (Palazzolo, 2006:6-9) as a result of the trauma, and the mother ceases speaking altogether, leaving Mirta’s father in his own state of distressed isolation to pick up the pieces and raise their remaining child in the aftermath of Mirta’s demise. They believe her to be truly deceased, though Marcolino claims to have seen his sister in her new form. In defending his having seen Mirta, his speech impediment worsens (Palazzolo, 2006:8-9).

Apart from the claims of Marcolino, which never get confirmed, Palazzolo’s story is the only one amongst the four authors’ works to include a mortal who learns of the immortal existence of the one who has been reborn in undeath. Though it would seem that the sharing of such information might erase solitude and isolation, the opposite appears to be true. While, in La Spina’s case, the reader does not know what happens to Frate Gino following the conclusion of his missive, we can assume that this is the last contact between the writer and the reader, that Frate Gino intends to bid farewell to anyone from his mortal existence as a way to spare them any suffering or potential damnation resulting from the burning desires of his unnatural state. Like Palazzolo’s Mirta, La Spina’s character is forced to cut ties with the living world, mourning his own demise and suffering the consequences of a death with which most mortals need not ever deal.

Finally, the isolation and solitude of Valti’s vampire, the little boy Mario, is perhaps the most heartbreaking and rendered all the clearer from the image of the young child who “aspett[a] qui nell’angoletti buij qualche regazzino che vo’ ggiocà nell’ombra e me je faccio avanti come amico” (Valti, 2018:364)³⁶. His existence is reminiscent of Rice’s girl-

³⁶ “I’m awaiting, here in dark corners, some little boy who wants to play in the shadows and I present myself as a friend.”

vampire Claudia, murdered and made vampire by Lestat de Lioncourt in *Interview with the Vampire*. Decades pass, and while she develops the needs and wants of a woman who has accrued decades of experience and maturity, she remains in the body of a preternatural child, unable to change or savour pleasures of the flesh, the only one of her kind – the only child-vampire. Similarly, Mario has spent the last 100 years in his vampiric state, forever in the body of a child and relying on the innocence of his cherub face to trick children to draw nearer so he might feed on them, baiting them by appealing to their own fear of loneliness and desire for friendship: he seeks out “quarache regazzino che vo’ ggiocherà” and he poses “come amico” – as a friend. Though we do not know whether the boy puts on this act merely so that he can feed, a dreadful sadness colours his words, in his reflection of 100 years of the same deception and betrayal of his former existence. He preys on children, on their need for companionship, using them for nourishment instead of increasing his own circle of companions. And though Marisella suffers the same fate, the siblings do not hunt together. Mario merely alludes to his seeing her play tricks on mortals, and he does not partake. They are merely acquaintances, roaming Borgo on their own, “senz’ ariposo,” “without rest” (Valti, 2018:364) – and, notably, without the peace that comes with being in the company of a beloved sibling, or the closure that comes from knowing that your loved one is at peace. Instead, both eternal children are cursed to their separate and isolating vampiric fates.

So, what does it mean to have these two stories by La Spina and Valti appear at this time, in 2018, 25 years after what Giovannini refers to as “il fatidico 1993”? What does it mean that they differ not just from each other but from the works of their women-writer counterparts in the first two decades of the 2000s? Considering that all of the works mentioned here would fit into the category of paraliterature – since, as we explored at the beginning of this essay, romance and horror novels are often deemed, subjectively, to be ‘qualitatively inferior’ – we can understand these stories featuring vampires as containing a two-fold marginality: that of their medium, which is considered ‘marginal’ compared to mainstream literature, and that of their content and characters, who are also marginalised by the society in which they dwell.

Palazzolo and De Nicolo occupied a different socioliterary space, compared to Valti and La Spina, when they wrote, responding to a need that they might not have known was there. I would argue, however, that La Spina and Valti were granted this freedom to explore the vampiric existence in their short stories because of the path that Palazzolo and De Nicolo paved with their undead-romance writings. Consequently, La Spina and Valti had more freedom to explore other possibilities and could embrace an 'immunity' to contemporary external influences, given that vampires in literature were hard to find in Italy in the latter half of the 2010s. Returning to the marginalisation of the *medium*, we can also argue that these two women, amongst the 14 authors writing for Raimondi's *I signori della notte*, 12 of whom are male-identifying, represent a marginalised group in themselves in this collection and this canon.

This one characteristic persists, regardless of epoch and of what is fashionable in one culture or another, independent of country or socio-economic status: humans, who cannot fathom the meaning of immortality or an idea of never-ending time, identify with isolation, rejection, solitude, and marginalisation³⁷. The vampire continues to embody so many discordant qualities, so many vices and virtues, that make the vampiric lifestyle appealing to mortals, with immortality and, in some canons, beauty, power, and charm topping the list of desirable traits. Being able to live forever tempts even the most cautious and life-loving individual because death is a grand mystery. That is why the disappearances of Marisella, Mario, Ludovico, and Mirta are so disturbing: their families have no answer or closure regarding their whereabouts. If death can be defeated, then the rest – maybe even an existence lived as a blood-sucking being – must be worth it. Indeed, despite Andrea's initial shock at seeing Ludovico kill a man by sucking his blood, as he gets to know the humanity-possessing creature

³⁷ At the time of this writing, most, if not all, countries of the world are engaging in and practising what is being called "social distancing," sometimes rephrased as "physical distancing," in order to stop the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19). Part of the struggle of ensuring that individuals commit to this practice is human beings' natural desire to be amongst others, and part of this practice of social distancing involves not leaving one's home, standing at least two metres away from other humans, and abstaining from social gatherings. The human need for companionship has never seemed so real and tangible as it has in the months of self-isolation and quarantine that the global community is experiencing currently.

inhabiting Ludovico's preternatural body, the horror of vampirism is not present or at the forefront for him. Bloodsucking (and murder) is secondary; love and companionship are first, blinding the boy to the consequences of his romantic choices. In the other stories, isolation and solitude are fortified and exacerbated by the killing of individuals who, in other circumstances, might have provided companionship and support: mortals are not love objects but sources of food and power – unless, of course, mortals are transformed into vampires (or zombies) instead of into sustenance. While virtually no laws could persecute the undead for their murders, these undead creatures are not brainless zombies: as we have seen in the testimonies of Mario and Frate Gino, their conscience, religious or otherwise, and urges they cannot control are their primary sources of torment, reinforcing their solitude, marginalisation, and sense of aloneness in a world with nowhere to turn.

Even if readers are not themselves marginalised, the topic and its consequential circumstances of solitude and isolation resonate with them because they represent some of their deepest fears and worries – and, in many cases, in the current pandemic, they represent some of their realities. Status, acceptance, community, and interdependence are fluid and can never be taken for granted, and in these stories of vampires, just one bite changes *everything*. It forces people, like Mario and Mirta, to take on monstrous qualities and go to extremes to survive, and involves renouncing their own families and loved ones, all in the name of survival in a forced never-ending solitude. As contemporary readers surrender to these marginalised immortal characters who slink in the shadows of monotony, their interest may be two-fold: on the one hand, they yearn for the immortality and imperviousness to disease that would free them from the uncertainty in the world, and, on the other hand, they unexpectedly commiserate and identify with the lost, cursed, lonely, and isolated undead protagonists rather than with the free but dangerously innocent and naïve human, mortal ones. In the current pandemic, these themes have never been more present and felt more real, making vampire stories, especially those involving a romantic element, surprisingly and remarkably more applicable, apt, and relatable than in previous decades.

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