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# Eros as the Virgin Vampire: Monsters, Desires and Female Erotic Curiosity in the *Twilight* series, a retelling of Cupid and Psyche<sup>1</sup>

Adèle Hoareau

VALE and CRLC Research Units, Sorbonne University, France

## Abstract

This article aims at analyzing some of the common features between the tale of Cupid and Psyche, found in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, and Edward and Bella's love story in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* saga. Bella's trajectory mirrors Psyche's: a marriage with a beautiful monster, virginity loss, motherhood and a happier-ever-after. This fairy-tale ending is achieved through the female characters' sexual awakening, imbued with fear and danger. While critics have demonstrated how Meyer's depiction of desire and sexuality could be questionable given the young readers it is targeting, this article endeavors to show how a form of empowerment can still be found in Bella's journey to sexuality, comparable to Psyche's discovery of *Eros*. This article intends to analyze both texts through the concept of "erotic curiosity" (Aumiller; Dover), as it pushes the characters to face the unknown, trespass over boundaries set by men – Cupid's call for obedience; Edward's call for abstinence –, and eventually become (sexually) active superwomen.

Cet article entend analyser certains points de contact entre le conte de Psyché et Cupidon tiré des *Métamorphoses* d'Apulée et la romance entre Bella et Edward dans la saga *Twilight* de Stephenie Meyer. La trajectoire de Bella suit celle de Psyché ; toutes deux se marient avec un séduisant monstre, perdent leur virginité puis deviennent mères. Cette fin typique des contes de fées n'est rendue possible que par l'éveil à la sexualité des personnages, non sans peurs ni dangers. La critique a démontré la façon parfois problématique dont *Twilight* dépeint le désir et la sexualité auprès de ses jeunes lecteurs. Néanmoins, cet article entreprend d'analyser ces deux textes à la lumière de la "curiosité érotique" ("*erotic curiosity*"; Aumiller, Dover) des personnages féminins qui leur permet d'affronter leur peur de l'inconnu et de dépasser les limites imposées par leurs partenaires (l'obéissance attendue par Cupidon, l'abstinence imposée par Edward). Ainsi, elles deviennent des femmes adultes, (sexuellement) actives et divines.

## Keywords

Cupid and Psyche, erotic curiosity, desire, monsters, *Twilight*, fairy-tale

Psyché et Cupidon, curiosité érotique, désir, monstre, *Twilight*, conte merveilleux

"For *this?*" he asked, catching my hand as it moved down his stomach.  
"Sex was the key all along?" He rolled his eyes. [...]  
"You are *so* human," he said again.  
"I know."

(Stephenie Meyer, *Breaking Dawn*, 101)

2025 marks the 20-year anniversary of Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight*<sup>2</sup>, that not only led to a four-book series with the addition of *New Moon* (2006), *Eclipse* (2007) and *Breaking Dawn* (2008), but also to a novella: *The Short Second Life of Bree Tanner* (2010) and two rewritings: a gender-swapped retelling, *Life and Death: Twilight Reimagined* (2015) and *Midnight Sun* (2020). Recently, Meyer and Netflix announced the adaptation of this last book, written from the male character's perspective, into an animated series<sup>3</sup>. An invitation, as it were, to read the series once more, and gauge its long-lasting impact on Young Adult romance and popular culture<sup>4</sup> as

<sup>1</sup> DOI: 10.61736/alizes.123/44/05.

<sup>2</sup> Unless stated otherwise, the term "*Twilight*" will be used throughout the paper to refer to the entire series.

<sup>3</sup> Delbyck, Cole. "Sink Your Teeth into the New *Twilight* Animated Series *Midnight Sun*," *Netflix Tudum*, <https://www.netflix.com/tudum/articles/twilight-animated-series-midnight-sun-release-date-news>, Accessed 4 Sept. 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Even Google surfed on the latest *Twilight* buzz last October, as they added a "hoa hoa hoa season" banner to their *Twilight* research tab, in reference to a TikTok meme about fall being "*Twilight* season", featuring one of

a whole. But if fans keep coming back to the books, films and fanfictions, critics and scholars too have dedicated volumes to the series, examining its philosophical ramifications (Housel et al), as well as its “contradictory messages” about love and sexuality, body image or even race (Wilson). Among these messages, critics have demonstrated *Twilight*’s problematic depiction of self-harm, co-dependence and violence (Kokkola, “Sparkling Vampires”; Borgia) and lastly, its conservative views on gender issues (Silver, Seifert).

While these necessary comments on the series should be taken into account – especially if we consider the young readers it is written for – this article intends to stress how *Twilight* offers a form of female empowerment through Bella’s sexual awakening. Arguably, Bella’s story follows a conservative trajectory for a female character – a trajectory close to popular fairy tales – that is: marriage, virginity loss, motherhood and a happier-ever-after. Yet, she remains a powerful agent in one specific domain: her desires are never silenced, – they are restrained and delayed, yes –, but always driving her forward. Bella’s impulse is not entirely surprising if we consider the series’ inspirations and ties to the fairy tale genre, more specifically the Animal as Bridegroom type<sup>5</sup> and the tale of Cupid and Psyche.

This article purports to compare the depiction of female desire in both stories, notably through the concept of “erotic curiosity”, as defined by Rachel Aumiller (“The Virtue of Erotic Curiosity”, 2022) and Daniela Dover (“Two Kinds of Curiosity”, 2024), based on Plato’s *Symposium*. While Dover defines erotic curiosity as “a complex epistemic, aesthetic, affective, and practical orientation toward an object” (826), Aumiller focuses on *Eros* as a “transformative process” (209), as Psyche is gradually awakened by erotic curiosity, leading her to grow and eventually become immortal. Women’s desire and curiosity seem to be closely monitored, as female curiosity is popularly regarded as base or sinful.

This is particularly true in *Twilight* and its apparent “abstinence-only agenda” (Silver 123), as it is said to be teaching young girls that they have to be submissive and wait for their own Edward, in keeping with the traditional definition of female virginity as something to be protected at all cost, only to be given to the right person at the right time (after marriage). *Twilight* does indeed depict desire as a paradox: it is both a danger to women and a pathway to beauty, pleasure and immortality. Meyer’s resistance towards sex does not stem only from her Mormon beliefs and background, it is also rooted in the romance genre, as well as fairy-tales and young adult literature in which women’s position is challenged, but nonetheless the *locus* of possibilities. Like Psyche’s, Bella’s possibilities only appear once Edward-Eros awakens her erotic curiosity, despite his call for abstinence.

### **Psyche, Bella and “Erotic curiosity”**

When asked about her choice to put Canova’s *Cupid and Psyche* (1787-1793) on the art page of *Midnight Sun* (2021), Stephenie Meyer wrote: “There’s a gentleness, an innocence, and a sweetness to the moment between Cupid and Psyche that felt aligned to Edward and Bella’s first kiss even though the mythology is unrelated” (stepheniemeyer.com). But is this really the case?

On the one hand, the tale of Cupid (the latin equivalent to *Eros*, the Greek god of love and

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the film’s songs, “Eyes of Fire” by Blue Foundation.

<sup>5</sup> Folklorists have sorted fairy tales into distinct types based on storylines, meanings and symbols. The “animal as Bridegroom” type – the story of a woman betrothed to an animal that will eventually find its humanity again – is one of the major types in the Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index. ATU425 is divided into different sub-types, among which: *Cupid and Psyche*, classified under 425B “Son of the Witch”, or *Beauty and the Beast*, labeled as 425C. *Twilight*’s ties with fairy-tales might explain some of its tropes, for example the age gap between Edward and Bella as well as her journey from her father’s protection to her husband’s.

desire) and Psyche (*Psykhé* in Greek, meaning “soul”) is found in Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*<sup>6</sup>, a late 2<sup>nd</sup> century novel. The embedded narrative tells the story of beautiful virgin princess Psyche, forced to marry a mysterious monster who only visits her at night, forbidding her to see him. She eventually disobeys and discovers Cupid, the beautiful god of Love himself, in her bed. Considered as one of the first fairy tales, the story of Cupid and Psyche was kept alive through the Middle Ages, read as a Platonic, then a Christian allegory of the love of God (Gaisser, Gély). The divine couple inspired countless artists around Europe; Canova, Keats and La Fontaine, among many others. On the other hand, Meyer’s *Twilight* universe relates how seventeen-year-old Bella falls in love with Edward, a virgin vegetarian vampire who struggles to fight off his desire for her blood. The lovers have to negotiate their desires and urges, not only to be together, but simply to stay alive – and remain chaste.

This article argues that Meyer’s depiction of love as an irresistible force able to overcome deadly trials, leading to holy matrimony and immortality is certainly derived from Psyche’s tale. Both female characters fall in love with a god-like creature shrouded in darkness and mystery. Both are driven by their curiosity to discover the truth about their partners, get married, become mothers before enjoying the delights of immortality – or vice versa. It is curiosity that compels Psyche to disobey her husband’s commands and discover Cupid in her bed; it is still curiosity that pushes Bella to confront Edward’s vampirism. But what type of curiosity are we talking about?

*Curiositas* understood as the desire to trespass the boundaries of knowledge–, is, without a doubt, a prominent theme in Apuleius’ *Golden Ass*<sup>7</sup>. However, Dover wishes to emphasize the “sunnier side of curiosity”, because “it can connect us – aesthetically and epistemically, as well as ethically – to the world.” (Dover 813). More than a means of connection, curiosity is a motivation: “Like love, curiosity is a powerful motive: something that launches schemes and consumes lives” (Dover 821). Curiosity, desire and love are more than feelings, they are a driving force into action.

But this curiosity also paves the way to the maiden’s sexual awakening. Cupid and Edward can be seen as symbolizing desire itself – *Eros*; not only in terms of carnal desire – what the Latins called *libido* –, but desire as an impulse towards knowledge and contemplation. In *Twilight*, as well as in Cupid and Psyche, desire and curiosity go hand in hand. Aumiller offers a typology of curiosity based on its inherent links with desire through the tale of Cupid and Psyche in the *Golden Ass*. According to her, Psyche is at first the embodiment of “nonerotic curiosity”, which is a form of curiosity lacking intent and focus, thus preventing the soul from finding true interest in contemplation and “leading to despair”. On the other hand, Cupid suffers from the extreme opposite: “noncurious eros” (210). In her words, while “Psyche’s curiosity falls on all things equally and thus shallowly” (215), Cupid’s desire is a form of “erotic desire that lacks curiosity’s talent for seeing beauty in many contrasting bodies, activities, customs, and ideas” (210). Only “erotic curiosity”, which combines Cupid’s desire and Psyche’s curiosity, leads to the Platonic revelation of Love and Truth. For Psyche, this shift occurs when she sees Cupid in her bed, and touches one of his arrows.

While desire is broadly understood in terms of a lack and the drive towards its fulfillment, its definition has always been a subject of interest to philosophers (Epicurus’s table of desires and needs, Seneca’s stoicism...). The same could be said about the nature of the “erotic” and its antithetic conceptualizations (Bataille, Lorde). Aumiller’s definition of “erotic curiosity” as a transformative process combining curiosity and desire seems particularly relevant in our

<sup>6</sup> I will refer to the English translation of *The Golden Ass, or, Metamorphoses*, by E.J Kenney.

<sup>7</sup> The insatiable Lucius is blinded by his eagerness to learn everything – even the secrets of magic –, as a punishment for his curiosity, he is turned into an ass; see DeFilippo, Joseph G. “Curiositas and the Platonism of Apuleius’ *Golden Ass*,” *American Journal of Philology* 111, no. 4, Winter 1990.

reading of *Twilight*. Bella becomes the modern embodiment of Psyche, – the “nonerotic curious” soul –, gradually ignited by desire and erotic curiosity, while Edward, a modern-day vampire version of Eros, is also transformed by Bella’s human curiosity: “when Eros and the curious soul come together, the transformation is mutual” (Aumiller 209). Dover describes erotic curiosity as follows:

Erotic curiosity often involves a practical disposition to explore the object. It often involves an inchoate and hopeless desire to somehow merge with the object. It often involves an intense affective attraction to the object. It often involves a tendency to aesthetically contemplate the object with pleasure. And it often involves desires and/or dispositions to acquire knowledge about the object<sup>8</sup> (Dover 826).

Bella and Psyche both experience these different aspects of erotic curiosity: a wish to “explore” their lovers, a desire to physically merge with them – erotic desire –, which in turns leads to affection and love, as well as an aesthetic experience. Finally, erotic curiosity pushes both characters to know more about their divine/vampiric lovers and the world they belong to. It is precisely the birth of this “erotic curiosity” in Psyche and Bella that will be examined in this paper, as we are invited to experience it with the characters. However, in Bella’s case, this experience is first and foremost crystallized around abstinence and virginity.

### **The Monster’s Appeal and the Vegetarian Vampire**

Since the 1990s, vampires have made a remarkable comeback in mainstream screen productions. The most popular ones, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-2017) and the *Twilight* series (2008-2012), feature “vegetarian vampires”, refraining from drinking human blood. Stefan in *The Vampires Diaries* and Edward in *Twilight* quickly became “boyfriend material” (Backstein 39) specifically for this ability to show restraint. Edward explains that he is vegetarian because he does not “*want to be a monster*” (*Twilight* 163, emphasis in original). While the vampire has always been a literary figure problematizing desire and power, modern vampire narratives prefer self-aware and moral characters, victims of their own monstrosity: “Traditionally, the vampire casts no reflection, but instead it reflects us; each generation sees in the vampire what it fears or desires or fears and desires, for they often are the same thing” (Billson 10). Edward Cullen indeed combines “fear and desire”: “I’m the world’s best predator, aren’t I? Everything about me invites you in – my voice, my face, even my *smell*” (Meyer, *Twilight* 231, emphasis in original). Though in *Twilight*, vampires don’t have fangs, they remain lethal creatures. The vampire’s first weapons are therefore his good looks and seductive appeal, just like the treacherous yet beautiful god of love, Cupid. Apollo’s oracle warns Psyche’s father about her future husband:

No human son-in-law (hope not) is thine,  
But something cruel and fierce and serpentine  
That plagues the world as, borne aloft on wings  
With fire and steel it persecutes all things (Apuleius 61).

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<sup>8</sup> While Aumiller’s observations are based on Apuleius’ text, Dover considers that erotic curiosity can also be experienced for an inanimate object, or a general topic, such as a keen interest in insects (see p. 825).

<sup>9</sup> Critics have extensively studied vegetarian vampires and their symbolism, see Wright, as well as Housel & Wisniewski.

Cupid's arrows and their alluring cutting edge are easily comparable to the vampire's most deadly weapons: his fangs, or rather in our case, teeth. The vampire and the god of love, serpentine creatures of darkness, are incarnations of desire, alluring and destructive.

The vampire, more than any other monster, is a combination of opposites: pleasure and pain, burning desire and cold death; an allegory perhaps of Freud's theory of life and death drives, *Eros and Thanatos*, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). This tension is epitomized by the vampire's thirst for blood, a metonymic appetite for sex. When Edward catches Bella's scent, his monstrous instincts resurface: "Thirst scorched down my throat – tightening my muscles and filling my mouth with venom – and I closed my eyes, trying to concentrate through the desire for her blood that raged inside me" (Meyer 103). His desire is only directed – or so it seems – to her blood, but the sexual innuendo is hard to miss; with his muscles "tightening", and mouth "filling with venom", Edward is both a predator ready to pounce and a lover on the edge of orgasm. Later on, Edward's thirst gradually becomes an unfamiliar hunger: "it would be a monumental mistake to dwell on the strange hungers that thoughts of her lips ... her skin ... her body ... were shaking loose inside of me" (Meyer, *Midnight Sun*, 224). Evidently, it is no longer Bella's blood that appeals to Edward, but her body. Vampiric thirst gradually becomes a human hunger ... in other words: male desire. For vampires – and men in general in a patriarchal society – women are there for the taking: blood, body and soul.

Unsurprisingly, in Stephenie Meyer's saga, the dialectic of the male hunter and the female prey is omnipresent. In his paper on the "erotics of male predation", Luke argues that for male hunters, hunting and "romance" are two sides of the same coin (Luke 630). Interestingly enough, when Edward confesses his nature and love to Bella, he summarizes the situation with a now fan-favorite quote: "And so the lion fell in love with the lamb..." (Meyer *Twilight* 240). Again, this tension between seduction and hunting, love and death, is clearly evident. In vampire stories, it is the maiden's appearance that brings the predator out. Even when vegetarian, "the vampire's power can never be underestimated: the very notion of "devouring" and "eating" someone is redolent of sex (and, in some cases, rape), and he could have what he wants for the taking" (Backstein 38).

This link between male desire as hunger and the maiden's fear of being devoured also draws back to Apuleius' tale<sup>10</sup>. Psyche's sisters try to scare her into killing her husband – whom yet remains a mystery to her: "it is an immense serpent, writhing its knotted coils, its bloody jaws dripping deadly poison, its maw gaping deep, if only you knew it, that sleeps with you each night" (Apuleius 70). A serpent waiting for the right moment to devour her: "he will eat you up" (Apuleius 71). Read allegorically, Desire's mouth is, like the vampire's, filled with blood and poison, ready to swallow down its prey. The fear of being devoured hides another fear: losing one's virginity.

Desiring men, therefore, becomes a threat to the maiden's safety – and purity. The *Twilight* series stages several deadly encounters with violent men driven by their sexual impulses. Thanks to Edward, Bella escapes the assault of a group of men while out alone. Edward is able to recognize other hunters: "Yet a predator was loose on the streets of Port Angeles. A human monster" (*Midnight Sun*, 215). This "human monster" might be a bigger threat to her than the vampire himself. Male desire as a whole becomes monstrous as long as it remains uncontrolled: "it is no longer the vampire that stands for perverted sexuality but man" (Lindén 225). Seductive, dangerous and even lethal, male desire puts women – especially young virgins, at risk. Hence the need in *Twilight* for control; and more precisely, abstinence.

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<sup>10</sup> It is also a motif in *Beauty and the Beast* (de Villeneuve, 1740 & de Beaumont, 1756), as Belle expects to be devoured by the Beast at supper.



## Mormon Chastity Versus Teenage Desire

For Edward, abstinence seems to be a necessity to protect not only Bella's life but his vegetarian diet – and by doing so, his humanity. Curbing the vampire's appetite is curbing man's desires. Yet, seduced by her vampire boyfriend, Bella tries to have sex with him several times in the series, despite the obvious danger. In *Eclipse*, she understands the deeper meaning to Edward's reluctance: protecting both of their virtues (Meyer 453). He claims: "my virtue is all I have left". Becoming a vampire did not cost Edward his soul, but premarital sex certainly will: he eventually agrees to have sex, but only after marriage.

In *Twilight*, "virtue" and "soul" are seemingly synonymous: to protect one's soul, one has to remain chaste, and engage in sex only within marriage. The emphasis on abstinence has been linked to Meyer's upbringing as a Mormon (Lampert-Weissig, Silver), as the Law of Chastity is one of her community's pillars<sup>11</sup>. Through marriage then – through God – lovers are granted immortal afterlife. Meyer's reconfiguration of Cupid and Psyche is blatant in this binding together of "love and lust" with the immortal soul, as she draws from the tale itself as well as its Christian allegory, in which the love of God blesses the soul with immortality. In Apuleius' text, Cupid's embrace saves Psyche from Venus's death sleep. Jupiter then declares them legally married and allows Psyche to become a goddess: "Take this, Psyche," he said, "and be immortal. Never shall Cupid quit the tie that binds you, but this marriage shall be perpetual for you both" (Apuleius 88).

In *Breaking Dawn*, holy matrimony leads to the couple's loss of virginity, which in turns causes Bella's pregnancy, death and rebirth as an immortal vampire. The allegory is thus doubled: Edward becomes not only Cupid's incarnation, but a textual – and erotic – image of God, whose love grants immortal life. Love and religion go hand in hand, as Romance specialist Catherine Roach points out: "the mythic narrative of Christianity follows the pattern of the romance narrative, with a guaranteed happy ending (for well-behaved believers or the "saved"), wherein all works out and you live forever after" (Roach 4). However, Meyer's religious upbringing is not the only key to understanding the general concern about virginity in pop culture. The last decades showed a renewed interest for teen chastity, from the "True Love Awaits" movement to the purity rings worn by Disney channel pop stars<sup>12</sup>. According to Claudia Lindén's paper on masculinity in *Twilight*, Edward's chastity "shows that sex and love is a question of culture, that there are different approaches and possible ways to be a sexual being" (Lindén 228).

Paradoxically, this sexual awakening starts with abstinence in the series. Backstein explains how the lack of sex creates a safe space for readers who are given the opportunity to experience desire without its consequences (40). Sexual tension, always there but never consummated, could be precisely what appeals to readers, leading some critics to claim that *Twilight* has created a new sub-genre of romance, "abstinence porn" (Seifert). More interestingly, this safe space also benefits Bella, as Edward's "adamant" virginity allows her to voice her desire:

Bella is a desiring subject : she is open, explicit, and unashamed about her desire for Edward, and is the sexual aggressor for most of their relationship. In this sense, she is active, not passive. The work of sexual resistance so often ascribed to girls is taken off her shoulders by Edward, who takes on the role of gatekeeper (McAlister 220).

<sup>11</sup> About Mormon ideals and anti-abortion agenda in *Twilight* see Silver (2010); The law of chastity includes "strict abstinence from sexual relations before marriage and complete fidelity and loyalty to one's spouse after marriage" (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Days)

<sup>12</sup> About the link between *Twilight* and the True Love Awaits movement, see Kokkola 166; about pop stars and purity rings see McAlister (chapter 1).



A true reversal: Bella is no longer sexual prey, but an “aggressor”, and it is Edward’s turn to resist temptation. Meyer’s conservative view on premarital sex actually serves another purpose, as it invites the reader to experience the delights of erotic texts, and explore their own desires. Mercer concurs: “The narrative effect of this device is that teen girl readers, placing themselves in the position of Bella, can imaginatively “give themselves over to their own desire” and let someone else worry about the morality and safety of it all” (Mercer 272). While Edward is a sexual being through restraint and abstinence, it is through exploration and curiosity that Bella finds her way to sexuality. With her, young readers explore their blossoming “erotic curiosity”.

### **Desire in the Flesh: Tales of Sexual Awakening**

Bella’s expression of her desires – to herself and the readers, but also to Edward – is typical of romance novels (Radway). In *Diagnosing Desire*, Spurgas discusses Freud’s long-lasting theory that women are “more sexually receptive, and when properly developed, they are sexually passive” (29), as well as “immature” (37). However, Meyer’s depiction of Bella’s active and demanding desire goes against the mainstream. Her desire is far from passive: it drives her forward, encouraging her to conquer Edward’s love and face the threat of his thirst. Here, the filiation between Psyche and Bella is quite clear. They gradually become “desiring subjects”, in other words – *erotically* curious. Psyche’s discovery of Cupid is the first pivotal moment in the narrative, exemplifying the shift from sheer curiosity to carnal desire:

She saw a rich head of golden hair dripping with ambrosia, a milk-white neck, and rosy cheeks over which there strayed coils of hair becomingly arranged, some hanging in front, some behind, shining with such extreme brilliance that the lamplight itself flickered uncertainly. On the shoulders of the flying god there sparkled wings, dewy-white with glistening sheen, and though they were at rest the soft delicate down at their edges quivered and rippled in incessant play. [...] At the foot of the bed lay a bow, a quiver, and arrows, the gracious weapons of the great god (Apuleius 73).

Following our argument that *Twilight* is, in fact, a retelling of Cupid and Psyche, it is no surprise to find parallels between the scene above and Bella’s discovery of her vampire boyfriend’s body in the sunlight:

His skin, white despite the faint flush from yesterday’s hunting trip, literally sparkled, like thousands of tiny diamonds were embedded in the surface. He lay perfectly still in the grass, his shirt open over his sculpted, incandescent chest, his scintillating arms bare. His glistening pale lavender lids were shut, though of course he didn’t sleep. A perfect statue, carved in some unknown stone, smooth like marble, glittering like crystal (Meyer, *Twilight* 228).

Both excerpts draw on the tradition of the *blason*, as the narrative/poetic voice singles out details of the lover’s body: Cupid’s “milk-white neck, and rosy cheek”, then his hair and wings; Edward’s skin, chest, arm and eyelids. It is a *blason* as well as an *ekphrasis*, since Psyche and Bella are no longer admiring their lovers, but works of art in the flesh: Cupid’s hair is “becomingly arranged” as a silhouette in a painting, the colors are detailed, distinguishing a “milk-white” from a “dewy-white” hue; while Edward becomes “a perfect statue” with his

“sculpted” and “carved” body. Moreover, both are “glistening”, their wings or skin “sparkled” in the light. The emphasis on the light and the way their bodies reflect it reinforces their otherworldly nature, perfectly fitting into the environment, bringing it a new, enhanced color. Light plays a symbolic role in the scene. It is supposed to reveal the true identity of the mysterious lovers but it rather highlights a blinding beauty that gradually becomes a threat, due to its alluring power. Indeed, Psyche cannot miss the bow and arrows at Cupid’s feet, while Bella still sees the reddish glow of the vampire’s hunt on Edward’s face. Both scenes illustrate how erotic desire is a complex attraction that leads not only to love and affection, but also to an aesthetical pleasure (Dover 826).

This textual filiation casts a new light on this scene in *Twilight*. Just like Psyche, it is *Eros* – desire itself, that Bella encounters for the first time, the first step towards her sexual awakening. It seems that for both characters, setting eyes on desire is not only an act of erotic curiosity, it is mainly an act of self-assertion. Gazing at desire in the flesh allows Psyche and Bella to claim a form of agency. Thanks to their erotic curiosity and blooming sexual desire, they face their fear of intimacy and sex.

### Facing the Unknown

Despite being a century old, Edward too has no sexual experience: he calls himself “spotless” (*Eclipse* 454). Meyer explained this oddity in her series’ vampiric transition: the vampire remains stuck at whatever age and stage of development they were in when they turned<sup>13</sup>. Edward is no longer the vampire sex icon, whose hundred years of experience promise delightful and bloody pleasures, but a teenager (which might explain his emotional immaturity). Consequently, sex is, for him as for Bella, uncharted territory. Before their first night together as a married couple, Bella feels her husband’s unease: “I guessed [...] that he was just as nervous as I suddenly was” (*Breaking Dawn*, 72). The comparative structure (“as nervous as I was”) serves to show the virgin fear of sex shared on both parts. The narrator’s genuine anxiety certainly aligns with that of the teenage girls devouring the books. Along with Edward and Bella, they too experience their “first time” (McAlister 227).

However, Meyer does not describe the actual intercourse, but rather what happens before and after. Bella and Psyche’s experiences are actually quite similar, their fear of the unknown emphasized:

Night was well advanced when she heard a gentle sound. Then, all alone as she was and fearing for her virginity, Psyche quailed and trembled, dreading, more than any possible harm, the unknown. Now there entered her unknown husband; he had mounted the bed, made her his wife, and departed in haste before sunrise (Apuleius 64).

The deed itself is summed up with three verbs and the euphemism “made her his wife”; highlighting Psyche’s passivity as well as the quick succession of actions. For Psyche, sex is something done *to* her, in haste and darkness. McAlister argues that, in the socially accepted virginity loss script, “sex becomes something done to the female body rather than something the female body participates in” (McAlister 245). Bella shares Psyche’s fear as she suffers from a “full-scale panic attack” (*Breaking Dawn*, 76) and admits: “I was freaking out because I had

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<sup>13</sup> In *Breaking Dawn* (30-32), Bella is told that turning children into vampires is considered a capital offense by the vampire establishment, as they are unable to control their emotions, thus becoming ruthless killers driven by hunger only.

no idea how to do this, and I was afraid to walk out of this room and face the unknown” (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 76). Sex is the “unknown” to be afraid of, that both characters eventually face. Then, the intercourse is expressed by a break in line: through the ellipsis, the reader only imagines what happened<sup>14</sup>.

On the following morning, Psyche is visited by her invisible maids who “ministered to the new bride’s slain virginity” (Apuleius 64). In Apuleius’ text, sexual violence as a preamble to sexual enjoyment was not seen as a contradiction in term, so much so that at the end of the tale, she gives birth to a new goddess, Pleasure (*Voluptas*). Bella’s loss of her virginity leaves her “blissful” but covered in bruises too: “Under the dusting of feathers, large purplish bruises were beginning to blossom across the pale skin of my arm” (Meyer 81). Many have read there the illustration of Edward’s abusive behavior, as well as an overall “unhealthy definition of passion as pain” (Borgia 162). Kokkola goes as far as saying that Bella seems to suffer from the Battered Woman Syndrome following Leonore Walker’s work on domestic violence<sup>15</sup> (Kokkola 42). While the aftermath of their first sexual encounter remains problematic, as it leaves not only Bella bruised, but the pillows torn (and later the whole room in ruins), it is undoubtedly an enjoyable experience for Bella. So much that she wants to repeat it, despite Edward’s reluctance. To avoid hurting Bella again, Edward chooses abstinence once more. It is only when Bella wakes up in tears after an erotic dream in chapter six that he yields, and they have sex a second time. This exemplifies Dover’s point that erotic curiosity is self-sustaining: “for an erotically curious person, the process of inquiry tends to deepen and reinforce curiosity rather than exhausting or satisfying it. Like love, erotic curiosity finds ways to replenish itself” (Dover 826). Bella’s erotic curiosity does not fade, it is doubled by erotic desire, both revolving around Edward.

Moreover, Apuleius echoes the necessary repetition of the experience for Psyche to feel pleasure: “Things went on in this way for some little time; and, as is usually the case, the novelty of her situation became pleasurable to her by force of habit” (Apuleius 64). Bella’s virginity loss is quite different – sex is already a source of “bliss” and pleasure:

I tried to remember this – to remember pain – but I couldn’t. I couldn’t recall a moment when his hold had been too tight, his hands too hard against me. I only remembered wanting him to hold me tighter, and being pleased when he did... (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 82).

The fact that Bella likes violent sex can be disturbing for young readers; yet I suggest that it does not suppress her agency and her quest for sexual pleasure. The emphasis on Bella’s explicit desire and pleasure cannot be overlooked, as it puts young women’s sexual life at the forefront of pop culture, as exemplified by the colossal number of erotic fanfictions the series inspired<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> Yet, it was enough to shock numerous readers; see McAlister’s analysis of Bella’s virginity loss in Part IV of *The Consummate Virgin*. Bella’s virginity loss is indeed a major point of concern for fanfiction readers and writers, see Day.

<sup>15</sup> Psychology Professor Lenore Walker explained the mechanisms behind abusive relationships and what she calls “the circle of abuse”, see Walker, Lenore E. *The Battered Woman Syndrome*, Fourth Edition, Springer Publishing Company, 2017. Critics have also commented on domestic violence in other retellings of *Beauty and the Beast*; see Maas, Megan K., and Amy E. Bonomi. “Love Hurts? Identifying Abuse in the Virgin-Beast Trope of Popular Romantic Fiction,” *Journal of Family Violence*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2021, p. 511-22; and Béres, Laura. “Beauty and the Beast: The Romanticization of Abuse in Popular Culture,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, May 1999, p. 191-207.

<sup>16</sup> *Twilight* fanfictions indeed explored this specific aspect of the series, as exemplified by the success of *50 Shades of Grey*, by E. L James, which was first published as a fanfiction and is famous for its sexually explicit scenes. About sex and fanfictions, see Day.

## Erotic Curiosity and Female Empowerment

As previously demonstrated, Bella's and Psyche's journeys lead them to discover desire and experience sex. Curiosity is a stereotypical trait of female characters, deeply rooted in sexist imagery<sup>17</sup>. In La Fontaine's version of Psyche's tale, Cupid tells her that the typical female sins are "curiosity, vanity and wits"<sup>18</sup>. It is indeed what causes Psyche's downfall, not once, but twice: first when she disobeys Cupid who then abandons her, then when she opens Proserpina's box of beauty, plunging her into a death sleep. However, it seems that far from the stereotypical female trait in need of male control, curiosity becomes Psyche's tool to learn resilience and grow up. Pei He argues: "*curiositas* pushes [Psyche] forward to discover her love, endure hardship, and achieve her goals" (He 201). Indeed, it is out of curiosity that Psyche hurts herself with Cupid's arrows, leading her to fall in love with him:

Curious as ever, Psyche could not restrain herself from examining and handling and admiring her husband's weapons. She took one of the arrows out of the quiver and tried the point by pricking her thumb [...] Thus without realizing it Psyche through her own act fell in love with Love. Then ever more on fire with desire for Desire she hung over him gazing in distraction and devoured him with quick sensuous kisses, fearing all the time that he might wake up (Apuleius 73).

Once pricked by Cupid's arrows, it is Psyche's turn to "devour" her husband. Sexual impulses are no longer directed at her, but rather acted upon, by her. Her newly-found "erotic curiosity" enables her to become an active force in the narrative, "through her own act" of touching Cupid's arrows: "If Psyche's moment of enlightenment gives her familiarity and intimacy with her divine husband, through her own *curiositas* she transforms herself from a passive to an active agent" (He 210). Eros/Cupid's name and dual translation illustrates how both concepts of love and desire become, from this moment on, tangible for Psyche (she "fell in love with Love" and kisses "with desire for Desire"). This excerpt also clarifies how Psyche's curiosity, her desire to know, paves the way to another form of desire, this time carnal.

On the other hand, Bella's curiosity enables her to expand her limited horizon in Forks: "I wished there was some way to explain how very uninterested I was in a normal human life" (Meyer, *Twilight*, 431). Her interest in Edward might not be blind love, but the means to her ends, a way to transcend her "normal human life" and turn into a vampire, with or without his help. Erotic desire is a call to action. At the end of the first book, Edward refuses to turn her into a vampire, but she does not change her mind: "He frowned at my tenacity. No one was going to surrender tonight" (Meyer, *Twilight* 434). Bella's negotiation with her vampire boyfriend draws on the lexicon of warfare: ("tenacity", "surrender"), in which desire becomes a "non-negotiable variable" (McAlister 239). Meyer blurs once more the boundaries between love and violence, romance and warfare, thus highlighting its intrinsic ties with power<sup>19</sup>. Both

<sup>17</sup> On the change of paradigm on female curiosity, see Cottegnies, Line, Sandrine Parageau and John J. Thompson, editors. *Women and Curiosity in Early Modern England and France*, Brill, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> "*Vous êtes tombée justement dans les trois défauts qui ont le plus accoutumé de nuire aux personnes de votre sexe ; la curiosité, la vanité, et le trop d'esprit*". La Fontaine, Jean de. *Les Amours de Psyché et de Cupidon*, 1669, Moetjens, 1700, p. 69. Psyche's story was adapted in a Vaudeville by Théaulon et Armand Dartois, in a 1814 play entitled *Psyché et la curiosité féminine (Psyche and Female Curiosity)*.

<sup>19</sup> The (im)balance of power in heterosexual relationships and its inherent violence is a hallmark of feminist critique. See Lorde, Audre. "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Trumansburg, 1984, p. 53-59; and Vance, Carol, *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, Pandora,

girls learn how to use male desire to their advantage. As an example of seductive power used as a form of domination, Haskins points out how Psyche uses seduction to convince Cupid to let her sisters visit: “she seems to have also learned her sexual power over him and obviously has no qualms about using sex to try and control him for personal gain” (Haskins 254). For Bella and Psyche, there is a form of power to be found in owning their sexuality.

### Forbidden Fruits

The condemnation of female curiosity is a trope that hails back to Pandora’s box and Eve’s apple. Pei He claims that Psyche suffers from a “gender prejudice in scholarship”, as the positive effects of her curiosity have been overlooked: “Psyche’s female curiosity fits her into the stereotype of transgressive female figures in classical literature such as Pandora and Eve, and, as a result, the positive aspects of her *curiositas* [...] are often ignored (201)”. Indeed, Psyche resists her husband’s orders, the first being never to see him, the second never to let her sisters visit. Yet, it is precisely because she disobeys these unfair commands that she becomes immortal and they are free to be together on an equal footing. I would argue that Bella suffers from the same prejudice. The book itself invites the readers to draw a parallel between Bella and Eve:

The cover of *Twilight* connects the Christian fall from immortality to the vampire motif. It depicts the outstretched hands of a girl holding a red apple<sup>20</sup>. This allusion to Eve’s temptation of Adam is evoked when Bella tempts Edward to take her, literally body and soul (Kokkala 173-4).

A temptress perhaps, but Bella is, as we have seen, equally tempted. Meyer also quotes from Genesis: “But of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die” (2:17 King James Bible); a reflection of Bella’s curiosity and appetite for transgression, represented by her wish to become a vampire, thus ending her human life. With her husband’s vampiric bite to change her, she metaphorically tastes the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Dying in childbirth, she is turned into a vampire and after three days of an excruciating transformation, she is “birthed”<sup>21</sup> again, only prettier, stronger and faster. Her enhanced senses grant her a better understanding of her environment: “Everything was so *CLEAR*. Sharp. Defined” (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn*, 357, emphasis in original).

The continuum from curiosity to sexuality is potent in the Bible, as well as in Psyche’s tale: “seeing the face of Desire is equivalent to eating the apple: each is a fall from innocence into carnal awareness and lust” (Gaiser 339). Eve’s original sin is punished by God with painful childbearing and submission to men, a fate partly shared by Bella. The loss of her virginity results in a horrific pregnancy<sup>22</sup> that eventually kills her, and her desire seems forever directed at her husband. However, because they become immortal and their husbands’ equals, Bella and Psyche’s “falls” are actually more of an elevation. Meyer’s vampires are characterized by a supernatural beauty, speed and strength, and as such they borrow more from gods than the traditional gothic vampire. Long before her metamorphosis, Edward already saw Bella as the

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1992.

<sup>20</sup> This scene is reenacted in Hardwicke’s movie, demonstrating Edward’s supernatural reflexes as he is able to catch the apple falling from Bella’s hands (*Twilight*, directed by Catherine Hardwicke, Summit Entertainment, 2008).

<sup>21</sup> Humans freshly turned into vampires are called “new-borns”.

<sup>22</sup> About teenage pregnancy see Silver; about the “horrors of pregnancy”, see Lampert-Weissig.

incarnation of another mythical figure caught between life and death: the goddess Persephone eating yet another forbidden fruit: “as she ate, a strange comparison entered my head. For just a second, I saw Persephone<sup>23</sup>, pomegranate in hand” (Meyer, *Midnight Sun* 191).

For Pei He, curiosity becomes the means of empowerment: “Psyche’s transgressive *curiositas* [...] enables her self-empowerment via growth, as with other feminist *Bildungsroman*, and such empowerment involves her self-discovery, discernment, self-knowledge, and self-assertion” (He 202). Psyche’s impulse to resist her husband’s orders and fulfill her erotic curiosity “results in her psychological development from an innocent girl into a fearless and resolute woman, a fully powered agent, and a divine mother” (He 202). The same conclusion can be drawn for Bella, as she goes from her father’s protection in *Twilight* to her husband’s in *Breaking Dawn Part 1*, only to become a powerful vampire able to save her family and the vampire world with her immortal gifts in *Breaking Dawn Part 2*.

It is no surprise that elements of all of these “transgressive” women come together in *Twilight*. Despite her apparent frailty, Bella is, without a doubt, transgressive. She resists Edward’s “adamant virginity”, fights to live her life on her own terms (even if it means dying to become a vampire), and unapologetically longs for sexual pleasure.

## Conclusion

Far from its iconic half-dead blood-sucker ancestor, Meyer’s virgin teenage vampire could be read as a Mormon celebration of abstinence. Yet, Edward is also a modern Cupid, whose erotic appeal revolves around his monstrous, mysterious nature and the bold curiosity necessary to face it. Consequently, *Twilight* and Cupid and Psyche put sex in the foreground; the characters’ sexual awakening leading to a form of female empowerment, as they grow up and become powerful independent super-women (a goddess for one, a vampire for the other). Yet, the stories’ resolutions differ: Psyche’s ascension to Mount Olympus follows the recognition of her marriage with Cupid by Jupiter, while Bella’s arrival in the Olympic Coven<sup>24</sup> is the direct consequence of the loss of her virginity and resulting pregnancy. The start of it all, however, is the same in each text: the maiden’s discovery of desire. Erotic curiosity, then, is not only about carnal desire, it is an impulse towards life and experience. Even more, it is a pathway to empowerment.

While in terms of sexual education, Meyer’s tetralogy may be interpreted as a warning against premarital sex and teenage pregnancy, she also paradoxically celebrates sex as a joyful, enlightening process, through which women can achieve equality with their partners. In this light, the last scene of *Breaking Dawn* is extremely relevant: now a vampire with psychic abilities, Bella is able to share for the first time her thoughts with Edward, who could read everyone’s mind except hers. The “thoughts” she shares are actually erotic memories,

perfectly recalled: his face when I’d opened my eyes to my new life, to the endless dawn of immortality... that first kiss... that first night... His lips, suddenly fierce against mine, broke my concentration. [...] And then we continued blissfully into this small but perfect piece of our forever (Meyer, *Breaking Dawn* 698-9).

In *Twilight*, the fairy-tale-like happy ending is driven by desire and pleasure. A metaphor

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<sup>23</sup> This comparison runs throughout *Midnight Sun*. While Bella sees him as Cupid, Edward sees himself as Hades, condemning her to the Underworld.

<sup>24</sup> The Olympic Coven is the name given in the *Breaking Dawn* vampire index to the Cullen vampire family, as they live in the Olympic Peninsula, Forks, Washington.

perhaps for Meyer's footprint on romance as a whole: by exalting female desires and fantasies, the genre allows female readers to read, feel and express their own desires, and to follow, in a way, Bella and Psyche's footsteps. Without a doubt, *Twilight* paved the way for the countless romance fantasy novels that are now more concerned with consent and female empowerment, as Sarah J. Maas's *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series (2015-2021) and its Beauty-inspired Feyre exemplify. Curiosity, seduction and desire tend to form a continuum of female agency in romance fantasies; they are no longer female toxic traits, nor simply sources of sin or pleasure, but a compass to navigate the world of men.

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### Adèle Hoareau

Adèle Hoareau is a PhD student at Sorbonne University. She is a member of two research groups, VALE *Voix Anglophones, Littérature et Esthétique* and CRLC, *Centre de Recherche en Littérature comparée* and specializes in contemporary American literature and comparative literature. Her thesis which focuses on the study of mainstream retellings and adaptations of *Beauty and the Beast*, combines gender and reception studies, pop culture and adaptation theories.

Adèle Hoareau est doctorante agrégée d'anglais à Sorbonne Université. Elle est membre du laboratoire Voix Anglophones, Littérature et Esthétique (VALE) ainsi que du Centre de Recherche en Littérature comparée (CRLC). Ses recherches portent sur la culture populaire et les questions de genre. Son travail de doctorat s'intéresse aux réécritures et adaptations filmiques anglophones de *La Belle et La Bête* depuis 1991.