



ARTICLE



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Geo-political vampirism: how and why has Western literary scholarship appropriated and then re-mythologised the socio-historical origins of the vampire?

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The article considers the claims of Western academics like Frayling (1992) that the literary vampire began with Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819). Crawford (2016) identifies a German literary vampire tradition existing one hundred years before Polidori, yet that work has strengthened Eurocentric claims concerning the literary vampire by academics like Bloom (2018). The article reviews Anatol's (2022) challenge to the dominant position of *Dracula* in vampire criticism, Anatol identifying a literary tradition pre-dating Stoker, that tradition seeing the documenting of Caribbean vampire folklore by British colonialists/slave owners, travel writers and journalists. In sympathy with Anatol's non-Eurocentric consideration, the article re-examines/disputes Western academia's 'mythology' concerning the Villa Diodati (1816), when Lord Byron's reading from the German *Fantasmagoriana* apparently inspired Polidori and Mary Shelley to write their novels. The article identifies an Ottoman literary tradition that directly influenced Byron's 1813 poem 'The Giaour', his unfinished story 'A Fragment' (1819), and Stoker's *Dracula*. The article explores Ottoman vampire ('obur') literature, starting with Celebi's *Book of Travels* of 1666, which refers back to the fifteenth century 'vampire fatwas' in the Balkans under Ottoman rule. The article traces how the dominant Turkic languages of the region informed the proto-Albanian language, the 'vampire' (as both term and demonised 'other') entering Albanian folklore. The Ottoman empire declining, the rising Austro-Hungarian and then British empires appropriated the vampire westward, exoticising and demonising non-central Europeans. Finally, the article provides a post-colonial reading of Southey's 1801 orientalist poem *Thalaba the Destroyer*, reading the first true 'vampire' in English literature.

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Introduction

Particular Western academics have long claimed the literary tradition (if not literary creation) of the vampire to be a Western one. For example (and as also quoted by Cameron and Karpenko (2022)), Christopher Frayling asserts that Polidori's *The Vampyre* of 1819 is 'the first story successfully to fuse the disparate elements of vampirism into a coherent literary genre' (1992: 108). Yet the evaluative nature of the terms 'successfully', 'disparate' and 'coherent' beg contestation, especially when they deny the existence of or diminish or dismiss the hundred or so years of vampire 'literature' that preceded Polidori. Indeed, more recently, critics have celebrated how Crawford's *The Origins of the Literary Vampire* (2016) has helped 'redirect scholarly attention' such that there is a (re)new(ed) recognition that '[t]he long and distinguished [...] literary tradition of the literary vampire began in Germany during the Age of Enlightenment [and that] German literature was the first to adapt the vampire figure from central European folklore and superstition and give it literary form' (Rowman and Littlefield, 2022). Crawford implicitly contests Frayling, yet in turn Crawford denies the existence of or diminishes or dismisses the worth of any non-German or non-European vampire 'literature' that might pre-date and inform that literary tradition.

For all that Crawford helps to identify a competing focus of 'attention' for traditional vampire academia, usefully detailing an earlier, German literary tradition of the vampire, Crawford's work also serves to strengthen Eurocentric claims concerning the literary vampire, the immediate influence of Lord Byron's reading of (the 1812 French translation of) the German *Fantasmagoriana* upon Polidori and Shelley at the Villa Diodati when they began writing *The Vampyre* and *Frankenstein* already recognised and well documented (Dalton, 2020: 47). Hence, succeeding critics like Bloom (2018) are able to reassert Frayling's sort of sentiments a new, albeit more broadly: 'This book is a new history of the vampire [...] Although vampires may have their origins in the opaque chronicle of assorted folklore beliefs, they only become 'vampires' *qua* vampires when they enter the European bloodstream *as vampires*, rather than as a part of the general pantheon of the undead, many of whom – ghosts, ghouls, revenants – have displayed their taste for blood for centuries. But they are not vampires.'

Ironically, just as Crawford challenges the traditional academic 'attention' afforded Polidori's *The Vampyre*, so Anatol (2022) sets out to challenge the traditional academic 'attention' given to Stoker's *Dracula* of 1897: 'H.L. Machlow, for example, identifies *Dracula* as "the defining fictional vampire" in popular culture [while] Mary Williamson comments *Dracula* has "dominated critical interpretations of the vampire, eclipsing earlier incarnations"'. Anatol concedes that certain contemporary academics like Ingrid Thaler have 'branch[ed] out further than *Dracula*' but observes that such academics still '[identify] eastern European folklore and nineteenth-century literature from western European folklore as the root of contemporary conventions'. Unlike Crawford, however, Anatol challenges the Western academic hegemony by revealing and detailing a non-Eurocentric tradition concerning the literary vampire, since '[l]ong before Stoker's novel was published, documents about vampirism, cannibalism, and bloodlust in the Caribbean were available in England, taken down by European landowners, travel writers, and missionaries.' It is precisely in the vein of Anatol's research, which illuminates and presents a non-Eurocentric tradition¹ and origin for the vampire (based specifically upon the 'bloodsucking, skin-shedding *soucouyant* of Caribbean lore', in Anatol's case), that my article determines to analyse more deeply the British literary tradition which arguably starts with Polidori's work in order to identify how it might explicitly borrow from an alternative non-

Eurocentric *literary* tradition (specifically based upon an Ottoman tradition, via the Balkans, in this case).

The Western academics cited above appropriate, claim and implicitly create the literary origins of vampire literature for themselves, Western academia and their own publications. As a corollary, the critically 'established' socio-historic and literary influences which informed and inspired Polidori's novel might therefore be contested. Western critics have often asserted that both Polidori's novel and Shelley's *Frankenstein* of 1818 were first draughted in 1816 at the Villa Diodati in part as a response to a challenge from Lord Byron after his reading of stories from the *Fantasmagoriana* of 1812. Such an assertion aligns with Crawford's claims concerning the pre-eminence of a German or Western tradition in vampire literature, especially as historical, literary and textual research into the tales in *Fantasmagoriana* concurs that the tales are exclusively European in their content and do not date earlier than 1810 (Day, 2004; Woudenberg, 2015). However, Byron had included the motif of a vampire in both his 1813 poem 'The Giaour' (line 755 onwards) and his unfinished story 'A Fragment' published in 1819, leading to Polidori's novel at first being falsely ascribed to Byron (White, 1987).

It is a closer reading of Byron's 'The Giaour' that begins to contest the pre-eminence of German vampire literature. 'Giaour' is an offensive Turkish word for infidel or non-believer, and a term Byron borrowed at the same time (during his Grand Tour of 1810-11) as he learnt of the Turkish tradition of throwing female adulterers into the sea in a sack (Khrisat, 2018). He makes this tradition central to the plot of his poem when Leila, a member of her master Hassan's harem, falls in love with the *giaour*. Hassan throws Leila into the sea, and the *giaour* takes revenge by killing Hassan. The character of the Ottoman narrator predicts that the *giaour* will become a vampire (describing the condition at length), but the *giaour* enters a monastery due to his remorse. We can begin to see, here, how a lack of good faith, (including within a family as per the quote below), a lack of the right faith (including entire bloodlines and races as per the quote below), and a lack of faithfulness, along with religious demonisation, are synonymously embodied in the vampire as and when it is appropriated from the Ottoman tradition (as per the quote below and as will be further exemplified, detailed and discussed later in this article), a tradition that is actually continued in the German tradition described by Ossensfelder's 1748 poem 'The Vampire', Burger's 1773 poem 'Lenore' and Goethe's 1797 poem 'The Bride of Corinth', albeit that the German tradition specifically demonises the non-Christian while the Ottoman tradition demonises the non-Muslim. It seems, then, that the Ottoman Empire's vampiric tradition may have passed into Europe via the occupied countries of Hungary and the Balkans, those countries appropriated or reclaimed by Europe as the Ottoman Empire declined.

*But first, on earth as Vampire sent,
Thy corse shall from its tomb be rent:
Then ghastly haunt thy native place,
And suck the blood of all thy race;
There from thy daughter, sister, wife,
At midnight drain the stream of life;
Yet loathe the banquet which perforce
Must feed thy livid living corse:
Thy victims ere they yet expire
Shall know the demon for their sire,
As cursing thee, thou cursing them,
Thy flowers are wither'd on the stem.
But one that for thy crime must fall,
The youngest, most beloved of all,
Shall bless thee with a, father's name —
That word shall wrap thy heart in flame!*
(Byron, 1813:30)

As described by Salim Kirgi (2018), the Ottoman literary tradition largely begins with Evliya Celebi's *Book of Travels* of 1666, a poetic travelogue through the Ottoman-ruled Balkans, where he witnesses *obur* (meaning 'gluttons') with vampiric powers and harks back to the c.15 'vampire fatwas' (documented in judicial records of the day) which were enacted by Ebussuud Effendi, the famous sheikh of Suleiman the Magnificent. The so-called fatwa involved the digging up of non-Muslim, Balkan graves, the pile-driving of stakes, and the decapitation or burning of corpses. Indeed, etymologists such as Petar Skok (1973: 564) hypothesise that the words *obur*, *ubyrly* (meaning 'witch') and *upir* (meaning 'drink') must have passed from dominant Turkic languages into proto-Slavic and proto-Albanian languages, giving us *pir* and *pija* (while *dham* means 'tooth'). (In Turkic languages the pronunciation of /b/ and /p/ can be all but the same.) Celebi's *Book of Travels* (titled *Seyahatname* in the original, a title which was also synonymous with an Islamic literary tradition of 'travel writing' dating back to the Middle Ages (Anetsopher, 2012)) was in part translated and borrowed from significantly (detailed below) by the Hungarian Turcologist Arminius Vambery in order to help produce his own 1864 travelogue titled *Travels in Central Asia*. Vambery (whose name becomes 'Vampery' with the shared b/p allophone, Brundan (2015) reading *Dracula* as based on Vambery himself) then went on to have two prolonged discussions with Bram Stoker in London in 1890 (Hutcheson and Smart, 2007: 3), discussions which can perhaps help to explain why the vampire *Dracula* (in the eponymous novel) was sourced from Vlad III, a prince that grew up in the Ottoman Palace (Ludlam, 1962). The traveller, polyglot and cultural historian Vambery (having both grown up with the Balkan folklore tradition of the vampire (below) and then having read of the Ottoman vampire tradition in Celebi's *Seyahatname*) came to London on a speaking tour to promote his 1886 book titled *The Story of Hungry*, which included a specific history of the Transylvania region. Hutcheson and Smart (2007: 3) importantly identify that, when Stoker's *Dracula* gives a brief family history to Harker, 'ranging from his identity as a member of the Szekely tribe and their descent from "the Ugric tribe ... their Berserkers" (53) and the Huns, including the notorious Attila, [t]he material is actually a synopsis of material gathered by' Vambery, and taken from Vambery's book and talk. It was Vambery's material that historically detailed and described Vlad Tsepes, Vlad Dracul, for and within Stoker's work, and it is after this 'exchange' that Stoker changes the working title of his manuscript from *The UnDead* to *Dracula* (Hutcheson and Smart, 2007: 4). Such an appreciation could also explain why Stoker's original interest in Austria as a literary setting (as reflected in his 'Dracula's Guest' short story, thought to be the original but deleted first chapter for *Dracula*) then moved further east to Transylvania (Florescu and McNally, 1979: 320). There is ongoing debate and conjecture about the full nature of the 'exchange', yet Stoker both/either expresses his gratitude and/or acknowledges his debt to Vambery via his 'fond mention' (Hutcheson and Smart, 2007: 3) of Vambery in his book *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving* (1906), and via the words of Van Helsing in *Dracula* (critics as recent as Winrow (2019) seeing Van Helsing as based on Vambery):

I have asked my friend Arminius, of Buda-Pesth University, to make his record, and from all the means that are, he tell me of what he has been. He must, indeed, have been that Voivode Dracula who won his name against the Turk, over the great river on the very frontier of Turkeyland [...] The Draculas were, says Arminius, a great and noble race, though now and again were scions who were held by their coevals to have had dealings with the Evil One. They learned his secrets in the Scholomance, amongst the mountains over Lake Hermanstadt, where the devil claims the tenth scholar as his due. In the records are such words as 'stregoica'

witch, 'ordog' and 'pokol' Satan and hell, and in one manuscript this very Dracula is spoken of as 'wampyr,' which we all understand too well. (Chapter 18)

Whatever the particulars or precise nature of the 'exchange', it represents an inflection point in Stoker's creative focus, setting, content and production of/for *Dracula*, a moment when the unholy 'demon' is seen as coming from further east than previously understood: where the predominantly Christian Austro-Hungary had seen Hungary under Ottoman rule until 1699, parts of Romania (e.g., specifically Wallachia, *historically ruled by Vlad Dracul* and bordered by Transylvania) were not free of the predominantly Muslim Ottoman rule until 1877/78. Such a late date for the end of Ottoman rule would have given the character of *Dracula* an even greater sense of real and current danger to those in the West (an existential threat even to the British Empire, as per the novel's own plot and description (Dalton, 2020)). The inflection point also represented (whether deliberate or not) an appropriation and re-weaponising of a literary vampiric tradition that had originated in the east, as previously discussed. It is an appropriation which echoes Vambery's own appropriation and re-weaponising of Celebi's *Seyahatname* ('Book of Travels'): where the 'dervish-ghazi' (travelling Muslim warrior on jihad) Sari Saltik is prominent in various passages of the *Seyahatname* and is the warrior most responsible for the Islamization of the Balkans (Anetsopher, 2012), Vambery then uses the same role/disguise of the dervish in order to conduct his own journey back into Central Asia, working all the while for the British Foreign Office 'to combat Russian attempts at gaining ground in Central Asia and threatening the British position on the Indian sub-continent' (Norton-Taylor, 2005). Vambery's appropriation in turn echoes the earlier appropriation and (mis)representation of Ottoman incursions into the Balkans as represented/performed in the very early songs and poems of the German Michel Beheim (1416?-1479?), who was a member of the entourage of the Christian King Ladislaus V of Hungary, was present at the Siege of Belgrade (1456), that city falling to the Ottomans, and wrote one of the first song-poems in reaction to the fall of the then Christian city of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453. His work involved anti-Turkish, 'invective-filled rhetoric, crusading propaganda, castigation of the Christian nobility for a failure to come together, and an interpretation of the Turks under Mehmed II as a scourge of God' (McDonald, 2017). One particular poem was titled 'Story of a Bloodthirsty Madman Called Dracula of Wallachia' (1463). The (propagandist) poem was written the year after *Dracula's* imprisonment by King Matthias of Hungary, Vlad having lost Walachia to his younger brother Radu, the latter having won the support of the Walachian boyars who had tired of Vlad's notoriously bloody reign, Radu also having sided with the Ottomans. Therefore, Vlad's 'unholy' behaviours were seen as having turned Walachia into a lost, fallen, un-Christian kingdom (Arreseigor, 2021). Vlad was released by Matthias in 1475 and tasked with reclaiming Walachia, yet despite initial successes Vlad was ultimately defeated and his head was sent to Mehmed II, who purportedly had it displayed above the gates of the Islamic Constantinople. Whether hero or villain, Soldier of God or Satanic demon, the figure of Vlad himself (like his kingdom before him) is a site of imperialist, historical and religious (not to mention academic) contestation, appropriation and demonisation.

As might be interpreted or drawn from the above, there were continual and deliberate attempts over the centuries to 'own' not just territory, but also the prevailing narrative that swayed hearts and minds, demonised the 'other', and kept the local population loyal or devout based on belief, fear and/or prejudice. Just as the invading Ottomans demonised the non-Muslim Balkans during the 'vampire fatwas', so in turn did the travelling stranger of the 'wrong' faith and blood who parasitically married into the local community, in order to propagate their own breed, become a key theme/motif of

Balkan vampiric folklore (Righi, 2011). This time, however, it can be read that it was the Ottoman incomer being demonised or othered. Inevitably, it is just such a theme/motif (of undesirable immigrants/inlanders) which Bram Stoker picks up and places within the geopolitical context of the British Empire, the more eastern Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires now supplanted and demonised by the West. Indeed, the colonialist or orientalist attitudes, themes and motifs concerning different faiths, bloodlines, and cultures, along with false identities, demonic nature and corrupted communities, all inform the context of the first creative expression of the vampire in English literature: Robert Southey's epic poem of 1801, *Thalaba the Destroyer*. Within the poem, the Muslim hero (like the warrior of the *Seyahatname* tradition) quests through Middle Eastern lands populated by murderers, corrupting temptresses, evil warriors and sorcerers, and suffers terrible persecution and the loss of loved ones, including the death of his bride-to-be who returns to him as a vampire he must kill. Our hero only 'wins through' by destroying everyone and everything, including himself, the apparently virtuous Thalaba made a more capable destroyer by his society than any other, one who all but brings about the End of Days. The exoticisation and demonisation of the foreign seen throughout the poem are both embodied by the lover-as-vampire, and Southey then extends that exoticisation and demonisation to eastern Europe, the Balkans and the Ottomans via an extensive footnote to the poem's use of the term vampire. That footnote reports on, documents and details (as if true and verified) a range of vampire tales from Belgrade, Greece, Hungary, Transylvania and 'Cossava on the Frontiers of the Turkish Servia', warning the reader that non-belief in the vampire or not taking its existential threat seriously sees us cast as 'Atheists and Infidels' (Southey, 2012).

To reprise, we have seen how the 'othering' and demonising mythology concept of the vampire spread via language and literature from the Ottoman empire into the Balkans, then to be appropriated and re-used by the oppressed populations to demonise via folklore the invasive outsider or corrupting foreigner by blood, then to be appropriated and re-used by the competing and succeeding Austro-Hungarian empire to demonise via propagandist poetry those they fought eastwards, then to be appropriated and re-used by a German literary tradition (as the Austro-Hungarian empire declined westwards) to demonise eastern Europe and beyond, and finally to be appropriated and re-used by the work of a succession of British poets, writer-historians and novelists who, as a group, had encountered the mythology in terms of *each one* of its differing geochronological phases of development, to demonise those from eastern Europe and beyond who might threaten the British Empire. Before concluding, however, it is valuable to the argument and discovery of this article to note that the Ottoman vampire tradition may actually have appropriated or re-used the eleventh-century Indian vampire tradition represented by the *Vetala Panchavimshati* (or *Vikram-Vetala*) collection of stories and legends, the 'vetala' a vampiric demon in Hindu mythology. Significantly, the collection was written in Sanskrit, a language which loaned many words to the Turkic languages, as well as Sanskrit and Persian originally being the same languages before they became written languages, Persian one of the languages of the Ottoman empire along with Turkish and Arabic (Strauss, 2003). The Sanskrit word for drink is *pibati* and the Turkic was *upir*, both pre-dating (by a thousand years or so) the proto-Slavic and proto-Albanian *pir* and *pija*, constituting the 'pire' in 'vampire'. Also, the Sanskrit word for tooth is *danta* and similarly pre-dates the proto-Slavic and proto-Albanian *dham*, constituting the 'dham' in 'dhampir' (in Balkan folklore, the offspring of a vampire and a human).

Yet the connection between the Indian vampire tradition and the British one was far more direct than via linguistic influences over thousands of years, since the best known English version of the *Vikram-Vetala* was that produced by Sir Richard Francis Burton,

publishing *Vikram and the Vampire* in 1870. The latter work was not a simple translation, however; rather, it was a very free adaptation or improvisation (Penzer, 1924: 227) which, in keeping with the appropriation previously discussed, took the opportunity to fictionalise, orientalise and implicitly misrepresent both Hinduism and India. As Burton's preface to the 1870 edition states:

Miletus, the great maritime city of Asiatic Ionia, was of old the meeting-place of the East and the West. Here the Phoenician trader from the Baltic would meet the Hindu wandering to Intra, from Extra, Gangem; and the Hyperborean would step on shore side by side with the Nubian and the Aethiop. Here was produced and published for the use of the then civilised world, the genuine Oriental apologue, myth and tale combined, which, by amusing narrative and romantic adventure, insinuates a lesson in morals or in humanity, of which we often in our days must fail to perceive the drift. The book of Apuleius, before quoted, is subject to as many discoveries of recondite meaning as is Rabelais. As regards the licentiousness of the Milesian fables, this sign of semi-civilisation is still inherent in most Eastern books of the description which we call "light literature" (Burton, 1870)

Burton was a British explorer, writer soldier and orientalist scholar (de la Fuente, 2023) who toured India, and the Middle East in disguise precisely in the tradition of Vambery before him, and of course Celebi before him, and Sari Saltik as the 'dervish-ghazi' character before him. Finally, it must be noted that Bram Stoker and the author of *Vikram and the Vampire* knew each other well. Indeed, as White (2022) identifies, 'Prior to Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, vampires were never represented in literature as reanimated or 'undead' humans capable of transforming into bats. The source of Stoker's innovation may be traced to his personal acquaintance Sir Richard Francis Burton, who in his adaptation of a South Asian anthology of 'Gothic' tales of horror and adventure had identified its hero's antagonist, called a *vetala* in Sanskrit, as both a male vampire and a giant bat.'

In conclusion, based on all of the above, both Frayling (1992) claiming that the vampire tradition is a British one that started with Polidori and Crawford (2016) describing the vampire tradition as a European one can be understood as symptomatic of Western academia's appropriation of cultural narratives and literary traditions that existed long before those claimed for themselves by Europe and the UK. Whether the literary vampire is a European or non-European tradition demonising the 'other', this article's Post-colonialist and New Historicist consideration of the vampire understands its contestation to be as geopolitical as it is more traditionally moral, religious and/or racial. Just as the creative authors cited in this paper were formed by their societies and their socio-historic contexts, so have been the academics cited in this paper. It should be no small surprise, then, that the primacy or worth of particular literature(s) and particular academic considerations should be a site of geopolitical contest. Post-colonial theorists, however, will remain alert to historically colonialist trends within academia; hence moves towards the decolonisation of academia and curricula in recent years.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this research as no data were generated or analysed.

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Note

1 It might be debated whether the Caribbean tradition can be considered a 'true' or full 'literary tradition'. Either way, it is a tradition that pre-dates the European one, a tradition that was colonially appropriated by European writers. It can be argued that

the Caribbean tradition's relative degree of 'literariness' should not be understood as a measure of either its validity or ownership, since implicitly such a measure is a repetition of the sorts of appropriative claims that have already been described in relation to European academics like Frayling, Crawford, Machlow and others.

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Author contributions

I am the sole author of the article: AJD. There were no supervisors involved in the writing of the article. The article was 100% researched and written by AJD. The author (AJD) confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, literature review, literary analysis, generated insights and interpretation, and manuscript preparation.

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