VAMPIRES IN KILTS

FREDERICK BURWICK

As sexual predator the Vampire was closely related to other villains of the Gothic Drama of the period. Cast in a new role as one who first debauches then sucks the blood of his victims, the vampire underwent a major transformation from his earlier folkloric identity in the eighteenth century to his peculiarly urbane post-revolutionary character. Once no more than a resurrected corpse that preyed upon the living, the new vampire was a nobleman of the ancien régime. In the figure of the sophisticated vampire, sexual transgressions were blended with the Sadistic themes of the sexual libertinism of a decadent aristocracy. Also, the stage vampire was an evil antagonist and defiler of religious orthodoxy, whose worship of Satan included the blasphemous parody of drinking the blood, not of Christ, but of a victim or new convert to the dark ways of the living dead.

The vampire melodrama performed during the 1820s introduced a disturbingly different transgressive behaviour.¹ In imposing his spell on his victims, male as well as female, the stage vampire controlled all witnesses to his act. Members of the audience, no less than characters on the stage, succumbed to the Wirkungsästhetik of the vampire’s gaze.² The viewer of the play, as another convert, is presumed to fall under the vampire’s thrall. This essay provides an opportunity to discuss the presumptions of transgressive theatre: not simply to reveal the trespasses against established norms, but to provoke audience tensions of participation and repudiation.

¹ This essay is indebted, as any study of stage vampires must be, to the thoroughly researched commentary in Roxana Stuart, Stage Blood: Vampires of the 19th Century Stage, Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1994.
As manifestation of the “Byronic hero”, the character of this Romantic vampire was sketched by Lord Byron himself. The traditional vampire, as abundantly documented in Augustin Calmet’s *Treatise on Vampires*, was a hungry corpse who rose from the grave. The new vampire combined the wickedness and the charm of Byron himself, an aristocrat at ease in high society, oblivious to moral constraints, and readily seducing women to feed an insatiable lust. The Byronic vampire that gained prominence on the European stage in the 1820s, ultimately known as Lord Ruthven, came into being one night in Switzerland. At Villa Diodati on Lake Geneva in 1816, Byron, Shelley, Mary Shelley, and John Polidori engaged in a ghost story competition. Mary Shelley commenced her tale of Victor Frankenstein and his creature. “Poor Polidori”, Mary later recalled, “had some terrible idea about a skull-headed lady, who was so punished for peeping through a keyhole – what to see I forget – something very shocking and wrong, of course”. Byron told of Augustus Darvell, who is guided by a companion to an ancient burial ground in Smyrna, where he asked to be buried according to a prescribed ritual. Enough of the story is told to make it apparent that Darvell is returning to his own tomb. Abandoning his story of the “skull-headed lady”, Polidori transformed Byron’s hints about Augustus Darvell into a full-length narrative entitled “The Vampyre”, introduced by “A Letter from Geneva, with Anecdotes of Lord Byron” and published in Henry Colburn’s *New Monthly Magazine* (April 1819).

The author of the introductory letter referred to himself throughout in the third person, leaving the reader to surmise that the story was Byron’s. Many were fooled, even Byron’s publisher. Byron promptly wrote to John Murray (15 May 1819):

---

