The Tale of the Living Vampire: New Directions in Vampire Studies

By Kevin Dodd

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For many, Bram Stoker's titular *Dracula* (1897) is the epitome of the Vampire – to the extent that some of his iconic characteristics are anachronistically attributed to him and even retroactively applied to earlier vampiric figures. This also means that Dracula has become an outsized and perhaps over-represented topic in Vampire Studies, making Kevin Dodd's *The Tale of the Living Vampire* (2021) a fresh take on our favourite blood-sucking monster varietal. Indeed, Dodd first states that *Tale* is interested in *Dracula* only indirectly (xi). Instead, the book moves beyond our cultural (and academic) fixation with Stoker's creation to unearth and examine the myriad historical and mythic vampiric figures that long predate (and influenced) the Count. Certainly, the 'vampire' as an imagined figure has evolved and expanded to suit essentially every social context; as Dodd notes, it is the 'variety, the refusal, and the adaptability' of the vampire that interests him (xi). Though, as *Tale* suggests, to holistically examine the now-archetypal vampire of the nineteenth century, we must first turn to its ancestors.

Like Nick Groom's recent *The Vampire: A New History* (2018), Dodd's latest contribution aims to destabilize current critical understanding of the vampire through a rigorous historical account. Dodd effectively uses centuries-spanning, pan-European sources to trace the vampire's genesis across cultural and social boundaries, dividing his findings into several thematic groupings: 'Beginnings of the Nineteenth-Century Vampire', 'The Vampire Bat and the Monster', 'Gender and Sexuality' and 'The Sympathetic and Merciful Vampire'. Within these,

era-based chapters offer a near-encyclopaedic resource for the vampire scholar interested in the formation of the archetypal nineteenth-century vampire.

To understand the vampire, we must first study the revenant. As Dodd notes, there has been little work 'on the precise relationship between the revenant and the early modern vampire' (1), which this section supplements through a systematic review of early European proto-vampires. Key to Dodd's analysis is the acknowledgement that what 'sets the early modern vampire apart from the revenant is the emphasis on reports of the undead from unbiased, respected, and skeptical Westerners' (2) – these beginning chapters focus on the alternate 'biased' sources, namely the folkloric, regional and fluid reports of the revenant. Dodd helpfully sorts these disparate stories into several categories for the reader: Communal Revenants (from the sixteenth century, five drowned Icelanders warn their friends of their forthcoming deaths [4]), Religion and Revenants (a thirteenth-century Genoan archbishop who was assaulted by the devil in the body of a naked woman's rotting corpse [9]), and Proto- or Urvampires (a twelfth-century English scoundrel who returns from the grave to become a *'sanguisuga*, or a bloodsucker "filled with the blood or many persons"' [18]). These examples, amongst many more, demonstrate the prevalence of revenants across a millennium of European history. Though each revenant differs physically, has distinct origins, and is destroyed in every conceivable way, their collective presence indicates an enduring cultural fear and fascination of the undead figure long before it coalesces into the modern vampire of the nineteenth century.

Among the modern vampire's many iconic features, the ability to turn into a bat – or have an association with bats – is one of its most recognizable traits. In the chapter '"An Evil Kind of Animal:" 300 Years of the Monstrous Vampire Bat up to the Nineteenth Century', Dodd traces the genesis of this symbiotic relationship across colonial and religious boundaries. This chapter

engagingly highlights how European imperialists drew parallels between flying monstrous creatures (such as the Classical harpies, Stymphalian birds, and Furies) and the fauna they encountered during their colonial exploits. For instance, in 1511, historian/propagandist Pietro Martire d'Arghiera wrote that '"in many places bats as large as pigeons flew about the Spaniards as soon as twilight fell, biting them so cruelly that men, rendered desperate, were obliged to give way before them as though they had been harpies"' (70). As Dodd illustrates with this chapter, colonizers used figurative, Othering language to characterize the worlds they encountered as distinctly monstrous, and in the process cemented the vampire bat as a symbol of pain, pestilence and parasitism; in other words, a natural companion for the vampire. This association is increasingly linked to racialized people as the nineteenth century approached. Dodd's careful analysis (and inclusion of contemporaneous illustrations) shows how Black, Jewish, Irish and other marginalized communities were vilified through caricatures that combined their human faces and bodies with vampire bat imagery (125-134).

The third thematic section of *Tale*, 'Gender and Sexuality', outlines the vampire's early formation as a figure of deviant sexuality. Dodd writes, 'there long had been a tradition with the European revenant, the precursor to the vampire, that unless the dead body had returned to confess, to compensate for one's wrongdoings, or to exhort the listeners to piety, it was probably a vehicle for the devil' (140). One common example of this in proto-vampire literature is the devil seducing men by possessing or taking a female form – a trope that reflects the evergreen cultural belief that women are responsible for men's sexual impulses or impropriety. Dodd further argues that this narrative (the devil seducing men through women) 'represented a more secular male fantasy: a powerful woman who wants to giver herself wholly and for all time to a particular man' (141). Through this perspective, studying the evolution of gender and sexuality

in revenant and, later, early vampire stories, consequently allows us to study the development of contemporaneous social beliefs and anxieties surrounding sex and sexual behaviours – albeit, from a very male perspective.

The chapter I found most intriguing is '"A Person of My Sex:" The Transgendered Vampire of the Nineteenth Century'. As Dodd notes, the modern vampire emerged in a time of intensive conversation around the nature of gender itself; particularly in the latter part of the nineteenth century – the era of the New Woman, suffragettism, and women in the work force – 'interest was shown in designating cross-dressers in history and homosexuals as masculine women and feminine men' (155). In other words, there was increasing understanding of gender as a fluid construct and the possibility that identity could exist beyond the concrete limitations of the body. Enter the vampire, a figure whose very existence is predicated on physical and psychic liminality. Since Dodd is discussing gender non-conformity in its nascent form, the examples given are understandably wide-ranging in their variances and flexible in their connection to "vampirism". Such texts include Jacques Cazotte's *The Devil in Love* (1772/76), Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Paul Féval's *Vampire City* (1875). As Dodd writes, there were a range of gender and sexual experiments across the nineteenth century, and within literature (or more broadly, entertainment) the vampire was uniquely situated to comment upon or embody these changes, and thus 'ought no longer [be] ignored' (168).

I recommend *The Tale of the Living Vampire: New Directions in Vampire Studies* to any scholar interested in examples of proto-vampires, the early modern vampire, metaphoric representations of colonial and class anxiety, and emergent European gender and sexual dissidence. This work offers a veritable treasure trove of primary source references which, coupled with each chapter's bibliography, makes the work an excellent resource for Vampire

Studies. Dodd has an astute eye for revealing patterns within the literature and folklore, and he weaves a compelling history from these fascinating cultural artefacts.