

Dracula: An International Perspective – Marius-Mircea Crişan - 2017

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Rooted in the British literary tradition of the 18th century, the field of Gothic Studies has been experiencing a rise of popularity abroad. This can be proved by the fast-growing number of publications on Gothic aspects in literature and cinema. Within the last five years alone, a number of foreign authors published significant academic books on the Gothic. This, among others, includes Xavier Aldana Reyes' *Spanish Gothic*, Roberto Curti's *Italian Gothic Horror Films, 1970-1979*, or Anna Depta's, Szymon Cieśliński's and Michał Wolski's edited volume in Polish entitled *Faces of Vampirism*.

The Gothic constitutes the background of Romanian Marius-Mircea Crişan's book, *Dracula: An International Perspective*, published by the prestigious British publishing house Palgrave Gothic (part of Palgrave Macmillan). The volume consists of fifteen chapters by international scholars, studying Count Dracula and various aspects of representation of Dracula and his vampiric descendants in Gothic literature, film and culture.

In his book, Crişan gathered a number of well-established Dracula specialists, as well as new names in the field of vampire studies. As a result, the book constitutes a well-balanced study of the ever-popular myth of Dracula, a Transylvanian aristocrat born on the pages of the 19th century novel by Bram

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Stoker². In the 20th century, the character became an object of research of numerous academic disciplines, ranging from literature studies and history, through imagology and film studies, to tourism, sociology and psychology. Crișan's book offers a variety of intercultural perspectives, providing a multidimensional interdisciplinary volume.

The book begins with Crișan's introduction re-visiting significant critical approaches and theories which over the years have influenced and shaped the understanding and interpretation of the Dracula myth. Crișan recalls the importance of the 1970s book by Raymond T. McNally's and Radu Florescu's *In Search of Dracula: A True History of Dracula and Vampire Legend* (1972), which instigated the debate on the relation between Bram Stoker's literary Dracula and a historical figure of Vlad the Impaler³. This theory quickly spread out of academic classrooms onto other spheres of culture, resulting in a massive increase of interest in both Stoker's novel and the real Wallachian prince. This in turn, led to the rapid growth of tourism in the Romanian geographical regions of Transylvania and Wallachia (Light 2016).

In time, McNally's and Florescu's theory was contradicted by a Canadian scholar Elisabeth Miller. In one of her articles, she presents the following opinion:

I do not dispute that in using the name 'Dracula' Stoker appropriated the sobriquet of the fifteenth-century Wallachian voivode. Nor do I deny that he added bits and pieces of obscure historical detail to flesh out a past for his vampire. But I do vehemently challenge the widespread view that Stoker was knowledgeable about the historical Dracula [...] and that he based his Count on the life and character of Vlad. While it is true that the resurgence of interest in Dracula since the early 1970s is due in no small measure to the theories about such connections, the theories themselves do not withstand the test of close scrutiny (Miller 1998, 179).

Anna Gemra, author of a monumental Polish book on Gothic literature, supports Miller's conclusion by means of the following claim:

² The first edition of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* was published by Archibald Constable and Company on 26 May 1897 in London.

³ Vlad the Impaler, also known as Dracula (Romanian: Vlad Țepeș, Vlad Drăculea), lived between 1431-1476. The Wallachian prince, famous for his hatred towards the Turks, is till this day famous for his apparent love of blood and impaling his enemies. (Melton 2011, 790-796).

Although many scholars are willing to compare Vlad the Impaler and Count Dracula, in fact, the world's most famous vampire has taken not much from his historical archetype. [...] [Vlad the Impaler] has merely lent the name to his literary descendant, together with the fame of a notorious brute. All the rest is a mixture of old legends, stories and myths – a 'wonderful Dracula folkore' (Gemra 2008, 163).⁴

Nevertheless, a vast number of films and other texts of popular culture keep cultivating McNally's and Florescu's theory and refuse to part with the idea of merging the character of Stoker's *Dracula* with Vlad the Impaler⁵.

A large variety of interpretations of the literary *Dracula* initiated a trend of studying vampire figures, ultimately leading to a revival of interest in the subject of the Gothic. Crişan's book presents the development of the phenomenon chronologically, starting with the beginning of Gothic literature and its impact upon the diegetic world of Stoker's *Dracula*, through the novel's subject and themes, its 20th century interpretations and developments, finishing with the birth of the vampire myth and its evolution in the third millennium.

The first four chapters are devoted to literature. William Hughes discusses the subject of Irish Gothic in reference to works of Charles Robert Maturin, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu and Bram Stoker. The subject is continued by Donatella Abbate Badin, who analyses the representation of Italy as a Gothic space in the 19th century works by the chosen Irish writers. Lucian Vasile Szabo and Marius Crişan examine different ways of depicting Eastern and Central Europe in Edgar Allan Poe's short stories. The literary section is concluded by Sam George and her analysis of the vision of Transylvania in the German legend of *The Pied Piper of*

⁴ Quotation translated by the author of this review.

⁵ Over the years, a large number of films and other texts of popular culture have consolidated a popular image of *Dracula* as proposed by McNally and Florescu, in which the fictional character has been merged with the historical figure of Vlad the Impaler. Among the most popular cinematic examples are: *Bram Stoker's Dracula* directed by Francis Ford Coppola (Columbia Pictures 1992) and *Dracula Unknown* directed by Gary Shore (Universal Pictures 2014). In both films, the character of *Dracula* constitutes a mixture of fiction and history.

*Hamelin*⁶. Sam George presents the characters of the Pied Piper and Dracula as metaphors of otherness.

The next section of the book addresses historical elements of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and their interpretations in the context of geography and tourism. Hans Corneel de Roos traces the location of the fictional Castle Dracula Bram Stoker had in mind, and shows that the author took steps to make sure that his fictional Count could *not* be identified as the historical voivode Vlad III, thus taking the debate about the vampire's identity and the way Stoker incorporated (and concealed) historical and geographical facts one step further. Clive Bloom presents the study of stereotypical and metaphorical meaning of Transylvania, as well as the vision of East London in literature, resulting in political interpretation of *Dracula*. Travel and tourism in Bram Stoker's novel is the subject of Duncan Light's chapter, continued by Marius Crișan's theory on the relation between Dracula myth and the Transylvanian Hunedoara castle. Kristin Bone discusses the influence of literature classics upon the settings for the contemporary novels.

John Browning focuses on the evolution of the narrative voice in *Dracula*, while Nancy Schumann studies emotional evolution as well as identity issues and gender consciousness of vampiric characters in literature and film. Cinema is the main topic of the chapters by two Polish scholars, Magdalena Grabias and Dorota Babilas. Both chapters indicate the change of perception of vampire characters. Magdalena Grabias analyses a new dimension of Gothic space in cinema and television, with special focus on the 21st century films and shows. Dorota Babilas offers a chapter on family values as presented in contemporary vampire films.

Crișan finishes his volume with a chapter by an American scholar, Carol Senf. The readers are offered a detailed study of history and evolution of Gothic space and aesthetics in literature, from the birth of the genre until today. The author interprets the changes from the social, geographical and philosophical perspective and stresses the role of Bram Stoker and his iconic novel in forming the Gothic canon. Senf posits that it is the novel's intercultural aspect that opened the door for the evolution of the Gothic into its contemporary form.

The book has met with enthusiastic reactions from both academic and non-academic circles. Its interdisciplinary approach and international perspective allow

⁶ *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* (German: *Rattenfänger von Hameln*) is a German legend told in writing, among others, by the Brothers Grimm in *Deutsche Sagen* (1816/1818), as well as in English by Robert Browning in *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842).

for a variety of interpretations of Dracula and his vampire descendants. In Crişan's own words, "the development of the Dracula myth is the result of complex international influences and cultural interactions" (Crişan 2017, 12). Hence, the book presents a new research perspective explaining the unfaltering popularity of the Stoker's hero and the consequent new trends and ways to interpret the world and the multicultural reality.

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