Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies • Vol. 18(67) No. 1 – 2025
https://doi.org/10.31926/but.pcs.2025.67.18.1.4

On Night's Wing: Bats as Vampiric Signifiers of Death, Darkness, and Disease

James McCREA[1]

Images of bats have graced illuminated manuscripts, church architecture, and funerary art throughout Mediaeval Europe, calling into question their current associations with vampires as adversaries of Western Christianity. This essay outlines the cultural development of bats originally considered strange yet innocuous animals to signifiers of vampiric evil, using an interdisciplinary survey to pinpoint how and when attributions such as darkness, otherness, and contagion arose. Drawing from mediaeval thought, nineteenth-century literature, and modern-day scientific texts, a complex development ties the bat to the vampire by way of dragons and devils, becoming the de-facto symbol of vampirism and eventually the twenty-first century plague-bringer in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: *bats, dragons, devils, darkness, contagion*

1. Vampiric Wings

Bats and vampires are nearly ubiquitous in recent cultural memory, to the point where J. Gordon Melton asserts bat symbolism to be iconographically-inseparable from the contemporary vampire (2010, 42). However, this relationship appears to be taken at face value in scholarly discourse, since researchers are comfortable describing the existence of such a relationship without critically evaluating why, when, and how the bat assumed its vampiric association. Further compounding the issue, extant literature predicates the bat's symbolism upon a long-established dialogue wherein the animals themselves are considered unholy, which several scholars suggest originates in overtly-negative theological dialogues from the Middle Ages (2013, 43). For instance, biologist Jens Rydell blames Christianity, claiming that "[the bat's] association with the Devil has been maintained by the church and obviously has had a strong influence with important negative consequences for bats (2018, 88)." Consequently, this paper attempts to determine how and when bats began to symbolise both vampirism and evil by examining their representations in

[1] National University, San Diego, USA, Jmccrea@nu.edu

literary and visual culture beginning in Mediaeval Christendom. To this end, I believe bats were not considered unholy until the proliferation of vampire literature in the late nineteenth century, and their literary nature as infernal, pestilent creatures was retroactively projected onto them as they also became emblematic of cultural otherness from the Western European perspective. Thus, cultural history has unduly condemned bats as profane, dangerous animals not merely in the realm of creative expression but also in scientific discourse.

It is important to enter this discussion by questioning why bats are the primary animal associated with vampirism when numerous other real-world animals such as mosquitoes and leeches also gain nourishment from ingesting blood. Bram Stoker exerts tremendous authority by likening the two throughout *Dracula*, especially when the titular vampire stalks the skies of London in the shape of a large bat (2008, 103). However, Dracula commands all manner of beasts associated with darkness—namely rats, owls, moths, foxes, and wolves (336). Nevertheless, bats have haunted the Gothic graveyards and ruins of Western Europe since the nineteenth century, and have accompanied vampires ever since (Melton 2013, 42–43; Rydell 2018, 89).

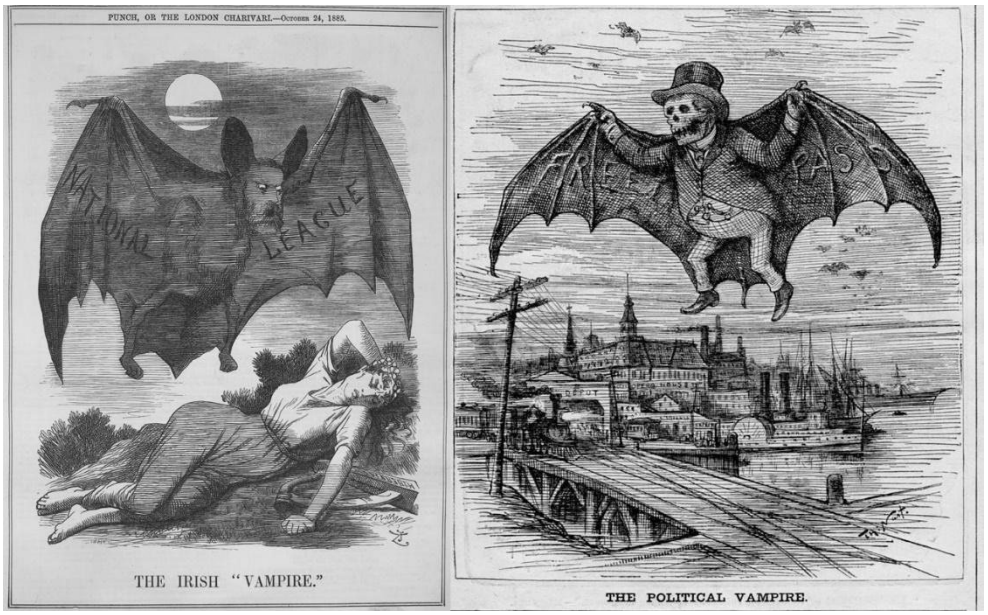

Figure 1. London's *Punch Magazine* portrays the Irish National League as a human-faced "Irish 'Vampire'" bat (24 October 1885) while Thomas Nast's skeletal "Political Vampire" looms over the railroad as an emblem of rapid industrialisation in New York's *Harper's Weekly* (4 April 1885).

Andy Boylan traces this affiliation to numerous sources closely predating Stoker's research for *Dracula* in the late nineteenth century (2008). Certainly, capitalists have been called vampires by Voltaire (1784), Friedrich Engels (1892, 238), and on numerous occasions by Karl Marx (1867, 257, 282, 330). Consequently, economical critiques of capitalists would visually manifest as bat-winged oppressors in contemporary publications (Figure 1). Curiously, their only vampiric commonality is the presence of dark, membranous wings.

Indeed, much of Boylan's assessment focuses on the presence of wings in vampire literature, citing Alexandre Dumas' 1851 theatrical adaptation of John Polidori's *Vampyre* as Lord Ruthven, the illusory vampire in "Pepopukin in Corsica" as part of The Stanley Tales (A.Y. 1827), and William H.G. Kingston's "The Vampire; or Pedro Pacheco and the Bruxa" (1863). However, we see a tendency towards the nondescript when these authors comment upon their vampires' wings. For instance, Kingston's vampires bear "black wings" in their natural form, but they can otherwise shapeshift into bats and owls (1863, 10). Similarly, Dumas offers little more description to Polidori's Lord Ruthven except for his "great wings" (1851, 99). And finally, the vampire in "Pepopukin in Corsica" is entirely illusive, existing merely through ventriloquism intended to frighten away an unwanted suitor—the false vampire's detached voice claims to leave blood stains across the Alps as it flies over them with nondescript wings (1827). Excluding Kingston, none of the authors describe bats or even bat-like aspects to the vampiric image, and Kingston alone merely mentions bats as one of many bestial forms they can occupy. Otherwise, the descriptor of Kingston's wings are "black," while Dumas' are "great," and A.Y.'s are "spectral" (1827, 70). Minimally, the nineteenth-century vampire is not inherently bat-like, but rather large and shadowy.

2. Taking Satanic Flight

Specifically regarding wings, Boylan refers to a long-standing tradition in religious art to differentiate good from evil by portraying devils with bat wings (2008, 8). He correspondingly links the image of Satan to Dracula through bat-like wings, which fits with Stoker's elevation of Dracula as a presence of ultimate evil tantamount to Satan on earth (8). Predating Stoker's image of Dracula as webbed-winged evil, Renaissance art historian Simona Cohen emphasises the relevance of Dante Alighieri in linking bat wings to ice-imprisoned Satan in *The Divine Comedy* (2008, 233). Indeed, Satan has been depicted with webbed wings in illuminated manuscripts as early as 1370 CE (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Satan in *The Divine Comedy* from 1370 CE (Add MS 19587, folio 58r) courtesy of the British Library.

By comparing fourteenth-century portrayals of Satan to earlier versions such as *The Apocalypse of Saint-Sever* from the eleventh century (Figure 3), Alighieri's influence becomes clear by virtue of the Devil's wings alone, which shift from feathery to membranous. Consequently, devils have been portrayed as having webbed, bat-like wings ever since.

Art historian Lorenzo Lorenzini reinforces Alighieri's lasting influence by referring to the bat as a foremost guise of Satan, describing it as "pre-eminently the animal of night and of death" (2006, 123). Lorenzi further claims the bat usurped the owl as Classical Antiquity's symbol of darkness, and later symbolised Jews as an unclean race (2006, 50).

Figure 3. Satan appears with shadowy wings in *The Apocalypse of Saint Sever* (BnF Latin 8878 folio 145v) courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

As previously stated, the owl's dual significance as both nocturnal and wise allows the bat to embody the semiotics of darkness in the cultural mind. Regarding the bat's emblematic relationship with Judaism, Véronique Plesch describes its iconographical significance thusly:

> *As a nocturnal animal, it may represent the spiritual darkness in which Jews remain by refusing to accept Christian faith, or it may symbolise heretics, who hide during the daylight hours. Because of its hybrid nature, half-bird and half-rodent, it may also refer to duplicity and hypocrisy, both considered Jewish traits. Bats have also been linked to invidia [envy], a vice very much associated with Jews* (Plesch 2002, 145).

Art historical discourse clearly aligns bat wings with infernal evil and non-Christian otherness, but there is little evidence to suggest that bats evince evil aside from Alighieri's decision to depict Satan with webbed wings. Plesch's interpretations point to a generalised sense of misunderstanding shared by bats and cultural minorities, wherein both beasts and people with uncommon features are construed as malfeasant others. However, this distinction is flawed considering bats were rarely considered evil in religious art and literature prior to the nineteenth century.

Saint Basil's moralization expands upon Pliny the Elder's straightforward description in the first-century compendium *Naturalis Historia* (Book 10, 81), in which he states that the bat is the only flying creature that's milk-bearing and gives live birth rather than laying eggs. These descriptors graced the pages of bestiaries with little variation throughout the Mediaeval era (Barber 2018, 157). However, visual representation varied in illuminated manuscripts between 1300 and 1500

(Figure 4). Similarly, bats appear as carvings in the misericord seats and choir stalls on Lincoln Cathedral (Figure 5).

Figure 4. Bats in illuminated manuscripts from left to right: *The Luttrell Psalter* (British Library, Add Ms 42130 fol. 164r, 1325-1340), *Bestiarius* (Royal Danish Library. GKS 1633 4º, ca 1400) *Le Livre et le Vraye Hystoire du Bon Roy Alixandre* (British Library, Royal 20 B XX fol. 51v, 1420).

Figure 5. A stylistic bat appears in the choir stalls of Lincoln Cathedra

The pleasant features and almost leaf-like wings of these bats seem to bely their assumed status as unholy creatures, which is equally refuted by their placement in the holiest section of the church (Bennett 2015). Likewise, bats occupy sanctified burial spaces in Europe well into the eighteenth century, most notably appearing in the Parisian *Père Lachaise* Cemetery (Rydell et al 2018, 86–88). Thus far, bats seem welcome in the Christian sacred space, calling into question the backlog of critical discourse accusing the church of harming their image (Boylan 2008, 8; Cohen 2008, 233; Lorenzini 2006, 123; Rydell 2018, 88).

3. The Devil's Draconic Forebears

So if neither scripture nor moralising text describes the unholy nature of bats, what exactly is the source of the purported backlog of Christian defamation? If, as Renaissance historians are so confident to claim, Alighieri is predominantly responsible for the convention of likening features of bats to all things infernal, then the veracity of such a claim necessitates a closer reading of his work alongside an etymological assessment of bats during his era. In a survey of Florentine bat iconography, natural history scholar Marco Riccicci and animal researcher Jens Rydell both claim that Alighieri invented the term *vispistrello* to describe Satan's wings in *The Divine Comedy* (2017, 178). Therein, the fictional Alighieri beholds the fallen angel imprisoned in ice, recounted as follows in Italian with a subsequent translation by Stanley Appelbaum:

> *Sotto viascuna uscivan due grand'ali, quanto si convenia a tanto uccello: vele di mar non vid'io mai cotali. Non avean penne, ma di vispistrello era lor modo; e quelle svolazzava, si che tre venti si movean da ello: quindi Cocito tutto s'aggelava.* 'Below each face two wings emerged, as large as was suitable to such a large bird: I never saw ship's sails of so great a size. They were not feathered, but like a bat's in nature: and he kept flapping them, so that three winds proceeded over him: hence all of Cocytus was frozen over' (Alighieri 2003, 106–107).

Appelbaum's translation is one of convention in that he unquestionably defines *vispistrello* as bat, but with good reason. The modern Italian term for bat, pipistrello, is an obvious derivation of Alighieri's neologism, no doubt influenced by their association throughout centuries of cultural memory. Moreover, *vispistrello* seems to be an obvious derivative of the Latin *vespertilio*, itself a permutation of the Latin term for "evening" (Lewis 1890). However, there are numerous words in the written record of Italian vernacular that denote bats while bearing little phonemic similarity

to *vispistrello* in years prior. English linguist John Florio's seventeenth-century Italian dictionary uses the following words to define both "night bats" and "rare mice" as interchangeable terms: *barbastrello* (70), *grignáppola* (239), *luscióla* (305), *nóttola* (343), *pipiglióne*ly (385), *rattopenágo* (417), *sbarasóle* (450), *sporeglióne* (495), *tópo aláro* (530), *pipistréllo* (386), and finally *vipistréllo* (558). Curiously, the only verb mentioning bats, *vipistráre*, refers to the act of hovering during the twilight hours (558). Unfortunately, Florio's text lacks any information delineating the usage of these words throughout Italian history, making it difficult to determine which of these terms were common in Alighieri's era. However, his compendium demonstrates how bats in Italy share multiple meanings and differing phonemic forms, and also how they are often synonymous with mice.

Regardless, the recurrence of *vesper* as a principal element in the bat's etymology is highly relevant. First and foremost, it effectively welds the bat to the darkness of night by virtue of definition alone. Secondly, it highlights a unique aspect of Italian linguistic history since it is the only Romance language whose word for bat is based on *vesper*. Spanish and Portuguese derive *murciélago* and *morcego*, respectively, from *mus* and *caecus*—Latin terms for "mouse" and "blind" (Lewis 1890). French is not altogether dissimilar in its usage of *chauve-souris*, derivative of the Latin *calva sōrex*, which means "bald shrewmouse" (Lewis 1890). This naming convention predates Alighieri's, with a notable example occurring in Marie de France's *Fables* in 1180. It is worth noting that *Fables* itself is composed of Aesop's fables retold for a French audience (Kinoshita and McCracken 2014, 35). This suggests a possible linguistic convention linking bats to bald mice beginning in Ancient Greece, as Marie de France describes the bat as a bird whose plumage is ravaged resultant of the creature's duplicity nature (Kinoshita and McCracken 2014, 161). Thus, if Alighieri wanted to refer to bats specifically in his description of Satan, why did he invent a new word when there were suitable naming conventions?

4. Linguistic Aberration in Hell

Christopher Livanos portrays the fictional Alighieri's descent into the depths of Hell as a conceptually-sound expression evoking the Christian doctrine of formless, insubstantial evil, noting that it cannot exist in its own right but must instead characterises nonexistence (2009, 81). According to Livanos, Alighieri accomplishes this by conceptually distancing the reader from reality as metaphysical evil accumulates in the text's hellish environment, which is so strong at its base in Satan's ninth circle that language itself becomes inarticulate (2009, 84). For example, Alighieri plays with language by evoking similar phonetic qualities of Latin and Italian Vulgate to blur distinctions between meaning; *monstrum* shifts from its Latin

definition of "ill omen" to the vernacular "wondrous thing," while its homophonic *moneo* verbally signals "warning" (2009, 82–83). Consequently, Alighieri's monsters are complex signifiers balancing the infernal and the divine wrapped in admonition of sin. Alighieri establishes this degree of semantic mastery in his treatise on Italian linguistics *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, wherein he refutes grammar as an inferior construct compared to vernacular linguistics, thus effectively rejecting the syntax-heavy Greek and Latin as "artificial" (Book 1, I). He posits the natural formation of vernacular language as a distinctly human necessity mandated by individuality, which is responsible for diverse interpretations of signifiers:

> *So it was necessary that the human race, in order for its members to communicate their conceptions among themselves, should have some signal based on reason and perception. Since this signal needed to receive its content from reason and convey it back there, it had to be rational; but, since nothing can be conveyed from one reasoning mind to another except by means perceptible to the senses, it had also to be based on perception. For, if it were purely rational, it could not make its journey; if purely perceptible, it could neither derive anything from reason nor deliver anything to it. This signal, then, is the noble foundation that I am discussing; for it is perceptible, in that it is a sound, and yet also rational in that this sound, according to convention, is taken to mean something* (Alighieri, Book 1, III).

Essentially, Alighieri's own theory necessitates the creation of neologisms like *vispistrello* to effectively communicate ideas appealing to both the rational and perceptive aspects of readers' reception when presenting a new concept in a setting rendered irrational by concentrated unholiness. Hence, the usage of *vispistrello* could signify the poet's creation of a term specific to Satan's wings in absence of an existing descriptor suitable to convey the natural world. Compare the Latin words for "evening" and "lizard"—*vesper* and *stilio* (Lewis 1890). Note how each word corresponds closely to the phonemic and semantic qualities of *vispistrello*. Thus, Alighieri seems to intentionally compound the Latin phrases while applying a stylistic phonemic variant to the resultant neologism to impart a vernacular Italian impression. Most importantly, the compound word evokes the dark, scaly wings of a dragon—an unnatural, nonexistent monster impossible to describe. *Vispistrello* also conceptually cites a secondary connotation of *vesper* signifying the evening star (Lewis 1890). Thus Alighieri's Satan as the fallen angel Lucifer—the Morning Star, and once brightest of God's Heavenly Host—now shines only in his tomb among the dead as described in Isaiah 14:12–15. Moreover, Alighieri robs Satan of any inference with the diminutive mouse, with whom the bat shares common meaning in Italian vernacular. Satan is further linked to draconic imagery in the buffeting of his tremendous wings—each larger than a ship's sails, generating three sets of winds

powerful enough to keep his circle of Hell frozen (2003, 107). This semantic and phonemic evidence establishes Alighieri's poetic usage of languages both ancient and contemporary to convey new concepts—in this case, Satan as a grand fallen angel with tremendous wings of shadow and scale.

Alighieri's conflation of the Satanic and the draconic is of utmost pertinence for two reasons, with the first relating to a symbolic phenomenon anthropologist David E. Jones calls the world-dragon complex in *An Instinct for Dragons* (2002, 38). Therein, Jones outlines the evolutionary processes that influenced ancient primates to identify and respond to three distinct types of predators in specific ways, those predators being birds of prey, big cats, and reptiles (2002, 25–38). Jones suggests that the imagery of these dangerous predatory beasts—through their physical features and also their movements while pursuing prey—received by ancient primates transferred to early hominids, effectively forming a bestial trinity of primordial fear in the human psyche (2002, 45).

> *In a way, the creature we call "dragon" projects through cultural and individual artistic lenses as a primary feature of human evolution. Evolution is driven by natural selection, and natural selection does not work unless a threat exists in the environment to prevent an ill-adapted organism from passing along its genetic materials. In comparing the evolutionary history of humans and that of three primate predators, one can discover when the roots of the dragon began to take hold* (Jones 2002, 38).

Art historian Sharon Khalifa-Gueta expounds upon Jones' theory to describe the seemingly ubiquitous nature of dragon imagery throughout world history, noting the appearance of monstrous, dragon-like imagery surfacing in the Neolithic Middle East, Pre-Columbian Americas, and Aboriginal Australia at the earliest (2018, 265–266). She then describes the dragon's proliferation in Mediterranean culture as a mythological derivative of snakes, largely based on linguistic, biological, and iconological evidence (2018, 270–274). Archaeologist Birgitta Johansen describes a similar permeation of draconic imagery throughout Northern Europe during the Iron Age (1996, 83–88). Thereafter, the dragon entered into Christian visual culture as a malevolent composite of serpentine and otherwise predatory beasts following Christianity's proliferation throughout Western Europe (Johansen 1996, 88; Khalifa-Gueta 2018, 276–277; Rezachevici 1999, 3; Weinstock 2014, 184–185).

Once more, we return to Alighieri and his image of Satan as a terrible multi-headed, winged devil. Draconic imagery now becomes doubly pertinent considering the dragons of Alighieri's era closer resembled monstrous hybrids of the predatory animals described by Jones rather than enormous serpents, effectively evoking an even more heightened sense of danger by virtue of carnivorous hybridity. Hence,

there was no standardised depiction of dragons throughout the Middle Ages. Such stylistic variance is easily observed by examining depictions of Saint Margaret's triumph over the dragon throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In terms of visual literacy, hybridity seems to be the common factor in draconic representation—perfectly echoing Jones' primaeval world-dragon (2002, 25–38). As such, Alighieri may very well have understood the visual potency of hybrid Satanic dragons, and attempted to linguistically mongrelize Satan's description to further abstract the concept. As a result, the dragon becomes Satan and vice-versa. This is textually evident in illustrations of Revelation 12:7, wherein the Archangel Michael slays the dragon who is now rendered a humanoid, webbed-winged, and almost modernly devilish humanoid rendered in Alighieri's descriptive modes (Figure 6).

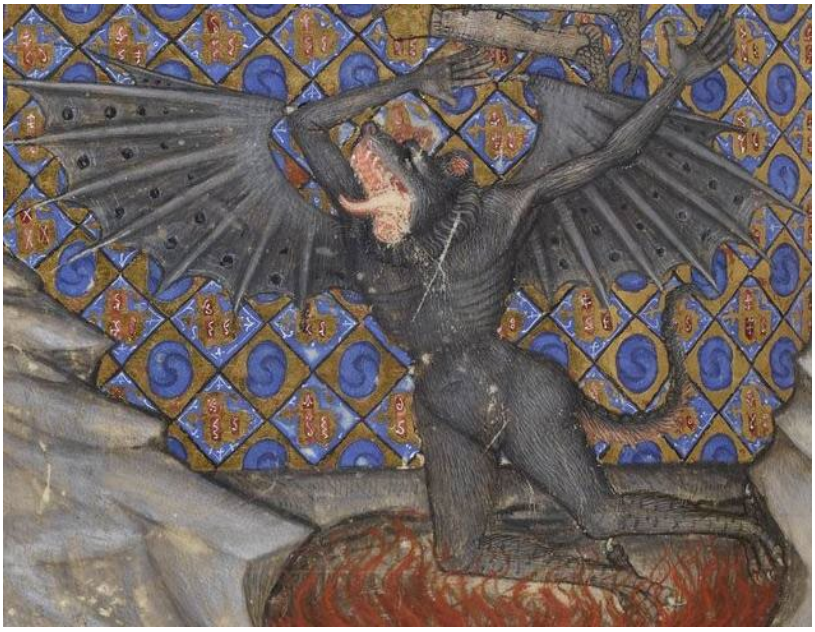

Figure 6. Detail from *Missale et Horae ad Usum Fratrum Minorum* (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Latin 757, fol. 357v, 1301–1400).

Evidently, demons and devils and all things infernal seem to have inherited their wings from dragons rather than bats. So too did the nineteenth-century vampire, recalling otherwise nondescript wings described by Dumas, Kingston, and A.Y. Thus, great, black, and shadowy wings defined the vampire as an evil presence in the mould of Alighieri. The bat, thus far, does not flutter into this semiotic discussion.

5. Vlad Țepeș Dracula: From Dragon to Devil

An important extant similarity between bats and the unholy is one of pure semiosis, which may very well be what ultimately links the two in the late nineteenth century. Just as Satan and the dragon became synonymous with evil, so too did the historical Vlad Tepes Dracula shift from a warrior-leader bearing draconic heraldry to a fictional vector of otherworldly terror through literary transmogrifications. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock expounds upon the dual meaning attributed to Dracula's surname:

> *While the nickname Tepes comes from Vlad's treatment of his enemies, the nickname Dracula comes from the fact that his father, Vlad II (c. 1390 to 1447) called himself Vlad Dracul (Vlad the Dragon) after his initiation in 1431 into the Order of the Dragon, a chivalrous society dedicated to defending Christianity from non-Christians. His son consequently became known as Dracula, meaning son of Dracul or son of the dragon. While the term would have had positive connotations for both father and son, the fact that "Dracul" also means "devil" in Romanian adds an additional intimidating connotation to the name. Linking the name Dracula to the vampire legend was apparently Stoker's idea, as there is no indication that Vlad was connected to vampirism during his life. Indeed, there is some doubt whether Stoker knew anything about Vlad's connection to impalement* (Weinstock 2014, 178).

Although the dragon retained its close association with Satan in Dracula's lifetime, it also becomes a signifier of triumph over evil when used as a heraldic symbol, where it often circles itself or, as with the Order of the Dragon, it in fact strangles itself with its own tail (Rezachevici 1999, 3). Dracula's father, the elder Dracul, had great affinity for the symbol, minting coins with it and adopting it as his seal of office (Rezachevici 1999, 3). However, by the time Dracula sought power, a sense of malfeasance became attached to the surname through its homophonic similarity with the Romanian term for devil (Revachevici 1999, 4). Enemies and contenders of Dracula were quick to assert the connection, such as Dan III of Wallachia, who accused Dracula of, alternatively, being led by Satan or in fact being the Devil himself prior to his attempt to usurp Dracula in 1460 (Harmizachi 1911, 53; Tocilescu 1931, 71–72). Romanian medievalist Constantin Rezachevici claims that Dracula never took up the draconic heraldry of his father, but since the elder Dracul heightened the visibility of the Order of the Dragon, it became noteworthy enough to finds its way to Stoker's attention centuries later (1999, 4). Stoker's notes themselves reveal this via a lone sentence describing "Dracula" as a Romanian noun meaning "devil" (Boylan 2014, 8). No impalements are mentioned, nor are any other historical references. The

historical Dracula thus inherits Satanic association through the dragon, and the bat has yet to make an appearance.

Similarly, many historical aspects of the real Dracula's life are absent from Stoker's novel. This is indicative of a long-standing dichotomy in vampire fiction as described by vampirologist Paul Barber, wherein mythical elements are preferred over historical documentation (1996). Folklorist Bacil Kirtley supports Barber's claim by delineating the historical elements of Stoker's novel, revealing Stoker's firm understanding of Eastern European folklore as it appears throughout Dracula (1956, 136–138). Specifically, Stoker's work cites Romanian beliefs in vampires characterised by their mastery of shapeshifting, so much so that they can become intangible shimmering beams of airborne light (Murgoci 321–345). Furthermore, Romanians claimed that the proximity of animals and objects near a freshly-dug grave could resurrect the corpse as a vampire, describing the bat as one of many animals bearing such power (Barber 1988, 33). These elements made their way into Stoker's text whereas allusions to historical aspects of the real Dracula are only tenuously related to fifteenth-century Romania (Kirtley 956, 136–137). Stoker makes no reference to the atrocities ascribed to Dracula as documented in fifteenth-century Slavish chronicles and Saxon pamphlets, implying Stoker's unfamiliarity with texts (Kirtley 1956, 133–134). This division between folklore and history is of utmost relevance in revealing a mindset among the Victorian English seeking to demonise deviance and outsiders without real-world substantiation. Moreover, this factor ultimately becomes significant to bats as they can easily represent otherness.

Otherness, of course, is pertinent to Dracula in critical discourse. Literary scholar Ken Gelder asserts the fear of Stoker's fictional Dracula as a signifier of the Victorian distaste for diversity, particularly that of intermingling with Eastern Europeans (1994, 11–12). Stoker all but announces this cultural anxiety in his descriptions of the Szgany people, noting their superstitious, non-religious customs flourishing in the lawless landscape of Hungary and Transylvania (47). Essentially, Dracula threatens England with reverse-colonisation by infiltrating Victorian society and spreading a cultural form of pestilence by proxy to Transylvanian customs and behaviours. In order to heighten the threat to Victorian stability, Stoker attached as many signifiers of dangerous otherness to Dracula as possible. Stephan Schaffrath positions Dracula as a signifier of chaos by virtue of the vampire's ability to inflict sexualization upon women, thus altering Victorian England's fixed gender roles (2002, 98). Additionally, Eszther Muskovits posits Dracula's interactions with Johnathan Harker while shaving as seething homosexual desire, which effectively allows Dracula generate gender fluidity and universally invert gender roles (2010, 4). Fundamentally, Dracula's menace is one of cultural multivalence, effectively embodying as many signifiers of cultural otherness as possible. Most importantly,

the vampire's congealed otherness is further weaponized through bloodborne transmission, effectively conflating cultural otherness and infectious disease.

Thus, Dracula becomes a composite of everything abhorrent to the Victorian English, semiotically recalling the hybrid dragons gnawing at the psyche of primaeval humanity and their ultimate assimilation into Satan as the ultimate composite of metaphysical evil, now rendered vampirically as a pestilent Romanian corpse. Of all the nocturnal animals under the vampire's sway, the bat is most associated with otherness—recalling both Pliny the Elder's ancient attribution of it as a hybrid of mouse and bird (Book 10, 81) as well as its Biblical categorization among the impure fowl (Deuteronomy 14:18; Leviticus 11:19). However, as previously discussed, bats themselves were no more ill-received than any other animal in the Mediaeval West. This would change in the nineteenth century as they became closely associated with non-Western countries in both Eastern Europe and the Americas through expedition and ethnography. For example, German folklorist Heinrich von Wlisocki describes the fear of bats in Eastern Europe as follows:

> *If a bat flies past humans, enemies speak of him as evil. If a bat flutters to the window of a hospital room, the patient soon dies. The bats often become entangled in the hair of a person, causing that person to die soon. In some places… it is believed that bats also suck the blood of sleeping people, especially virgins. If you build a stable, in some villages you bury a bat in the bottom and put some salt and bread under the lowest beams or bricks, as well as coals from an oven, to keep the witches away from the building. If you dream of bats, you will soon be at a loss* (Wlisocki 1893, 162).

Wlisocki's account is curious because true vampire bats are only located in Central and South America—no blood-drinking bat existed in Europe (Tuttle 2017, 1). This was a common error even among scientists, as described by bat expert Merlin Tuttle who outlines the erroneous history of identifying vampire bats by noting how early biologists named numerous genii *Vampyrops* and *Vampyressa* despite their herbivorous natures (2018, 1). One such example recalls antiquarian Charles Waterton's encounters with false vampire bats in 1891's Wanderings in South America. He notes their enormous 26-inch wingspan and proclivity to pick fruit from the trees, which he claimed to be attempts at feeding upon pollinating insects rather than consuming the fruit itself (135–136). Rather than direct observation, Waterton's means to identify a vampire bat was a leaf-like growth on the bat's nose (136). Curiously, Waterton regrets having never experienced a vampire attack in his lifetime:

> *I had often wished to have been once sucked by the vampire...There can be no pain in the operation, for the patient is always asleep when the vampire is sucking him; and for the loss of a few ounces of blood, that would be a trifle in the long run. Many a night have I slept with my foot out of the hammock to tempt this winged surgeon, expecting he would be there; but it was all in vain* (Waterton 1891, 138).

Despite Waterton's expectations of visits by large, vampiric bats, his emergence from South America unscathed suggests encounters with frugivorous megabats rather than true vampire bats. To wit, Waterton's vampiric attribution based on a bat's nose-leaf had been rectified within ten years of his publication, as demonstrated by Ernst Haeckel's illustrations of various bat species in *Kunstformen der Natur* (1899). Haeckel's compendium predominantly focuses on marine life, but one page is devoted solely to bat's faces, offering an insight as to the number of bats whose face bears the vampiric nose-leaf described by Waterton (Figure 7). Thus, Waterton misidentifies bats that would be recognized as distinctly herbivorous in the near future.

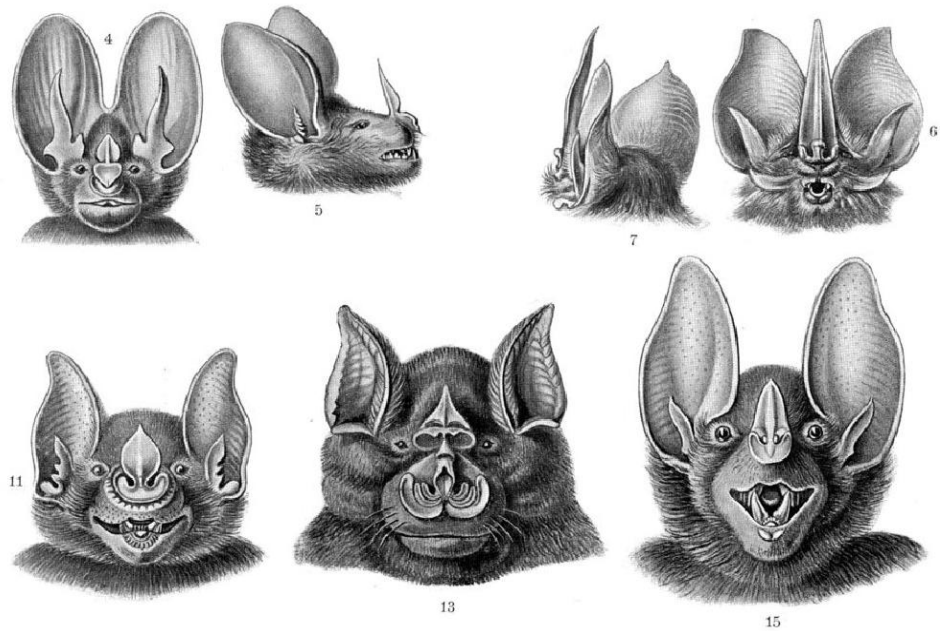

Figure 7. Harckel's diagrams indicate insectivorous leaf-nosed species named clockwise from top-left: lesser false vampire bat, big-eared woolly bat, Tome's sword-nosed bat, greater spear-nosed bat, greater horseshoe bat, and the spectral bat

However, by examining Haeckel's lithograph we can derive a sense of visual otherness just from the physiological representation of South American bats. Of all the depicted species, only two of them dwell outside of the Central and South Americas—the lesser false vampire bat and the greater horseshoe bat (Nowak 1999, 326–327; Piraccini 2016). Of those, only the greater horseshoe bat is found in Europe. Considering the nineteenth-century conflation of vampirism in bats with their nasal structure, the greater horseshoe bat's distinctive nose condemns it to vampirism through visual similarity alone. As such, Wlisocki's Eastern European blood-drinker may very likely have been the insectivorous greater horseshoe bat. This demonstrates how the nineteenth-century bat had been linked to otherness through physical similarities to bats from beyond Western Europe. Effectively, that which is not Western is thusly maligned, and Stoker's creation of Dracula as a congealed symbol of non-Victorian otherness effortlessly absorbs the bat as its chief bestial signifier.

Dragons and devils have since occupied their own phantasmagoric niche in cultural memory, growing apart symbolically with the passing of centuries and the accrual of meaning. John the Revelator's dragon, as the image of ultimate evil, was all but lost in the humanization of dragons following J.R.R. Tolkein's *The Hobbit*, and eventually the dragon became a complex, multivalent symbol in literatures of fantasy and speculative fiction (Weinstock 2014, 186–189). The hybridised dragons seen at the feet of Saint Margaret gave way to grand reptilian beasts both sleek and sublime. Meanwhile, devils, demons, and fallen angels remained relegated to the depths of hell as relatively static icons of damnation. Devils generally remain representations of evil, but the draconic memory of their evil wings fades as the dragon becomes humanised. And the bat—very real, and only indirectly harmful at its most dangerous—still flutters in the long shadows cast by parasitism, disease, and otherness. Since dragons were the first to shed their association with inherent evil, they bore far less commonality with the infernal than bats, with whom Satan began to share crooked wings. Just as history twisted the historical figure of Vlad Dracula from "Son of the Dragon" to "The Devil," so too did cultural semiosis mould bats into vampires.

6. Pestilent Otherness

Bats have only very recently been absolved of their status as disease-bearers, as recent studies prove that the proportion of carried viruses varies very little across all orders of birds and mammals (Mollentze and Streicker 2020). In other words, bats are no more or less capable of harbouring disease than common sparrows.

Unfortunately, bats remain emblematic of pestilence, and have done so throughout even the twentieth century (Olival et al, 2016). Tuttle recalls pandemic scares of the mid-2000s and early 2010s that touted bats as the primary hosts of coronaviruses hypothesised to be the progenitors of newer, human-contractible viruses (2018, 1). For instance, Carrie Arnold of *New Scientist* claimed in 2014 that Ebola, hepatitis C, SARS, and MERS were all derived from bats, accusing the animals "spreading contagion on night's wing." She refers to the work of Linfa Wang, the director of Duke University's Program in Emerging Infectious Diseases, who has long predicted that bats would cause another disease outbreak (2014, 1). However, virologist Chantal Reusken conducted experiments on bats to determine their ability to harbour MERS within a two-year span following the outbreaks in 2014, noting their ability to host the human-infectious strain of MERS despite their own bat-exclusive strain lacking the complete sequence necessary for human transmission (2016, 56). Essentially, the viruses bats are most accused of bearing are sufficient to infect themselves and similar animals, but not humans. In fact, further scientific research established that dromedary camels are a significant vector for human transmissions of MERS rather than bats (2016, 59). Consequently, Tuttle faults the sensationalist coverage of bats for delaying and overshadowing Reusken's discovery (2018, 1–2). Tuttle also recalls similar incidents occurring throughout the American rabies scare in the 1970s, resulting in exaggerated coverage of pestilent rabid bats influencing the U.S. Centres for Disease Control to attempt mass culls of bats by poisoning their habitats with the insecticide DDT (2017, 1). In addition to undermining conservation efforts, the endeavour caused great ecological damage and exposed the toxin to the public (Barclay et al 1980; Tuttle 2017, 1).

Yet this kind of reaction to the inference of bats as vectors for disease is no recent phenomenon. In a 1955 survey of Eastern Mexican bats, biologist Walter Dalquest isolates vampire bats as a dire threat to humans and cattle alike, devoting multiple paragraphs to the most effective and ineffective means of killing bats—both vampire and otherwise (80–81, 86–87). Dalquest maintains this stance despite admitting that neither he nor anyone on his team were attacked by vampire bats during the research period, and that locals emphatically refuted his claims despite evidence of vampire bat bites on children and cattle (82). Evidently, the Mexican people were far quicker to blame the bite-marks on bruja—witches—than on vampire bats (82). The reticence of Mexican culture to ascribe malice to bats implies the rarity in which the animals posed a palpable threat to their society, likening any instance of human-bat interaction as a sorcerous aberration.

In the Western eye, bats have retained their symbolic threat of bloodborne violence in cultural memory despite a recorded history of non-aggression. Even in 2020 the cultural memory of the dangerous bat remains potent. Just as Wang predicted in 2014, bats are once again central to the discourse of mass pestilence

(Arnold 2014, 1). The COVID–19 pandemic demonstrates history's proclivity in repeating itself, since the discovery of bat-exclusive coronaviruses closely related to COVID–19 effectively elevates bats as the primary culprit in causing global outbreak despite scientists being currently unaware of how such a zoonotic virus can transmit from bat to human without any intermediating species (Fenton et al, 2020; Sun et al 2020). At the time of this writing, pangolins appear to be a primary transmitter not only for carrying a closely-related coronavirus of their own (Sun et al, 2020), but also due to their long-time popularity and sustained prevalence in the Southeast Asian illegal animal trade for their body parts, which are consumed as food in addition to their value in Eastern Asian folk medicine (Xu 2016, 1–2). In fact, the pangolin trade has been so fervent that the Endangered Species (Import and Export) Act was amended in 2006 to enact stricter penalties for pangolin smuggling (Yap 2008, 18).

Unfortunately, the same way sensational media coverage delayed scientific progress in identifying camels as reservoirs for MER outbreaks in 2014, bats are at the forefront of COVID–19 discourse while pangolins are largely relegated exclusively to scientific texts that may not be able to reach wider audiences. In its place, images of a dead bat floating in a bowl of broth proliferate Western media (Marsh 2020) while musician Ozzy Osbourne's son Jack mockingly vows revenge on bats if COVID–19 reaches the Osbourne household (Moniuszko 2020). Symbolically, the bat is once again touted as an emblem of otherness welded to fallacious interpretations of Non-Western culture as barbaric, and of a virulent in its malignance that it offends even the self-appointed deviants of Western pop-culture.

7. Conclusion

Essentially, modern and postmodern interpretations have been far more cruel to bats than those of the Middle Ages. Well before bats were considered harbingers of doom and disease, they were strange little creatures whose significance was their affection for one other. As Saint Basil recounts in *The Hexaemeron*, "what natural love bats have for each other! How they interlace like a chain and hang the one upon the other! A very rare spectacle among men, who for the greater part prefer individual and private life to the union of common life (Homily 8, 7:9–14)." Linking bats—vampire and otherwise—to our contemporary cultural climate, Tuttle offers an updated interpretation of Saint Basil's sentiment from a scientific perspective:

> *Removed from our prejudice, even the common vampire [bat] is a remarkably altruistic and sophisticated animal. It is one of the world's relatively few mammals known to adopt orphans and care for unrelated individuals, and it has been kept by laboratory scientists as an intelligent and gentle pet* (Tuttle 2018, 5).

Effectively, that which is not Western is thus maligned. In its symbolic flight from the humbled bald mouse into demonic proximity through linguistic invention during the Italian Renaissance, the bat has accrued myriad unpleasant associations that situate it as a keystone image in the nineteenth-century imagination. Readers of contemporaneous gothic literature thus expect the otherwise obscure vampires to sprout bat-like wings. Stoker's fictionalised Dracula bears much of the credit here, as his transformation into a bat cements him as a symbol of non-Victorian otherness that effortlessly absorbs the bat as its chief signifier. The vampire's weaponization of pestilent otherness through cultural and bloodborne transfusion is consequently forced upon the bat, whose wings are historically less dark and terrible than they are diminutive and bald. The vampire essentially welds itself to the image of the bat, elevating the creature as its primary visual signifier in a uniquely parasitic fashion echoing the pestilent threat of the vampire itself. Ironically, all the same malignancies—biological, cultural, or otherwise—associated with the literary vampire affect bats in the same way they affect humanity.

References

A.Y. 1827. "Pepopukin in Corsica." In *The Stanley Tales, Original and Select,* Volume 1, ed. by Ambrose Martin. London: Thomas Hurst and Co.

Alighieri, Dante. 1996. *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, trans. by Steven Botterill. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Alighieri, Dante. 2003. *The Divine Comedy, Selected Cantos: A Dual-Language Book*, trans. by Stanley Appelbaum. Mineola: Dover Publications.

Arnold, Carrie. 2014. "Reservoir Bats: Spreading Contagion on Night's Wing." *New Scientist*. https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg22129550-700-reservoir-bats-spreading-contagion-on-nights-wings/

Barber, Paul. 1988. *Vampires, Burial, and Death: Folklore and Reality*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Barber, Paul. 1996. "Staking Claims: The Vampires of Folklore and Fiction." *Skeptical Inquirer* 20 (2): 41–44.

Barber, Richard. 2018. *Bestiary: Being an English Version of the Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Bodley 764, with All the Original Miniatures Reproduced in Facsimile*. Martlesham: Boydell Press.

Barclay, R.M.R. et al. 1980. "Comparison of Methods Used for Controlling Bats in Buildings." *The Journal of Wildlife Management* 44 (2): 502–506.

Bennet, Carol. 2015. *Lincoln Cathedral Misericord Seats*. Lincoln: Lincoln Cathedral.

Boylan, Andy. 2014. “Stoker and the Bat.” *Vamped*. https://vamped.org/2014/04/05/stoker-bat/

Cohen, Simona. 2008. *Animals as Disguised Symbols in Renaissance Art*. Leiden: Brill.

Dalquest, Walter. 1955. “Natural History of the Vampire Bats of Eastern Mexico.” *The American Midland Naturalist* 53 (1): 79–87.

Dumas, Alexandre. 2004. *The Return of Lord Ruthven*. Tarzana: Black Coat Press.

Engels, Friedrich. 2010. *The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844*, trans. by Florence Kelley Wischnewetzky. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fenton, Brock et al. 2020. “COVID-19 and Threats to Bats.” *FACETS* 5: 349–352.

Florio, John. 1695. *A Dictionary Italian and English: Formerly Compiled by John Florio, and Since his Last Edition, Anno 1611, Augmented by Himselfe in His Life Time, with Many Thousand Words and Thuscan Phrases*. London: T. Warren.

Gelder, Ken. 1994. *Reading the Vampire*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Haeckel, Ernst. 1899. *Kunstformen der Natur* [Art Forms in Nature]. Leipzig: Verlag des Bibliographischen Instituts.

Johansen, Birgitta. 1996. “The Transformative Dragon: The Construction of Social Identity and the Use of Metaphors During the Nordic Iron Age.” *Current Swedish Archaeology* 4: 83–102.

Jones, David. 2002. *An Instinct for Dragons*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Khalifa-Gueta, Sharon. 2018. “The Evolution of the Western Dragon.” *Athens Journal of Mediterranean Studies* 4 (4): 265–290.

Kingston, William H.G. 2011. “The Vampire: Or Pedro Pacheco and the Bruxa.” In *Vintage Vampire Stories*, ed. by Robert Eighteen-Bisang and Richard Dalby, 9–18. New York: Skyhorse Publishing.

Kinoshita, Sharon and Peggy McCracken. 2014. *Marie de France: A Critical Companion*. Martlesham: Boydell Press.

Kirtley, Bacil. 1956. “‘Dracula,’ the Monastic Chronicles and Slavic Folklore.” *Midwest Folklore* 6 (3): 133–139.

Lewis, Charlton. 1890. *An Elementary Latin Dictionary*. New York: American Book Company.

Livanos, Christopher. 2009. “Dante’s Monsters: Nature and Evil in the ‘Commedia.’” *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society* 127: 81–92.

Lorenzi, Lorenzo. 2006. *Devils in Art: Florence from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance*. Florence: Centro Di.

The Luttrell Psalter. 1325–1340. The British Library, Add MS 42130.

Marie de France. *Fables*. 1998 (ed. by Charles Brucker). Leuven: Peeters Publishers.

Marsh, Calum. 2020. “How the Myths Surrounding Bat Soup Came to Represent our Collective Fear and Confusion Over COVID–19.” *National Post*. https://nationalpost.com/life/covid-19-bat-soup

Marx, Karl. 2019. *Capital: A Critique of Economic Theory.* Volume One. Mineola: Dover Publications.

Melton, Gordon J. 2010. *The Vampire Book: The Encyclopedia of the Undead*. Canton: Visible Ink Press.

Missale et Horae ad Usum Fratrum Minorum. 1301–1400. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Latin 757, fol. 357v.

Mollentze, Nardus and Daniel G. Streicker. 2020. "Viral Zoonotic Risk is Homogenous Among Taxonomic Orders of Mammalian and Avian Reservoir Hosts." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 117 (17): 9423–9430.

Moniuszko, Sara. 2020. "Ozzy Osbourne's Son Jack Says He Won't Let 'A Disease Started by Bats' Hurt his Father." *USA Today*. https://eu.usatoday.com/story/entertainment/celebrities/2020/05/01/ozzy-osbourne-son-jack-wont-let-coronavirus-hurt-his-dad/3064197001/

Murgoci, Agnes. 1926. "The Vampire in Roumania." *Folklore* 37 (4): 320–349.

Muskovits, Eszter. 2010. "The Threat of Otherness in Bram Stoker's Dracula." *TRANS*-10: 1–11.

Nowak, Ronald. 1999. *Walker's Mammals of the World,* Vol 1. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Olival, K. et al. 2016. "Host and Viral Traits Predict Zoonotic Spillover from Mammals." *Nature* 546 (7660): 175–190.

Piraccini, R. 2023. "Rhinolophus Ferrumequinum." *The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.* https://www.iucnredlist.org/

Plesch, Véronique. 2002. "Not Only Against Jews: Antisemitic Iconography and its Functions at La Brigue." *Studies in Iconography* 23: 137–181.

Pliny the Elder. 1855. *Naturalis Historia*. Eds. John Bostock and Thomas Riley. https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Plin.+Nat.+toc

Reusken, Chantal B.E.M. et al. 2016. "Cross Host Transmission in the Emergence of MERS Coronavirus." *Current Opinion in Virology* 16: 55–62.

Rezachevici, Constantin. 1999. "From the Order of the Dragon to Dracula." *Journal of Dracula Studies* 1: 1–5.

Rydell, Jens et al. 2018. "Cimetière du Père-Lachaise: Bats and Vampires in French Romanticism." *Journal of Bat Research and Conservation* 11 (1): 83–91.

Saint Basil the Great. 370. *The Hexaemeron*. New Advent. https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/32018.htm

Schaffrath, Stephan. 2002. "Order-Versus-Chaos Dichotomy in Bram Stoker's Dracula." *Extrapolation* 43 (1): 98–112.

Stoker, Bram. 2008. *The New Annotated Dracula*, (ed. by Leslie S. Klinger). New York: W.W. Norton.

Sun, Jiumeng et al. 2020. “COVID-19: Epidemiology, Evolution, and Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives.” *Trends in Molecular Medicine* 26 (5): 483–495.

Tocilescu, Grigore George. 1931. *534 Documente Istorice Slavo-Române din Țara Românească și Moldova: Privitoare la Legăturile cu Ardealul, 1346–1603* [534 Slavic-Romanian Historical Documents from Wallachia and Moldova: Looking at the Transylvanian Connections]. Bucharest: Cartea Românească.

Tuttle, Merlin. 2017. “Introduction to the Natural History of Vampire Bats.” In *Natural History of Vampire Bats*, ed. by Arthur M. Greenhall, 1–5. Abingdon: Routledge.

Tuttle, Merlin. 2018. “Fear of Bats and its Consequences.” *Journal of Bat Research and Conservation* 10 (1): 1–4.

Voltaire, François-Marie Arouet. 1784. “Vampires.” *Oeuvres Complètes de Voltaire* 43: 386–392.

Waterton, Charles. 1891. *Wanderings in South America*. London: Cassel and Company Ltd.

Weinstock, Jeffrey Andrew. 2014. *The Ashgate Encyclopedia of Literary and Cinematic Monsters*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing.

Wlisocki, Heinrich von. 1893. *Volksglaube und Volksbrauch der Siebenburger Sachsen* [Popular Beliefs and Customs of the Transylvanian Saxons]. Berlin: Emil Felber.

Xu, Ling, et al. 2016. “An Overview of Pangolin Trade in China.” Cambridge: *TRAFFIC International.* https://www.traffic.org/publications/reports/pangolin-trade-in-china/

Yap, Janice. 2009. “Trade in Pangolin.” In *Proceedings of the Workshop on Trade and Conservation of Pangolins Native to South and Southeast Asia: 30 June–2 July 2008, Singapore Zoo*, ed. by S. Panel and S.Y. Chin, 18–20. Petaling Jaya: TRAFFIC Southeast Asia.

Vocabolario Italiano & Inglese, a dictionary Italian & English formerly compiled by John Florio, and since his last edition, Anno 1611, augmented by ... thousand words, and Thuscan phrases (1659) **Giovanni Torriano** (author)