

## **Sucking the 'Blood' of Shakespeare: Bram Stoker's Appropriation Of Shakespearean Legacy in *Dracula* (1897)**

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### **Abstract**

E.J Clery in "The genesis of 'Gothic' fiction" has famously proclaimed that "scratch the surface of any Gothic fiction and the debt to Shakespeare will be there" (30). Although Clery has made this comment in her discussion of the eighteenth-century Gothic fictions in general, a discrete scratching of the textual and generic surface of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) leads the readers to unmask the writer's profound indebtedness to the great Elizabethan dramatist. The present essay endeavours to examine the degree of influence that William Shakespeare exerted on the text *Dracula* which, through its numerous adaptation and appropriation in the popular media, has turned Count Dracula into a universally recognized cultural icon of this century.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, Gothic, textual, generic, adaptation, appropriation, icon

Horace Walpole in his preface to the second edition of *The Castle of Otranto*, notoriously subtitled as 'a Gothic story', overtly declared that "The great master of nature, Shakespeare, was the model I copied" (66). Despite having created a novel which was an unprecedented blending of ancient and modern romance, Walpole maintained in the same preface that he sheltered his own 'daring' under the brightest dramatic genius of his country and acknowledged to have imitated Shakespeare's 'masterly pattern' in crafting his work. However, following Walpole, a host of Gothic novelists in order to frame their narratives of terror and horror avowedly chose Shakespeare as their model and employed not only quotations and allusions borrowed directly from the Shakespearean oeuvre but also used techniques, devices, motifs and themes which had successfully been dramatized by the Elizabethan playwright more than a century ago. That the Gothic writers of the eighteenth century chose Shakespeare as their immediate predecessor is hardly surprising. For, on one hand, Shakespeare's chequered dramatic realm provided them with suitable material to exploit in their grim tales of evil and, on the other hand, they sought to utilize the cult of the 'National Bard' in defence of

their radical literary adventure in a Neo-classical age. Evidently, the Gothic romances of Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, Mathew Lewis, Clara Reeve, Sophia Lee et al are seen to be replete with epigraphs extracted from Shakespeare's poetry. Moreover, the dark and sombre supernatural atmosphere, the ambiguous and ambivalent nature of the hero-villain, the grisly and macabre settings infested with ghosts, corpses, witches and goblins, the intricate plots of murder, bloodshed and rape and the over powering thematic concerns of incestuous relationship, mistaken identity or avenging the assassination of a father all of these ostensibly stem from the vast and fertile world of Shakespeare's drama.

Kelley Hurley in her *The Gothic Body* (1996) explains the Gothic as "an instrumental genre, re-emerging cyclically, at periods of cultural stress, to negotiate the anxieties that accompany social and epistemological transformations and crises" (5). After the emergence and effulgence of the Gothic fiction amidst the late eighteenth century cultural turmoil, it suffered a transient decline in popularity only to resuscitate in the volatile decades of the late nineteenth century fin de siècle. Shakespeare however reserved his centrality in the changed world of the Victorian Gothic fiction especially in such popular writings as Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). Gary Taylor observes that in the nineteenth century Shakespeare became "more relevant to the cultural domain and the objects of more kinds of cultural activity. Shakespeare's reputation, like Britain itself, entered a period of expansion and diversification" (qtd. in Wyne 132). Abraham Bram Stoker, an Irish author, theatre critic and manager of the Lyceum Theatre, is commonly known to have gone through Edward Dowden's radical reinvention of Shakespeare in his *Shakspeare: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art* (1875). Stoker also highly appreciated Henry Irving's spectacular production of *Hamlet* in 1876 at the Theatre Royale. Irving reproduced *Macbeth* twice at the Lyceum theatre first in 1875 and then in 1888. He also produced Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* in 1896. However, Irving's interpretation of Shakespeare's plays, particularly of *Macbeth*, is thought to have profoundly influenced Stoker's Gothic conception behind the creation of *Dracula* (Wyne 130).

The sub-plot of Seward/ Renfield, for instance, has obvious echoes of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Dale Townshend in his essay "Gothic Shakespeare", incorporated in the book *A New Companion to Gothic* (2012) edited by David Punter, has pointed out Seward's Lear-like conviction (51) in his uttering "that way madness lies" (Stoker 263). Christy Desmet argues that Renfield's demeanour as "a zoophagous (life-eating) maniac" (Stoker 103) "involves the horrid inversion and literalization of Gloucester's lines from Act IV, scene I in *King Lear*: 'as flies to wanton boys, are we to th' gods/ They kill us for their sport'" (qtd. in Townshend 51). Stoker himself once acknowledged that of all the plays that he had discussed with Henry Irving *Macbeth* interested him the most (Wyne 142). Lucy Westerna's character, especially her somnambulistic behaviour as a vampire, has been drawn to a large extent upon Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth. In fact, the major women characters of the novel bear close resemblance with the well-known Shakespearean heroines like Desdemona from *Othello* or Ophelia from *Hamlet*. Townshend has mentioned that "Lady Macbeth and Ophelia furnished Stoker with two competing, apparently mutually exclusive models of femininity, aspects of which are identifiable behind most of the representations of women in the novel" (52). Christy Desmet, however, is of the opinion that Stoker composed *Dracula* keeping in his mind the versatility of the actress Ellen Terry,

who had been famous for her passionate acting of Lady Macbeth and Ophelia in those days (qtd. in Townshend 53).

Bram Stoker employs ample quotations from Shakespeare's plays to emphasise the feeling of sublime terror in the narrative of his magnum opus. Jonathan Harker's direct reference to Hamlet in his comment "this diary seems horribly like the beginning of the 'Arabian Night' for everything has to break off at cock crow- or like the ghost of Hamlet's father" (Stoker 61) is suggestive of the similarity between the two characters. Hamlet's famous speech "what a piece of work is man" from Act ii, scene ii, is provocatively reframed in these lines of the novel "What manner of man is this . . . or what manner of creature is it in the semblance of man?" (Stoker 66). Harker like the Shakespearean tragic hero takes recourse to scribbling in order to ward off horrific events surrounding him as he perceives: "Up to now I never quite know what Shakespeare meant when he made Hamlet say 'My tablets! Quick, my tablets! 'tis meet that I put it down etc.'" for now, feeling as though my own brain were unhinged or as if the shock had come which must end in its undoing, I turn to my diary for repose. The habit of entering accurately must help to soothe me" (Stoker 68). Besides, the name of Van Helsing, the vampire-hunter doctor in Stoker's novel also has a subtle allusion to that Shakespearean tragedy. Helsing, the name, is generally considered to have originated from the name of Hamlet's castle, Elsinore- Helsingor or the island of Helsing. Therefore, it would not be exaggerating to deem Stoker's *Dracula* as a late-Victorian rewriting of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

## Conclusion

Julie Sanders in her celebrated book *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2006) describes adaptation and appropriation as the two distinct manifestations of intertextuality the study of which essentially takes interest in "how art creates art or how literature is made by literature"(1). Julie observes "An adaptation signals a relationship with an informing source text or original" whereas "Appropriation frequently affects more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain" (26). Over the years both the classics i.e. *Dracula* and Shakespeare's plays have separately been adapted and appropriated within the context of contemporary culture. But since the advent of the twenty first century, we witness Shakespearean oeuvre being profusely invoked to unfold the horror of the Draculas, vampires or zombies in popular fictions, television series, films, videogames and cyberspace. Undeniably this phenomenon itself opens up a fertile terrain of academic study.

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