

Literary Heritage of *The Giaour*

The film *The Giaour* is a modern interpretation of Lord Byron's 1813 poem. In the poem's narrative, the beautiful harem slave Leila is drowned as an adulteress. Her lover, the Giaour ("the infidel") kills her master Hassan in revenge, and is in turn cursed to live forever on the blood of his fellow humans.

In 1813 the best-selling poem cemented Byron's reputation and inspired, via John Polidori's *The Vampyre*, the vampire genre of gothic fiction that would later yield *Dracula* (1897). Yet Leila, caught between the two vocal male protagonists and their lethal passion, remains strangely bloodless, dying without uttering a word.

What resolved the mystery for us was a paper by Professor Rebecca Nesvet (University of Wisconsin, Green Bay) that argued that Leila is the Giaour himself dressed as a woman – the theme Byron would revisit in *Don Juan*. At the height of British homophobia, Byron evaded censure by setting his tale in a harem to exploit the Orientalist stereotypes: the cruel harem master and a silent female slave.

At least that was his plan. The reality was not so smooth.

During his Grand Tour of the Levant (1809–11), Byron was a guest of Ali Pasha, the Ottoman governor of Ioannina (Epirus). Both Ali (then in his 70s) and his oldest son, Veli Pasha (39), plied the young poet with gifts and invitations to hunts and banquets. Veli, who had commanded forces against Souliotes, Septinsular Republic, and Serbian rebels, was particularly demonstrative. This was probably the first time the young lord had allowed himself to enjoy attentions of powerful, older men.

Returning to England in 1812, Byron published the first two cantos of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. He then followed its success with *The Giaour* (1813), the first of his "Turkish Tales", inspired by events and impressions of his Grand Tour. Although *The Giaour* became a bestseller, Byron began revising the poem, extending it to 1,332 lines (more than three times its original length) over seven subsequent editions.

The poet then left Lady Caroline Lamb, courted and married Annabella Milbanke, fathered a daughter, had an affair with his half-sister Augusta, and separated from his wife, all the while maintaining his prodigious output. Losing the custody of his daughter (a rare occurrence in those patriarchal times) he left England, never to return. Byron biographer Benita Eisler suggests he suffered a breakdown. Queer studies pioneer Louis Crompton characterized these activities as frenetic; motivated by the need to deny his own homosexuality. We suspect another poem, published during Byron's absence, was to blame.

After the publication of *The Giaour*, someone in Byron's circle must have suggested he read a poem by John Stagg: "The Vampyre" (1810). Byron recognized in Stagg's poem both the Oriental monster that entered the European consciousness via former Ottoman territories, where it was believed converts to Islam would become vampires; and the poem's undeniable homoeroticism. He panicked: he had himself come face to face with the homosexual vampire, figuratively speaking.

In 1816, Mary Godwin and Percy Bysshe Shelley visited Byron at his rented villa in Geneva. In that wet and cold summer, a contest was proposed: to see who could write the best tale of horror. Mary began her masterpiece *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus*; Shelley did not write anything. Byron wrote one chapter of *Fragment of a Novel* and talked about his vampiric protagonist. And John Polidori, Byron's personal physician, was there to listen.

In 1819, Polidori published *The Vampyre*, using Stagg's spelling. To further annoy his former employer, Polidori borrowed the name Ruthven for the titular monster, from the thinly-disguised Byron figure in Lady Caroline Lamb's novel *Glenarvon* (1816). This penny dreadful, initially marketed under Byron's name, sold well, but failed to make Polidori rich, and the physician-turned-author killed himself.

The mid-19th century would see the vampire rise to become a fixture in popular entertainment. Two more notable queer vampires would join the genre: Sheridan Le Fanu's lesbian vampire Carmilla (1872), and Oscar Wilde's omnivorous, non-blood drinking variant Dorian Gray (1891), before Bram Stoker, another Irishman, created the unambiguously heteronormative Dracula, who immigrated to London with his harem of three Brides to unleash the terror of foreign pestilence.

— Rika Ohara (October 2020, Los Angeles)