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## Keeping the Faith: Catholicism in *Dracula* and its Adaptations

D. Bruno Starrs

Despite the fact that Irishman Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) is arguably replete with Catholic allegory, little critical attention has been paid to its pro-Catholic theme. Nor does any stage or screen adaptation faithfully foreground the text's Catholicism. The novel's religious analogy is obvious: in the most basic of his many perversions of Catholic lore, Count Dracula is the figurative anti-Christ who promises eternal life through the ingestion not of sacramental wine representing the blood of Christ, but of actual human blood.

In analyzing Stoker's characterization of his eponymous star, both Ken Gelder and Judith Halberstam argue the Count is anti-semitically modeled on stereotypical images of blood-sucking, baby-stealing Jews (Gelder 13, Halberstam 248). Clive Leatherdale comments on its Catholic allegory and rationalizes it as a response to the weakening hold of creationism in the face of Charles Darwin's evolutionism: "The book offers an exercise in syllogistic logic: a supposedly immortal being is destroyed by the defenders of Christ, armed above all with a faith in God – the conclusion therefore follows that God exists" (177). In addition to combating semitism and evolutionism Leatherdale suggests an even more political role for the anti-Christ when he tentatively asks: "Are Harker and Seward [both Englishmen and the two most obviously Protestant of the protagonists] converted to the Catholic faith once they discover its tangible power? Perhaps it's as well that Stoker, likewise a confirmed Protestant, chose not to confront the issue" (185). Or did Stoker, rather than shirking the political issue and despite claiming to be a Protestant while he lived a high-profile life in England's theatre circles, in fact, subtly thematicize it? Writing the biography of Stoker, David Glover notes: "Indeed, it is essential to see that the anxieties that animate these novels are inextricably bound up with the most deeply rooted dilemmas facing late Victorian culture" (15). Writing at the time of the Land Acts which stripped the landlords of their power, Stoker was only too aware of the decline of the Anglo-Irish gentry. Did he cautiously write a novel promoting the proselytization of Protestants to Catholicism in an era when to do so might be dangerous to an Irishman's health and/or freedom? One reading of *Dracula* indeed suggests that its author was a closet Catholic cloaking his dangerous views in a relatively safe literary medium.

Of course, this argument is difficult to support. Nowhere in the novel does Stoker use the labels "Catholic" or "Protestant." Yet the religious affiliation of most characters is certainly suggested:

i) Dr. Abraham Van Helsing is an open-minded Dutch savant, who is not deterred by rational scepticism when he is faced with the threat of vampirism, and proceeds to combat said threat by combining nineteenth-century medical and scientific knowledge with vampirological lore drawn from superstition and ancient beliefs about the use of garlic, stakes, the crucifix, the Host and the Wafer. Stoker does not over-determine Van Helsing's specific religion: no indication of his Catholicism is given until chapter 13, when he removes from his neck a small, gold crucifix which he places on the lips of the deceased Lucy.

ii) Jonathan Harker proclaims himself an English Churchman, which basically means Anglican or Protestant. On two occasions he is surprisingly respectful to the followers of the Catholic Church because, apparently, of the strength of their convictions. The first time when he is passing through the villages en route to Transylvania, the recipient of much fearful crossing of chests from villagers and travelers recalls:

She then rose and dried her eyes, and taking a crucifix from her neck offered it to me. I did not know what to do, for, as an English Churchman, I have been taught to regard such things as in some measure idolatrous, and yet it seemed so ungracious to refuse an old lady meaning so well and in such a state of mind. (Stoker, *Dracula* 9)

While indicating his Church of England and Protestant affiliation and discomfited by the icon, Harker nevertheless accepts it graciously. His journey of acceptance of and faith in the Catholic sacraments is foreshadowed by his obvious social and religious tolerance. During the mirror scene at the castle he begins to regard the crucifix as his defence from the advances of Dracula (35) and it's not very long before he comments:

Bless that good, good woman who hung the crucifix round my neck! For it is a comfort and a strength to me whenever I touch it. It is odd that a thing which I have been taught to regard with disfavour and as idolatrous should in a time of loneliness and trouble be of help. Is it that there is something in the essence of the thing itself, or that it is a medium, a tangible help, in conveying memories of sympathy and comfort? Some time, if it may be, I must examine this matter and try to make up my mind about it. (38)

The other occasion is when Van Helsing flippantly introduces the Holy Wafer:

“The Host. I brought it from Amsterdam. I have an Indulgence.” It was an answer that appalled the most sceptical of us, and we felt individually that in the presence of such earnest purpose as the Professor's, a purpose which could thus use the to him most sacred of things, it was impossible to distrust. In respectful silence we took the places assigned to us. (255)

Despite Van Helsing's unusual use of the Indulgence (they're given only as a dissolution of past sins, not intended sins), Harker is awestruck by the apparent power of the Catholic Church's sacraments against the Count. Later, when expecting a confrontation with Dracula, Harker is totally convinced and says while grasping his crucifix and gun “We each held ready to use our various armaments, the spiritual in the left hand, the mortal in the right” (362). Harker has made up his mind about it.

iii) Dr. Seward's self-identification as an Englishman suggests that he, like Harker, is also Protestant.

iv) Renfield's religion is difficult to determine, but his catchcry “The blood is the life” (181) is a quotation from Deuteronomy 12:23. The metaphoric significance of his role has Catholic resonance. Through Mina Harker, Renfield symbolically turns from blood-eating to blood-letting. He lures Dracula into his cell and attempts to kill Mina's attacker but loses his own life instead. In a Catholic analogy, the solution to blood-lust is shown to be self-sacrifice.

v) As with Renfield, Arthur Holmwood's religion is not specified, but his surname associates him with the holly, which with its crimson berries and points, permits an identification with the crucified Jesus Christ, his head bloody from the crown of thorns (see Mark 15:17). Holmwood's staking of Lucy and his former gift of a blood transfusion is emblematic of Christ's self-offering on the cross whence blood gushed from his pierced side (see John 19:34).

vi) Killed by a blow to his left side, Quincey Morris assumes the role of Christ dying on the cross, to cancel out the force of the anti-Christ that is Dracula. Whereas Dracula unnaturally transcends death through endless rebirth, the Jesus-like death of Morris leads to a form of *spiritual* rebirth. He is resurrected a year later in the shape of Mina and Jonathan's baby.

vii) While the Ascendant Protestant woman Lucy is destroyed by Dracula, middle class Mina, with her Irish maiden name Murray and her Irish connections, survives. In a gesture of marialotry, Mina is cast in the role of the Blessed Mother by the Catholic Van Helsing, and he does so in the process of announcing her exclusion from the activities of the vampire-hunting party: “You must be our star and our hope, and we shall act all the more free that you are not in the danger, such as we are” (Stoker, *Dracula* 293). These

words endow Mina with the iconic attributes of that merciful patron of voyagers: “Mary, Star of the Sea.” Perhaps Mina is Jonathan’s Mary, to share his journey from Protestantism to Catholicism?

Apart from their own individual journeys of discovery there are group dynamics to be considered. Kellie Wixson has made another case for *Dracula* to be seen as proseletyzing propaganda, but can’t quite bring herself to say it in as many words. As the story progresses, the sharing of text and other collaborative efforts suggests to Wixson that the group consisting of Harker, Seward, Morris, Godalming and Mina is becoming less Protestant and more Catholic. Set with the task of creating a common body of knowledge and led by the charismatic and forceful Van Helsing, the party, of whom the Protestants amongst probably shared the belief that individual testimony has a special religious value, would find itself working towards a group testimonial, guided by Catholic (and superstitious) principles. Wixson notes: “Harker returns to Transylvania under conditions which are the complete opposite of those of his first trip – instead of being alone, unsure, and Protestant, he is now in a group, experienced, and quasi-Catholic” (254).

Both Harker and Seward are apparently converted to Catholicism: by the end of the book Harker no longer sees crucifixes, rosary beads and holy wafers as idolatrous and Seward, who once quipped “*Omnia Romae venalia sunt*” (Stoker, *Dracula* 80) (“everything in Rome was up for sale”) admits to experiencing “a mighty power fly along my arm” (364) when he confronts Dracula with a cross. However, avoiding controversy and censure, Stoker created the eschatological warriors not as Irish supermen but rather as a Catholic Dutchman and his converted multi-national believers in the powers of the crucifix and the Host. Unlike fellow Irishman and author, Catholic James Joyce, Stoker must have been a cautious and wary opposer to the “metrocolonial” political climate enforced by the Anglo-Protestant settlers of Ireland (Valente 3). Valente seems to be suggesting Stoker was rejecting the “bitter subjugation” (4) of his homeland, but in the seemingly innocuous form of a trans-continental Gothic novel. Caught between the might of the British Empire and the increasing strength of the Irish, it is perhaps understandable why Stoker exercised caution. Willard Potts cites another Irishman, John Eglinton:

In 1905 [he] complained that a main canon of the writers forming what is now called the “literary revival” seemed to be that they must not give offence by any too direct utterance on the central problem of Irish life [ ... ] by which Eglinton meant religious relations between Irish Protestants and Catholics. (11)

It is known that Stoker gave little offence, even when he railed against so-called “degenerate writers” for not being good Christians and having “in their selfish greed tried to deprave where others had striven to elevate. In the language of the pulpit, they have ‘crucified Christ afresh’” (Stoker, “*Censorship*” 485), but it is not apparent whom he thought were the least degenerate Christian writers, Catholics or Protestants. His hesitation to clarify is understandable: few would deny the existence of an unfavorable climate for pro-Catholic writers in turn-of-the-century Britain and few would fail to appreciate the need for subtlety. Indeed, Stoker may have written an understated inversion of possibly the single most pivotal event in Anglo/Irish political history. Instead of a Protestant Dutchman, William III (later William of Orange), sailing across the seas to save England from the perils of Catholicism and from its Irish exponents, Stoker gives us a Catholic Dutchman again crossing the seas to save England, this time armed with the holy sacraments of Catholicism and, for that matter, the sectarian attributes of Irishness.

The final thrust in this analytic stake (forgive the pun!) perhaps lies in the fact that after the novel’s publication, Stoker’s wife Florence apparently converted to Catholicism. Film historian David J. Skal notes that Florence “found security in Catholicism, to which she converted in 1904, eight years before her husband’s death. She had been attracted by the pomp and theatricality of the Catholic ritual as it was practiced at the Brompton Oratory, one of the most sumptuous Catholic churches in England” (xi).

*Dracula* as pro-Catholic propaganda is curiously undeveloped by Leatherdale and glossed over elsewhere in the literature. However, Alison Milbank does come close when she seems to suggest that the novel is merely a clumsy Hibernian attempt to syncretically amalgamate the warring Irish Catholics and Anglo-Protestants: “Stoker used a demonic character to unite a disparate opposition. So, Dracula calls

forth a union of Protestant word and Catholic sacrament, figured as modern and ancient modes of communication” (21). I use the adjective “clumsy” in conceding with Valente that if syncretism was Stoker’s actual intention as it was with his earlier novel *The Snake’s Pass*, it was “an act of literary apprenticeship” (12); yet it possibly saved Stoker the vilification, and indeed imprisonment, some other Irish writers and activists were unable to avoid. In the novel, Harker is brought back to health in the Catholic hospital of St. Joseph and Ste. Mary in Budapest. Mina and he were married there under the auspices of a Protestant Chaplain of the English mission church, an event which gains significance as a symbolic attempt to syncretize the two faiths. But if Stoker was happy depicting Protestants and Catholics peacefully working together, one wonders why he included no contribution by expert practitioners of the Protestant faith to the destruction of Dracula.

Of course, as Jacques Derrida argues, no text survives deconstruction to a sole meaning or “transcendental signified.” But surely it remains the attentive adaptor’s duty to understand as many interpretations of his or her source work as may be suggested. This caveat is particularly relevant when one acknowledges that the overwhelming embracement of and ongoing enthusiasm for *Dracula* by Hollywood only began when a relatively simplistic theatrical adaptation by Hamilton Deane and John L. Balderston was staged nearly 30 years after the novel.<sup>1</sup> Deane and Balderston’s stage-play, embraced by Hollywood in 1931, apparently neglected the pro-Catholic theme for the sake of a succinct and entertaining production. To them, the proselytization of Protestants to Catholicism may have been a troublesome theme that simply got in the way of a good show. Or one might also argue that increasingly secular societal attitudes worldwide since the *fin de siècle* have seen writers ignorantly emphasize other aspects of the book in their unfaithful theatrical or cinematic adaptations. The battle between Protestantism and Catholicism is perhaps not as furious today in popular culture as it was in Stoker’s social and political milieu. But if the theatrical adaptor of *Dracula* aims for maximum faithfulness, then this theme should not be overlooked.

Is today’s movie-going world ready for a frank and faithful transposition of Stoker’s pro-Catholic theme? One recent Hollywood version of *Dracula* suggests it may be. *Van Helsing* (2004), written and directed by Stephen Sommers, is a loose, analogous adaptation of the stories of Dracula, The Wolfman, Frankenstein, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. It merely alludes to some key characters from the Stoker novel, however, simplifying them radically to permit as many action sequences as possible. Van Helsing, played by Hugh Jackman, is more a strapping “Indiana Jones” than an elderly European with a curious accent. Though his character Gabriel, apart from sharing a surname, bears little relation to Abraham Van Helsing in the diegesis of the novel, his motivation in *Van Helsing* is made clear: he is on a mission from a top-secret Holy Order of the Vatican. Rather than responding to an old friend to whom he owes a favour as the original Van Helsing did, Gabriel Van Helsing is summoned by a mysterious cabal supported by a basement full of monks committed to research and gadget-making. Like a nineteenth century 007, Van Helsing meets the leaders in their secret hideout before taking on his next brief. He is given unofficial permission to bend the rules, a nod to the Indulgence the literary Van Helsing is granted. Of course, the Protestant/Catholic divide has not gone away and in 2004 filmmakers are as sensitive as ever. This *Dracula* movie refrains from mentioning the “P” or “C” words but in a film with so thin a plot any edifice is plainly visible: Gabriel Van Helsing is saving the world from Dracula on behalf of the Catholic Church. It will be interesting to see, in the inevitable sequel to *Van Helsing*, if some more is shown of the secret Holy Order hidden deep within the cob-webbed catacombs of the Vatican that sends the Catholic superhero out on his good deeds. If such an adaptation so loosely based on the original acknowledges the pro-Catholic theme at all, then a more faithful version of *Dracula* might eventually be brave enough to foreground it.

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<sup>1</sup> Stoker, himself a theatre professional, wasted no time in staging the very first and arguably only faithful adaptation ever, as it involved no additional mediator/s. It was an apparently one-off “cut and pasted” version performed by the Lyceum players on the morning of May 18, 1897. This was a staged reading of *Dracula; or, The Undead*, ostensibly for copyright purposes. Unfortunately, the script of this inaugural 1897 performance does not bear out an emphasis on aims of either proselytization to Catholicism or syncretism between the faiths. For the text and details of the reading, see Sylvia Starshine.

Since Stoker's death the inventions of popular cinema and gimmick-laden stage devices (as commenced by his widow) have rapidly become the main concern as the writers and producers of Dracula stage-plays, musicals, films, theatre restaurants and even theme parks either deliberately or un-knowingly neglect the thematically important Catholic allegory in favor of cheesy comedy and cheap thrills. According to Geoffrey Wagner's 1975 "three modes of adaptation," these are not faithful "transpositional" adaptations but, rather, mere works of "commentary" or "analogy" (226). By excising the theme of pro-Catholicism they have made a significant comment about the theme's relevance and significance. Before Deane and Balderston's 1927 transmogrification of a disgusting, blood-sucking undead monster with foul breath and hairy palms into a sexually alluring and culturally refined opera-cape-wearing gentleman whom one would plausibly invite into one's English - and Protestant - drawing room, Count Dracula was arguably the anti-Christ who was particularly vulnerable to Catholic sacraments and could apparently only be killed by Catholics and converted Protestants. The production of a stage or screen adaptation of *Dracula* that is faithful to this pro-Catholic theme might change forever the public's understanding and reception of Bram Stoker's most famous novel and ensure the author's original intentions, in an anti-Catholic environment, are finally recognized. If the cultural and political metamorphosis and myth/legend-like devolution of Dracula that ensued in the 30 years since its debut performance is ever reversed by a new faithful theatrical or cinematic adaptation that identifies and foregrounds this pro-Catholic theme, then the most enduring literary figure of the last 108 years will be reborn. The way is paved for a revisionist contribution to the currently popular reception of *Dracula* in mainstream thought.

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