

“And With All That, Who Believes in Vampires?”

Undead Legends and Enlightenment Culture

In the winter of 1740, English literary giant Alexander Pope proclaimed himself a corpse. After a lingering illness, he declared in a letter that he had “become deaf to the voice of the charmer”, and that “upon the application of a lady’s warm hand it appeared that the torpor was general.” He blamed this seeming state of death on his doctors, whom Pope claimed (perhaps jestingly, perhaps not) had taken him to the grave on purpose. This avowed dead man pronounced himself interred at Twickenham where, actually, he was working on his grotto. In Pope’s own words, this corpse:

...has been seen some times in Mines and Caverns and has been very troublesome to those who dig Marbles and Minerals. If ever he has walk’d above ground, he has been (like the vampires in Germany) such a terror to all sober & innocent people, that many wish a stake were drove thro’ him to keep him quiet in his Grave.¹

If you haven’t studied the vampire lore of Early Modern Europe, Pope’s allusion to “the Vampires in Germany” may be a bit confusing, even in the context of his enigmatically constructed personal correspondence. The idea of a vampire commanding “Achtung!” is rather curious as juxtaposed with the Romantic phrasings of the Romanian Count Dracula so familiar to the twenty-first century reader. Indeed, the term “Germany” was misleading even in Pope’s time, encompassing - in Pope’s usage, anyway - all the nations of the Habsburg Empire, including Transylvania, but also Bohemia, Moravia, Croatia, and, for a time, Serbia, which was probably the most notorious hotbed of vampire activity in Pope’s time despite the prevalence of Transylvania in popular mentality. This lumping together of peoples was certainly not unique to Pope; Maria Todorova’s work on historic perceptions of the Balkans gives copious examples of how

the remarkably diverse region has been essentialized by writers throughout history.² Pope's words, however, do give us a unique perspective on how the lives of those in Eastern Europe were swirled around in Early Modern discourse. This lack of insight is especially acute when considering the rapid development of the vampire concept in Western Europe during the Enlightenment. Rather than an intriguing cultural expression from an area increasingly interesting to Western "Great Powers" as the Ottoman Empire began its decline, the vampire took on the same character in the 1700s that the UFO would assume in the 1950s. The undead were a sensational phenomenon of wonder and banter to believers and an unconscionable blight on the Age of Reason to more rational thinkers. This paper will briefly examine the development of European vampire belief in the print culture of the 1700s, then proceed to elucidate the main points of both "believers" - most notably the renowned conservative theologian Dom Augustin Calmet - and critics like Rousseau, Voltaire, and Habsburg court physician Gérard van Swieten. Finally, this paper will consider the Enlightenment's treatment of vampire accounts and legends as a missed opportunity for understanding the cultures from which they stemmed.

A vampire sensation in Western Europe began in 1732 with the publication of "Visum et Repertum", a brief but thorough account by Austrian military surgeon Johannes Fluckinger describing a Serbian vampire hunt in lurid detail. This formal, precise reckoning (Fluckinger and his fellow Austrian officers had observed much of the hunt with their own eyes) detailed the exploits and, at much more length, the destruction of Serbian vampire Arnaud Pavle and his brood. Like the Kinsey report two centuries later, it contained much to titillate the blossoming republic of letters despite its clinical nature: blood dribbles from Pavle's lips, he groans in pain when skewered by the

ubiquitous stake, one of his progeny attacks a young girl, and the circle of vampires grows to include fifteen souls - men, women, boys, and girls alike.³ All this against an exotic backdrop of *hajduks* (the definition of which no chronicler seemed to know - more on that later), village priests observing unusual rituals, and exotic names from an all but unknown land that was a new home for legions of German emigrants, as Belgrade had recently been resettled as a German city.⁴ In an era that saw a thriving trade in the sensational, semi-legal “under the cloak” literature lovingly described by Robert Darnton in his work on “forbidden best sellers” (which included both surprisingly literate anti-clerical pornography and viciously subversive proto-science fiction),⁵ the ostensibly respectable “*Visum et Repertum*”, reprinted in the Dutch *Glanneur*, the French *Mercure Galant*, and the English *London Journal*, was both familiar in its gory vigor and refreshing in its imperially-sanctioned openness.

Beyond its obvious appeal to readers, the Austrian report was also influential to authors and publishers. 1732 saw publications in German, Latin, and Italian dissecting the Pavle case and other instances of undead prowlers. The Pavle sensation also inspired the reprinting of older books with vampiric allusions. Exemplary among these was Pitton de Tournefort’s *Voyage into the Levant*, a work of natural history and cultural study of the Ottoman Empire commissioned by France’s Louis XIV. Aside from his remarks on “Commerce, Religion, and Manners”, Tournefort thoroughly - and skeptically - describes the Keystone Kops-like destruction of an undead *vrykolakas* on the Greek island of Mykonos that culminated on New Years Day, 1701, when the *vrykolakas*, already submitted to such indignities as disembowelment and having its heart torn out and burned, was finally fully cremated.⁶ Given the publicity the work garnered from its

vampiric allusions in the chapter on “The Present State of the Greek Church”, Tournefort’s volume went through five French and two English editions between 1732 and 1741. Further, the penetration of the period’s *mentalité* was evident in English political satire and commentary as early as May, 1732, when contemporary pundit Nicholas Amhurst (writing under the name of Caleb D’Anvers) opined in *The Country Journal; or, The Craftsman* that: “...these Vampyres [sic] are said to torment an kill the living by sucking out all their blood, [but] a ravenous minister, in this part of the world...carries his oppressions beyond the grave, by anticipating the publick revenues, and entailing a perpetuity of taxes, which gradually drain the body politick of its blood and spirits.”⁷ This euphemistic reference, perhaps surprisingly, is the first known use of the term “vampire” in English. (Linguist Katharina Wilson claims that vampires were written about in English as early as 1688, but the text she references was not actually published until 1741, throwing this early date into doubt.)⁸

As an aside, it is worth mentioning that this solid pairing of the walking corpse with drinking blood was really quite new in the 1730s. Traditional legends, including the Pavle account, do not explicitly have the antagonist rising from the grave and seeking blood. More often, the vampire is said to strangle or smother his (or her) victims, and death comes from a more gradual wasting not directly attached to any bloodsucking. Though the idea that the dead take blood to return to life may be as old as mankind - recall the Homeric hero feeding the shades of Hades blood in *The Odyssey* - a firm grafting of these traditions appears to be a product of Enlightenment print culture and its characteristic standardization of concepts.⁹

In 1746, the vampire had earned a lengthy dissertation by one of the most prominent Biblical scholars of the age. Dom Augustin Calmet was a Benedictine abbot and a voracious examiner of scripture, particularly textual criticism of Hebrew originals. His magnum opus, *Literal Commentary on all the books of the Old and New Testaments*, reached twenty-five volumes in its most loquacious edition in 1725. By the time Calmet undertook his *Dissertations sur les Apparitions des Anges des Démons et des Esprits, et sur les revenants, et Vampires de Hongrie, de Bohême, de Moravie, et de Silésie*, he was over seventy years old, and detractors often mused that he was growing senile.¹⁰ An examination of Calmet's work, however, reveals a man who, if nothing else, remains an erudite master of source work and compiler of facts. His analysis, particularly his expression of it, may be another matter.

As befits a writer of his time, Calmet begins his two-volume *Dissertations* in a near-Cartesian manner, stating that he writes “only for reasonable and unprejudiced minds, which examine things seriously and coolly; I speak but for those who assent even to known truth only after mature reflection, who know how to doubt what is uncertain, to suspend their judgment on what is doubtful, and to deny what is manifestly false.”¹¹ The first hints that what Calmet accepts as “known truth” may not jibe with his contemporary *philosophes*, however, comes later in his introduction, as he continues: “I do not write in the hope of convincing freethinkers and pyrrhonians, who will not allow the existence of ghosts or angels, nor even of the apparitions of angels, demons, and spirits....”¹² Indeed, Calmet's criteria for evidence rather quickly fall into line with that of his scholastic predecessors. On the laws of the physical universe, he quotes Saints Augustine and Jerome with the same confidence that Aquinas had many centuries earlier, going so far as

to take Plutarch at his word that the spirit of Theseus fought the Spartans at Marathon.¹³ Perhaps the nadir of Calmet's reasoning by Enlightenment standards comes in his consideration of "the garter", a magical means of traveling at impossible speeds. As Calmet says, "Almost incredible things are related on that subject, nevertheless the details are so circumstantial, that it is hardly possible there should not be some foundation for them." In this case, Calmet's foundation for a belief in magical super-speed was Spanish Inquisition figure Tomás de Torquemada.¹⁴

Having laid the foundations for supernatural activity in this essentially medieval style, Calmet directly approaches vampirism in the same manner, relying on what he deems credible witnesses, albeit with less faith than he had in Classical authors. In his consideration of the Arnaud Pavle case, for example, he copies in several pages from the *Glaneur Hollandais* contending that the supposed visitations were the imaginings of people already sick, and that the soils in which the Serbian vampires were buried may have played a role in the supposed supernatural condition of the bodies.¹⁵ That being said, however, Calmet still assumes - or appears to assume - that even the most fantastic events probably occurred, strictly on the weight of testimony. When considering the possibility that vampire reports are inaccurate observations of premature burials, for example, he dismisses this argument by asking: "If all this is only imagination on the part of those who are molested, whence comes it that these vampires are found in their graves in an uncorrupted state, full of blood, supple, and pliable; that their feet to be in a muddy condition the day after they have run about and frightened the neighbors, and that nothing similar is remarked in the other corpses interred at the same time and in the same cemetery?"¹⁶ That Calmet does not openly consider that at least some of the signs

mentioned here might also be imagined - and this is really quite typical of Calmet's work - does seem to indicate that Occam's razor did not figure prominently in his thought.

As one might expect, the era's rationalists were quite enthusiastic in seizing upon Calmet's rhetoric, albeit usually without addressing Calmet's case directly. Indeed, Jean-Jacques Rousseau made good use of how blithely Calmet's reasoning could be dismissed when composing his open *Letter to Beaumont* in 1764. In addressing traditional Christian faith in Biblical testimonies, he invoked vampires as an example of the natural right to doubt such witnesses, saying:

If there is a well-attested history in the world, it is that of the Vampires. Nothing is missing from it: interrogations, certifications by Notables, Surgeons, Parish Priests, Magistrates. The judicial proof is one of the most complete. And with all that, who believes in Vampires? Will we all be damned for not having believed?¹⁷

In this quote, made with seemingly little consideration on Rousseau's part, we get an idea of how Enlightenment figures reckoned not only reality, but what topics so much as merited discussion. Rousseau can assume the vampire is an obviously false idea here with no effort of legitimization and get away with it because the concept stands utterly outside his reality - and, presumably, his readers'.

This dismissive trope is also utilized by Voltaire in his *Dictionnaire Philosophique*. Though he does summarize some of Calmet's cases, he does so selectively and satirically - seriously interrogating the sources seems quite beneath him. Instead, he uses the vampire as a rhetorical device to attack his more usual religious targets and question rather the Age of Reason has failed a bit under his watch. He writes:

What! is it in our eighteenth century that vampires exist? Is it after the reigns of Locke, Shaftesbury, Trenchard, and Collins? Is it under those of d'Alembert, Diderot, St. Lambert, and Duclos that we believe in vampires, and that the reverend father Dom Calmet, Benedictine priest of the

congregation of St. Vannes, and St. Hidulphe, abbé of Senon—an abbey of a hundred thousand livres a year, in the neighborhood of two other abbeys of the same revenue—has printed and reprinted the history of vampires, with the approbation of the Sorbonne?

These vampires were corpses, who went out of their graves at night to suck the blood of the living, either at their throats or stomachs, after which they returned to their cemeteries. The persons so sucked waned, grew pale, and fell into consumption; while the sucking corpses grew fat, got rosy, and enjoyed an excellent appetite. It was in Poland, Hungary, Silesia, Moravia, Austria, and Lorraine, that the dead made this good cheer. We never heard a word of vampires in London, nor even at Paris. I confess that in both these cities there were stock-jobbers, brokers, and men of business, who sucked the blood of the people in broad daylight; but they were not dead, though corrupted. These true suckers lived not in cemeteries, but in very agreeable palaces.

Who would believe that we derive the idea of vampires from Greece? Not from the Greece of Alexander, Aristotle, Plato, Epicurus, and Demosthenes; but from Christian Greece, unfortunately schismatic. For a long time Christians of the Greek rite have imagined that the bodies of Christians of the Latin church, buried in Greece, do not decay, because they are excommunicated. This is precisely the contrary to that of us Christians of the Latin church, who believe that corpses which do not corrupt are marked with the seal of eternal beatitude.

After slander, nothing is communicated more promptly than superstition, fanaticism, sorcery, and tales of those raised from the dead. There were "broucolacas" in Wallachia, Moldavia, and some among the Polanders, who are of the Romish church. This superstition being absent, they acquired it, and it went through all the east of Germany. Nothing was spoken of but vampires, from 1730 to 1735; they were laid in wait for, their hearts torn out and burned. They resembled the ancient martyrs—the more they were burned, the more they abounded.

The result of all this is that a great part of Europe has been infested with vampires for five or six years, and that there are now no more; that we have had Convulsionaries in France for twenty years, and that we have them no longer; that we have had demoniacs for seventeen hundred years, but have them no longer; that the dead have been raised ever since the days of Hippolytus, but that they are raised no longer; and, lastly, that we have had Jesuits in Spain, Portugal, France, and the two Sicilies, but that we have them no longer.¹⁸

Not all Enlightenment rationalists were as dismissive as Rousseau and Voltaire - indeed, both authors may well have thought they were safely assuming that their cases had been made by others. One of the more assiduous researchers of vampire stories was Habsburg chief physician Gerard van Sweiten. In 1755, at the behest of Empress Maria Theresa, van Sweiten prepared a thorough report on vampires in the Empire, dissecting cases with what we would today call forensic science, showing how some occurrences presumed by believers to be supernatural had precedent in medical study. In his words:

Let us examine the alleged facts offered as proof of vampirism. Rosina Iolackin, died December 22, 1754, was dug up on January 19, 1755 and declared a vampire fit for the fire, because she was found intact in her tomb. In the winter, anatomists keep cadavers in the open air for six weeks and even two months without putrefaction. And it is worth noting that this winter has been particularly harsh.

Some months ago I read a small English treatise printed in London, in 1751, in which one could read of a notable and well-proven fact. In the month of February 1750, the tomb of an old family in the county of Devonshire in England was opened: among many bones and numerous rotting caskets was found an intact wooden box: it was opened out of curiosity; within was found the whole body of a man: the flesh yet retained its natural firmness; the joint of the shoulders, neck, and fingers were completely supple: when the face was pressed, it gave under the finger but regained its shape as soon as the pressure lifted: the same thing was tried on the entire body; the beard was black, and four inches long. The cadaver had not been embalmed, as no sign of incision was spotted. There you have an English vampire, which for 80 years had rested peacefully in its tomb, bothering no one.¹⁹

Indeed, even Calmet himself comes off as ultimately skeptical in the conclusion to his *Dissertations*. As credulous as he is in the body of his work, he brands the thought of revenants coming out of their graves morally impossible, the doctrine of excommunicants returning as undead theologically impossible, and casts serious doubt on the witness testimony he holds so dear throughout the text. As he maintains: “I require unprejudiced witnesses, free from terror and disinterested, quite calm, who can affirm

upon serious reflection that they have seen, heard, and interrogated these vampires, and so have been the witnesses of their operations; and I am persuaded that no such witnesses will be found.”²⁰ That being said, however, it does bear repeating that it was, perhaps, not Calmet’s *conclusions* that drew the dismissive ridicule he has received, but his *method* and standard of proof. Even taking Calmet’s most telling refutation of vampire belief into account, one can almost hear Rousseau shout that even calm, disinterested witnesses can give erroneous evidence.

All this being said, one problem that emerges in these fascinating episodes of Enlightenment vampirism is the missed opportunity throughout for cultural understanding, both through flat out error or disinterest in further investigation. As Herder pointed out: “The idioms of every language are the impressions of its country, its nationality, its history...And if they are good for nothing else they will at least open the way to the student of language so he can understand the genius of the nationality and explain one by the other.”²¹ Though the vampire is acknowledged by many folklorists as a world motif,²² it is difficult to imagine anything more culturally idiomatic than the Slavic vampire encountered by the European Great Powers in the eighteenth century. Rather than being seized upon as a valuable artifact that might assist in the understanding of East European culture, we see the vampire and everything associated being dismissed out of hand.

The most grievous examples of this dismissal are the numerous factual errors made by Enlightenment skeptics and believers alike. Time and again, we read of “Hungarians” with fine Magyar names like “Plogojowitz” and “Pavle“; neither Calmet nor Voltaire seem to give two hoots that these notorious vampires are Serbs, and that

there never has been a native Hungarian belief in vampires.²³ Whenever the Arnaud Pavle case is cited, we see the vampire himself and so many of his cohort referred to as “haiduks” or some other permutation of the Slavic term. However, these texts never explain this term, and thus never even attempt to elucidate the vampiric tendencies of the *hajduci*, Serbian bandits who fought the occupying Turks for centuries but, in an ironic twist, by and large ended up administering the Belgrade hinterland for the invading Habsburgs during their twenty-year tenure as unpopular Catholic suzerains in Orthodox Serbia.²⁴ Given this rather basic bit of knowledge of South Slavic culture, it may well have dawned upon the Western audience that the hajduk vampire was a scapegoat for the conditions of Habsburg rule, which saw the Serbs evacuated from Belgrade in favor of Catholic German-speakers. More often, the “Heyducqs” are dismissed as a type of soldier - or, in Calmet, accorded the status of a “people” unto themselves!²⁵ Voltaire argues elsewhere that Chinese culture should be respected as unique, rich and venerable, but the Balkans, it appears, have not produced anything worth thinking about since Alexander the Great.²⁶

To sum up, the Enlightenment vampire presents as a case of print culture creating a supernatural sensation, awakening latent fears of the deceased and exciting the curiosity and dread of the Western masses. Though it penetrated intellectual circles, its consideration can hardly be called debate, as that would require some interaction of ideas. Rather, the vampire amongst the intelligentsia can be described as a wall of neo-scholastic naiveté abutting a snide embankment of dismissal, with both sides unable or unwilling to make the forays into the topic that would have generated worthy insight. Perhaps the most positive thing to come out of the Enlightenment vampire craze was that,

largely in reaction to Gerard van Sweiten's skeptical report, Empress Maria Theresa banned not only vampire hunts, but also witch trials throughout the Habsburg Empire.²⁷ That the vampire, in all its ostensible absurdity, could achieve this is cause for at least a bit of solace.

¹ M. R. Brownwell, "Pope and the Vampires in Germany." *Eighteenth-Century Life* 2 (June, 1976), 96-97; Alexander Pope, *The Correspondence of Alexander Pope*, ed. George Sherburn, 5 vols. (London: Clarendon Press, 1956), 4:227.

² Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

³ Paul Barber, *Vampires, Burial, and Death: Folklore and Reality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 15-18.

⁴ Stu Burns, "From Passarowitz to Belgrade: The Habsburg Empire in the Balkans" in *Selected Papers: European Studies Conferences, 1993-1999* (Vienna: Edition Praesens, 2001), 7-13.

⁵ Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995).

⁶ Joseph Pitton de Tournefort, *A Voyage into the Levant* (London: D. Midwinter, R. Ware, C. Rivington, A. Ward, J. and P. Knapton, T. Longman, R. Hett, C. Hitch, S. Austen, J Wood and C. Woodward, J. and H. Pemberton, 1741, 3 vols.), Vol. 1, 1, 142-148.

⁷ Quoted in Elizabeth Miller, ed., *Bram Stoker's Dracula: A Documentary Volume - Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 304 (Farmington Hills, MI: Thomson Gale, 2005), 43.

⁸ Katharina Wilson, "The History of the Word *Vampire*", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 46 (1985), 577-583.

⁹ David Keyworth, "Was the Vampire of the Eighteenth Century a Unique Type of Undead Corpse?" *Folklore* 117:3 (2006), 1-16; for a classic discussion of how print standardizes previously fluid paradigms, see Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 80-88.

¹⁰ Arnold Ages, "Voltaire, Calmet and the Old Testament," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 41 (1966), 118-123.

¹¹ Augustin Calmet, *The Phantom World: Concerning Apparitions and Vampires*, translated by Harry Christmas (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2001 ed.), 3.

¹² Calmet, 5.

¹³ This is especially notable in Volume I, Chapter 13 (Calmet 46-52); Plutarch is cited in Calmet, 125.

¹⁴ Calmet, 80. For those unfamiliar with Torquemada and his historical reputation (and the bemused reaction received by this passage at the reading of this paper suggests that this is more common than I originally thought), see Edward Peters, *Inquisition* (New York: The Free Press, 1988), 81-97. Note that Peters is among the more generous of scholars when evaluating the work of Torquemada and his peers.

¹⁵ Calmet, 232-234.

¹⁶ Calmet, 299.

¹⁷ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Letter to Beaumont" in Christopher Kelly and Eve Grace, ed., *The Collected Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2001), 9:68.

¹⁸ Voltaire, "Philosophical Dictionary: Vampires," in *Works*, ed. Tobias Smollett (Paris: E. R. Du Mont, 1901), 14:143-149.

¹⁹ Quoted in Jean Marigny, *Vampires: Restless Creatures of the Night* (London: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993), 111-112.

²⁰ Calmet, 332-337.

²¹ Quoted in Gene Bluestein, *Poplore: Folk and Pop in American Culture* (Amherst: University of

Massachusetts Press, 1994), 35.

²² Michael E. Bell, *Food for the Dead: On the Trail of New England's Vampires* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2001), 237. In his review essay of the topic, prominent folklorist Alan Dundes asserted that the vampire was not a world motif, giving the examples that there was no indigenous vampire folklore among Native North Americans or in traditional Oceania. However, turn of the century antiquarians collected multiple stories from the New England Abenaki that fit the vampire motif as tightly as the Slavic model, and Australian anthologist Ramsey Smith has documented tales of the *yara-ma-yha-who*, an impish creature that sucked its victims' blood while gradually transforming them into more creatures. See Alan Dundes, *The Vampire: A Casebook* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 161; M. Raymond Harrington, "An Abenaki 'Witch-Story,'" *Journal of American Folklore* 14 (1901), 160; E. W. Deming, "Abenaki Witchcraft Story," *Journal of American Folklore* 15 (1902), 62-63; J. Gordon Melton, *The Vampire Book: The Encyclopedia of the Undead*, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Visible Ink, 1999), 25.

²³ Melton, 354.

²⁴ Burns, *op. cit.*

²⁵ Calmet, 227.

²⁶ In his *Philosophical Dictionary*, to use just one example, we see Voltaire show great respect for the antiquity of Chinese civilization, especially its relative freedom from religious dogma. He also criticizes how observers like the Jesuits dismiss the more astounding aspects of Chinese civilization as false because of the incompatibility of an enduring, sophisticated, non-Christian civilization with the Jesuit worldview. To further abuse the term, this strikes the reader as ironic given how chronically dismissive Voltaire is throughout his work. For prime examples, see Voltaire, "Philosophical Dictionary: China," in *Works*, ed. Tobias Smollett (Paris: E. R. Du Mont, 1901), 7:79-95.

²⁷ Gabor Klaniczay, "Decline of Witches and Rise of Vampires in 18th Century Habsburg Monarchy." *Ethnologia Europaea* 17 (1987), 165-180.