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Enchanted Kiss

John Corigliano and Mark Adamo's new opera *The Lord of Cries* is the latest incarnation of the vampire myth.

By Charles Shafaieh



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Hungarian actor Bela Lugosi as Count Dracula, his signature role on stage and screen

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VAMPIRES JUST WON'T DIE. These undead bloodsuckers recognize few boundaries, whether in form or content. In Germany, Heinrich Marschner's *Vampyr* (1828) marked the creature's first appearance in opera. Rock groups Bauhaus and Judas Priest sing about them. *Sesame Street*'s Count von Count teaches math lessons. Vampires abound in international films, from F. W. Murnau's German Expressionist *Nosferatu* (1922) to Ana Lily Amirpour's "Iranian vampire Western" *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014). Their modern literary manifestations are equally diverse, from Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* (1976) to Seth Grahame-Smith's *Abraham Lincoln, Vampire Hunter* (2010). The latter typifies a twenty-first-century compulsion for mash-ups featuring vampires. Now, that trend continues with John Corigliano and Mark Adamo's opera *The Lord of Cries*, an amalgamation of Euripedes's *Bacchae* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), which has its premiere next month in Santa Fe.

ALTHOUGH JOHN POLIDORI'S short story *The Vampyre* (1819) ushered this monster into European popular culture, most of the past century's "children of the night" lead back to *Dracula*. The novel's plot is easily distilled: Five men endeavor to defend two women from a centuries-old vampire. A meandering, overstuffed narrative contains this simple story, however, with a profusion of themes and symbols that facilitate its myriad interpretations.

Among these details are "infected blood," which fostered AIDS metaphors; a fear of invasion by the "Oriental" Other and anti-Semitic descriptions with obvious contemporary resonances; and a clash between the Enlightenment's valorization of reason and Romanticism's interest in mystery and emotion, which, while more muted today, persists. Like so many horror narratives, it also features manifestations of taboo desires.

Adamo considers repressed sexuality central to the novel, which, years ago, he thought about adapting for the opera house. The task "stymied" him, he admits, in part because he sees *Dracula* as "a plot device rather than a character." He adds, "It's really about the men who are so overwrought, often bursting into tears, and who fear a loss of control to which sexuality speaks." He shared his difficulties and theories about the novel with William M. Hoffman, the librettist of *The Ghosts of Versailles* (1991), Corigliano's only other opera. Hoffman suggested that Adamo read *The Bacchae*. The Greek tragedy concerns Pentheus, King of Thebes, who refuses to join his mother and others as they perform the ecstatic rites that Dionysus requires of his followers. When Pentheus later indulges his curiosity and, disguised as a woman, spies on these acts, Dionysus fatally punishes him.

As Adamo realized the similarities between the texts' libidinal undercurrents, he saw the job shift to "translating" Euripedes to Stoker's Victorian London. Despite being an accomplished composer, most notably of *Little Women* (1998), he also intuited that Corigliano, his husband, was the ideal fit for the music. "I cannot write realistic opera," says Corigliano. "I think opera belongs in the world of fantasy and imagination. This is a surrealistic piece that deals in things that look like they're something, but all of a sudden you see they're something else."

Alongside its fantastical elements, this cautionary tale references many real contemporary scandals. Adamo points to hypocritical religious leaders such as Ted Haggard and politicians such as Eliot Spitzer, whose public comments counter their own behaviors. "That which you deny will return to destroy you. That's textbook Freud," says Adamo. "Repression is always a problem. The opera is about anyone who can't look in the mirror. Of course the vampire doesn't cast a reflection—he is a reflection!"

By writing Dionysus/Dracula as a countertenor (Anthony Roth Costanzo will originate the role), Adamo and Corigliano highlight the vampire's indefinable sexuality. *Dracula* is neither man nor woman, human nor animal, alive nor dead. Overdescribed by Stoker in a way that makes him unknowable, he becomes unassimilable to human or even earthly codes of desire. In this way he exemplifies "the queer," which Sue Ellen Case, in her essay "Tracking the Vampire," describes as "the taboo-breaker, the monstrous, the uncanny."



Husbands and collaborators: librettist Mark Adamo and composer John Corigliano, cocreators of *Lord of Cries*

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“Queer desire,” she writes, “punctures the life/death and generative/destructive bipolarities that enclose the heterosexist notion of being.” Reproduction, in other words, is not the vampire’s interest. Christopher Craft extends Case’s reading in his provocative “‘Kiss Me with Those Red Lips’: Gender and Inversion in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*” by identifying the vampire’s mouth as “the [novel’s] primary site of erotic experience” and a potent symbol of queerness. “Luring at first with an inviting orifice, a promise of red softness, but delivering instead a piercing bone, the vampire mouth fuses and confuses ... the gender-based categories of the penetrating and the receptive,” he writes. “Furthermore, this mouth, bespeaking the subversion of the stable and lucid distinctions of gender, is the mouth of all vampires, male and female.”

Ignoring reproduction, the vampire focuses on pleasure. It becomes the physical embodiment of *la petite mort* (little death), the French phrase for orgasm. While the vampire is inherently androgynous, its female-presenting manifestations are often depicted as the more libidinous (which in part led to the “vamp” femme-fatale persona of early cinema, made famous by Theda Bara). With the persistence in the U.S. of a Puritanism that penalizes women for exposing their nipples in public and the Motion Picture Association of America’s harsh ratings for films that depict female pleasure, that vampires still arouse the American psyche is unsurprising. Avoiding the censors by transposing sexual intercourse into vampiric feeding seems almost as necessary today as it was in Victorian England. Neil Jordan’s 2012 film *Byzantium* provides an ideal depiction of this sexist imbalance as it follows a conservative vampire brotherhood’s attempted assassination of a rogue female vampire, a sex worker who later runs her own brothel and who emasculates the brotherhood when killing her victims with a thumbnail she elongates at will.”



German actor Max Schreck as the vampire Count Orlok in F. W. Murnau's 1922 silent film *Nosferatu*
AF archive/Alamy

The implied consequences of an existence based solely on non-reproductive pleasure extend well beyond the denigration of society. They include the death of society itself via the dissolution of heterosexual marriage and, by extension, the family. To desire the vampire's bite—as one typically must invite them in—is to wish for your own death. Freud, whose first book on psycho-analysis was published shortly before Stoker finished *Dracula*, called this urge the death drive, or Thanatos (contrasted to Eros). He identified it as an unconscious urge toward a return to the inorganic—a desire we repress in order to live in society, but which, as a result, can manifest itself in violence against others. The vampire is its quintessential example. By preying on humans, it survives. But if this relationship extends to its logical conclusion, if vampires drain humans or turn them into fellow undead without limit, they will starve. In this Malthusian nightmare of overpopulation and food scarcity, the vampire becomes both a symbol of self-preservation and a lesson against allowing Thanatos unlimited expression. The vampire's total victory—the apocalypse of the apocalypse—would pervert pleasure by transforming *la petite mort* into *la grande mort*.

While these themes suggest why *Dracula* and its offspring attract continued interest, Columbia University's Gil Anidjar, author of *Blood: A Critique of Christianity*, argues that a religious foundation underpins the still-thriving fascination with the vampire, at least in the West. "There's something about the Christianity of the vampire as a figure of memory—the memory he keeps and activates," Anidjar says. "He is, after all, a dark version of Jesus, with the blood that you must drink and the making (or unmaking) of souls. Like Jesus, he is also an ambiguous sexual figure, a figure of seduction." Anidjar observes that the repeated reminder of Jesus's resurrection and the promise of his return, which finds its corollary in the mechanical reinvention/resurrection of the vampire in popular culture, also influences societal imagination. "The living dead have significance in a culture with a god that is resurrected. We're not the only ones—the Egyptians had it as well—but our dominant culture isn't Egyptian, it's Christian. The effect this has on what Freud calls 'mourning and melancholia' (with regard to the ability or inability to mourn) is absolutely crucial. In many ways, the vampire is just a shadow version of our so-called secular regime. A figure of endless loss, he signals we do not know how to mourn."



Author John Polidori
Art Collection 2/Alamy

explanation, however. Film and theater director Alejandro Jodorowsky argues, “Theater itself should not last even a day in the life of man. Just born, it should immediately die.” The definitionally fleeting nature of live performance opposes the vampire’s immortality—an immortality threatened even more by the precarity of a singer’s voice, always at risk of collapse or failure. Conversely, cinema, like the vampire, exists outside time. Its projected nature also legitimizes the monster’s spectrality and inhumanness while reinforcing its existence as a screen on which we project our anxieties and repressed emotions. To continue putting Dracula on film, therefore, doesn’t represent his death so much as it repeatedly validates his existence as an asynchronous entity.

Lord of Cries is thus audacious, as the vampire’s return to opera dares to defy the genre’s current boundaries. “The score is very hot,” says Corigliano, who here employs amplification and takes instruments to sonic extremes. “I think I went all out.” This excessiveness that pushes at the edge of the form’s possibilities, taken further by Adamo’s Euripidean fusion, is perhaps what the vampire requires. About Greek tragedy, the German scholar Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff wrote, “The tradition is dead; our task is to revivify life that has passed away. We know that ghosts cannot speak until they have drunk blood; and the spirits we evoke demand the blood of our hearts. We give it to them gladly.” His words apply to opera as well. We will see in Santa Fe whether audiences and artists, and through them the tradition, are open to a transformation that only gifts of blood can occasion.

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RELIGION AND REPRESSED DESIRE, both of which feature in *Lord of Cries*, are subjects rife with emotional and theatrical potential. This makes them ideal for opera—yet vampires rarely seem to attract composers and librettists. Unlike literature and film, the stage, by and large, no longer appears hospitable to them, or any other Gothic horror creatures. Today’s absurdly high ticket prices are a plausible cause for this absence. Vampire melodramas entertained working-class audiences in 1820s Europe, inspired by Polidori, and at Paris’s macabre Grand Guignol in the first half of the twentieth century. Even Broadway in 1977, when Frank Langella starred in *Dracula*, was relatively affordable, especially by contemporary standards. But the industry has changed, at least in America, and with it audience demographics and expectations.

WHY VAMPIRES SUCCEED ON FILM, which remains a populist medium, may have a more metaphysical