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# THE HISTORY OF THE WORD "VAMPIRE"

BY KATHARINA M. WILSON

Like the legend of the living dead, so the origin of the word "vampire" is clouded in mystery. For most readers and authors alike, the vampire is a dark and ominous creature of the woods of Hungary or Transylvania. His name is often believed to be of the same national origin.<sup>1</sup> However, both linguistic studies concerning the etymology of the term "vampire" and the first recorded occurrences of the word in major European languages indicate that the word is neither Hungarian nor Rumanian.

There are four clearly discernible schools of thought on the etymology of "vampire" advocating, respectively, Turkish, Greek, Hebrew, and Hungarian roots for the term. The four groups are chronological and geographic entities: the first group is represented by a nineteenth-century Austrian linguist and his followers, the second consists of scholars who were the German contemporaries of the early eighteenth-century vampire craze, the third comprises recent linguistic authorities, and the last is almost entirely limited to recent English and American writers.

The first group of etymological theorists on the word "vampire" consists of Franz Miklosich and of many followers, Montague Summers and Stephan Hock among them, who use him as their authority.<sup>2</sup> Miklosich, a late nineteenth-century Austrian linguist, suggests in his influential work *Etymologie der Slavischen Sprachen* that the word "vampire" and its Slavic synonyms "upior," "uper," and "upyr" are all derivatives of the Turkish "uber"—witch.

The second theory subscribes to the classical origins of the term. Summers, for instance, refers to an unidentified authority claiming the Greek verb  $\pi\iota$  to drink as a possible source for "vampire."<sup>3</sup> Another etymological explanation along this line was proposed by Harenberg in the eighteenth century. S. Hock quotes the German scholar as saying that, "Es läst sich vermuten dass das Wort zusammen gesetzt sey aus Bluht draus Vam geworden, und piren, das ist begierig nach einer Sache trachten."<sup>4</sup>

The third theory, which advocates the Slavic origin of the word, has now gained almost universal acceptance, and the root noun underlying the term is considered to be the Serbian word "BAMIIUP". Kluge, Falk-Torp, the Grimm brothers, Wick, and Vaillant all point to the Serbian origin of the word as do, for example, the *OED* (London, 1903), the German *Brockhaus*, the Spanish *Encyclopedia Universal Illustrada* (Madrid, 1930-33), and the *Swensk Etymo-*

<sup>1</sup> A great many of the vampire novels and plays are set either in Hungary or in Transylvania as, for example, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Melesville's play *Le Vampire*. I am grateful to Prof. A. O. Aldridge of the Univ. of Illinois for his helpful suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> Franz Miklosich, *Etymologischen Wörterbuch der Slavischen Sprachen* (Wien: Wilhelm Braumüller, 1886).

<sup>3</sup> Montague Summers, *The Vampire, His Kith and Kin* (London, 1928), 18.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Hock, "Die Vampirsagen und ihre Verwertung in der deutschen Literatur," in *Forschungen zur neueren Litteraturgeschichte*, XVII, (1900), 1-133.

*logisk Ordbok* (Lund, 1934-54).<sup>5</sup> Vasmer mentions the 1074 *Liber Prophetarum* as a possible source for the term, but this suggestion is refuted by A Brückner on the grounds that in the *Liber Prophetarum* the word “upir” appears as a proper name.<sup>6</sup> Other sporadic attempts to explain the Slavic etymology of the word include Sobolevskij’s theory that “vampire” derives from an old Polish or Polabic root and Maszynski’s suggestion that the Serbo-Croatian verb “pirati” (to blow), contains the stem for “vampire.”<sup>7</sup> A. N. Afans’ev lists several possible theories, among them the Lithuanian “wempti” (to drink).

A quite convincing case for the Bulgarian origin of the word is made by A. Brückner in his 1934 article “Etymologien.”<sup>8</sup> He contends the Serbian term “vampir” is only a borrowing from Bulgarian via Greek. Thus, the Serbian “BAMIIUP,” appears to have served merely as a transmitter, but is not the root of the term.

The fourth school of writers, notably English and American, contend that the belief in vampires has its roots in ancient superstition but that the word itself is of recent and of Hungarian origin. In a recent publication on vampires, for example, Raymond McNally says:

Linguistic authorities differ over the origin of the word. For example, F. Miklosich, an eminent scholar of Slavic languages claims that ‘vampire’ derives from *uber*, the Turkish word for witch. But undoubtedly the source of ‘vampire’ is the Hungarian word *vampir*.<sup>9</sup>

Similar statements are made by Summers and Wolf, just to name a few.<sup>10</sup> Their speculations, however, seem utterly unfounded for the first appearance of the

<sup>5</sup> Kluge, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* (Berlin, 1975); Falk-Torp, *Norwegisch-Dänisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 12th ed. (Leipzig, 1956); Wick, *Die Slawischen Lehnwörter in der neuhochdeutschen Schriftsprache* (Marburg, 1939)

<sup>6</sup> Max Vasmer, *Russisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Heidelberg, 1953), and A. Brückner, “Etymologien” in *Slavia Casopis pro Slovanskou Filologii* v. 13 (1934), 272-280.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted from Vasmer, *Russisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*.

<sup>8</sup> Brückner refutes earlier and contemporary attempts to assign a Serbian origin to the term, and he proposes that the Bulgarian word “upir” lies at the root of the word “vampir.” He defines “upir” by saying, “Es nannten so Bulgaren die den Alten bekannten Nachtvögel mit ehernem Schnabel welche Schlafenden das Blut aussaugen” (279). He also explains the gradual change in meaning from one mythological monster to another: “. . . die Nachtvögel sind zu Nachtwandlern, zu Nachtmenschen geworden, die nunmehr aus dem Grabe steigen und vom Blute der lebenden zehren” (279). Incidentally, the Slavic word “strigoi,” which now means monsters or werewolves, originally referred to night-birds that sucked the blood of children as well. Brückner suggests that the term “upir” was borrowed by the Greeks from Bulgarian, just as the Greek word for werewolf, “strigoi,” is also a Bulgarian borrowing, and acquired the nasal “am” in Greek. He says: “Das ‘am’ vom heutigen Vampir ist somit neugriechisch, der Name selbst bulgarische Benennung der strigae, die sich erst im Christlichen Aberglauben aus Nachtvögeln zu eigenen Vampiren verwandelten. . .” (279)

<sup>9</sup> Raymond I. McNally, *A Clutch of Vampires* (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1974), 10.

<sup>10</sup> Summers, 18. Leonard Wolf, *The Annotated Dracula* (New York, 1975).

word "vampir" in Hungarian post-dates the first use of the term in most Western languages by more than a century.

Just as the etymology of "vampire" is subject to controversy, so is the history of the introduction of the word into the recorded vocabulary of major European languages and literatures, and the way of transmission is not always clear.

In France, according to most dictionaries, the word "vampire" was introduced in 1737 through the *Lettres Juives*, the ninth chapter of which recounts two incidents of vampirism in the village of Kisilova near Graditz.<sup>11</sup> But the *Mercure Galant* reported already in 1693 and 1694 cases of vampirism in Poland and Russia.<sup>12</sup> Also, in 1693 a Polish clergyman asked the Sorbonne how one is to deal with vampires or corpses believed to be vampires. Calmet records that the doctors Fromageau, de Precelles, and Durieroz unanimously condemned the cruel treatment.<sup>13</sup> The term, however, became a household word in French only after Dom Calmet's 1746 publication of his *Dissertations sur les apparitions et sur les revenants et les vampires*.

In French belles lettres the vampire theme appears first as a reaction to the popularity of Polidor's story *The Vampire* and its dramatic versions in England. *The Vampire* was translated into French in 1819 by Henry Faber, and it was followed by more or less obvious imitations and continuations by Cyprien Bernard (1819), Charles Nodier (1820), and others.

The German fortunes of the word are strikingly similar to those in France even though a cognate of the term "vampire" was already introduced to the German scholarly audience in 1721, when Gabriel Rzazynsky published his work *Historia Naturalis Curiosa regni Poloniae*.<sup>14</sup> Rzazynski recounts several seventeenth century stories of Polish, Russian, and Lithuanian vampires which he calls by their Polish name (*upior*). In the vernacular, however, the term first appeared in newspaper reports of the *Wiener Diarium* and other Viennese papers that published, as in France, the results of an official investigation concerning vampirism in the Graditz district, which took place in 1725. Some of the pamphlets identified the Serbian district Graditz as a place in Hungary (rather than a province of Hungary); this reference may underlie the popular belief that Hungary is the homeland of vampires. Six years later even greater attention was given to an incident in the winter of 1731-32 when a vampire epidemic was reported in Medvegja, Serbia. The incident involved Arnold Paul, and the case, reported in the *Visum et Repertum* of the investigating commission, was reprinted in Nuremburg in 1732 in the *Commercium litterarium ad rei medicae et scientiae*

<sup>11</sup> Yovanovitch, *La Guzla de Prosper Mérimée* (Paris, 1911), 310.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted by Dom Calmet, *Traité sur les apparitions des esprits, et sur les vampires, ou les rewanans de Hongrie, de Moravia* (Paris, 1751), II, 60: "Ils paroissent depuis midi jusqu'à minuit, et viennent sucer le sang des hommes au des animaux vivans en si grande abondance, que quelquefois il leur sort par la bouches, par le nez et principalement par les oreilles, et que quelquefois le cadavre nage dans son sang répandu dans son, cercueil. On dit que le Vampire a une espèce de faim, qui lui fait manger le linge qu'il trouve autour de lui."

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 65ff.

<sup>14</sup> Gabriel Rzazynsky, *Historia naturalis curiosa regni Poloniae* (Sendomir, 1721) is credited by Hock with introducing vampires to the German scholarly audience.

*naturalis incrementum institutum*.<sup>14a</sup> The official reports were followed in Germany and Austria by a burst of medical and philosophic treatises by anonymous authors and by scholars such as, for example, C. F. Demelius (1732), P. Gengell (1732), J. C. Pohlius (1732), J. C. Meinig (1732), J. H. Voigt (1733), J. C. Fritch (1732), J. H. Zopf (1733), J. C. Harenberg (1733), J. C. Stock (1732), and G. B. Bilfinger (1742).<sup>15</sup>

The first use of vampires in German belles-lettres occurred in 1748, when August Ossenfelder's poem "der Vampyr" appeared as the appendix to Christlob Mylius' article about vampires in the *Naturforscher*. The vampire theme received the first truly memorable treatment in 1797, when Goethe composed his "vampirisches Gedicht" entitled "Die Braut von Corinth," but the actual wide-scale popularity of the vampire theme was occasioned, as in France, through the translations and adaptations of Polidori's *The Vampire* in the 1820's.

In England, the term first appeared in the seventeenth century. According to Todd and Skeat, Paul Ricaut (Rycaut) introduced the term in his *State of the Greek and Armenian Churches*, published in 1679.<sup>16</sup> Todd quotes Ricault as saying: "[The vampire is] . . . a pretended demon, said to delight in sucking human blood, and to animate the bodies of dead persons, which when dug up, are said to be found florid and full of blood." The reference, however, is misleading, as Ricaut does not mention vampires by name here; he only describes the phenomenon as a superstition resulting from the reproachable overuse of excommunications in the Greek church. Ten years later, in 1688, the term must have been fairly well known, because Forman, in his *Observations on the Revolution in 1688*, written in the same year and published in 1741, used the term in a footnote metaphorically without attaching any explanation to it. He says:

Our Merchants, indeed, bring money into their country, but it is said, there is

<sup>14a</sup> Interestingly (at least to readers of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*), gypsies were used as experts for destroying the Serbian Vampires. Prof. Vukanovic quoting Raufft says: "In the year 1731 vampires disturbed the village of Medvedja. The High Command from Belgrade immediately sent a commission of German officers and others to the spot. They excavated the whole cemetery and found that there were really vampires there, and all those dead found to be vampires were decapitated by the Gypsies, their bodies cremated and the ashes thrown into the river Morsira," T. P. Vukanović "The Vampire" in *Vampires of the Slavs*, ed. Jon C. Perkowski, 205.

<sup>15</sup> C. F. Demelius, *Philosophischer Versuch, ob nicht die merckwürdige Begebenheit derer Blutsauger in Niederungarn, anno 1732 geschehen, aus denen principiis naturae könne erleuchtet werden* (Vinariensi, 1732); D. Gengell, *Evers Atheism* (quoted by the *Travels of 3 English Gentlemen*); J. S. Pohlius, *Dissertatio de hominibus post mortem sanguisugis, vulgo sic dictus vampyren* (Leipzig, 1732); J. C. Meinig, *Besondere Nachricht von denen Vampyren oder so genannten Blut-Saugern* (Leipzig, 1732); J. H. Voigt, *Kurtzers Bedencken von denen Acten-Mässigen Relationen wegen derer Vampiren, oder Menschen- und Vieh-Aussaugern* (Leipzig, 1732); J. G. Fritch, *Eines Weimarischen Medici muthmassliche Gedanken von denen Vampyren, oder sog. Blutsangern* (Leipzig, 1732); J. H. Zopf, *Dissert. de. Vampyris Serviensibus* (Duisburg, 1773); J. C. Harenberg, *Vernünfftige und Christliche Gedanken über die Vampirs oder Bluetsaugende Todten* (Wolffenbüttel, 1733); J. C. Stock, *Dissertatio Physica de Cadaveribus Sanguisugia* (Jena, 1732); G. B. Bilfinger, *Elements Physices cum Disquisitione de Vampyris* (Leipzig, 1742).

<sup>16</sup> Todd's augmented edition of Dr. Johnson's *English Dictionary* (1827) and W. Skeat's *Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (1884).

another Set of Men amongst us who have as great an Address in sending out again to foreign Countries without any Returns for it, which defeats the Industry of the Merchant. These are the Vampires of the Publick, and Riflers of the Kingdom.<sup>17</sup>

The *OED* mistakenly refers to the *Travels of 3 English Gentlemen from Venice to Hamburg, Being the Grand Tour of Germany in the Year 1734*, as the first use of the word in English. The composition of the *Travels* postdates both Ricaut and Forman by half a century, and the work was not published until 1810, when the Earl of Oxford's library was printed in the *Harleian Miscellany*. The description of vampires in the *Travels* is nevertheless the first serious English explanation of the phenomenon and will therefore be considered here.

The anonymous author of the *Travels* was a member of the Royal Society and of the University of Oxford, and this description of vampires is contained in the description of Lubiana in the Duchy of Carniola, Serbia. Usually, only the first sentence of the two very informative pages dealing with vampires is given, so it will be quoted more fully here. It reads:

These Vampyres are supposed to be the bodies of deceased persons, animated by evil spirits, which come out of the graves, in the night time, suck the blood of many of the living, and thereby destroy them. Such a notion will, probably, be looked upon as fabulous and exploded, by many people in England; however, it is not only countenanced by Baron Valvasor, and many Carnioleze noblemen, gentlemen, etc., as we were informed, but likewise actually embraced by some writers of good authority. M. Jo. Henr. Zopfius, director of the Gymnasium of Essen, a person of great erudition, has published a dissertation upon them, which is extremely learned and curious, from whence we shall beg leave to transcribe the following paragraph: "The Vampyres, which come out of the graves in the night-time, rush upon people sleeping in their beds, suck out all their blood, and destroy them. They attack men, women, and children, sparing neither age nor sex. The people attacked by them complain of suffocation, and a great interception of spirits; after which, they soon expire. Some of them, asked at the point of death, what is the matter with them, say they suffer in the manner just related from people lately dead, or rather the spectres of those people; upon which, their bodies, from the description given of them, by the sick person, being dug out of the graves, appear in all parts, as the nostrils, cheeks, breast, mouth, etc. turgid and full of blood. Their countenances are fresh and ruddy; and their nails, as well as hair, very much grown. And, thought they have been much longer dead than many other bodies, which are perfectly putrified, not the least mark of corruption is visible upon them. Those who are destroyed by them, after their death, become Vampyres; so that, to prevent so spreading an evil, it is found requisite to drive a stake through the dead body, from whence, on this occasion, the blood flows as if the person was alive. Sometimes the body is dug out of the grave, and burnt to ashes; upon which, all disturbances cease. The Hungarians call these spectres Pamgri, and the Serbians Vampyres; but the etymon, or reason of these names, is not known." . . .

These spectres are reported to have infested several districts of Serbia, and the *bannat* of Temeswaer, in the year 1725, and for seven or eight years afterwards, particularly those of Mevedia, or Meadia, and Parakin, near the Morava. In 1732, we had a relation of some of the feats in the neighborhood of Cassovia;

<sup>17</sup> Forman, *Observations on the Revolution in 1668* (1741), 11.

and the publick prints took notice of the tragedies they acted in the bannat of Temeswaer, in the year 1738. Father Gabriel Rzaczynski, in his natural history of the kingdom of Poland, and the great duchy of Lithuania, published at Sendomir, in 1732, affirms, that in Russia, Poland, and the great dutchy of Lithuania, dead bodies, actuated by infernal spirits, sometimes enter people's houses in the night, fall upon men, women, and children, and attempt to suffocate them; and that of such diabolical facts his countrymen have several very authentic relations. The Poles call a man's body thus informed *U pier*, and that of a woman *U pierzyca*, i.e., a winged or feathered creature; which seems to be deduced from the surprising lightness and activity of these incarnate demons.<sup>18</sup>

The appearance of the *Travels* in the *Harleian Miscellany* was followed by extremely popular works on the vampire theme, such as Byron's "The Giaur," Southey's "Thalaba," and Polidori's *The Vampire*.

In Italy, the Latin use of the word precedes its use in the vernacular. Pope Benedict XIV responded to a question similar to the one asked at the Sorbonne. Unlike the learned doctors, however, Pope Benedict realized that the belief in vampires was firmly rooted in ancient superstition and was not easy to extirpate. He considered the subject in Chapter 4 of the second edition of his work *De Servorum Dei Beatificatione et de Beatorum Canonizatione*, published in Rome in 1749. In the chapter entitled "De vanitate vampyrorum," the Pope takes issue with the cruel maltreatment and mutilation of corpses believed to be vampires. In the vernacular, the term "Vampiro" first appeared in Davanzati's *Dissertazione sopra i vampiri* in 1789.

In Russian, "vampir" is said to be a recent borrowing from either German or French, while the Russian cognates of "vampire," "upir," and "upyr" were shown by Brückner to be of Bulgarian origin.<sup>19</sup> Kayimierz Moszyinsk, on the other hand, argues that the term *upire* has been known for a long time among the East Slavs, for written sources of the years 1047, 1495, 1600 mention the word either as a proper name (of a Novgorodian Prince) or as place names.

Finally, in Hungary and Transylvania, the supposed homeland of vampires, the term "vampire" exists only as a neologism and was never as popular as in the West. In Hungarian, the word "vampir" first appeared in 1786 in an article of the *Nyelvtudományi Értekletek*: "Vampirok . . . living people."<sup>20</sup> Thus, the term postdates the English and French use by a century and the German use by half a century. According to Benkő Lőránd, the word was introduced in Hungary through the German press.<sup>21</sup> Mór Jókai introduced the term into Hungarian belles lettres in 1874. In Transylvania, on the other hand, the term is even more recent and is included in the *Dictioner de Neulogisme*. Nandris points out that "for vampire the Slavs had a word, which does not exist as a

<sup>18</sup> "The Travels of 3 English Gentlemen" in *Harleian Miscellany* (London, 1810).

<sup>19</sup> The recent introduction of the term "vampir" from German or French into Russian is attested by Vasmen (see n. 6 above) and by Preobrazhensky, *Etymological Dictionary of the Russian Language* (New York, 1951).

<sup>20</sup> Quoted from Benkő Lőránd *et al.*, *A Magyar Nyelv Történeti Etimológiai Szótára* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1976). The same is said in *Révai Nagy Lexikona*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

loan word in Rumanian, and the Russian word of which is *upyr*."<sup>22</sup> In an article on Rumanian vampires, Agnes Murdoci notes several vampire-related superstitions and says that "as regards the names for vampires, dead and alive, *strigoi* (fem. *strigoica*) is the most common Roumanian term, and *morii* is perhaps the next most usual."<sup>23</sup> The term "vampire" is little used, but Ms. Murdoci has found a reference to vampires in the *Biserica Orthodoxa Romana*: "The Archbishop Nectarie (1813-19) sent round a circular to his higher clergy (prototypes) exhorting them to find out in what districts it was thought that the dead became vampires."<sup>24</sup>

In sum, the earliest recorded uses of the term "vampire" appear in French, English, and Latin, and they refer to vampirism in Poland, Russia, and Macedonia (Southern Yugoslavia). The second and more sweeping introduction of the word occurs in German, French, and English, and records the Serbian vampire epidemic of 1725-32.

Thus, the historical data appear to complement the linguistic studies, for the first occurrences of the term "vampire" in European languages all refer to the Slavic superstitions; the wide dissemination of the term and its extensive use in the vernacular follows the outburst of vampirism in Serbia. Paradoxically, although the superstition of vampirism seems to have developed in Eastern Europe, the word "vampire" (for which the Slavic cognate is *upir*) that is now universally used to describe the phenomenon, seemed to have gained popularity in the West.

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<sup>22</sup> Grigore Nandris, "The Historical Dracula: The Theme of His Legend in the Western and in the Eastern Literatures of Europe," in *Comparative Literature: Matter and Method*, ed. A. O. Aldridge (Urbana, 1969), 124.

<sup>23</sup> Agnes Murgoci, "The Vampire in Roumanian," in *Folklore*, XXXVII (Dec. 1926), 321.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 323, 324.