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Such a Dark Thing: Theology of the Vampire Narrative in Popular Culture, M. Jess Peacock

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M. Jess Peacock, *Such a Dark Thing: Theology of the Vampire Narrative in Popular Culture*

(Eugene, Oregon: Resource Publications, 2015)

In *Such a Dark Thing*, M. Jess Peacock, recipient of the 2013 Ronald L. Williams Book Prize in Theology and Ethics, provides an engaging exploration of the vampire's representation in popular culture, focusing mainly on horror films and novels, while developing an original theological reading. This book sets itself the ambitious aim of analysing the vampire, not merely as the epitome of evil that is invariably vanquished by the supreme power of good, but also as a creature endowed with both divine and malicious characteristics. Well-researched and easy to follow, this is a must-read for any student interested in the complicated relationship between vampires and religious symbols.

The book consists of five chapters, an epilogue, and an extensive sequence of appendices which review the novels, films, and series that Peacock refers to throughout his work. By approaching the vampire through the lens of a theological framework, *Such a Dark Thing* offers an original analysis that contrasts with the general shift towards technological developments and secularisation that have dominated vampire fiction and films such as Jim Jarmusch's *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013) and Anne Rice's *Prince Lestat* (2014). Rice's latest novel explores the opportunities that medical advancements might offer to vampires; while Jarmusch accentuates on the artistic qualities of vampires in a self-destructive world, devoid of any trace of divinity.

In emphasising, by contrast, the association of the vampire with evil and the demonic, as well as with human uncertainty regarding the afterlife, the author also discusses what he terms the 'Monstrous Divine'. He argues that 'God represents the most diabolical, violent and bloodthirsty monster of all, an otherworldly ancient deity that takes no issue with the detached murder of countless innocent lives in order to punish those deemed as irretrievably wicked' (p. xxiii). The duality of the divine is obvious in the Hebrew Bible: Yahweh is both Creator and Destroyer. What is more surprising is the way in which Peacock interprets Communion, as both a symbolic and literal consumption of Jesus's flesh and blood in remembrance of his sacrifice, as a practice destined to appease the presumed wrath of God. Within this theological context, the author reads the vampire as the embodiment of not only theological but also societal issues, as an antagonist that questions divinity, while nonetheless confirming its existence.

The first chapter, entitled 'OMG! The Vampire as "Mysterium Tremendum"', is probably the most compelling. Here, Peacock transfers and attaches to the vampire the

theological concept of ‘*mysterium tremendum*’, which Rudolf Otto describes as a ‘combination of fascination and terror, wonder and dread’ (qtd p. 2). This is said to arise when one is confronted with the ‘numinous’ — defined as the sense of the ineffable that characterises an encounter with the divine. This process of reassigning these two religious concepts to the vampire is particularly thought provoking, especially since the author raises two important questions, the first regarding the vampire’s possible divine essence, and the second, conversely, concerning the potential status of the horrific as part of an inherently benevolent divinity. This discussion leads to the assertion of striking similarities between the horror genre and Christianity, since both consist of ‘unfathomable *numinous* entities’ (p. 4), which do not hesitate to take innocent lives. Peacock further argues that the angel, as a representation of religion, and the vampire, who stands for the horror, are not that different: both possess a human-like appearance and are agents of destruction: ‘[t]he typical response of the corporeal cast of characters to the *mysterium tremendum* of the vampire is indistinguishable from the typical response of the mortal to angels in Scripture: fear, awe, horror and foreboding’ (p. 6). Admittedly, the analogy between Christ and the vampire drawn by Peacock is also to be found in Nina Auerbach’s *Our Vampires Ourselves* or in Susan Clements’ *The Vampire Defanged*. Nevertheless, Peacock accentuates the common aspects that these seemingly antagonistic figures share, since they are neither dead nor alive and both promise eternal life, although the implications of the vampiric afterlife are obviously very different.

The second chapter, entitled ‘The Vampire as Agent of Theodicy’, focuses on the problematic existence of evil and sin that the undead represent. Peacock addresses here the aforementioned controversial questions regarding the relation between God and evil, or more precisely why God permits the existence of evil. Intriguingly, he suggests by way of an answer that ‘the vampire may serve as a window into the nature of God [...]. The mortal individual, when faced with evil, demands to know where God is amidst the evil’ (pp. 17-18). Regardless of the social and cultural changes that each new age triggers, for Peacock, the vampire therefore remains a religious symbol that both challenges and reestablishes the existence of the divine. The undead thus reiterates perennial questions, such as why God would allow the existence of evil, how one can protect oneself from evil, and what one might find in the afterlife.

Drawing on numerous references to Stephen King’s *Salem’s Lot* (1975), Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) and cinematic vampires from horror films, Peacock’s work provides an impressive exploration of religious tropes, including Communion, different levels of sin,

temptation, and the power of the cross in relation to the vampire. Nevertheless, the limited amount of space he allocates to such a considerable selection of films and novels is regrettable, as the discussion bounces back and forth haphazardly between cinematic and literary vampires. Some readers might be disappointed that certain vampires like Marius, Saint-Germain, or Akasha were overlooked, but fans of the horror genre will surely be pleased to find that Peacock includes in his book numerous vampire horror movies such as Stephen Norrington's *Blade* (1998), David Slade's *30 Days of Night* (2007), and Jim Mickle's *Stake Land* (2010).

While the first half of the book consists of original and persuasive arguments regarding the theological and monstrous aspects of the vampire, the enterprise of drawing up a 'best of' list of what the author considers the most representative films and novels is in itself risky. Nonetheless, it is interesting to see what Peacock extracts from each of them in order to trace the various aspects that make the vampire 'such a dark thing'. In spite of its shortcomings, this is a book that scholars of both horror and theology will surely appreciate.

Laura Davidel

***Women and the Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. by Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik**
(Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016)

One of the many strengths of *Women and the Gothic* is its timing. Edited by Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, the book has emerged as 2016 unfolds as a period of tremendous change, particularly in respect to politics and women. Women have recently gained significant political power, and the chance to alter the course of Western history dramatically. *Women and the Gothic* therefore appears at a crucial time, and is an excellent contribution to the ongoing conversations concerning women, feminism, and gender.

The above events may appear unrelated to gothic literature but, as Horner and Zlosnik outline in the book's introduction, the analysis presented here is contextualised within wider political discourses. The editors muse upon the changing face of feminism, with recent online activities such as the Everyday Sexism Project reflecting a general movement to 'revive feminism' (p. 2). The events listed above very much contribute to this, as discussions about feminism are evident within mainstream debate. It is against this backdrop that the book re-engages with the gothic and seeks to analyse women's place within it. The central argument in Horner's and Zlosnik's introduction — which is reinforced by every chapter — is simple: