

POOR POLIDORI

GRANDAD OF THE CONTEMPORARY VAMPIRE

for The Midnight Society



presented by

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INTRODUCTION

Being in the market of writing dark fiction, it follows that much of my time is spent mired in the shadowy stuff. What you have in front of you is the results of my efforts researching, documenting, and dallying in everything from the arcane to the supernatural.

I've been writing fiction for several years, and have acted as a contributor for a number of online publications in the same timespan. Where possible, articles have been researched and referenced with citations.

You're holding a sampling of the the fun stuff that fuels my practice that other institutions, organizations, communities, and blogs were kind enough to publish.

If you'd like to work with me, make a suggestion for future articles, or alert me that the world is ending and I ought to backup my hard drive, feel free to send a note.

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POOR POLIDORI

for The Midnight Society

In the summer of 1816, a group of artists, poets, and friends gathered together at the Villa Diodati on Lake Geneva in Switzerland. Sounds quaint enough. So here's the dirt, and I'm paraphrasing liberally from a couple of different sources: Mary Shelly's step-sister, Claire Clairmont, had the idea: she was hooking up with Lord Byron and even though he wasn't really feeling it, she decided to "surprise" him in Switzerland though he never really invited her along for the trip. With her, Claire brought Mary and her main squeeze, Percy, along for kicks. Percy Blyse Shelly and Lord Byron hit it off, but Lord Byron had a travelling companion too: his physician, but his physician thought he was just hanging out because Lord Byron liked his company rather than, you know, attending to Lord Byron's health. Bit of a burn, thinking Lord Byron was cool with you, when in fact you weren't part of the squad.

The physician in question was John William Polidori, and he was nineteen.

So let's be clear: 1816's got a nickname. They call it "a year without a summer" because the weather was sorta crap. It's also called the "summer of horror" because a movie was made about this villa hangout in Geneva and what happened while this motley crew was trying to entertain themselves. During a three-day long storm, and following Lord Byron's reading of a German book of ghost stories called *Fantasmagoriana*, Lord Byron challenged those present to write their own stories of thrills and terror.

Mary Shelly (then, still Mary Godwin because she and Percy hadn't yet tied the knot — they'd do that in December) went off to write *Frankenstein*. Lord Byron wrote a few chapters of something that never was finished. And John William Polidori — who was neither a writer nor a poet though he dabbled in literature — produced a story that sowed the seed



for the vampire becoming a romantic figure.

Prior to *The Vampyre*'s publication, the creature was usually recognized as a monster — not the sort of thing you find circulating in polite society, seducing its victims, and sipping their blood.

This is to say that in 1819 when Polidori wrote *The Vampyre*, Lord Ruthven was the origin figure in a legacy that spawned Bram Stoker's *Count Dracula*, Anne Rice's *Lestat*, and probably Stephenie Meyer's *Edward*... if you could call that sparkly atrocity a romantic anything. I dunno. A sparkly vegetarian block of rock? Different strokes for different folks.

INSPIRATION FOR “THE VAMPYRE”

Polidori might've been feeling a bit burnt about the whole affair at Diodati. Lord Byron was a presence: He was a charming devil, established already in the literary world as a poet, and he had a reputation with the ladies (and some of the men too.) He was eccentric, captivating, mesmeric, fabulous, sensational, and notorious. To be his friend was to be part of the “in crowd”, but Polidori might've taken things out of context when Byron asked him to tag along.

The Polidori-Byron relationship was fraught from the outset. At their first meeting, over dinner, Polidori requested that Byron read from one of his plays. Surrounded by friends who couldn't resist a good laugh, Byron obliged, and Polidori left the table to pace the streets embarrassed and angry that his efforts were being ridiculed. Traveling together, Byron was annoyed that Polidori frequently experienced travel sickness, and Polidori has miffed by Byron's larger-than-life arrogance. Polidori was moody and petulant, and Byron often took the opportunity to knock him down a few pegs. Polidori only wanted to be considered Byron's equal, but hey — Byron is Byron. Humility wasn't really his thing. This wore on Polidori, so it's understandable to imagine that Byron was sucking the life out of him.

THE VAMPYRE: PLOT, THANKS TO WIKIPEDIA

Aubrey, a young Englishman, meets Lord Ruthven, a man of mysterious origins who has entered London society. Aubrey accompanies Ruthven to Rome, but leaves him after Ruthven seduces the daughter of a mutual acquaintance. Aubrey travels to Greece, where he



becomes attracted to Ianthe, an innkeeper's daughter. Ianthe tells Aubrey about the legends of the vampire. Ruthven arrives at the scene and shortly thereafter Ianthe is killed by a vampire. Aubrey does not connect Ruthven with the murder and rejoins him in his travels. The pair is attacked by bandits and Ruthven is mortally wounded. Before he dies, Ruthven makes Aubrey swear an oath that he will not mention his death or anything else he knows about Ruthven for a year and a day. Looking back, Aubrey realizes that everyone whom Ruthven met ended up suffering.

Aubrey returns to London and is amazed when Ruthven appears shortly thereafter, alive and well. Ruthven reminds Aubrey of his oath to keep his death a secret. Ruthven then begins to seduce Aubrey's sister while Aubrey, helpless to protect his sister, has a nervous breakdown. Ruthven and Aubrey's sister are engaged to marry on the day the oath ends. Just before he dies, Aubrey writes a letter to his sister revealing Ruthven's history, but it does not arrive in time. Ruthven marries Aubrey's sister. On the wedding night, she is discovered dead, drained of her blood — and Ruthven has vanished.

LORD BYRON, THE BULLY

It's not hard to imagine that Byron inspired Lord Ruthven's character. It wouldn't be the first time either, as there existed another Byron-inspired character by the name of Lord Ruthven in *Glenarvon* by Lady Caroline Lamb, also published in 1816.

Here's the kicker: when *The Vampyre* went to publication in 1819, the publisher made a very large boo boo:

They published *The Vampyre* with an authorial attribution to the figure that inspired the story — Lord Byron — but not Polidori who actually wrote it. In fact, the story was only completed for a friend of Polidori's outside of the Shelly-Byron circle, and it lay forgotten for three years before Henry Colburn picked it up and funneled it into *New Monthly Magazine* with Byron's name on it.

Byron denied that it was his work though the critical response favored it, while Polidori fought to reclaim *The Vampyre* as his own. Multiple reprints and reissues were put into the world while Polidori scrambled to assert that the rights belonged to him. He even tried to reissue the work as his own, but was rejected as a plagiarist. Disgusted, he left the literary world to pursue the training of a monk, but was rejected on the grounds that he'd written



such an unsavory thing as *The Vampire*. Irony. Polidori tried to pick up law while using his mother's maiden name to escape his reputation, but fell into gambling instead.

At twenty-five, unable to escape the shadow that Lord Byron cast over him, and unable to re-establish his damaged reputation, Polidori drank a beaker of cyanide (prussic acid) and took his own life.

“Poor Polidori,” wrote Byron when he heard of the young man's passing, “it seems that disappointment was the cause of this rash act. He had entertained too sanguine hopes of literary fame.”

You can read Polidori's diary pertaining to Byron and Shelly here, or read *The Vampyre* in its entirety here.

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ABOUT THE PUBLICATION

The Midnight Society

“Poor Polidori: Granddad of the contemporary vampire” was written by Kira Butler, and appeared at *The Midnight Society* on October 29, 2016.

<http://midnightsocietytales.com/2016/10/29/poor-polidori-granddad-of-the-contemporary-vampire/>



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kira Butler writes speculative fiction for adults, new adults, and young adult readers. She especially appreciates dark urban fantasy and low key horror, and likes to write about everything in between. She lives in Montreal, where she is working towards the completion of her first young adult horror novel.



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