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“The Very Globe Came Undone”: Ontological Negation in Enoch Campion’s The Tragedy of Dracule

Ed Simon

“I thrice shall nail the papal crown to his head/ as nail’d I the Saracens’ turbans theirs.” In act 4 scene 4 of Enoch Campion’s 1592 play The Tragedy of Dracule, the titular antagonist confronts with reptilian efficacy three Ottoman envoys sent by Sultan Mehmed II. The Wallachian prince, described as having serpent eye and tongue, hisses to his prisoners, saying “Your charge Constantinople’s scourge may be/but now a high’r god your souls sent to be/not to the sheep Nazarene false as yours / nor to the stiff-neck’d Jews’ God of Mos’ic law / for three in one, and one in three, all these / gods strut, lie, and die, three imposters all.” The dramatic action is placed in a Hungarian monastery, where the plays massive central personality, Vlad Tepes, son of Vlad Dracule of the House of Dragon has spent the entire scene torturing the unfortunate diplomats. The scene isn’t out of character for Vlad, as the scholarly and apocryphal tradition which has accumulated around the fragmentary text has it that the character

2 Ibid. 12.

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has spent four acts murdering his way across Hungary, Romania, Saxony, the Balkans, and the Ottoman Empire. Now, after scenes which apparently included implement, dismemberment, rape, infanticide, and cannibalism, we reach the narrative denouement in which the arch-heretic sinner explicates his nihilistic non-theology, his “ontological negation” as philosopher Adolph Trachtenberg describes it.

Mathias Blum writes in *Akiva’s Garden* that “No play in the Renaissance canon, no play in the English canon, no play in literature is as terrifying as *The Tragedy of Dracule*, not because of what it says, but because of what it doesn’t say.” This play will examine these themes of negation which surround the rich folkloric extra textual tradition associated with a play none of us have ever been able to see performed in its entirety, fusing both the archival scholarship of Eamonn Peters with the hermeneutic interpretations of Trachtenberg.

In the only surviving monologue from the mythic play which exists more as lacunae than as reality, Vlad continues his speech, saying “Nor to Asmo’dus, Belial, or Moloch / shall a scorch’d sacrifice of you be made / for as true as their persons shall be / truer still is King Nothing, the only / God beyond me.” Campion’s unwieldy stage directions which follow read “Vlad does nail the Saracen’s turbans to their pate, using the real actors as real sacrifice, collects real blood to make Cornish pasty for later.” Say what you will about Shakespeare’s “Exeunt, pursued by a bear,” what Campion lacks in pithiness he makes up for in sheer horrifying shock value. Plays are rarely notable for their stage directions; amazingly the previously quoted section isn’t even the most infamous one in *The Tragedy of Dracule*, that distinc-

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3 Mercer remains the best resource for narrative description of Campion’s play, albeit his is a study that is light on theoretical interpretation.
7 Ibid.
tion being reserved for the paradoxical and counterintuitive one which ends the play in act 5 scene 5 which reads with an intense apophatic minimalism “Thus God dies.”

A fitting ending to an unsettling play, or at least an unsettling play insomuch as we’re able to piece together any details about it, the entirety of that which remains from the cursed text fitting on less than five pages. *The Tragedy of Dracule*, as it survives in quotation, fragment, conjecture, description, innuendo, rumor, curse, and incantation is almost less a work of literature than it is a type of spell, a lost grimoire unraveling the fabric of reality itself. Nothingness is at the core of this play, which itself has become a nothing. But where other scholars have gone through the painstaking work of compiling secondary quote and praying for some archival magic where a complete manuscript exists, hoping that some palimpsest in some dingy English library contains all of Campion’s eponymous work, I argue that the play itself never actually existed, and that as a type of potential non-existent literature its most potent aesthetic and philosophical contribution is in its very Nothingness. Note that I am not claiming that the play’s existence is a hoax per se, but rather that *The Tragedy of Dracule* is itself its own type of textual object which could be viewed as an ontological negation.

Despite the non-existence of either foul or fair papers, much less a complete printed version, *The Tragedy of Dracule* has haunted the periphery of textual scholarship. For those familiar with the critical murmurings about the text, no play in the Jacobean repertoire has had the reputation for pure unmitigated violence, horror, or perversion as Campion’s gothic stage nightmare. According to secondary contemporary sources, in his highly fictionalized retelling of the rule of the sixteenth-century Wallachian prince Vlad Tepes, the shadowy Campion presented a blood-soaked drama which was not to be matched by *Titus*

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8 Ibid. 66.
Andronicus, ’Tis a Pity She’s a Whore, The Duchess of Malfi, or Tamburlaine.9

Departing from the already nebulous moral world of Senecan revenge tragedy, Campion’s only written text gained a reputation not just for licentiousness and barbarism, but indeed occult powers as well. William Prynne in his 1640 Diabolicon wrote,

Of the whoremongers and blasphemers who plyed their infernal trades amongst the dens and brothels and bear-pits of Southwark, not even Marlowe matched the demonic Campion, the strange wizard and reviled master of necromantic arts, whose hateful Dracule charged a power that made the threads unravel, the knots come loosed, and the very Globe came undone, so that being itself should be strangled.10

Indeed while The Tragedy of Dracule was performed supposedly only three times, it was that final performance which would draw Prynne’s horrified reaction.

First staged in the attic of The Bishop’s Miter in 1592, before its author had yet disappeared, scholar Eamonn Peters has made a convincing case that the work was performed as a sort of ritualistic closet drama, with its various roles read by members of the infamous School of Night, possibly including Marlow, Walter Raleigh, Thomas Harriot, John Dee, and Campion itself, though as Peters reports the actors only got to the fourth act, as a fire below had broken out and interrupted their performance.11 The wider London public would not be presented with the play until 1620 at the Blackfriars, when halfway through the second act a representative of the Privy Council arrived and stopped the production. The players, as well as Cuthbert Burbage, one of the theater’s shareholders, were all sent immediately to New-


gate.\textsuperscript{12} Ostensibly the production was interrupted because James I feared that the anti-Catholicism of \textit{The Tragedy of Dracule} would offend representatives of the Hapsburg Crown, as Prince Charles was involved in negotiations to marry the Spanish infanta, but even Prynne for whom nothing could be too anti-Catholic didn’t believe that this was the actual reason for the play’s closing.\textsuperscript{13} \textit{The Tragedy of Dracule}’s final and only complete performance supposedly occurred at midnight on Walpurgis Night at Tyburn Field in 1640, on the eve of civil war.\textsuperscript{14} According to Prynne, several observers, and general legend surrounding that event, the words of the occult play itself were so powerful that “meaning was if as no meaning,” the very substance of reality becoming terrifyingly nullified.\textsuperscript{15}

The play itself supposedly saw only one printing, though only some paratextual remnants of dubious legitimacy remain, and the only portions of the play’s dialogue that survive are in quotation from Campion’s critics. Needless to say the play was never listed in the Stationer’s Register. While I concur with Peters’s contention that the play should be read as occult closet drama—more ritual than play—I further his argument concerning the deficit of actual archival material. The small community of scholars familiar with \textit{The Tragedy of Dracule} hold out hope that a printing or even a manuscript might exist in its entirety; Peters, on the other hand claims that the play was an unusual instance of oral, performed literature where participants were formally forbidden from recording the play in its entirety, rather agreeing to commit the ritual to memory.

Though Campion’s biography is slightly more transparent than that of his infamous play, the details of his life are still difficult to fully verify. Prynne claims that he was “raised in the old abominable faith of popery,” though whether he has any familial connection to rescuency is impossible to ascertain.\textsuperscript{16} Other

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} Ibid. 185.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Ibid. 186.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Ibid. 187.
\item \textsuperscript{15} William Prynne, \textit{Diabolicon} (London, 1640), 4,368.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 4,366.
\end{itemize}
sources claim that Campion was born in Devonshire in the mid-
sixteenth century amongst a community where a still surviving
Celtic paganism endured. In the realm of the more verifiable,
there are in the records of the parish of Torbay, baptismal re-
cords indicating that an “Enoch Campion” was welcomed into
the Church of England in 1562 at the Church of St. Barlaam and
Josaphat, and most scholars have agreed that this record refers
to the author of The Tragedy of Dracule.\footnote{Mercer, \textit{Source Materials for Campion's Dracule}, ix.}
In his only extant, ver-
ified book entitled \textit{Of the Seventh Generation}, Campion gives
little biographical information himself, other than to write “I
come from that West Country where the sun dies at night and
the pitter-patter of the old gods’ feet still beat out their demon
rhythm at midnight,” which would seem to verify his Devon-
shire origin.\footnote{Enoch Campion, \textit{Of the Seventh Generation} (London, 1590), 52.}

Campion’s presence in the necromantic circles of Elizabethan
London is well established, though his origins were shadowy to
his compatriots, men like Dee and Simon Forman. Both knew
Campion, though neither could speak with any authority about
the man’s circumstances, with Dee writing in 1601, “Some have
seen the Cornishman in the scrying mirrors, some call for his
Enochian magic, though none know his true name.”\footnote{John Dee, \textit{Ecstasticks I Hath Known} (London, 1601), 17.}
The oc-
cultist William Lilly, who did not know Campion personally
but who had some associates in common wrote in 1658 that “In
the years before war many have spoken of the Druid Campion
whose words could undo words.”\footnote{William Lilly, \textit{The Theocosmologiometaophysinopticon} (London, 1658), 139.}
Indeed one of the most pro-
vocative aspects of the Campion mythos is that for as shadowy
as the circumstances of his birth may be, there is simply no re-
cord of his death. Similar to the legends of immortality which
surround figures like the Count St. Germaine, a tradition grew
which claimed Campion never died, with anecdotal stories of
his presence as a member of Sir Francis Dashwood’s Hell-Fire
Club of rakes in the eighteenth century, his presence in French
Symbolist poetics circles in the nineteenth, and even a reported sighting of Campion in Manhattan by noted occultist Crowley Jean Bucknell at a diner at 1st Ave. and 62nd in 1957. Lilly claimed that Campion’s colleagues hewed to a more Faustian understanding of the master’s demise, writing that Campion “walked with Satan: and he was no more; for Satan took him.”

For all of the richness of Campion apocrypha, I argue that a close examination of the available references to where and when the play was performed, as well as the contents of the play, should avail us of the belief that the play ever really existed at all, whether as material object or as performed piece. Indeed the non-existence of The Tragedy of Dracule is its chief aesthetic and metaphysical accomplishment, for the spoken play is not the real play, and whereof we cannot perform we must remain silent. I base this interpretation on a single cryptic line from the only extant text by Campion, an unusual commonplace book that doubles as a type of grimoire entitled Of the Seventh Generation. This heterodox compendium of folklore, heretical theology, theurgy, metaphysical speculation, and memoir is the only verified writing of the shadowy Campion. Recalling both the prose style and the varied interests of writers a century later, like Thomas Browne and Robert Burton, Campion provides an engaging and full portrait of a human mind—unfortunately that human mind was one that was undeniably twisted. The lurid content of the text has helped it to develop a reputation of being a sort of sadist’s Voynich Manuscript, which may speak to the fact that the trustees of Wordsworth & Southey College whose special collections department owns the only copy Of the Seventh Generation set a strict quota of the number of scholars allowed to consult the work and placed a time limit of one hour per decade for all approved researchers. Scholars sign a waiver promising to quote no more than 1% of the book in any of their publications. As such, few have read the book, even less in its entirety, and no one should expect a comprehensive edi-

21 Ayeslboro, “A Play that You’ll Never See,” 27.
22 Lilly, The Theocosmologiometaphysinopticon, 142.
tion available to the wider public anytime soon, as the gift of the book to Wordsworth & Southey College by trustee Andrew Carnegie in 1898 stipulated that “This is a wicked book for wicked men, and none but the prepared shall read it.”

It was during my reading Of the Seventh Generation that I came across an unpublished line, where Campion writes, “The Romists worship a cracked statue after the schismatics smash idols and rood screens, but the Puritans make a Pope of paper; rather in the ending there will be the word and the word will not be with us for the word will unravel, and the chief word shall be that which was never uttered but shall still have been heard.”

Though my hypothesis remains tentative, I conjecture not that Campion did not write The Tragedy of Dracule, rather that he did in another dimension, and that the incantatory power of the play was such that it did just what it promised to do — literally erase itself from the very fabric of reality. The play did once exist, but like a god who commits suicide, it achieves the new status of never having existed even though it once did, in a past that no longer is, in a universe just next door that we can never go to.

Trachtenberg writes in his classic The Patterson Aphorisms that

[t]he English play of the Dracule is not just an atheistic nihilism, but a nihilism beyond mere nihilism, that negates negations themselves, a negative assertion beyond both paradox and tautology so as to be a type of hyper-paradox, a negation of a negation that is neither Hegelian dialectic generating a new positive, nor simply negation, but an apophatic nothingness that gestures to an emptiness which undoes existence.

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23 Andrew Carnegie, letter to trustees of Wordsworth & Southey College, June 9, 1898.
24 Campion, Of the Seventh Generation, 66.
What could be more vexing than a text for which there is no text, where we have nothing we are able to interpret, but that we fear still has the power to interpret us?
Bibliography


