Corpse or Changeling? ——An Irish Folkloric Aspect of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*[1]

Masaya Shimokusu

The Irish-born Bram Stoker (1847-1912) incorporates various Irish motifs in *Dracula* (1897). There are already two book-length studies of the relationships between the novel and Ireland: David Glover's *Vampires, Mummies, and Liberals* (1996) and Joseph Valente's *Dracula's Crypt* (2002). Delclan Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland* (1995), Terry Eagleton's *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* (1995), and Seamus Deane's *A Short History of Irish Literature* (1986) also locate Stoker and his work in the genealogy of Anglo-Irish literature. *Dracula* was published in the heyday of the Irish Literary Revival, when Irish folklore and folktales were being variously articulated and transformed into poems or dramas. It can be supposed that Stoker may have shared the same source of imagination with contemporary Irish writers such as Lady Wilde, Lady Gregory or W. B. Yeats.

Among other things, this paper will examine the motifs of "changeling" folktales in *Dracula*. In the course of my argument, both folktales about the abduction of babies and about the kidnapping of newly-wed or pregnant females will be considered to be "changeling" folktales, though such classification is contrary to Stith Thompson's standard *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (1975). The reason is that the young W. B. Yeats categorized both types of story as "changeling" tales in his *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888). In discussing "changeling" motifs in *Dracula*, it seems reasonable to follow Yeats's contemporary understanding of how

such stories should be categorized.

In the bible of Irish folklore studies, *A Handbook of Irish Folklore* (1942), Seán Ó Súilleabháin points to various conditions or factors which collectors of folklore working in Ireland should pay attention to. Collecting "changeling" folklore, Ó Súilleabháin suggests that two questions should be asked: "When people suspected that a changeling had been substituted for a human being, what methods did they adopt to prove their suspicions true?" (475); and "What methods were adopted to banish changelings and secure the return of the abducted person?" (476). These questions will be kept in mind during the present study, and I will focus on how the characters in *Dracula*, especially the male ones, react to victims who seem to have been "spiritually" abducted by supernatural beings, and how their actions are observed and recorded in the text. By examining these, we can notice the shadows of Irish fairies or fairy-doctors haunting the text of this Irish-born writer's novel. Also, I will examine how a female character in *Dracula* avoids being a victim of supernatural or superstitious rituals by observing and recording every matter related to the vampire like a 19th-century folklorist.

Before investigating *Dracula*, it is worth emphasizing that even in the late 19th century, folk belief in "changelings" had not wholly faded: they were not creatures existing only for entertainment in storytellers' tales. Three examples can be given here. The first is the work of Sir William Wilde, published in the middle of the century. While his wife, Lady Wilde, collected folktales or pieces of folkloric knowledge for artistic reasons, as a surgeon and eye doctor, Doctor Wilde, in his *Irish Popular Superstitions* (1852), drew attention to what his rivals, "fairy doctors" or "herb doctors," did to their patients or clients. He recorded some cases in which

superstitious folklore caused misery. The following is a good illustration:

> [A] country newspaper informs us of the body of a child having been disinterred at Oran, in the County Roscommon, and its arms cut off, to be employed in the performances of certain mystic rites. About a year ago a man in the county of Kerry roasted his child to death, under the impression that it was a fairy. He was not brought to trial, as the crown prosecutor mercifully looked upon him as insane. (28)

As W. B. Yeats, Lady Wilde and Lafcadio Hearn point out,[2] threatening a fairy disguised as a human being with fire was one of the most popular and dependable ways to force it to reveal its true identity. Dr. Wilde's descriptions may be categorized as reportage, not a catalogue of dead knowledge. In another passage, he indicates that recently-confined females were sometimes regarded as substitutes left by fairy kidnappers. Some pregnant women suffered from mental aberration, which was superstitiously associated with fairy abduction in some rural areas of 19th-century Ireland (128).

A second example is an incident that occurred two years before the publication of *Dracula*, that is, in 1895. In the village of Tipperary, Ballyvadlly, a peasant named Michael Cleary and his relatives were arrested on suspicion of murdering Michael's wife, Bridget Cleary.[3] Michael and Bridget lived in a very rural village, and Bridget was rumoured to have a paramour. Moreover, she was skilled at sewing and sold eggs, so she had her own ways of earning a living. Thus, Michael's patriarchal position at home was insecure. When Bridget became ill, Michael fanatically believed that his own wife had been abducted by fairies. His relatives shared his

fear and anxiety, and performed superstitious rituals in order to establish whether the woman before them was really human or not. When Michael killed Bridget, he believed that what he had burned to death was a fairy, not his wife. Furthermore, he suggested that they should ambush his "real" wife riding on a white horse with a fairy prince at a hill beside the village. This case was widely reported by contemporary newspapers.[4] Of course, a contemporary centralized legal system of the British empire never tolerated the crime of Bridget's husband. Nevertheless, it is also true that even at the end of the 19th century, superstitious belief, preserved in folktales of changeling fairies, could prompt horrible domestic violence just like the cases which Doctor Wilde collected in the middle of the century.

The last example is "purely" an artistic one. W. B. Yeats's play, *The Land of Heart's Desire* (1894), is based on a folktale of bride abduction. While its scene of the drama is set "at a remote time" (7), the play itself was produced in the end of the 19th century; the drama was contemporary with *Dracula*. Yeats turned the folktale into a highly symbolic drama. A young woman is trapped in a mundane rural life. A fairy child tempts her to fly to another world. After she is spiritually taken away, she is physically dead. The woman's mother-in-law consoles her son by saying: "Come from that image; body and soul are gone/ You have thrown your arms about a drift of leaves,/ Or bole of an ash-tree changed into her image" (44). In the play, a fantastic and unrealistic fairy child actually appears on the stage. However, despite this fantastic element, some scenes in Yeats's drama seem to reflect how folk belief in changelings actually functioned in real communities. Brides who were bored with rural domestic life and constantly nagged by their mothers-in-law must have sometimes vanished or eloped. In such situations, resort to belief in fairy kidnapping was a way of explaining what might otherwise

have been distressing. Or, if a husband experienced the sudden death of his newly-wed wife and could believe that her corpse was a piece of wood left by a fairy as a substitute for his spouse, he may have found a way to deal with his loss. Yeats's drama does not show how to "secure the return of the abducted person," but how to cope with the disappearance of a family member.[5]

Bram Stoker had plenty of opportunities to absorb Irish folklore. It is well-known that he had an intimate relationship with the Wilde family. He was one of the frequent visitors to Sir William and Lady "Francesca" Wilde's salon, and both Bram and Oscar went to Trinity College Dublin. It can hardly be supposed that Stoker did not read the folkloric books by the Wildes. In his youth, Stoker visited various local districts of Ireland as a clerk of petty sessions working for the Dublin Castle. He thus had many opportunities to contact locals in various districts of late 19th-century Ireland (Belford 59-69).

Some folktale tellers can be found in Stoker's works. *The Snake's Pass* (1890), a thriller published seven years before *Dracula*, is Stoker's first and only novel with an Irish setting. In the early part of the novel, in a tavern in the remote west of Ireland, a variety of uncanny legends about the district are narrated by local Irish peasants—tales about the treasure of the French Army arriving there at the end of the 18th century or about the golden crown of the ancient king of snakes: Stoker evokes a scene in which folktales are being told and some pieces of folklore are shown by locals beside the fire (18-31). Interestingly, after the climax of the novel, readers learn that the treasures spoken of by the natives "really" exist under the ground of the remote west of Ireland.

In *Dracula*, the stories told by an old fisherman, Swale, at Whitby are also

interesting. Swale tells young ladies visiting the port town, Mina Murray and Lucy Westenra, many stories related to tombstones; tombs without corpses or unhappy relationship between a mother and her handicapped son (65-68). His stories have realistic details and do not sound like nonsense fairy tales. In Stoker's novels, locals often narrate stories sounding real, and even some of them are finally revealed as true.

My argument concerning *Dracula* will lead to an investigation of the relationship between the ladies abducted by the vampire and their intimates. Dracula the vampire comes from the world of superstition and folklore. In the novel, in referring to Transylvania, Jonathan Harker, the first narrator of the story, states that "I read that every known superstition in the world is gathered into the horseshoe of the Carpathians, as if it were the centre of some sort of imaginative whirlpool" (10). It is well-known that Stoker frequently visited the Reading Room of the British Museum to research the customs and folklore of Eastern Europe.[6] While some of these are faithfully represented in the text of *Dracula*, some are modified or transformed in order to suit the story. One good example is the appearance and social status of the vampires. In many existing accounts of vampires in 18th-century Eastern or Central Europe, those regarded as vampires were the corpses of peasants with abnormal burials, not aristocrats living in castles. When a plague began to prevail in a village just after a peasant died, his or her tomb was often dug up in order to repel the plague. The corpse, which was supposed to be a vampire responsible for the epidemic, had a stake driven into the heart and was cremated.[7] Stoker amalgamated various pieces of peasant folklore with the historical figure of Vlad the Impaler to create his own ideal vampiric figure. As this example shows, the sources which Stoker referred to were often transformed to fit his storyline or settings. Stoker's

Irish origin and knowledge of Irish peasantry and folklore are likely to have influenced such a transformation of the information which he made use of in the novel.

Vampires in *Dracula* abduct babies, and Dracula likes attacking newly-wed ladies just as fairies always abduct people at liminal stages in their lives. The first narrator, Jonathan Harker, is also a victim of kidnapping, though he is lured into crossing the threshold of Dracula's castle by himself. Harker is at a liminal stage in his life; he is an apprentice to a solicitor and has a fiancée with whom his new life is about to start. Harker is confined in Dracula's castle and faces horrid experiences. He is seduced by three female vampires. As many critics point out, the number three is important in *Dracula*.[8] The number three is also a magical number in many folktales in the world, including Irish ones. For example, at the end of the 19th century, Jeremiah Curtin collected Irish myths and legends and published them under the title of *Myths and Folk Tales of Ireland* in 1890. Most of the stories compiled in the book are filled with the number three—stories entitled "The Three Daughters of King O'Hara" or "The Three Daughters of the King of the East, and the Son of a King in Erin" for instance. Conspicuously, a protagonist in "The Weaver's Son and the Giant of the White Hill" gets through three blockades to save his three sisters (Curtin 26-36). Count Dracula kidnaps babies or infants for his three brides. However, in this case, Dracula does not seem to leave any substitutes for them, as the fairies in "changeling" stories do. We can guess that this is so because one local woman visits the Castle of Dracula and vehemently demands that the Count return her children (48-9). The abducted infants seem to be the vampires' "food."

After Dracula gets to the British mainland, he begins to hunt ladies

who are also in transitional periods in their lives. His first target is Lucy Westenra. The lady is described as a woman who is about to deviate from the social and moral standards of Victorian society. She is extraordinarily attractive and is proposed to by three men on the same day. (It is worth emphasizing again the use of the number three.) Her remark on this occasion violates Victorian ethical sense: “Why can’t they let a girl marry three men, or as many as want her, and save all this trouble?” (60). In addition, when Lucy and Mina Murray are at Whitby, Lucy shows the symptom of sleepwalking and sneaks out of her room in the midnight. Although she seems to be mesmerized by the supernatural power of Dracula, in this scene Lucy is also described as a lady who unintentionally or unconsciously gets over the boundaries of safe zones.

After the incident at Whitby, Lucy becomes ill through loss of blood, but no one apart from Professor Van Helsing can work out what has been badly influencing her health. Van Helsing has often been called a “psychic doctor” by critics, but his knowledge of superstitious or folkloric subjects makes him look like a “fairy doctor,” or “herb doctor,” in Irish folktales or in the episodes recorded by Sir William Wilde.

Although Van Helsing and his followers take various supernatural measures, Lucy passes away. However, the real horror starts just after her death because her corpse turns into an inhuman creature. As Dracula abducted locals’ babies for his three brides in Transylvania, the thing, which was formerly Lucy, kidnaps infants for her terrible diet. Actually, her body is not taken away, but we should not overlook the fact that only her spirit is replaced by a demon. Lucy’s fiancé, the Honorable Arthur Holmwood, asks, “Is this really Lucy’s body, or only a demon in her shape?” Van Helsing’s answer is: “It is her body, and yet not it. . .” (190).

This comment of Van Helsing's can be linked with the scene in *The Land of Heart's Desire* in which the Irish peasant's young wife dies. Her body is there; only her spirit is taken away to the fairy world. Angela Bourke's discussion of the relationship between the changeling folktale and Oscar Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* is also suggestive. Dorian's body stays in the real world, but his soul or spiritual part is carried away to the inside of a picture which is given mythical power by Basil the painter ("Hunting Out the Fairies" 42-3).[9]

In *Dracula*, Lucy's close male friends intend to regain the real Lucy who was abducted to an unknown world just like Michael Cleary after burning his own wife. They ambush their lady at the cemetery where she is buried. While the vampirized Lucy roams around in the night, it gets back to a corpse in the daytime. To make the corpse "God's true dead" (193), they must reveal Lucy's tomb and follow a terrible laborious process. Following the instructions of fairy doctor Van Helsing, they perform superstitious and incredibly violent acts with her corpse:

> 'Go on,' said Arthur [Holmwood, the former fiancé of Lucy] hoarsely. 'Tell me what I am to do.'
>
> 'Take this stake in your left hand, ready to place the point over the heart, and the hammer in your right. Then when we begin our prayer for the dead—I shall read him, I have here the book, and the others shall follow—strike in God's name, that so all may be well with the dead that we love, and that the Un-Dead pass away.' (191)

After Arthur obediently follows Van Helsing's instructions, they decapitate Lucy's corpse and stuff the mouth with garlic. Except for the pseudo-

sacramental action, there is little allusion to Ireland in this scene. Nevertheless, the relationship between the humiliated corpse of Lucy and her close male relatives seems to mirror actual cases of domestic violence or destruction of corpses in the countryside of 19th-century Ireland as a result of superstitious fairy belief.

In *Dracula*, there is another lady who should be discussed in this context: the newly-wed Mina Harker, the former Mina Murray. Because she is also at a transitional stage in her life and surrounded by the male team violating corpses everywhere, she naturally becomes another victim of Dracula. She is forced to drink the vampire's blood and destined to be one of blood-thirsty creatures. This talented lady is extraordinarily intelligent. Her intelligence seems to disturb the male-centred public sphere of the Victorian era, and it is worth recalling the fact that Bridget Cleary had the means of earning money—sewing and selling eggs—which destabilized her husband's patriarchal position at home (Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget* Ch.3). One of Mina's prominent skills is operating a typewriter, which allowed many talented Victorian ladies to engage with the public sphere. At the final stage of the novel, she determines to type every piece of information related to Dracula and compile and examine the existing records on the vampire:

> . . . I [Mina] asked them [Dr Van Helsing and his fellows] all to lie down for half an hour whilst I should enter everything up to the moment. I feel so grateful to the man who invented the 'Traveller's' typewriter, and to Mr Morris for getting this one for me. I should have felt quite astray doing the work if I had to write with a pen. . .
>
> I have asked Dr Van Helsing, and he has got me all the papers that I have not yet seen . . . Whilst they are resting, I shall go over all

> carefully, and perhaps I may arrive at some conclusion. I shall try to follow the Professor's example, and think without prejudice on the facts before me. . . (303-304)

Her persistent efforts successfully shape the ephemeral folkloric monster into a clear cut image. Thanks to her rational inferences and writing, the male vampire hunters could catch up with Dracula and destroy the vampire. Dracula's death lifts the curse on Mina, and as a result, she can avoid being another victim of supernatural and superstitious rituals conducted by the vampire hunters including her own husband.

Taking account of Mina's writing, it is worth investigating what happens to Lucy's writing when she becomes a victim of Dracula. After Lucy collapses due to the vampire's attack, she stops writing her diary and letters; her voice and ways of writing disappear from the text while one of her admirers and abusers, Dr. Seward, minutely describes how they humiliate her corpse.

On the other hand, Mina never loses her ability to write though surrounded by potential attackers. In her description of the last battle between the vampire and its hunters, no ritual takes place to destroy Dracula. The vampire is just stubbed out, and its body "crumble[s] into dust" (325) and disappears. In Mina Harker's description, no humiliation of the corpse is permitted to the superstitious abusers.

In the late 19th century, belief in fairies still haunted the mindset of Irish people. In this period, contemporary writers with Irish origins wrote or produced various literary works with Irish folkloric motifs including fairy belief. Among others, the "changeling" was one of the most conspicuous motifs in their works. In the Irish-born Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, the leitmotif

of the “changeling” is also prominent. Its male characters persistently humiliate one of the female victims who seems to be spiritually kidnapped by the vampire though they once attempted to save her. On the other hand, the female protagonist of the novel, Mina Harker, does not fully depend on the male supernatural hunters. She records what is going on by herself, and succeeds in avoiding becoming one of the brides of the demonic monster, and at the same time, another victim of supernatural and superstitious rituals.

Notes

1 This article is based on a paper read at the IASIL (The International Association for the Study of Irish Literatures) Conference at University College Dublin on the 17th of July, 2007. The research from which this paper was developed had been funded by a special research grant from the Dean of the Faculty of Cultural Policy and Management, Shizuoka University of Art and Culture. I wish to thank Dr. David Chandler for his helpful suggestions and editorial assistance.

2 See Lady Wilde *passim*, especially vol. II, 173-4, Yeats, *Fairy and Folk Tales* 47, and Hearn 333-334. Many babies were suspected of being “changelings,” and Hearn points out that “[h]undreds of children were actually burned alive by their own mothers” (333).

3 The story of Bridget and Michael is told in the nonfiction book, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* (1999), by Angela Bourke.

4 Coincidently, articles about the trial of Oscar Wilde were juxtaposed with Michael Cleary’s story in contemporary newspapers.

5 On the relationship between the frustrated newly-wed wife and Irish folkloric elements in the play of Yeats, see Bramsbäck 59-69.

6 Extracts of the documents on Eastern Europe which Stoker referred to may be found in Leatherdale *passim*.

7 Paul Barber researched the cases of corpses of ordinary Europeans regarded as

vampires in his *Vampires, Burial, and Death*. See Barber *passim*.

8 For instance, see note 5 on page 60 of the 1997 Norton edition of *Dracula*. The text is annotated by Nina Auerbach and David J. Skal.

9 Another aspect may be added to this argument. If a soul is taken away, it might be possible to let it return to the real world. Here, stories based on changeling folktales have some similarity with the idea of metempsychosis or Buddhism's *Rinne-tennsho*. Lafcadio Hearn renarrated several Japanese stories with the motif of metempsychosis. Hearn may have had Irish changeling folktales in mind when he rewrote stories such as "The Story of O-tei" in *Kwaidan* (1904).

Bibliography

Barber, Paul. *Vampires, Burial, and Death: Folklore and Reality*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1988.

Belford, Barbara. *Bram Stoker: A Biography of the Author of* Dracula. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1996.

Bourke, Angela. *The Burning of Bridget Cleary: A True Story*. London: Pimlico, 1999.

____. "Hunting Out the Fairies: E. F. Benson, Oscar Wilde and the Burning of Bridget Cleary." *Wilde the Irishman*. Ed. Jerusha McCormack. New Haven: Yale UP, 1998. 36-46.

Bramsbäck, Birgit. *Folklore and W. B. Yeats: The Function of Folklore Elements in Three Plays*. Stockholm: Uppsala, 1984.

Curtin, Jeremiah. *Myths and Folk Tales of Ireland*. 1890. New York: Dover, 1975.

Deane, Seamus. *A Short History of Irish Literature*. 1986. Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1994.

Eagleton, Terry. *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture*. London: Verso, 1995.

Glover, David. *Vampires, Mummies, and Liberals: Bram Stoker and the Politics of Popular Fiction*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996.

Hearn, Lafcadio. *Life and Literature*. Ed. John Erskine. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1921.

Kiberd, Declan. *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*. London: Vintage, 1996.

Leatherdale, Clive. *The Origin of Dracula: The Background to Bram Stoker's Gothic Masterpiece*. London: The Desert Island Books, 1995.

Ó Súilleabháin, Seán. *A Handbook of Irish Folklore.* 1942. Detroit: Singing Tree Press, 1970.

Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*. 1897. New York: Norton, 1997.

____. *The Snake's Pass*. 1890. Dingle: Brandon, 1990.

Valente, Joseph. *Dracula's Crypt: Bram Stoker, Irishness, and the Question of Blood*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2002.

Wilde, Lady. *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms, And Superstitious of Ireland: With Sketches of the Irish Past*. 2 vols. 1887. Tokyo: Edition Synopses, 2003.

Wilde, W. R. *Irish Popular Superstitions*. 1852. Shannon: Irish University Press, 1972.

Yeats, W. B. *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry. A Treasury of Irish Myth, Legend, and Folklore*. Ed. Claire Booss. New York: Avenel Books, 1986. xiii-326.

____. *The Land of Heart's Desire*. 7th and Rev. ed. London; T. Fisher Urwin, 1912.