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Cover Page Footnote

Michael McGlasson is an independent scholar and researcher whose interests include Edgar Allan Poe, British (Victorian/Edwardian) Theatre History, and horror cinema (especially Hammer films). He recently edited the upcoming book *In All Sincerity...Peter Cushing* by Christopher Gullo. Author's Note: The following essay, initially published in *First Knight* (Vol. 6 no. 2, December 2002), the official journal of the Irving Society, is a revised and expanded version with a focus on Sir Henry Irving, Bram Stoker and their connections with a certain actor employed by Henry Irving in the late nineteenth century. The tale behind this "alliance" is both fascinating and ironic, for it demonstrates how the lives and careers of those in the distant future are sometimes pervasively influenced and guided by the actions and creations of another human being without intent or premeditation.

It's all in the blood: The Bram Stoker/Peter Cushing Alliance*

Michael McGlasson

[Michael McGlasson is an independent scholar and researcher whose interests include Edgar Allan Poe, British (Victorian/Edwardian) Theatre History, and horror cinema (especially Hammer films). He recently edited the upcoming book *In All Sincerity...Peter Cushing* by Christopher Gullo.] Upon his return to England following the second American tour of 1884-1885, the great British thespian Sir Henry Irving had, according to his grandson Laurence Irving, “made up his mind to present [*Faust*] at the beginning of the winter season. He was naturally tempted to play Mephistopheles, [for] having created so many minor villains, he owed the devil himself his due” (460). This statement about Sir Henry, who dominated the English stage for more than three decades and was the first actor in theatre history to be knighted, opens the proverbial door to a very strange set of circumstances which have apparently remained dormant and unexplored for at least a hundred years. While it is a matter of fact that Henry Irving portrayed the character of ¹Mephistopheles in William Gorman Wills’ *Faust* 792 times between 1885 and 1904, it is not generally understood nor recognized that Irving’s role as the fallen archangel, second only to Satan in power amongst the denizens of Hell, was indeed a form of atonement to the devil himself. However, this role also served as a device for foreshadowing, a literary/biographical hint of situations or events that had yet to unfold.

Not surprisingly, there were many such instances of foreshadowing in Irving’s personal life, especially in his relationships with those associated with the Lyceum Theatre in London between 1880 and the end of the Victorian era. One instance in particular stands out like some foreboding icon, for while living at 15A Grafton Street in London in 1879, Irving, who had always maintained an “undefined sense of religion,” had a large crucifix hanging on the wall behind his bed, and on the bedside table “stood another crucifix, which beside it, attached to his watch-chain, was a smaller silver one” (L Irving 320), apparently tossed onto the stage by an admirer during a performance of *Hamlet*.

Of course, as any well read enthusiast on the history of the English stage can confirm, the Dublin-born Abraham “Bram” Stoker, thoroughly devoted to the theatre for a good portion of his life, served as Henry Irving’s business manager, personal advisor, protector and publicity agent from the autumn of 1878, when he was hired as the acting manager of the Lyceum, until the later months of 1905. During these twenty-seven grueling years, Stoker practically killed himself in order to support and, in a sense, direct Irving’s career. One example of this slow death by dedication is that Stoker, the ever tireless, competent secretary, wrote thousands of letters in response to adoring fans and theatrical associates during his years with Irving, “an arduous task that,” according to biographer Barbara Belford, “transformed his once readable ... script into an undecipherable ... scrawl” (99).

Amazingly, during his tenure with Sir Henry, Stoker managed to write numerous short stories and quite a few novels based on various motifs and themes connected with the weird and the supernatural, most of which were “pure horror, mixed in with romance, nightmares and curses” (Leatherdale 59). Of the longer, earlier works, two deserve mention: *Under the Sunset* (1882), a

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collection of eight Irish-based short tales including “The Invisible Giant” who could “pass through the vapoury walls of his abode,” and his first novel *The Snake's Pass* (1891), an “Irish romantic tale with shifting bogs, ancient superstitions and ... buried treasure” (Belford 139, 191).

But during the writing of these and other ephemeral titles, perhaps beginning as early as 1890, Stoker busied himself with a very special project which has promoted “more research, study and rumors concerning its origins ... than [Stoker] could possibly have imagined” (Haining & Tremayne 172). Whether in his Lyceum office during the quiet hours of the night and well away from Irving’s manic desire for control, or seated at his writing desk at his home at 18 St Leonard’s Terrace, whether on vacation in Whitby or Cruden Bay, Stoker methodically recorded copious notes concerning his research into the occult, the fables and myths about vampires, the geography and customs of far-off Transylvania, and a brief commentary on a fifteenth-century Wallachian voivode named “Dracula.”² In 1897, the London-based firm of Constable published the results of Stoker’s research in the form of *Dracula* (originally entitled *The Un-Dead*), now considered by many literary scholars and readers worldwide as a masterpiece of Gothic horror fiction. A critic for *Punch* noted that “This weird tale is about vampires; not a single, quiet, creeping vampire, but a whole band of them, governed by a vampire monarch, who is apparently a first cousin to Mephistopheles” (quoted in Ludlam 108), an ironic observation which reinforces Laurence Irving’s remark on his grandfather’s temptation to play the role of Mephistopheles in *Faust*. Grigore Nandris, while discussing the similarities between *Dracula* and Christopher Marlowe’s play *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, points out that the character of Dracula is “a kind of Faustus without the medieval religious conflict” (381). Therefore, one could safely conclude that Irving’s role as Mephistopheles in *Faust*, based on Goethe’s dramatic poem and adapted for the stage by W G Wills, was at least indirectly an inspiration for Stoker’s creation of the world’s most recognizable and infamous demon lover. Peter Haining and Peter Tremayne argue this with the affirmation, “We have no doubt that Irving was Stoker’s model for Dracula, [for] the similarities in physique and looks are striking and obvious” (173). In addition, the name “Dracula,” according to Stoker’s source, was the Wallachian word for “devil,” a thinly-veiled reflection of Irving’s red-robed Mephistopheles.

In October 1906, Henry Irving, the once proud, demanding, egotistical master of the British stage, died at the age of sixty-seven and was buried (after cremation) with much ceremony in Westminster Abbey. As for Stoker, he continued to write and published three more novels steeped in the supernatural: *Lady Athlyne* (1908), *The Lady of the Shroud* (1909), and *The Lair of the White Worm* (1911). He also managed to assemble a two-volume biography, *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving* (1906) which recorded his thirty-odd years in the company of the “Dark Prince.” On 20 April 1912, Stoker died at the age of 64 from various medical complications, one being Bright’s Disease, an obsolete term for a kidney ailment which poisons the blood.

Thus ended Bram Stoker’s contributions to the history of English theatre and literature. Following his death, the author of *Dracula* faded into obscurity, although the novel itself has gone through dozens of editions and is still in print today. But within a few short years, a new medium of artistic expression came to the forefront and catapulted the name of Bram Stoker into the stratosphere of immortality: the motion picture industry soon created a new cultural icon in the shape of a blood-sucking, malevolent human monster universally known as Count Dracula.

On 26 May 1913,³ thirteen months after Stoker’s death, a son was born to George and Nellie Cushing in the small English village of Kenley, Surrey, just southeast of Shrewsbury. Precocious

² Stoker’s Notes for *Dracula* are housed at the Rosenbach Museum in Philadelphia. For details about these Notes as well as specifics about how much Stoker knew (or did not know) about the historical Dracula, see Elizabeth Miller, *Dracula: Sense & Nonsense* (Desert Island Books, 2000).

³ While scholars do not agree on the exact date of *Dracula*’s publication, the evidence strongly suggests 26 May (See Miller 58). If so, then Peter Cushing was born on the anniversary of the novel’s publication.

and inquisitive as a young child, Peter Wilton Cushing apparently inherited his keen interest in the theatre and acting via a familial link going back some twenty years before his birth. His step-uncle, Wilton Herriott, was a well-known stage actor who appeared as a regular in the ever popular production of “Charley’s Aunt” by Brandon Thomas, and his aunt had acted with Gertie Millar, the musical comedy performer, perhaps between 1906 and 1912. But Peter’s father, a quantity surveyor, “was not enamored of the [acting] profession,” and regarded “all actors as rogues and vagabonds” (Del Vecchio & Johnson 9), a sentiment obviously not shared by several members of his immediate family or his in-laws, yet widespread among his contemporaries, born and raised under the strict moral tenets of Victorian/Edwardian society.

Another member of the Cushing family had even more of an association with the English stage, beginning in the early 1880s and well into 1897, the year that *Dracula* was published. Henry William Cushing, the father of George Cushing (b. 1881) and the paternal grandfather of Peter Cushing, was born sometime around 1843. We know that he married Mary Pearson on 25 August 1863, which would make him twenty years old at the time, a prime age for young Victorian men to marry. While personal information about him is scarce, there is a brief entry in Peter Cushing’s autobiography (1986) which states that his “Grandad” was “a vocalist” in 1881, a “civil engineer” in 1886 and “an actor (Tragedian)” in 1912 (124).⁴ This indicates that Henry Cushing might have put his vocal abilities to good use at the Avenue Theatre Playhouse in Northumberland, London, in *The French Scribe*, a comedic opera, in 1886. However, his work as an actor is substantially documented, especially through theatrical references and the playbills issued by – yes – the Lyceum Theatre, the home stage for Sir Henry Irving, his leading lady Ellen Terry, acting manager Bram Stoker, and a company of lesser-known character actors, including Henry William Cushing.

A rather complete list, aided by the *John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera* (currently held at the Bodleian Library of the University of Oxford), George B Bryan’s biographical guide *Stage Deaths*, and J D Wearing’s *The London Stage*, indicates that Henry Cushing appeared in eight plays with multiple performances between 3 May 1890 and 7 April 1897. Of these, three are plays by William Shakespeare: *Macbeth* (1890, 1895 and 1896 as an “Attendant”), *Henry VIII* (1892 as a “Secretary”), *King Lear* (October 1892 and 1893 as Sir Nicholas Vaux), and *Richard III* (1896 and 1897 as Cardinal Bouchier). The remaining plays include Dion Boucicault’s *Louis XI* (1890, 1893, 1895 as Monseigneur de Lude), Charles Reade’s *Lyon’s Mail* (1891, 1893, 1895 as the Commissary of Police), Alfred Lord Tennyson’s *Becket* (1893 as the Bishop of Hereford and 1894-95 as John of Oxford), and *The Foresters* (1892 as a “Justiciary”). Cushing possibly appeared in eleven other plays listed with those above: *The Dead Heart* (1890), *Olivia* (1890 and 1891), *The King and the Miller* (1891), *Ravenswood* (1891), *Charles I* (1891 and 1895), *King Arthur*, *Nance Oldfield*, *The Corsican Brothers*, *Journey’s End in Lover’s Meeting* (all 1895), *A Story of Waterloo* (1895 and 1897), and *Madame Sans-Genie* (1896 and 1897).

There remains one additional play in which Henry Cushing appeared in the role of a “Citizen” who surely gazed in awe at “the awful horror ... of the Blood-avenger” with “eyes as inflexible as Fate” (Nandris 393) while acting manager Bram Stoker stood silently in the wings: none other than W.G. Wills’ *Faust* with Irving as Mephistopheles, the crimson-clad “Prince of Darkness.”

Although first performed at the Lyceum on 19 December 1885, *Faust*, much like *Richard III* and *King Henry VIII*, went through a galaxy of productions, for by July of 1894, Henry Irving “had played Mephistopheles six hundred and sixty times” (L Irving 565) and would continue in the role until 1904. As for Henry Cushing, the playlist from the *John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera* points out that *Faust*, with Cushing as a “Citizen,” was offered to the public twenty-three times between 14 April and 30 June 1894. Surely, every production of *Faust* in which Henry

⁴ Apparently, this last statement is incorrect. In *Stage Deaths*, George B Bryan records that Henry William Cushing died on 12 April 1899; his obituary, published in *The Era*, a contemporary theatrical newspaper, has yet to be examined by the author.

Cushing was featured as a Citizen of Nuremberg, or possibly a university student, a soldier or even a minor witch or “He-Ape” (being one of many demonic spirits) must have been a terrifying experience with long-lasting impressions. He would have experienced the very same Henry Irving that might have inspired Bram Stoker in the creation of his Count Dracula.

According to Madeleine Bingham, “In his theatre, Irving demanded obedience, sparing no one, not even himself. Rehearsals would last all day and sometimes half the night, for [his] driving will demanded sacrifice, human sacrifice, in the temple of the theatre” (158). From this description of what it was like being an actor in Irving’s company, it is clear that Henry William Cushing, along with dozens of even lesser-known performers, was a hard-working member of Irving’s theatrical crew. His love for the stage and acting is also quite evident, for he undoubtedly would have agreed that actors, in the words of Sir Henry, “should never forget that excellence

... is attained only by arduous labour, unswerving purpose and unfailing discipline” (L Irving 452), three traits which Henry Cushing passed on through his bloodline to his grandson, Peter Wilton Cushing.

Another example of the ironic undercurrent found within this “alliance” is related to Henry Irving’s facial appearance, which has been described as “composed of a high, narrow forehead ... penetrating eyes ... a thin, straight nose, hollow cheeks, a sensitive almost lipless mouth, and a marvelously mobile jaw” (Biography Resource Center), a portrait that could also be applied to Peter Wilton Cushing who, like his paternal grandfather, was drawn to a career in the theatre. In 1939, at the age of twenty-six, Cushing arrived in Hollywood and soon found himself under contract with director James Whale for the film *The Man in the Iron Mask* in the role of “King’s Messenger,” a bit part not unlike that of Henry Cushing as a “Citizen” in *Faust*. It was in this film that Cushing experienced an epiphany linked to his grandfather via his first lines as a film actor: “How could I mistake it? I’ve been here before” (Del Vecchio & Johnson 21).

Sixty-four years after Henry William Cushing appeared in the May 1894 production of *Faust* at the Lyceum, a film by Hammer Studios premiered in New York City on 29 May 1958 at the Mayfair Theater. *Horror of Dracula* (released as *Dracula* in the UK), introduced to American audiences two relatively obscure British actors: Christopher Lee as the “terrible creature whose thirst for human blood [has] to be satiated” (Del Vecchio & Johnson 93), and Peter Cushing in the role of Abraham Van Helsing, the Count’s fanatical pursuer and the main protagonist in Stoker’s Victorian masterpiece.

In one memorable scene from Tod Browning’s 1931 version of *Dracula*, Bela Lugosi turns to a bewildered Dwight Frye and points to a broken cobweb before uttering “The spider spinning his web for the unwary fly; the blood is the life, Mr Renfield.” This observation is inherently linked to not only the character of Dracula, but also Peter Wilton Cushing, the grandson of the “Citizen” who stared into the face of Mephistopheles in *Faust* and most probably was well-acquainted with Bram Stoker, the humble secretary and servant to his own “Dark Prince,” born with the knowledge that life and sometimes fate is truly all in the blood.

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