

# ‘The Poet and the Vampyre,’ by Andrew McConnell Stott

By MAXWELL CARTER OCT. 24, 2014 [The New York Times](#)

Trading ghost stories before the fire has, reflexively, become the stuff of fiction. Creating one's own tales has not. In the summer of 1816, Lord Byron; his doctor, John Polidori; the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley; and Shelley's lover, Mary Godwin, did just that, hatching, with improbable coincidence, "Frankenstein" and "The Vampyre," the slender precursor to Bram Stoker's "Dracula." Andrew McConnell Stott's "The Poet and the Vampyre" examines the fateful gathering's personalities, promise and perils.

The company was nothing if not precocious. Byron, its host and guiding light, had shot to fame with the 1812 publication of "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage." He read, wrote, traveled and seduced prolifically, occupying the pinnacle of fashionable society until his marriage to Annabella Milbanke ended in scandal amid accusations of madness and sodomy. Dogged by rumor, he resolved to quit England for good in April 1816, pausing for several months to recover his health in Switzerland before settling in Venice. For the journey, he engaged the 20-year-old Polidori, freshly graduated from Edinburgh's prestigious medical school, where Charles Darwin would matriculate in 1825.

On the other side, Shelley, expelled from Oxford for atheism, had eloped with the 16-year-old Harriet Westbrook, only to abandon her three years later for Mary, then 16. The latter was the daughter of the Jacobin novelist and philosopher William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, author of "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman," who didn't survive the birth. When Godwin remarried, his stepdaughter, Claire Clairmont, eight months younger than Mary, became her closest companion. What Claire lacked in polish she made up for in determination, setting her cap for Byron at age 17, pursuing him single-mindedly until they slept together one week shy of her 18th birthday. It was their affair that caused the group to meet at the Villa Diodati, the manor Byron rented on the southern shore of Lake Geneva.

Holed up during one of the summer's many storms, they found that "the gloom turned their amusements ghostly." They read out ghoulish tales in French; Byron proposed they each write their own. According to Shelley's preface to the first edition of "Frankenstein," the two poets and Mary alone took part in the "playful desire of imitation." In reality, Polidori, who had keen literary ambitions, also tried his hand. Byron and Shelley gave up the exercise shortly thereafter. Mary carried on, completing "Frankenstein" the following year. So, too, did Polidori, crafting "The Vampyre" from the eight-page fragment Byron had discarded.

Stott's narrative is fluid, informative and stylish, offering uncommon insight into Claire and Polidori, who were misguided and overmatched. Regrettably, Mary and the creative process itself receive shorter shrift. Given the summer's legacy, this is an unfortunate omission. Indeed, commercial interests notwithstanding, the book might more suitably be called "The Stepsister and the Physician." For the troubled strivers powerfully illustrate Stott's thesis.

These "archetypes of grievance" were haunted forever after not by pallid monsters, but by the ruinous specter of fame. Polidori, who seems never to have met someone he couldn't antagonize, spent his remaining years in Byron's long shadow, spiraling into debt and despair. He died,

almost certainly by his own hand, in 1821. He was 25. Claire lived into old age. Though Byron was willfully cold and indifferent until his own death in 1824, two years after their 5-year-old daughter, Allegra, succumbed to typhus, Claire continued to fixate on his image, her spinsterish hate burning as brightly as her girlish love. As Stott (a professor of English at the State University of New York at Buffalo) concludes, the hapless pair “found that what they hoped would exalt them caused them only pain.” Mary’s infamous “creature” disabuses Dr. Frankenstein rather more succinctly: “You are my creator, but I am your master; obey!”

## **THE POET AND THE VAMPYRE**

**The Curse of Byron and the Birth of Literature's Greatest Monsters**

By Andrew McConnell Stott

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