

PALGRAVE GOTHIC

# BRAM STOKER AND THE GOTHIC

Formations to Transformations

Edited by  
Catherine Wynne



# Bram Stoker and the Gothic

## Formations to Transformations

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Catherine Wynne

*University of Hull, UK*

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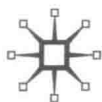
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First published 2016 by  
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN 978–1–137–46503–0

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bram Stoker and the Gothic: formations to transformations / Catherine Wynne, University of Hull, UK [editor].

pages cm

ISBN 978–1–137–46503–0

1. Stoker, Bram, 1847–1912—Criticism and interpretation. 2. Gothic fiction (Literary genre), English—History and criticism. 3. English literature—19th century—History and criticism. 4. Horror tales, English—History and criticism. I. Wynne, Catherine, 1971– editor.

PR6037.T617Z575 2016  
823'.8—dc23

2015025943

Typeset by MPS Limited, Chennai, India.

*This book is dedicated to my mother,  
Rose Wynne*

# Acknowledgements

With warmest thanks to the British Academy for supporting the Bram Stoker Centenary Conference in 2012 in Hull and Whitby. The essays in this collection have emerged from the conference and Stoker Birthday symposia.



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# Introduction

Catherine Wynne

## I

### Gothic heritage and disease narratives

In August 1665 in the village of Eyam in England's Peak District, a tailor bought a bale of cloth from London 'to make clothes. What resulted was an unleashing of the bubonic plague in this small community. The disease allegedly killed 260 of Eyam's residents before it abated over a year later. Although having little knowledge of the spread of infection, the villagers sealed off their community and this self-imposed quarantine prevented the disease from spreading into the surrounding district ([www.eyammuseum.org.uk](http://www.eyammuseum.org.uk)). Eyam is, Patrick Wallis argues, 'the epicentre of Europe's plague heritage' (2005: 2). Almost forgotten in subsequent centuries, it was not until the late 18th century that the plague story of Eyam was recreated and largely reimagined through folklore and literature finding its 'fullest expression' in literature produced in the mid-19th century (Wallis, 2005: 2). By the time of its bicentenary in 1866, the Eyam plague was firmly embedded in cultural heritage and Eyam itself became, and remains to this day, a sombre tourist site.

In Charles Dickens's *All the Year Round*, for instance, an 1869 article entitled 'The Plague at Eyam' describes how the 'journeyman of the tailor ... opened the box ... and at once observed a peculiar smell; for exclaiming "How very damp they are!" he hung [the cloth] before the fire to dry. Even while attending to them a violent sickness seized him' and he died after a '[l]arge swelling rose on his neck and groin' and the 'fatal plague spot appeared on his breast' (17 July, 1869: 161). By June the following year, the article continues, the local vicar, William Mompesson, urged the locals not to depart the village, 'warn[ing] them



against the guilt of carrying the plague far and wide' (162). By August 1866 Mompesson lost his wife to the disease. The vicar, according to this account, had by that summer instituted a plan with the Duke of Devonshire at Chatworth (five miles from the village) to organize supplies to be sent to Eyam and points near to the village where such goods could be left were arranged near rivulets and here money left by the villagers could be cleansed by running water or by vinegar: 'Here, very early in the morning, supplies were left .... And here would be left the record of deaths, with other information for the world outside Eyam' (162). Through this narrative of heroic self-sacrifice Eyam provided a 'framework around which ... a fragment of the past could be woven: a tamed catastrophe that, like medieval or modern wars, became a tableau for unproblematic heroism' (Wallis, 2005: 13). Wallis cautions, however, that the Eyam plague was not a 'romantic interlude' but an event whose 'bloody weight' is testified by the parish registers of the death toll (Wallis, 2005: 36). Whether Mompesson and his acquaintances saved the extended area from infection through quarantining remains unresolved but the event serves to aid an interpretation of how 'heroic or romantic narratives continue to permeate accounts of epidemics' (Wallis, 2005: 37).

These points have a contemporary relevance to the Ebola outbreak (a viral disease which spreads through contact with bodily fluids and blood of infected individuals) which has devastated West Africa since 2014. Here isolation measures are in place and foreign aid workers, who have contracted disease, are airlifted home to special units and achieve heroic status. Literature is often used to attempt to reach an understanding of such catastrophes and with rapidly spreading infectious disease Gothic provides a rich source of speculation, if not, explanation. A medical article relating to pre-2014 outbreaks of the Ebola epidemic, for example, draws on Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Masque of the Red Death' (1842) – a Gothic tale of an infectious disease spreading through a walled abbey where the ruling Prince and his nobles have secluded themselves to avoid this unidentified disease called the red death (Vora and Ramanan, 2002). Equally, contemporary Gothic narratives are fuelled by the fear of the spread of infection as they transform real fears into Gothic nightmares.

In 'The Plague at Eyam' from *All the Year Round*, the event, in line with a 19th-century interpretation of infectious disease, is also gothicized. The article describes how a

line was drawn around the village, marked by well-known stones and fences; and it was agreed upon by all within it that the boundary