

## Celtic Vampires: Neil Jordan's Film *Byzantium* as Irish Neomyth

James Aubrey

Metropolitan State University of Denver, Denver, USA

Director Neil Jordan's 2013 film *Byzantium* is a vampire narrative with a female empowerment theme that attains the status of Irish neomyth. Although much of the story takes place in England, the vampires originate in southwest Ireland, recognizable in filming locations and from historical allusions, Catholic religious references, Gaelic speech acts, traditional Irish songs, imagery from Celtic mythology, and a title that invokes a relevant Yeats poem with the title "Byzantium." Such references to Irish culture elevate the supernatural mother-daughter protagonists to modern mythic status in their centuries-long conflict with an Ireland-based, patriarchal vampire Brotherhood.

*Keywords:* vampire, myth, film, feminism, Irish

The title of the film *Byzantium*, directed by Neil Jordan, provides no hint that it is a horror-thriller with action chases and two beheadings—let alone a vampire movie or a women's picture—but the film could fit into any of those popular movie genres with its story of a mother-daughter vampire family pursued over the centuries by a band of all-male vampires called The Brotherhood. As the genre crossovers suggest, this film eludes easy categorization, but that same hybrid appeal gives it a wide reach. Indeed, the best category label for *Byzantium* may be neomyth—a term used in 2016 by Celtic scholar Mark Williams in the book *Ireland's Immortals* to describe novels that adapt mythic traditions to modern circumstances. Williams focuses on the role of supernatural, immortal figures in Irish literature, but his argument can readily be extended to cinema as well, and to *Byzantium* in particular.

Jordan's film is not set in the city of Byzantium (the medieval name for Istanbul, Turkey); most of the story takes place in England, but there are crucial scenes set on a mysterious-looking island that seems to be off the coast of Ireland. The island has a cave with an entrance from above, through a dome made of rocks, where humans can enter to die and be reborn as immortal vampires. Except for preserving the customary belief that a vampire must be invited into one's house, *Byzantium* uses none of the traditional European vampire lore and motifs such as garlic and capes, nor is there any superstition-based explanation of vampire origins involving suicide or a dog jumping over an open grave. In the film the process of transformation from mortal human to immortal vampire is arbitrary, seemingly magical: inside the cave a mortal is killed and replaced by his or her immortal double. When this transformation is complete, hundreds of birds fly noisily out of the cave, and the water of a nearby waterfall turns red. The process is meant to seem not rational but mysterious, and it can be emotionally satisfying as a quasi-sacred ritual, concluded in one instance when the film's newly re-born protagonist-mother Clara joyously bathes in the blood-red river in a symbolic baptism into vampirehood. The

island location is never explicitly identified as Irish, but it is accessible by boat from the story's primary setting in an English seaside resort town that one of the male characters makes clear is *not* Ireland when he recalls, "There was a rebellion in Ireland, and we were sent to crush it." Later in the story a teenage boy named Frank, who has a blood ailment, remarks that his family has moved, presumably from Ireland, to England because "the health care over here is free." The actual shooting location in England is the seaside-beach town of Hastings, across the English Channel from France. By contrast, the distant, rocky island with its steep cliffs and rock-domed cave entrance is recognizably a visual conflation of two locations: the monastic cemetery on the offshore island of Skellig Michael and the waterfall at the base of Mount Torc, both in the scenic Baera Peninsula of County Cork, in southwest Ireland. A film audience need not recognize these actual locations to appreciate that the island represents some mysterious place such as folkloric, romantic Ireland, where fairies exist and magical things can happen—as opposed to the drab English town with a run-down amusement park and drug-addled prostitutes.

The scenes on the coast of England take place in two different time periods, the early nineteenth century and the early twenty-first century. Dressed in a Regency period naval uniform, a character named Lord Ruthven picks up a child named Clara on the English beach where she has been gathering cockles, and turns her over to the local madam in a house of prostitution, where he deflowers her himself. Clara grows up as a prostitute and gives birth to an infant girl named Elinor, whom she places in an orphanage, where at night from outside she secretly watches her daughter through an openable, stained glass skylight. Years later, when Lord Ruthven returns to the brothel, evidently dying of syphilis, his friend Darvell offers him a map to an island where he is told that he can attain immortality; however, Clara steals the map and obtains immortality for herself—as a vampire. In another flashback, additional years later, when Elinor has reached sixteen, Clara takes her from the orphanage to the island, where Elinor, too, becomes an immortal vampire. The two of them embark on itinerant lives together, as Clara provides for them financially by means of prostitution and murder. To sustain herself with blood, about once a month Clara kills someone, violently and ruthlessly, but Elinor having been brought up in the orphanage to have a conscience, sustains herself by killing only elderly people who feel ready to die. In one of the film's most original touches, the vampires do not have fangs with which to bite their victims but, instead, one of their thumbnails grows into a kind of talon when they are about to kill, and they use it to slash or to puncture an artery of the victim.

Elinor's first killing in the film invites the audience to associate vampirism with Ireland. As the film opens, in modern-day England, Elinor is writing in a journal while, in voice-over, she reports that her mother does not allow her tell anyone her story, lest they be discovered as the murderous vampires they are. Elinor then crumples up her journal entry and throws it off the balcony of their apartment. Below, however, an old man finds it, figures out that she is a vampire, and offers himself to her to be killed, with a declaration that he is ready to die. Elinor proceeds to grow her long, pointed thumbnail, uses it to puncture his wrist, and delicately drains his blood with her mouth. An important aspect of this early episode is that the old man is evidently Irish, for he uses the Gaelic expression *neamh-mhairbh*, explained to mean "revenants neither dead nor alive," as he describes Catholic priests having told stories of such when he was younger, which he opines were "meant to frighten the children." As he translates the Gaelic for Elinor, he simultaneously prepares the film audience to understand that the Irish know about vampires, and that the Irish Catholic church has invested in Continental European vampire lore, with its apotropaic crucifixes, to supplement scriptural teachings (Barber, 2008). With

that set-up, the film invites its spectators subsequently to imagine that the magical island that is the source of vampirism is also Irish, just off the southern coast.

The building where Elinor grew up has a sign in the 1800s reading North Haven Private Orphanage; it is recognizably the same building that serves in the twenty-first century as the North Haven College of Further Education, as a poster visible on an interior wall indicates. Elinor and her friend Frank are taking a writing course there, but Frank unwisely shows Elinor's journal to their teacher, which prompts Clara to visit the building and murder him for having discovered their secret. The building has been remodeled, but it still has the same architectural frieze over the door depicting a half-human female with two fish tails—a melusine, as this kind of river spirit was known in medieval Europe (and is known today as the Starbucks mermaid). There is irony in the fact that the one-time dormitory now serves as Elinor's classroom, with the same octagonal skylight-window that Clara once watched her daughter through; in the building where 200 years before she was educated as a developing child, she is now being educated as a teenager in a (very) prolonged adolescence.

Putting the orphanage and the school in the same building was done partly to introduce this irony, and it must have saved the filmmakers the trouble and expense of finding a second location, but another function of the double use is to connect the story to Celtic mythology via the repeated cinematographic image of the melusine above the entrance to the building, in both the nineteenth-century and the twenty-first century versions of its façade. Historically the melusine, or melusina, is not Irish, but it does have a place in the popular culture of the Bretonic Celts across the sea from Ireland, in northwestern France. In the film the first view of the melusine is in a night scene as Clara deposits the infant Elinor on the steps of the orphanage. The second view is in the background of a modern scene where Frank is hurt in a bicycle accident in front of the building. In a third view the camera tilts upward to reveal the melusine as Elinor observes in voiceover that "Humans need to tell stories." This is a meta-cinematic moment, for *Byzantium* is such a story. Probably many English people today would not be able to name the creature they are looking at, but the film image helps to create the intriguing fantasy that such supernatural creatures as melusines and vampires still exist, at least in mythic stories. The presence of such creatures in the current cultural imaginary is reinforced by the North Haven College logo, which is a stylized color graphic depiction of a mermaid's tail. And the idea of the melusine would have been of particular interest to director Neil Jordan, whose 2009 film *Ondine* similarly invited viewers to consider that a beautiful, female drug courier from Romania might be a selkie—another supernatural water creature thought to be able to shed its seal-coat and assume human form in order to mate with men. Although living in Ireland, the character Ondine says that her name is pronounced as if French, and another character wonders aloud to Ondine, if she is French, "What are you doing here?" A different character raises the same question by pointing out that the selkie tradition is Scottish, not Irish. The point in the film would be that these mythical water creatures are not limited by modern national boundaries—as Jordan's 1994 film *Interview with the Vampire* also indicates, with its setting in New Orleans rather than, say, Transylvania. Another explanation for the melusine's presence in this film might be that *Byzantium* is a continuation of Neil Jordan's propensity for myth making.

The melusine image is not the *Byzantium*'s only use of Celtic folklore. The unexplained process of transformation from human to vampire is marked by two visual alterations to the *mise en scène* on the mysterious island: CGI birds fly noisily upward and out of the cave, and the nearby waterfall turns red. The second device borrows from the iconography of Mannanán, an important Irish god of the sea who sometimes

travels by chariot “over an ocean churned to the colour of blood” (Williams, p. xiii). So when the newly transformed Clara bathes in the red waters of the magic waterfall, besides baptizing herself, she is enacting a conflation of Mannanán and Bóand, eponymous goddess of the River Boyne and mother of Óengus, who lives in the holes of rocks and has his own flight of birds that wheel and sing in a kind of halo above his head (Williams, pp. 87, 430, 444). The filmic birds’ preternatural behavior glances at the iconography of Óengus, but they are also, more directly, reenacting the apotheosis of Midir and Étain, who leave the sinful world for “an unfallen and eternal life” in the world of the divine *síd* by changing into birds, rising “up through the skylight” and flying off as a pair of wild swans (pp. 86, 89). Thus the vampires of *Byzantium* not only originate in Ireland, they are associated iconographically with the immortals of Celtic mythology. Also, like Celtic (and Nordic) gods, these vampires can be killed—in *Byzantium*, by beheading (Williams, p. viii). These connections to Celtic folklore are reinforced in the film by aural connections to folk songs credited as “traditional.” One is “The Unquiet Grave,” sung by Clara in the background of the first scene at the hotel Byzantium. The other song is a lullaby, “A Mother’s Lament,” this time sung by Clara to Elinor while they are traveling, about a skellington—modern Irish slang for skeleton. The scene is a tender display of mother-daughter affection—except for the creepiness of calling one’s baby “a skellington wrapped up in skin.”

These uses of Irish traditions might seem predictable for a native Irish man such as Neil Jordan, or for screenwriter Moira Buffini, whose parents are both Irish. Jordan sets his best-known film, *The Crying Game*, initially in Ireland, and *Ondine* is titled after a traditional Irish water creature. It is true that Ireland has no previous vampire tradition, but in an interview about *Byzantium*, Jordan has observed that there are stones piled on graves and burial mounds all over Ireland, as if to keep the dead from emerging as undead revenants. The traditional explanation for such cairns is that the stones kept the departed spirit from re-entering the corpse (Halloran), but Jordan’s speculation seems more plausible, if the stones indeed had some function other than to mark the gravesite. Of course both interpretations reflect the common human longing for an afterlife—the stuff that myths are made of—and the very absence of a vampire tradition in Ireland provided a reason for the makers of *Byzantium* to invent one.

In an interview, Neil Jordan’s regular film producer Steven Woolley explains that in 2008 he attended a performance of Moira Buffini’s play *A Vampire Story* and, afterward, urged her to develop it as a film script. Her play contains no Irish old man, no gynothropic Brotherhood, and no references to Ireland. Indeed, the stage play does not contain any vampires, ultimately, for the final scene reveals that Elinor is a hungry, anorexic teenager in a psychiatric ward, who evidently has been imagining herself and her sister to be blood-obsessed vampires. Woolley urged Buffini to take the story material in the direction of a realistic horror film, and when Neil Jordan later read the resulting screenplay, he was immediately interested. There was early talk of shooting the story in Morocco rather than Turkey, so it must have been Jordan who later advocated for Ireland as the magical place, after the screenplay had been drafted. Indeed, Buffini remembers feeling concern over the fact that Ireland had no tradition of vampires, whereupon Jordan emailed her about ancient Celtic burials with beheaded corpses and rocks placed on their chests. Jordan’s assurances notwithstanding, Buffini’s screenplay is unique as an Irish vampire story. The film story’s vampires are understood to be real, not rationalized or explained away at the end, let alone dismissed as hallucinations. The two female protagonists have acquired deadly adversaries in a vampire Brotherhood, who provide a source of conflict and add a strong element of suspense to the narrative. In a further difference from the play, the film’s settings and locations have come to include Ireland as well as England. As an auteur, Neil Jordan is theoretically responsible for such changes;

however, the script preceded the filming, so Buffini deserves her sole credit for the extensively developed screenplay, along with its Irish aspect.

An element of Buffini's stage play that was retained in the film was her naming two of the Brotherhood characters Ruthven and Darvell, after vampire males in the earliest vampire stories written in English. In 1816 George Gordon, Lord Byron, wrote a fragment of a would-be vampire story during the famous ghost story writing contest among himself, John William Polidori (his doctor and companion), Claire Claremont (his sometime lover), Percy Shelley (his fellow poet), and Mary Wollstonecraft (later Percy's wife, whose contribution to the contest would be developed and published as *Frankenstein*). In Byron's fragment a terminally-ill gentleman named Augustus Darvell travels to a Turkish cemetery with an unnamed companion, gives him a ring with an Arabic inscription, and instructs his companion to bury him on the spot, to throw the ring into the Bay of Eleusis on the ninth day of a month, and the next day to visit the temple of Ceres—and to tell no one that Darvell has died. Polidori took Byron's fragment and developed it (without Byron's permission) and published it in 1819 as *The vampyre: A tale*. In Polidori's version the dying man to be buried is an aristocrat named Lord Ruthven, who soon returns from the dead. He promptly kills a Greek girl with a knife that his companion identifies as Ruthven's; then a year later he reappears in England, this time courting his former companion's sister. The companion tries to warn everyone that Ruthven must be an undead revenant, but no one believes him and the story ends with a fatal marriage and sensationalistic last words: the "sister had glutted the thirst of a VAMPYRE!". Moira Buffini used the vampire names from the two stories, Ruthven and Darvell, in both her script for the stage play *A vampire story* and in her screenplay for *Byzantium*. In the first instance she was hinting that her young anorexic's reading experiences were shaping her hallucinations. In the second, Buffini was indirectly acknowledging her source material and paying *homages* to Byron and Polidori.

In the process of developing the film's more complicated plot, with The Brotherhood in violent pursuit of Clara and Elinor, Darvell reveals himself to be a progressively minded male who comes to reject the Brotherhood's anti-feminist ideology and elects to execute his misogynistic vampire Brother with the medieval sword they carry around, perhaps inspired by the specially inscribed knife in Polidori's tale. At the end of the film narrative, Clara emancipates Elinor and walks off with Darvell, explicitly not as her romantic partner but as her future ally against The Brotherhood. In the film's upbeat ending, all three seem newly independent.

Given the vampires' origins in Ireland, with its historically religious culture, The Brotherhood may be intended to resemble the Irish Catholic church, with its strongly patriarchal traditions. In one scene, two of the Brothers meet with Clara in the religiously named Trinity College, Dublin, where they chastise her but then forgive her for having sinned against their all-male tradition. They decide to pursue Clara only later, after she has turned her daughter into another female vampire—a more serious kind of sin that threatens to establish a counterpart Sisterhood determined "to curb the power of men," as Clara declares her purpose to be. She clearly intends not only to survive but to subvert what The Brotherhood stands for: the kind of patriarchy that has manifested itself in the Roman Catholic church's 2000-years of strictly male priesthood. In the last scene of *Byzantium*, Elinor's final act serves to carry forward her mother's purpose, for she takes Frank, whom earlier she has kissed romantically, to the magical island to become a vampire and, audiences are left to imagine, to start a family and a future community of vampires free from masculinist oppression. Other details that tend to connect The Brotherhood with Catholicism would include the old man who tells of priests promoting vampire lore and the execution blade that is said to be "from Byzantium, a souvenir of the crusades," where it must have been appropriated in the name of Jesus. Religious language is another basis for associating The Brotherhood

with the Church: in the film's opening monologue, in voiceover, Elinor calls Clara her "savior"; the vampire cave is called "a shrine" with "healing powers," and the immortal double inside the cave is referred to at one point as "a nameless saint." Even the story's skeptical social worker uses religious language to express her doubts about vampires, referring to the unlikelihood of their existence as something that would constitute a modern day "miracle" if they were found to exist.

A question remains: Why call the whole film *Byzantium*? Short titles are fashionable in the twenty-first century (Steinberg, 42), but this title gives no indication of the film's content. Indeed, the title is misleading, for Byzantium, like Constantinople, is an obsolete name for Turkey's largest city—not a place name associated with the British Isles, let alone a place name associated with vampires. The word *Byzantium* occurs twice in the film, with reference to the medieval sword and as the name of the English hotel whose owner Clara manipulates into letting her set up a brothel inside, to provide a more stable source of income for her and her daughter. Although the word *Turkish* appears in Polidori's story, the word *Byzantium* does not, nor does it appear in Byron's fragment. Thus, to elevate the name *Byzantium* to film title seems arbitrary—until one remembers that the name has special significance in Irish culture.

"Byzantium" is the title of one of the best known poems by Ireland's national poet, William Butler Yeats (or W. B. Yeats, as he is known in Ireland and the United Kingdom). A poetic vision of the complex relationship of body, soul, and art, "Byzantium" employs images of living bodies aspiring to the status of living-dead "shades," in a time and place Yeats idealized, under the rule of sixth-century Byzantine emperor Justinian (Connor, pp. 20-21). Yeats imagines the body as "the fury and the mire of human veins," whereas the soul is more permanent, like an artistic "Miracle, bird or golden handiwork" that scorns "complexities of mire or blood" (lines 8, 17, 24). In between the real and the ideal is what Yeats terms "the superhuman / I call it death-in-life and life-in death" (lines 13-14). From this vampire-resonant description Yeats goes on to imagine a human transformation to a superhuman, bloodless state, in "Byzantium":

Where blood-begotten spirits come  
And all complexities of fury leave,  
Dying into a dance,  
An agony of trance,  
An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve. (lines 29-32).

Ultimately Yeats seems ambivalent about making this transformation from mortality to divinity, but he was evidently fascinated by the idea of immortality and associated it with the city of Byzantium. In 1939 Yeats was buried at his own suggestion in Sligo, near Ben Bulbin and also within sight of the legendary, rocky burial mount of Queen Maeve ("Under Ben Bulbin," pp. 375-376).

The fact that Neil Jordan was born in that same town of Sligo makes it particularly likely that he would associate the name Byzantium with Yeats and, more generally, with Irish cultural identity. It is also possible that the fairly common knowledge of Yeats's one-time membership in the Celtic, hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a lodge of male adepts around the turn of the twentieth century (Williams, p. 333), might have given Jordan the idea of making the Brotherhood of antagonists Irish, to help define the female protagonists in this new myth of Irish feminist identity, originating in an imagined Irish past and providing a narrative to justify the present emergence of the modern, empowered, Irish female as Yeats's anticipated superhuman.

Thus in the film *Byzantium* England can stand for any static, traditional culture and Ireland for an evolving one. *Byzantium* is a neomythic narrative of heroic, cultural aspiration, like Yeats's "Byzantium" or his other

poem with the prophetic-sounding title “The Second Coming,” which ends with an ambiguous vision of cultural evolution: “What rough beast slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?” Like that imagined supernatural creature out of myth, or like David Bowman, hero of Stanley Kubrick’s mythic film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, who is re-born at the end as an evolved, post-human savior figure, Clara and Elinor are neomythic heroes. Neil Jordan’s film *Byzantium* invites audiences both inside and outside Ireland to identify with these two re-born, formidable female vampires as the newly secular Ireland’s culture bearers. By extension, the film invites audiences to see empowered women and allied males as heroes of the mythic present and the ever-evolving future.

### References

- Barber, P. (1988). *Vampires, burial, and death: Folklore and reality*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Beatty, B., & Newey, V. (Eds.). (1988). *Byron and the limits of fiction*. Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press.
- Buffini, M. (2008). *A vampire story*. London: Samuel French.
- Buffini, M. (2011). Interview on the *Byzantium* DVD. MPI Media Group.
- Browning, B. (Producer), & Jordan, N. (Director). (2009). *Ondine*. Screenplay written by Neil Jordan. Performances by Colin Farrell and Alicja Bachleda. Wayfare Entertainment.
- Byron, G. G. (n.d.). *A fragment*. (1819). Retrieved from <http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/Byron/fragment.html>
- Conner, L. I. (1998). *A Yeats dictionary: Persons and places in the poetry of William Butler Yeats*. New York: Syracuse University Press.
- Interview with the vampire: The vampire chronicles*. (1994). Directed by Neil Jordan. Screenplay written by Anne Rice. Performances by Tom Cruise, Brad Pitt, Christian Slater, Thandie Newton, Kirsten Dunst. Geffen Pictures.
- Jordan, N. (2011). Interview on the *Byzantium* DVD. MPI Media.
- Kubrick, S. (Producer & Director). (1968). *2001: A space odyssey*. Directed by Stanley Kubrick. MGM.
- Molinder, C. (Producer), & Alfredson, T. (Director). (2008). *Let the right one in* [in Swedish, *Låt den rätte komma in*]. Screenplay written by John Ajvide Lindqvist. Performances by Lina Leandersson and Kåre Hedebrandt. EFTI.
- Melusine. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki>. 17 January 2017.
- O’Halloran, W. (1916). *Early Irish history and antiquities and the history of West Cork*. Library Ireland. Retrieved from <http://www.libraryireland.com>
- Polidori, J. W. (2016). *The vampyre: A tale*. N. p.: Cavalier Classics (The story was originally published in 1819)
- Shelley, M. (2012). *Frankenstein; or, the modern Prometheus: Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley: The 1818 text*. (D. L. Macdonald & K. Scherf, Eds.). (3rd ed.). Peterborough, Canada: Broadview Press.
- Steinberg, D. (2017, January). A short tribute to long movie titles. *The Hollywood Reporter*, 42.
- Williams, M. (2016). *Ireland’s immortals: A history of the gods of Irish myth*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Woolley, S. (Producer), & Jordan, N. (Director). (1992). *The crying game*. Performances by Stephen Rea and Jaye Davidson. Palace Pictures.
- Woolley, S. (2011). Interview on the *Byzantium* DVD. MPI Media Group.
- Woolley, S. (Producer), & Jordan, N. (Director). (2013). *Byzantium*. Screenplay written by Moira Buffini. Performances by Gemma Arterton and Saoirse Ronan. Demarest Films.
- Yeats, W. B. (1994a) The second coming. In D. Albright (Ed.), *The Poems* (p. 238). (2nd ed.). London: Dent. (The poem was originally published in 1920)
- Yeats, W. B. (1994b). Byzantium. In D. Albright (Ed.), *The Poems* (pp. 298-299). (2nd ed.) London: Dent. (The poem was originally published in 1932)
- Yeats, W. B. (1994c). Under Ben Bulbin. In D. Albright (Ed.), *The Poems* (pp. 373-376). London: Dent. (The poem was originally published in 1939)