

## William Beckford's *Vathek* A Call for Reassessment

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### Abstract

Since its first publication in 1786, *Vathek* brought fame to William Beckford. It has attracted critical attention on many levels. It soon has become the inspiration of poets and novelist during and after Beckford's age. George Gordon, Lord Byron is said to have cited *Vathek* as a source for his poem, "The Giaour". Other Romantic poets used oriental settings in their works. The list includes writers such as Robert Southey, Thomas Moore and John Keats. For a long period of time it was cited to exemplify the Gothic trend in fiction given its emphasis on the supernatural, ghosts, and spirits, as well as the terror it tries to induce in the reader. Critics placed it in the first rank of early Gothic fiction. Other historians of the fantasy genre disagreed. Les Daniels states *Vathek* was "a unique and delightful book". Daniels argues that the novel had little in common with the other "Gothic" novels; "Beckford's luxuriant imagery and sly humour create a mood totally antithetical to that suggested by the grey castles and black deeds of medieval Europe" (1975, 15). Franz Rottensteiner calls the novel "a marvellous story, the creation of an erratic but powerful imagination, which brilliantly evokes the mystery and wonder associated with the Orient"(1978, 21), and Brian Stableford has praised the work as "a feverish and gleefully perverse decadent/Arabian fantasy". (2005, 40). Several other important studies were conducted to examine the autobiographical elements in the work. Consciously or not Beckford included autobiographical material in the novel, as his contemporaries recognized. In the late twentieth century it was read as an example of the projection of sodomy and homosexuality. The novel is studied as an example of queer literature. Beckford's sexuality has been a key concern of critics looking for the inner explanation of *Vathek*'s opposites. Little, however, is done to show how Beckford's works reflects the first attempt to construct "orient of the mind" and therefore constitutes an earlier attempt in the now long tradition of orientalist discourse. This paper tries to reassess the reading of the novel from this perspective.

**Keywords:** Beckford, *Vathek*, oriental tale, orientalism

Since its first publication in 1786, *Vathek* brought fame to William Beckford. It has attracted critical attention on too many levels. It soon has become the inspiration of poets and novelist during and after Beckford's age. George Gordon, Lord Byron is said to have cited *Vathek* as a source for his poem, "The Giaour". Other Romantic poets used oriental settings in their works. The list includes writers such as Robert Southey's famous work *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801) and Thomas Moore's *Lalla-Rookh* (1817). (Gemmett, 1977, 137). John Bernard suggests that John Keats's vision of the Underworld in "Endymion" (1818) is indebted to the novel.(1977, 595).

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Several other studies were conducted to examine the autobiographical elements in the work. Consciously or not Beckford included autobiographical material in the novel, as his contemporaries recognized. Carathis, *Vathek*'s ruthless, powerful, and formidable mother, is an analogue for Beckford's mother; Nouronihar, who goes from sweetness and innocence to sharing *Vathek*'s lust and merciless drive for power, is based on Louisa Beckford, William's cousin and mistress; Gulchenrouz, Nouronihar's childlike cousin, her betrothed, and the only character to go to Heaven in *Vathek*, is based on Beckford's lover William "Kitty" Courtenay; and *Vathek* is based on Beckford himself.

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Various claims have been made, some of which have perhaps over-emphasized its "unique position both as an oriental tale and a s work of art." (Sitwell, 1930, 21). Other critics went even further to suggest that *Vathek* is not a mere literary *tour de force*, a flight of unregulated imagination. J. W. Oliver (1977) states that Beckford,

"with his oriental enthusiasm, was almost bound to produce a full-dress Eastern tale sooner or later. Such a tale would, inevitably, have been far superior, in point of fidelity to actual Eastern models, to the conventional eastern tales which stuffed out the grandiose verbiage the magazines of the Eighteenth Century.(3)

Brian Fothergill (2005,4) stresses Beckford's distinction among his contemporaries "in being more authentic to western readers and in being based on a wider knowledge of Eastern literature and custom than most other authors of Superior Oriental tales possessed".

Other critics see *Vathek* within the context of the late eighteenth century's gothic themes and suggest that like many of his contemporaries, Beckford "had the same love for the sadistic and the macabre; this was the beginning of modern psychological interest in the curious by-ways of human spirit, and was a characteristic of Romanticism of which Beckford was a pioneer". (Boyd, 1962, 89)

J Garrett (1992, 8), claims that though he was influenced by the orientalism of his day, Beckford does not privilege "West" above "East".

J. M. Mackenzie (1995, 23) thinks that Beckford's imaginative and fantastic view is based on his knowledge of the East.

Donna E. Landry (2008, 11) feels that William Beckford typifies the Englishman who wishes he were something else: an Oriental ruler of a type inspired by reading the the 1001 Nights and Ottoman and Safavid court poetry. His novel *Vathek* is an attempt to re-enact his previous *Arabian Nights Entertainments* re-enactment: his twenty-first birthday party celebrations at Fonthill. Even at his most private, Beckford writes from an Eastern repository of tropes, while at his most Oriental, he satirises English rural society, especially the hunting-mad set represented by his cousin Peter Beckford. Even the figure of the camel Alboufaki signifies both Eastern learning and English gentry folly, typifying the complexity of Beckford's literary achievement.

Beckford's sexuality has been a key concern of critics looking for the inner explanation of *Vathek's* opposites. In 1785 Beckford left England temporarily in the wake of a scandal over his relationship with the young William Courtenay. (RB Gill, 2003, 9)

Most of these critics agree to relate the work, as indeed Beckford himself clearly indicated, to the events and setting at the old Fonthill House, especially the great "Egyptian Hall" at Christmas 1781. The novel at any rate has put the East to western satirical ends. Roger Lonsdale (1971, xxix) thinks that Beckford "appears to identify variously with the perplexities, frustrations, and longings of all three of his main characters". The moral is, after all, that a material self-indulgence might lead to a catastrophe.

Whether *Vathek* was a mere and immediate response to the imaginative and emotional stimulation of the events at Fonthill or was only a vehicle to descry aspects of his parents and, hence, pour into it the complications of his private life, the fact is that while most of the reviewers, when refusing to believe it was a genuine Arabian tale (translated from Arabic), had no difficulty in relating it to the *Arabian Nights*, first translated into English early in the century. Following the practice of the *Arabian Nights* and its imaginative glamour, Beckford based his tale on a historic personage.

Although certain descriptive passages were said to have been suggested to him by a mass of Oriental literature and engravings (Lees-Milne, 1976, 25), *Vathek's* eventual popularity and influence upon writers was immense. It was followed by numerous picaresque tales with an Oriental setting.

Mirella Billi (2011) states British culture had fascination with the Orient. Eastern stories had drifted across Europe by Byzantium, Italy, Spain, and the Crusaders who helped the oral transmission of stories. Some of these stories were re-elaborated into legends and tales of adventure.

Diago Saglia (2002) states that the Orient is a proliferating presence in British literature. "The orientalist's dimension gradually developed for the earlier manifestations into an intersection of texts and objects \_\_\_ while became increasingly pervasive, visible and accessible within British Culture" (76). Saglia also states that "there was a diffusion and popularization of texts, which went along with the growing 'materiality' of Oriental consumerism, even in imaginative and visionary writers such as William Beckford" (76).

As a product of a heated and highly sensitive imagination, long impregnated with the readings of the *Arabian Nights*, *the Persian Tales* and other works of early travellers to the East, *Vathek* had a great impact on the verse of the Romantics. Southey read it when he was working on his *Thalaba* 1801, Thomas Moore (*Lalla Rookh*, 1817) utilized the romantic picture of the East it evoked. Byron was greatly influenced by it (Mahmoud, 1972, 111). He offered Beckford's tale the most lavish praise and acknowledged his indebtedness to it in a footnote to the Turkish narrative poem "The Giaour", "for correctness of costume, beauty of description, and power of imagination it far surpasses all European imitations ... as an Eastern tale, even *Rasselas* must bow before it"(John Murray, 1855, 49), Byron states. *Vathek* has, in a way, set the tone of the English Oriental fiction that followed.

The authenticity some critics liked – following Byron to attach to Beckford needs first to be brought into focus. To his western readers, the accuracy of Beckford's details and the intensity of his conception are so impressive that those travellers who – after him – wanted to exercise their Oriental fantasies, think of his work

as a translation from the source, from the heart of the authentic Orient, rather than a story made by an outsider. Yet Beckford is a secondary, detached figure. His work was based on a 'library Orientalism' whose touch of authenticity, however impressive, had to be mediated through the experience of others. Since he is far from the East, he stands somewhat apart from the otherness in it. Therefore, his authenticity is second – hand, his Orientalism parthenogenetic. Not him, rather his consciousness that tours the Orient and its labyrinths, digging its eccentricities out.

Here, however, the purpose is richer. For Beckford, the protagonist Vathek – essentially as an oriental – is the other who gains most of the 'significance' due to his 'difference'. The oriental, then, is a version of that which stands over against us and, by virtue of its unlikeness, helps us to understand what 'we' are in 'ourselves'. It becomes a curious mirror, the magic mirror in which by staring at the otherness, 'we' come to see 'ourselves' more clearly. The need for that, however, is not only Beckfordian. Edward Said has argued that the orient is the one of Europe's "deepest and most recurring images of the other". When the orient – according to said – helps to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, and experience (Said, 1978, 2), it becomes part of the process of self-making; an element in 'our' most essential activity, and it is in that light that the 'treatment' of the orient – though essentially – other becomes the mirror that reflects the opposite and thus enhances and achieves self-realization. The Orient according to Edward Said (1990, 234) was a European invention and regarded "a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences."

Beckford's Oriental world is a vast field in which consciousness can seek its opposite and thereby make it possible for the self to realize itself. Beckford made out of the world of *Vathek* a context which is perspicuous and dense with detail, lavish, sensuous, and ironic. As the narrative moves from one moment of melodrama to another the context moves along and supports those moments, contributing by its own intensity of surface to the concentrated force of the text. The world of *Vathek* is densely and intensely other, parading its difference with a mock solemnity which is remarkable for its deftness of touch. For the self in the making the combination of density and detail means that there is that much more. Otherness to deal with, that much for the self to devour and grow fat on as it seeks its necessary opposite.

Hunger and thirst are the impelling forces of Vathek's personality:

He sat down indeed to eat; but, of the three hundred dishes that were daily placed before him, he could taste of no more than thirty-two. (14)

All these feasts, the woman, the craving of knowledge, are finally instances of this desire to touch at his world in every possible way, from every possible angle, to make it all part of himself. Beckford infused the world with specificity because the more points there are at which the self can make contact with Otherness and come out to realize itself more fully.

For the observer of such a context, for Beckford as well as his readers, the Caliph Vathek himself is a part of that otherness. He is the object of Beckford's (and our) devouring, as well as being, in himself the apostle of ingestion. Thus, the high order of the attentiveness to detail which characterizes Beckford's text is more than a matter of correctness of costume which had impressed Byron.

In some elaborate and garnished narrative, the Orient serves Beckford, then, to create his own private mythology. This, in effect, is not the product of direct seeing but, of the perusal of other texts. He does *not* possess the matter of the Orient but the matter of the other texts which have brought the Orient to him. It is not immediacy, rather it is mediation. Thus, Beckford's text does not speak only of facts of popular culture but of models of possessing experiences. The self is authenticating itself, not only by testing itself against Otherness but rendering the way in which it sees that Otherness and seeks to possess it. It is an imperialism of the imagination.

In April 1781, Beckford wrote to Lady Hamilton: "I fear I shall never be ... good for anything in this world, but composing airs, buildings towers, forming gardens, collecting old Japan, and writing a journey to China or the moon." (15) In 1782, he wrote *Vathek*.

When Beckford, the 'Oriental scholar' who had never set foot in the Orient, chooses to train his fantasies, he restructures an Orient by his art and makes its colours, lights, and people visible through his images, rhythms and motifs. Earlier reviewers in the west would, then, see *Vathek* as a remarkable imitation of an Orient, and welcome such an Orient as the text offers.

The novel, nonetheless, whether taken as exploiting the imaginative terror and the psychological shock tactics which were entering the English novel at about this time, or whether overtaken by the tide of the vogue identifiable in the romantic Eighteenth century (i.e. the Romantic trend), frames through Beckford's elegant and ironic prose a rich picture of the bizarre, sadistic, grotesque, violent, and highly improbable. "You could scarcely find anything like the Halls of Eblis in the Eastern Writings, for that was my own" (16), Beckford confessed to Cyrus Redding fifty years later.

The narrative, on the other hand is written in a dead pan prose bristling with a wicked humour, which entirely redeems the conventional setting and makes the follies and inconsistencies of the story – its viciousness

rather entertaining. But there are always the shades of the violent, the vicious, and the sadistic:

... the Princess remained in the company of her negresses, who squinted in the most amiable manner from the only eye they had; and leered with exquisite delight, at the skulls and skeletons which Carathis had drawn forth from her cabinets.(17)

Scenes in the tale (especially like that involving the Giaour, who is kicked, kicked again, and finally rolled like a ball through the city of Samarah) demonstrate that when no more exaggeration is possible, the only option remaining is self- satire:

The Caliph, raising his arm as high as he was able made each of the prizes glitter in the air but, whilst he delivered it, with one hand, to the child, who sprung forward to receive it; he with the other, pushed the poor innocent to the gulph; where the Giaour, with a sullen muttering, incessantly repeated; 'more' 'more'!(18)

The supernatural is more of faerie than Gothic; and it presents the bizarre tale of the Caliph with some puckish humour and enlightened good sense.

To add to the horridness and grotesqueness of this world, everything becomes painted in dark hues. The nightfall which always seems to be overtaking Vathek and his attendants accentuates the starkness and portentousness implicit in the natural setting:

The curtain of night seemed dropped before him, everything appeared disclosed. The falling waters filled his soul with dejection... Extending himself on the brink of the stream, he turned his eyes towards the blue summits of the mountain, and exclaimed, 'What concealed thou behind thee, pitiless rock? What is passing in thy solitudes?' (19)

The brooding and ominous landscape complements the events of the plot by creating an atmosphere of Gothic terror and imminent disaster:

At length she arrived at the opening of the glen; but instead of coming up to the light, she found herself surrounded by darkness; expecting that, at a considerable distance, a faint spark glimmered by fits. She stopped, a second time: the sound of water –falls mingling their murmurs; the hollow rustlings among the palm-branches: and the funeral screams of the birds from their rifted trunks: all conspired to fill her soul with terror. (20)

There is no normal activity, there are no ordered events. The scenery encourages us to suspend all logical analysis and to accept the validity of the extravagant episodes that transpire.

But everything is too violent to be true and this is what makes *Vathek* unembarrassedly improbable, an embodiment of the bizarre and the fantastic. Yet it leaves the impression that the tale is true of life, that it states profound truths about the nature of humanity.

The juxtaposition of magnificence and absurdity is used consistently in the presentation of Vathek's character and position. Combined with each incident presenting Vathek in an heroic or majestic light is a reminder of the burlesque or the merely human. The supernatural and the 'natural' are blended in a cast of characters that includes Mohamet and Eblis and their respective servants, the Genii and the Giaour at the supernatural level, as well as a host of people who bear an unmistakable humanity, sometimes staggering under its burden and sometimes delighting in its variability. The human characters range from low to high, from the sweating breathing populace of Samarah to Vathek himself. Naivety is found in the behaviour of the fifty children, unknown sacrificial victims; sublimity in Vathek's displays of magnificence. What follows is the blending of the ludicrous and the fearful:

As their strokes were repeated, a hollow noise was heard in the earth; the surface hove up into heaps; and the ghouls, on all sides, protruded their noses to inhale the effluvia, which the carcasses of the woodmen began to emit. They assembled before a sarcophagus of white marble, where Carathis was seated between the bodies of her miserable guides. The Princess received her visitants with distinguished politeness; and, supper being ended, they talked of business. (21)

The tension here is between the terrifying nature of the ghouls and their revolting act of eating corpses on the one hand, on the other, the ironic reserve of the narrator, demonstrated in his choice of the conventional expression, "supper being ended, they talked of business." Indeed, most of the shocking excesses presented in the tale are narrated in a similar tone. Vathek's attempted sacrifice of the fifty beautiful children to the appetite of the Giaour, the murder in the tower of one hundred and forty men attempting to rescue Vathek from what they think to be a dangerous fire, Vathek's sacrilege in fouling the sacred broom carried to him by pilgrims from Mecca, all are narrated in a tone of restrained amusement, sympathizing neither with the victims nor with the perpetrators of vicious acts but encompassing all with sardonic observation. The discrepancy between style and content forces an uncomfortable fusion of the ludicrous and the terrifying. The assumption of the normalcy inherent in the tone creates in the reader an ethical disorientation. The world presented has no apparent moral meaning, yet the ambivalence of the narrator's ironic reserve will not permit that conclusion to be drawn.

Among the figures populating the pages of *Vathek* are a surprising large proportion of the physically grotesque. They are "fifty female negroes mute and blind of the right eye"(22), who are particularly talented in

the use of the garotte. Beckford offers also the description of another strange assortment of people the objects of the charity of the Emir Fakreddin:

Whenever the Caliph directed his course, objects of pity were sure to swarm round him; the blind, the purblind, smarts without noses, damsels without ears, each to extol the munificence of Fakreddin, who, as well as his attendant grey-beards, dealt about, gratis, plasters and cataplasms to all that applied. At noon, a superb corps of cripples made its appearance; and soon after advance, by platoons, on the plain, the completest association of invalids that had never been embodied till then. The blind went groping with the blind, the lame limped on together, and the maimed made grotesque gestures to each other with the only arm that remained: the sides of a considerable water-fall were crowded by the deaf, amongst whom were some from Pegu, with ears uncommonly handsome and large, but who were still less able to hear than the rest. Nor were there wanting others in abundance with hump-backs; wenny necks; and even horns of an exquisite polish. (23)

What is significant in this passage is not the description of the physically abnormal creatures, but the manner in which that description is presented. The particular fascination with the physically abnormal gives rise here to a tension between the comical and something else that jars with merriment. Beckford presents this spectacle in a form of derisive burlesque that assaults humanity. The material imagery in this context amuses but it also repels by the lack of charity both in the description and in the very act of being amused. To present one or two grotesque personages might be amusing or disturbing enough, but Beckford's canvas teems with grotesques. Not only does he offer platoons of invalids but also a succession of scholars proudly sporting interminable beards, two pious dwarfs who recite the Koran monotonously and endlessly (they are reciting it for the hundred and ninety-ninth time in the course of the tale), the abnormally fat and conceited Bababalouk, Vathek's chief eunuch, whose voice resembles "the ringing of a cracked jar"(24), and an unusually large number of silly, decrepit, and pious grey beards.

Vathek's pursuit of Nouronihar is merely an interlude in the dominant action of the tale, Vathek's quest for the Subteranean Kingdom, where the talisman and the treasures of the pre-Adamite kings and of soliman-Ben-Daoud were deposited. And even the quest, here, is ironic. Vathek's mother, Carathis, is an ironic parody of the mother-figure in the traditional romance. Her wisdom is in the form of knowledge of the occult and her device is accompanied by a domineering power that Vathek finds impossible to resist. When Vathek strays, she placed him firmly on the true path, the one which leads ultimately to his damnation. Nouronihar, the lady of pleasure, is similarly an ironic refraction of the traditional figure. The temptation she offers leads Vathek away from the route obtained by his mother from the Infernal Power.

Vathek's quest for the key to the secrets of nature leads him more and more deeply into evil. When Vathek is later damned, the reader does not receive a sense of tragic waste. Beckford conveys his moral.

The scenario of the world of oddities Beckford sketches in his work makes *Vathek* one of the distinctive contributions in the field. Edward Said (1995) hand, doubts that the interest of Beckford, Byron, Thomas More and Goethe in the Oriental matter is for its own sake; he believes it was like an outlet to their concern in "Gothic Tales, pseudo-medieval idylls, visions of barbaric splendor and cruelty . . . sensuality, promise, terror, sublimity, idyllic pleasure, intense energy: the Orient as a figure in the pre-romantic chameleon life quality called objectively" (118-119).

William Beckford's *Vathek* is a work that keeps inviting reassessment. William Beckford deploys a phantasmagoric magic lantern to orientalize the East. If the work was regarded a pioneering work in the Gothic tradition, it is equally poignant in its rich orientalist lore.

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