

Free literature review on vathek and the queer gothic

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In William Beckford's 1786 novel *Vathek*, the titular character, an Arabic caliph with endless sexual passion and thirst for knowledge, delves slowly but inexorably toward damnation with the help of his astrologist mother, Carathis, and a Jinn known as Giaour. This book, along with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, demonstrate early examples of Gothic fiction. In particular, however, *Vathek* can be cited as an example of queer Gothic fiction; as Gothic literature deals greatly with the unknown, *Vathek*'s journeys and the characters he meets along the way can be interpreted as homosexual (or at least fluid in their sexuality and gender identity). *Vathek*, Gulchenrouz, the fifty sons of *Vathek*'s viziers, Giaour and others have a great deal of anxiety and sexual tension regarding their identities, which forms a substantial part of the queer subtext of the novel *Vathek*. *Vathek*, when read as a queer Gothic novel, displays an immense fascination with non-cisgendered characters and desires, as well as homosexual and bisexual behavior in its characters, creating an important way of understanding 18th century attitudes towards sex and gender. There have been many readings of *Vathek* over the years, many of which revolve primarily around the Orientalism and imperialism inherent in a French author writing about the exotic Arabic world. The novel is often read as an "eighteenth-century depiction of the East as a place of luxury, magic, the marvellous, comedy and beauty" (Krober 1). However, the sexual nature of the characters in *Vathek* are shown to be immensely fluid and fascinating, spanning the spectrum of deviant and queer sexual behavior just as other Gothic texts might; instead of toeing the traditional line of terror and horror that Gothic texts do, *Vathek* focuses primarily on fear of the

unknown (Krober 1).

In order to better understand the anxieties inherent in *Vathek*, it is necessary to define the Gothic novel, and what criteria a novel must fulfill in order to be Gothic. According to Fincher, the " Gothic novel reflects a deep anxiety in eighteenth-century culture about the changing status of masculinity and femininity in a period of political and social change" (Fincher, 2001). A great deal of Gothic fiction deals with the changing or questioning of identities, such as Shelley's *Frankenstein's* monster questioning whether or not he is a real man or a creature - people in the eighteenth century were drawn to and repulsed by the abnormal, which helps to explain the Gothic novel's success. In essence, *Vathek* fulfills this criteria by being about someone who eschews social mores and engages in an amoral chase after selfish carnal pleasures, and inhabits a world of flexible sexuality and gender; deviating from the norm in this way illustrates the Gothic (and queer) anxieties inherent to the book.

Many homosexual and homoerotic characters are shown in *Vathek*, most particularly Gulchenrouz and the fifty sons of the viziers of *Vathek*; they are all alternately said to be effeminate or to toe gender lines in myriad ways. At the same time, they do not have identities of their own, and no internal life; they merely serve as sex objects for others' desires to be fulfilled.

Gulchenrouz, as a character, is particularly strong as an example of queer Gothicism in the novel; he has many attributes that set him apart from the typical man of the 18th century. Gulchenrouz is a patron of the arts, and engages in traditionally feminine pursuits: his art includes " the most elegant arabesques that fancy could devise," he sings " in the most enchanting

manner," and eschews riding horses and darting lances to perform archery and dance (Beckford 65). He is a sensitive, effeminate soul; his " heart always tremble[s] at anything sudden or rare" (Beckford 67). In terms of his relationship to Nouranihar, they seem to take almost reverse-gender roles in their interactions: he looks for " refuge in the fond arms of Nouranihar," in order to find solace like a woman would (Beckford 66).

As for the fifty sons of Vathek's viziers, they are described with an equally effeminate nature. They spend a great deal of time " coursing butterfliesculling flowers, or picking up shining little pebbles," and often are seen " imparting a thousand caresses" on each other; they also perform archery just like Gulchenrouz does (Beckford 25). However, they do not achieve the gender-bending extremes of Gulchenrouz himself, who does end up dressing as a woman: " when Gulchenrouz appeared in the dress of his cousin, he seemed to be more feminine than even herself" (Beckford 66). Gulchenrouz is depicted as " a husband more womanish than [Nouranihar]," whose " divine beauty" is directly contrasted with his femininity; there is also the implication that he will not " decay" her reproductive capability due to his " inefficient and nerveless" hands (Beckford 74). In essence, Gulchenrouz is implied to be at least spiritually and personally female, in terms of gender identification; however, it cannot be said that he has a sexual identity per se, as otherwise Vathek might perceive him as a potential threat to gaining Nouranihar's hand (Krober 2). Rather, he dismisses him as " more womanish than" her, further infantilizing him by saying that Bababalouk can take care of him (Beckford 73-74).

Gulchenrouz's sexual activity is stripped of its sexual nature by Beckford,

creating a sexless creature characterized more for his fluid gender identity than his actual sexual desire (Krober 3). The fifty sons go to Gulchenrouz and kiss " his serene forehead and beautiful eye-lids" (Beckford 97). However, the kisses are given " without fear" and are in " congratulation," something decidedly different from sexual desire; he is lumped in with the fifty sons in a nest of genius, a decidedly sexless place that instead focuses on peace (Beckford 97). Gulchenrouz is not engaged in any female-centered sexual liaisons, but neither is he engaged in male-centric ones; the issue is not that he is gay, but that he is asexual. The narrator's talk of " the inconsistency of women" refers to Gulchenrouz's loyalty rather than sexual activity, also stating that he is in perpetual " childhood," " pure happiness" and " undisturbed tranquility" (Beckford 98, 120). Compared to all the deviant sexual behavior that occurs around him in the novel, making this choice is a strong one.

Given these fluidly sexual and gendered creatures, their interactions with Vathek (and his reactions to them) cement the work's validity as a queer Gothic novel. Vathek acts in a clearly homophobic fashion toward them, likely due to his own closeted homosexuality. Vathek himself is a lothario, a commanding and domineering womanizer who constantly presses the issue of deviant sexuality in order to compensate for potential desires for me. He is " much addicted to women" and is a " great admirer" of them, demonstrating his heterosexuality openly and brazenly (Beckford 1, 10). When it comes to Nouranihar, it is clear that he wants her in a sexual manner, and he is openly threatened by the Giaour's potential threat to his wives, telling Bababalouk to " redouble [his] vigilance" in keeping his eye on

the rival (Beckford 16).

Vethak acts according to the norm for heterosexuality (e. g. sleeping with as many women as possible), but has a difficult conflict within himself - he must juggle " the contrast between the desire for nonstandard sexuality and the fear and condemnation of queer sexuality" (Krober 3). Despite his open heterosexuality, and the distaste for queer sexuality that he has, there is an innate draw that he has to it, found especially in the relationship between him and the Giaour. The Giaour is able to withstand Vethak's " terrible eye," which he can " sustain without the slightest emotion" (Beckford 6). In Gothic fiction, the " gaze between men becomes a metaphor for cultural vigilance and paranoia in the late eighteenth century over both queer bodies and desires" (Fincher, 2001). To that end, Vathek's inability to vanquish the Giaour with his stare indicates a difference in feeling than with the women he can bring to their knees using said gaze; this is the first indicator of his feelings for the Giaour. Vathek even kisses him at the mountain garden around Samarah, likening it to kissing the " coral lips and the lilies and roses of his most beautiful wives" (Beckford 15). This is a very clear example of his sexual desire, however latent, for the Giaour.

Carathis, Vathek's mother, is a direct counterforce to Vathek's rampant sexual needs, acting as " chastity in the abstract, an implacable enemy to love intrigues and sloth" (Beckford 92). She performs her role as the stopper of sexual activity, however aberrant, stopping the " tender connexions" of many characters, from Vathek and Nouronihar (93) to the ghouls and her negresses (92). After kissing the Giaour, Vathek is " blessed with an excellent appetite" which can clearly be construed as homosexual need

(Beckford 16). While he never is fully cognizant of this homoerotic love for the man, the Giaour manages to contextualize his own abandonment of sexual norms, noting that he is "an Indian; but, from a region of India, which is wholly unknown" (Beckford 14). Because of this status as the Other, his value system is markedly and apparently different from that of the Vathek, which challenges Vathek to do the same. Experiencing a new kind of sexuality apart from the control of Carathis, Vathek is drawn to the Giaour's openness with his sexual desires, and consequently chases him (Krober 4). Reading Vathek as a queer text sheds some light on both the author and the time in which the book was written. Beckford himself, at the time of the writing of the novel, was in "a public and scandalous love affair with a man," revealing something of himself, possibly, in the subtext of Vathek (McNeil 3). Beckford is said to be a concrete and important presence in the novel, which is "typical of other authorial personae, artistic creations that paradoxically function properly only when taken as factual biography" (Gill 2). The Eastern exoticism of Vathek, along with its addressing of moral concerns in a lascivious and potentially exploitative way, is "essentially the sort of fabular parable that the eighteenth-century reader enjoyed" (Gill 3). These factors make it a quintessential Gothic novel, particularly one that addresses queer issues.

There are many things to glean from Beckford's life in the main character of Vathek himself; he was domineered by a Calvinist mother, he was at times homosexual and bisexual, and many other labels often attributed to Vathek. Always a fugitive from scandal, his own homosexuality is hinted at in the fact that he left England for some time in 1785 to escape scandalous rumors of

him and young William Courtenay (Gill 7). To that end, reading *Vathek* through a queer Gothic context reveals much about the author's own fascination with his own internal hypocrisies, as well as the puritanical yet voyeuristic nature of eighteenth-century England (Haggerty 346). Even the depiction of hell as populated with "isolated, miserable individuals with their hearts literally on fire" is often likened by scholars to be part of his frustration with his own homosexual thoughts (Fincher 229). The subtextual nature of *Vathek*, when viewed through the perspective of characters dealing with their non-traditional sexual instincts (whether through repression or celebration), is given greater clarity when read within the context of the needs and wants of both the author and the time in which the book was released.

In conclusion, *Vathek* is important as a work of queer Gothic literature for many reasons. Gothic literature, by definition, explores and explicates the scandalous fascinations of its eighteenth-century audience, and queer Gothic focuses particularly on their focus on alternative sexualities. The novel's characters and situations depict a world of fluid sexuality and gender identity, from Gulchenrouz's feminine asexuality to *Vathek*'s confusion and anxiety regarding his latent homosexuality. Finally, the novel's subtexts, when viewed through a queer Gothic reading, reveal Beckford as a man dealing with similar issues of his homosexuality through the characters in the book, thus providing Gothic audiences with the kind of work they were demanding. This results in a classic and influential work that can be viewed successfully and productively through a queer Gothic lens.

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