

MANFRED AND VATHEK

To Byron, William Beckford's *Vathek* was

... a work ... which ... I never recur to, or read, without a renewal of gratification.¹

Earlier he had written, in a note to *The Giaour*, line 1334, of:

... that most eastern, and ... "sublime tale", the "Caliph Vathek". I do not know from what source the author of that singular volume may have drawn his materials; some of his incidents are to be found in the "Bibliothèque Orientale"; but for correctness of costume, beauty of description, and power of imagination, it far surpasses all European imitations; and bears such marks of originality, that those who have visited the East will have difficulty in believing it to be more than a translation. As an Eastern tale, even Rasselas must bow before it; his "Happy Valley" will not bear a comparison with the "Hall of Eblis".²

The influence of the novel on the poems Byron wrote immediately prior to *Manfred* is often pointed out.³

The standard point of reference when relating *Manfred* itself to *Vathek* is the opening stage direction of II iv, giving "Arimanes on his Throne, a Globe of Fire, surrounded by the Spirits", which echoes unambiguously the following passage from Beckford's book:

An infinity of elders with streaming beards, and afrits in complete armour, had prostrated themselves before the ascent of a lofty eminence; on the top of which, upon a globe of fire, sat the formidable Eblis. His person was that of a young man, whose noble and regular features seemed to have been tarnished by malignant vapours. In his large eyes appeared both pride and despair: his flowing hair retained some resemblance to that of an angel of light. In his hand, which thunder had blasted, he swayed the iron sceptre, that causes the monster Ouranbad, the afrits, and all the powers of the abyss to tremble.⁴

"Aherman" is mentioned by Beckford immediately after this, as a spirit subsidiary to Eblis; by substituting the Zoroastrian Evil One for the Moslem, Byron effects a clear but honest borrowing – a gesture of creative respect – without merely plagiarising.

Manfred, the protagonist, is as like and unlike Vathek, the protagonist, as the similarities and dissimilarities between Beckford's book and Byron's would lead one to expect. Instead of depicting blasphemy simply against one monotheism (Islam, in the case of Vathek) Manfred depicts blasphemy against so many religions that one cannot keep them all in mind at once. Instead of a brilliantly-wrought exercise in High Camp, which is what I take *Vathek* to be, *Manfred* expresses a profound guilt, a true existentialist horror before its time, at which one is never tempted to smile – as one does at *Vathek*, conscious that such a reaction is partly what Beckford is aiming at. Vathek is compelled to his career of impious necromancy, partly by ambitions of political self-aggrandisement well beyond the Napoleonic, and partly by his mother – two undignified factors which Byron never confers on Manfred. Byron is, here as elsewhere, criticising via omission, in the act of borrowing. We may see him becoming more critical of *Vathek* as the process of writing his play continues; for, as Jerome McGann points out⁵ the original setting of III iii, at the foot of a tower, is a clear echo of Vathek and his own Babel-like

References are to Roger Lonsdale's edition of *Vathek*, O.U.P.

1: CPW III 486; note to *The Siege of Corinth*, line 598.

2: CPW III 423.

3: See CPW III 415, and notes to *The Giaour*, 22, 339, 389, 479, 483, 496, 568, 612, 619, 748, 784, 1334; also *The Corsair*, 695-6; and *The Siege of Corinth*, 598.

4: *Vathek*, pp. 110-11.

5: CPW IV 474.

creation. Manfred's presence in such a building – designed for impiously astrological purposes – would bring him down to the monomaniac level of Vathek:

... having ascended, for the first time, the fifteen hundred steps of his tower, he cast his eyes below, and beheld men not larger than pismires; mountains, than shells; and cities, than beehives. [Compare Manfred's thoughts on the Jungfrau, at I ii 14-16.] The idea, which such an elevation inspired of his own grandeur, completely bewildered him: he was almost ready to adore himself; till, lifting his eyes upward, he saw the stars as high above him as they appeared when he stood on the surface of the earth. He consoled himself, however, for this intruding and unwelcome perception of his littleness, with the thought of being great in the eyes of others; and flattered himself that the light of his mind would extend beyond the reach of his sight, and extort from the stars the decrees of his destiny.⁶

Manfred is not as stupid as this, and is obsessed throughout with a “perception of his own littleness”, despite having achieved the supposed wisdom at which Vathek aims. As Jerome McGann also writes, the subsequent unexplained fire in the tower, and the comical panic among Manfred's servants, in the rejected III iii, confirms Byron's model:

In the mean time, the inhabitants of Samarah, scared at the light which shone over the city, arose in haste; ascended their roofs, beheld the tower on fire, and hurried, half naked, to the square. Their love for their sovereign immediately awoke; and, apprehending him in danger of perishing in his tower, their whole thoughts were occupied with the means of his safety.⁷

Byron's avoids these recollections in his revised act. Vathek's mother-fixation is part of the comedy of his predicament, and deprives him of the dignity which the psychologically similar Coriolanus possesses; and dignity for his hero is an effect at which Byron is aiming. However, Manfred's tone when faced finally by his “Genius” (in III iv) still derives from that of Vathek, when similarly placed. Here is Vathek, faced with a Genius who would warn him off the final stage of his transgressions:

Whoever thou art, withhold thy useless admonitions: thou wouldst either delude me, or art thyself deceived. If what I have done be so criminal, as thou pretendest, there remains not for me a moment of grace. I have traversed a sea of blood, to acquire a power, which will make thy equals tremble: deem not that I shall retire, when in view of the port; or, that I will relinquish her, who is dearer to me than either my life, or thy mercy. Let the sun appear! Let him illumine my career! it matters not where it may end.⁸

And here Manfred, faced with his Genius, after all his transgressions are accomplished:

Thou false fiend, thou liest!
 My life is in its last hour – *that* I know,
 Nor would redeem a moment of that hour;
 I do not combat against Death, but thee
 And thy surrounding angels; my past power
 Was purchased with no compact with thy crew,
 But by superior science – penance – daring –
 And length of watching – strength of mind – and skill
 In knowledge of our fathers – when the earth
 Saw men and Spirits walking side by side,
 And gave ye no supremacy: I stand
 Upon my strength – I do defy – deny –
 Spurn back – and scorn ye –⁹

6: *Vathek*, p. 4.

7: *Vathek*, p. 33.

8: *Vathek*, p. 105.

9: III iv 109-21.

... and so on. Vathek, like the necromancers of Marlowe and Goethe, has others to blame – his mother, and the ugly Giaour who starts him on his evil path; but Manfred is his own tempter and will be his own Nemesis.

One underdeveloped part of the final episode in *Vathek* probably caught Byron's attention. Walking in the vicinity of the Hall of Eblis, Vathek and his beloved Nouronihar come across

... a small square chamber, where they discovered, sitting on sofas, four young men, of goodly figure, and a lovely female, who were holding a melancholy conversation by the glimmering of a lonely lamp.¹⁰

The “lonely lamp” echoes Manfred's first line (“The lamp must be replenished ...”). The woman and one of the men are – we later understand – brother and sister, and have pursued, like the others, careers of great sin, for which they now await punishment; though what their sins have been we are not told. They gravely invite Vathek and his beloved to sit and tell their story, and to listen to theirs: but Beckford, who worked at the extra episodes the stories would have involved, never included them in his finished work, despite debating whether or not to do so.¹¹ When the final doom is pronounced on Carathis, Vathek's mother, it is also pronounced on Vathek, Nouronihar, and on their four new companions, and its effect on their relationship is terrible:

Kalilah and his sister [this is the first and only time their relationship is defined] made reciprocal gestures of imprecation; all testified their horror for each other by the most ghastly convulsions, and screams that could not be smothered. All severally plunged themselves into the accursed multitude, there to wander in an eternity of unabating anguish.¹²

Did Byron imagine the afterlife of Astarte and Manfred in similar terms? When Samuel Rogers went to Fonhill, he gathered more about the extra episodes, and told Byron something of them; Byron's curiosity was naturally great. On March 3rd 1818 he wrote to Rogers:

Your account of your visit to F[onhill] is very striking. – Could you beg of him for me a copy in M.S.S. of the remaining tales? I think I deserve them as a strenuous and public admirer of the first one; [see the first two quotations of this essay] – I will return it – when read – & make no ill use of the copy if granted – Murray would send me out anything safely; – if ever I return to England I should like very much to see the author, with his permission; – in the mean time you could not oblige me more than by obtaining me the perusal I request – in French or English – all's one for that – though I prefer Italian to either. – I have a French Copy of Vathek which I bought at Lausanne.¹³

As far as we can tell, Rogers never persuaded Beckford to comply with Byron's request. Had he done so, Byron would have been gratified, for one of the three tales – the unfinished *Story of the Princess Zukais and the Prince Kalilah* – is indeed a tale of accursed, albeit unconsummated, sibling incest. (The Episodes were published by Stephen Swift & Co in 1912, in a translation by Sir Frank Marzials.)

Beckford, upon reading the letter to Rogers in Moore's *Life* (evidence, perhaps, that Rogers never passed on the request) was surprisingly scathing about Byron's interest in Vathek and its extra episodes, assuming merely that Byron was looking for material to plagiarise:

Rather cool after all – considering the red hot partiality he professed for Vathek – a book, I know, he used to carry about in his pocket, & which lay sometimes I have been told, under his very pillow –

10: *Vathek*, pp. 115-16.

11: See Lonsdale, 158-9, n to 116.

12: *Vathek*, pp. 119-20.

13: BLJ VI 17-18.

happy for him that he never saw thes [sic] episodes – they would have roused him to frenzy – & have shortened the little rest he ever enjoyed – the most original of the set as full as it could glare of Hell & the Devil, I have since thrown into the fire – the two which remain are quite sufficiently Satanic – Your Corsairs & Don Juans are milk & water Puritans compared with Barkiarokh, [printed Marzials, pp. 51-161] whose atrocities shamelessly worked up & rhymingly paraphrased in the style of the passage about the moon and the cloud in his Siege of Corinth, might have furnished the material of half a dozen poems & extracted as many thousands from the coffers of absolute John [Murray] Signed W.B.¹⁴

14: Quoted Harold S. Wiener, *Literary Sources of Byron's Turkish Tales*, in *Nineteenth Century Studies*, Princeton 1940, p. 95.