William Beckford

Vathek

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WILLIAM BECKFORD was born in 1760 in Wiltshire or London. He inherited an immense fortune on the death in 1770 of his father, a wealthy sugar planter, radical Whig MP, and two-term Lord Mayor of London. Privately tutored at Fonthill, the family's opulent Wiltshire estate, he completed his education in Geneva, undertook the Grand Tour in 1780–1, and over the next forty years was often abroad, frequently seeking refuge from ostracism at home. By 1784 he was well married, a Member of Parliament, and on the brink of elevation to the peerage, but that autumn the so-called 'Powderham scandal', when he was rumoured to have been caught *in flagrante* with a teenage boy, destroyed his reputation and obliged him to withdraw to Switzerland. He returned briefly to England in 1787 after the death of his wife, leaving their two young daughters in his mother's care, and spent much of the next decade in Portugal, France, and elsewhere in continental Europe, with intermittent return visits. During this period he began to plan a fantastic new Gothic mansion for Fonthill, which he was at last able to inhabit from 1807, surrounded by his now vast collection of artworks, curios, and rare books, much of it acquired in Paris during and after the French Revolution. In 1822 he sold Fonthill Abbey, under pressure from declining sugar prices; the structure partly collapsed three years later. Thereafter he lived mainly in Bath until his death from influenza in 1844.

Beckford was mercurial, extravagant, prodigiously talented, yet unable to harness his talents. His best known work, *Vathek* (1786), is a youthful and richly imaginative *jeu d'esprit*, first composed in French in 1782, translated and annotated by Samuel Henley under Beckford's guidance, but then published by Henley without his consent. His other books include *Dreams, Waking Thoughts, and Incidents* (1834; a prior version was printed but suppressed in 1783), *Modern Novel Writing, or The Elegant Enthusiast* (1796), and three interrelated 'Episodes of Vathek', sporadically drafted in the 1780s but not published until 1909–12.

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WILLIAM BECKFORD

Vathek

Edited with an Introduction and Notes by
THOMAS KEYMER

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INTRODUCTION

Beckford's precocious masterpiece *Vathek*, which first appeared in June 1786 as *An Arabian Tale, from an Unpublished Manuscript: With Notes Critical and Explanatory*,[1] has commanded the admiration of readers from Byron to Borges. Their critical and creative responses, with those of the symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, the novelist André Gide, the horror writer H. P. Lovecraft, and the cultural theorist Susan Sontag, among others, have much to tell us about the work and its startling range of effects. Interest has often been intensified by biographical factors, and Byron was fascinated by Beckford's stupendous wealth (from inherited sugar plantations in Jamaica) and the pleasures he used it to fund: his scandalous sexual libertinism; his legendary collection and connoisseurship of the arts; his immense, soaring, and, it turned out, structurally unsustainable mansion, Fonthill Abbey. But it was above all for the strangeness and opulence of his literary vision that Byron was drawn to Beckford. He found in *Vathek* a uniquely persuasive instance of the eighteenth-century fashion for oriental tales, and cited the work as an inspiration for his own oriental epics of the 1810s. A note to the first of these, *The Giaour* (1813), praises *Vathek* as 'that most eastern and . . . "sublime tale" ', and adds that 'for correctness of costume, beauty of description, and power of imagination, it far surpasses all European imitations'. Even the paradisal opening of Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas* (1759), the most sophisticated pseudo-oriental tale of the period, was outshone by Beckford's narrative and its infernal close: '[Johnson's] "Happy Valley" will not bear a comparison with the "Hall of Eblis." '[2]

Yet it is precisely in the famous climax to *Vathek*, set in the

[1] This unauthorized first edition has 'The History of the Caliph Vathek' as the running title; Beckford's first French-language editions are simply *Vathek* (Lausanne, 1786) and *Vathek, conte arabe* (Paris, 1787).

[2] *Byron's Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), iii, 423; 'sublime tale' is quoted by Byron from the anthologist Henry Weber, who regrets excluding from his *Tales of the East* (1812) the 'sublime tale of the Caliph Vathek, which could not be inserted without invading the rights of literary property' (i, p. lxii).

fiery underworld of the Qur'anic devil Eblis (or Iblis), that others have found a bedrock of European tradition beneath the shimmering Arabian surface. For Borges, Beckford creates at this point 'the first truly atrocious Hell in literature': atrocious, that is, in its very nature as a represented environment, whereas 'the *dolente regno* of the *Divine Comedy* is not an atrocious place; it is a place where atrocious things happen'. With his spectacular evocation of the subterranean palace, Beckford unleashes a rhetoric of sublime description that aligns *Vathek* not only with oriental tales but also with the gothic novel and its signature effects of immensity, obscurity, and terror. At the same time he absorbs, while artfully distorting, established Christian narratives of sin and perdition. Literally, Vathek's crime is one of blasphemy against Islam, the religion that, by virtue of his office as Caliph, he is charged to uphold. But the quest on which Vathek then embarks, for transcendent personal power and for the magical 'talismans . . . and the treasures of the pre-adamite sultans' (p. 30), leads him and his corrupted entourage into an underworld of eternal torment with recognizably Christian connotations. Specifically, Beckford reworks the Faust myth, in which a pact made with the Devil to gain knowledge and pleasure ends in grisly damnation. Yet at the same time he invests his underworld with a special glamour that destabilizes the myth. As Borges brilliantly observes, 'In the congenerous story of Doctor Faustus and the many medieval legends that prefigured it, Hell is the punishment of the sinner who makes a pact with the gods of Evil; in this story, Hell is the punishment and the temptation.'[3]

It was on this culminating scene and its hypnotic sensory effects that Beckford focused in his fullest surviving account of the genesis of *Vathek*, written late in his long life, and in somewhat testy response to Byron. He was certainly indebted to Byron's praise for the nineteenth-century revival of interest in *Vathek*, which after its first brief flush of fame (or in some quarters infamy) had slipped from public view. Originally the work was composed in French, a language sometimes used by elite amateur authors of

[3] Jorge Luis Borges, *Other Inquisitions, 1937–1952*, trans. Ruth L. C. Simms (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), 139.

fiction (Lady Mary Wortley Montagu is a notable precursor) to signal their distance from the vulgar professionalism of Grub Street. But an English translation by Beckford's former tutor, John Lettice, was under way within months, and a separate translation was later undertaken by Samuel Henley, former Professor of Moral Philosophy at the College of William & Mary, Virginia, who had returned to England during the American Revolution. Beckford's earliest letters about *Vathek* credit Henley as a prime instigator of the tale, 'answerable for having set me to work upon a story so horrid that I tremble whilst relating it, & have not a nerve in my frame but vibrates like an aspen'.[4] Thereafter he guided Henley's labours himself, for two years monitoring the translation in progress, and also Henley's ambitious annotations, in a spirit of collaborative endeavour. But there were also increasing tensions, and Beckford had lost control of the process by mid-1786, when Henley took it on himself to publish the translation while Beckford was away in Switzerland, compounding the offence by presenting it as his own scholarly edition of an Arabic manuscript.

Two imperfect editions in French, the first published in Lausanne in November 1786, the second in Paris the following summer, mark Beckford's hurried efforts to repossess his literary property. But neither of these (different) French versions, unidiomatic in the first place and reconstructed without access to the fair copy in Henley's possession, has the energy, power, and wit of the English text; as Borges neatly puts it, 'the original is unfaithful to the translation'.[5] Both French versions were soon republished in German translations, but otherwise neither could repeat the relative success of the London edition, which garnered seven, mainly glowing, reviews, though without generating an early second edition or the usual Dublin reprint. Unsold copies were still hanging fire years later, when the Lausanne edition was reissued with a new (and rather felicitous) title page as *Les Caprices et les malheurs du calife Vathek* (1791); the London edition was

[4] A. W. Thibaudeau (ed.), *The Collection of Autograph Letters . . . Formed by Alfred Morrison*, 2nd ser., 2 vols (1893), i, 183, dated 29 January 1782.

[5] Borges, *Other Inquisitions*, 140.

similarly reissued in 1809, optimistically dressed up as 'A New Edition'.[6]

It was not *The Giaour* alone that resurrected *Vathek*, and towards the end of the Napoleonic Wars both works benefited from renewed interest in oriental subjects, which, as Nigel Leask writes, 'formed part of a broader cultural engagement with the question of imperialism, productive of so much stimulation and anxiety in Regency Britain'.[7] But the boost provided by Byron—which Beckford celebrates after a later reprint of *The Giaour* as 'a note which will set Vathek agoing again'[8]—is beyond question. Over the next few years Beckford was able to bring out the nearest thing there is to definitive editions in French (1815) and English (1816), and the latter of these—pointedly renamed *Vathek, Translated from the Original French*—provides the copy text for the present edition. Twelve further editions (published in London, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Paris, Lyons, and Leipzig) appeared before Beckford's death in 1844, and the work has rarely, if ever, been out of print since that time.

The new lease on life enjoyed by *Vathek* in the nineteenth century also prompted Beckford to revisit a series of related tales in French, the so-called 'Episodes of Vathek', originally drafted between late 1783, soon after he had deposited his manuscript with Henley, and mid-1786, when Henley went to press; at that point Beckford seems to have abandoned the 'Episodes' with the third still unfinished and perhaps no more than a draft title for the fourth. Told in the voices of the doomed princes encountered by Vathek in the subterranean palace, the 'Episodes' have little of the main work's gleeful panache, a fact that may be attributable to the personal disasters of disgrace and bereavement that transformed Beckford's life as he wrote them. But the surviving evidence, notably Beckford's correspondence with Henley and a cancelled passage in the 1816 edition, indicates an enduring, or

[6] See Jon Millington's invaluable *William Beckford: A Bibliography* (Warminster: Beckford Society, 2008), 257–74, which lists several previously unrecorded editions.

[7] Nigel Leask, *British Romantic Writers and the East: Anxieties of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 13.

[8] Robert J. Gemmett (ed.), *The Consummate Collector: William Beckford's Letters to His Bookseller* (Norwich: Michael Russell, 2000), 157, dated 3 August 1832.

at least intermittent, desire to publish the 'Episodes' as a continuation of *Vathek*, or perhaps as interpolated tales. His letters to Henley charting the progress of the 'Episodes' may have been a ruse to slow down his impatient translator and buy time to get his French into publishable shape. 'The publication of *Vathec* [in English] must be postponed at least another year', he instructs Henley, who was no longer listening, in early 1786; to anticipate the French version 'would be tearing the proudest feather from my turban'.[9] But thirty years later Beckford seems to have revived the idea of publishing the 'Episodes', if only fleetingly, when he inserted in the third edition of *Vathek* a passage listing their titles, only to withdraw this passage during production.[10] Later still, in the 1830s, he made desultory efforts to sell them to the publisher Richard Bentley, but then backed away when it looked possible that Bentley might bite. Now the 'Episodes' were a work 'the publication of which I am not desirous . . . I am so very loth that I hardly know the price that would tempt me'.[11] It was no doubt during this period that Beckford guardedly revised the homoerotic opening episode, 'The History of the Princes and Friends Alasi and Firouz', by the time-honoured expedient—suggested most immediately by Matthew Lewis's gothic novel *The Monk* (1796)—of turning Firouz, a 13-year-old boy, into a ravishing princess named Firouzkah. Firouzkah begins the revised version disguised as an attractive young prince, but in mid-narrative she loses her shirt to expose—to the relief of confused, besotted Alasi—'a breast which the houris might have envied'.[12]

Yet for all this belated activity surrounding the 'Episodes', Beckford still lacked the wherewithal to publish them. He had no English version, and probably still no ending to the third tale.

[9] Thibaudeau (ed.), *Collection of Autograph Letters*, i, 196, dated 9 February 1786.

[10] On the cancelled third-edition passage, and its precursors in the Lausanne and Paris editions, see below, 'Note on the Text', and n. to p. 91.

[11] Gemmett (ed.), *Consummate Collector*, 313, dated 25 August 1734.

[12] William Beckford, *Vathek, with The Episodes of Vathek*, ed. Kenneth W. Graham (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview, 2001), 355; see also p. 24 on the probable debt to *The Monk*, which uses the same device to legitimize Ambrosio's love for his novice Rosario. Graham's edition makes what in the circumstances is the best available case for integrating the 'Episodes' with *Vathek*, though to designate *Vathek* a 'frame tale' (22, 379) is to let the tail wag the dog.

In revising the opening tale, he may simply have aimed to make the Alasi–Firouz romance acceptable for manuscript circulation among smart new friends such as Benjamin Disraeli, the emerging novelist and future prime minister.[13] It was not until the twentieth century that the 'Episodes' at last limped into print, in a bathos-strewn Edwardian translation—'"Why it's a woman!" said the old man'—produced by a retired general.[14] Somewhat more impressive, the odd infelicity notwithstanding, were the extracts published in the language of composition two or three years before this translation, to be welcomed into the canon of French literature by André Gide, who gamely compared Beckford's prose style with Lafontaine's and Molière's.[15]

Beckford's moments of optimism about the 'Episodes' lead us back to Byron, to whose promotion of *Vathek* he reacted with an unusual version of the anxiety of influence, flowing in reverse. 'Now is your moment for increasing the Vathek mania by all that analysis, commentary etc. can do for it,' he told his bookseller George Clarke almost half a century after the first publication of his tale: 'Now the propitious hour for sharpening the public appetite for more powerful episodes—which if ever they emerge from Hades into day light will reduce Byron's Corsair and Victor Hugo's monsters and scoundrels to insignificance.' No doubt Beckford was gratified when Clarke assured him that *Vathek* had already 'caused Byron to fall very low in the thermometer', and that readers disliked the 'Lewisian Walpoleian hash': a new Bentley's Standard Novels edition, that is, which shoehorned *Vathek* into a single volume with works by Horace Walpole and 'Monk' Lewis.[16] But still more galling than Byron's success with oriental epic, and old or new competition in gothic modes, was the

[13] 'Unless very intimate with that language, the episodes to V[athek] would be thrown away even upon him,' notes Beckford of Disraeli on 7 March 1833 (Gemmett (ed.), *Consummate Collector*, 183).

[14] Beckford, *Vathek, with the Episodes*, ed. Graham, 355. At this point Graham reprints Sir Frank Thomas Marzials's translation of 1912, which was preceded in 1909–10 by the publication of two episodes in French.

[15] See Gide's letter of 14 June 1913, in André Gide, Lucien Lavault, Lewis Melville, and Valéry Larbaud, 'Le Dossier Vathek', *Nouvelle Revue Française*, 9 (1913), 1044–50.

[16] Gemmett (ed.), *Consummate Collector*, 290, dated 10 July 1834; 292, dated 12 July 1834.

'gross error', widely made but blamed by Beckford on Byron above all, that *Vathek* was a juvenile work. 'I was of full age when I first committed [*Vathek*] to paper,' he tells Clarke with indignation, 'and the scenes which preceded and followed the magnificent celebration of my one and 20th birthday—the Egyptian halls and vaulted chambers of Fonthill peopled with the prototypes of Gulchenrouz and Nouronihar solely visible for three consecutive days and nights by the glow of lamps and fires—suggested my first ideas of the palace of Eblis.' Here Beckford specifies not only the created world of his narrative but also its twin foci of erotic attention: the betrothed lovers whom Vathek encounters and manipulates on his quest, leading one to damnation while the other is saved. A few years later he wrote a longer memoir of the now much mythologized Fonthill event, which took place in December 1781 (after more decorous and conventional birthday festivities in September), using the memoir to contest the false chronology:

> I composed Vathek immediately upon my return to town thoroughly embued with all that passed at Fonthill during this voluptuous festival. It will be seen that the Khalifeh's adventures were written down, not at the age of seventeen as Lord Byron has chosen to fancy, but at the age of twenty and two.

Vathek was above all a work of imagination and dream, suggests this memoir (reprinted in the present edition as Appendix II). Yet the vision it offered, far from being the callow stuff of adolescent fantasy, was self-consciously at the cutting edge of a new aesthetic, and also a new technology, of spectacle and illusion.

Dated just six years before his death, Beckford's memoir of the 'voluptuous festival' is the work of a lifelong fantasist, recalling events that had been played out more than fifty years beforehand, in an architectural space that had long been demolished, with protagonists Beckford had outlived. It demonstrates his enduring descriptive powers, but its status as historical evidence is more questionable, and the story it tells about the origins of *Vathek* leaves other key factors out of account, not least the young Beckford's voracious reading in multiple languages, including Arabic. Related reminiscences need to be taken with the same pinch of

salt, among them a boast to his first biographer, Cyrus Redding, about his white-heat composition of the work 'at one sitting . . . in . . . three days and two nights of hard labour'.[17] There may indeed have been a speedy first draft: Roger Lonsdale points to the comparable case of Beckford's unpublished 'Histoire de Darianoc', 'written in obvious haste in cryptic, fragmentary and ungrammatical French'. But Beckford's letters at the time suggest at least a five-month period of composition, from January to May 1782, and the ending was possibly not written until the following January.[18] Whatever the shortcomings of the memoir as matter of fact, however, it brings beautifully into focus the most intriguing features of *Vathek*: its studious suspension of real-world expectations; its unrelenting rhetoric of sensory evocation; its dizzying effects of sublimity and magic; its decadent sexual charge.

More or less luridly, the sexual charge is to the fore in popular biographies of Beckford, and several scholarly accounts place it front and centre. As Iain McCalman bluntly explains the rationale for the event, 'Beckford wanted an Oriental spectacle that would completely ravish the senses of his guests, not least so that he could enjoy a sexual tryst with a thirteen year old boy, William Courtenay, and Louisa Beckford, his own cousin's wife.'[19] This sense of multiple intertwined crimes—adultery, pederasty, and borderline incest at once—aptly suggests the deliberateness with which Beckford liked to act out transgression. But in fact Louisa Beckford (whom one biographer likens not to Nouronihar but to Carathis, Vathek's scheming, malignant mother) is probably no more than a sideshow here, so insecure and desperate in her

[17] Cyrus Redding, *Memoirs of William Beckford, of Fonthill*, 2 vols (London: C. J. Skeet, 1859), i, 243.

[18] William Beckford, *Vathek*, ed. Roger Lonsdale, Oxford English Novels (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. xiii; the recent French editor of 'L'Esplendente' tactfully mentions having to adjust 'la syntaxe qui rendait certaines phrases incomprehensible' (William Beckford, *L'Esplendente et autres contes inédits*, ed. Didier Girard (Paris: José Corti, 2003), 19). For the date of *Vathek*'s completion, see also Beckford's letter to Henley of 13 January 1783, which may refer to the main narrative, as opposed to the supplementary episodes, in the second clause: 'I go on bravely with the Episodes of Vathec, and hope in a few weeks to wind up his adventures' (Lewis Melville, *The Life and Letters of William Beckford of Fonthill* (London: William Heinemann, 1910), 127).

[19] Iain McCalman, 'The Virtual Infernal: Philippe de Loutherbourg, William Beckford and the Spectacle of the Sublime', *Romanticism on the Net*, 46 (May 2007).

relationship with Beckford that just weeks after the house party she was recommending her 4-year-old son to him as 'a little victim in training to sacrifice on your altar . . . He grows every day more and more beautiful, and will in a few years answer your purposes to perfection.'[20] Plainly the real issue was William Courtenay, who, though unnamed in the 1838 memoir, had obsessed Beckford since their first meeting, when Courtenay was just 11. If a delirious letter of 8 December 1781 is to be believed—'Du theatre je le porte dans mon lit . . . O Ciel, que me puis-je mourrir dans ses embrassements et plonger mon ame avec le sien dans le bonheur ou les peines qui ne doivent jamais finir'—Beckford was already abusing Courtenay before the Fonthill extravaganza took place.[21] But it was not until the so-called 'Powderham scandal' of 1784, when he was caught in compromising circumstances with Courtenay at the family's Devon estate, that gossip about sodomy became public. It was relayed by the London newspapers with gloating innuendos and excruciating puns. The *Morning Herald* for 27 November could scarcely credit 'the rumour concerning a *grammatical mistake, of Mr. B*— and the *Hon. Mr. C*—, in regard to the *genders*', for who would 'link themselves beneath the lowest class of brutes, in the most *preposterous rites*'? On 8 December the same paper was more explicit about 'the detestable scene lately acted in *Wiltshire*, by a pair of fashionable *male lovers*'. And as the *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* for 2 December observed, Beckford's prospects of elevation to a barony and a seat in the House of Lords were now at an end: 'When a recent exploit was first mentioned to a noble wit, the only observation which he made on the subject was—He should have postponed the business till he got among his *peers*.'

[20] For Louisa Beckford as Carathis, see Timothy Mowl, *William Beckford: Composing for Mozart* (London: John Murray, 1998), 88; for her startling letter of 2 February 1782 about her son, see Guy Chapman, *Beckford* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1937), 117.

[21] For the surviving draft of Beckford's letter of 8 December 1781 to his unshockable confidante Giustiniana Wynne, Countess Orsini-Rosenberg, see Boyd Alexander, *England's Wealthiest Son: A Study of William Beckford* (London: Centaur Press, 1962), 265; see also the full translation supplied by Mowl: 'From the theatre I carry him to my bed. Nature, Morality and Fame are all forgotten, confused and swept away. Oh God! I wish I could die in these embraces and my soul dive down with his into eternal bliss or eternal punishment' (*William Beckford*, 109).

It was only a few years earlier that a convicted sodomite was killed by mob violence in a London pillory, prompting the famous parliamentary speech of 11 April 1780 in which abolition of the pillory was urged by Edmund Burke. Beckford was too well connected to be at risk of this fate, but the scandal not only disgraced him in England but also pursued him abroad. In Lausanne his ostracism was orchestrated by the historian Edward Gibbon, on whom Beckford later revenged himself by buying Gibbon's vast library at auction, locking it up unread for years, and then making a present of it to his Swiss physician. He also inscribed his copy of Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* with a paragraph attacking, in *tu quoque* style, the 'prurient and obscene gossip of your notes—your affected moral purity perking up every now and then from the corrupt mass like artificial roses shaken off in the dark by some Prostitute on a heap of manure'. Beckford's inscription also attacks Gibbon's 'ignorance of the oriental languages' and 'unclassical fondness for meretricious ornament, your tumid diction, your monotonous jingle of periods', and so reveals other important priorities at work in *Vathek*, notably the painstaking illusion of Arabian authenticity and Beckford's desire to get past the cerebral, periodic prose style, associated especially with Johnson and Gibbon, that carried such literary prestige at the time of writing.[22]

With its emphasis on the youth, beauty, and ecstasy of his guests (others known to have been present, including Henley, are now airbrushed out), the memoir is laden with overtones of sexual rapture: the bewitching languor, the melting of susceptible hearts, 'the delirium of delight into which our young and fervid bosoms were cast by such a combination of seductive influences'. Here Beckford resumes the sensuous rhetoric of *Vathek* itself, launched with his opening account of the palace of pleasures, elaborated in the pageant of graceful boys whom Vathek scrutinizes 'with a malignant avidity that passed for attention' (p. 21), and culminating with the introduction of Nouronihar and Gulchenrouz, who share 'the same long, languishing looks; the

[22] Quoted in Gemmett (ed.), *Consummate Collector*, 18.

same tresses; the same fair complexions; and, when Gulchenrouz appeared in the dress of his cousin, he seemed to be more feminine than even herself' (pp. 52–3). Nouronihar is Vathek's choice, but the primary gaze of the narrative is on the epicene Gulchenrouz, with his 'vermillion little lips' (p. 55) and cheeks 'the colour of the blossom of pomegranates' (p. 58), all evoked in a language of exotic luxuriance that looks back to Antoine Galland's *Les Mille et une nuits* (1704–17) and, behind that, to Arabic traditions of love poetry. Writing about *Vathek* in her journal for 1791, Hester Piozzi was only the first of many readers to sense that 'Mr Beckford's *favourite Propensity* is all along visible I think; particularly in the luscious Descriptions given of Gulchenrouz'.[23]

More recent commentators have associated the homoerotic surface of the tale with deeper patterns of transgression, excess, and expressive resistance to dominant moral and social codes, specifically as properties of the gothic mode. Though not straightforwardly a gothic novel in the tradition of Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* or Lewis's *The Monk*, *Vathek* shows obvious marks of this tradition. Recognizably gothic traits include grotesque elements in counterpoint with the ideal beauty of Nouronihar and Gulchenrouz, such as the Giaour, with his firebrand eyes, hideous laugh, and 'long amber-coloured teeth, bestreaked with green' (p. 7), and an emphasis throughout the narrative on the soul-chilling terror induced by inexplicable forces. Then there are the tale's uncanny labyrinthine interiors and immense desolate landscapes, from the 'secret stairs' and 'mysterious recesses' of Vathek's tower (pp. 25–6) to the chasms, gulfs, and precipices beyond it, alike in their capacity to suggest the dark places of human psychology while rendering civilization tiny and fragile. Alongside all this, crucially, is a perplexing suspension of normally accepted restraints on conduct and desire. For scholars such as George E. Haggerty, *Vathek* is an early instance of 'queer gothic', an extravagant, obsessive, self-consciously deviant mode, 'in which all normative—heteronormative, if you will—configurations of

[23] *Thraliana: The Diary of Mrs. Hester Lynch Thrale (Later Mrs. Piozzi), 1776–1809*, ed. Katharine C. Balderston, 2nd edn, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), ii, 799; *Vathek* as a whole was 'a mad Book to be sure, and written by a mad Author'.