Interrogating Orientalism
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The postcolonial perspective forces us to rethink the profound limitations of a consensual and collusive “liberal” sense of cultural community. It insists that cultural and political identity are constructed through a process of alterity. Questions of race and cultural difference overlay issues of sexuality and gender and overdetermine the social alliances of class and democratic socialism. The time for “assimilating” minorities to holistic and organic notions of cultural value has dramatically passed. (251)

—Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*

Bhabha’s challenging remarks (1994) about the intersections of postcolonial theory and sexuality have resulted in some notable studies about the “alterity” of the sexual other. Hawley’s *Postcolonial, Queer* (2001), Patton and Sanchez-Eppler’s *Queer Diasporas* (2000), and Jan Campbell’s *Arguing with the Phallus: Feminist, Queer and Postcolonial Theory* (2000) begin to address the “questions” Bhabha raises in his “postcolonial perspective” by demonstrating how the “liberal sense of cultural community” has largely failed to achieve its intended end—constructing and maintaining a communitarian ideology that emphasizes unity among disparate groups and de-emphasizes their differences. Far from achieving a homegrown, heterogeneous, yet harmonious group of subalterns who subscribe to what Bhabha identifies as “the holistic and organic notions of cultural values” and then joyfully merge into the collective, this heterosexist utopianism ironically illustrates the unconscious dread and discomfort many “liberals” feel with the actual lives and histories of marginalized groups. Accepting “alternative lifestyles” into the “cultural community”—giving GLBT citizens a place at the table—becomes such a leavening outcome that the queer body (and its interpretive sites) actually disappears into the larger body politic. “Alternative lifestyle” becomes
a polite characterization, a periphrasis for a life whose true sexual realities and activities are alien and off-putting and disturbingly different, even for Rainbow Coalition liberals. After all, in common parlance, deviation from social and cultural norms all too easily slips into deviance. Analogously, for queer theorists who appropriate a postcolonial critique, conventional representational strategies are frustrating precisely because they result from “liberal” attempts at wide-ranging inclusiveness and cultural assimilation. Rather than affirming and celebrating “queerness,” the very differences that distinguish “alternative” sexualities in the first place, these strategies have contributed to the erasure of queer desire and difference, awarding them an undifferentiated place within the harmonious universe of human desire.

Not coincidentally, the postcolonial critique of liberalism coincides with its equally cogent critique of Saidian Orientalism, for sexual deviance also underwrites the stereotypical expectations evoked by the “Oriental Other.” As many readers of Orientalism have noted, because colonial discourse was so powerful, the Orient remains forever fixed, static, and inert, rather than, as Ania Loomba remarks in her book Colonialism/Postcolonialism, relationally dependent (178). She writes: “Colonial identities—on both sides of the divide—are unstable, agonized, and in constant flux” (178). Of course, in a Saidian context, colonial sexual identity emerges from a form of stereotyping. Orientalist texts, in this view, reify the sensuality and exoticism of the female body, which never changes position or shifts its focus back to the colonizer because it is always the object of imperial desire. Likewise, Western expectations of the Oriental text also inscribe a version of the homosexual man, but the beauty of the male body is feminized, open to secret queer inspection, but never explicitly the object of desire. The relationship between effeminacy and beauty also suggests close ties to camp, particularly in dress, because its exaggerated otherness is permitted and even expected in the public display of the Orientalized male body. Unfortunately, Orientalizing the homosexual male in this fashion still underscores an essentialist view of sexual identity. Such desire may indeed be transgressive, but the breaking of sexual taboo is well within the logics of Saidian Orientalism; in fact, it is “embedded within a myth of reciprocity” (158). According to this “myth,” sexual relations between the colonizer and the colonized are “reciprocal,” comprising a “transaction” to which both parties agree. These relations are necessary to the development of social and cultural harmony though, as Loomba also claims, “colonial sexual encounters, both heterosexual and homosexual, often exploited inequities of class, age, gender, race, and power” (158). Orientalism tends to minimize the force of these “inequities” by naturalizing—making them appear eternal and timeless and standing in place. By contrast, Sánchez-Eppler and Patton suggest in Queer Diasporas, “Sexual-
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Sexuality is not only not essence, not timeless, it is also not fixed in place; sexuality is on the move” (2). They make this argument in order to emphasize that sexual identity (as is the case with race, gender, and class) is not essential, though typical Orientalized representations of sexuality might so indicate, nor is it “a succession of strategic moves” (4). Sexual identity is, in fact, a “cluster of claims to self that appear and transmogrify in and of place” (4), largely confirming Loomba’s arguments about the “flux” of colonial sexual identities and undercutting Said’s views about the hegemony of the West and the powerlessness of the East within Orientalist representations.

While Sánchez-Eppler and Patton transform sexual identity into something presently active rather than eternally passive, precisely the positioning of the Saidian Oriental Other, whether female or male, a postcolonial critique of arch-Orientalist texts such as William Beckford’s *Vathek* actually makes “deviant” sexual practice visible and conventional readings of homoerotic representations quaint and perhaps even homophobic. Whether on the supportive liberal Left or the discriminatory conservative Right, both sets of readers wish that the reality of queer sexual practices would simply go away. *Vathek* becomes an interesting test case for “liberal” ideology because the author’s biography, which hints darkly at a subterranean sexuality that lies beneath his heterosexual cover story (Beckford was married and had a daughter), so easily fuses with the persistently Orientalized sexualities contained in the novel. For *Vathek* admirers, uneasiness about the novel derives from the conflation of homosexuality and pederasty, a connection most liberals go to great lengths to avoid because the social and political anger (rightly) vented against child molestation can all too easily spill over into antigay sentiment. Called “the great Apostle of Paederasty” by Byron (Eisler, 176–77), Beckford becomes a problematic author to engage openly, for he uses the novel’s hyper-Orientalism to disguise, displace, and diffuse his scandalous life, which includes a perhaps chaste affair with thirteen-year-old William Courtenay and a whole bevy of boy servants whom he spies on from his tower at Fonthill. One is even tempted to say that Beckford’s fascination with Orientalist tropes (and much of his knowledge is authentic, coming directly from sources in the French; Beckford originally even composes *Vathek* in French) is the source of his corruption. Even more outrageously, however, and this is the real source of critical unease, Beckford enjoys his corruption, which, as we shall see, he coyly embeds in the narrative.

And a sampling of critical opinion over the last sixty years reveals an entrenched desire to cleanse Beckford from a squeamish form of sexuality by burying its details within the larger (and acceptable) spectrum of human desire. Eagleton writes that “it is characteristic of liberalism to find names and definitions restrictive” (*Illusions*, 68), and so critics of Beckford,
asserting his rightful place in the literary canon, but not wishing to outline his (or any other) “alternative” sexual practice too definitely, tend to make Beckford’s pederasty vanish while permitting traces of Beckford’s homosexuality to survive. As Fuery and Mansfield claim in their book, “[T]he cultural real contains elements that much of the social order refuses to acknowledge as being part of its systems” (34). Representatives of a profession prone to attack by cultural conservatives, Beckford’s academic critics, as Foucault might suggest in Discipline and Punish, attempt to manage Beckford’s “body” so that they do not appear to approve of or tacitly support any specific behaviors or actions. And because Beckford has so ably contrived arch-Orientalist landscapes in which “deviant” desire can safely inhabit and even invisibly flourish (with the collusive help of his “liberal” critics), Beckford neatly avoids the messiness of his pederasty. Many of his critics divert attention away from Beckford’s pederastic practices and direct the focus toward his presumed psychosexual guilt for homosexuality. A dirty old man becomes a tragic closet case. Thus, several critics assume the podium of heterosexist moralizing in order to create a cleaner, more sexually hygienic Beckford. They often emphasize the Orientalized “sensuous desires” and the “intoxicating joys” in Vathek while at the same time projecting Vathek’s ultimate doom on Beckford’s psychic life. In other words, the (straight) caliph atones for the (queer) author’s crimes, confirming moral judgment against Vathek while dissipating moral outrage against Beckford. Though not alone in this version of Vathek’s relationship to Beckford, Mohammed Sharafuddin, one of the most important recent critics of Romantic Orientalism, succinctly summarizes this interpretation of Beckford’s novel: “Vathek is part of [Beckford’s] inner world. It is a projection of an amoral, secret life into the public domain; it gives the rein for the first time to what could well be called the outlawed self” (1).

One of the most insightful of Beckford’s critics, Adam Potkay, rightly identifies the novel’s emphasis on “male reciprocity, unlimited mutuality, [and] the communion of kind” as forming the basis for the “heaven of boys” that concludes the novel. Yet Potkay sees this pubescent homosociety as faintly misogynistic. Potkay drolly sums up his argument: “Vathek relies, in part, on the all-too-familiar logic that when someone must take the blame, cherchez la femme” (297). Moreover, he argues, “the attraction of a segregated paradise [at the end of the novel] attests to, even as it rejects, the increasing sexual integration of polite society” (303–4). While Beckford’s novel does indeed reflect the anxiety of British society toward its altered sexual landscapes, this reading of Vathek neatly sidesteps the issue of Beckford’s trafficking in homosexual pleasure and loudly ignores his complacent and smug consumerism. Closer to the mark than other critics of the novel, therefore,
is Diego Saglia who observes that for Beckford, the East “is more and more readily available in a metropolitan space which sees a burgeoning consumption of the oriental in the shape of products, objects, visual experiences and literary texts” (76). In the end, most critics prefer to avoid Beckford’s hog-gish and shameless appetites, reducing his bothersome jouissance to safe and pious epithets.

Though not intentional, the more seriously critics take Vathek’s fate as a reification of Beckford’s “tormented soul,” the more glaringly they misread the exuberance of both Beckford’s novel and its homoerotic imaginings. An implicit judgment of high moral seriousness underlies such persnickety, sermonizing critical strategies, but such strategies also raise the red flag of homosexual panic, thereby illustrating what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick refers to as the “Gothic unspeakable” of the Romantic period (95), that public abhorrence of aristocratic representations of homoerotic desire (pederastic desire even more) that might actually “wash through” and infect the “middle classes” (95). If Beckford really does have all those pederastic dreams (or occasional homosexual couplings, and with boys), then the conclusion to his novel represents his justifiable fear of divine “retribution,” the worried resolution to the psychic conflicts inherent in all lustful deviates, the understandable anxiety at the activities of sexual predators. And if Beckford, the married proprietor of Fonthill and father of two, actually enjoys his fantasies and occasional homosexual couplings, then, at the very least, he should make no overt displays of desire or love of pleasure that lead the unsuspecting public back to his indiscretions. Although Beckford outrageously indulges in hyperbole when he describes Vathek’s fickleness and fecklessness, as well as his uncontrollable appetites and terrifying gothic eye, critics eagerly see an opening that moves the reader away from pederastic desire and toward psychosexual guilt, thus pushing the suggestion that Beckford self-identifies with or can be linked to a psychologically impaired and morally damaged Vathek. In so doing, these critics posit a strange bricolage, for readers must refashion the homosexually combustible, real-life Beckford into the heterosexually conflicted but doomed, fictional Vathek. This process advances a moral whitewash, but it does have the advantage of preserving a liberal commitment to homosexual desire without also having to connect that desire to a discomfiting pederasty.

R. B. Gill makes much the same point in his essay “The Author in the Novel: Creating Beckford in Vathek.” He interrogates the performativity of Beckford’s public image, postulating that the apparent contradiction between Beckford’s public and private personae produces “many Beckfords, some he himself created and many created by his various critics” (242). Gill continues: “Vathek is a clear case of a novel especially in need of a biographical centre
to resolve its ambiguities” (242). Yet Beckford ultimately thwarts the resolution of the novel’s “ambiguities,” the tantalizing journey of critical ambition provoked by the novel’s dazzling exoticism and the novelist’s equally exotic biography. Beckford thus hides in open sight his unrestrained glee at creating a queer fantasy under the noses of an audience that simultaneously embraces puritanical sexual mores yet indulges in imaginative “alternative” sexual practices. “Beckford is eager,” Gill writes, “that we see him laughing and manipulating the diverse attitudes of Vathek without being compromised by naive commitment to them” (253).

Readings of Vathek that stress the moralistic connections between Beckford’s and Vathek’s character and actions are, of course, not entirely inaccurate, for one cannot say that Beckford does not at all resemble Vathek. Like Vathek, he is whimsical in his interests, fanciful in his desires, and extravagant in their planning and execution. And like Vathek, Beckford (from a very early age) has the financial resources to be as whimsical, fanciful, and extravagant as he imagines. Finally, and perhaps most tellingly, like Vathek, Beckford can generally afford to resist public disapproval (or at least separate himself from it). Despite a publicly sullied heterosexual reputation, Beckford manages for almost eighty-five years to live the luscious “Oriental” life he is able to purchase, eluding his constrictive, draining family; jealous enemies; sycophantic hangers-on; and titillated, pseudo-ardent admirers (such as Byron). Forcing Beckford to emerge as an author who perceives he is a moral reprobate confirms a critical view that takes Beckford’s psychosexual guilt seriously. But if one decouples the seriousness of the novel’s ending with Beckford’s more playful attitudes toward his title character, the critical field shifts away from inescapable homosexual tragedy and tilts instead toward homoerotic farce. As Malcolm Jack indicates, Vathek “shows distinct touches of humour in its . . . bathetic contrast between drama and absurdity” (xxii). Properly contextualized, the “bathetic” mordancy of the novel lies in humorously pitching the caliph from his own heterosexual pedestal, puncturing the traditional sexual norms he represents by lampooning him as a petulant “Mama’s boy” who knows nothing of sacrifice, courage, or self-denial, but only omnivorous self-gratification.

In the final analysis, even Byron’s Sardanapalus, who spontaneously transforms himself from feminized Oriental despot to glorious and masculine warrior, is more convincing as a serious character than Vathek because, at the last, love and honor form the basis of Sardanapalus’s commitment to his country, Byron’s last-ditch effort at genuine dramatic pathos. The bathos of Beckford’s Orientalized protagonist stems, in part, from Vathek’s utter inability to maintain a single idea, to conform to a single standard of predictable public behavior, reasonable or not. In effect, Beckford deliberately exag-
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gerates Vathek's despotism, making him more despotic than other despots in eighteenth-century Oriental tales, precisely because he cannot master or control his appetites at all; he fails to subsume them under any sort of overarching plan of action that he himself conceives.

In a very real sense, Vathek is a boy expected to rule in an adult world, a very dangerous and intelligent boy who dresses up as a caliph and who cannot possibly meet the social, political, and cultural obligations expected of him. As a religious leader, for example, Vathek fails to listen to or abide by any orthodox sentiments. Though Vathek has a “predilection for theological controversy” (3), he nonetheless ruthlessly persecutes those who contest his heterodoxy, imprisoning them “to cool their blood” (5). His desire to build his own tower that imitates Nimrod so inflames the ire of Mahomet that the Prophet curiously commands his own servants, the “genii,” to assist Vathek in its completion in order to see how far Vathek will go in his impieties. But Vathek is no mere dark servant for Eblis, the Islamic equivalent of Lucifer, for Vathek undermines the gravity of his own moral blasphemy. Since he does not appreciate fully his own “irreligious conduct” (4), we cannot regard his inflated, exaggerated desire to enter Eblis's dark kingdom as a serious threat to traditional cultural norms. At best, Vathek parodies a satanic figure, pathetically oblivious to the consequences of his and his mother's caprices or to the damage that his violent rage may cause to his reputation. After the Indian (not yet identified as the Giaour) escapes from Vathek's prison, he kills the guards. Infuriated, Vathek kicks their dead carcasses “till evening without intermission” (7), convincing his subjects he has gone mad. After an old man can only translate the runes on Vathek's magical sabers for one day because the runes themselves change daily, Vathek mercifully orders that only half his beard be burnt. When “reverend Moullahs” bring Vathek a besom (broom) that had been used “to sweep the sacred Cahaba” (39), Vathek takes the besom and brushes away cobwebs from the ceiling as if it were a common cleaning implement, causing two Moslem clerics to die “on the spot” (41). Finally, never truly her adult equal, Vathek says nothing admonitory to Carathis. Ferreting out the hiding place of Gulchenrouz, his mother conspires with her evil camel Alboufaki, uses her necromantic powers to resurrect ghouls, steals mummies from catacombs to supply herself with magical rhinoceros horns and oil of venomous serpents, and ritualistically slaughters Vathek's loyal subjects as fiery oblations to the Giaour. Yet Vathek remains aloof from her actions, even as he grows ever more dependent on her powerful magic and on her brilliant public relations.

Although Islamic bees loyal to Allah on one occasion attempt to sting Vathek for his brutal treatment of clerics, no subject ever reproves his decadence or attacks his overindulgence. So committed is he to see the banquet
halls and riches of the Underworld that he even lapses into the homoerotic
to seal his relationship to the Giaour. For example, during a bout with a
virulent form of dipsomania, the Indian/Giaour cures him with a draught
that finally quenches his thirst. His health restored, Vathek “leap[s] upon
the neck of the frightful Indian, and kiss[es] his horrid mouth and hollow
cheeks, as though they had been the coral lips and the lilies and the roses of
his most beautiful wives” (15). This amazingly unsexy kiss confirms their
 unholy union, their unbreakable bond. When Vathek treats the Giaour to
a lover’s kiss, however, he unwittingly makes a lover’s promise. Soon after
Vathek makes his journey onto the plains outside Samarah, the Indian
reveals himself as the Giaour, gives Vathek a glimpse of the Palace of Subter-
ranean Fire, and demands the blood sacrifice of fifty sons as a “libation” he
must drink (“Where are they?—Where are they?—perceivest not how my
mouth waters?” 26), suggesting perhaps that Vathek’s previously insatiable
thirst was actually a symptom of the Giaour’s authority over Vathek.

To cure the Giaour’s thirst, Vathek proposes a contest for fifty of the
“handsomest” boys among his subjects, and the proud parents celebrate the
Caliph’s sudden generosity:

The lovely innocents destined for the sacrifice, added not a little to the hilar-
ity of the scene. They approached the plain full of sportiveness, some cours-
ing butterflies, others culling flowers, or picking up the shiny little pebbles
that attracted their notice. At intervals they nimbly started from each other
for the sake of being caught again, and mutually imparting a thousand
caresses. (25)

The “cavalcade” of boys, not yet weaned from the feminized ways of the
harem and of inconstant women, “sport” with one another and, despite the
fact they are contesting for the caliph’s favor, impart affection to one another.
Blissfully unaware that Vathek intends to sacrifice them to the Giaour by
throwing them into a chasm that magically appears behind Vathek, the boys
in turn approach Vathek one by one, unable to see the danger ahead of them.
In a horrifying striptease, Vathek “undresses himself by degrees” (27), taking
off items of clothing and jewelry as prizes for the youthful combatants:

To the first, I will give my diamond bracelet; to the second, my collar of
emeralds; to the third, my aigret of rubies; to the fourth, my girdle of topaz-
es; and to the rest, each a part of my dress, even down to my slippers. (26)

As each child comes forward, Vathek tempts each one with a piece of his
ensemble and then “pushes” the unsuspecting boy into the “gulph” and the
waiting mouth of the Giaour (27). While Vathek feels compassion for the boys, appreciating their “beauty” even as the Giaour salivates over his victims, Vathek does not intuit his homoerotic connection with the Giaour, not even when he himself becomes ravenously hungry after the sacrifice of the boys, eating everything he can find. In fact, Vathek’s stripping itself is a mirage. The more clothing and valuable baubles Vathek removes from his body, the less one discerns his body or true motivations. As with the Giaour, physical proximity and intimacy breed blindness and ignorance. Nakedness becomes a metaphor for secrecy, kissing a metonymy for suspicion and deceit.

In addition, the Giaour’s presumed pedophagia literally incarnates a typical form of Orientalized discourse that “constructs the Orient as a passive, childlike entity that can be lover and abused, shaped and contained, managed and consumed” (Sardar, 6). Of this passage, Alan Richardson aptly concludes: “Beckford’s private sexual fantasies cannot be disentangled from the cultural fantasy of a supine, infantile, inviting East” (10). But fantasy and consumption are separate realities—an “inviting East” is not the same as an “abused, shaped and contained, managed and consumed” Orient. Vathek certainly parodies the Caliph’s overindulgence and hyperconsumption, but that parodic representation does not necessarily entail feelings of pederastic guilt. Indeed, it is dangerous to equate Vathek’s use of young boys for his infernal purposes and Beckford’s exuberance for boys for his domestic ones. Beckford’s almost giddy desire for prepubescent males may not amount to a sexual practice; instead, Beckford’s pederasty—occluded within Orientalized landscapes—may actually become a scarcely concealed sexual politics that, in the end, is almost too unbearable to contemplate, for it challenges both heteronormative and homonormative categories of acceptable sexual expression.

Indeed, Beckford revels in his outrageousness, basks in his defiance of social norms and expectations. He writes: “. . . I am determined to enjoy my dreams, my phantasies and all my singularities, however discordant to the worldlings around . . .” (quoted in Richardson, 8). That determination helps to explain why Eblis, the Giaour’s residence of Orientalized evil, remains so “discordant” to Beckford’s “wordling” critics and why those same critics attempt to align the shape of the narrative with their own moralist expectations. While Vathek’s travails within the halls of Eblis ultimately do result in the proper punishment of all in service to the Giaour, a predictable conclusion for all literary works of the period that employ satanic tropes, the end matter of Beckford’s novel does not presuppose that Beckford feels he is in personal moral jeopardy or that he identifies at all with the justice of its conclusions. In fact, the Eblis scenes in Vathek principally serve to reinforce the self-indulgence that drives his Orientalism. In effect, Eblis constitutes a
revenge fantasy that challenges the basis of British heterosexist politics in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. From Beckford’s perspective, it is a politics that demands his social and cultural expulsion for his own deviance while refusing to examine its own ideological inconsistencies and sexual foibles.

Familiar with both Christian and Islamic traditions, Beckford cleverly transforms Milton’s Satan into the Giaour, Milton’s Pandaemonium into Eblis. But whereas Milton emphasizes both the internal agony of Hell’s dominion (“The mind is its own place, and itself / Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven,” *PL* 1.254–55) and the internal relief of spiritual redemption (“. . . but shalt possess / A paradise within thee, happier far,” *PL* 12.586–87), Beckford delightedly gloats over the horrifying physical torments of the (heterosexual) damned and glosses over the internal spiritual agony that must ensue when a soul is utterly separated from the divine. Beckford also parodies perhaps the most famous religious trope of Milton and seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry, the flaming heart. Beckford appropriates the flaming heart by literally rendering the passion and desire that kindle spiritual desire and Orientalizing it through one of the most famous exponents of sexual excess, Soliman ben Daoud. No longer Solomonic in wisdom and judiciousness, Soliman displays his allegiance to the Koranic, not the biblical, traditions. He had been able to conjure genii and other spirits—that was his divine gift or talent, which, like Vathek, he squanders in the service of licentiousness (“I forsook the holy city, and commanded the Genii to rear the stupendous palace of Ista kar. . . . There, for a while, I enjoyed myself in the zenith of glory and pleasure,” 113). Soliman’s belief that his punishment is merely purgatorial underscores the scope of his torment. He deludes himself into hoping that the “cataract” will eventually cease flowing and his enflamed heart will be extinguished. Vathek and Nou- ronihar immediately recognize not only the horrific nature of his physical torment, but that it will eventually engulf them as well, making valueless the genii’s offer of riches, banquets, and honors. More importantly, however, once the hellish flames do engulf their hearts, Beckford stresses their physical revulsion for one another (“. . . all testified their horror for each other by the most ghastly convulsions,” 119). Even in Milton’s Hell, Satan and the rebel angels can, in some measure, still take pleasure in their physical presence and physical transformations, which helps explain Milton’s catalog of demons marching into the Hall of Pandaemonium, as well as Satan’s ability to morph into a beautiful angel, the illusion of which only Ithuriel’s spear can break. In Beckford’s novel, Eblis becomes the imagined place of torment for his deluded tormentors, where the trappings of socially validated and culturally embraced heterosexual passion reveals itself for what it is—sexual
colonialism—comprised of vacuous preaching, empty moralizing, vain consumption, and gratuitous threats to achieve worldly mastery and authority.

Interestingly, however, Beckford gives the last word in his novel not to Vathek, but to Vathek’s pubescent, hyperfeminized rival, Gulchenrouz (and by extension the “good old genius” who miraculously saves him from Vathek and Carathis, as well as the fifty boys from the bloodlust of the Giaour). Beckford gleefully concludes that the “humble, the despised Gulchenrouz passed whole ages in undisturbed tranquility, and in the pure happiness of childhood” (120). Or, to paraphrase Adam Potkay, Gulchenrouz forever dwells in boy heaven. The pouty boy-consort to Princess Nouronihar escapes Vathek’s vindictive whimsy and Carathis’s obsession with diabolic power, but not to take his rightful and manly place as head of a kingdom and an arranged marriage. Rather, Gulchenrouz’s happy fate is to consort “undisturbed” with other boy-men who may now frolic and play with Gulchenrouz, free of the very adult privileges and responsibilities that should have normally attended them. And the “good old genius” brings the boys to Roc nests “higher than the clouds” (97), where he himself “fixes” his own “abode,” “in a . . . nest more capacious than the rest” (97). In the campiest (and, from the Islamic perspective, the most blasphemous) passage in the novel, Allah himself and the Prophet inscribe their names on waving streamers, flashing like lightning and guarding these pederastic but “inviolable asylums” against any magical intrusions from afrits, zombies, or Carathis’s potent incantations. For his part, Gulchenrouz receives the accolades of all the boys who “vie[ . . . ] with each other in kissing his serene forehead and beautiful eye-lids” (97). Beckford continues: “Remote from the inquietudes of the world; the impertinence of harems, the brutality of eunuchs, and the inconstancy of women; there [Gulchenrouz] found a place truly congenial to the delights of his soul” (97; emphasis added). For the first time in the novel, Gulchenrouz is free to act as he wishes, and not as the result of the dubious plans of Fakreddin, the faithlessness of Nouronihar, the untrammeled and dark desires of Carathis, or Vathek’s unabated search for absolute power. The “good old genius” ironically saves the other boys from the fires of Hell by taking them away from Vathek as he is about to make them a blood sacrifice to the Giaour. In addition, however, the “genius” removes the endangered boys from the burden and duty of propagation. They no longer have to endure a harem’s “inconstant” women, nor must they face the sexual uselessness of castrated men. In carving out a niche among the Roc nests for his charges, the “good old genius” has firmly established a pederastic oasis among the clouds, a pleasant and eternal homosociety that need never confront the social and cultural exigencies of conventionally Orientalized manhood. In fact, the homoerotics of this boy heaven, its innocent attractiveness (though
perhaps it might appear sinister from our contemporary perspective), lies in the boys never becoming fully sexualized, “for the genius, instead of burthening his pupils with perishable and vain sciences, conferred upon them the boon of perpetual childhood” (98). In the words of Adam Potkay, the novel is an antibildungsroman, with Beckford’s boy heaven becoming “an allegory of infancy” that always and everywhere preempts the unavoidable dissatisfactions that come with adult maturity, in particular sexual segregation and propriety (301).

Diego Saglia points to Beckford’s heaven of boys as an Orientalist simulacrum, in which “actual and imaginary orients intersect in a nexus of reality and fiction, legality, desire and visual attraction, [are] all encapsulated in Beckford’s observation ‘I have still sparks of Orientalism about me to catch fire at such a sight’”(80). But this simulacrum exhibits slippage even as it feigns representational and moral fixity. Beckford uses this simulacrum to construct his Orientalized queerness, a refuge for his homoerotic desire (and submerged pederasty). Beckford’s readership accepts his outrageous campiness because camp often underlies the Gothic, as it does in the works of Matthew Lewis, Ann Radcliffe, or Charlotte Dacre, and because the Gothic is ultimately a conservative genre, often confirming a culture’s ethological underpinnings even as it appears to explode them. Beckford can, therefore, easily hide his homoerotics—his “sparks of Orientalism”—in plain sight because he aligns the fate of his title character with the conventions and expectations of most eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary figures who truck with the sexually satanic. In other words, despite the resemblances between Vathek and Beckford, it would be a mistake to equate them. The man who in his letters salaciously refers to his boy servants by wicked epithets—“Pale Ambrose,” “Cadaverous Nicobuse,” “Miss Long,” “Miss Butterfly,” “Countess Pox,” or “Mr. Prudent Well-Sealed Up” (Norton, 2)—can hardly be said to rue his homoerotic/pederastic passions or truly identify with Vathek’s doom. After his return to England from an exile originally urged by a family terrified of scandal (but perhaps equally upset that they would receive no peerage), Beckford, though married and a father, still aspires to the status of the “good old genius” in the novel of his youth. Dwelling within the panoptic fortress of Fonthill and free from prying scrutiny, Beckford magnanimously reviews his Orientalized estates, at the head of women whose fear of public exposure and ridicule makes them ultimately complicit with his psychosexual proclivities, and in charge of a large group of boy servants who incarnate his fictional male harem. In a very real sense, Beckford’s own guiltless and shameless terrestrial paradise is, mutatis mutandis, the “heaven of boys” in Vathek.

Robert Mack may be right when he suggests that “Homosexual writers
are at home in the oriental tale . . . it is a place to be free of the restrictions of the mundane realism tied to the demands of the market-place and the goings on of ‘real’ society” (xvii). But *Vathek* is no mere escapist fantasy that briefly distracts the reader from the exigencies of the world and its commercial realities. Nor is its Orientalism the exuberant screen through which Beckford secretes his tragic sexual identity; or, as El Habib Benrarahal Serghini likens it, “Beckford’s orientalism has permitted the self to show off its glories, but it has also linked the luxuriance of surface with the sad opulence of the condemned soul” (63). Rather, Beckford’s Orientalist tale not only reifies the moralistic expectations inherent to much eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Oriental literature, it also cheerfully undermines them by refusing to acknowledge sexual perversion, licentiousness, or personal embarrassment of any kind. That Beckford may have embraced his own pederastic desires makes him challenging to critics who wish to recontextualize him within a more manageable heterosexist ideology. They then can more readily pass comfortable (and comforting) moral judgments, and critics frequently do so because the “chilling” (to use Haggerty’s word) homoerotics of Beckford’s writing makes many heterosexual readers uneasy, calling into question any encoded prescriptions about sexuality or the identity politics of the social and cultural status quo. Beckford’s Orientalist homoerotics perhaps even threaten the legitimacy of such readers to pass these judgments. In the end, however, the novel may just as easily make gay readers queasy because it shamelessly conflates pederasty and homosexuality, an absolute distinction that activists have recently gone to great lengths to make in order to establish, to the extent possible, a mainstream sexual politics that permits gay men a place at the table (to use Bruce Bawer’s clichéd phrase). Long gone are the pre-AIDS, sexual outlawry of John Rechy; the shocking yet titillating fetishism of leather queens; and the winking presence of NAMBLA (North American Man-Boy Love Association) in gay pride parades. Now “queers” find themselves in the astonishing position of recommending lifestyle changes to hapless heterosexual men, of making them over, of transforming them into better and improved versions of their own masculinity. As a result, being mainstreamed means rejecting any kind of separation, especially a sexual separation that promises or justifies pedophilic play within the fantastic landscapes that Beckford conjures. Being mainstreamed signifies normalization, a jettisoning of the closeted but fanciful ghettoes contained by Orientalized discourse. Heterosexual and homosexual readers of *Vathek* thus find themselves ironically bound and committed to an ideology that uncovers Beckford’s presumed psychosexual guilt within the text, for without this shame, Beckford’s heaven of boys becomes the panicked, postmodern hell of liberals.
NOTES

1. Adrienne McLean makes this case in her essay “The Thousand Ways There Are to Move: Camp and Oriental Dance in the Hollywood Musicals of Jack Cole.” McLean cites the important work of Michael Moon, who also makes use of Said’s Orientalism, in order to argue that despite the campy flamboyance of Orientalist representations, Orientalism is homophobic because it fixes homosexuality within a heterosexist system, rendering it powerless within such a dominant paradigm. In his work “Flaming Closets,” Moon connects the subjugating practices of Orientalism to racist sexual fantasies in which “masters” can freely couple with “the dominated bodies of others” (38).

2. In an unwittingly amusing application of Freudian theory, Brian Fothergill writes that Beckford’s trip to Switzerland had quite failed to instill “manly attributes” (62). Indeed, Fothergill melodramatically continues, “Even worse was happening . . . in the city where Calvin’s shadow seemed to offer so little protection against the temptations of the world and the flesh if not of the very Devil himself; for by the shores of the lake of Geneva [Beckford’s mother’s] son found himself involved in a romantic entanglement with another youth” (62). For Fothergill, the problem is not that Beckford had a homosexual dalliance but that “the intensity of his responses to any stimulation of the senses, be it personal or artistic in origin,” never diminishes. Beckford assigns too much emotional meaning “to what was in reality no more than an adolescent infatuation” (63). The tragedy of being eternally stuck in a homosexual phase also occurs to Robert Gemmett as well, for in his description of Beckford’s relationship to Courtenay, Gemmett reluctantly affirms the hermeneutic circle between Beckford’s life and his book: “It is the frustration of this great effort in the Kingdom of Eblis that provides the best image of Beckford, the artist-voluptuary, who, subjected inexorably to the furies of time and reason, must witness a failure of imagination and the ultimate collapse of his palace of art” (117). Even much more recent readings of Vathek rely on the absolute identity between Beckford’s psychology and Vathek’s retributive fate. Sounding much like Ernest Bernbaum, Marilyn Gaull writes, ”But just as the ending, a conventional one of symbolic retribution, conflicted with the novel itself, so Beckford’s conventional side—the one who would marry the loyal and agreeable Lady Margaret Gordon, serve in Parliament, and father two daughters who were devoted to him—seemed constantly in conflict with the deviate” (234–35; emphasis added). In “Beckford’s Paederasty,” George E. Haggerty more explicitly ties Beckford’s life with the horrifying end of Vathek in Eblis: “[Beckford] grappled throughout his life with a sexual instinct that made him a criminal in his own desire” (137). Eric Meyer views Vathek in postcolonial terms, whereby Beckford embodies the colonized East and the imperial West: “The structure of narrative in Vathek . . . closely approximates Teresa de Lauretis’s Oedipal paradigm, although with a more obviously politically overdetermined subtext: the Orient becomes a feminized passive object that is subject to male desire . . .” (668). Vathek becomes, in this view, the Orientalist penetrator who is himself penetrated or “subject to male desire.”