

”Exposure and Repentance in W. Beckford’s French Manuscripts”

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- Didier Girard -

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Exposure and Repentance in William Beckford's French Manuscripts

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*To Léonard S.K. A.,
Alas, In the Mood for Love.*

The reluctance with which the English-speaking world considers
William Beckford as a writer is not ambiguous at all, it is the result of sheer

ignorance, or to be more explicit, the result of his fiction being literally ignored. It may be understood by the fact that except for several volumes of travel-diaries, he is still considered only as an eccentric and a collector (which he certainly was) and incidentally as the author of only one book *Vathek*, initially written in French and a reliable edition of which is still wanting. The reading public or even the evolution of its tastes are certainly not to be blamed for such a situation but publishers and editors, who have preferred to dodge the tantalizing difficulties of establishing texts, thus producing motley editions and scarcely reliable reeditions which have rather reinforced the idea that Beckford's productions are mere curiosities rather than a consistent *oeuvre* which in size or literary worth — if unveiled and properly published — would be no less consistent than that of Horace Walpole or of a Mary Shelley for example. The fact is that William Beckford is the author of many more literary pieces, some written in French and some in English, most of which are not yet available in the English-speaking world. Although the early tales, written in English, are essential to understand the essence of what WB's dreams and sensibility were then made — and were to be made in later life — it is only when he used the French language that Beckford seems eventually to have grasped and given an accomplished form to the full potential creativity that was in store and this, probably for two reasons. On the one hand, because of family pressures and social constraints, the French language provided William with a code through which he could start to express and/or expose his wildest (and sometimes unutterable) dreams and *reveries*. But the manipulation of a foreign language (that he, of course, had learnt to master from an early age in reading and conversation) was also a technical challenge for a budding writer trying to articulate his visionary tales, mental images and inner thoughts or sensations. The inherent constraints of any language and of a foreign one

at that, triggered off in William Beckford the desire to overcome the difficulties of framing his own visions into words, giving birth, in the manuscripts, as in those of most writer's, to many drafts and *repentirs* (in French, a technical art history term to describe "signs of repentance" on a canvas when a painter paints over a formerly used canvass either to embark on a brand new painting or retouch and modify some details, leaving under the new layer of paint traces of the former painting or drawing that can only be seen through X-Rays). For these two reasons, the French language became for Beckford the vehicle of both exposure and repentance, a dynamic dichotomy which is not equally evident in other Beckford's manuscripts written in English.

Biographically speaking, let us not forget also that much of what Beckford learnt (that is, apart from what he read in books in English) was discovered in French. Moreover his lifelong continental European correspondence — still to be published — is filled with letters in French and last but not least, we should consider one very important fact : the creative years of Beckford as a writer span only from the years from 1777 to 1797 (even if he made great efforts in the 1810's and 1830's to have his books republished, revised or edited, there is no sign of an outburst of literary invention at that period which was marked rather by a desire to be more conventionally regarded as a man of letters) with a particularly impressive creative decade ending in 1787, a period during which he travelled extensively and exchanged views and opinions mostly in French.

It would be unfair not to take into account the fact that Beckford, from the mid-1790s onwards, somehow veered from the realm of literature to that of architecture and more domestic theatricals. And this also explains why biographers rightly pointed him as something else than a lifelong dedicated writer, which probably harmed his reputation. His case among XVIIIth century writers is far from isolated, even if the

flamboyance with which Beckford carried out all his projects is and probably doomed him in the public eye. Anyway, Beckford's prophecy "If ever the world discovers the key of certain anonymous publications, it will find I have not been idle. All things considered it had better not goad me to publish. Many would wince if I did." has almost come true or is about to, so it is maybe time we explored the texts somewhat more objectively rather than with a so-called biographical purpose in mind. Within the scope of this article, Beckford's use of the French language in his Arabian tales, in other words his literary technique, will be analyzed and commented upon but instead of adding subjective and generalising views on the matter, the emphasis will be put on one single manuscript, that of the first episode of *Vathek*, of which many versions exist. Thus, all the variants and minor changes will be thoroughly considered and listed one way or another in this paper, either in the main body of the text or in the footnotes to give to any reader the possibility to form his own opinion and avoid sampling which is almost always damaging, as a critical technique, in the case of unpublished or little-known literary material.

Whatever the version one reads of the first episode of *Vathek*, the plot is as follows : Alasi, a young prince whose father, the King of Kharezme, dies prematurely, and who has no keen interest or inclination either for government or women, enjoys dancing, music and above all solitude. One day, as he is alone in a forest, he meets with a rider who was apparently looking for him to put a charming and graceful boy of 13 under his protection. His name is Firouz. They spend happy hours together. Alasi takes him back to his Court at Zerbend and pretends he is the son of a poor shepherd so as not to arouse jealousy or suspicion from his Royal circle. Soon, the sweet and graceful creature proves to be cruel, mischievous and downright

vicious (he turns a mullah into a donkey and has him killed, tortures various animals, drives his instructors mad, forces the faithful shepherd to break his allegiance publicly to his Lord by revealing the truth about his own origins, does everything he can to discredit and jeopardize Alasi's planned marriage with Roudabah, princess of Ghilan and so forth). In short, through his atrocious deeds, the *protégé* also reveals the weaknesses of all and he then goes as far as convincing Alasi to declare war on Ghilan, in order to undermine and counteract any possible vengeance that the insulted princess might be preparing. Battles and massacres follow. Firouz is wounded and after their defeat, they manage to escape thanks to magical powers which bring them to the cavern of a magus, spiritual father of the child and a staunch believer in the religion of Zoroaster, who convinces Alasi to convert his kingdom to the new religion if he wants to gain the realm of perpetual bliss. Back in Zerbend, they destroy every rebel to the new cause and when every trace of Muslim faith is eradicated, they go back to the portals of Eblis. *En route*, a series of episodes show further examples of Firouz's cruelty and subversion, then they reach Eblis where they realise they are trapped and doomed along with Vathek and the other princes.

The common plot of the different versions is inevitably marked by a tension between what could be labelled as a superior form of *kitsch* (imitation, imitating, telescoped clichés, and a very complex treatment of the notion of exoticism) and a pervading sublime strain, which is quite sombre and subversive, and in the end overpowering. Needless to say, exposure and repentance could also be tackled at length from a purely thematical point of view but this is not our aim ; they will be considered from a purely genetic critical point of view to see what the author William Beckford was aiming at in his different drafts. One major difference is of course the fact that in one version (never published or even discussed in detail so far

in any language or country except by Kenneth Graham and André Parreaux in his doctoral thesis) Firouz remains a young boy all along, turning this version into what is probably one of the very earliest examples of purely homoerotic fiction in European modern times (another one being the also unpublished — up to this date in its explicit first version — story made up by the prince de Ligne, *Les deux amis*). In all the other versions (and especially that which has been used for the currently available editions of *Vathek and its Episodes*), Firouz is revealed, after being wounded in the battle and given medical treatment, to be in fact a girl who has been brought up and dressed as a boy from her earliest years, putting the tale in the long tradition of cross-gender and transvestite fantasies. One may notice that in both cases, the love affair is one of a paedophilic nature.

The History of the Caliph Vathek was expected by its author to include various episodes (to make it simple, Alasi, Barbiarokh and Zulkais). As said before, and discussed elsewhere (K. Graham, J. Millington and Anthony Hobson's learned articles in bibliophile studies), there are many different versions of *Vathek* itself but as far as the first episode under scrutiny here (Alasi) is concerned, it can be read in 5 different versions : D13, entitled "Histoire de deux princes amis" ; D14 "Histoire du prince Alasi et de la princesse Firouzkah" which itself can be divided into what we shall call D14' (the full version of D14) and D14" (the 'abridged' version) as D14 has many crossed out passages on its pages (and sometimes lexical changes, too). Then, there is D15 which is in fact a clean copy of D14", the abridged version, with a very few changes and finally the version of *The Episodes* that was used for all subsequent editions up to this day, i.e. the Lewis Melville bilingual edition. We shall not consider D15 as it is hardly different from D14" and, despite the great discoveries Lewis Melville made into Beckford studies otherwise, his 1912 edition of the *Episodes*

should once and for all be forgotten as it is marred by far too many mistakes in his copying the manuscript : apart from the famous misreadings of some of the characters' names (Rondabah instead of Roudabah among the main characters), there are many more mistakes of a more serious nature and which nobody has ever thought of checking from the manuscripts. Just to give a few examples taken from the last pages of this edition, one will realize that the "nous pouvions" (Melville, 30) is in fact "nous pensions" (D15/65) while "ceux qui ne vouloient pas croire ce qu'on leur prescrivait" (Melville, 27) is in fact "preschoit" (D15/58) as Melville did not see that the words he was trying to decipher could be misspelled, a very common thing in the 18th century, determined as he was to be looking for what were considered correct French words and expressions in 1912! These kind of mistakes are repeated all along, but more than that, Melville also introduced French mistakes of his own, especially numerous in terms of accents and punctuation (that were correctly handled in the manuscript), capital or small letters ; he also made the rather pedantic choice of keeping the old 3rd person singular form of the French "imparfait" past tense but did not always stick to the rule ("paraissait" and not "paroissoit" on p.5) and the number of misprints is impressive (f.i., "l'enviter à venir venger la mort" 27 or "et c'es pourquoi le Calife Vathek" on the same page!). Moreover, apart from these "mistakes", it is rather interesting to wonder why Melville chose D15 and not one or the other manuscript as his reference version, and this is maybe a more serious error in terms of genetic criticism. Because this manuscript was neater or/and shorter or/and the one which seemed to be the last stage in the process of modifying and correcting, he assumed it was the one most ready for publication according to his own standards but probably too, according to what he thought were Beckford's. Yet, whether one

likes it or not, things are not that simple. Melville has some excuses, he was the first one who excavated these treasures but what is more alarming is that no editor or publisher (except for Professor Graham, see below) since then, and especially since the time the Beckford Papers have been available for consultation by anyone willing, has taken the trouble to investigate the matter more seriously before producing more and more *Vatheks*, replicating the same indelicate gesture as the then understandably impatient Samuel Henley did when he published, anonymously, his English translation in late August 1786, without the *Episodes* and before Beckford had approved of it.

So the three 3 versions to be considered are in fact D13, D14' and D14'' (D14 will be used to refer to what is common to D14' and D14''). Professor Kenneth Graham is the only Beckford scholar who has been researching thoroughly the various stages of the writing of *Vathek and the Episodes*, with a special effort to attempt dates : according to him, D13 and D14 were written in the 1780's and the corrections added on D14 and D15 would be of a much later date. We do not have further absolutely scientific evidence to put forward but one hint could be derived from the factual changes that occur from one to another of the 3 versions. There are very few of them as a matter of fact, as changes are often to be found between two versions and not among the three of them. And they might be revealing. For instance the age given to Alasi is 18 in D13, 20 then changed into 25 in D14', and 20 in D14''. We do know that *Vathek* was written in French by Beckford between January 1782 and February 1783, and we also know that Beckford started his *Episodes* not later than 13th January 1783 and that there must have been a complete first draft of them not later than March 1785. It might be interesting to remember that the 18/20/25 change referred to above confirms the dates in the correspondence : D13 would date

back to early 1783, D14' late 1784/85 and D14'' not earlier than 1790.

Professor Graham's attractive theory according to which the rumours around the Powderham scandal of October 1784 might have given birth to a revised version (in short D14) finds here a perfect justification but one must also take into account that D14', as will be seen further down, is not exempt from erotic and morally controversial burning issues. The other striking feature of D14' is that it is much more characteristic of an "Arabian tale" than D13, as will be illustrated later, and this is also due not to a desire to be more acceptable but also the result of two orientalist's (Beckford and Samuel Henley) long discussions and correspondence on these matters. But D14' and all the variants never went too far in the mid and late 1780s ; in his correspondence with Henley especially, Beckford showed signs of an insatiable appetite for more and more picturesque and Arabian details but also some doubts about the modifications to be made from the original, his indecision increasing especially after the death of Beckford's wife in the summer of 1786 (which in itself was maybe more damaging for the reputation of Beckford than the Powderham scandal itself two years before ; and also this tragic early death tended to confirm Henley in his fears that Beckford would never have the strength or willpower to come to a decision in terms of publishing). On the other hand, D14'', the more censored version in terms of sexually explicit matters (whether homo or heterosexual) was probably the only alternative for Beckford after his wife's death and exile to Spain and Portugal, if he wanted to have it published in the 1790's. Moreover, could the fact that such an aphorism as "car les flatteurs se détachent rarement d'un roi tant que la couronne brille sur sa tête" (d13 : 60/7-8) disappears in D14'' explain that it could not be printed in French after the end of the French Terror in Paris or at the time of Napoleonic battles and conquests in the early XIXth century? Last of all, the only

other factual change from one version to another is the change in the choice of plants in the description of the pavillion where Alasi and Firouz are sheltered at the beginning of the episode. In D13 there are “orange-trees and honeysuckle”, in D14’ “palm-trees and acacia” and in D14” “pomegranate trees and oleander”. Is the choice in D13 dictated by the Italian landscapes Beckford had been overwhelmed by in the previous years and often present in his correspondence of that period? Is D14’ modified by a desire to add some Arabian local colour and then to come back in D14” to a more symbolical, if not allegorical, use of images in his tale?

All things considered, D13 must have been written some time between early 1783 and late 1784 and the first revised edition (D14’) conceived at the end of 1784 or early 1785 (before September in any case). But Beckford became gradually doubtful, and certainly not convinced by the new version although he enjoyed the idea of playing with oriental subject matter provided and discussed by Samuel Henley. After the death of his wife, and Henley’s final betrayal, everything came to a stop for quite a while. He probably reconsidered a possible publication in the early 1790’s, maybe during the ‘convalescence’ period that took place during the year 1790. The most conventional final version and new copy of D14” (D15 indeed) probably dates back from the 1810s when Beckford thought of having a certain number of his books republished, as was the case with a reedition of the French text of *Vathek* in London in 1815 and many others in the years following. Beckford’s tone by then had become incredibly moralizing, edifying and almost too conventional to be true.

The earliest versions of Beckford’s manuscripts, also the most difficult to decipher, are usually disparaged by Beckford specialists as being full of anglicisms.

This does not seem to be true as far as “Alasi” is concerned. Needless to say, spelling, punctuation and sometimes phrasing are quite different from what they are today, but more than that, they were not standardized in the late 18th century as they are supposed to be today. Anyway misspellings and surprising phrases are not less numerous in any version than in D13. In fact, the only — and still, debatable — impropriety to be found in D13 is situated after the scene with the Mullah turned into a donkey, when Alasi cries “Meurs-y” (D13 : 14/1), suggesting ‘die in that disguise’, corrected in D14 into a simple “Meurs!”. On the contrary, “je n’eusse pas changé mon royaume.... pour l’immense Empire du Calife Vathek (D13 : 1/3)” tuned into “ je n’eusse pas échangé” (D14) is far from an improvement or “rien ne pourra t’arracher à moi” (D13 : 6/3) into “vous arracher d’auprès de moi” (D14) which is quite awkward. Often, too, the links between the various scenes are more sobre and less self-conscious and over-explanatory : “Ces discours” (D13 : 20/18) becomes “De semblables discours” (D14) ; “qui l’avoit fait devenir fou. On détestait sa cruauté” (D13 : 05/13) becomes “l’avait fait devenir fol. On détestoit un acte si atroce”. Sometimes, the nuances contained in the circumlocutions used by Beckford to describe certain states of mind are lost, whether for the worse or the better : “je cédaï à la dernière tentation que le mage employa pour me séduire” (D13) is turned into “je cédaï à la dernière séduction du mage” (D14).

Structurally speaking, a certain number of paragraphs disappear in D14” (as opposed to both D13 and D14’) : some of them concern minor digressions that can be rightly considered as cumbersome in the first drafts and some others which deprive the last version of its moral (in this case immoral) dimension, turning the tale into something which sounds much more like a comedy of manners, not fitting in the

overall thematic and symbolical pattern of *Vathek* : The dying father's worries about the qualities of his son Alasi as a successor to the throne are more fully developed in D13 and D14', and the scene with the deer killed by Firouz out of jealousy, a few hours after he and Alasi first meet, is entirely absent in D14''. These two changes in D13 and D14' seem to suggest and prepare the reader to the impending fate awaiting Alasi and Firouz and their fatal affair (or Alasi and the future Firouzkah in the straight version) as if vice, doom and the sombre *défilé* of passions were already inscribed within human nature in the bud. Instead, D14'' reestablishes, by this structural repentance, an opposition between experience and innocence which is not present in the earlier versions nor in the whole structure of *Vathek* nor in Beckford's other works. Another and last well-known group of variants among the different versions of Alasi is of course linked to the sex change in the case of D14 (as opposed to D13) and pre-announced several pages before by an episode which does not exist in D13. It must also be said at this point that the changes and the number of whole paragraphs being erased between versions D14' and D14'' plummet after the scene when the female sex of Firouzkah is revealed (this scene is situated at about three fifths of the whole episode), implying that the structural changes between D14' and D14'' before that scene are mainly the result of self-censorship in terms of the expression of emotions, sensations and longings, whether gay or straight. To make it simple, we could say that up to that revelatory scene, D13 and D14 are much more alike, structurally speaking, whereas afterwards D14' and D14'' are closer.

Before we go any further and see that the exposure/repentance dynamics in Beckford's writing are not just a matter of homoerotic or heterosexual factual situations, it should also be borne in mind that there are two other structural changes which take place between D13 and D14 and which have nothing to do with sexual

identity : when Alasi is led by the Magus to visit his famous Hall of Fire, the description only takes into account its infernal, dazzling, macabre, in short sublime, dimension as opposed to the idyllic place in which Alasi and his beloved wake up, a place described as the Eden-like Cheheristan. In D13, after this description, Firouz conjures up the same place for Alasi but as if seen from a different perspective, thus creating parallel worlds (Cheheristan, a vision of Hell, and a vision of something in between) . Hence, the description of the Hall of Fire as being one thing and many at the same time, creates some mental space for the reader which is a far less binary, less ambivalent, more ambiguous and richer combination of the sublime and the picturesque. The other big change is of course the final series of misdeeds carried out by Firouz on their way back from Zerbend to the Hall of Eblis. In D14, only the revenge against Roudabah is enacted but in D13, two more scenes are depicted at length and with great ferocity : after Firouz's exposure of the hypocrisy and weaknesses of so-called social virtues in both versions (heroism, loyalty, ambition, respectability etc.), Firouz's subversion reaches a higher level in D13 with a fierce attack on more exalted and would-be disinterested virtues, namely love and spirituality. The scenes of the two lovers Assan and Kerima, apparently madly in love but finally led to drown and kill each other to save their own lives and the episode of the santon said to have led an exemplary hermit's life but who does not hesitate one instant to reject, corrupt and deny his faith and each one of his most sacred principles to fuel his long-repressed lust and hedonism which are liberated by the sole exposure of the beautiful and devilish charms of the "innocent"-looking Firouz.

The key to fully understanding the text as it appears in D13 is not just to be found in the exposure of a homoerotic love theme, however exceptional it may

sound for a text written in the 1780s. D13 should preferably be read under a pre-romantic light as what is remarkable in it is that the whole catalogue of feelings, fears and emotions is open, unbound, in front of the reader's eyes. There is no struggle between so-called antagonistic feelings but a whole array of nuances and subtle degrees in every possible emotion. For instance, while "l'ami intime de votre père" (D13 : 5/4) is introduced in D13, the same character is referred to as "l'ami du roi votre père" in D14 as if titles and social connections were more important to storytelling than the nature and intensity of the bonds between individuals (to take an example with no emotional or sexual inuendo). Firouz is also often called "chef d'oeuvre de la nature" (D13 : 6/2) or simply "Firouz" instead of "aimable enfant" or then "mon cher prince". Dealing with the nuances of the heart, D13 is extremely effusive "ce coeur était paîtri de tendresse et ne respirait que la volupté" when compared to a much more virtuous "était armé contre les passions violentes" in D14. In D13, Firouz's emotional transports know no bound "M'embrassant avec un redoublement de tendresse" (d13 : 25/8) or "se jette dans mes bras" (throws himself in my arms) which turn, respectively, into an eloquent blank or "à mes genoux" (to my knees) in D14. More profoundly, the pre-romantic strain in D13 is also to be found in the depiction of a lonesome soul imbued with melancholy "est-ce un prestige que quelque Génie ennemi de mon repos me fait? Ce charmant fantôme va peut-être disparaître à mes yeux et laisser ce coeur, qui n'avait encore rien aimé, dans l'amertume d'un sentiment inutile!" (7/11-15), whereas the lonesome heart in D14 is rather that of a victim to social ostracism imposed by the Royal etiquette "le ciel m'envoie cet ami de coeur que je n'aurais jamais trouvé à ma cour". Secondly, love becomes what the surrealists (as developed in Breton's *Nadja* for example) were to dwell upon 150 years later : in other words, the inner revolution brought by love and

sexual drives leads to a chaotic metamorphosis of our perceptions of the whole world, both immaterial and physical, and this appears only in the D13 version : “Je ne pouvais comprendre comment en si peu de temps qu’il me semblait, j’avais fait tant de chemin ; je vis bien qu’on est hors de soi quand on craint pour ce qu’on aime pour pouvoir calculer les distances” (42/19-22).

Concerning now the differences between D14’ and D14”, they are less subtle and certainly less interesting from a literary point of view, mostly because the expression of any intense emotion is simply repressed (metaphorically rendered by the frequent replacement of the verb “aimer” by “chérir”). The whole love situation (again whether gay or straight, the sexual identity not being a decisive parameter for the narrator as far as story-telling is concerned) is quite fascinating. In D13, “Nous nous suffirions l’un à l’autre” conveys, through the use of a verb in the conditional, the idea of an idealised love whose physical actualisation is envisaged, dreamt of, fantasized upon, versus the more down to earth “nous nous suffisons” in d14’. At other moments, when sensual gestures are exchanged they are not commented upon in D13, which is often the case in D14’ “qui nous fit rougir tous les deux” / “en se relevant d’un air embarrassé”. In all these examples the variants disappear completely in D14”. This version, in fact, goes even further as any kind of excess of emotion or sexual attraction is carefully repressed, at least in its expression : While Firouz arouses “Un tendre intérêt dans tous les coeurs sensibles” (D14’), the interest aroused in D14” is no longer “tendre” and does not affect “tous les” (all) hearts any longer. And there is clearly no explicit reference to sexuality : the hair, and especially the cut or burnt hair are simply erased in the last version (“sauver une seule de ces belles boucles de Musc qui ornaient ta tête”) and the promises made to Amni to have Roudabah’s sexual favours (“Les serments qu’elle vous promet d’enfreindre toutes

les fois qu'il s'amusera avec son impertinent favori") do not appear at all . So it is interesting to notice that D14" is not just censored in terms of the representation of homosexuality but against any form of sexuality that goes against the preservation of the institution of marriage, whether standard heterosexual (Roudabah and Amni caught in the act, although the scene is supposed to portray a powerless Roudabah under the spell of some djinn, in a similar way as in *Vathek* when Carathis discovers Vathek and Nouronihar) or based on a more exotic alternative sexual pattern (see above, footnote 27).

To conclude on self-censorship, it seems that between the two "acceptable" (heterosexual) versions, D14' verges on libertinism (both in terms of sexual representation but also in terms of morals) since it plays with the norm whereas D14" protects the reader against "the other side" by putting blinkers on his eyes to prevent any inside vision of what is considered as evil. This is as remote as possible from what is at stake if one considers the whole of Beckford's writings and it is not surprising that the apparently genuine aphorism "la raison a des droits sur l'esprit de l'homme que les passions ne peuvent jamais entièrement lui ôter" has disappeared in this version as the plot of any version of the story of Alasi and his companion would tend to prove the contrary. The implicit paradox, and not contradiction, of this aphorism in the episode of Alasi draws Beckford's work nearer to Sade's than to any Romantic tale of the 19th century.

In comparison, D13 on the other hand seems to be devoid of any moralizing purpose although it is a very amoral piece of writing, maybe more seducing and subversive as there is much less self-consciousness on the narrator's part. Not so much because it depicts the ecstasies and the throes into which two male

lovers are hurled than because it gives free rein to a polymorphous, ferocious emotional appetite and an incredibly 'modern' literary representation of sensual perceptions. Yes, the object of desire in D13 is clearly a boy of 13 and this version is incredibly explicit for that period and it remains a mystery (and a 'miracle', see Graham on the homoerotic theme in his introduction) how this version was left to come down to us. When Alasi is introduced he is described as "un jeune garçon, plus beau que l'étoile du matin" and later, 5/23-24, his voice is "'plus douce que le son d'un luth céleste" whereas in d14' he is "une figure céleste, sous l'habit d'un jeune garçon ... cet être étonnant" as if the game on appearances and transvestism or rather cross-dressing could excuse or enhance the fascination for a being of the same sex. In D14, he is "une figure angélique..... si gracieux, si délicat" ; here, of course, the aesthetic and angelic/divine sublimations correspond to the conventional withdrawal into a fiction that dare not speak its name. Another, even clearer, progression is to be found after the scene with the shepherd in which Firouz is called "mon petit ami" in D13, "Firouz" in D14' and "celui qui en était l'objet" in D14". Moreover, the servants at the dinner with the Magus are all boys in D13, whereas little girls are added in D14 (and it will be noticed that only in D14' there is an element of exoticism added as the little boys are said to be Persian and the little girls Georgian).

D13 homosensitivity should not be equated with the presence of a very misogynistic voice in D13. Firouz indeed in any version is a male-chauvinist diehard but the attack on women by this character is much fiercer and more articulate in D13 than in any other version. Yet this does not imply, as sometimes suggested, that this episode, as a piece of writing by Beckford, is also misogynistic. One should not forget that D13 is also the only version where Alasi himself is not that convinced by Firouz's prejudiced ideas ("De tels discours ne pouvaient pas faire une grande impression sur

moi, ils sont trop rebattus ; mais les plans de mon bien aimé étaient irréversibles”) and most important of all the feminist discourse is completely absent from the D14” version, and this on two occasions. After her love scene with Amni, Roudabah explains :

“Je suis l’égale d’Alasi ; il m’est autant permis qu’à lui d’avoir un favori. Si toutes les femmes pensaient comme moi, ou,le hommes changeroient les lois injustes qu’ils ont faites ; ou nous cesserions de nourrir de notre lait les tyrans qui nous subjuguent. (D13 : 31/5-19)

And when Firouzka’s childhood, and especially her experience as a little girl dressed and brought up as a boy, is discussed by her spiritual father, only in D14’ (and not in D14”) can we read : “Elle s’en réjouit beaucoup en pensant qu’on lui passerait toutes ses fantaisies de femme comme des petits écarts permis à un jeune homme”. Finally, while explaining Alasi’s attitude when she first met him, Firouzkah is remembered to have said ‘Alasi méprise et fuit les femmes” (d14’, despises and flees from) whereas the verb ‘néglige”(neglect) is used in d14” and we may wonder whether this is not a very early example of politically correct speech in English fiction? Indeed, the repentance of Beckford in the last version is probably, by its too many blanks, more misogynistic than the early versions.

What is more interesting with regards to the representation of sexuality when we compare the two versions D13 and D14 is to see that in the heterosexual version, a series of antitheses are used to enact the story. First love and friendship are presented as two totally different affairs of the heart : “le louable, le calme sentiment de l’amitié pouvait seul y faire entrée, l’amour, qui , en prit la forme ; et me

perdit”. The morale of it is that if there is confusion between the two, doom (and hence a certain amount of poisonous temptation, too) will follow. In D13, “les doux sentiments de l’amitié devaient aisément entrer dans une âme comme la mienne ; ils la pénétrèrent tout entière” feelings and emotions, in the plural, develop and take a wayward path of which the lover-wanderer is never really fully conscious. And the presentation of Alasi’s confusion of mind is as much confused, giving to the text probably more coherence and realism : “mon ami dont les passions étaient violentes, impétueuses et bizarres. C’est donc à cet ami, que vous voyez ici avec moi, que je dois le sort dont je frémis d’avance, moins parce qu’il a d’effrayant que par la crainte d’avoir à le reprocher à celui dont la présence me fait trouver le bonheur, même dans ce terrible séjour” (D13 : 1/11-16) In D14, confusion is to be punished and banished, love either dwells in Paradise or Hell. In D13, one has the feeling that there could be a paradise somewhere in hell and that the road to hell can lead its sinewy course through paradise.

In D14, antithesis is also a matter of confrontations, when Firouz warns Alasi against his marriage with Roudabah, he says “attendez vous à un autre combat que celui de l’amour” whereas in D13, it becomes “celui auquel on s’attend le jour de ses noces” as if in D13, the confrontation is of a sensual nature but in D14, love itself is defined as a struggle, which is never the case in D13 in which affection or desire is a general transport one surrenders to, no matter what one actually does. Firouz in this version says to Alasi : “vous ne pourrez aimer Roudabah puisque vous m’avez aimé” (D13) and this is not supposed to be a moral principle but more simply a lesson in sentiments. In D14, the tone is much more moral and forbidding : “vous ne sauriez aimer R puisque vous m’aimez”.

When Alasi and his beloved have arguments, the only way out comes as the result of a

balance of forces. After Firouz's fit of jealousy, Alasi reacts vehemently "Quelle extravagance est-ce ceci, prince de Shirvan? Que vous importe mon union avec Roudabah" whereas in D13, the lover is by definition a slave to love whose willpower is bound to fuse with the partner's whims : 'je n'eus pas la force de me fâcher ; je m'excusai pour apaiser mon ami, que je devais rigoureusement tanser, je lui alléguai les ordres de mon père <. . > je le conjurai de ne pas me quitter, et qu'il serait toujours pour moi l'objet le plus chéri" (D13 : 10/19-25)

In D14, individual desires are also presented as opposed to the way of the world but in D13, erotics and the imagination do not automatically oppose politics. In the first case, Alasi's solitary disposition is shown as an impossible alternative to the duties of his Royal status but in D13, individual traits and inclinations are rather encouraged if they can benefit the multitude. In D13, he does everything he can to make his own and his subjects' happiness fuse "et pour cela je donnais des fêtes magnifiques, qui souvent me fatiguaient à mort, et contrariaient mon penchant pour la solitude" (3/12-14). In the explanation given by the spiritual father to have Firouzkah be brought up as a boy, one learns that there was no male heir to the throne and Firouzkah was the only means to ensure social and political cohesion whereas, in the D13 version Firouz as a boy had to be brought up in the world of men, far from magic luxuriance and too much bounty. During this explanation the father concludes : ' il possède l'univers en possédant le coeur de son ami" (D13 : 47), thus belittling the importance of terrestrial power.

In terms of narrative technique, too, D14 is much more based on external focalisation, with various forces in presence corresponding to various characters which are more marked and who express themselves a lot in direct speech. In D13, the focalisation is more internal. In the scene of madness when Firouz is torn

apart with rage and jealousy the scene is described from a very subjective narrator's point of view : "je le trouve couché par terre, ses habits déchirés, ses belles tresses coupées, ses yeux versant des torrents de larmes" and the whole situation is rearranged by a *innamorato furioso*, giving birth to a description which is mainly characterised by a fragmentation of the body). Moreover, emotional transport is often accompanied with physical transport. Inevitably, in D13, the setting seems to be the continuation, almost the embodiment, of the protagonist's desire whereas in D14, spatialization is more objective and conventional.

We could almost speak of a process of homology in the representation of homosexual desire "Tandis que ma respiration répétait les mouvements de la sienne" (D13 : 42/25 43/1) while in D14' the body of the desired is seen from a distance, shortened and emphasized at the same time by a physical gesture from one towards another "les mouvements de son sein élastique sur lequel j'avais doucement posé la main". The homology process between the various characters is also at work between individuals and the setting around them. In D14, the setting is mainly used to give local colour to what is aimed to be and sound and feel like an Arabian tale. In D13, the setting has a more allegorical function. First the body of the desired is so to speak petrified. Describing Firouz's chest, the narrator (Alasi) exclaims : " < . . . > la vue de cet Albatre palpitant qu'il me présentait, me mirent hors de moi-même (D13 : 9/4-6) and the *loci* where love is supposed to expand attains a symbolical role. The pavillion with the painted silk on the walls is more fully described with a profusion of details into decorative arts which fascinate Firouz (as opposed to Fiouzkah who enters the pavillion and expresses a desire to play the lute) as if the harmony of the *décor* was the guarantee of a harmony of tastes and hence of body and

soul, and this is something to be found at several stages of the narrative in D13

Ces lumières attachées imperceptiblement à cette voûte d'azur ; ces cristaux artistement enchâssés dans le roc, qui, en se réfléchissant les uns les autres multiplient à l'infini des arbustes, des fleurs et des coquillages et de diverses couleurs, tout cela n'est point l'ouvrage de l'homme (D13 : 45/22-25 ; 46/1-2)

In D13, the décor also seems to have an almost erotic function since it is there that Firouz and Alasi's complicity seems to be the greatest. They do not seem to have well-defined and fixed roles but rather to reinvent them at pleasure. During the scene of the candle-lit dinner prepared by Firouz, the latter enjoys playing the role of a servant " il s'en acquittait avec transport". The same scene exists in D14 but as can be noticed semi-direct speech is introduced in order to show that is part of a strategy on the part of Firouz "car il voulait, disait-il, me servir d'échanson" whereas things are taken for granted in D13.

As a conclusion, one could say that the greatest difference between versions D13 and D14 is that the latter version is much more contrived. In a way, Beckford indulged in orientalism in this version, and the abridgements made in D14", although the latter version is — as seen before — very disappointing in many regards, are for the most part justified. On April 9, 1785, Beckford wrote to Samuel Henley : "I shall sit down to revise *Vathec*, and much approve of your idea to preface the tale with some explanation of its costume" and we know that this correspondence fueled his imagination, giving birth in D14', and only in D14', to a Persian pavillion, to the

man in the forest referred to as “le rustique”, to Firouz being described as “le plus beau des sabihs”, in fact many passages are developed, sometimes overloaded with exotic ornaments, learned references are added, names and titles are given to the full and spectacular or exotic effects are never considered superfluous. Alasi’s father’s speech at the beginning of the episode is full of references to the folklore of Kharezme whereas D13 is much more concerned with a *Bildungsroman* pattern set up within a pre-romantic frame of sensibility. In fact it seems that although the D14 version is interesting in terms of exoticism, it is less spontaneous than in D13. There is however another discrepancy between the two versions. D14 is much more of a moral tale : The narrative of D14’ is several times (three different instances to be more precise) directly addressed to the protagonists of *Vathek*. Alasi’s narrative, in this version, sounds much more like an apology in which the narrative itself is the exposure of one’s repentance (“Je sentois le besoin de m’entretenir avec moi-même” “une impression sur mon coeur qui confondait ma raison” and the aphorism which only appears in D14’ : “Quand on s’est arrangé avec soi-même, on y revient rarement deux fois ; car il est bien plus aisé de se laisser aller à son penchant que d’en examiner la source”). Seen in that light, D14’ is not devoid of interest as a very peculiar example of libertine literature in the late 18th century, not so much in terms of sexuality but in broader terms. In D14’, Firouz expresses an “éloignement presque farouche pour le genre humain” (towards the human race) whereas it is neutralized in D14” as a disgust against “les usages communément admis” (conventions) and the episode of the Mollah turned into a donkey leads to a rather interesting conclusion “fit cesser cette dégoûtante bouffonade” followed by a rather humouristic counterpoint ‘cet étrange figure affublée d’une peu d’âne < . . > en agitant deux oreilles postiches d’une grandeur démesurée” whereas in D13 or D14” the episode is

more factual : j'allais ordonner qu'on éventra l'âne, ou qu'on brisa la Machine" (D13 : 13 / 3-4).

Last of all, William Beckford, in D13 appears much more subversive and visionary — the machine is destroyed, the fabric is broken in pieces — when what is supposed to be an Arabian tale sometimes turns — and this is probably the quintessence of Beckford's special brand of orientalism — into a tale which feeds on further Eastern philosophies. Multiplicity or accumulation of antitheses are not major themes in Beckford's writings if we consider them as a whole, their morals are not swaying between a multiplication of different realities but include a self-destructive germ that is unique because it contains multitudes and dynamic contradictions. Thus one vision of the Zoroastrian Hall of Fire, if seen from the sublime depths of Eblis, can take the soul higher and higher into the same and many parallel worlds :

“Je tremblais, mes jambes allaient se dérober sous moi, Firouz me soutint et me dit, que craignez-vous ici, cher Prince? Vous aurais-je mené dans le séjour du danger! Voilà le Dieu de la nature de toutes ses terreurs ; allons le voir dans sa gloire. En me parlant ainsi, il m'entraîna dans un autre lieu que je ne saurais vous décrire, car à peine puis-je y jeter un coup d'oeil, je fus ébloui par une infinité de rayons qu'un dôme, plus éclatant que le soleil dont il rendait la lumière, réverbérait sur des pierreries sans nombre dont nous étions entourés

Ote moi de la présence de tout Dieu D13 (51/21-25 ; 52/10)

Without (a) God, is there still such a thing as repentance or does it become nothing else but another form of exposure and what is there left to expose

then? In William Beckford the self is everything and yet reveals nothing that the eye and soul have not penetrated.
