



Vathek

William Beckford

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Vathek is a Gothic novel written by William Beckford. Vathek capitalized on the 18th (and early 19th) century obsession with all things Oriental, which was inspired by Antoine Galland's translation of *The Arabian Nights*. Beckford was also influenced by similar works from the French writer Voltaire. His originality lay in combining the popular Oriental elements with the Gothic stylings of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*. The result stands alongside Walpole's novel and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in the first rank of early Gothic fiction.

The novel chronicles the fall from power of the Caliph Vathek (a fictionalised version of the historical Al-Wathiq), who renounces Islam and engages with his mother, Carathis, in a series of licentious and deplorable activities designed to gain him supernatural powers. At the end of the novel, instead of attaining these powers, Vathek descends into a hell ruled by the demon Eblis where he is doomed to wander endlessly and speechlessly.

Vathek, the ninth Caliph of the Abassides, ascended to the throne at an early age. He is a majestic figure, terrible in anger (one glance of his flashing eye can make "the wretch on whom it was fixed instantly fall backwards and sometimes expire"), and addicted to the pleasures of the flesh. He is intensely thirsty for knowledge and often invites scholars to converse with him. If he fails to convince the scholar of his points of view, he attempts a bribe; if this does not work, he sends the scholar to prison. To better study astronomy, he builds an observation tower with 11,000 steps.

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