

Orientalism as a Regulatory Episteme in William Beckford's *Vathek* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

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Abstract

This study aims to deconstruct the epistemic foundation of Orientalism in William Beckford's *Vathek* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Beyond delineating *Vathek*, Victor Frankenstein, and their worldviews/quests as Orientalized constructs replicating Orientalist patronizing tropes, this study explores them as products of fantastic urges whose discursive foundation can be traced back to Orientalism. Therefore, Orientalism—as this study defines it—functions as an episteme that instigates *Vathek*'s and Victor's overreaching, disastrous knowledge quests. This episteme comprises ideas conjured up and disseminated by Orientalized tales like *The Arabian Nights*. Drawing on Immanuel Kant's views about what constitutes the Enlightenment spirit, the study demonstrates that Orientalism renders both *Vathek* and Victor failed enlightened men. Ultimately, Orientalism transforms their quests into distorted fantasies in both novels, leading to the creation of deformed artifacts that echo Orientalism itself as they both represent deviant praxis drawn from eccentric assumptions.

Keywords: William Beckford, Mary Shelley, Frankenstein, *Vathek*, Orientalism.

Introduction

Western interest in the Orient grew drastically during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, enhancing the crystallization of “a new awareness of the Orient” (Said 1978, 42), whose discursive power is evident in canonical Western works. William Beckford's *Vathek* (1786) and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; Or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818) are among such works influenced by this increased attention to the Orient. *Vathek* is entirely about Eastern people and their lives, and its depiction of the Orient is believed by some critics to be “authentic” (Demata 2003; Watt 2008). This authenticity stems from Beckford's integration of a myriad of secondary Eastern sources, Western travel literature,

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and Orientalist works, such as Barthélemy d'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque Orientale* (1697) and Sir William Jones' translation of the *Muallaqat* (1782).

Similarly, Shelley's *Frankenstein* is "highly conscious of the Orient and Orientalist discourse" (Lew 1991, 255). According to Joseph Lew (1991), Shelley acquainted herself with a variety of Orientalist literary works, including Beckford's *Vathek* (1786), Robert Southey's *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801), *The Curse of Kehama* (1810), Sydney Owenson's *The Missionary* (1811), and Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Alastor* (1816).¹ After all, Antoine Galland's translation of the *Arabian Nights* (1704–17) had a vital impact on framing the stories of the defiant Muslim Caliph Vathek and the indulgent European scholar Victor Frankenstein.

Robert Irwin (1994), Donna Landry (2008), and James Watt (2008) explain how the Arabian tale allowed Beckford to project his personal desires/fantasies and construct the narrative of *Vathek*.² Victor, likewise, makes straightforward references to stories from the *Nights*, indicating that he had either read the tales or heard about them from others. While conducting experiments in his laboratory, he compares himself to the "Arabian" from the story of Sinbad, who "had been buried with the dead and found a passage to life aided only by one glimmering, and seemingly ineffectual light" (Shelley [1818] 2012, 79).³

While Edward Said's seminal 1978 book, *Orientalism*, describes 'modern' and 'academic' Western Orientalism as an ethnocentric, hegemonic discourse that essentializes the Orient, manipulates Oriental representations, and perpetuates thereby hierarchical West-East power relations, Orientalism—as conceptualized in the current study—does not only constitute mere speculative traits fostering Western envisioning of the Oriental "other" but further serves as an episteme that informs and shapes the epistemological frameworks of knowledge quests within *Vathek*, *Frankenstein*, and beyond (i.e., their writing processes). This episteme comprises a well-defined body of ideas channeled through literature, as in the case of the *Arabian Nights* and the Orientalist accounts. Therefore, rather than characterizing how the production of *Vathek* and *Frankenstein* is conditioned by Orientalism, the current study seeks to demonstrate that Orientalism in these works produces knowledge quests marked by overreaching unregulated, disastrous knowledge. In other words, this study maintains that Orientalism—as an episteme—conditions the moral and epistemological deviance of Vathek and Victor and actively partakes in the formation of their drive for knowledge quests. Orientalism, as a body of knowledge, mainly nourishes the imagination of Beckford, Shelley, Vathek, and Victor, as depicted in the ways Vathek and Victor develop different predispositions that trigger revolutionary and unorthodox quests. They endorse indulgence, extravagance, transgression, and moral, scientific, and intellectual abuse. All in all, both Vathek and Victor manage to Orientalize (or rather fantasize) their personal worlds, which they bring into ruin not because the world itself is made Oriental, but because they both transgress the cultural, social, and epistemological boundaries of their contexts.

Literary criticism on *Vathek*'s and *Frankenstein*'s Orientalist engagement has largely discussed them within the theoretical framework established by Said. In this arena, the Orient in *Vathek* serves as an alterity that, according to critics, enabled Beckford to project his personal fantasies.⁴ According to John

Garret, "[t]he *Vathek* of *Vathek* has no historical authenticity, nor was he intended to have any. Beckford created an autocratic character who jettisons the ballast of his traditions and his religion and thrives on the goodwill of his subjects" (1992, 17). Garret (1992) discusses how Beckford's portrayal of *Vathek* maintains cultural boundaries between East and West.⁵ These boundaries do not "privilege" one over the other but rather highlight the discrepancy between Islamic and Christian epistemologies. The daunting fall of *Vathek* at the end, Garret maintains, has its roots in his application of the Western frame, "to put bounds on the boundless, to inscribe a circle round the infinite" (1992, 26).

As for *Frankenstein's* Orientalist engagement, critics have focused mainly on the racial identification of the monster as the other and how othering the monster contributes to defining the European against the non-European. This identification also manifests European apprehensions about the dangerous other. Anne Mellor (2001), for instance, argues that the terror caused by the monster is due to his racial difference. The monster, Mellor writes, "is not white-skinned, not blonde-haired, not blue-eyed. He is not Caucasian. He is not of the same race as his maker, Victor Frankenstein, who, as opposed to the creature, 'lies white and cold in death'" (2001, 2). There is an apparent anxiety around the mysterious origin of the monster. In his study of Orientalism in *Frankenstein*, Lew (1991) argues that the creature's physical appearance links it to the subjects of imperialist rule in British India.⁶ In a similar interpretation, Zohreh Sullivan (1989) expounds on the overlapping of patriarchal and imperial discourses in the makeup of the monster. The monster is both racially and sexually othered. Its unhomely shape unveils "19th-century anxieties about the proximity and fluidity of racial and sexual Otherness" (Sullivan 1989, 20). The monster's otherness explains the refusal to integrate it within the circle of the DeLacy family.⁷ The cultural deviance of the monster is also stressed by Paul Stock (2010), who posits that the alienation of Victor and the creature can be attributed to the novel's attempt to define what does and does not constitute the "European." Victor's experiment, according to Stock (2010, 100), is associated with "'over-reaching'" knowledge pursuits, which characterize scientific progress and demarcate its relationship with the non-European world.

The critical insights selected above rightly handle important cultural and political nuances in the characterization of *Vathek* and Victor and in foregrounding the cultural and political boundaries of their worlds. However, the critical focus and stance of these studies have not gone beyond the theoretical framework detailed by exponential postcolonial scholars like Said (1978, 1993), Gayatri Spivak (1987), Homi Bhabha (1994), and Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (1989) in their theoretical standpoints about cultural, political, and social concerns characterizing the relationship between Europe and Third World/subaltern peoples within (post)colonial settings. Therefore, rather than exploring how characters like *Vathek* and Victor typify stereotyped/Orientalized characters premised upon essentialist, patronizing tropes, this study discusses how Orientalism harbors the epistemological tools that fashion these characters' pursuit of knowledge and simultaneously renders their aims a formidable failure. In light of the epistemological spirit of Orientalism, *Vathek* and Victor defy and transgress all cultural, social, and religious boundaries that are well-established in *Vathek's* Islamic context and in the Enlightenment backdrop of *Frankenstein*.

Orientalized/Fantasized Quests and Inevitable Failure

While Vathek and Victor had been indoctrinated with cultural beliefs and practices common in their societies, they were enlightened by pursuits and inclinations uncommon in their worlds. We are told that Vathek, “from an early accession to the throne and the talents he possessed to adorn it, his subjects were induced to expect that his reign would be long and happy” (80). Vathek apparently possesses a grand image in his subjects’ imagination. He has the type of character that satisfies their expectations due to his excessive thirst for knowledge. The reader is told that people’s admiration for Vathek has nothing to do with his sensual appetites. Even though the public is obsessed with his “talents,” only the narrator knows that Vathek might use these talents excessively and reincarnate the plight of Dr. Faustus. Therefore, Vathek’s context is not morally and intellectually chaotic and unregulated. Rather, Vathek sought to fanaticize/Orientalize his world in accordance with his eccentric urges. Likewise, Victor is exceptionally ambitious and intellectually ardent. He admits that he could become as such because “[n]o youth could have passed more happily than mine. My parents were indulgent, and my companions amiable. Our studies were never forced; and by some means we always had an end placed in view, which excited us to ardor in the prosecution of them” (67). His excesses were not enforced by his formal education. Also, they were not prevalent nor made normal in his social environment. His parents might be blamed for their generosity with their son; however, this generosity cannot be the reason for his damnation.

Vathek and Victor are not aliens in their settings. Their intellectual preparation can be placed in an actual epistemological context. Following Immanuel Kant’s philosophical tenets in his essay “What is Enlightenment?” (1784), Vathek and Victor can be read as embodiments of failed enlightened men. They, borrowing from Kant, dramatize man’s attempt to release himself from “self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another” ([1784] 1991, 54). While man is supposed to accept and internalize external guidance based on Kant’s definition, Vathek and Victor are self-willed, listen to their inner voices, and possess the uncommon “courage” to break with boundaries and use their reason to satisfy their curious knowledge inquisition.

Then, what would be progressive in the pursuits of Vathek and Victor? Following Kant’s ([1784] 1991, 54) argument, Vathek and Victor apply self-apprenticeship and embody the Kantian concept of *Sapere aude*, or “[h]ave courage to use your own understanding.” This courage signals man’s “maturity,” marked by his ability of rational reasoning. Vathek riskily transgresses social and religious norms to gratify his sensual indulgences despite his awareness of his eventual divine retribution. According to the narrator, Vathek’s “indulgencies were unrestrained; for he did not think . . . that it was necessary to make a hell of this world to enjoy paradise in the next” (80). His flights of fancy are accompanied by his irrevocable will to act, and he ignores the continuous warnings urging him to repent and return to the righteous path. Similarly, Victor apparently possesses unmatched zeal to divulge the secrets of the world and thus undertakes a weird, perilous quest. He contends that “[m]y dreams were therefore undisturbed by reality; and I entered with the greatest diligence into the search of the philosopher’s stone and the elixir of life” (69).

Victor and Vathek seem ostensibly Romantic dreamers opposing the confinement of Enlightenment rationalism. However, their dreams—unlike those of dreamers in William Wordsworth's and John Keats's works—are neither unfulfilled nor escapist desires projected onto imaginative realms. Rather, Victor and Vathek actualize their dreams in their contexts. Also, their experience reveals that they are conscious of the existing rational paradigms of their worldviews. So, they do not reconstruct their worlds in dreams. Rather, they forcefully utilize material and epistemological tools at their disposal to turn their dreams into new realities.

Nonetheless, Vathek's and Victor's will and authority have not guaranteed their successful enlightenment. While Orientalism contributes to the formation of their enlightened endeavors, it concurrently sets off their enlightenment failure because it locks them up in a far-fetched realm where reasoning is misused or does not exist at all. Their Orientalist engagement thus alienates them. Commenting on Kant's (1784) definition of Enlightenment, Michael Foucault (1984) argues that reason, based on Kant's discussion, can ensure one's self-liberation because it is supposed to replace the role exterior authority does. Both Vathek and Victor demonstrate their outstanding ability to use reason, an "obligation" that comes from within. Their stories underscore their habitual and self-centered inclinations to pursue sensual and intellectual endeavors. For example, Vathek's pride drives him to envision himself as equal to Providence by constructing a tower in imitation of Nimrod. He also engages in disputes with others, especially over controversial, theological topics. Victor, likewise, admits that his quest is driven by a pressing need to gratify his scientific indulgence, which is conditioned by the fantastic, not the real. To be sure, Vathek's and Victor's reasoning defies the mainstream cultural, social, and intellectual norms. Consequently, their rationalization, rather than deeds, is excessive on account of its nature and outcomes.

For Kant, as explained by Foucault (1984), reasoning must act within two domains: private and public. The private use of reason is mandatory when one belongs to a society and has a predefined role, thus abiding by certain social regulations and abstaining from reasoning. While private reasoning appears circumstantially informed and restrained, public reasoning is unrestrained and practiced for the sake of reasoning itself (Foucault 1984). The tragic flaw—so to speak—of Vathek and Victor is the way they reason publicly instead of privately. Vathek and Victor are consumed by habitual, sensual, and scientific pleasures. This tendency is further nurtured by their obsession with the fantastic that makes them transgress the cultural, social, and intellectual denominators of their realities. Vathek and Victor think that their will-to-know is sufficient to legitimize their pursuit of the unknown. For instance, Vathek seeks to unfold the "secrets of Heaven" (82) and Victor ends up creating the monster. Their pursuits, therefore, temporarily satisfy their egoistic urges, leading to their own ruin and the destruction of those around them. It is this isolation that produces their inclinations, which in turn do not conform to (and are not subject to) the restraints imposed by their realities. Vathek is depicted as a dissenting Muslim whose aims are egoistic. Victor, on the other hand, does everything it takes to insulate his desire against any social or religious restrictions.

In the course of Vathek's and Victor's intellectual self-liberation, Orientalism as an episteme partakes in the formation of their bizarre endeavors by equipping their minds with 'rational' filters that render the world, in their eyes, a place of endless and attainable possibilities. Their rational tendency

initiates their “way out” (in Foucauldian terms) from the moral and intellectual norms of their worlds. Orientalism simultaneously regulates their enlightenment process. The Islamic worldview of Vathek’s narrative and the estrangement (or othering) of Victor’s model and his monster set them as dissenters, both in the processes and aims of their pursuits. It is because Vathek and Victor deny or ignore their social status as a ruler and a scientist who have public responsibilities that their failure is meant to stress the necessity of reasoning privately, rather than publicly, in a way that sanctions/regulates their will and authority. The narratives underpin this understanding as they deploy the antitheses of Vathek’s and Victor’s models. Vathek is presented as an insolent, impious, and defiant Muslim, while “good Mussulmans” in general are expected to denounce his model. Most importantly, Vathek is a Caliph who is expected to set a good model for his subjects. For example, The Genius advises him to “be just to thy subjects; respectd: the minivers of the Prophet” (148). Captain Walton embodies a contrasting model to that of Victor, for unlike Victor, he enjoys a “serenity of conscience” (111) that helps him reconcile his ambitions with public interests. He attempts relentlessly to be helpful to his fellows by discovering a passage to the North Pole. In the meanwhile, he emphasizes that his fantasies shall override neither his safety nor the safety of his crew.

Vathek’s Orientalism: How Not to Fashion a True Muslim

Addressing the way Orientalism functions in these novels exposes critiques of Orientalism itself as a knowledge quest. As a Western construct, Orientalism turns into a transgressive pursuit of knowledge, a form of conquest that results in the production of licentious and monstrous knowledge, leading to cultural and intellectual epistemic violence. Readers are told that Vathek does everything he can to “acquire a great deal of knowledge, though not a sufficiency to satisfy himself” (82). What is considered licentious and deplorable in his inquisition, in the Islamic context, is that he—unlike “good Mussulmans”—“wished to know everything, even sciences that did not exist” (82), and thus he is “dubbed by insolent curiosity of penetrating the secrets of Heaven” (82).

As demonstrated in the introduction of this paper, critics such as Garret (1992), Irwin (1994), and Landry (2008) read Vathek as an autobiographical fantasy that reproduces Beckford’s “weird” (Irwin 1994, 250) and “queer” (Landry 2008, 7) disposition. There is also critical consensus on how Beckford’s Orientalism—his engagement with Eastern sources and the *Arabian Nights*—implanted the seed of his tale. Irwin writes that Beckford,

[a]s a child, [...] had been fascinated by the *Nights* and he had begun to collect [O]riental paintings. His godfather, William Pitt, Lord Chatham, concerned at the boy’s unhealthy interest in things [O]riental, wrote to his tutor instructing him to ensure that the boy had no further access to the *Nights*. Beckford’s Indian paintings were burnt, but tales of Oriental vice and despotism had already worked upon the boy’s imagination. (1994, 246)

Beckford might be distinguished for his faithfulness to Eastern sources in writing Vathek, yet his obsession with the Orient becomes unhealthy when the Orient becomes a destructive topos in Beckford’s

mind, according to which everything Oriental is defined. *Vathek*'s tale, in addition to the footnotes and endnotes appended to the story, illustrates Beckford's acquaintance with original Eastern and Orientalist sources. He almost certainly envisioned the Orient through the lenses established by previous Orientalists, whose portrayal of the Orient is uncensored and exotic. Therefore, Beckford's scholarly faithfulness does not guarantee the creation of the true *Vathek*. Rather, *Vathek* appears more fantastic than real. Far from exploring the historical credibility of *Vathek*, Beckford's Orientalism, as an episteme, places him out of the Enlightenment project, unfolding him as a dissenter whose transition to "maturity" is irrational.

The fact that Beckford draws inspiration from the *Arabian Nights* and uses it as a vehicle for his fantasies in *Vathek* does not provide a complete understanding of Beckford's Orientalism. While it is claimed that Beckford remains loyal to Eastern sources, which make up the episteme that helps fashion *Vathek*'s character, it is not implausible to argue that *Vathek*, Beckford's proxy, cannot be essentially Eastern. *Vathek* is rather de-familiarized. Moreover, the narrative resists any attempt to appropriate *Vathek* as a true Muslim. *Vathek* is required—as a Muslim—to incarnate an "Islamic" episteme inherent in the following premise: "Woe to the rash mortal who seeks to know that of which he should remain ignorant, and to undertake that which surpasseth his power!" (87). Nevertheless, *Vathek*'s desires and actions are far from being driven by such principles. He deals with women lustfully, immerses himself in sensual indulgences, and imitates Nimrod, a despotic king who ruled Babel and built a tower to penetrate heaven. *Vathek*, therefore, is a confusing figure standing at a crossroads; he is neither Western nor Eastern. As such, Orientalism's effect on Beckford becomes evident in creating a one-off fictional product that does not conform to any Western or Eastern paradigms.

Then, it is plausible to conceptualize *Vathek* as a hybrid character who draws from two cultures. However, he is not a product of an actual colonial encounter between West and East. Rather, he emerges from Beckford's personal attempts to blend elements that belong to neither culture. That is, Beckford's endeavors reverberate his disaffection with domestic cultural patterns, on the one hand, and his predilection to enliven the marvelous East, on the other hand. Following Bhabha's (1994) premises on hybridity, *Vathek*'s characterization dismantles any essentialist, hierarchal classification of East and West because *Vathek* as a hybrid character invalidates any alleged supremacy of both. To use Bhabha's terms again, *Vathek*'s hybridity creates an "ambivalent space" (Bhabha 1994, 112) that admits difference between Western and Eastern cultures. However, the space *Vathek* creates is rather metamorphosed as it erodes traces of its original sources. This is why *Vathek*'s cultural model is deemed immortal, potentially signaling the impossibility of the coexistence between the two cultures.

Vathek's mother, Carathis, partially shapes his defiant spirit. There is an emphasis on her non-Arab and non-Muslim origins, but what seems more foregrounded than her racial difference is her moral and religious orientation. *Vathek* "not only loved her as a mother but respected her as a person of superior genius; it was she who had induced him, being a Greek herself, to adopt all the sciences and systems of her country, which good Mussulmans hold in such thorough abhorrence" (85). Therefore, *Vathek*'s upbringing is seemingly aligned more with Western paradigms. Critics argue that *Vathek*'s characterization owes much to Western models. For example, "*Vathek*'s temptation and his quest for the forbidden surely owe something to the Faust legend" (Irwin 1994, 252).⁸ Yet, the discrepancies with

which Vathek is characterized serve, in the ostensibly “Islamic” world of the novel, as a “way out” or counter-narrative that takes him beyond existing epistemological, moral, and religious boundaries. That is, Vathek’s defiant spirit initiates his “exit” from the epistemological order of his world; however, his context resists his full enlightenment. The notions of reward and punishment deflate Vathek’s enlightenment and dismantle his Orientalized world. The narrator tries to fantasize the last scene, where Vathek is punished in hellish, eternal agony. He does so by mocking the very rationale that legitimizes Vathek’s damnation. Vathek is damned, the narrator relates, because he refused to remain “ignorant and humble,” while “Gulchenrouz passed whole ages in undisturbed tranquility and the pure happiness of childhood” (158). This explanation is not truly Islamic. Beckford rather secularizes the notions of punishment and reward and unfolds them to material or mundane consequences of one’s choice.

However, the text itself refutes this understanding, as the Islamic episteme is supposed to regulate Vathek’s endeavors entails his being liable to punishment because his “blind ambition” induces him to “transgress those bounds which the Creator hath prescribed to human knowledge” (158). These rules do not exclude the pursuit of knowledge but rather regulate its process. The prototypical maturity of Vathek, for Beckford, resides in his defiance of these rules. To put it in Foucauldian terms, Vathek does not allow the “spiritual director to take the place of [his] conscience” (Foucault 1984, 34). However, Vathek’s conscience does not lead to his atonement, for he is apparently steered by a bad conscience that does not abate his “habitual luxury” (103). Beckford seems conscious of Vathek’s plight (i.e., his bad conscience), yet he endorses it. Therefore, the narrator’s mocking commentary on Vathek’s damnation invokes the audience’s cathartic detachment from the scene of his punishment. This attempt to alienate the reader falls short because the narrator’s words contravene his patronizing tone. The reader is warned that Vathek’s “punishment” is caused by his ambition, while the narrator asserts that Vathek’s blind ambition can be “chastise[d]” (82), not necessarily punished with destruction.

The narrator’s alternating words might be understood in the context of Beckford’s authenticity and loyalty to his Eastern sources. In Islamic context, Vathek’s sins can be atoned; that is, his sins cannot essentially bring about his inevitable damnation. This is why he is afforded opportunities for self-correction by renouncing his perfidious acts, repenting, and submitting to the will of God. However, Vathek eventually succumbs to his audacity and pride, refusing to discipline himself. This authenticity challenges his fantasized, Orientalized world, where one is caught in the following polemic: either to comply with and internalize the model of Vathek, the unmitigated villain, the learned, self-willed, and ambitious, or to remain ignorant and humble and enjoy tranquility and peace of mind. Yet, Beckford’s authenticity dismantles this polemic. As pointed out earlier, the Indian Giaour warns Vathek about the moral and epistemological rules that should regulate his desires and behavior. These rules underpin the following: ignorance is not an essential state, not all knowledge quests are permissible, and there are limits to desires and knowledge inquisition. Such limits are not meant to undermine human reasoning or knowledge quests. Rather, they aim at regulating individual reasoning, and the pursuit of knowledge is conditioned by what/how/why to pursue. One should pursue legitimate knowledge, following righteous and legitimate pathways, which should also propagate beneficial and useful outcomes for humanity.

That being said, Vathek's fate is not metaphysical (i.e., cannot be deciphered), nor does it contradict his epistemological context. Also, his fate is not meant to suppress his reasoning command or endorse ignorance as an essential state in human beings. Rather, his fate recuperates what we shall call *rational ignorance*, informed by the individual's fully conscious reasoning, taking into account a well-established moral system. This becomes more obvious as we read the novel's less strict tone towards the relinquishing of certain knowledge inquisitions. Vathek is advised, not forced, to hold back and reconsider his undertakings. Vathek is exposed to alarming situations that implore his self-disciplining. For example, the inscriptions on the sabers that Vathek asks the old man to decode warn him against excessive pride and unregulated ambitions. Also, directly before his downfall, the Genius urges Vathek to renounce his old ways of life. Nonetheless, he considers such warnings as "useless admonitions" (148) and those who internalize them as being "deceived" (148). Garrett argues, "The final horror of Vathek's and Nouronihar's separation from God is deeper because it has been self-willed and could have been avoided" (1992, 16). This self-willed defiance becomes apparent as Vathek deems himself a missionary, an iconoclastic sacrificial figure whose duty is to break the chains that confine man from pursuing whatever he desires. Thus, he assures the Genii, who urges him to repent, that "deem not that I shall retire" (148). Vathek strikes the readers' common notions usually associated with the situation. It does not impose an apocalyptic, eschatological end. Rather, the "awful and irrevocable decree" mandates Vathek, unlike Faust and Victor, to "wander in an eternity of unabating anguish" (158), paradoxically, in the Hall of Eblis.

From a different angle, Vathek unfolds in "endlessness [...] without the transitional stage of death" (Garrett 1992, 21). Had Vathek's career not been violently terminated, we might have wondered, would anguish be sufficient to regulate him? Apparently, this punishment, for Beckford, will not stop Vathek from pursuing his career. Moreover, Vathek witnesses the eternal punishment of Eblis and his followers in hell, and he is given a chance to get the message. While not concluding the story with Vathek's death, the novel keeps the door open for something to come: Vathek might reconsider his undertaking and behave himself. This is also reminiscent of Islamic rhetoric on sin, repentance, and forgiveness, and framing Vathek's end in endlessness alludes to Islamic beliefs about the afterlife (hereafter). In this regard, Garrett argues that

Vathek ends with the feeling that the Caliph's lifespan has only just begun. After the interposition of the shepherd-genius, the frivolity of tone that has endured for most of the novel quickly changes into a final somberness: a contrast that dramatizes the folly of regarding the ephemeral material world as if it possessed the permanence of the spiritual. (1992, 27)

Artistically, resisting closure stresses the failure of Beckford's personal fantasy, which is evident in the un-fulfillment of his desire and his inability to totally disintegrate from his enchantment of disenchantment. It also underscores the failure of his attempts to liquidate or neutralize the moralizing of the tale.

In fact, the eternal anguish imposed on Vathek has its roots in his inability to internalize a self-willed and fatalist spirit simultaneously. Vathek could not reconcile his desires with the regulations of his

society, nor could he maintain a balance between private and public reasoning. He is given a grace period until the last moment to “return,” which entails acknowledging his unrighteous deeds, feeling remorse, renouncing his lifestyle, and submitting to destiny. Beyond the conservative, religious context of self-correction, the tale broadens its horizons to encompass the political and mundane, for Vathek is compelled to undergo self-correction for the sake of his safety and the preservation of his monarchy against corruption and, consequently, destruction. In other words, if Vathek deserves punishment, it is because he violates both the divine and the mundane (or because he does not reason privately). For example, he kidnaps Nouronihar and erects the tower to defy the divine.

Frankenstein's Orientalist Engagement and Domestic Agenda

There is a critical consensus on the ubiquitous effect of Orientalism on the writing of *Frankenstein*. According to Shelley's (aforementioned) reading list,⁹ Shelley read Beckford's *Vathek* before or while she was writing the novel. Also, as mentioned earlier, she acquainted herself with the Orientalist fiction of her time. Most importantly, *Frankenstein* includes clear textual references to the *Arabian Nights*. Victor refers to the story of Sinbad while explaining his scientific expedition. The novel also includes a concrete reference to Arabs through the Arab character of Safie. Readers are additionally exposed to the character of Henry Clerval, Victor's Orientalist friend, who is busy studying Oriental languages. In the context of the novel's Orientalist engagement, critics like Mellor (2001) associate the creation of Frankenstein's monster with the Orientalist topos; the monster's hideous, un-belonging physical make-up triggers speculation on the novel's racist allegiances towards the unknown, dangerous other. Lew concedes the novel's “pervasive but subtle” imperialist ethos (1991, 257), while Spivak thinks that Orientalism and imperialism are not central to Shelley's novel enterprise but rather “incidental” (1985, 255).¹⁰ Spivak might not be mistaken to relegate *Frankenstein's* Orientalist engagement as secondary because the scientific quest of Victor seems to occupy an epistemological and professional zone that is seemingly far from Orientalism. Stock (2010) also underscores the novel's revolutionary and radical adherences. He writes, “Introduced as a European, Frankenstein's activities are ideologically connected with radical attempts to reshape European society and also connected with the controversial trajectory of recent history” (2010, 100–101). In this light, the catastrophic unfolding of Victor's experimentation signals the degeneration and disenchantment of the revolutionary ethos, which is embodied in the act of creating the monster.

Nonetheless, the Orient still matters in deconstructing the novel's domestic agenda. Stock's suggestion echoes a line of argument put forward by other critics and literary historians who believe that Islam and the Islamic world represented a successful and desired revolutionary model, and the engagement of writers like Shelley in this model should be scrutinized within this framework.¹¹ The novel displays new venues pertaining to the Orient and to the novel's domestic enterprise. Orientalism acts as an episteme that partakes in weaving the novel's texture, and understanding this epistemological intervention helps us rationalize the tension around Victor's scientific urge and experimentation. Orientalism in *Frankenstein* is also an object of inquiry, presented and encouraged as an alternative to

Victor's pursuits. Yet, the novel criticizes Orientalism when it becomes a form of 'over-reaching' knowledge quest (like Victor's) that is not spurred by the will to serve humanity. In other words, Orientalism is central to the development of Victor's indulgent scientific and domestic affections. *Frankenstein* thus unfolds Orientalism as a radical and indiscreet knowledge quest that explores, encroaches, engineers, and manipulates the unknown.

Frankenstein, like *Vathek*, re-enlivens the debate over avoiding progress for the sake of happiness, tranquility, humbleness, and ignorance. Victor epitomizes the enlightened man; he is a daring, diligent, and accomplished scholar and apostate Promethean. Unlike the mocking judgment of Beckford's narrator on Vathek's downfall, Victor reflects on his devastated situation and the unfolding of his scholarly pursuit to Robert Walton as follows:

I then thought that my father would be unjust if he ascribed my neglect to vice, or faultiness on my part, but I am now convinced that he was justified in conceiving that I should not be altogether free from blame. A human being in perfection ought always to preserve a calm and peaceful mind, and never to allow passion or a transitory desire to disturb his tranquility. I do not think that the pursuit of knowledge is an exception to this rule. If the study to which you apply yourself has a tendency to weaken your affections and destroy your taste for those simple pleasures in which no alloy can possibly mix, then that study is certainly unlawful, that is to say, not befitting the human mind. If this rule were always observed, if no man allowed any pursuit whatsoever to interfere with the tranquility of his domestic affections, Greece would not have been enslaved; Cæsar would have spared his country; America would have been discovered more gradually; and the empires of Mexico and Peru would not have been destroyed. (82)

Shelley's experiment nonetheless refutes Beckford's thesis and instead proves that ignorance, or better to say, ignoring certain knowledge pursuits such as exploring the elixir of life and dark magic, can be "legitimate," an obligation to a high extent. It follows, then, that human knowledge has limits, not those incurred by man's intellectual deficiency but those externally imposed for greater plans, part of which is human safety and the avoidance of distortions, imperfections, and catastrophic lapses.

In so doing, Victor does not mention scholars whose pursuits were proven useless or catastrophic, nor others who served humanity. He rather invokes colonization and imperialism, and therefore knowledge quest, colonization, and imperial expansion seem to be premised upon the same logic: the will to know, conquer, and expand. What concerns us is how Orientalism, as a knowledge pursuit, falls within the same domain Victor spells out here. As he relates the other world to "domestic affections" (82), Orientalism is not an exception because it contributes further to the definition of the relationship between the domestic and international arenas. Following Said's (1978) argument about the impaired psycho-material foundations of Western Orientalism, and how Orientalism has been consolidating power-oriented beliefs and practices, Orientalism becomes an illegitimate pursuit as the Orientalist transgresses all boundaries, including those of "domestic affections."

Elizabeth Bohls argues that “Victor pointedly connects his dark scientific urge to the destructive hunger for discovery, conquest, and colonization that led to genocide in the Americas. He poses an antithesis between aesthetics and empire: a more tasteful, tranquil civilization would never have done these horrible things” (Bohls 1995, 236). By drawing this comparison, *Frankenstein* harbors anti-science propaganda as the novel likens Victor’s quest to colonial conquest. We suggest that *Frankenstein*, contrary to *Vathek*, is very careful in positing its standpoint in this debate. While Victor urges Walton to “seek happiness in tranquility, and avoid ambition, even if it be only the apparently innocent one of distinguishing yourself in science and discoveries” (Bohls 1995, 216), he nonetheless renounces this ethos and instead ponders whether giving up his ambition and desire does not constitute his ultimate failure. Victor reminds Walton, “Yet why do I say this? I have myself been blasted in these hopes, yet another may succeed” (Bohls 1995, 216). It is important to note that Victor’s failure does not legitimize attempting it for the second time; one might succeed in a different pursuit, or other pursuits might end in success.

In terms of *Frankenstein*’s Orientalist undertaking, Lew (1991) maintains that the novel conforms to the dominating Orientalist discourse of its time. This is embodied, first, in the material and political exploitation that regulates Robert Walton’s and Henry’s engagement with the Orient, and second, in the way Safie represents a liberal and revolutionary icon who refused to stay confined within Oriental patriarchy (Lew 1991). The Orient is a prominent professional preoccupation of Henry, about whom Victor tells us the following: “Languages were his principal study; and he sought, by acquiring their elements, to open a field for self-instruction on his return to Geneva. Persian, Arabic, and Hebrew gained his attention, after he had made himself perfectly master of Greek and Latin” (93).

Yet, *Frankenstein* may have sought to emphasize something different about Henry’s and Victor’s interest in the Orient. Henry is not an Orientalist in the Saidian sense; his Orientalism is not substantiated by a materialist agenda. He studies Oriental languages purely for the sake of knowledge. As for Victor, while he shows interest in this pursuit, it does not elevate his quest to a level that might fully capture Victor’s knowledge urge. The Orientalist works, as he states, offer him a “different” area of information, but most importantly, they enable him to find “relief” from rigid science. He says:

I felt great relief in being a fellow pupil with my friend and found not only instruction but consolation in the works of the orientalists. Their melancholy is soothing, and their joy elevates to a degree I have never experienced in studying the authors of any other country. When you read their writings, life appears to consist of a warm sun and a garden of roses,—in the smiles and frowns of a fair enemy, and the fire that consumes your own heart. How different from the manly and heroical poetry of Greece and Rome. (93)

Victor finds instruction and entertainment in Orientalists and Oriental works. One source that feeds his imagination is *Arabian Nights*. While experimenting in his lab, he compares himself to “the Arabian who had been buried with the dead and found a passage to life aided only by one glimmering, and seemingly ineffectual light” (79). In particular, Victor refers to the episode of the fourth voyage of Sinbad from the

Oriental tale. This reference reinforces the evidence that "*Frankenstein* is obsessed with the impact of Oriental texts upon Western minds, and particularly upon the education of the generation born at the end of the eighteenth century" (Lew 1991, 256).

The episode at the De Lacy family's cottage also dramatizes Orientalism as a form of apprenticeship, in which the monster is also engaged. There, Safie becomes well-versed in languages, politics, history, and geography. Interestingly, knowledge on these subjects mainly concerns the Orient and is drawn from Orientalist works. The monster benefits from this circle. In addition to learning languages, the monster (as well as Safie) is briefed on the history of empires by Felix through Volney's *Ruins of Empires*, of which Felix, as the monster maintains, "gives minute explanation" that helps the monster to understand the "purport of this book" though he could not at first (134). Felix chooses this book because its "declamatory style was framed in imitation of the eastern authors" (134). What the monster and Safie learn from this book includes:

A cursory knowledge of history and a view of the several empires existing in the world; it gave me an insight into the manners, governments, and religions of the different nations of the earth. I heard of the slothful Asiatics; of the stupendous genius and mental activity of the Greeks; of the wars and wonderful virtue of the early Romans—of their subsequent degeneration—of the decline of that mighty empire; of chivalry, Christianity, and kings. I heard of the discovery of the American hemisphere and wept with Safie over the hapless fate of its original inhabitants. (134-135)

When it comes to defining Englishness and otherness, the novel's tone becomes patronizing, reinforced by their Orientalizing practices. However, this is not the only form of Orientalism the novel unfolds. Henry pursues, as an alternative, a disinterested, unutilitarian engagement with the Orient.

Moreover, the study argues that delving into the intellectual underpinnings of Victor's scientific inquiry reveals deeper layers of the impact of Oriental(ist) episteme on the development of his fantastic urge and scientific enticement. This impact is filtered through the *Arabian Nights*, and Victor gives us an early clue to the enduring influence of this source on his mind. He compares the moment of the seemingly impossible discovery of "the cause of generation and life" (79) to—again—"the Arabian who had been buried with the dead" (79). Apparently, the story of the "Arabian" lures him to the endless possibilities of human power and achievement, making his imagination thrive and rendering reality, in his eyes, a land of achievable wonders.

The impact exerted upon him by Henry stimulates and expands his imagination. Victor asserts that:

The resources of his mind on this occasion were truly astonishing: his conversation was full of imagination, and very often, in imitation of the Persian and Arabic writers, he invented tales of wonderful fancy and passion. At other times, he repeated my favorite poems or drew me into arguments, which he supported with great ingenuity. (94)

Later, Victor claims that it was his imagination and fantasy that led him to create the monster: "My imagination was vivid, yet my powers of analysis and application were intense; by the union of these

qualities, I conceived the idea, and executed the creation of a man" (211). The impact of Orientalism on Victor's rational power is realized in the distortion of his scientific outcomes, paralleling the way Orientalism resulted in a deformed Orient existing only in the fiction of Orientalists.

While Victor's quest is ostensibly damned, Walton's is treated differently. The novel does not provide a concluding judgment on Walton's project and remains silent on his failure. Walton actually reconsiders his pursuit, and Victor urges him to listen to his tale in an attempt to hopefully "enlarge [his] faculties and understanding" (62). Though Walton contests any doubts about "the solid advantage" and "inestimable benefit" of his pursuit of "mankind" (52), he decides to halt his expedition at the moment of possible diversion by a storm. He attributes this decision to his caring and rational consideration of the situation. He relates to his sister, "I shall do nothing rashly; you know me sufficiently to confide in my prudence and considerateness whenever the safety of others is committed to my care" (56).

This decision is also prompted by his undeniable fear of the unknown: "the part of the world never before visited, and [he] may tread a land never before imprinted by the foot of man" (52). Elsewhere, he states, "I am going to unexplored regions, to 'the land of mist and snow;' but I shall kill no albatross; therefore, do not be alarmed for my safety" (56). Meanwhile, we are not told that Walton has to relinquish his scientific exploration at all. Rather, the novel keeps the door open for him to consider those material and moral undertakings, which are ignored by Victor while planning or pursuing his quest and ambition.

Conclusion: A New Horizon in Orientalist Studies

Orientalism created an epistemological scheme to which Western authors (like Beckford and Shelley), fictional characters (like Victor), and perhaps readers have been exposed. This exposure went beyond a fleeting encounter; it shaped the minds of these individuals, not just in how they conceptualized the Orient but also to the extent that it motivated them to shape their personal and intellectual endeavors. This is clearly reflected in Victor's exposure to the *Arabian Nights* and his friend's Orientalism, and how the knowledge he acquired honed his scientific indulgence and imaginative drive. Victor's scientific pursuit ends up bringing into existence the distorted, destructive monster that resembles the Orientalism of Orientalists. Both Victor and the Orientalists produced dissenting knowledge that consequently generated dissenting intellectual tendencies and practices.

Similarly, Beckford's Orientalist quest unfolds Orientalism as an episteme that informed his fantasies. *Vathek*, in its content and form, was inspired by the *Nights*, and Beckford is often credited with incorporating an "authentic" Orient into his work while paradoxically imbuing it with fantastical elements. Beckford admitted that he inherited this fantastical element from the *Nights*, a fact that underscores his distorted Orientalist quest. Consequently, Beckford's Orientalism constitutes a failed conquest in which he attempted to modulate the moral and epistemological spheres of the Orient to fit his personal fantasies. Beckford may have remained faithful to Eastern sources except in the case of *Vathek*'s characterization, where he tried to depict *Vathek* as a deviant non-Muslim/atheist, yet this attempt failed because the story's background remains Islamic. In short, Orientalism inspired Beckford to create the fantastic figure whom he fails to accurately portray as a true Muslim.

Orientalism does not merely remain the product of Orientalists' fantasies and fabrications about the Orient. Instead, it becomes an independent ideological entity that uncontrollably infiltrates the authors' imaginative faculties and operates in ways that alter the epistemological conception, realization, and outcomes of characters and events in fiction, even in works that ostensibly were not crafted against an Orientalist backdrop, like *Frankenstein*. Thus, Orientalism provides the epistemic framework that shapes Vathek's and Victor's quests and simultaneously stands as an episteme attempting to regulate those quests using alternative tools and mindsets. The way Orientalism interferes in framing the nature and outcomes of these quests renders it a locus of excess and transgression. This approach to Orientalism opens new horizons in Orientalist studies and expands its scope to incorporate epistemic violations and quests within various Western cultural frameworks.

الاستشراق كأساس نظري معرفي في (فانك) لويليام بيكفورد و (فرانكشتاين) لماري شيلي

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الملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تفكيك الأساس المعرفي للاستشراق وتحليله في روايتي (فانك) لويليام بيكفورد و (فرانكشتاين) لماري شيلي. ويذهب هذا التحليل إلى ما هو أبعد من الصور النمطية المرتبطة بشخصيتي فانك وفكتور فرانكشتاين التي يمكن إدراجها في البناء الفكري للاستشراق الذي قدمه إدوارد سعيد في كتابه (الاستشراق)، بل إن هذه الدراسة هي محاولة لفهم المركبات التخيلية المستمدة من الأسس النظرية للخطاب الاستشراقي. وبالتالي، فإن دور الخطاب الاستشراقي في ضوء هذه الدراسة يتجلى في كونه نظرية معرفية تشكل الدافع الرئيسي لمساعي فانك وفكتور في بحثهم المعرفي الذي يقودهم إلى نهايات كارثية، وهذه النظرية المعرفية مبنية بالأساس على المادة الاستشراقية لقصص مختلفة كقصة (ألف ليلة وليلة)، وبالرجوع إلى آراء إيمانويل التي كانت حول الأطر النظرية لحركة التنوير، فإن هذه الدراسة توضح أن الاستشراق يجعل كلاً من فانك وفكتور شخصيتين فاشلتين في ضوء الركائز الفلسفية لحركة التنوير. وبهذا المعنى فإن الاستشراق كونه نظرية معرفية يحول الأهداف المعرفية لهاتين الشخصيتين إلى خيالات وسلوكيات مشوهة توازي في انحرافها الاجتماعي والديني والفلسفي الفرضيات المشوهة والصور النمطية التي مثلها الخطاب الاستشراقي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: وليام بيكفورد، ماري شيلي، فانك، فرانكشتاين، الاستشراق.

Endnotes

¹ Rebecca Nesvet asserts that Shelley's reading list includes Simon Ockley's *The History of the Saracens* (1708–18), Beckford's *Vathek* (1786), and "'New Arabian Nights,' probably the [. . .] 1792 text" (2005, 371). Shelley's reading list is available at <http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/MShelley/readalph.html>.

² According to Landry, Beckford claims that *Vathek* was "a re-enactment of the three-day event Beckford had staged at Fonthill, which was itself a re-enactment of the *Arabian Nights*. The very premise of an *Arabian Nights* re-enactment was that it made possible otherwise forbidden or unimaginable sensory and aesthetic experiences" (2008, 178). Irwin also asserts that "during the early 1780s, while he [Beckford] polished and revised the novel [Vathek], he . . . worked with the assistance of a Turk, Zemir, on a rather loose translation into French of some stories in a manuscript of the *Nights*, which had been brought to England by Edward Wortley Montagu" (1994, 247).

³ Subsequent citations from Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Beckford's *Vathek* will be given as page numbers only. The story of Sinbad and other potential ones is channeled to Victor through his intellectual apprenticeship with Henry Clerval, the literary orientalist. Victor states that he finds both sentimental solace and intellectual boost in Henry's "resources", which are "full of imagination; and very often, in imitation of the Persian and Arabic writers, he invented tales of wonderful fancy and passion" (94). The "fancy" and "passion" Victor realizes in the Oriental sources fuel his courage and inspire his endeavor to embark on his mission. He emphasizes that "[u]nless I had been animated by an almost supernatural enthusiasm, my application to this study would have been irksome, and almost intolerable" (78). Victor's commentary reveals how much his exposure to Oriental knowledge demarcates his intellectual self-formation, that is, how it steers his scientific quest and experimentation.

⁴ See, for example, John Garret (1992), Robert Irwin (1994), Mohammad Sharafudin (1994), Donna Landry (2008), and James Watt (2008).

⁵ See also Eric Meyer (1991) and Robert Irwin (2003)

⁶ However, the monster, according to Lew, "exists outside [the] . . . categories" of male and female, or Occident self and Oriental other (1991, 274). The novel thus questions any absolute separation between the self and its others, thereby critiquing "the growth and methods of the British Empire in the East" (Lew 1991, 283).

⁷ Gayatri Spivak maintains that "there is plenty of incidental imperialist sentiment in *Frankenstein*" (1985, 254). However, she suggests that the novel also criticizes imperialist procedures because it refuses to countenance "binary oppositions" of race and gender, which often "consolidate the imperialist self" (1985, 254–6). Elizabeth Bohls (1995) furthermore aligns *Frankenstein* with Western hegemonic discourse over the Orient. The novel uses the nightmare of a fantastic creature to explore the latent violence of a master discourse constructed on principles of detachment and exclusion. "Both Victor

and the explorer Walton let 'the enticements of science' lead them into isolation from family and friends" (Bohls 1995, 232).

- ⁸ This line of argument had already been posited by Eric Meyer (1991). Donna Landry, in contrast, stresses that *Vathek* "owes more to the *Nights* (and to the Islamic poetry with which the *Nights* was intertwined in Beckford's imagination) than to any other source" (2008, 168). Garret argues that Beckford's characterization is rather ambiguous and bogus in the sense that Beckford "does not privilege 'West' above 'East'; there are discernible differences between Islam and Christianity, which Beckford took seriously in *Vathek*, while also indicating that neither religion had sufficiently accommodated all the energies and aspirations kindled in the human spirit" (1992, 17).

⁹ See note (1).

¹⁰ See note (7).

¹¹ See Garcia (2012).

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