

Anxiety of Motherhood in *Vathek*

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In William Beckford's *Vathek*, we encounter one of the only living and active mothers in the Gothic genre. Carathis, the mother of the titular character and caliph, exercises her maternal control in pursuit of the survival as well as fame of her offspring, but is led terribly astray, securing for herself and her child an eternity of damnation. Revealing eighteenth-century concerns about the role of mothers, and eerily anticipating Freud, *Vathek* reveals cultural anxieties about the power of the mother over the child, especially when the mother has her own desires and ambitions. In her hellish end, Carathis illustrates the fate of women who seek more than society is willing to allow them. In conclusion, it appears that whether she lives or she dies, whether she is present or absent, whether she is selfish or selfless, the Gothic mother will bear the weight of the father, and the patriarchy, and his ruthless desire to have sons and money, and if she dare, as Carathis dared, to have her own ambition and her own son, she will fail and she will only have her mother to blame.

In a footnote on “On *The Reproduction of Mothering: A Methodological Debate*,” the editors pose a thought provoking idea: “Motherhood whether as experience or as subject for research, is now as controversial as it once was bland” (482). Nowhere is this more evident than in the post-Freudian field of psychoanalysis and in the Gothic novel. In one, scholars wrestle with the development of children and the place of the mother in that development, and in the other, authors illustrate manifestations of those same anxieties centuries before society had the words to describe them. In William Beckford's *Vathek*, we encounter one of the only living and active mothers in the Gothic genre, with the rest either resigned to the sidelines or the grave (frequently both). Carathis, the mother of the titular character and caliph, exercises her maternal control in pursuit of the survival of her offspring, but is led terribly astray and secures for herself and her child an eternity of damnation instead of infernal control of the universe. Rife with critical concerns about the eighteenth-century woman, *Vathek* reveals cultural anxieties about the power of the mother over the child and expresses

concerns about the mother consuming the child, like a reverse birth, when the child fails to separate from its mother in the early stages of development. In Carathis, the ambition of the mother is unfolded to its fullest extent, and her downfall illustrates the punishment for any woman's desire for control.

Psychoanalysis has spent a great deal of energy examining the development of the child, especially in relation to its parents. Claire Kahane, in her article “Gothic Mirrors and Feminine Identity,” defines the psychoanalyst's notion of the “pre-oedipal period of our early infancy” as the period in which “mother and infant are locked into a ‘symbiotic relation,’ an experience of oneness, characterized by a blurring of boundaries between infant and mother—a dual unity before the emergence of a separate self” (48). In such a relationship, “separation and individualization, for both boys and girls, then, means breaking or loosening the primal attachment to the mother” (48). Nancy Chodorow, a leading psychoanalyst, remarks that for proper development and survival, “all children must free themselves from their mother's omnipotence and gain a sense of

completeness” (147). Though the eighteenth-century Gothic authors did not have the terms or theory to define the mother-child relationship as such, they did in fact have a rich cultural heritage that allowed them to recognize concerns with mother-child relationships based on an inherited and deep-seated sexism and anti-feminism that was threatened not only by the female body but by her natural control over the next generation of male citizens of the British Empire.

Eighteenth-century English culture was still largely at war with itself about what a woman was, biologically, legally, and theologically, and what she was capable of doing, and all of these concerns rested on the inability of the patriarchy to understand the woman in the most basic biological sense. As Ruth Bienstock Anolik suggests in her essay “The Missing Mother,” the female body itself was disruptive to “cultural categories, particularly at childbirth,” because her body “is fragmented, one becomes two; what was internal and invisible becomes external and visible” (30). Anolik also states that the mother was unable to be categorized in the long-standing “virgin” or “whore” dichotomy, especially in literature, and as such, she presented a considerable obstacle for writers of the day, and thus, Anolik suggests, had to be written out (29). Noting that the Gothic world was a dangerous place for any woman, Anolik remarks that “no woman is at greater peril in the world of the Gothic than is the mother. The typical Gothic mother is absent: dead, imprisoned or somehow abjected” (25). However, I suggest that because the mother’s position was so perilous, because she was already outside of the binary imposed by the culture, the mother is a figure that Gothic authors were very interested in and concerned about. Whether she was absent or present, the mother presents herself as a figure of great anxiety

(for readers, the characters, and the author) in the texts, and furthermore, is fertile ground for examining societal conventions.

Vathek, by William Beckford (1786), centers on the passage of the titular character from the land of the living to the realm of the undead and damned in the ruthless pursuit of power and fortune. Vathek, a caliph of a kingdom in the vague landscape of the Orient, is introduced as a creature of insatiable desire, “addicted to women and the pleasures of the table” and “devoted [...] to the sole gratification of his senses,” and unrestrained emotions, especially anger (85, 107). Despite being a grown man, Vathek frequently displays childish behaviors like demands for food from his mother and fits of rage or wrath when he doesn’t get his way. Spoiled by his position and his adoring mother, Vathek is unable to provide for himself, even in the most basic sense. Carathis, his mother, scolds him, “You but ill deserve the provision I have brought you,” to which Vathek exclaims, “Give it to me instantly! [...] I am perishing for hunger!” (103). Like a child, he desires instant gratification, and like a child, he is heavily reliant on his mother. Though the novel is titled after the son, the novel appears instead to be focused on the mother, Carathis¹.

Carathis has immense power over the adult Vathek because even in adulthood, he still requires the same things from her that he needed as an infant, displaying the inability of Vathek to individualize and the power of the mother to suspend the child in a perpetual state of need, thus retain her power over the person. When Vathek falls ill or into a fit of passion, it is only Carathis

¹ Carathis bears close resemblance to another independent mother – Medea. Both sorceresses and foreigners in the land of their husbands and sons, they resort to wickedness and evil to secure better lives for their children. For more on Medea, see Nancy Datan’s “After Oedipus: Laus, Medea, and Other Parental Myths.”

that is able to assuage or comfort him. She treats him as a child, tucking him into bed and sitting with him until he was composed enough to rest: “Nor would these transports have ceased, had not the eloquence of Carathis repressed them,” and “Nor could anyone have attempted it with better success” (93, 89). Carathis supplies the stability for Vathek that, because he is immature, he could not supply on his own as a fully developed man could. Carathis’ care is not fabricated, but entirely based in her love for her son at first. When he is ill she devotes herself entirely to finding some restorative cure for him, and grieves when he is in pain. She protects him from the angry mob that seeks to destroy Vathek for murdering civilian sons and keeps an eye on the stars to watch for danger coming his way.

Further establishing the deep connection between the two is the subterranean tunnels that only they know about and use. In connecting the dark, cavernous underground space to a mother’s womb, as Leslie Fielder does by connecting an underground dungeon to the womb and “maternal blackness” “beneath the crumbling shell of paternal authority,” a direct link between Vathek’s childishness and his mother’s power over him becomes evident (qtd. Kahane 47). Vathek, by Carathis’s desire and design, remains under her maternal power and so does the entire kingdom. Vathek and Carathis literally become a single entity for a moment after the sacrifice to the Giaour² and burning of the soldiers and servants in the tower, as they celebrate together and their two identities are fused into one pronoun: “This infernal liquor completed

their impious temerity, and prompted *them* to utter a profusion of blasphemies. *They* gave loose to *their* wit [...]. In sprightly humor, *they* descended the fifteen hundred stairs, diverting *themselves* as *they* went” (Beckford 105, emphasis mine). Once Carathis and Vathek are set down the road to hell, they become a single figure again, as in the pre-birth stage, and ultimately must meet the same fate.

Though her maternal affection for Vathek is clear, Carathis obviously has designs of her own, like Medea, in actively perpetuating Vathek’s immaturity. When presented with Vathek’s situation with the wicked Giaour, Carathis delights in the turn of events: “The recital of the Caliph therefore occasioned neither terror nor surprise to his mother: She felt no emotion but from the promises of Giaour” (101). In fact, she had been preparing for such an opportunity for quite some time by gathering a stockpile of magical items “from a presentiment that she might one day, enjoy some intercourse with infernal powers: to whom she had ever been passionately attached, and to whose taste she was no stranger” (102). Thus, Vathek provides Carathis the means of reaching her goal of obtaining power, infernal or otherwise, which has been denied to her because she was a woman. In her efforts, she never abandons Vathek for her own gains, but constantly prods him to carry on his mission from the Giaour under her command so that he might reign over dominions in the Palace of Fire. To do this, however, she must exert complete control over Vathek.

Carathis, being a foreign woman in the caliphate, has no control but what Vathek allows her with his position, and it is power which Carathis desires above all else. Carathis has immense and total control over Vathek, because she did not “create boundaries in relation to” Vathek when he was a child, nor did she “treat [him] as a

² In the novel, the Giaour, an evil spirit, is the one who makes Vathek the offer of becoming a king of the underworld. It is upon his commands that Vathek sacrifices 50 young boys. Carathis, unable to go to the Giaour directly, does many wicked deeds to gain his favor for her son.

differentiated other,” and because Vathek himself did not have to “give up his mother in order to avoid punishment,” likely because his father was dead and no alternate masculine role model is noted: all of which are ideas that Nancy Chodorow suggests are essential to the separation of mother and child (146, 138). Thus, because Carathis did not actively seek to break ties with her son, and instead enabled his needy behaviors, she was able to maintain control over the caliph and over his caliphate—a situation which she surely would have been denied should Vathek have formed as an independent man. Because she has control over the king, she has control over the kingdom and exerts that power in several ways, exemplified in Carathis’s proclivity for subjecting her inferiors to scorpion stings and snake bites to “amuse herself in curing their wounds” which likewise keeps her from being “indolent” (107).

It is her power over Vathek, however, that proves crucial. She gives him direct orders, performs magic to aid his tasks, and grows irritable when he strays from her clearly devised plan. Until she enters into hell, Carathis is entirely bent on the promotion of her son, as she exclaims: “Either I will perish or Vathek shall enter the palace of fire. Let me expire in flames, provided he may reign on the throne of Soliman!” (136). When he is distracted from what she sees as their mutual goal, she immediately intervenes to set him back on the right path, as mothers are wont to do when their toddlers stray too far from their watchful eye. Vathek, until the final scene, is not interested in disobeying his mother, and when she demands that he drown his new wife Nouronihar and continue his mission immediately, he agrees, “Dread thy lady, you shall be obeyed” though he does beg his mother that his wife be allowed to live and aid their mission (138). This is not an outright denial, but rather the hopeful

beggar of a child who fears his mother’s wrath, which Chodorow notes as typical of children who “maintain a fearsome unconscious maternal image, as result of projecting upon it the hostility derived from their own feelings of impotence” (147). Vathek knows well that he could not complete his task without Carathis’s wisdom and command, nor could he have come so far without her. In recognition of his own impotence, he resigns himself to her commands. Carathis is also acutely aware of her responsibility in the mission, upbraiding Vathek as she reminds him, “Glutton that thou art! [...] Were it not for me, thou wouldst soon find thyself the mere commander of savory pies!” (141). Carathis is also aware of Vathek’s immaturity, as the scold harkens to his earlier singular desire for food.

It is not fated, however, for Carathis’s control to last. Arriving in hell before her, Vathek becomes instantly aware of the trap he’s been led into and blames his mother for his situation: “The principles by which Carathis perverted my youth, have been the sole cause of my perdition!” (151). Vathek is suddenly aware of the power his mother has exerted over him and how her power rendered him submissive and impotent, but he does not seem to recognize his own hand in his damnation and his willful obedience to her orders. When Carathis arrives, he upbraids her for her schemes and her poor parenting: “Execrable woman! [...] Cursed be the day thou gavest me birth! Go, follow this afrit; let him conduct thee to the hall of the Prophet Soliman: there thou will learn to what these palaces are destined, and how much I ought to abhor the impious knowledge thou hast taught me!” (152). Vathek blames her entirely for his damnation, and cites her as the sole reason that he has been so led astray by specifically cursing her womb, which carried and nourished him before he was born. It is also

the metaphorical womb that has contributed to his situation, the protective and isolated world that Carathis cultivated for him as prince, and which she used to nourish him and her own desires for power. He blames her knowledge and her curiosity, not his own, in securing him a place among the damned, and damns *her* body and not his own for securing him an eternal hell. Despite that Vathek was never separated from his mother in childhood and adulthood, he is suddenly able to separate himself now that it is inopportune for him to be so closely linked with his mother.

Vathek's situation is manifest of the anxieties that the patriarchy had concerning an "unnatural mother" which Felicity Nussbaum describes in her article "Savage Mothers:" "The 'unnatural mother' refuses [prescribed] duties and is instead capable of heinous acts that threaten lineage and even civilization itself" (127). Carathis has denied Vathek, and thus Vathek's ancestors, a continued heritage by sending him to hell before he could reproduce and continue his family line, and even saw to the destruction of his ancestral palace and caliphate. Nussbaum continues: "This perverse mother is a center of energy and violence, rather than all-nurturing, her excesses made akin to the 'barbaric' or 'savage' of both sexes" (127). It was Carathis's energy alone that propelled the story arc, as Vathek was frequently able to be directed off the path by distractions, and she was the driving force behind nearly all the physical violence in the novel. However, I argue that it was not mere evil alone, but a desire to see her son instated among the magic kings of her dreams, which, though misguided, was a motherly act, and her past actions of caring for and comforting Vathek likewise display a nurturing element to her character.

In a final assault on motherhood, and in realizing yet another anxiety about motherhood, Carathis damns *her own*

mother for her fiery fate:

In delirium, forgetting all her ambitious projects, and her thirst for that knowledge which should ever be hidden from mortals, she overturned the offerings of genii; and, having execrated the hour she was begotten and the womb that had born her, glanced off in a rapid whirl that rendered her invisible, and continued to revolve without intermission. (153)

Carathis blames her own mother, who had no place in the narrative until this moment, for her downfall. Thus, Beckford is revealing anxieties about a circular narrative in the lives of people who have been led astray by their parents. Ending in a vicious cycle that could only be broken by the destruction of a lineage, Beckford finishes with a subtle but clear concern about the sins of the ancestors coming down upon the head of the present generation, but with a caveat. It is the woman who has sinned, and it is through the woman that the sin was allowed to wreak havoc on the male heir, just as the Biblical Original Sin revisits humanity on account of Eve's transgression.

Of course, as Anolik emphasizes in her article, a plethora of anxieties about motherhood are apparent in the Gothic genre. Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, displaying a similar relationship between mother and child and similarly motivated mother, shows the opposite side of Carathis's coin: one where the mother was perceived as positive protective force in her daughter's life, but one that nonetheless was unwilling to allow her child to individualize, which led to the child's eventual ruin. J. S. LeFanu's *Uncle Silas* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* display anxieties about the absence of a mother's protection for either a male or female child, and the danger to a child denied a mother's love and attachment. *Vathek*, then, stands as a negative example of a mother's control and manifests as the

anxieties that the patriarchal society had concerning the power of women, even in the house, as they had “power to shape the public realm, particularly the nation, through procreation and education” (Nussbaum 126).

In any Gothic novel, the position of mother is fragile one. While fathers are often the ones driven by the desire to secure a family line and fortune, it is the mothers who must suffer for their ambition. Because they are the literal carrier of the next generation, because the child heir receives life and nourishment from their bodies, and because the child comes forth into the world from their bodies, the patriarchy can blame any disfigurement in the child, literal or behavioral, on the body that created it. The patriarchy can pin any blame on the woman if the line is not able to be secured—much in the vein of Henry VIII and his inability to procure a male heir for the English throne. Whether she lives or she dies, whether she is present or absent, whether she is selfish or selfless, the Gothic mother will bear the weight of the father, and the patriarchy, and his ruthless desire to have sons and money. If she dares, as Carathis dared, to have her own ambition and her own son, she will fail and she will only have her mother to blame.

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