Late Eighteenth-Century Gothic and the Religious Other: The Cases of William Beckford’s *Vathek* and Matthew G. Lewis’s *The Monk*

By

Georgia Ntola

A dissertation submitted to the School of English, at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

MA in English and American Studies

Dissertation Supervisor: Dr. Maria Schoina

Thessaloniki

September 2017
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Chapter 1: <em>Vathek</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1. William Beckford and the Genesis of <em>Vathek</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2. Europe Meets the “Orient:” <em>Vathek</em>, the Middle East and Islam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Chapter 2: <em>The Monk</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1. Creating the Quintessential Gothic Novel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2. Demonic Catholicism in <em>The Monk</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Chapter 3: Evaluating <em>Vathek</em> and <em>The Monk</em>’s Attitude towards the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1. Ambiguous Portrayals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2. Competing Enjoyments: British Protestant Liberty versus Foreign Tyranny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Conclusion: Reappraisal of the British Nationalist Attitude</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine the attitude of late-eighteenth century English Protestants towards religious otherness, with regard to the issue of transgression, and within the context of British nationalism. The novels examined for the purposes of the study are William Beckford’s *Vathek* (1786) and Matthew G. Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796), both of which deal with foreign religious systems, namely Islam and Catholicism respectively. Both Vathek and Ambrosio begin from a state of religious fundamentalism and piety, but commit various transgressions in the course of the narrative, resulting in their punishment by the Devil. Both religious faiths are criticized in the novels, with Protestantism, the established British religion, ostensibly rising as superior to both. This paper will contest that view by evoking Slavoj Žižek’s theory on ethnic fantasies and racism. Briefly, Žižek’s theory addresses the Self’s uneasiness stemming from the fact that the Other has access to some strange, alien jouissance, by not doing things like the Self. By studying transgression in *Vathek* and *The Monk*, I maintain that for all their assertions regarding the superiority of their religion, especially within the context of nationalism, late-eighteenth-century Protestants were actually uneasy by the confrontation with other religious systems. In particular, I argue that the fundamentalist lifestyle of Vathek and Ambrosio as depicted in the novels appears to afford the possibility of transgressive, painful pleasure, something that, in my opinion, is perceived as missing in the Protestant Self that asserts its superiority on the grounds of the freedom it allows.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First of all, I would like to express my profound gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Maria Schoina, who never failed to provide me with the support and guidance I needed for the completion of the present dissertation. More importantly, though, I would like to thank Dr. Schoina for offering me ample encouragement and inspiration throughout my academic years. I also wish to thank Dr. Yannis Kanarakis for his help with the theoretical part of my dissertation, and for supporting my idea.

Finally I would like to thank my family and friends, in particular Konstantinos Voukoureslis and Aigli Mpisa, for being a constant source of emotional support during the writing process and for believing in my ability to carry out this project. In my best and worst days alike they were always by my side, and for that I am truly grateful.
Late Eighteenth-Century Gothic and the Religious Other: The Cases of William Beckford’s *Vathek* (1786) and Matthew G. Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796)

I. Introduction: British National Identity and Religious Patriotism

Scarcely had the abbey-bell tolled for five minutes, and already was the church of the Capuchins thronged with auditors. Do not encourage the idea, that the crowd was assembled either from motives of piety or thirst of information. But very few were influenced by those reasons; and in a city where superstition reigns with such despotic sway as in Madrid, to seek for true devotion would be a fruitless attempt. . . . The women came to show themselves, the men to see the women: some were attracted by curiosity to hear an orator so celebrated; some came because they had no better means of employing their time till the play began; some, from being assured that it would be impossible to find places in the church; and one half of Madrid was brought thither by expecting to see the other half. . . . As to the remainder of the audience, the sermon might have been omitted altogether, certainly without their being disappointed, and very probably without their perceiving the omission. (Lewis 3)

The opening of Matthew Lewis’s infamous Gothic romance, *The Monk*, may surprise the reader with its straightforward condemnation of the purportedly impious, superficial Catholics of Spain, who only gather in church to socialize and catch a glimpse of the celebrated but seldom seen Ambrosio. As Emma McEvoy insightfully stresses, although *The Monk* relies for its plot on the aesthetics of Catholicism, its morality is recognizably Protestant (xxix). The author hence appears to relish his description of Catholic hypocrisy, implicitly asserting the superiority of eighteenth-century British Protestants through an unspoken comparison. Thus, through its remarkably anti-Catholic rhetoric, Lewis’s novel claims a memorable place in the
British nationalist literature of the long eighteenth century, namely the period spanning from 1688 to 1815. It was during these turbulent years that the British gradually forged their national identity and developed intensely patriotic sentiments, thus laying the foundations on which the British Empire would thrive.

Jeremy Black asserts that English patriotism was given a “tremendous boost” and “fresh definition” during the Glorious Revolution of 1688, when English Parliamentarians succeeded in overthrowing the Catholic King James II and placed on the throne the Dutch William of Orange, a Protestant (56). The significance of this replacement lies in the Parliament’s subsequent affirmation that “‘it hath been found by experience, to be inconsistent with the safety and welfare of this Protestant Kingdom to be governed by a Popish Prince’” (Journals of the House of Commons, qtd. in Claydon and McBride 3). The far-reaching aftermath of this declaration, issued on 29 January 1689, was that no Catholic would ever serve as a British monarch again, as a necessary measure to safeguard the kingdom from Catholic threats. Commenting on the gravity of the constitutional resolution, Claydon and McBride stress that it amounted to an official acknowledgement of Britain’s intimate relation with Protestantism, proving that the kingdom “was something so closely bound to the reformed faith that neither its interests, nor its constitution, nor its very identity, could be conceived without reference to that religion” (3).

British patriotism was consolidated, according to Linda Colley, by the successive wars that took place periodically from 1689 to 1815 between Britain and France (1). According to Colley, constant confrontation with their greatest rivals compelled the British to fashion their national identity largely in response to the perceived Otherness of their French enemies, whom they regarded as “superstitious, militarist, decadent and unfree” (5). Whereas Colley has been criticized for
overemphasizing the impact of the Other in the formation of the British identity and for underplaying the heterogeneity of the British society, I think she is correct in evoking the two countries’ chronic antagonism so as to account for the eventual development of nationalistic sentiments on the part of the British. ¹ As Joshua Searle-White asserts in *The Psychology of Nationalism*, the very awareness of difference between groups is enough to sow the seeds of hostility and serve as basis for nationalism when interests clash (10).

One of the most notable differences between the British and the French was their religions. Whereas France was “the world’s foremost Catholic power” (5), Protestantism, according to Colley, constituted “the dominant component of British religious life,” the basis on which Britain was “explicitly and unapologetically founded” (19). England broke with the Catholic Church in 1534, when the Act of Supremacy officially acknowledged the English monarch, Henry VIII, as the Head of the Church of England (Brown 56-7). The new Church was thus added to the increasing number of religious movements across Europe protesting against Emperor Charles V, who sought to ban Lutheranism (64). The subsequent Reformation brought about various changes that marked the new faith, subsequently known as Protestantism, as distinct from Catholicism.

As Brown stresses, the most prominent novelty brought by Protestantism was its emphasis on the worshiper’s internal state (66). More specifically, Protestants

¹ Claydon and McBride remark that Colley, in her effort to illustrate the strong Protestant emotions that united the British in the eighteenth century, was forced to exclude the Catholic Ireland, an act they note as a weakness of her argument (17). They thus try to come up with a more comprehensive picture of Protestantism’s formative role in the development of “a wider British solidarity” (17). Jeremy Black, on the other hand, claims that Colley ignores in her study the dissenting voices within the Protestant community, and that she presents a simplistic image of Protestantism that defined itself as merely not-Catholicism (55).
determine piety by highlighting the true motives and intentions behind actions, as opposed to the Catholic belief that piety is attributed to the transformative, almost magical, power of worldly objects labeled as divine (66). Further, Protestantism innovatively put forth a belief in the immediacy of God’s relationship with the faithful (66). Hence, mediating priests and institutions with a potentially selfish agenda were no longer needed for the interpretation of the Scriptures (67). Free from their influence, the individual became the sole agent in building a relationship with God (67). Hence, in order for the faithful to be truly independent and able to interpret the Scriptures on their own, the Bible had to be translated in vernacular English, as opposed to the elitist Latin, and become available to the entire congregation (67). The use of the English language in religion thus further instilled in British Protestants a sense of their uniqueness and excellence. This unmediated relationship with God cherished by Protestantism contributed to the sense of independence and superiority felt by the Protestant British owing to their religious faith, and they came to envision themselves as God’s Elect (Colley 21).

The existence of a Parliament became an additional reason for national and religious pride, for it was a legislative body that could exercise power along with the monarch, hence depriving the latter of absolute authority. The British were thus distinguished from other states, the heads of which were answerable to religious authorities such as the Pope. Credited with the legitimization of Protestant rulers in Britain (49), the Parliament initiated a number of political innovations with the expulsion of the Catholic James II, by denying him “the divine right of kings, historic right and continuity of rule” (Wright 83). At the same time, it further favoured Protestants since only they were officially acknowledged as citizens (Colley 55). Progressively, as Colley notes, the Parliament became “a vital part of elite
patriotism,” since it allowed the male elite to assume the position of a Roman senator, reveling in his rhetorical skills while at the service of his distinguished polity (53).

The Parliament thus functioned as the epitome of England, “as a society of autonomous citizens all actively engaged in public life and exercising an unremitting vigilance over the working of executive government” (Marshall 6). Furthermore, the awareness that their Parliament was efficient, “by the standards of the time not obstructive” (Colley 53) and a “part of the Protestant inheritance” (56) consolidated the belief among the British that their “Parliament was unique, splendid and sovereign, the hard-won prerogative of a free and Protestant people” (54). In all, through Protestantism, the British came to cherish the idea of themselves as superior to their enemies, independent, and blessed with “superior religious freedom” (45).

Protestantism, as Victor Sage attests, is perpetually grappling with its own identity, “always in the process of reforming itself” (xiii). In this attempt at self-shaping, therefore, Catholicism proved itself to be a vital point of reference in the early days of the new faith. The Protestant doctrine was from its inception rather hazy and ambiguous, and its proponents sought to consolidate the new religious faith by largely defining it against the previously established Catholic religion (Haydon 49). Thus, Protestantism acquired astonishing dimensions through its identification with England and the almost unanimously voiced necessity to oppose Catholic influences and escape them. Protestantism’s negotiation of its identity as being at odds with Catholic traits hence formed the basis for the shaping of a British national identity while in confrontation with its Other.

The clash with the Catholic Other thus instilled in the British an overwhelming sense of self-importance, which would be further reinforced through the contact with the exotic peoples of the British colonies. As the British colonial project expanded
across the world, the so-called Orient became an object of fascination for the British subjects, who compared themselves to the indigenous peoples of Asia and Africa. Through this comparison, the British Self asserted its “difference from and superiority to its cultural others,” thus firmly establishing an imperial culture (Makdisi 62). Cultural differences, however, were to be found among European countries themselves too, leading to the polarization between North and South. Hence, the European South also served at the time as a locus exploited through literature to reinforce the cultural and national superiority of the British (Politi 13).

This feeling of superiority ostensibly emerges in the Gothic narratives of the late eighteenth century. British Gothic writing frequently and conveniently demonized religious and cultural Otherness, particularly in the form of corrupt priests and lords, in a manifestation of anti-Catholic sentiments. As McEvoy, for example, mentions in her discussion of the Gothic literary tradition, the figure of the villainous Catholic priest was a staple of the typical Gothic novel (xvii). A characteristic case in point is Matthew G. Lewis’s quintessentially Gothic tale The Monk, wherein the title character, the Catholic Ambrosio, commits numerous transgressions and is subsequently punished by no other than the Devil himself. The same fate, however, is shared by the protagonist of William Beckford’s Arabian tale Vathek, who embarks on a quest for knowledge and power, only to commit his own share of transgressions that earn him eternal torment in hell.

In the novels, both Vathek and Ambrosio begin as devout men, immersed in their religious faiths. Vathek is a caliph, a spiritual and political leader of Islam considered by Muslims to be the successor of Mohamed, whereas the Catholic monk Ambrosio is regarded as the most virtuous man in Madrid. Both of them emerge from strict fundamentalist religious systems, and both religions heavily rely on superstition.
In my perspective, the religious faiths of both individuals are presented in a negative light in the novels, either explicitly, as in the case of *The Monk*, or implicitly within the wider cultural framework of the period, as in the case of *Vathek*. On the one hand, *The Monk*’s representation of Ambrosio’s crimes and the cruelty of Catholic institutions exposes and condemns what the British perceived as Catholic hypocrisy, vice and superstition. On the other hand, *Vathek* belongs to the Western Orientalist tradition, which systematically represented the exotic East as inferior, uncivilized and dangerous. In this respect, Islam is also negatively represented. Thus, in the eyes of the eighteenth-century British, Protestantism ostensibly rises as superior to both. Nevertheless, such superciliousness may reveal, once examined, more complex sentiments.

The aim of my dissertation will be to examine the British Protestant attitude towards Catholicism and Islam, with regard to the issue of transgression, as it is represented in late eighteenth-century Gothic literature. My purpose will be to offer an understanding of the ways in which a considerable portion of British Protestants perceived of the religious Other at the time within the context of the emerging British nationalism, and how that perception ultimately affected their self-image as a nation. In this process I will use Slavoj Žižek’s insights on the racist fantasies regarding the Other, and will then associate them to the issue of religion. Žižek’s assertion that what is at stake in tensions between communities is in fact the different ways in which each deploy their jouissance, or enjoyment, will prove to be particularly useful when it comes to the confrontation between eighteenth-century British Protestants and their religious Other. Thus, by applying Žižek’s theory to *Vathek* and *The Monk*, I wish to propose that, in spite of their strong claims to national and religious superiority, eighteenth-century British were in fact quite unsettled by Otherness. What I am
primarily interested in is to see how the concept of religion, very frequently used as a façade for politics, fits within the late eighteenth-century British nationalism in its confrontation with the alien cultures of the Middle East and Southern Europe.
II. Chapter 1: Vathek

1.1. William Beckford and the Genesis of Vathek

William Thomas Beckford, the son of William Beckford, who served twice as Lord Mayor of London, had a privileged upbringing. Labeled by his ardent admirer, Lord Byron, as “England’s wealthiest son” (CH 1.22.275), owing to his immense fortune, the extravagant Beckford was a notorious libertine, a devoted art collector and a novelist, whose most memorable literary work is Vathek.

Vathek is a strange, remarkable creation. The novel was first written in French in 1782 by the twenty-two year old Beckford, but was translated in English and published in 1786 by Samuel Henley, without the author’s permission (Keymer xi). Beckford claimed to have composed it “‘at one sitting . . . in . . . three days and two nights of hard labour’” (qtd. in Keymer xvi). In his novel, Beckford artfully made use of notable tropes of the Orientalist tradition, introduced to England through the Arabian Nights, among which are the exotic Middle-Eastern setting, the Islamic religious tradition and the sensuality of the harem. To these he added a number of popular Gothic characteristics, in particular the figure of the tyrannical, ruthless ruler, acts of graphic violence, and considerable doses of the supernatural. Most chillingly, at the climax of the novel, Beckford illustrated his own, terrifying version of the Halls of Eblis, the Islamic hell. Tellingly, in one of his letters, Beckford referred to the story of Vathek as “so horrid” that he could not narrate it without shuddering (qtd. in Keymer xi).
The novel chronicles the Caliph Vathek’s\textsuperscript{2} irreverent journey for forbidden knowledge and power and his subsequent punishment. The story begins in the city of Samarah, which used to be the capital of the Abbasid Caliphate. At the beginning of the novel, Vathek, hungry for knowledge, pleasure, and “theological controversy” stirs the resentment of the prophet Mohamed, who resolves to stop providing guidance for Vathek, anticipating the mortal’s hubris to be his downfall (Beckford 48). Vathek is subsequently visited by a dark-skinned, “hideous” stranger (49), a “Giaour” from India (57), who stimulates the greedy Caliph’s ambition by bringing him an array of supernatural objects and promising to take him to “the palace of subterranean fire,” on condition however that Vathek renounces Islam (64). The Caliph agrees, and is thus instructed to travel to Istakhar. On the way, he and his entourage stay at the palace of the Emir Fakredden, whose daughter, Nouronihar, is eventually seduced by Vathek. After separating Nouronihar from her betrothed, the childlike and effeminate Goulchenrouz, Vathek and Nouronihar continue their journey and reach the palace of Eblis, the Devil in Islamic theology. Eblis gives Vathek, his mother Carathis, and Nouronihar unlimited access to his treasures, but informs them that after a few days, they will pay for their hubris with eternal torment, suffering from an inextinguishable fire in their hearts.

Following its publication in 1786, \textit{Vathek} caused a sensation among the audience and, in the years to come, it would exert considerable influence on those authors aspiring to narrate Oriental tales. Among the most renowned admirers of the novel was no other than Lord Byron, who credited \textit{Vathek} as the inspiration for his

\textsuperscript{2} Vathek is a Caliph of the Abbasids, a dynasty that historically descended from the prophet Mohamed’s uncle and governed by inherited right. As such, the rulers, named “Caliphs,” constituted the absolute political and religious authorities in Islamic polities (Lewis 4).
own Oriental works. In a note to *The Giaour*, Byron spoke in the highest terms of *Vathek*, arguing that

> for correctness of costume, beauty of description, and power of imagination, it far surpasses all European imitations, and bears such marks of originality that those who have visited the East will find some difficulty in believing it to be more than a translation (231).

The quotation makes it evident that what impressed Byron with reference to *Vathek* was its authenticity of detail, a trait apparently serving at the time as “a criterion for the evaluation of literature” (Demata 13).

*Vathek* is widely believed to be authentic not only as far as it reflects Oriental customs known at the time, but also in being a semi-autobiographical account of Beckford’s own predilections in pursuit of pleasure. An unapologetic hedonist throughout his life, Beckford was forced to depart in self-exile for the continent two years after the composition of *Vathek*, following the eruption of a scandal which publicly revealed his homosexual liaison with a then-fifteen year old aristocrat, William Courtenay. Vathek’s persona is therefore assumed to have been modeled after Beckford himself, given that the character’s transgressions include unrestrained debauchery and intimations of pederasty. What is more, Beckford admitted that his inspiration for the Halls of Eblis came from the decorations of his twenty-first birthday celebrations, where “‘the prototypes of Gulchenrouz and Nouronihar’” were also present (qtd. in Keymer xv). These biographical facts, so skillfully merged with the alluring image of the East that was popular in the day, strongly serve to cement

---

3 The characters of Gulchenrouz and Nouronihar were fashioned after William Courtenay and Louisa Beckford, the wife of Beckford’s cousin, both of whom had an affair with the author at the time of his twenty-first birthday (McCalman n.p.).
the novel’s imaginative blending of two deeply diverse cultures, the European and the Middle Eastern.

1.2. Europe Meets the “Orient”: Vathek, the Middle East and Islam

Beckford’s Vathek was therefore a unique experiment, combining what was known about the mysterious Eastern lands with a recognizably European literary mode of writing that conventionally drew heavily on the Christian tradition. This innovative amalgamation was therefore admired for its creator’s original genius, and gained a prominent position in the long history of Europe’s complicated engagement with the Middle-Eastern culture.

The perceived authenticity and realism of Vathek, which so greatly captivated Byron’s imagination, was partly a result of the scholarly - for the standards of the period - information that accompanied the original publication. The material included explanatory notes compiled by Samuel Henley as well as a preface locating the text’s origins in an Arabic source. At the time, quasi-accurate information about the Middle East came mainly from two sources, the most notable being the French scholar’s, Barthélemy d’Herbelot, Bibliothèque Orientale, a heavily edited encyclopedia of Oriental cultures published in 1697. The second source of information about the Middle East was the immensely popular A Thousand and One Nights, Antoine Galland’s French translation of an Arabic original, that was published in English in 1708 (Makdisi 63). The latter work sparked an unprecedented interest in the so-called Oriental culture, which would assume immense proportions over the century in the form of Orientalist literature produced by English natives.

Vathek’s first edition included a concise commentary, with information largely derived from d’Herbelot’s encyclopedia, which substantiated the events and facts
referred to in the novel (65). These included biographical information about the actual Caliph al-Wathiq, on whom the persona of Vathek was based, other historical personages mentioned in the novel, as well as geographical sites (Demata 17-8). Significantly, the fictional text and the explanatory notes were located in different parts of the printed book, so that facts could remain distinct from fiction (17). According to Saree Makdisi, in the years that saw the proliferation of Oriental tales, from the publication of *A Thousand and One Nights* until *Vathek*’s publication, “Orientalist entertainment . . . easily outshone Orientalist ‘knowledge’” (63). Thus, Beckford’s compilation of the explanatory notes that made the reader feel “as someone who also share[d] in a broader knowledge of and power over the Orient” was the catalyst that shifted the balance towards Orientalist knowledge and prompted a new interest in the Middle East (65).

The excessive interest of Europeans in the Middle-Eastern area and its culture constitutes the subject matter of Edward Said’s influential study, *Orientalism* (1978). In his book, Said argued that the systematic engagement with the so-called Oriental cultures was neither objective nor disinterested, but actually constituted a European strategy to culturally and politically subdue the Middle East, as part of the wider European imperialist scheme. Said labeled this practice “Orientalism,” and defined it as “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (3). Said asserted that, in generating their own narratives about the cultures and residents of the Middle East, the Europeans were, in effect, creating a power imbalance and assumed a superior position to the silenced people they described (7).

---

4 Throughout *Orientalism*, Said uses the terms Occident, or West, and Orient, or East, to designate respectively Europe and, often indiscriminately, the regions of Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. Acknowledging such a label as essentialist and rather arbitrary, I will henceforth focus solely on his insights regarding the Middle-Eastern culture and populations.
In addition, by producing a collective discourse that described the East according to European perceptions and made it accessible to a wide audience, Orientalists ensured that the foreign region, its culture and residents, were made “less fearsome” and therefore liable to manipulation (60). The formerly obscure and feared Middle-Eastern people were thus “reduced” to images controlled by European Orientalists in the cultural domain, figuratively eradicating any potential threat they might pose (Marshall 6). This process of cultural domination eventually created a set of dichotomies that portrayed the European culture as civilized and superior, while its Middle-Eastern Other took the form of a savage and corrupt culture of barbarians.

Nevertheless, as scholars have come to agree in recent years, the perception of the East in a negative light, influenced by imperial considerations, may not have always been the case. Sharafuddin states his belief that “not all western writers [were] wholly . . . the inevitable product of their age’s imperialist and political ideologies” (xvii). According to the critic, exposure to the European political milieu of the late eighteenth century may have shaped the consciousness of intellectuals in a different, more open-minded way, so as to foster “a genuine interest in other countries and cultures” (xvii). A typical case in point was Beckford himself, whose committed attempts to learn Arabic and translate material from manuscripts during the composition of Vathek are described by Keymer as an example of an “engaged, informed, appreciative orientalism” (xxiii). However, Beckford’s identification with Vathek is, in my opinion, nonetheless suspicious. An owner of plantations in the colony of Jamaica himself, Beckford was already involved in the imperialist practices of his country when he imaginatively penetrated yet another culture. As Meyer astutely states, Beckford’s identification with the protagonist of his novel amounts to

5 Italics in the original.
an exercise of cultural imperialism on his part, thus making the author’s cultural position notably ambiguous (666).

An examination of *Orientalism* reveals that Said’s views, though insightful, are not particularly fair to the peoples of the Middle-Eastern areas, whose plight at the pens of European Orientalists the theorist sought to articulate and redress. Since he never gives their own point of view on the Orientalist project, Said’s representation of them is indeed that of a rather silenced population, that unwittingly fell victim to the curiosity of European cultural imperialism. Nevertheless, his use of the concept of power, which he borrowed from Michel Foucault, and the image of the inferior Other generated by the Orientalist practices lends strength to his argument by virtue of its historical resonance.

Said himself traced the rough beginnings of Orientalism in the late eighteenth century (3), the period in which, as Makdisi chronicles, “a momentous shift in British imperial policy” took place (66). In the 1770s, Warren Hastings, the East India Company’s governor of Bengal, suggested the accumulation of knowledge concerning Oriental cultures, regarding legal, religious and linguistic matters, so that the colonial territories could be ruled more effectively “from within” (66). Such practices progressively solidified imperial rule and fostered notions of cultural superiority, while yielding an inexhaustible source of material to be examined by the learned British. For although the Middle East was never under British occupation, the subject position assumed by the British, who, with a voyeuristic pleasure, voraciously consumed any information relating to the so-called Orient, testifies to a hegemonic relationship between the two parties that favoured the Europeans. In the words of Eric Meyer,

---

6 Italics in the original.
The panoptic eye of the imperialist, masquerading as ethnographer or Orientalist, asserts the hegemony of the dominant culture by the right it assumes of positioning the other in a field of sight that is also and always a field of power. (663)

The result of this practice was the establishment of a hierarchical relation between the exotic foreigners and the advanced Europeans who studied the formers’ culture with scientific curiosity.

The representation of the Middle-Eastern Other as inferior was further underpinned through the literary practice of travel writing at the time. The ultimate goal, as Roy Bridges attests, was for the non-European cultures to “be influenced, exploited or, in some cases, directly controlled,” fortifying the project of Britain’s “‘informal empire’ or ‘unofficial imperialism’” (53). In addition, Carl Thompson argues that travelogues were also used to boost the Europeans’ self-image, always at the expense of the alien cultures they encountered (119). The comparison, therefore, between the European Self and its non-European Other, while in the process of the former’s self-fashioning, constructed the Other “in some subtle or unsubtle way principally as foil or counterpoint to the supposedly heroic, civilized and/or cultured protagonist” (119).

The practices of Orientalism served yet another purpose when it came to the Middle East, namely to undermine the growing power of Islam, Christianity’s greatest rival. As Billie Melman states, there was something uncanny about the Middle Eastern lands, which had fostered Judaism, Christianity and, most alarmingly, Islam (105). Islam, the third monotheistic religion to claim worldwide theological predominance, was established in the area in the early years of the seventh century AC and had, ever since, a tumultuous relationship with Christianity. Despite the many
common characteristics of the two religions, conflicts arose out of the competing worshippers’ mutual conviction that “they were the unique possessors of all of God’s truth” (Lewis 5).

Islam and Christianity share a common heritage in the sense that the former claims to hold the “final expression” of God’s truth, which Christianity left incomplete (6). Chronologically succeeding Judaism and Christianity, Islamic theology acknowledges many of the Old Testament prophets, and, most significantly, the existence of a single God. Nevertheless, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is not accepted, and the highest veneration is reserved instead for the prophet Mohamed (6). Owing to these theological differences, Islam was viewed by European Christians, for many centuries, as “simply false,” a perversion of their own faith (7). In the words of Said, Islam was “a lasting trauma” for Christian Europeans (59).

More importantly, though, Islam was a source of terror for Christianity, not the least because of its dominant role in the worshipper’s life. As Bernard Lewis attests,

For Muslims, Islam is not merely a system of belief and worship, a compartment of life, so to speak, distinct from other compartments which are the concern of nonreligious authorities administering nonreligious laws. It is rather the whole of life, and its rules include civil, criminal, and even what we would call constitutional law. (4)

The institutions of Church and State are therefore inextricably linked in the Islamic faith. With such a prevalent position accorded to religion in a Muslim’s life, Islam became associated in the European mind with “absolute despotism” (Sharafuddin xx), and the image of the tyrannical Caliph, the religious and political authority in Islamic
polities, became one of the many stereotypes about the Middle East that the Orientalist tradition assiduously perpetuated (Melman 107). As P. J. Marshall notes, despotic regimes were believed to “produce conditions of insecurity that frustrated all individual initiative,” thus stifling progress (4). In this respect, therefore, Islamic despotism in the political and religious milieu was directly contrasted to the Protestant tradition that celebrated its liberty, autonomy and prosperity in the political and religious domains (Colley 54). More importantly, however, Islam’s blending of religion and politics historically rendered it a dangerous threat for Christian society, especially since the concept of juxtaposition, namely the “striving . . . in the path of God” for the spread of Islam and the conversion of the “infidels,” is “one of the principal obligations of Muslims” (Lewis 9). Islam therefore posed both a religious and a military threat “to be resisted and overcome” by Christian Europe (7).

Said’s insights in Orientalism also include the representation of Islam in the Orientalist tradition. A notable case in point that Said presents is d’Herbelot’s Bibliothèque Orientale, the main source of information for Vathek, which significantly reinforced the image of Mohamed as a false prophet (66). The entry for Mohamed in d’Herbelot’s encyclopedia listed the Islamic prophet as the initiator of the “‘Mohammedan’” faith, a derogatory term frequently used by the Europeans at the time (66). Judging by its terminology, Said concludes that the Bibliothèque Orientale presented and perpetuated an image of Islam as “the imitation of a Christian imitation of true religion” (66). On the other hand, though, Sharafuddin remarks that eighteenth-century intellectuals, especially the Romantics, had an ambivalent stance towards Islam (xxi). In their writings, he notes, Islam figured both as a symbol of oppressive despotism which ought to be escaped, but also at the same time “it offered an alternative to the compromised or corrupted political and social systems of
Europe,” by virtue of its prominent place in a non-European culture (xxi). Nevertheless, as he concludes, the image of Islam as a tyrannical religion was difficult to shake in Europe (xxi). Thus, although there were those intellectuals who were favourably inclined towards Islam and the Middle East, if only for purposes of escapism, the dominant image was, by and large, one of an alien, tyrannical culture, at odds with the British Protestant freedom-loving tradition. The imperialist framework within which such views flourished also powerfully reinforced a contrast between the Eastern culture and its hegemonic Western Other.

Religion has a prominent place in *Vathek*, but its portrayal seems to suggest that the heart of Islam has been corrupted. Vathék’s role as a Caliph is to be the paradigm for Muslims by embodying all of Islam’s highest values and thus leading a virtuous life. Instead, however, in the course of the novel, the strong-willed Caliph violates many Islamic principles and indulges in debauchery. *Vathek* thus reinforces the negative image of the East as a locus where unruly, savage desires reign, literally personified by the character of Vathek. Described from the beginning as a man prone to “theological controversy” (47), Vathek’s chief sin is that he rebelliously renounces Islam to satisfy his personal ambition for unlimited knowledge and power. Through this act, Vathek violates the Qu’ranic edict that prohibits inquisitiveness regarding forbidden knowledge (*The Holy Qu’ran, Al-Ma’idah* 5.101). The renunciation occurs at the behest of the Giaour, the agent of Eblis, and is finalized following the sacrifice of “fifty of the most beautiful sons” of his viziers (64-5). His Faustian quest is thus launched with the murder of innocents, casting a foreboding shadow over the Caliph’s venture. What is more, Vathek is repeatedly described as drinking wine (59, 76), a pastime also prohibited in the Qu’ran (*The Holy Qu’ran, Al-Ma’idah* 5.90). As the vicegerent of Mohamed, Vathek fails to abide by the word of the prophet, even in his
everyday life, and is thus marked as unworthy of a position that grants him absolute power in the Islamic polity he governs. As far as Mohamed himself is concerned, he displays an almost sadistic pleasure in relinquishing his charge of Vathek (48). Instead of striving to chastise him, in consideration of his faithful subjects, the Prophet further tempts the Caliph and kindles his greed (48).

‘Let us leave him to himself,’ said he to the Genii, who are always ready to receive his commands. ‘Let us see to what lengths his folly and impiety will carry him; if he run into excess we shall know how to chastise him. Assist him, therefore, to complete the tower which, in imitation of Nimrod, he hath begun, not, like that great warrior, to escape being drowned, but from the insolent curiosity of penetrating the secrets of Heaven; he will not divine the fate that awaits him.’ (48)

In this light, therefore, Mohamed’s popular representation as a false prophet appears more resonant.

The seduction of Nouronihar constitutes yet another one of Vathek’s transgressions, as he violates the Emir Fakreddin’s hospitality. The Emir is notably the most genuinely pious character in the novel. Upon learning that Vathek and his entourage approach, the Emir considers it his sacred duty to host them and meets them “with a hundred old grey-beards and as many Korans” (91). Nevertheless, his exaggerated piety and devotion to Vathek, the Commander of the Faithful, is treated ironically. Upon meeting the Caliph, Fakreddin lavishes “prolix and insipid” compliments on the former (91), and later on falls victim to the revered Caliph’s “terrible look” by comically falling down “bathed in a sweat cold as the damp of death” (109). Furthermore, Sharafuddin convincingly argues that the episode involving Fakreddin and Nouronihar’s seduction is interesting only for as long as it is “erotic and voyeuristic; whenever it turns pious, the very worthiness produces only
yawns and impatience” (xxxiv). For him, therefore, “the ethical is put to the service of the aesthetic,” as the author indulges in the picturesque details of Vathek and Nouronihar’s courtship (xxxiv). Thus, in my opinion, true devotion to Islam is ridiculed along with Fakreddin, its prime champion, as the focus is placed on the transgressive act of the girl’s seduction.

Vathek also appears to take issue with the supernatural elements that characterize the Islamic lore, which would be viewed as superstitious beliefs by a rationally-minded British Protestant. Vathek features a plethora of beings that are found in Islamic theology, and are supposedly allowed to intervene in human lives. Among such creatures are, notably, the aforementioned Genii, devoted to the service of the Prophet (48), as well as afrits, spirits doing Eblis’s bidding (145). The most prominent superstition which Vathek portrays, though, is that of the “evil eye,” a popular belief in many Eastern cultures, which is all too literally dramatized in the novel. For, when angry,

one of [Vathek’s] eyes became so terrible that no person could bear to behold it, and the wretch upon whom it was fixed instantly fell backward, and sometimes expired.

For fear, however, of depopulating his dominions and making his palace desolate, he but rarely gave way to his anger. (45)

The superstition of the evil eye assumes therefore a factual dimension, which is nevertheless visibly treated with irony by the novel’s narrator. Hence, Vathek satirizes the truthfulness attributed to superstitions, thereby undermining the represented culture for its credulity.

Ultimately, the faithful Muslims themselves appear to be rather disoriented and insipid on the basis of their stance towards Vathek. Following the Caliph’s
sacrifice of the fifty boys, the crowd present at the site erupts in rage against Vathek, who escapes to his tower with the help of his mother and his vizier (69). Nonetheless, that same crowd, upon seeing the Caliph’s tower on fire, rushes to help him, having felt their “love to their sovereign immediately awoke[n]” (73). The “dolts,” as Carathis derisively calls them, pay for their altruism with their lives, and are finally offered as a last sacrifice to the Giaour, so that Vathek can begin his sacrilegious journey (74). Following this tragedy, Morakanabad, Vathek’s vizier whose two sons fell prey to the Giaour, remains a blindly loyal servant to the Caliph and his mother and continues to believe the lies they feed him (77). Vathek’s Muslim subjects, therefore, are by and large portrayed as a gullible crowd that is easily manipulated by a superstitious love for their unworthy leader.

Overall, the cultural framework within which Vathek was conceived greatly determined the representation of the alien Middle-Eastern culture. Influenced by the imperialist climate of the time, the novel appears to perpetuate, for all its innovative traits, the comparison between East and West, with the latter assuming a hegemonic position. Both the Eastern politics and the religion thus seem to be corrupt. As a Caliph, Vathek is simultaneously a political and a religious leader, yet his transgressive actions in the latter domain push him to his downfall and result in the deaths of many of his loyal subjects. Betraying his prophet’s edicts, and commanding himself a misguided crowd, Vathek’s failures thus illustrate the failure of Islam in the story conceived by Beckford.
III. Chapter 2: *The Monk*

2.1. Creating the Quintessential Gothic Novel

The story of Matthew Gregory Lewis’s production of *The Monk* uncannily resembles that of Beckford’s *Vathek*. Published in 1796 and allegedly composed in ten weeks when Lewis was twenty years old, *The Monk* was quickly distinguished from other Gothic novels of its time and triggered many imitations. Indeed, to this day, *The Monk*’s power to shock its readers has not waned, and its violent eroticism is often found in subsequent Gothic tales. However, whereas Beckford’s novel was unequivocally praised, *The Monk* sparked an immense controversy, by virtue of its provocative material.

Set in Spain in an unspecified period between the late fifteenth and the early eighteenth century, *The Monk* tells the story of Ambrosio, the abbot of the Capuchins, as he spirals from extreme piety to criminal transgression. The charismatic Ambrosio is celebrated throughout Madrid for his holiness, but tempted by a woman, Matilda, who conceals herself in his monastery as the novice Rosario, he breaks his vows of chastity. Obsessed with the satisfaction of his sexual desires, Ambrosio eventually becomes infatuated with the innocent Antonia and plots her seduction, assisted by Matilda’s knowledge of sorcery. In his effort to effect his designs on Antonia, he kills the girl’s mother, Elvira, who has discovered his nefarious purposes for her daughter and threatens to make his vice known to the world. Ultimately, Ambrosio succeeds in raping Antonia, whom he subsequently kills, while simultaneously a convent is burnt in retribution for the crimes of its prioress. Ambrosio is consequently apprehended by the Inquisition and, in order to escape, he yields his soul to Lucifer, who conveys the former abbot away from prison and into the wilderness. There, Lucifer informs
Ambrosio that Antonia was in fact his sister, thus making him guilty of matricide and incest. He also reveals that he had long plotted Ambrosio’s corruption, and hence sent Matilda, his “crafty spirit,” to effect his fall from grace (Lewis 415). Lucifer then throws Ambrosio in the rocks beneath, where he suffers for six days and then dies. As Ambrosio’s story unfolds, a considerable part of the novel is also devoted to the subplot of the romance between Agnes de Medina and Raymond de las Cisternas, who strive to overcome the obstacles the corrupt Catholic clergy and her relatives throw in the path of their love.

Commonly believed to have been influenced in its gruesome descriptions by the horrors of the French Revolution (Miles 16), *The Monk* attracted critical opprobrium in the wake of its publication. Although Lewis secured life-long renown as an author (Summers 212), he was simultaneously attacked for the novel’s obscenity and blasphemy (214-5). His status as a Member of Parliament, in particular, once revealed, occasioned even harsher criticism (217). Probably the most famous review of the novel came from the Romantic poet Samuel T. Coleridge, who, albeit praising Lewis’s genius (419), nevertheless suspected him “of a species of brutality” and accused the young author of “a low and vulgar taste” (421).

In spite of such reviews, though, the novel ensured its enduring popularity owing, to a great extent, to its fierce castigation of Catholic institutions. Anti-Catholicism constituted, in a sense, an easy strategy with which to secure the popularity of Gothic novels, which famously dwelt on the concepts of monastic enclosure and sinister priests to excite their audiences. Thus, *The Monk* both reflected and fueled the anti-Catholic climate of its period, by reproducing in a shocking manner the idea of the unscrupulous corruption and vice of the Catholic clergy.
2.2. Demonic Catholicism in *The Monk*

*The Monk* is a typical example of English anti-Catholic literature. Lewis’s elaborate narrative seizes every opportunity to flaunt its vehement anti-Catholicism, most strikingly through its portrayal of ostensibly Catholic characters that criticize their religion’s shortcomings and voice recognizably Protestant opinions. Hence, through its denigration of Catholicism, *The Monk*’s narrative defends British Protestantism, and, by extension, affirms Britain’s superior place in the European world.

The European South had long been a site of attraction for the British, who, in the eighteenth century, systematically chose the picturesque Mediterranean locations for their “unique excursion[s]” (Pemble 2). Nevertheless, the British were largely predisposed by history to regard the European South in contempt, for “history had shown the South to be in decline” (228). As Pemble attests,

> The shores of the Mediterranean were strewn with carcasses of dead empires and encumbered with museums of extinct art. The ancient supremacies of Tyre, Greece and Rome had vanished, and the successor states of Turkey, the Italian Republics, and Spain had in their turn become effete. Political, economic, and cultural power had shifted to the North; and the North was now encroaching on the South, scattering the phantoms and the dust. (228)

The change in the distribution of power therefore considerably affected the perceptions and representations of the European South, which was found lacking when juxtaposed to the progress of Northern European countries in recent years. In its “ruins, deserts, tombs of potentates without posterity, and palaces to let,” the British hence read the visible results of Southern decay (232).
The image of the European South as a locus of decadence in the collective English imaginary thus reinforced the latter ones’ vision of their national superiority. In light of this, the English solidified their national myth by creating a narrative for Southern European countries with the same ardour that characterized the Orientalist mania of the period. Crucially, the fact that the European South had been the homeland of Catholicism, the arch nemesis of British Protestantism, further stigmatized Catholic Italy and Spain in the eyes of the majority of British Protestants, thus allegedly rendering their inhabitants all the more prone to vice.

Echoing Colley, Colin Haydon asserts that the intense anti-Catholicism of the seventeenth century had a profound impact on English national identity, as it fundamentally set England apart from the rest of Catholic Europe (33-4). In the words of Pemble, Southern Christianity was “too remote to be familiar, yet too familiar not to be disturbing . . . [like] a travesty of features well known and deeply cherished” (211-2). Much like Islam, Catholicism was despised in England as being at odds with the notion of liberty and favouring despotism in the political domain, by virtue of granting the Pope absolute authority over the world’s Catholics (Haydon 34). The phantom of Catholicism had therefore not completely abandoned Britain, as Haydon notes that “‘popery and tyranny’ and ‘popery and arbitrary power’ became two of the most common political slogans of the age,” thus condemning the Pope as the instigator of the evils supposedly inherent to the Catholic faith (34). In addition, as Diane Hoeveler notes, the lower social orders largely associated the Pope with the image of the Devil, a concept perpetuated through ritualized public affirmations of Protestant faith, such as the annual celebrations of the Gunpowder Plot’s failure (4).

Interestingly enough, the British appear to have been simultaneously attracted to and appalled by Catholicism. As Pemble cites, the British would enthusiastically
gather to Catholic churches in Southern Europe to attend rituals, only to passionately
castigate them thereafter (212). Forsaking all sense of decorum, the British travelers
gave memorably rude performances of their disdain for Catholic practices during
Mass, so as to make known their “shock and outrage” at the highly theatrical Catholic
rituals (213-4).

Catholicism was hence consistently attacked through sermons (Haydon 38),
“anti-popish books” (40) and almanacks (41). According to Hoeveler, there were
three key tenets of British anti-Catholicism, namely “political distrust of the clergy,
thelogical disagreements about transubstantiation, and popular fears about foreign
invasions from the Catholic countries of France and Spain” (5). The Catholic clergy,
in particular, was habitually subject to suspicion and charged with hypocrisy. As
Pemble notes, Catholic priests were seen as behaving inappropriately at congregations
(214-5), while sneakily exercising power that was at odds with their professed
humility (215-6). Perhaps most alarmingly of all, though, the “self-seeking” Catholic
clergy were very often accused of using their vows of celibacy as a façade for
indulging in “unnatural vice,” as it was the case in France, in 1730, when a girl was
seduced by her confessor (Haydon 34-5). While addressing the mistrust of the English
towards Catholic priests, Haydon further notes that the latter ones were believed to
actively distort the Gospels with their erroneous interpretations of Christian doctrines,
while simultaneously contributing “little or nothing to the society that supported
them” (34-5).

The materialism of Catholic rites was also at the centre of Protestant critique
(34). The extreme reverence of Catholics for relics and their literal view of
transubstantiation were regarded by the supposedly rational Protestants as ludicrous
superstition, a danger for religion and a perversion of Christianity (34). The
theological differences and the ways in which they affected the exercise of each religious faith hence caused additional friction between the two cultures.

The welfare of their country was additionally a capital concern for the English, who constantly felt threatened from the rest of Catholic Europe. France and Spain supported the Jacobite political movement, which aimed to restore the overthrown Catholic Stuart dynasty to the British throne (37). The return of the Catholic faith was thus an ominous possibility, which naturally increased the anti-Catholic, xenophobic attitude in times of war, most notably with France (44). The anti-Catholic sentiment eventually culminated in the extremely violent Gordon Riots of 1780. In June 1780, British Protestants rioted in London, in response to the Papists Acts of 1778, which aimed at the emancipation of Catholics in Britain. What is more, the imported reports of violent atrocities committed by the Spanish Inquisition, the religious body appointed to uphold the smooth function of Catholicism, further served to alarm the English, who went on to vilify “popish brutality” at every opportunity (38). In all, Catholicism was widely believed to have a dehumanizing effect on its practitioners and was hence condemned as dangerous (Hoeveler 7).

_The Monk_ was the product of a culture steeped in such beliefs, and powerfully contributed to their reproduction. Lewis chose Spain as the locus of his story, a country renowned for its “religious tyranny” (Pemble 223). As Tzina Politi states, Spain was primarily stigmatized owing to its association with the Catholic Queen Mary I, also known as the notorious Bloody Mary (17). Mary had strong links with Spain, since it was the birthplace of her Catholic mother as well as her husband, King Philip II, who famously threatened England with the Spanish Armada in 1588. The conflict was therefore as religious as it was political. During Mary’s brief, yet extremely bloody reign, she reinstated Catholicism as England’s official religion and
had many Protestants burnt at the stake, a practice also regularly used by the Spanish Inquisition against offenders. Associations of Spain with awful violence were thus very common among the English during the centuries that followed Mary’s reign. In addition, the attempted invasion of Britain by the combined forces of Spain and France in 1779 revived the fearsome stereotype of Catholic Spain and reinforced the political and religious threat it posed to Protestant Britain.

The picture Lewis paints of Catholics in *The Monk* sustains the negative image Protestant British had at the time. As I mentioned in my Introduction, the novel opens with an extensive reference to the superficial motives that have driven the citizens of Madrid to church. The crowd gathers to socialize, flirt, pass the time or to indulge their curiosity regarding the mysterious Ambrosio (3). Very few are brought there by motives of true piety (3). The opening paragraph thus makes a powerful statement about Catholicism, as it questions why in a novel centred around the clergy, as the title reveals, true devotion is spectacularly lacking. As Robert Miles remarks regarding this scene, the church figures as a site “of display rather than worship, and of sexual rather than of religious pursuits. . . . In short, it is a society that is worldly where it ought to be religious” (84). That scene, therefore, sets the tone for the rest of the novel with its resolute castigation of Catholic hypocrisy. Lewis draws attention to the characteristic theatricality associated with Catholicism and its elaborate rituals, and exploits such aesthetics only to criticize them.

Lewis’s critique is nowhere sharper than in his treatment of the purportedly corrupt, malicious Catholic clergy. The novel’s readers come frequently across descriptions of the evil prioress of St. Clare’s convent, who is presented as the epitome of cruelty. At one point in the narrative, Elvira warns Lorenzo that his sister, Agnes, may not be safe in the hands of a woman...
haughty, inflexible, superstitious, and revengeful . . . [who] is infatuated with the idea of rendering her convent the most regular in Madrid, and never forgave those whose imprudence threw upon it the slightest stain. Though naturally violent and severe, when her interests require it, she well knows how to assume an appearance of benignity. She leaves no means untried to persuade young women of rank to become members of her community: she is implacable when once incensed, and has too much intrepidity to shrink at taking the most rigorous measures for punishing the offender.

(205)

The description turns out to be shockingly true, since the prioress is revealed at the end of the novel to have kept Agnes imprisoned as a punishment for disgracing the convent with her pregnancy, in observation of the “most severe and cruel” laws of St. Clare (41). The fact that the prioress also has four accomplices loyal to her, who assisted her in effecting Agnes’s incarceration in the vaults of the convent, intensely reinforces the image of corruption at the core of the Catholic clergy.

Spanish Catholics are further criticized for allegedly exploiting superstitious beliefs to manipulate the ignorant, gullible masses. As Robert Mighall notes, Madrid, by virtue of its geographical distance from rational Britain, was perceived as “the sanctioned preserve of terrors,” a city that “institutionalized unreason” (54). At the beginning of the novel, Don Christoval reports to the newly-arrived Leonella and Antonia that the mystery surrounding Ambrosio’s origins and parentage has prompted the monks to come up with a creative narrative of their own regarding the charismatic abbot (12). As Don Christoval reveals, “the monks, who find their account in the favour which is shewn to their establishment from respect to [Ambrosio], have not hesitated to publish, that he is a present to them by the Virgin” (12). The reputation of the monastery is thus enhanced through its association with Ambrosio and his
supposedly divine origins. In addition, near the end of the novel, a nun voices her unwavering conviction that the groaning noise heard in the vaults of the convent is uttered by the ghost of a robber who had once attempted to steal a ruby from the statue of St. Clare, before having his hand cut off by none other than the statue itself (345). The nuns are “scandalized” when the highly rational Lorenzo dismisses their claims and decides to further investigate the source of the noise, which is actually being made by none other than the imprisoned Agnes, located within a secret passage concealed by the statue (345). Hence, Lewis evokes a vivid image of a cunning priesthood who rely on superstition to promote their worldly interests.

Nevertheless, the Catholic clergy’s transgressions pale before the gravity of crimes committed by Ambrosio. Ambrosio, “the idol of Madrid” (42), is initially described as a man of exemplary piety, who has spent his entire life “in study, total seclusion from the world, and mortification of the flesh” (12). Nevertheless, he becomes an easy prey for Matilda as soon as she appeals to his vanity in order to seduce him. Indeed, Ambrosio’s pious humility is nothing but a well-preserved façade, as his arrogant reflections early in the novel reveal.

“Who,” thought he, “who but myself has passed the ordeal of youth, yet sees no single stain upon his conscience? . . . Religion cannot boast Ambrosio’s equal! How powerful an effect did my discourse produce upon its auditors! How they crowded round me! How they loaded me with benedictions, and pronounced me the sole uncorrupted pillar of the church!” (34-5)

His public image is thus his foremost concern and remains so throughout the novel. Following the beginning of his affair with Matilda, Ambrosio “redoubled his pretensions to the semblance of virtue” the better to conceal the violation of his vows of chastity and safeguard his reputation (212). Thus, it is the horrible prospect of
losing his prestigious reputation that prompts Ambrosio to kill Elvira, his long-lost mother, after she declares to him that

Silence would now be criminal. The whole city shall be informed of your incontinence. I will unmask you, villain, and convince the church what a viper she cherishes in her bosom. (285)

His crimes culminate in the rape of Antonia, whom he eventually also kills for fear that she will “publis[h] his guilt and her own infamy,” leading to his inevitable downfall (365). Ambrosio is therefore obsessed with upholding his own myth of superficial sanctity and humility, thus sustaining the popular stereotype of Catholic hypocrisy in the eyes of British Protestant readers.

The root of Ambrosio’s villainy, however, is ultimately traced in the institution of monasticism, which has also fostered his pride. As the narrator of The Monk attests, Ambrosio possessed by nature “many brilliant and manly qualities,” namely fearlessness, generosity and a keen intellect (221). Nevertheless, “those virtues, whose grandeur and disinterestedness were ill suited to the cloister” were methodically repressed by his tutors and substituted with the cultivation of his vices (221-2). The monks’ teachings ruined Ambrosio’s character, and

He was taught to consider compassion for the errors of others as a crime of the blackest dye: the noble frankness of his temper was exchanged for servile humility; and in order to break his natural spirit, the monks terrified his young mind, by placing before him all the horrors with which superstition could furnish them. (222)

The monastery therefore appears to be a nest of vice and perversion, ultimately responsible for Ambrosio’s crimes. Within the monastery’s walls, corruption thrives in secrecy, while it is publicly denounced through the adoption of a sanctimonious
guise. In reference to this view, Kate Ferguson Ellis stresses that for the eighteenth-century British Protestants “the monastery was the quintessential repressive institution, exerting its corrupting influence at a safe distance, both temporally and spatially from the English present” (146). Crucially, the repression of sexual desires in the narrative also serves as “a large critique of the stern Catholicism depicted in the novel” (Wright 68). *The Monk*, thus, provides a trenchant critique of monastic repression through the story of Raymond and Agnes, since the latter’s vows keep the couple apart and bring about her punishment for her illicit romance and pregnancy. More importantly, though, as far as Ambrosio is concerned, the novel hints that, had he not been confined to the monastery throughout his life, obediently repressing his sexual urges, he would never have experienced the murderous sexual desire that brought about Elvira and Antonia’s demises. Hence, monastic life is regularly castigated in the novel by the Protestant-minded characters, who voice their abhorrence at the supposedly unnatural enclosure and repression that characterize it (172).

What is more, Angela Wright notes that *The Monk* further criticizes Catholicism as a “religion fostering ignorance,” by denying its female characters sexual knowledge (76). Wright specifically refers to Antonia’s first meeting with Lorenzo, who acquaints her with Ambrosio’s extraordinary reputation in Madrid (Lewis 11-2). There, Antonia betrays her astonishing naïveté in revealing that she “knows not in what consists the difference of man and woman” (12). Under the guardianship of an exceedingly overprotective mother, who went as far as to copy and modify the Bible, so as not to excite Antonia’s “still sleeping passions,” the girl remains sorrowfully ignorant and cannot recognize Ambrosio’s predatory advances for what they are (243). Agnes, on the other hand, in the wake of her seduction and
imprisonment in the convent, lets her newborn baby die out of sheer ignorance regarding “how to treat it, or by what means to preserve its existence” (388). Thus, Wright seems to imply that both Antonia and Agnes might have been saved from suffering had their guardians educated them on matters of female sexuality. Ultimately, Catholicism is the culprit behind every tragedy in the novel, by virtue of its oppressive nature.

Overall, *The Monk* is concerned with the juxtaposition between appearance and essence, especially as it is embodied by the opposing religious practices of Catholicism and Protestantism respectively. The Catholic faith is thus portrayed as lacking in true piety and fostering vice whilst deceptively projecting a virtuous veneer. Ambrosio thus emerges as both victim and victimizer, having been subject to the corrupt teachings and practices of Catholic clergy, which he subsequently exploits to achieve his own nefarious ends.
IV. Chapter 3: Evaluating *Vathek* and *The Monk*’s Attitude towards the Other

3.1. Ambiguous Portrayals

Both *Vathek* and *The Monk* are generally considered to be key texts of the late-eighteenth-century British Gothic writing, each inaugurating a particular phase for the literature of the period. Written by young, socially prominent authors who were also Members of the British Parliament, the two novels did not go unnoticed by either audiences or critics, as, to a considerable extent, they mirrored popular beliefs about the foreign cultures they portray.

Each novel reinforces the notion of British superiority in a different way, by highlighting the difference of the represented culture from the British one. *Vathek* transports its European readers to an Oriental locus, regarded as authentic by the standards of the time, and steeps them in the customs of the Middle-Eastern culture. Given the cultural and historical framework within which works like *Vathek* were composed, modern literary criticism has consistently, and not altogether erroneously, interpreted this European practice as an innovative strategy for the cultural submission of the Oriental civilizations represented, whose populations were regularly portrayed as uncivilized and indulging in debauchery. Literature is thus viewed as an extension of the British colonial ventures that marked the eighteenth century, and an unequal power relationship is created between the hegemonic culture that represents, and the alien one that is represented. On the other hand, *The Monk* is astonishingly explicit in its vigorous castigation of Catholicism, the religion with which the majority of European countries were affiliated at the time. Its literary merit has preserved it in the canon as not merely anti-Catholic propaganda; yet nevertheless Lewis’s novel upholds the popular stereotype of the corrupt Catholic European South
that stands in opposition to the “dignified,” Protestant Britain in the North. Both novels therefore revolve around contemporary perceptions of Otherness and their relation to the British Self.

The picture of Otherness presented by both novels was simultaneously appealing and repulsive to the readers, a fact that significantly contributed to their popularity in the late eighteenth century. *Vathek* captivated readers with its sensuality, as Beckford devotes many passages to descriptions of exotic locations, the harem and the courtship between Vathek and Nouronihar. At the same time, though, readers are regularly reminded of the Caliph’s many cruel whims, which he stubbornly, and rather ludicrously, insists on satisfying, as a result of the authoritarian regime of Islamic polities that grants him absolute power. As far as Lewis’s *The Monk* is concerned, and in spite of its trenchant criticism of Catholicism, the novel heavily relies on the aesthetics of the Catholic faith as a device to excite the readers’ fascination. Thus Catholic churches and monasteries, rituals, as well as images of devout, innocent femininity, are widely exploited throughout the narrative, so as to evoke an atmosphere of religious solemnity. Notwithstanding the critique they are subject to, either implicitly or explicitly, the two alien cultures represented thus assume a dominant role in the narratives that is not altogether negative. In fact, images of the Orient and Catholic practices persistently captured the imagination of the British in eighteenth-century literature precisely because of their very foreignness.

Thus, the representation of Otherness in the narratives of *Vathek* and *The Monk* is admittedly complex, rather than monolithic, and allows for further analysis. It is my belief that the cultural differences that the two novels depict and ostensibly criticize ultimately become the foundation for a complicated relationship that actually fosters an appreciation of the alien cultures’ very difference from the British one. In
the final part of this thesis, I will therefore utilize the insights of Slavoj Žižek, so as to argue that *Vathek* and *The Monk* appear, in fact, to question the notion of British national superiority as far as both its national and religious characteristics are concerned.

### 3.2. Competing Enjoyments: British Protestant Liberty versus Foreign Tyranny

In recent decades, the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek has come to be regarded as one of the most prominent figures of modern philosophy. Innovative and controversial, Žižek’s thought has been shaped by G. W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx and Jacques Lacan, thus creating a unique lens through which he perceives the world. Hence, through his use of the concepts of Lacanian psychoanalysis, and the employment of Hegel’s dialectic method, Žižek contributes to the Marxist tradition of criticizing ideology. Noted in particular for his tendency to combine philosophy and popular culture, Žižek applies the psychoanalytic insights of Lacan to social phenomena, thus theorizing many aspects of contemporary, everyday life, including the hostility between nations and cultures.

A central term in Lacanian psychoanalysis that Žižek frequently alludes to, is jouissance. As Nèstor Braunstein affirms, the word “jouissance” is notoriously opaque and difficult to translate, as Lacan himself roughly defined it as “a combination of ‘enjoyment’ and ‘lust’” (103). Nevertheless, that characterization largely fails to capture the essence of the word. Lacan thus further elaborated on his conception of jouissance in the following words, arguing that

> What I call jouissance – in the sense in which the body experiences itself – is always in the nature of tension, in the nature of a forcing, of a spending, even of an exploit.

---

7 Henceforth referred to as “enjoyment” in the sources used.
Unquestionably, there is jouissance at the level at which pain begins to appear, and we know that it is only at this level of pain that a whole dimension of the organism, which would otherwise remain veiled, can be experienced. (qtd. in Braunstein 103)

Jouissance is therefore defined as a complex feeling of enjoyment mixed with pain, hence it is not altogether a pleasurable experience. Jouissance also contains the notion of excess, as Braunstein explains that “it is a ‘something’ lived by a body when pleasure stops being pleasure. It is a plus, a sensation that is beyond pleasure” (104). Bodily jouissance is lost upon the subject’s entrance into the Symbolic realm of language (110), but traces of it still remain in the body’s erogenous zones (Myers 97). In short, therefore, jouissance may be broadly defined as excessive, painful pleasure, an enjoyment that runs “beyond the pleasure principle” (Lacan 184). By virtue of its very excess, it necessitates some measure of controlling.

Jouissance is found at the heart of tensions between a community and its Other. In Žižek’s perspective, a community of individuals bonds over “their shared relationship toward a Thing, toward Enjoyment incarnated” (201). Žižek defines the Thing as a community’s “‘way of life’,” something accessible only to the group in question (201). According to Žižek, in order to identify the Thing of a particular community, one ought to notice “all the details by which is made visible the unique way a community organizes its enjoyment” (201). Therefore, all the elements that are particular to a certain community, from which the latter one derives its enjoyment, or jouissance, constitute the given community’s Thing. What is more, as Žižek meaningfully stresses, the necessary precondition for the Thing to exist is that the members of the community believe in the others’ belief in it (202). On the national

---

8 Lacan’s Symbolic “includes everything from language to the law, taking in all the social structures in between” (Myers 22).
9 Italics in the original.
level, therefore, this collective belief in the Thing assumes the form of national myth-making, so that, ultimately, the national Thing is “nothing but the way subjects of a given ethnic community organize their enjoyment through national myths” (202). Thus, as Žižek concludes, the possession of the national Thing is the foremost concern of any given nation (202-3).

The Thing is precious to the community, and thus its members feel the need to safeguard it from the threatening presence of the Other (201). The major paradox, according to Žižek, is that, despite the fact that the Thing is believed to be inimical and restricted to the given community, it is always assumed to be under threat from the Other (203). What concerns the subject with regard to the Other, as Žižek avers, is the question “Che vuoi?” or “What do you want from me?” (Myers 93). Unable to ever understand the desire of the Other, and in order to satisfy their own desire to know what the Other wants, subjects create fantasies to provide an answer to the question “Che vuoi?” (98). In Žižek’s view, the fantasy that answers the “Che vuoi” question is twofold. The subject, attributing to the Other an excessive jouissance, either apprehends that the hostile Other craves their own jouissance and wants to steal it, or else that the Other “has access to some secret, perverse enjoyment” that is alien to the subject (203). Therefore, the basis of hostility between the subject and the Other is the very awareness of the different ways in which each deploy their jouissance.

My intention is to focus primarily on the latter fantasy that Žižek alludes to, since an analysis of both Vathek and The Monk, and the socio-cultural context within which they were produced seems to confirm its existence. Composed at a time when, in an outburst of nationalism, the vast majority of British Protestants were celebrating what they perceived as their national superiority over all other cultures, Vathek and
The Monk seem to betray an insecurity stemming from the represented Other’s deployment of excessive jouissance.

Žižek affirms that a nation “exists only as long as its specific enjoyment continues to be materialized in a set of social practices and transmitted through national myths that structure these practices” (202) The national myth through which a significant portion of eighteenth-century British Protestants seem to have organized their collective jouissance appears to be a belief in their affinity to the concept of liberty, a notion they derived on the grounds of both their reformist faith (Colley 21) and their “unique, splendid and sovereign” Parliament (54). Such a belief clearly emanates from a sermon given by Richard Price, a Unitarian minister and philosopher, in the hundredth anniversary of the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Price paid tribute to the event claiming that it had brought about

that aera [sic] of light and liberty . . . by which we have been made an example to other kingdoms, and became the instructors of the world. Had it not been for this deliverance, the probability is, that, instead of being thus distinguished, we should now have been a base people, groaning under the infamy and misery of popery and slavery. (185)

Through his nationalist, intensely boastful rhetoric, Price thus voices his belief that the national myth of British greatness is predicated upon the importance of British “liberty,” which crucially emerges as superior when compared to foreign “slavery” (185).

Colley herself also draws attention to the pride the British derived from their self-image as indomitable and free, by citing James Thomson’s popular patriotic poem “Rule, Britannia” (10), and by referring to the British image of the Catholic
French Other as characteristically “unfree” (5). When it came to their complicated relationship with the Middle East, the British further asserted their superiority by virtue of their perceived native-like freedom and independence, traits that were diametrically opposed to the autocratic regimes of Islamic polities, famed for their despotic rulers and strict lifestyle (Melman 107).

It would thus seem that the polarity between the assumed concepts of British liberty and foreign tyranny provides an answer to the “Che vuoi” question. The first fantasy that Žižek alluded to appears to be an apprehension on the part of the British that their cherished liberty was threatened by the foreign despotic systems craving to steal the British jouissance, and subdue the proudly free nation. Such a view has historical resonance, since the British were always apprehensive of a potential reinstatement of Catholicism, dreading a possible return to the supposedly superstitious dangers and vice it sanctioned. As far as the militant Middle-Eastern populations were concerned, P. J. Marshall avers that they were also a menace to the freedom-loving Protestant nation. In his own words,

Unruly proconsuls with their standing armies were an obvious threat to British liberty, but luxury and the corruption and enervation which it would bring was the most pervasive fear conjured up by visions of empire in Asia. (7)

The British hence were anxious to preserve their characteristic liberty in the face of an alien Other potentially bent on overtaking them.

Bearing in mind the depictions of Otherness in the two novels, therefore, I propose that the alien jouissance that the British attributed to their Other through fantasy was a desire to transgress the strict limits imposed on them by their way of life and indulge in excess. Vathek, along with The Monk, present a picture of Otherness
that is directly at odds with the treasured concept of British liberty on which Britons prided themselves. The two novels illustrate strongly despotic cultures that foster restrictive ways of life, which ultimately compel characters to act in transgression.

Thus, *Vathek’s* Caliphate is ruled by the whimsical, vile Vathek, a selfish, tyrannical leader with no respect whatsoever for his subjects, whom he regularly abuses. From imprisoning those who disagree with him on theological matters (47) and burning the beards of those who fail to give him valuable information (53), to murdering fifty innocent boys (68) and sacrificing his loyal subjects to the Giaour (74), Vathek governs with utter disregard for human life. When informed of his people’s attempts to save him from a fire, and his mother’s decision to sacrifice them, Vathek, not running any real danger, heartlessly replies “‘Be it so . . . provided we finish and I dine’” (74). His people are shown to be granted no real freedom, as their duty is to obey the Caliph, even after his outrageous murder of their little children. They are ultimately rewarded for their loyalty with their deaths.

However, by virtue of being a Caliph, Vathek is regarded as the representative of the Prophet Mohamed, and as such he too is subject to the strict dictates of the Islamic faith. Having not only privileges, but responsibilities as well, Vathek is expected to observe all Qu’ranic edicts, such as the prohibition of wine and theological inquisitiveness, in addition to being the model of a pious Muslim himself. In this respect, therefore, gratification is institutionally denied to him. Vathek is also supposed to hold veneration for holy relics, such as “those precious besoms which are used to sweep the sacred Cahaba” (78-9), an attitude that would seem superstitious to eighteenth-century Protestant British. The notion of control in the Caliphate is strongly reinforced by its portrayal as a community subject to the Prophet’s panoptic eye, since, from the very beginning of the novel, Mohamed surveils all that passes and
has the power to intervene in the lives of his faithful (78). Life in a Muslim state thus seems to be the opposite of the one led by the “rational,” Protestant British, who castigated oppressively despotic, superstitious systems. As a result, Vathek resorts to “singularity and rebellion, both of which take sexual and intellectual forms” (Graham 25). He is finally punished by Eblis, the ultimate rebel against restrictions (36).

Likewise, *The Monk* presents the reader with the equally oppressive society of Catholic Spain. Lewis associates Spain with a strict, authoritarian, ubiquitous Catholicism, which he presents as a fundamentally corrupt religion that exerts unnatural influence over the faithful of all social classes. A prime example is the case of Agnes, who, being an unwilling victim to her noble parents’ superstitious devotion, “has been destined to the convent from her cradle” (122-3), and is thus spitefully persecuted so as to fulfill her mother’s “fatal vow” (124). A healthy, happy relationship with Don Raymond is hence forbidden to her by both her cruel aunt and the Catholic clergy that goes to extreme lengths to punish her. Ambrosio, too, has been the victim of a nasty Catholic upbringing, which suppressed his positive traits and instead developed his pride and hypocrisy (222). Both of them react to the restrictions imposed upon them by the rigid Catholic community with an excessive, transgressive sexual expression, which ultimately results in their different punishments.

Both of the represented communities, therefore, have common traits. Essentially, *Vathek* and *The Monk* portray foreign states with strongly despotic, systems, which limit enjoyment and knowledge, and foster superstition. Crucially, both are fundamentalist communities, where religion is inextricably tied to the identity of each polity. For, as Bernard Lewis explained, Islam occupies “the whole of life” for a Muslim, so that Church and State are identical (4). All citizens of Muslim
states therefore ought to live by the Islamic principles, and uphold them in every aspect of their life. Spain, on the other hand, was widely acknowledged as being the most staunchly Catholic nation in the eighteenth century (Atkin and Tallett 6). In light of this, Lewis’s portrayal of the country’s intimate relationship with the Catholic faith is not far from the truth, although undoubtedly biased.

Britain, however, was also a state largely defined by its religious faith at the time, using Protestantism to a great extent in order to boost its national prestige. As Colley notes, through their identification with Protestantism, the British imagined themselves to be “a chosen people struggling towards the light, a bulwark against the depredations of Antichrist” (31). By claiming the role of a “second and better Israel,” the British were once and for all abolishing a past characterized by obscurantism, and secured redemption “by the new and stoutly Protestant Hanoverian dynasty, resulting in an age of unparalleled abundance” (33). The national welfare was thereby entrusted to a political authority charged above all with upholding the Protestant faith. Protestantism, therefore, appears to have had equal importance to the British, as Islam to Arabs and Catholicism to the Spanish, in the sense of being largely identified with their national identity. In this respect, and taking into consideration the socio-cultural landscape that gave birth to Vathek and The Monk, the two novels turn the attention from the national level to the religious one, so that what actually matters the most is Britain’s conflict with its religious Other. The clash which the novels enact, therefore, ultimately undermines the myth of British excellence on both the national and the religious level.

I therefore propose that the fundamentalist lifestyle of Vathek and Ambrosio, as depicted in the novels, appears to afford them the possibility of transgressive jouissance precisely by virtue of its strict nature. Steeped in their communities’
respective values, Vathek and Ambrosio seek ways to gratify their desires through excess, outside of the rigid dictates of their religious cultures. The two men are prominent figures in their respective religious systems, perceived as the embodiment of their fundamentalist communities’ highest values. Nevertheless they systematically violate the limits imposed on their conduct, thus presenting a picture of Islam and Catholicism as closely connected with excess and transgression. Ambrosio’s habitual hypocrisy for the sake of keeping appearances and Vathek’s haughty disregard for Islamic edicts seem to imply that strictness breeds excess, thus giving Muslims and Catholics a unique access to forbidden enjoyment, an alien jouissance. In the end, both characters are promptly punished, thus having their excessive jouissance checked.

Such pleasure, in my opinion, appears to have been inaccessible to the British Protestant subject, who felt distinguished on the grounds of a supposed affinity with freedom. When contrasted to other, more restrictive religious systems, which had equal power at the time, British Protestantism and the liberty that characterized it fail to provide the subject with the jouissance of transgression that seems to be reserved for stricter religious systems. This very realization constitutes for Žižek a way for the subject to deploy their jouissance (206). He pointedly asks

Do we not find enjoyment precisely in fantasizing about the Other’s enjoyment, in this ambivalent attitude toward it? Do we not obtain satisfaction by means of the very supposition that the Other enjoys in a way inaccessible to us? Does not the Other’s enjoyment exert such a powerful fascination because in it we represent to ourselves our own innermost relationship toward enjoyment? (206)

Following Žižek’s insights, it turns out that such a conflict of enjoyments essentially betrays a feeling of resentment on the part of the British regarding their own unique
jouissance. Alluding to the Lacanian thesis that the subject’s desire is always actually the desire of the Other, Žižek elaborates on the subject’s complicated relationship with its Other (206). In this sense, therefore, he argues that

enjoyment is ultimately always enjoyment of the Other, i.e. enjoyment supposed, imputed to the Other, and that, conversely, the hatred of the Other’s enjoyment is always the hatred of one’s own enjoyment. (206)

Through fantasy, therefore, British Protestants appear to have attributed to their religious Other a unique power to transgress, owing to their respective strict religious systems. Through this process of imaginative speculation about the Other’s alien jouissance, British Protestants too did find a way to deploy their own jouissance. Nevertheless, in a nationalist climate where they systematically asserted their own supremacy, the Other’s jouissance was condemned as impious and found lacking in comparison to the British Protestant subject’s unique jouissance of liberty. As Žižek attests though, such a judgment actually amounts to a condemnation of their own deployment of jouissance.

Hence, as I see it, Žižek’s assertion that the “hatred of the Other is the hatred of our own excess of enjoyment” (206), when applied to the majority of British Protestants of the late eighteenth century points to a dissatisfaction with their own excess of liberty. Thus, in my perspective, such a view significantly questions the almost unanimously voiced belief in British national superiority, epitomized through

---

10 The subject’s complicated relationship with the Other originates in the phase Lacan named “the mirror stage,” which is the onset of ego formation. In the mirror stage the child first looks at the image of himself as it appears to others, trying to coordinate his bodily moves. He thus supposedly obtains an impression of his bodily coherence which he then links with his own lived reality. Nevertheless, the wished for unity is not really attained, since it is predicated on a power the child still lacks. Thus the child is “left forever trying to reconcile the other to its same” (Myers 22).

11 Italics in the original.
its libertarian political and religious system, and may instead betray a degree of insecurity about the obscure future of their rapidly expanding empire.
V. Conclusion: Reappraisal of the British Nationalist Attitude

Overall, Beckford’s *Vathek* and Lewis’s *The Monk* assume a strange position when it comes to their representations of Otherness. Although ostensibly they condemn the cultural and religious Otherness they represent, in their different ways they appear to actually begrudge the professed liberty of the culture that produced them.

As I have argued, liberty was believed to be an inherent part of both the political and the religious character of the British nation, prompting them to forge an image of themselves as indomitable and, by extension, superior to other cultures. It was hence triumphantly juxtaposed to the perceived restrictive political and religious systems of Middle-Eastern Muslims represented in *Vathek* and the Spanish Catholics of *The Monk*, which seem, in the novels, to delight in tyrannically oppressing their populations. Nevertheless, following Slavoj Žižek’s insights, the outcome of such oppression appears to grant access to transgressive enjoyment, unique to Muslims and Catholics, but not to Protestants.

As I see it, Žižek’s interpretation of tensions between communities can therefore point to an interesting conclusion regarding the British nationalistic attitude that characterized the eighteenth century. In light of this, the British repudiation against the strictly despotic political and religious systems that were at odds with their own, libertarian one, yet granted their populations access to transgression, was in fact directed at themselves. In this respect, *Vathek* and *The Monk* may be seen as problematizing not the problem of foreign tyranny, perceived as leading to excess and transgression, but rather, more startlingly, the problem of excessive native freedom, the sustaining value of British nationalism.


