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FONTHILL RECOVERED

— A Cultural History —

Edited by Caroline Dakers



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Reading *Vathek* and Fonthill Abbey

William Beckford's architectural imagination

Peter N. Lindfield and Dale Townshend

There is no doubt that, for those who visited it in its heyday, Fonthill Abbey in Wiltshire was the material realisation of the same architectural energies that William Beckford had brought to bear on *The History of the Caliph Vathek*, his Orientalist fiction that, though written in French in 1782, was translated into English by Samuel Henley and published without the author's knowledge or consent as *An Arabian Tale, From an Unpublished Manuscript* in 1786. Though James Wyatt, the most renowned architect of his day, prepared the Abbey's designs, it was Beckford who masterminded and oversaw the project, taking full control of it after Wyatt's death in 1813.¹ Registering Beckford's central role in the Abbey's creation, the celebrated account in the *Gentleman's Magazine* of the entertainments that Beckford had hosted at Fonthill for Lord Nelson, Lady Hamilton and others in late December 1800 implied a connection between his fictional and architectural projects by conjuring up a scene of lavish feasting, spectacle and sensory gratification that would not have been out of place at Vathek's Palace of Alkoremi.² When John Britton retold this event in his *Graphical and Literary Illustrations of Fonthill Abbey, Wiltshire* (1823), he made the links between Beckford's fiction and his country house more explicit by claiming that it was on this occasion, in particular, that 'the accomplished author of Vathek had determined to exemplify by practical illustration some of the theories of that original romance'.³ Though Fonthill Abbey, Britton went on, possessed neither the five wings of the Palace of Alkoremi nor the five other palaces devoted specifically to the gratification of the senses, Beckford, in the manner of his sybaritic Caliph, had assembled within and around his mansion 'the most delightful blandishments of art, the fascinations of talent, and the choicest luxuries of the palate: besides the most rare and delicious viands, fruits, and wines, with odiferous plants, flowers, and essences'.⁴ These comments, of course, are a close paraphrase of the description of the first palace-like wing that Vathek adds to the Palace of Alkoremi in *Vathek*: its tables, we are

told, were ‘continually covered with the most exquisite dainties; which were supplied both by night and by day, according to their constant consumption; while the most delicious wines and the choicest cordials flowed forth from a hundred fountains that were never exhausted’.⁵ John Rutter followed suit in *Delineations of Fonthill and its Abbey* (1823), claiming that the staircase in the Great Tower at Fonthill was meant to give the illusion of the ‘eleven hundred stairs’ in *Vathek*’s tower – although, in the first two French editions, the tower had a preposterous 15,000 stairs.⁶ So inveterate was the assumption that Fonthill Abbey was the material manifestation of, or even physical paeon to, Beckford’s extraordinary architectural vision in *Vathek* that when Henry Venn Lansdown visited the ruins of the Abbey in October 1844, he could not help but see in the stony fragments potent reminders of Beckford’s romance, the organ screen in the Octagon thus becoming one ‘designed by “Vathek” himself’, the Brown Parlour ‘the very room’ in which ‘the magnificent “Vathek”’ frequently dined on ‘every delicacy to tempt the palate’.⁷

In this chapter, we wish to subject the relation between *Vathek* and Fonthill Abbey, between Beckford’s literary and actual architectural endeavours, to further scrutiny, in some senses complicating what nineteenth-century visitors and commentators simply took for granted, and in other respects confirming yet also qualifying their assumptions. For, unlike the seemingly straightforward (though, itself, by no means uncomplicated) relationship between Horace Walpole’s Strawberry Hill and *The Castle of Otranto* (1765), that which exists between Beckford’s fiction and his house is characterised by a number of tensions and points of difference. First, while Beckford certainly seems to have exploited the connections between *Vathek* and Fonthill at times – and the lavish entertainments that he put on for Lord Nelson and his entourage in December 1800 seem to suggest as much – there remains evidence, both anecdotal and more empirical, that indicates that the relation between them was far more nuanced and complex for their creator than one of easy mirroring, semblance and equivalence.

Secondly, and unlike the Gothic architecture that links *The Castle of Otranto* to Strawberry Hill, *Vathek* and Fonthill Abbey do not, at first glance, appear to share a common style or form: while *Vathek*, though not without elements of the emergent Gothic-fictional mode, is a product of the Orientalist tradition in eighteenth-century fiction, the Abbey’s façade was uniformly Gothic in design, and its interiors, such as the grand drawing room (Figure 16.1), a mixture of Gothic and largely Classical spaces.⁸ Thus, while the Gothic style of Fonthill deliberately courted associations with Britain’s Catholic past, the architecture in *Vathek* – though its style, Beckford insists, cannot be precisely named and identified – is strongly Islamic and Oriental in spirit.

Thirdly, while *Otranto* was written when the construction of Strawberry Hill had for the most part been completed, *Vathek* predates the creation of



Fig. 16.1 Stedman Whitwell, *The Grand Drawing Room* [at Fonthill Abbey]. Plate 5 from John Rutter, *Delineations of Fonthill and its Abbey*, 1823.

Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

Fonthill by just over a decade: though it was planned from as early as 1790, Beckford's Gothic pile was built between the years 1796 and 1817.⁹ Separated by the differences in style, temporality and those imposed by Beckford himself, *Vathek* and Fonthill Abbey do not readily lend themselves to the type of analysis that W. S. Lewis undertook in his seminal article 'The Genesis of Strawberry Hill' (1934), that is, the identification of the return of 'real' architectural features of the writer's house in the fictional text that it was thought to have inspired.¹⁰ If anything, Beckford's fiction seemed to have inspired his home. As we argue in this chapter, though, it is through a consideration of what we term William Beckford's 'architectural imagination' – an underlying discursive construct that runs from his earliest manuscripts, published works and architectural endeavours through to his later projects, writings and recorded impressions – that some of these difficulties might be resolved or at least further explained. It is nothing new to say that Beckford's architectural endeavours were firmly grounded in the terms of biographical experience, a point to which critics have repeatedly returned, and to which some of our observations below attest. The novelty of our argument, however, lies in its articulation and analysis of Beckford's 'architectural imagination', a broader imaginative 'complex' that informed both his literary and his architectural works, and a rich, generative faculty of which he himself was self-consciously aware.

Fonthill's tower and the Tower of the Caliph

When an enthusiastic Cyrus Redding made his first acquaintance with the aged Beckford, now residing at Lansdown Crescent, Bath, in 1835, the sight of the writer's tower on Lansdown Hill (Figure 16.2) prompted him to make what must to both parties have seemed a rather predictable observation: 'while I was on Lansdown', he remarks, 'I thought of the Tower of the Caliph'; 'the towers in "Vathek," at Fonthill, and here', he continues, 'lead to such a conclusion'.¹¹ Beckford's reported response, however, swiftly undercuts Redding's assumption that the towers of Lansdown and Fonthill were homages to the tower of the Caliph in *Vathek* with a frank disclaimer:

'No,' he replied, 'I have extraordinary sight; God rarely gives men such eyes. I am partial to glancing over a wide horizon – it delights me to sweep far along an extended landscape. I must elevate myself to do this, even at Lansdown.'



Fig. 16.2 Lansdown Tower, Bath.

Beckford's Tower & Museum.

The tower at Fonthill was as necessary an appendage to such a structure as it would have been to a real abbey.¹²

A structure determined by his love of landscape-viewing and a 'necessary appendage' to the Gothic style in which Wyatt had designed and built, the tower at Fonthill bore no relation, Beckford claimed, to the Caliph's in *Vathek* beyond the most obvious and superficial of parallels. A sketch (Figure 16.3) that Beckford himself produced of Vathek's tower in the presence of Mr. John T. C. Heaviside in 1843 rather underlines this point.¹³ The grand and muscularly tapered tower in Beckford's sketch is governed by Classical forms: the lower section resembles a triumphal arch, the central register is framed by pilasters and the upper tier is encircled with



Fig. 16.3 William Beckford, *Vathek's Tower*, Drawn aged 83, 1843.

Collection of Philip Hewat-Jaboor.



Fig. 16.4 J. Martin, *View of the South Front [of Fonthill Abbey] from the Lawn Grand Drawing Room*. Plate 12 from John Rutter, *Delineations of Fonthill and its Abbey*, 1823.

Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

round-headed arcading. Although Fonthill's tower (Figure 16.4) is superficially similar in that it tapers upwards in sections, its ornament is firmly Gothic: lancet windows, blind arcading and pierced crenellations resembling a corona. Standing corrected, Redding defensively replied to Beckford with the comment that “The Tower of the Caliph is so prominent in ‘Vathek’ that I am not the only person who labours under the mistake”.¹⁴ Indeed, he was not alone in these assumptions, but when another anonymous correspondent in the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1844 published his recollections of his conversations with Beckford in 1837, he recalled the latter expressing similar sentiments. When asked whether his establishment at Fonthill was really as large as it was reported to be, Beckford vigorously replied with the expostulation “Enormous!” – before hastily adding the caveat that, despite the building's Alkoremi-like scale, “it did not realise the reports which were current as to the magnificence of my mode of living; for instance, I never sat down alone to forty dishes”.¹⁵ By Beckford's own admission here, he was not the Caliph of Fonthill that he was often taken to be, nor did he reside at Fonthill Abbey in a state of luxurious self-indulgence anywhere approaching that of his best-known fictional character.

‘The Transport of Pleasure’

While Beckford thus often tended to deny the somewhat superficial and commonplace connections between house and fiction that his contemporaries routinely

made, Fonthill and the architecture of *Vathek* are nonetheless indubitably linked by the deeper and more abiding terms of Beckford's architectural imagination, the precise contours of which were already taking shape in his juvenilia of the late 1770s. In the early 'The Transport of Pleasure' manuscript (ca. 1777–8), for instance, a 17-year-old Beckford described to his tutor, the artist Alexander Cozens, a rich and poignant vision of idealised existence within imaginary architectural space, one that would still be very much in place in Beckford's work over five decades later.¹⁶ Part boyish escapism and part romantic and erotic reverie, the piece described the fantasy of Beckford's and Cozens's retreat from society into an intensely private world of sensual stimulation and intellectual companionship. Ensconced in a high tower built on a hill, the two pass their days in an endless round of eating and drinking, reading and writing, philosophising and star-gazing, Beckford thus spinning a homoerotic or at least queer fantasy that would be realised to greater effect in *Vathek*.¹⁷ Not insignificantly, the imaginary tower in which Beckford and Cozens in this piece dwell is Gothic in design and furnishing, its painted windows 'crowded with gorgeous figures coloured in antient tomes' and lit by the lights of many tapers. One hundred steps within it lead up into 'a spacious hall wainscoted with cedar', while its arched roof is said to be 'strangely sculptured with gothic devices'. A Gothic tower containing censers, tapestries, rich chalices, softly-muted choirs, large flower-filled porcelain vases, mosaic-covered statues of knights, sovereigns and saints, and a capacious gallery enclosed with gilt lattice work: it is hardly surprising that Boyd Alexander was led to entitle this manuscript as 'Fonthill Foreshadowed' in his influential study *England's Wealthiest Son* of 1962.¹⁸

Yet, more than a 'prophecy' of the work that Beckford would undertake at Fonthill Abbey some 20 years later, the fantasy set out here is better thought of as an early expression of what we are calling Beckford's 'architectural imagination', a nexus of imaginative architectural elements, behaviours and luxurious sensations that would come to shape and determine much of his subsequent literary and architectural undertakings. As realised here, the coordinates of Beckford's architectural imagination involve the fantasy of withdrawal into a timeless and intensely private architectural space, one in which two individuals who are somewhat illicitly or transgressively linked with one another – here, the jejune student and his older male tutor – indulge in a lavish lifestyle of sensory delight and intellectual pleasure. Beckford's architectural imagination is nothing if not literary, for, in addition to its sense of the 'literary trance' in which Beckford and Cozens exist at the tower, 'The Transport of Pleasure' is shot through with literary allusion to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and the tale of Locman, the sage of the enchanted labyrinth of flowers that features in Marianne-Agnès Pillement, dame de Fauques's Oriental fiction, *The Vizirs; or, The Enchanted Labyrinth* (1774). Beyond this, the space depicted looks also to the Bower of Bliss in Book II of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, and, through Spenser, to the enchanted castles in the epic romances of Tasso and Ariosto: Beckford's architectural imagination is nourished and nurtured on some of the major texts of the British and European canon.

The most significant implication that this early work bears for an understanding of the relationship between *Vathek* and Fonthill Abbey is that, just as it draws simultaneously from fictions in both the Oriental and English or ‘Gothic’ traditions, so it refuses to impose a distinction between Gothic and Oriental styles of architecture: adjacent to the Gothic tower on the hill stands a suite of Oriental apartments, opulently furnished with Chinese and Japanese effects, and clearly taking their cue from Beckford’s erstwhile architectural tutor William Chambers’s evocative descriptions of the Halls of the Moon in *A Dissertation on Oriental Gardening* (1772). Opulently furnished with jewels, marble, ivory, porcelain, mother of pearl, silver and gold, these are the structures to which Chinese princes are said to retire, a place where, like Cozens and Beckford in the early fantasy, they feast ‘and give a loose to every sort of voluptuous pleasure’.¹⁹ The Gothic cedes effortlessly to Orientalism in ‘The Transport of Pleasure’ as if there were no substantial difference between them. Herein, then, lies a key feature of Beckford’s architectural imagination: as drawn to Orientalism as it is to the Gothic, it makes no firm distinction between them.

Traditions with Oriental roots

In this regard, Beckford was, for once, thoroughly in step with many of the architectural historians and practitioners of his day. Sir Christopher Wren’s memoirs that were published as *Parentalia* in 1750 had advanced the influential (though by no means uncontested) theory that Gothic architecture had derived originally from the east. Thus, he claimed, ‘what we now vulgarly call the *Gothick*, ought properly and truly be named the *Saracenick Architecture refined by the Christians*; which first of all began in the East after the Fall of the *Greek Empire* by the prodigious Success of those People that adhered to *Mahomet’s Doctrine*’.²⁰ This soon influenced Georgian architectural and interior design, and during the 1750s Gothic and Chinoiserie were often either grouped together as alternatives to the prevailing taste for Classicism or combined as hybrids in contemporary interior fashions. Plates in Thomas Chippendale’s influential furniture pattern-book *The Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker’s Director* (1754), for instance, present combinations of Chinese and Gothic motifs in single designs such as Plates XXI–XXI *Gothick Chairs*; XXIII–XXV *Chinese Chairs*; and CXI *China Case* (Figure 16.5).

Similarly, William and John Halfpenny in their *Chinese and Gothic Architecture Properly Ornamented* (1752) brought together the two aesthetics, unifying them as legitimate though still marginally inferior alternatives to Classicism.²¹ Underscoring the styles’ similarities, their Gothic and Chinoiserie designs are very similar in form, ornament and disposition; both were fashionably exotic, and in their flowing and asymmetric forms, they were mutually in keeping with late eighteenth-century Rococo. In the light of these and other examples, it would appear that Beckford’s Gothic Abbey at Fonthill was not as stylistically remote from the self-consciously

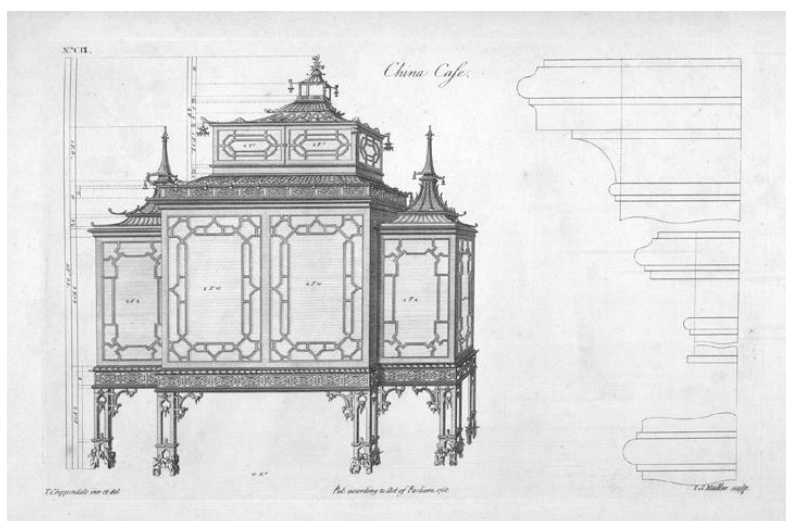


Fig. 16.5 Thomas Chippendale, *China Case*. Plate CIX from Chippendale, *The Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker's Director* (1753).

© Peter N. Lindfield.

Persian and Arabian tone and setting of *Vathek* as it first seems.²² A visual reconciliation of the two styles was depicted in a watercolour of the Hall of Eblis by Jackson (Figure 16.6) that is now held at the Lewis Walpole Library, Connecticut.²³ Successfully realising the space's cavernous qualities, the artist has also made an important and revealing architectural choice: swollen Egyptian columns (loosely of the Papyriform type) support overtly Gothic vaulting. This drawing, though surely not authorised or even known by Beckford, certainly provides insight into his architectural imagination, explaining, as it does, a reader's response to the apparent disjunction between the Gothic architecture of Fonthill and the Oriental forms and structures of *Vathek*.

It was not only Gothic architecture that eighteenth-century cultural commentators held to have originated in the east. In the first volume of *The History of English Poetry* (1774), Thomas Warton advanced the claim that literary romance too, the formal vehicle of Beckford's imagination in *Vathek*, originated with the Arabians and Saracens on the northern coast of Africa. Transported at the beginning of the eighth century into Spain, this 'extravagant' and highly imaginative literary form, Warton argues, eventually spread throughout Europe and into Britain; western contact with the east during the Crusades only further ensured its dissemination. Though Warton's views were not shared by all – Thomas Percy, for one, had earlier claimed in his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) that the romance form was originally of European or 'Gothic' extraction – they were sufficiently current for Beckford tacitly to rely upon them in his composition of *Vathek* in early 1782. As Henley's scholarly notes to the unauthorised translation of the text made clear, the enchanted architecture of the tale looked not to Gothic antecedents so much



Fig. 16.6 Jackson, *Hall of Eblis* from *Vathek*. N.D. Babb-Beckford no. 101.

Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

as to the Oriental magic and wonder of *The Arabian Nights' Entertainments*. Horace Walpole, in turn, perceived startling continuities between the eastern tradition of Romance and Gothic architecture: 'the *Arabian Nights* and King's [College] Chapel [Cambridge]', he wrote in 1789, are cognate with one another insofar as both are 'above all rules', the orders, symmetries and mathematical principles of classical literature and architecture.²⁴ It was precisely these presumed continuities between the imagination, romance and non-classical architectural styles that led John Britton to remark that one with so 'vivid' a fancy as William Beckford could not but choose to commission and oversee at Fonthill work in the Gothic mode: incapable of being satisfied 'with any thing of commonplace or even usual character', a mind such as Beckford's required 'novelty, grandeur, complexity and even sublimity; and it may be safely asserted, that no style or class of architecture is so well adapted to effect these purposes as the gothic, or ecclesiastical'.²⁵

Certainly, a sense of imaginative and fanciful 'rulelessness' (in the sense of being entirely 'without rules' rather than infringing or violating pre-existing ones) applies to the architecture of *Vathek* particularly well. Its architectural highlights – the Palace of Alkoremi and the Hall of Eblis – are said to be unclassifiable according to established architectural criteria, orders and traditions.²⁶ Though Sandro Jung has argued that the novel's architecture is recognisably Gothic in style, Beckford, when sketching out the surfaces of the Hall of Eblis, is insistent upon the fact that this is 'of an architecture unknown in the records of the earth'.²⁷ This important comment economically repeats the description of the extraordinary, fantastical architecture that the narrator William encounters at the centre of the earth in 'The

Long Story' or *The Vision* (ca. 1777), another early, florid architectural fantasy that Beckford addressed to Alexander Cozens. Part natural wonder and part constructed architectural fantasy, the Halls of the Glorious in this story are described as being 'divided by at least three thousand massy Columns into the most stately Halls decorated with Colonnades [sic] of slender pillars inconceivably striking'.²⁸ Though these references to pillars and colonnades in *The Vision* are couched in the language of Classicism, we are subsequently told that they 'supported neither frieze nor Cornice, nor any ornament in the least degree consistent with the rules of Architecture we observe on the surface of the Earth, but sustained on their airy Capitals a variety of glistening Garlands composed of Sparrs and intermixed like the branches which form our Bowers'.²⁹ Similar references to otherworldly orders of architecture that are yet to be conceived, identified and named as such run throughout the *Episodes of Vathek*.³⁰ Perpetually fascinated by fantastical natural, supernatural and manmade forms, Beckford's architectural imagination, like the *capriccio* tradition with which it was contemporary, is characterised by an interest in 'impossible' architectural structures that have no existence beyond the realm of fantasy.

'Impossible architecture' at Fonthill

As William North's prefatory 'Memoir' to his 1819 edition of *Vathek* observed, 'Much of the description of Vathek's palace, and even the renowned "Hall of Eblis," was afterwards visibly embodied in the real Fonthill Abbey, of which wonders, almost as fabulous, were at one time reported and believed.'³¹ Though Beckford, as we have argued, was known on occasion to dispute this, the assumption that Fonthill Abbey was, in some senses, the realisation of the architectural visions of *Vathek* was one that was shared by Rutter, Britton and numerous other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century visitors to the house. Although modern and contemporary Beckford scholarship has frequently rehearsed a similar claim, it nonetheless remains one that is worth exploring in greater depth. Despite Beckford's caveats, *Vathek*'s buildings and their architectural effects do, indeed, seem to offer numerous templates for Fonthill's exterior and interior, and a number of important themes expressed by the novel's architectural fabrics were subsequently realised by Beckford and Wyatt at the Abbey. Of these, architectural grandeur and sublimity – especially as expressed through scale – and the importance of collections and their display are the most important, and are also two elements that are introduced in *Vathek* at the outset of the narrative. Seeking substantially to augment the 'scanty' structure that his father Motassem had erected on the hill of Pied Horses, Vathek adopts as his primary architectural project at the Palace the construction of a tower, a building that, though it was conceived as an imitation of the Biblical Nimrod's building of Babel (Genesis 11:1–9), the Caliph erects 'not, like that great warrior, to escape being drowned, but from the insolent curiosity of penetrating the secrets of heaven'.³² As

critics have long pointed out, this reflects Beckford's life-long interest in towers, one that was expressed in 'The Transport of Pleasure' and which culminated in the building of Lansdown Tower, Bath, to Henry Goodridge's designs between 1825 and 1827.³³ The sheer grandeur, scale and the dwarfing of human inhabitants by imposing architectural forms that we see in *Vathek* seem to derive from Beckford's fascination with Giovanni Battista Piranesi's illustrations (Figure 16.7), an interest, it has been postulated, that was ignited by his father's large collection of the Italian's prints.³⁴ The influence of Piranesi on Beckford's architectural imagination is certainly evident in his printed but suppressed *Dreams, Waking Thoughts, and Incidents* (1783), the travelogue in which Beckford imaginatively adorns the blank German landscape with castles 'in the style of Piranesi',³⁵ and then later, before the Doge's Palace in Venice, imaginatively visualises and then draws 'chasms and subterraneous hollows, the domain of fear and torture, with chains, rocks, wheels, and dreadful engines, in the style of Piranesi'.³⁶ Similar Piranesi-inspired scenes of lofty and subterraneous architectural space recur in *Vathek*, though augmented here by eighteenth-century accounts of the sublime effects of grand and imposing architecture in writers such as John Dennis.

At Fonthill Abbey, sublime architectural grandeur was conveyed by its size. It was conceived on the scale of an exceptionally endowed monastery (such as the nearby Glastonbury), and intended to reflect Beckford's vast sugar-derived wealth that, at least initially, ensured him a handsome income. Although Beckford claimed that it had cost him £273,000 to realise, Fonthill is thought to have cost the substantially larger amount of £400,000, and has fittingly been styled by one modern critic as the work of a megalomaniac wishing to secure immortality for himself.³⁷ There is a striking connection, here, between Beckford's unbridled architectural imagination in *Vathek* and that realised in Wiltshire. By 1790, Beckford's thoughts about how to spend his income had settled firmly upon architecture. His announcement that 'I am growing rich, and mean to build Towers, and sing hymns to the powers of Heaven on their summits' resonates uncannily with the 'insolent curiosity' of the Caliph at the tower of Alkoremi to 'extort from the stars the decrees of his destiny'.³⁸ Wyatt's preliminary sketches for Fonthill (see Chapter 4, Figures 4.15 and 4.16) clearly illustrate, in turn, this ambition, and demonstrate the tower's centrality to, and dominance over, the remainder of the already palatial Abbey.³⁹ In Beckford's novel as in his house, towers are the architectural manifestations of hubris and overreaching ambition, characteristics that his architectural imagination simultaneously celebrates and censures.

The design of Fonthill changed considerably over the following years: with the dismantling of Fonthill Spensens between 1801 and 1807, the Abbey was to become Beckford's principal residence.⁴⁰ Wyatt cautioned against this, saying that 'much blame would be thrown on him as the adviser', to which Beckford replied, 'You are older than I am, yet I have lived long enough not to mind what the world says.'⁴¹ The Abbey's designs became increasingly ambitious and extensive in response to a new-found need for accommodation. Once again, the parallels

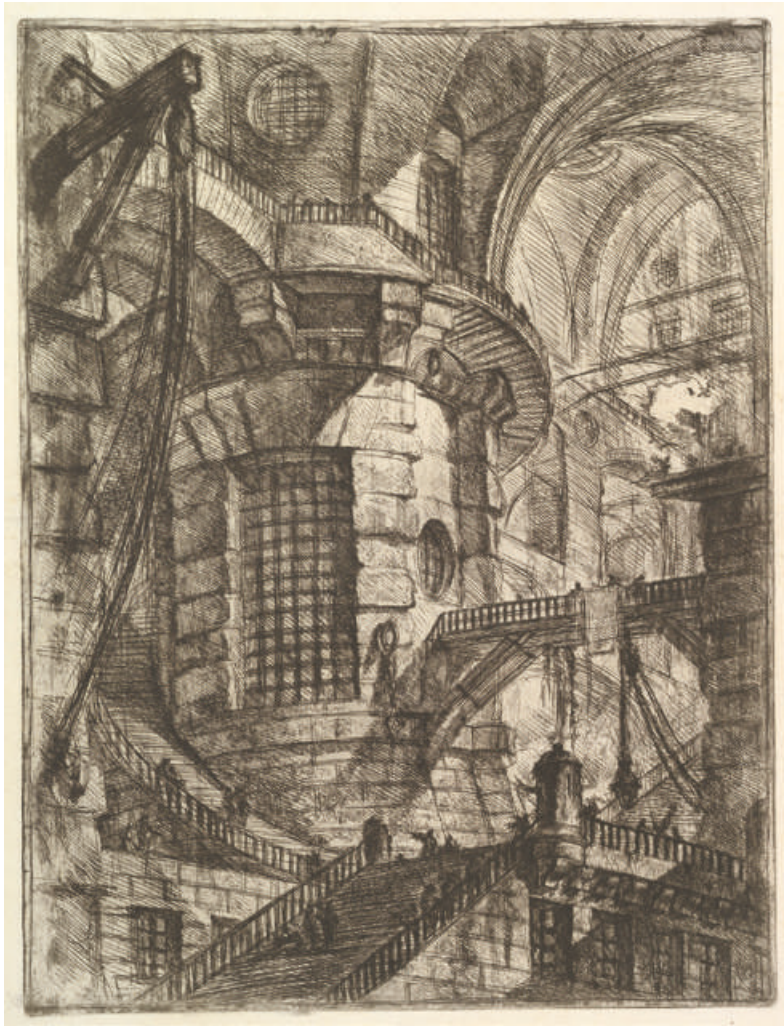


Fig. 16.7 Giovanni Battista Piranesi, *The Round Tower*, from '*Carceri d'invenzione*', ca. 1749–50.

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with *Vathek* are patent: like *Vathek*, who extends and redevelops the Palace that he inherits from his father, Beckford at Fonthill wished to expand, exceed and improve upon the scale and ostentation of his inherited Palladian pile. Like Beckford and *Vathek*, Walpole's work at Strawberry Hill had been driven by similar aims; its Gothic Revivalist architecture was to a large extent motivated by the desire to exceed paternal architectural example. Wyatt's proposal for the expanded Abbey, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1798, depicts Fonthill with a Salisbury Cathedral-like projection and spire towering over the expansive north and south

wings, a structure that quite literally reaches up to the heavens.⁴² A further extended proposal, this time with a 300-foot spire,⁴³ demonstrates the sheer insatiability of Beckford's architectural ambition, the ambition hinted at in his letter from 1790 and registered in Wyatt's reservations concerning his ability to satisfy it.⁴⁴ For Beckford, Vathek's folly in erecting such a tower, and his subsequent consignment to a lifetime of perpetual yearning in Eblis's hell-like depths, did not serve as sufficient warning about the dangers of over-reaching. Here too, it would seem, Beckford regarded his novel and his home as discrete, rather separate entities. Almost certainly, he could not emphasise the continuities between the two without heaping upon himself the damnation and suffering meted out to the Caliph at the narrative's end.

Nevertheless, misfortune did, indeed, strike Fonthill when, in May 1800, the crossing-tower collapsed. Undaunted, the ever-opportunistic Beckford seized upon the catastrophe as the occasion to create an even more ambitious residence: 'We shall rise again more glorious than ever', he wrote to Sir Isaac Heard on 21 May 1800, 'provided the sublime Wyatt will graciously design to bestow a little more commonplace attention upon what is supposed to be his favourite Structure'.⁴⁵ 'The Crash and the Loss', he insouciantly continued, 'sound magnificently in the Newspaper, I neither heard the one nor feel the other'.⁴⁶ In December of the same year, Beckford hosted the famous party for Lord Nelson and Lady Hamilton, by all accounts a sumptuous and extravagant event that prompted reporters and commentators to compare Fonthill Abbey to the Caliph's splendid Palace of Alkoremi. To Beckford's dissatisfaction, however, the house remained incomplete one year later. Urged into action by the frustrated client, Wyatt is reported as wishing to assure Beckford that he would 'do all in his power to forward the work at the Abbey so as to make them ready by the spring', promising to be at Fonthill 'by the end of this Month [December 1802] to see how all goes on & to settle any things that may be wanted'.⁴⁷ Progress was eventually forthcoming, and Wyatt created a suite of extravagant Gothic parade rooms on Fonthill's *piano nobile*. Of these rooms, the most impressive were the Abbey's north and south arms, King Edward's Gallery (see [Chapter 4 Figure 4.19](#)) and St Michael's Gallery (see [Chapter 4 Figure 4.17](#)) respectively. Since the space was so vast that it could not be heated, Fonthill's western limb, the cavernous Great Hall in which Nelson and Lady Hamilton were entertained, was later converted into the state entrance.⁴⁸ That the Abbey's proportions and decorative wealth had ironically become, in effect, a realisation of the Caliph's Palace in *Vathek* did not escape the shrewd John Rutter in 1823: 'The lofty tower now distinguishes the centre of an immense line of other towers and curtains', he wrote, 'stretching to the north and south, plainly indicating how much we have yet to explore the interior'; 'As we pass the threshold, the height of the archways, and the dimensions of the doors, are felt with surprise'.⁴⁹ Fonthill, it was clear, was as vast and sublime a spectacle as that described in the pages of Beckford's romance, but it was the underlying work of Beckford's architectural imagination that drew the two together.

The parallels between these two different but related expressions of Beckford's creativity do not end here: the Abbey, as William North's observation of 1819 made clear, also demonstrated notable similarities with the Hall of Eblis in *Vathek*. Eblis's watch towers, the narrator notes, 'ranged before the ruins of an immense palace, whose walls were embossed with various figures';⁵⁰ as the moon dilates on 'a vast platform', so it reveals 'the shades of the lofty columns which reached from the terrace almost to the clouds'.⁵¹ Early designs for Fonthill mirrored and repeated this mass of attenuated, ever-receding towers: as Rutter observes, 'designs were ordered to be prepared for a grand range of towers, to run direct eastwards from the Lancaster Tower; another and another succeeded each, and were successively demolished, until finally they shrunk into the small, but internally beautiful adjuncts of the Sanctuary and Oratory'.⁵² More acutely, when *Vathek* descends into the subterranean Hall of Eblis, he is struck by the 'grandeur of the surrounding objects' that 'extended their view to those at a distance', discovering in the gloom 'rows of columns and arcades, which gradually diminished, till they terminated in a point radiant as the sun, when he darts his last beams athwart the ocean'.⁵³ Although Beckford's Abbey lacks the columnar architecture described here – its lengthy arms, St Michael's and King Edward's Galleries, are Gothic rather than Classical in design – the prospect from Fonthill's central crossing (or Octagon) along St Michael's Gallery nevertheless simulates the effect described in the novel, particularly given that the gallery terminated with a sun-like oriel window designed to admit more light. Some impression of this effect can be gauged in the plate in Rutter's *Delineations* that depicts the view from the south end of St Michael's Gallery towards the Crossing and King Edward's Gallery (Figure 16.8).

The party at Fonthill Splendens

By Beckford's own admission, and as scholars have long pointed out, the Hall of Eblis sections in *Vathek* were directly inspired by a Christmas and coming-of-age party that he hosted at Fonthill Splendens in late 1781. The manuscript sources of this information are worth returning to, revealing, as they do, not only what has often been taken to be the fiction's primary point of architectural origin, but also the extent to which Beckford framed this event, both at the time and later on in his life, as the acute realisation of that particular nexus of space, intimacy, transgressive desire and sensory pleasure that, as we have argued, comprise the foundational terms of his architectural imagination. Having turned 21 only the month before, Beckford in a letter of 19 November 1781 to Louisa Pitt-Rivers enthusiastically discussed the preparations that Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg had been making for the staging of 'a mysterious something' at Splendens, 'a mysterious something', the letter continues, that, in the artist's 'own unhallowed words', 'eye has not yet seen or hearts of man conceived'.⁵⁴ Looking back on the event in a subsequent letter to Louisa in March 1782, Beckford, while urging his



Fig. 16.8 W. Finley, *Interior of St Michael's Gallery [at Fonthill Abbey], Looking Across the Octagon into the King Edward's Gallery*. Plate 7 from John Rutter, *Delineations of Fonthill and its Abbey*, 1823.

Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

correspondent to take no heed of the malicious rumours that transpired in its wake, made nostalgic reference to 'our orientalisms last December at Fonthill', recalling fondly 'those more fortunate retired hours' that the two passed 'immured in the Turkish chamber – when joy thrilled in every vein and every glance we cast

on the vaulted cieling [sic], glowing with saffron light, reminded us of the subterranean retreat of the princess of the Isle of Ebony in the tale of the 3 Calenders'.⁵⁵

In these letters of late 1781 and early 1782, then, we see a reiteration of the same fantasy that Beckford had expressed in 'The Transport of Pleasure' manuscript some four years earlier: the withdrawal of two illicitly connected individuals into a richly appointed architectural space, indulging there in the celebration of sensory and intellectual pleasure. Though not the queer romance of Beckford and Cozens his tutor, this retreat is equally transgressive and clandestine, for Louisa Pitt-Rivers was Beckford's senior by several years and the wife of his cousin, Sir Peter Beckford. The scandal surrounding the episode would subsequently play a role in ushering Beckford into a more respectable marriage with Lady Margaret Gordon in May 1783. Added to this scenario in the letters is Beckford's persistent fascination with impossible architectural forms, with structures that, as in *The Vision* and *Vathek*, have yet to be conceived and seen on earth: doors lead to passages, and passages to other passages, eventually combining into a fantastical architectural space that is impossible to fathom. As in 'The Transport of Pleasure', the scene, with its references to the Isle of Ebony and the three Calenders, is also couched in literary reference, a conflation of two separate stories from *The Arabian Nights' Entertainments*.

When, on 9 December 1838 (approximately 57 years later), the aged Beckford added a lengthy manuscript note to these letters to Louisa, his memories assumed even greater fanciful proportions. 'Immured we were "au pied de la letter" [literally] for three days following', he recalls, 'doors & windows so strictly closed that neither common day light [sic] nor commonplace visitors could get in or even peep in.'⁵⁶ '[T]he solid Egyptian hall', the note continues, 'looked as if hewn out of a living rock, the line of apartments of apparently endless passages extending from it – on either side – were all vaulted – an interminable stair case [sic], which when you looked down it appeared as deep as the well in the pyramid – & when you looked up was lost in vapour, led to suites of stately apartments gleaming with marble pavements – as polished as glass.'⁵⁷ '[N]o wonder', Beckford writes, 'such scenery inspired the descriptions of the halls of Eblis – I composed *Vathek* immediately upon my return to town thoroughly embued [sic] with all that passed at Fonthill during this voluptuous festival.'⁵⁸

A celebration of youth, beauty and the delights of all the five senses in an impossible, Piranesi-like architectural space: there is nothing quantifiably different in Beckford's memories of the festivities of December 1781 from the fantasies that he had expressed in 'The Transport of Pleasure' and, indeed, in *Vathek*. While his depiction of the Hall of Eblis in the novel certainly attests to just how formative this party at Fonthill Splendens was, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that it was simply the actualisation of the constitutive terms of Beckford's deeper, more pervasive imaginative architectural 'complex'. If not, the letters of 1781–2 and the note of 1838 certainly framed it as such.

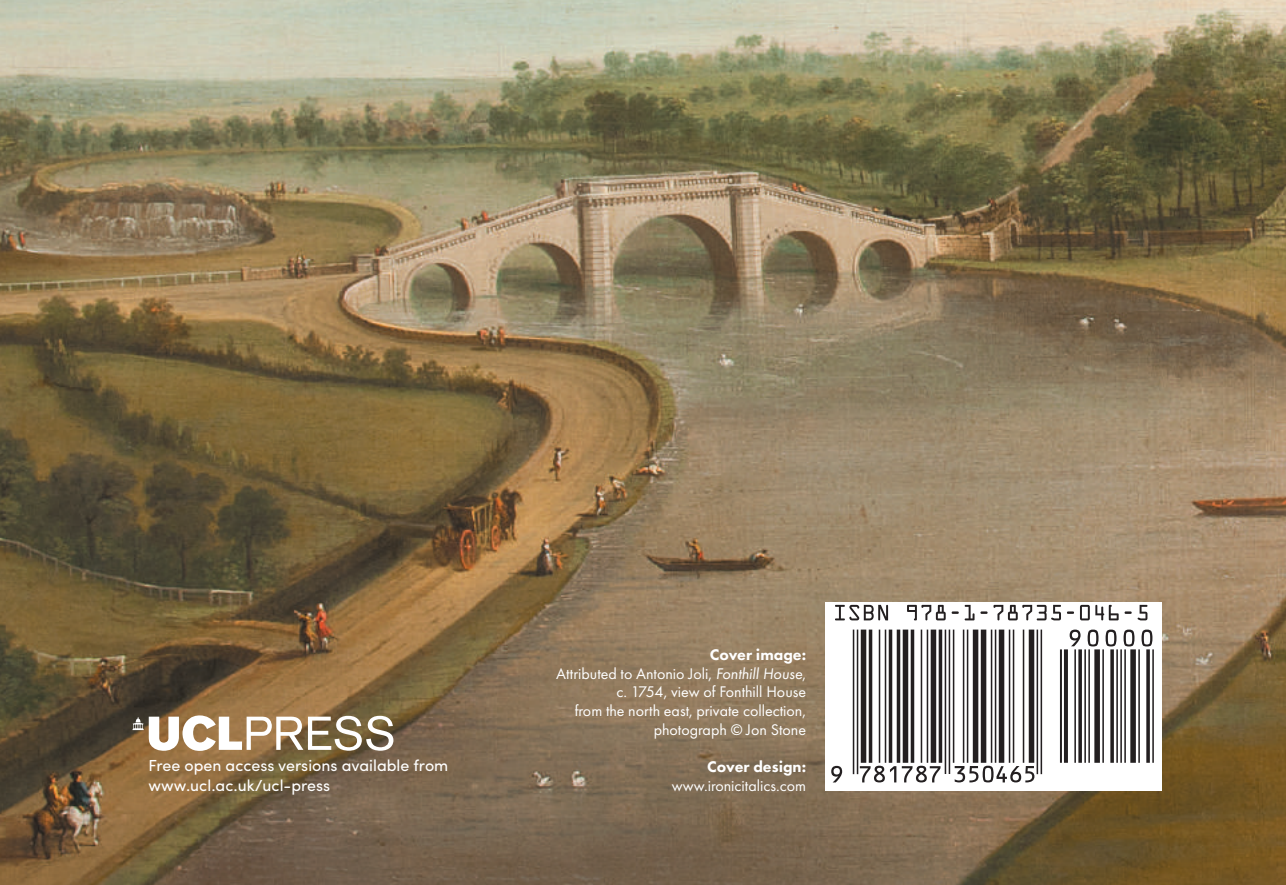
Beckford intimated as much in that revealing conversation that he had with Cyrus Redding upon the occasion of their first meeting at Lansdown Tower in 1835. 'Old Fonthill', Beckford noted, 'had a very ample, lofty, loud echoing

hall, one of the largest in the kingdom. Numerous doors led from it into different parts of the house, through dim, winding passages.⁷⁵⁹ While this certainly informed his writing of the closing sections of *Vathek*, the Hall of Eblis, he now claims, had been largely ‘generated’ by his own creative faculty, his imagination ‘magnifying’ and ‘colouring’ the Palladian spaces of the father’s home with the ‘Eastern character’ with which the son had long been enamoured. In Redding’s account, the Christmas party of 1781 is merely the catalyst to a much more generative process of imaginative engagement. Finally figured here as the ‘impulse’ of his ‘own mind’, *Vathek* is one manifestation of Beckford’s extraordinary architectural imagination, an expression of the same creative energy with which he approached the design and construction of Fonthill Abbey, the same singular and vital principle that drove and informed Beckford’s life and work from the earliest to the latest of days.

Fonthill, in Wiltshire, is traditionally associated with the writer and collector William Beckford who built his Gothic fantasy house called Fonthill Abbey at the end of the eighteenth century. The collapse of the Abbey's tower in 1825 transformed the name Fonthill into a symbol for overarching ambition and folly, a sublime ruin. Fonthill is, however, much more than the story of one man's excesses. Beckford's Abbey is only one of several important houses to be built on the estate since the early sixteenth century, all of them eventually consumed by fire or deliberately demolished, and all of them oddly forgotten by historians. Little now remains: a tower, a stable block, a kitchen range, some dressed stone, an indentation in a field.

Fonthill Recovered draws on histories of art and architecture, politics and economics to explore the rich cultural history of this famous Wiltshire estate. The first half of the book traces the occupation of Fonthill from the Bronze Age to the twenty-first century. Some of the owners surpassed Beckford in terms of their wealth, their collections, their political power and even, in one case, their sexual misdemeanours. They include Charles I's Chancellor of the Exchequer, and the richest commoner in the nineteenth century. The second half of the book consists of essays on specific topics, filling out such crucial areas as the complex history of the designed landscape, the sources of the Beckfords' wealth and their collections, and one essay that features the most recent appearance of the Abbey in a video game.

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