LITERATURE AND HOMOSEXUALITY
IN THE LATE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY:
WALPOLE, BECKFORD, AND LEWIS

GEORGE E. HAGGERTY

As an epigraph to his novel Howard's End, E. M. Forster chose two words and an ellipsis: "Only connect . . . ." The words themselves bespeak a kind of limited hope, and the dots suggest a reticence about what form that hope will take. Within the novel, however, the heroine Margaret Schlegel amplifies the words in an attempt to convince her friend of "the salvation that was latent in his own soul":

Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of their isolation that is life to either, will die.¹

I propose in this essay to show how this challenge of Margaret Schlegel's—of Morgan Forster's, if you will—addresses the literary dilemma which has beset gay novelists since the eighteenth century and to suggest the particular ways in which it can illuminate the work of three novelists of the late eighteenth century, Walpole, Beckford, and Lewis. These authors were homosexual—as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick says, "Beckford notoriously, Lewis probably, Walpole iffily"²—and my intention here is to explore the nature of their fictions and to suggest the degree to which their sexuality gives rise to recurring themes and literary obsessions.

As I have argued elsewhere, connecting "the prose and the passion" was for the Gothic novelists a challenge for the most part beyond their powers.³ Forster's epigraph, however, offers new insight into the tension between the public world and private experience in the Gothic novel and begins to suggest the personal nature of the Gothic literary dilemma. If Gothic novelists founder on an inability to find meaningful public form for their private obsessions,
the urgency of private meaning nevertheless gives these novels a peculiar
and at times unsettling power. To explore the nature of passion in these
novels is to confront at once the most deeply personal and the most vividly
literary concerns. "The prose and the passion," in other words, exist in an
uneasy relation, the former distorting and at times falsifying the latter for the
purposes of popular sensationalism; and the latter undermining and at times
perverting the former in the attempt to arrive at a kind of resolution.

Forster's allusion to "the beast and the monk" offers an even more
precise description of the shape of this internal struggle. The monastic and
the beastly not only provide the conventional vocabulary within which works
such as The Monk operate but also suggest the very nature of the response to
experience that their authors explore. Indeed, these writers defy the terms of
realistic expectation so often throughout their novels that no suitable formal
resolution of such extremes is possible. Perhaps this failure is a mark of
aesthetic debility, but it seems equally likely that a refusal to offer a convincing
resolution was at least partly an act of both personal frustration and political
defiance. The conventional assortment of Gothic atrocities—incest, necrophilia,
necromancy, murder, and other forms of abuse—in other words, hint at a
kind of desperation. The implications of that desperation is our subject here.

If we were to look beyond the eighteenth century, we should begin to
discern the shape of a development in many ways reflective of the personal
histories of gay people themselves. Happily, psychologists can now discuss
the stages of personality development in gay people as largely movement
from suppressed or mis-directed anger and self-contempt, through various
stages of experimental and provisional self-awareness, finally to full self-
acceptance and a degree of public self-assertion. Later writers such as James,
Forster himself, Isherwood, and Baldwin, suggest that this personal analogy
might be a legitimate model for the history of gay fiction. For although each
of these writers plays out within his own oeuvre some version of the drama
of personality development described above, each represents as well a subtly
more advanced stage of sexual self-assertion. Of course there are social factors
which in part account for the gradual emergence of the "gay writer," but the
development of literary forms itself suggests the gradual steps toward liberation.
Although the writers under consideration here fall for historical as well as
personal reasons into the earliest stages of the model, the terms in which
they express sexuality in their fictions are as varied and interesting as those
of any of the great writers who followed them.

The rich flowering of homosexual creativity during the last half of the
eighteenth century can be variously explained. Sedgwick claims that the
"Gothic novel crystallized for English audiences the terms of a dialectic between
male homosexuality and homophobia," suggesting both that homosexuality
was a recognized category and that the social response to homosexuality was
coherent and far-reaching. In doing so, she is usefully refining the study of
Alan Bray, who describes the emergence of a recognizably homosexual

168
subculture throughout the eighteenth century (and before) as well as the secularized "pogroms" which attempted to suppress or terrorize the members of that subculture. In any case, the eighteenth century was a time when both homosexual identity and homophobic response were achieving something like their "Victorian" configuration. As Sedgwick states, "once the secularization of terms that Bray incisively traces began to make 'the homosexual' available as a descriptive category of lived experience, what had happened was not only that the terms of a newly effective minority oppression had been set, but that a new and immensely potent tool had become available for the manipulation of every form of power that was refracted through the gender system—that is, in European society, of virtually every form of power."  

Such a social situation begins to explain the kind of tension I have suggested exists within the novels of Walpole, Beckford, and Lewis. It is impossible to chronicle the suffering that went into the creation of the Gothic novel, but the very emergence of anti-homosexual feeling, so evident, for instance, in the case of Beckford, hints at the source of such misery. Jeffrey Weeks could almost be speaking about the Gothic itself when he says: "A harmless pleasure can become the gateway to nameless hells when for whatever reasons it begins to carry a significant symbolic meaning." It is impossible to say whether what Foucault calls "the setting apart of the 'unnatural' as a specific dimension in the field of sexuality" had achieved its final form in the last decades of the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, the novels we are considering suggest the emergence of a "significant symbolic meaning" for both sexuality and the unnatural.  

What we think of as the Victorian configuration of organized repression coupled with lurid "secret" lives—the fear of sexuality on the one hand and the struggle for sexual expression on the other—was nurtured and given its ghoulish strength in the crenellated castles and subterranean vaults which the Gothic novel popularized. Sexuality in the Gothic novel is harrowing in its "aberrant" nature and in its association with the perversion of power. The homosexual basis for such fantasy is surely no accident. If Sedgwick is correct in asserting that "the Gothic unspeakable was a near-impenetrable shibboleth for a particular conjunction of class and male sexuality," we must remember, too, that what is spoken in these works constitutes the first whole-scale attempt to articulate the relation of self and society that any member of a sexual minority must experience. The novels of Walpole, Beckford, and Lewis, as I hope to show, can be seen as an attempt to come to terms with the kinds of inner conflict that the emerging crisis of homosexuality made inevitable. The disjunction of public values and private meaning so basic to the Gothic novel becomes the final source of horror in these works: the beast and the monk remain isolated and mutually destructive.  

According to Horace Walpole's editor and biographer, no concrete evidence of his homosexuality exists. The explicit sexual references in Walpole's correspondence with Lord Lincoln and his cousin Conway, are dismissed by
W. S. Lewis, with perhaps a hint of shrillness: "a handful of letters written in extravagant high spirits in the manner of the time are not proof [of homosexuality]." However, when we find Walpole posing as one of Lincoln's mistresses ("instead of desiring you to have done loving me, I am going to ask something much more difficult to comply with—pray continue to love me; I like it vastly"), we must wonder where the burden of proof is to lie. The "P. P." with which Walpole signs this letter and which poses for his biographer an impenetrable mystery, might for us signify the "unspeakable" physical basis of the relation between these two men, the penis itself.  

The Castle of Otranto (1764), the first English Gothic novel, tells the story of scandalous political usurpation and sexual compulsion in a medieval Italian castle. "I waked one morning in the beginning of last June from a dream," Walpole tells us, of "an ancient castle" and "a gigantic hand in armour," and so the Gothic novel was born. The appearance of the mangled limbs of a dishonored prince sets a definite tone of uneasiness in The Castle of Otranto—the novel opens with the horrifying discovery that the son of Manfred (the usurping prince) has been crushed beneath a gigantic helmet in the courtyard—and much of the action of the work is played out in and around such threatening reminders of Manfred's abuse of authority.

Dismembered bodies and bleeding statues, however, are only a small part of what is harrowing about Otranto. Manfred's political ambition is explained by emotional instability and sexual compulsion different in kind from that found in other novels of the period. His attempt to seduce his son's fiancée Isabella, for instance, and then his outrage when she refuses to submit to his incestuous proposals suggest that the quality of emotional upheaval is at least distinctive. Isabella's physical fear of Manfred is reflected in the imposing presence of the castle itself:

An awful silence reigned throughout those subterraneous regions, except now and then some blasts of wind that shook the doors she had passed, and which grating on the rusty hinges were re-echoed through that long labyrinth of darkness. Every murmur struck her with new terror;—yet more she dreaded to hear the wrathful voice of Manfred urging his domestics to pursue her.

The "long labyrinth of darkness" aptly suggests the sexual confusion and the intermittent hysteria of Otranto. Isabella's fear of Manfred animates this work with an eery terror which seems at moments to be the work's only rationale. Isabella herself is spared Manfred's revenge, but in his anger and frustration, he plunges his dagger into the bosom of his own daughter, effecting both absolute mastery and a type of incestuous violation in a single stroke. If the implications of such scenes reach beyond the terms of polite literary expression, the very sensationalism which motivates them might seem an affront to eighteenth-century codes of taste and refinement. The excess of passion in Otranto, this refusal to accommodate the emotional energy of the work
to an aesthetic of prose fiction, surely finds it source in the tension within Walpole himself.

For if one of the most cultured gentlemen of the age was trapped in confrontation with himself, the images for which he is now remembered give that confrontation graphic memorability. The crisis in *Otranto* centers on Manfred, whose sexual frenzy and violent self-assertion raise anxieties too powerful to be confined within a novelistic resolution. Walpole’s own father, the great Sir Robert, was but a distant and unattractive figure to the delicate and precocious Horace, who was both sensitive to his father’s neglect of his mother and outraged at his constant violations of his marriage vows.15 It hardly seems likely, however, that the sexually aberrant father/husband figure in *Otranto* is meant solely as revenge for paternal neglect. Far more to the point, it seems to me, is Walpole’s own emotional involvement with this prototypical Gothic villain: Manfred is a powerful but hypocritical ruler who is undone by the force of his own passions. He is overcome by the representatives of “good” in the novel, but the emphasis at the close is nonetheless on loss and isolation and the failure to connect. Manfred attempts to challenge the limits of convention and is summarily destroyed. We are not asked to feel sympathy for Manfred, yet we are impressed by the sheer scope of his badness. He is perhaps the simplest of Gothic villains, but he also comes clearly to represent the complex passions that disrupt the fashionable veneer of this novel.

“The beast and the monk” in *Otranto* are at odds, and their inability to be reconciled brings death and destruction. Walpole leaves the emotion generated within the work unresolved at its close and allows us to apprehend that emotion itself as a metaphor for the unspeakable. Unresolved passion therefore retains meaning in its very inability to be resolved. The novel cries out in pain, but there is no way to answer that cry or even to understand it. As a result, the book undermines its own effectiveness as a novel and even seems to work against itself. The contradictory nature of *Otranto* reflects a conflict inherent in the emergence of a homosexual identity in the kind of antagonistic society I have described. What Walpole instills in *Otranto* from the realm of private fantasy seems only to mark him as a brooding and unsettled genius, unable to come to peace with himself or even to lash out at his social confines with real effect. He turns his sensationalism on no one but himself.

With such a beginning, it is difficult to imagine where the “homosexual” novel could go. If Walpole expresses an intense dissatisfaction with family relations, an inherent horror of the nature of intimacy, and a sense that children are victims of blatant acts of sexual and aggressive brutality, William Beckford, Walpole’s successor as Gothic novelist, exploits these themes and even more sensationalistic ones in his own masterpiece of Gothic fiction. *Vathek* (1786) was conceived and written at a time when his homosexual fantasies were leading him into conflict with society’s version of the “natural”; and even though the love he felt for a young cousin was probably only
expressed in an outpouring of epistolary endearments, their very articulation was enough to condemn him to a life of exile and self-alienation, for scandal needs no evidence to try its victims and convict them. Beckford, universally shunned and even threatened with criminal proceedings, felt compelled to take refuge outside the range of English law.16 "Nothing," he had boldly claimed, "will prevent me daring to be happy in defiance of glory and reputation"; but that happiness was nonetheless elusive, if not totally illusory.17 Public disapproval was a more powerful foe than he had imagined.

If *Vathek* tells the story of open sensuality and perverse pleasures, it also laments the loss of innocence and looks for hope in the happiness of childhood. Beckford said himself as he approached his twenty-first birthday: "I am now approaching the Age when the World in general expect me to lay aside my dreams, abandon my soft illusion and start into Public Life. How greatly are they deceived how firmly am I resolved to be a Child for ever!"18 In so carefully articulating his obsessions, Beckford suggests the basis of unresolved passion in his works. His attempt to defy the conventions of society is doomed to utter and inescapable failure. This failure gives shape to his fictions as well.

The story of *Vathek* is simple, for all its eastern lore and necromantic detail: the title character, the Caliph of the race of the Abbasides, becomes obsessed with secret knowledge and seeks its delights at the expense of his own soul. Besides his own Mephistopheles in the form of Giaour, this eastern Faust is under the spell of his mother, Carathis, who encourages him in his nefarious experiments. She indeed seems so much more wicked than her son that we are not surprised to find her in a position of honor in the infernal halls of Eblis at the novel's close. Certainly we may wonder whether this wicked and domineering female is not a grotesque caricature of the stern Calvinist mother of Beckford himself.19

Vathek's sensuality itself is not a problem for him or his people (they "thought, that a sovereign immersed in pleasure was not less tolerable to his subjects, than one that employed himself in creating them foes") until he gives way to "the insolent curiosity of penetrating the secrets of Heaven."20 Even the Palaces of the Five Senses seem innocent enough until they are locked shut on account of his burning "thirst" for hidden knowledge. When that desire begins to be satisfied, when he has begun his satanic arrangements, the nature of his sensual enjoyments no longer seems so innocent: "insatiable curiosity" leads him to forsake the world of light for the darkness of subterranean fire.

Vathek's approach to the world of forbidden knowledge is littered with corpses and animated with hatred. Children sent to celebrate his munificence are cast into the abyss, and subjects who try to save him from conflagration are themselves thrown onto the sacrificial pyre. If we are tempted to find an unconscious allegory in Vathek's destructive self-indulgence and desire for nefarious satisfaction, we must remember that the premise of the story is
that Mahomet has given Vathek the license to follow his lusts to their logical outcome. Beckford is consciously exploring the nature of his own fantasies, the novel suggests, in a form which precludes repression and renders the public world weak and ineffectual, subject to private desire.

Within this fantasy, Vathek's appetites are a source of positive energy and could even save him from destruction but they cause him to feel already damned. Love, which seems to offer him freedom from the confines of morality, also traps him in a position of concupiscence and shame. This paradox the novel tries not so much to resolve as to bring into vivid relief. Nouronihar brings him therefore both pain and pleasure from the first moment that she enchants his soul:

The fond Monarch pursued her with his eyes, till she was gone out of sight; and then continued like a bewildered and benighted traveller, from whom the clouds had obscured the constellation that guided his way. The curtain of night seemed dropped before him: every thing appeared discoloured. The falling waters filled his soul with dejection, and his tears trickled down the jasmines, he had caught from Nouronihar, and placed in his inflamed bosom. (p. 114)

Later in the book, when at the moment of damnation his heart is literally inflamed, Vathek turns from his beloved in aversion and despair. For Nouronihar is herself tempted by more than the power of Vathek's stature: her own desires are as polluted with the infernal as his own. Their natural attraction, that is, can never be free of the unnatural bond which obsesses them. The pleasure they take in one another is nonetheless fully expressed, and it may indeed have produced a more sustained intimacy were they not goaded on to their nefarious purpose by the motherly ambition of Carathis herself. With such an inspiration, however, they do at last carve a path of destruction to the citadel of their dreams. When for the last time they turn their backs on Mahomet and achieve their wicked triumph, ambition blinds them to the fact that in entering the subterranean regions and fulfilling their ultimate desire, they enter a hell in which they can only be a torment to one another.

In the continuation of Vathek which Beckford planned, other damned souls were to share with the caliph and his bride fully developed stories of pederasty, masochism, necrophilia, and incest. But even in the published edition of Vathek, the basis for such development has already been well established. Sexuality here cannot be distinguished from the illicit desires to which it gives rise. Vathek and Nouronihar are set off from society finally only to imagine their own evil. Beckford's personal history is poignantly reflected in this tale of aberrant desire and final damnation, in which desire itself already implies the terms of the brutal resolution.

Guichenrouz, the only character who escapes the infernal, does so by remaining within "the pure happiness of childhood" (p. 211), in which love remains unsullied by the promptings of desire. Beckford's lament for his
own lost innocence cannot be far from the surface here, nor need we look much further to explain the impetus behind his notorious pederasty. Varhek becomes in a sense a testimony to the horror with which he contemplated his own internal paradox of innocent love and damning desire or reacted to the social repulsion that greeted publication of his sexual self. If this novel is an elaborate metaphor for Beckford's private suffering, it again emphasizes the difficulty of containing that passion within the social form of the novel. Metaphorically this novel may attempt to assert the supremacy of private experience, but the contextualizing force of the novel form itself answers that hope with the bitter reality of the self's isolation in a world of public meaning. Because the passion of the work exceeds the confines of the socially acceptable, it wanders in the no-man's-land of unrealized metaphorical potential. Beckford lived a similar life, exiled and never really becoming the person he could have been.

Matthew G. Lewis, the last of the novelists I will discuss, was neither as repressed as Walpole nor as sensitive as Beckford. Louis F. Peck makes an attempt to evaluate the long-standing tradition that Lewis was homosexual, but finds insufficient evidence either way. Whether or not we accept the implications of Lewis's extravagant and long-term financial and emotional commitment to the young William Kelly as a sign of sexual attachment, however, Byron's description of Lewis as "a middle-aged man who fills up his table with young ensigns, and has looking-glass panels to his book-cases" at least suggests the nature of Lewis's taste.21

The Monk (1795), the novel which catapulted Lewis to notoriety at the age of nineteen, tells a confused and inconsistent story about an hypocritical cleric who falls from a position of unassailable respectability to one of corruption and satanic dissipation. Ambrosio's downfall begins when he notices the resemblance between a portrait of the Madonna in his bedroom and a young monk called Rosario, whom he has befriended. The relation between priest and young novice becomes dangerously intimate: the friar at one point, for instance, takes Rosario's hand and presses it tenderly. Their eyes meet and the two men fall silent. Rosario says he has a confession to make: "The whole wide world cannot furnish an heart, that is willing to participate in the sorrows of mine!"22 The erotic nature of such interchanges is not an accident, nor is the hint of a crisis of sexual identity. For when Rosario is finally convinced that he can confide in Ambrosio, the result is surprising:

"Know then," [he says]. "Oh! how I tremble to name the word! Listen to me with pity, revered Ambrosio! Call up every latent spark of human weakness that may teach you compassion for mine! Father!" continued he, throwing himself at the Friar's feet, and pressing his hand to his lips with eagerness, while agitation for a moment choked his voice; "Father!" continued he in faltering accents, "I am a Woman!" (p. 58)
Rosario thereby becomes Matilda, and in this guise at last confesses her love for Ambrosio. "What I feel for you is love not licentiousness" (p. 59), she says, but within a moment or two Ambrosio perceives that "his heart throbbed with desire" (p. 62), and he has little peace in the remaining three hundred pages of the novel. The ambiguous nature of Rosario/Matilda's sexuality provides a titillating undertone of homoeroticism and a deliberate confusion of sexual roles. More importantly for Lewis, however, the exploration of unbounded licentiousness which follows these first timid hints of sexual expression becomes both revolutionary and subversive. Just like Beckford's eastern caliph, Lewis's repressed Monk becomes the pretext for both sexual fantasy and social retribution. Lewis too must be playing out the drama of his worst fears about himself and his place in society.

Ambrosio's progress from sexual innocent to abandoned sybarite is both rapid and purposeful. "Normal" social relations become fraught with the complications of desire. When Antonia, an innocent young communicant, catches Ambrosio's eye, he becomes so obsessed with her attractions that he will stop at nothing to possess her. Having employed cabalistc arts with which to enter Antonia's bedchamber and render her defenseless against his lust, Ambrosio is interrupted by her mother Elvira, who challenges him. He responds by murdering Elvira in one of the most brutal scenes of eighteenth-century literature: he grabs her, throws her on the bed, stiles her face with pillow, kneels on her stomach and struggles mercilessly as she wraps her arms around him in her final agony, until he realizes that she has become a "Corse, cold, senseless, and disgusting" (p. 304).

More than a hundred pages pass before we discover that this woman with whom Ambrosio is struggling on the bed of his proposed sexual violation is in fact his own mother. The excessive emotion of this scene thereby becomes in retrospect more pointed, and the sensationalism itself is given a rationale. If we are tempted to look for explanations beyond the confines of the novel itself, we can at least remark that for Lewis sexuality seems so deeply rooted in aberrant desire and guilt-ridden fear that no easy expression of sexual identity is possible. The particular implications of incestuous matricide, however, are perhaps not as important to Lewis as the gruesome and horrifying immediate impression of the violence of sexual frustration.

Antonia, Ambrosio's sister, is not spared the incestuous obsession of this unfortunate friar. Towards the close of the novel he discovers her in the underground vault of the Convent of St. Claire (a scene of such vivid horror that the "Mother" superior is literally beaten to a featureless lump when the convent is burned and pillaged in the closing pages of the work). Its scenes of incarceration and deformed authority are themselves suggestive of a violent resistance to patterns of control and the sources of power:

Naturally addicted to the gratification of the sense, in the full vigour of manhood, and heat of blood, He had suffered his temperament to acquire such ascendency, that his lust was become madness. . . . He longed for
the possession of [Antonia’s] person; and even the gloom of the vault, the
surrounding silence, and the resistance which he expected from her, seemed
to give a fresh edge to his fierce and unbridled desires. (p. 380)

After Ambrosio accomplishes Antonia’s “dishonour” in the “violence of his
lustful delirium” (p. 383), he curses her fatal charms and blames her for his
fall from grace. He determines further that she must never leave the dungeon
and that he will seal her in an abandoned sepulcher. When she tries to escape,
he has no recourse but to plunge his dagger twice into her bosom and leave
her “embracing the pillar” which was her cold alternative to his arms (p.
391).

The madness with which The Monk approaches its brutal resolution is
but the final measure of the distance between private and public experience
that these Gothic novelists continuously express in their fictions. In the language
of fiction itself, this madness emerges in the disjunction between tenor and
vehicle that supernatural presences suggest. It is inherent, moreover, in the
break between metaphorical flights of fancy and the contextualizing, normalizing
effect of the novel itself.23 Madness, in other words, is the mode of discourse
which answers the intense private anxieties that these novelists could barely
disguise in their fictions. If meaning looms so large for them that it overcomes
any sense of context, it can at least suggest to us the power of their feelings
and the inability of existing social forms to offer them any means of dealing
with themselves.

Our first homosexual novelists, then, offer in their fictions a gruesome
picture of the nature of human experience: corrupt authority, forced
confinement, isolation and torture, secret sins, contorted familial relations,
incest, rape, necromancy, murder—every possible “aberration,” it seems,
but that which would be most appropriate here. These works bespeak a
desperate social vision on the one hand, and on the other a deep sense of
unresolved emotional feeling, both of which violate the terms of conventional
social intercourse and defy the confines of novelistic expression. For all
their dark and brooding sensuality, however, these works are liberating—not
only because they were able to bring such issues—if not the issue—out into
the open, but also because they challenge conservative opinion about both
the nature of literary expression and the terms of “private” experience. If
they do not stand in the so-called “great tradition” of English fiction, that is
only because their expressive power outdistanced their ability to shape a
novelistic structure. The substance of their work had nevertheless a profound
effect on the nature of psychological exploration in the work of the greatest
nineteenth-century authors.
NOTES


5 Sedgwick, p. 92.


10 Sedgwick, p. 95.


15 See Lewis, *Horace Walpole*, pp. 11-12, 16.


18 Melville, p. 96; Fothergill, pp. 95-96.

19 Fothergill, p. 21.

