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**The Ambitious, the Selfish, the Wild:  
Female Violence and Self-Assertion in Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya***

TFM MASTER IN ADVANCED ENGLISH STUDIES: LITERATURE AND CULTURE

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*Meditation on the History of Italy*, Francesco Hayez, 1850. Detail.

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## Abstract

Charlotte Dacre produced what is arguably one of the most surprising and unconventional narratives of the early nineteenth century. *Zofloya, or the Moor* (1806) upsets any binary representation of erotic power as feminine passivity versus masculine violence. The daughter of a Jewish family of moneylenders and radical writers, Dacre penned a collection of gothic verses, *Hours of Solitude* (1805) before publishing her first novel *The Confessions of the Nun of St. Omer*, which most critics agree it was influenced by Matthew Lewis' *The Monk*. The British Critic noted on *The Confessions* that "the moral is good, for it teaches the mischief that arises from the neglect and violation of social duties" (Dec. 1805, 631). However, when Dacre published *Zofloya* one year later, it was received with mixed reactions about the "odious and indecent performance" of her heroine Victoria and her Satanic Moorish servant, Zofloya. (Monthly Literary Recreations, July 1806, 80).

My Master's Dissertation seeks to explore the representation of irresistible femininity in Victoria's character and her resort to violence as a mode of self-assertion. Victoria is a murderous woman driven by a destructive desire who stops at nothing to fulfil her wishes. As the trail of corpses along her way grows, how and why is Victoria de-feminized in the eyes of the reader through a progressive transformation in her physical appearance and emotional reactions? Is Dacre proposing a model of feminine self-assertion that is dangerous for Victoria only or for the world around her? Any tentative answer to these questions, through my analysis of *Zofloya* and its reception, will inform the construction of Dacre's representation of femininity, desire and power in ways that engage with the Gothic genre, the Romantic poetry of the sublime and the sentimental novel. The analysis will also take into account Dacre's choice to ethnicize her heroine, of Italian ascent. The critical case studies on Dacre's work have mostly argued about the extent to which she transcends contemporary representations of gender in her female heroines. My approach follows on these case studies by expounding on how Victoria's physical and moral destruction invites Dacre to suggest a reconfiguration of gender politics that blurs any boundaries between male and female.

**Keywords:** Gothic literature; Gender Studies; gender binary; Eighteenth-century literature

## Introduction

### Charlotte Dacre, the Female Gothic and *Zofloya*

Charlotte Byrne (1782?-1825), better known as Charlotte Dacre, was a British Gothic writer whose works received critical attention by many contemporary literary journals during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Although she is hardly known nowadays, Dacre was widely read by her contemporaries: some of her books underwent a third edition and some were even translated and reached an international audience. Among her readers we find authors such as Byron and Shelley. The latter was “enraptured” by her prose, and modelled both *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne* after *Zofloya*: “...the Rosa-Matildan school, especially a strange wild romance entitled *Zofloya, or The Moor*, a Monk-Lewis production [...] enraptured him. The two novels he afterwards wrote, entitled *Zastrozzi* and [*St. Irvyne*,] *The Rosacrucian*, were modelled after this ghastly production” (Medwin 1913:25). Byron was inspired by her in his juvenilia (McGann 1990:26) and dedicated a quartet to her in “English Bards and Scotch Reviewers”: “Far be from me unkindly to upbraid/ The lovely ROSA’s prose in masquerade/ Whose strains, the faithful echoes of her mind/ Leave wondering comprehension far behind” (1809:519). Dacre made an impression not only on two of the major Romantic poets, but also authored two books of poetry, four gothic novels, provoked numerous scandalised reviewers, and had the ability to instil bewilderment and perplexity in her readers, even today.

Dacre, who was born Charlotte King and later became Byrne by marriage, was the daughter of the radical writer and banker John King, a well-known figure in the literary circles of eighteenth century London. King made the personal acquaintance of William Godwin, as well as Byron and Shelley. Dacre’s career began in collaboration

with her sister Sophia, with whom she published a volume of gothic poetry in 1798, *Trifles of Helicon*. Later on, under the pseudonym Charlotte Dacre, she published *Hours of Solitude* (1805), her first solo incursion in the literary world, quickly followed by the gothic tale *Confessions of the Nun of St Omer* (also in 1805). By 1806 Dacre published what would become her best known work: *Zofloya; or, the Moor*. It was followed by *The Libertine* (1807) and *The Passions* (1811). Apart from those, Dacre was also a sporadic contributor to the *Morning Post* and the *Morning Herald* from 1802 to 1815, where she published poetry under the pseudonym Rosa Matilda, allegedly a tribute to Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*. In the 1820s she published the "naïvely royalist" (Baines, 2015) *George the Fourth, a Poem*. I quote Baines's definition here to highlight the fact that placing Dacre within a political spectrum is, at the very least, problematic. Although she was part of a Jewish minority and the daughter of an outspoken oppositionist, Dacre's political poetry is conservative. Stylistically, Dacre was closer to the gothic of de Sade and Lewis's as well as the short-lived Della Cruscan<sup>1</sup> poetic school, ridiculed by some for its "excessively effeminate and self-indulgently sensual" poetry (Craciun 1997:14). Dacre would be criticized for being excessively feminine, when her poetry points in fact to representations of women which are "dangerously unfeminine" (Craciun 1997:15).

*Zofloya, or, The Moor: A Romance of the Fifteenth Century* (1806) is Dacre's best known novel, and the only one to be found in print nowadays (Oxford World Classics and Broadview Press). It sold 754 of 1,000 copies in six months (Craciun 1997:10), it was translated into French and German and it was made into a chapbook, renamed *The Daemon of Venice*, in 1810. The novel offers a suggestive portrayal of female sexuality and violence, embodied in the figure of an amoral psychopath

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<sup>1</sup> Della Cruscanism was an eighteenth-century school of poetry known for "its exalted feelings, densely ornamental diction, and its addiction to pseudonyms ending in Matilda." (Michasiw 2008:x)

protagonist, Victoria di Loredani. Victoria seems to be closer to the Romantic hero-villains than to her contemporary heroines: “many texts demand empathy with the agonised villain who is now also a warped hero (or, in the case of *Zofloya*, a heroine) and we are asked to focus through his or her desire and passion [...] They are outsiders and tend not to be associated with institutionalised power” (McEvoy 2007:24). *Zofloya*’s originality in the representation of its Female Gothic (as defined by Ellen Moers) is derived from the shift between heroine and villainess: the archetypal virtuous and victimised heroine –Lilla- is here relegated to a secondary place, and the murderous villainess –Victoria- is placed in the centre of the stage. *Zofloya* can be read as a rewriting of Lewis’s *The Monk*, replacing its male protagonist with a woman or, a less popular view, of Radcliffe’s *The Italian* (Haggerty 2004:166). But Dacre not only makes a “mother-hating triple murderess who dreams of sexual congress with a demon of colour” her protagonist, she allows her to commit crime after crime and go unrepentant and unpunished and with no moral reprimand until the very end; and she also makes the narrator be, if not supportive of, at least sympathetic with Victoria’s misdeeds (Davison 2009:40, Michasiw 2008:x).

The contemporary reviews of *Zofloya* were scandalized by the graphic sexuality work of a female writer. *The Annual Review and History of Literature* 5 [1807] wrote: “There is a voluptuousness of language and allusion, pervading these volumes” (Davison 2009:35), and “there is an exhibition of wantonness and harlotry which, we should have hoped, that the delicacy of a female mind, would have been shocked to imagine” (Gamer 1999:1052). *The Monthly Literary Recreations* [1806] said “there has seldom appeared a romance so void of merit, so destitute of delicacy, displaying such disgusting depravity of morals, as the present” (Craciun 1997:261).

In order to contextualise the novel and its author in a historical and literary framework, we must re-examine the rise of the woman novelist in order to ascertain the relationship between women, genre and social discourse. Jane Spencer argues that the rise of the novel is essentially linked to the rise of female voices adopting this genre as means for the articulation of gender specific, socio-political concerns (Spencer 1986), therefore implying that the rise of the female writer springs both from opposition and as vindication. Spencer explains that women novelists usually responded in three manners to their circumstances: they could assume a radical political view, as Wollstonecraft or Charlotte Smith did. They could also conform to a domestic role, as it was the case with domestic fiction writers, who created a subversive space in which they celebrated feminine virtues such as self-sacrifice and restraint. This is subversive, while being in appearance compliant, because it gives voice to a female subjectivity. Thirdly, women could “try to escape from the need either to conform or protest through a fantasy that transformed their feminine position.” (Spencer 1986:107). Spencer goes on to claim that the romance is “a fantasy of female power, through which women could escape in imagination from the reality of their oppression” (Spencer 1986:187).

“Female Gothic” was coined and defined by Ellen Moers as “the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic” (Moers 1978:90). The critic understood female gothic texts as a “coded expression of women’s fears of entrapment within the domestic and the female body” (Moers 1978:90). However, Moers’s term has proved too broad and inconsistent. Other categories have spurned from the umbrella term, such as Diane Long Hoeveler’s ‘Gothic Feminism’, developed in *Gothic Feminism: The Professionalization of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës*. Hoeveler’s describes how women adopted the genre to carry out a “redefinition of sexuality and power in a gendered, patriarchal



society; [female gothic writers] invented [their] own particular form of feminism.” Hoeveler goes on, following Spencer’s aforementioned argument of fantasy as an escape: “In the female gothic she creates what she thinks is an alternative, empowering female-created fantasies. In her triumphant act of self-creation she rejects her subjugation and status of ‘other’ whether object of absence, and refuses to subscribe passively to confining male-created ideologies of “the woman as subject” (Hoeveler 1998:n.p.).

According to Milbank, the scholarly interest in gothic fiction in the 1970s and 180s coincided with the second wave of feminism (Milbank 2007:155). I chronologically contextualise the academic interest in gothic texts because, with the exception of a brief mention by Montague Summers, it initiates *Zofloya*’s modern critical consideration. Summers dedicates three out of twenty-eight pages to Dacre in the introduction to the 1928 Fortune Press facsimile edition, and places the author third in the Gothic writers’ canon. Dacre was rescued from critical oblivion in 1974, with Devendra P. Varma’s introduction to the Arno Press facsimile reprint of the novel. In 1986, Ann H. Jones not only corrects the inaccuracies of the previous biographical accounts on Dacre, she also states for the first time the potentially feminist value of the novel. She writes in *Ideas and Innovations: Best Sellers of Jane Austen’s Age*: “Dacre brought the psychological Gothic to bear on women’s passions.” (Jones 1986:243) and strongly defends the novel’s originality against the critical tradition –inaugurated by Summers in “Byron’s Lovely Rosa” in *Essays in Petto* (1928)- that considers it no more than a rewriting of *The Monk*. Carol Margaret Davison states that the novel “can serve as an exemplary focal point in the assessment of contemporary Female Gothic theory because of its unique and highly controversial nature” (Davison 2009:34). Indeed, there is no scholarly consensus as to where does *Zofloya* stand, especially in terms of gender

and feminism. The novel has been considered both a transgressive feminist text and a misogynistic moralistic one. In 1994, Clery stood in opposition to the 1990s feminist critical trend to regard *Zofloya* as transgressive in contrast with the historical constricting female context when she “does not treat *Zofloya* as a work that has to be excused or explained as anomalous given its point of production” and “underscores [its] prominent role of passion” (Davison 2009:36). Four years later, Hoeveler stated that the novel and its author are misogynistic. She argued that while Dacre would have had access to Wollstonecraft’s writings and in *Zofloya* she “produced a virtual parody of Wollstonecraft’s ideas, albeit in a perverted form, to a larger audience” her novel is also “racist, xenophobic and misogynistic- as politically correct as any early nineteenth century text.” (Hoeveler 1997:185). In the introduction to the 1997 Broadview Press scholarly edition of *Zofloya*, Adriana Craciun offers a new point of view that is in itself an answer to the question the Female Gothic critics have been wondering about since the 1980s: how can we read *Zofloya* as a Female Gothic? Craciun argues that we cannot, basing her claim in the fact that “Victoria is not a female Gothic heroine, nor is *Zofloya*’s plot that of the female gothic: Victoria’s character and her quest are those of the *male* Gothic villain” (Craciun 1997:11). In other words, for Craciun we have been misreading the novel by focusing on the fact that the author is a female and relying on our preconfigured social assumptions on gender. Craciun advocates for a reading of Dacre’s work in which we set the author’s gender apart: “rather than rely on our knowledge of Dacre’s gender [...] or her feminism [...], we re-contextualize Dacre within the tradition she was writing in and against, namely that of Lewis and Sade” (Craciun 1997:13). For Craciun, Dacre writes in the crossroads of the erotic male Gothic and the Della Cruscan over effeminate poetic style, and therefore she cannot be identified with either. Whereas I believe Craciun’s reading of Victoria as a villain

undermines the potentially ground-breaking existence of such a female protagonist, I concur with the author in regarding Dacre's production as a deeply ambiguous and gender-fluid one, and Victoria's quest for self-gratification a transgressive narrative.

In this MA dissertation, I wish to analyse Charlotte Dacre's representation of her protagonist in *Zofloya*, Victoria, especially the forwardness of her sexuality and the extent to which it gradually disempowers her throughout the novel. Following the Gothic tradition of demonization of female sexuality in its villainesses, Dacre places a psychopathic nymphomaniac in the centre of her narrative and allows her sexual desire to overflow, shattering all moral and gendered boundaries. However, it is not the protagonist's destructive desire what I think is most interesting in *Zofloya*, but Victoria's corporeal mutability with regard to the articulation of self-assertion constructed around this overflowing desire. Hence, I will try to answer the following question: To what an extent does Victoria's characterisation upset any normative binary representation of sexual desire as feminine passivity versus masculine violence? Dacre's protagonist retorts from traditionally feminine strategies to accomplish her objectives – such as using her physical attributes or poisoning– to masculine ones, as the escalating intensity of her appetite coincides with an increasing physical violence, whose climatic point is Lilla's brutally vicious murder. This escalating violence coincides with a process of de-feminisation through a masculinised transformation of Victoria's body. Therefore, I argue that (masculine, physical) violence is Victoria's tool of self-assertion. The masculinisation of her physical appearance is suggested by the narrator as the plot advances, up until Victoria herself makes reference to it. Through the analysis of Dacre's representation of femininity and its mutability, I seek to establish how Victoria brings the gender and sexual boundaries to collapse, and what are the intimations in gender politics of not only blurring the gender binary but also driving a masculinised

self-assertion to destruction. My approach, therefore, seeks not to contextualise *Zofloya* within the Gothic or examine its repercussions within the genre, but to analyse the representation of Victoria's sexual drive and how it affects her in terms of gender in materiality. Two authors have devoted their attention to Victoria's masculinisation in these same terms. Craciun's "I hasten to be disembodied" (1995) and James Dunn's "Charlotte Dacre and the Feminization of Violence" (1998). Craciun argues that Victoria's corporeality is "not a metaphor for but a *materialization* of her unnatural, because unfeminine, desires and actions." (Craciun 1995:78). For his part, Dunn explores the violence of female sexual desire in Dacre's heroines, and advocates for Dacre's feminist motivations: "let us make women the subject rather than the object of toxic erotic agony" (Dunn 1998:308). However, none of those approaches has examined self-assertion or the consequences of female masculinisation in terms of gender politics, which is what I propose to do.

## Chapter 1

### **Ascent: The Young, the Ardent, the Self-confident**

The protagonist of *Zofloya*, Victoria di Loredani, is a creature of instinct. Her primitivism, reflected in her boundless passions and quasi-animalistic qualities, clashes with her acute intelligence, directed and limited to the attainment of her immediate objectives. Victoria's awareness of the power over people that her masquerade of femininity confers on her ranks among of the most interesting of her traits. In this chapter I will analyse Victoria's psychology within the "nature versus nurture" debate in order to assess her character, her motivations and the means by which she attains her first objective: Berenza. For this purpose, I shall examine the textual evidence on Victoria's psychology, in an attempt to discern whether or not her character is a consequence of her upbringing. I will also focus on her performing femininity and explore the concept of masquerade. Finally, I shall revise how within the novel, female desire is a form of self-assertion.

In Victoria's first appearance, she is described both as "lovely and haughty" (3), an adjective that alludes to her physical allure together with one that speaks of her rank, pride and, most importantly, of her egotism. Victoria is aware of her beauty and of the power it grants her, a knowledge that makes her non-compliant. In this fashion, Victoria is established from the very beginning in opposition to what Mary Poovey described as the Proper Lady, the embodiment of feminine propriety, an obedient, passive, sexless woman (Poovey 1984). Victoria, however, is intimately aware of this cultural ideal, and she simultaneously rejects it and makes use of it, as we shall see further on. Victoria appears to be possessed of an "unchecked vivacity" (3), a phrase that, albeit common, here points to a vivacity that is untamed, raw, and primal, and therefore describes a person who does not conform to society's standards of decorum. Dacre goes on to

define her as “beautiful and accomplished as an angel, [...] proud, haughty, and self-sufficient- of a wild, ardent, and irrepressible spirit, indifferent to reproof, careless of censure –of an implacable, revengeful, and cruel nature, and bent upon gaining an ascendancy in whatever she engaged” (4). It is interesting to see that these adjectives are set in a scale from positive to progressively negative, with no further comment from the narrator. They emphasise and reiterate the personality traits that make up Victoria’s nature. The term “ascendancy” is crucial and might foreshadow the character’s rise and fall. Although Dacre attempts to justify such a disposition with an overindulgent parental upbringing, it is interesting to see how her brother, Leonardo, with the exact same rearing, follows a path that while seemingly unconventional is very different, even though their lives clash on two occasions. It is said of Leonardo that he is prone to fall into temptation: “this disposition, though it perhaps might never lead him into vice, would prevent him from repelling its inroads with the iron shield of energy” (4). He is described as noble and with a strong sense of family dignity, some traits that Victoria certainly lacks. Their reactions to their mother’s adultery are also different, but consistent with their psychological traits; Victoria only grows wilder and more selfish: “with an unlimited scope for the growth of these dangerous propensities, they bade fair soon to overtop the power of restriction” (14). Dacre insists on her protagonist being “by nature more prone to evil than to good” (28), contradicting her nurture argument. She reflects on how a proper education might have “ameliorated into virtues” (14) Victoria’s vices, and “corrected the evil propensities that were by nature hers” (132), from which it is inferred that those vices were not exclusively the result of her parent’s permissive care. In fact, Victoria is described later on in the novel as a creature, by nature, incapable of affection and prone to cruelty:

The ambitious, the selfish, the wild, and the turbulent were her's. Her's were the *stormy* passions of the soul, goading on to ruin and despair [...] her's was the foaming cataracts, rushing headlong from the rocky steep, and raging in the abyss below! She was not susceptible of a single sentiment, vibrating from a tender movement of the heart: she could not feel gratitude; she could not, therefore, feel affection. She could inflict pain without remorse, and she could bitterly revenge the slightest attempt to inflict it on herself. The wildest passions predominated in her bosom; to gratify them she possessed an unshrinking relentless soul, that would not startle at the darkest crime. (78)

In this description that borders on the satanic, Victoria's character is described allegorically in natural terms, likened to "the foaming cataracts, rushing headlong from the rocky steep, and raging in the abyss below". This communion of female protagonists with the natural world is a significant part of the English Gothic tradition. Dacre infuses Victoria with this "violent sublime" (Craciun 1997:28), which supports the idea of Victoria being a primitive, almost animal creature, incapable of assimilating into society. As Craciun claims: "the true subversive potential of Dacre's female characters lies thus in their mutual annihilation, and in the pleasure [they] find in this destruction" (Craciun 1997:28). Victoria is a creature of wilderness, and as such, is deemed to destruction.

The author also makes a point of her Laurina's (her mother) adventure being not a cause but an excuse for Victoria's vices go unchecked: "thus do vicious minds lay hold of every excuse for the pursuance of evil" (15). Victoria is cruel by nature "Unhappy girl, whom Nature organised when offended with mankind" (78). The nurture argument may be weaker as the rationalisation for either Victoria's character or her subsequent deeds, and I concur with Craciun in saying that "though the bad example set by her mother is repeatedly cited by the narrator as the cause of Victoria's "love of evil," the narrator contradicts herself repeatedly by also offering competing explanations" (Craciun 1997:16).

Having established the nature of Victoria's character, the story moves onto the romantic plot, centred on her relationship with the count Berenza and the difficulties she surmounts in order to be with him. The narrator tells us that "Berenza had awakened in her breast feelings and passions which had till now remained dormant, mighty and strong" (28). We are told that the origin of Victoria's feelings is not love or passion but envy: "an ardent consuming desire to, [like her mother] receive the attentions, listen to the tenderness, and sink beneath the ardent glances of a lover" (28). Dacre insists on establishing a cause-effect relationship between Laurina's adultery and Victoria's actions, writing "such were the baleful effects of parental vice upon the mind of a daughter" (28), but she is not convincing. Victoria is jealous of her mother receiving the attentions of a lover, but there is no reason to believe that this jealousy comes from the mother's example. As previously stated, Victoria is cruel by nature, and being envious would fit in her personality traits. She wants the romantic attention she is denied when, to her surprise, the villain chooses her mother over her (7). As the narrator explains: "Berenza *loved* – Victoria was only roused and *flattered*" (25). Victoria's motivations for pursuing Berenza romantically are, therefore, envy and flattery, never love or passion. She craves the attention, which is again a primitive, irrational motivation. When she encounters an obstacle, ensnaring the count becomes her sole purpose.

This obstacle appears in the form of confinement. The confinement plot is a typically Gothic resource, here marking the definitive break between Victoria and her society, her past and her future. In confinement, Victoria's scheming capacities develop, and she proves to be a very intelligent and resolute character. Victoria's first reaction, is one of rage: "the rage of Victoria knew no bounds" (45). This is -followed briefly, - by an emotional outburst "her passion vented itself in a violent paroxysm of tears" (45), that she quickly represses: "becoming suddenly ashamed of yielding, as she thought it,



to a weakness so ignoble, and angry with herself that the ill treatment of any one should have the power to excite in her either grief or lamentation". She channels this outburst instead into her initial and best-known emotion, rage: "she checked a rising gush, while rage and the most deadly hatred [...] took possession of her" (45). Victoria's anger, although understandable, is unconventional in a young person who has just been abandoned by their mother in a stranger's castle. She experiences an instant of grief that she denies: her tears could be understood as an outlet for her rage, but these may also point at something more revealing, since she quickly subdues them and considers them to be a sign of yielding to a "weakness so ignoble". Victoria's tears might be a sign of frailty traditionally associated with femininity. It follows, then, that this passage shows that for Victoria, any sign of the sociocultural construct of femininity might be based on an alleged weakness of the will: "victory which reason had obtained [...] against her weaker feelings" (46). Moreover, the fact that it is an emotion she has to repress shows how aware she is of not only her femininity but also of the ways in which this femininity, when it overcomes her emotionally, can be perceived as a weakness.

The fact that Victoria's emotional responses are extreme and primal, almost animal, is further emphasised in the escape plot by the narrator associating her with wild animals and animalistic attitudes. She is described as an "untameable hyena, that confinement renders only more fierce" (49), and, upon succeeding in escaping, she passed the night "in common with the race of animal nature" (61). Indeed, her reactions are always extreme, going from rage to ecstatic happiness, and it is only the ones she considers a weakness that she has trained herself to suppress. This makes her terrifying, a trait the reader is only too aware of, because in interaction with others, she performs. Performance is essential to understanding Victoria's character. Although actively rejecting any so-called weaknesses that we might associate with femininity, Victoria is

intimately aware of the sociocultural ideal she is expected to embody, a key fact if she is to use that ideal for her own benefit. As Melissa Bentley says: “Masquerade and dissimulation require an awareness of how one is perceived. They must acknowledge not only how they might be perceived but also how they ought to appear” (Bentley 2010:43). Diane Hoeveler writes that masquerade consists on “a form of male mimicry, a hysterical renunciation of authentic female desire because the woman can only know man’s desire, not her own” (Hoeveler 1998:n.p). The critic argues, then, that in masquerading, women suppress their own desire in order to perform a male ideal, with the objective of obtaining the male’s favour. As Joan Rivière claimed, femininity is “an elaborate construction, a costume, a form of cover that shielded one from the blast furnace of patriarchy” (Rivière cited in Hoeveler 1998:n.p). Luce Irigaray develops Rivière’s idea, arguing that, since femininity itself is a patriarchal construction, it follows that it is a form of masquerade: “what women do in order to recuperate some element of desire, to participate in man’s desire, but at the price of renouncing their own. [...] What do I mean by masquerade? In particular, what Freud calls *femininity*. [A woman] has to enter into a masquerade of femininity, [she has to enter into a] system of values that is not hers” (Irigaray 1977:134). The idea of masquerade, although certainly useful, does not fit perfectly with Victoria. First of all, Victoria’s desire is her own, and can be considered to be what fuels her actions. Victoria’s pursuit of Berenza, and more importantly, of Henriquez, serves the interest of her own sexual drive. Victoria’s strategy of masquerade would respond to her knowledge of the sociocultural boundaries imposed on her sex. However, she does not reject those boundaries, not while they do not interfere in the achievement of her desires. For instance, when she finally finds Berenza, she concentrates all her energies on modelling herself into a woman appealing enough, submissive enough for Berenza to desire: “if a woman can be taught to be

‘proper’, if she can indeed be molded into the perfect manifestation of virtuous femininity, then she can also don the mask of perfect femininity when it suits her interest. [...] Victoria successfully masquerades as a quiet, submissive and loving woman and, as a result, manages to coerce Berenza into loving her” (Gueorguieva 2010:54). However, she does not love him, because, by nature, she is incapable of love: “she did not *love* the scrupulous, the refined Berenza [...] she was by nature unfitted to admit so soft, so pure a sentiment as *real* love. Victoria’s heart was a stranger to every gentle, noble, or superior feeling.” (78). Victoria’s wishes revolve around the idea of being wanted, desired, and admired. Taking what she wants is, at this point, not enough, she will not be satisfied until Berenza desires her –on her own terms.

Victoria manipulates Berenza into loving her, with words and deeds, performing the femininity she thinks, rightfully, that he expects from her: “the artful Victoria, with an air of innocence” (74). The highest point of her performance is the scene of the dream, in which she pretends to talk in her sleep in order to convince Berenza of her feelings: “shutting her eyes, she affected in reality to be asleep” (79). She leads him to believe that she is calling his name, asking him why he does not love her. When he exclaims that he does indeed return her affection, she pretends to wake up “affecting surprise and shame” (79). With this simple trick, Berenza is persuaded of Victoria’s love and of his own feelings. But that is not enough, Victoria wants assurance that he will not leave her, since he is reluctant to marry her, something that is resolved when the couple is attacked in their bed by an assassin who wounds Victoria. Upon this event, it is said that she “*did* rejoice; for she felt that the wound obtained in defence of her lover’s life [...] would bind him inseparably to her” (83). Victoria is right, and Berenza’s feelings towards her worth as a wife change radically: “to conciliate his conscience, and to atone to Victoria for his past injustice, he must make her his wife”

(126). Berenza proposes, and, Victoria continues her masquerade: “Victoria heard him with a look of complacency, and all that softness she knew so well how to assume” (126). Her performance is interrupted by the following realisation: “sudden hatred and desire of revenge took possession of her vindictive soul. The conviction flashed upon her, that she had till this moment been deemed by Berenza unworthy of becoming his wife” (127). However, she quickly resumes her pretence “while secretly vowing the offence should never be forgotten, she again harmonised her features, and clothed them with smiles” (127). At that moment, she vows to herself that she will avenge her pride. In this manner, Victoria moves from having accomplished her first goal –having Berenza want her– to plotting the achievement of the second: punishing him for not having wanted her on her terms. Victoria’s scheming is almost overcome by her pride: “sometimes she even regretted that, under circumstances so humiliating, she had consented to become his wife, and almost determined to shew her contempt of his fancied condescension, by abandoning him” (128). Even so, she remains. It is not overtly said that she stays with him because abandoning her husband after having been abandoned by her family would leave her alone in the world with no relations and no friends, and she would have no social prospects, but it is nonetheless a historical reality we cannot ignore. If this is the case, then, Victoria chooses to stay in order to execute her revenge on the offending Berenza.

After a five-year lapse, Berenza’s brother Henriquez visits the couple. It is in meeting him that Victoria’s scheming, –until now, the reader assumes, occupied in planning how to punish her husband,– is set once again in motion: “Victoria, who, gazing upon [Henriquez] with admiration, in an instant drew ungrateful comparisons between their persons, to the disadvantage of [Berenza]” (129). Victoria’s whims, bent to her “fickle and ill-regulated mind”, (132) now focus all her energies on Henriquez.

The arrival of the brother-in-law represents for Victoria a new objective, a second romantic quest. However, on this second occasion the difficulties are greater, since Henriquez is about to propose to Lilla. “Dark and dreadful are the intricacies of the human heart, when debased as was Victoria’s. Almost unknowing to herself, she conceived immediate hatred for the orphan Lilla.” (132). Therefore, getting hold of Henriquez is more challenging: she must not only trick him into desiring her, but make him forget his love for Lilla. She becomes obsessed with him: “Henriquez was the subject of her thoughts by day; he employed her fancy by night; his form presented itself if she awoke; he figured in her dreams if she slumbered” (133). As Craciun notes: “Dacre in effect demonstrates the identity of passion and destruction, and the pleasures found in both” (Craciun 1997:13). She draws pleasure from this plotting, from her own desire as well as from the anticipation of the destruction that will accompany her in this pursuit: “Victoria dwelt with unrestrained delight upon the attractions of the object” (132). Her evil nature takes hold of her, but there is no textual evidence that this outburst of depravity has any effect whatsoever—emotional or moral—on her: “time rolled on, and the effervescence of Victoria’s mind increased almost to madness. [...] the most wild and horrible ideas took possession of her brain; crimes of the deepest dye her imagination could conceive appeared as nothing” (134). Victoria’s decline begins with Victoria’s indifference. If Victoria’s wild, cruel and almost evil character had until this point fuelled her actions and, in a way, served her purposes, her need to conquer Henriquez turns these traits turn against her, something that is related to the appearance of the satanic envoy Zofloya, as we shall see in Chapter 2. James Dunn discusses female eroticism in Dacre and claims that the “feminine eros in Dacre’s logic is an accelerator, energizing particles of desire and focusing them upon a male target [...] for Dacre, eros is always agonized because it is always characterized by the movement of desire into

violence” (Dunn 1998:308). Because of her inability to control her own erotic desire, Victoria loses all control over her mind and her actions, and becomes subjected to her own desire, a force so powerful that will eventually obliterate her. It is interesting to contrast Dacre’s portrayal of female desire as a destructive force with the eighteenth-century regard of female sexuality against which it reacts. Poovey states that “given the voraciousness that female desire was assumed to have, the surest safeguard against overindulgence was not to allow or admit appetites of any kind. Since women were encouraged to display no vanity, no passion, no assertive “self” at all” (Poovey 1984:21). Victoria fits into the contemporary assumption of “voracious” desire. Therefore, there is a case for arguing that Victoria’s desire is a form of self-assertion. All her powers and abilities are put at the service of her own desire to captivate first Berenza, and then Henriquez. Her free will unfolds in a primal, raw desire. Nevertheless, that same free will is seized, eventually, by Zofloya. This is only partly true, as we shall see. The intricacies of Victoria’s relationship with the demon will be explored further in the next chapter.

## Chapter 2

### Downfall: This Heart Knows Not to Shrink

The appearance of Zofloya in the second half of Book 2 coincides with the failure of Victoria's self-reliance. The protagonist's relationship with the satanic envoy Zofloya becomes one of dependency: the more she relies on him, the less confident she is of herself. As we shall see, Victoria's self-assertion is gradually replaced by blind ambition. She comes to be driven exclusively by her feelings, in contrast to how, up to this point, her emotions had supported her wishes and assisted her in the achievement of her objectives. In this chapter I will analyse Victoria's downfall in terms of self-reliance. For this purpose, I shall explore the power dynamics between Zofloya and Victoria, the latter's aloofness in relation to the terms of her relationship with the satanic envoy, the shift in the act of performance, and the intricacies of Victoria's self-confidence and its loss.

Zofloya reverses the power dynamics in Victoria's microcosm. He is the only character that awakens a feeling other than either hatred or –exclusively- desire: “her mind filled with terror, she looked upon him with dread, and essaying to fly, she stumbled and awoke” (136). It is true that their relationship is filled with erotic resonances—as well as racist undertones, which become more prominent as the story advances. Her interest in the servant, which later shifts into total dependence, reaffirms Victoria as the sole subject of desire in the novel: “she could perceive that he observed her, [...] regarded her with a tender, serious interest, that filled her soul with a troubled sort of delight. [...] her pride felt no alarm; but, on the contrary, she took pleasure in knowing that he gazed upon her.” (145). It is in the change of perspective achieved by the placement of the morally dubious female character in the “position of subject rather

than object” (Dunn 1918:318) that most strikes to the modern reader. As Dunn says: “some of her women are fundamentally ‘good’ and some are fundamentally ‘evil’, but beyond good and evil her women are all what might be called ‘desiring subjects’” (Dunn 1998:318). However, Zofloya does not fulfil the role of romantic or sexual interest in the way that Berenza and Henriquez do. Their association is underpinned by a simple premise: Zofloya serves Victoria in the attainment of her goals. As the sorcerer himself explains: “Your fate, your fortune, fair Signora, will be of your own making: I am but the humble tool, the slave of your wishes; your cooperation with me can alone render me powerful” (162). However, as the plot advances, the opposite seems to be the case. Zofloya, the satanic envoy, is attracted to Victoria’s potential for mischief, and makes use of this potential to drive her into extremes. Zofloya himself states that “your very *thoughts* have power to attract me [...] they are bold and spirited, they convince me that you partake of myself, and that you are worthy of my present devotion.” (178). As Adriana Craciun explains: “Zofloya’s influence on Victoria, urging her on to increasingly violent crimes, is clearly a projection of her own destructive desires” (Craciun 1997:15). The servant acts as a catalyst for Victoria’s dark nature: “hers was not that innocent vivacity which springs at once from the *purity* and *sanity* of the heart; it was the wild and frightful mirth of a tyrant, who condemns his subjects to the torture, that he may laugh at their agonies.” (143). Zofloya enables Victoria to materialize her wishes, because it is in his interest, as a personification of the devil, that she cause mischief. As Zofloya explains: “I did not seek you, because it increases my triumph and my pleasure that you should will me into your presence, with joy do I promote your wishes, but with redoubled joy when you *yourself* invite me.” (180). Craciun goes as far as to claim that “the submission of the protagonist to the infernal agent, through the selling of the soul, is [...] on one level, a liberation.” (Craciun 1997:15). According to



this line of this argument, by the sealing of their contract, Victoria's evil nature is liberated from any social or moral constrictions is now free to carry out all the mischief can. However, I believe that, as shall be further argued, Victoria seems to gain a certain rational capacity, and an awakening of her consciousness when placed in contrast with Zofloya. Nevertheless, it is true that this awakening does not translate into any change in her desires, let alone in any kind of remorse.

Victoria is completely oblivious to the terms of their relationship. As Kim Michasiw explains: "Victoria is convinced until quite late in her career that Zofloya has merely served her will" (Michasiw 1997:xxv). Zofloya first appears to her in a dream and tricks her into marrying him. Later on, he offers her a bouquet of roses and, she plucks her finger, unknowingly sealing their contract. She fails to perceive the symbolism behind these scenes, and regards the servant, first as a providential accomplice for her scheming "aided and advised by thee, I might command success" (162) and later as her champion, a powerful sorcerer she blindly trusts in all her endeavours, even with her life "thou soothest me ever, and attractest me irresistibly" (199). Craciun argues that the marriage metaphor is used to "highlight the subjecting (not liberatory) function of heterosexuality and its central institution, marriage." (Craciun 1997:15). According to Craciun, Victoria's downfall, if we read her relationship with Zofloya as a metaphor for marriage, is ripe with social critique: "the story of Victoria's downfall is thus also the story of the loss of social identity, mobility and independence that a woman suffers in marrying her lover." (Craciun 1997:16). This is a valid point of discussion that might suggest an answer to Victoria's loss of self-assertion, since if we read the two characters' relationship in this way, Victoria's loss of self-assertion is a consequence of the metaphorical marriage. For Carol Margaret Davison, this argument misreads the novel, since there are instances of happy marriage,

a point with which I do not concur at all. There are no happy marriages in *Zofloya*, not even, as the author suggests, Victoria's parents (Davison 2009:38), whose marriage is dissolved by unfaithfulness, leading to ruin, disgrace and, eventually the Marchese's murder. Still, Davison makes an interesting point in claiming that, by representing the compact with the devil as marriage, Dacre is "advanc[ing] a new 1806 twist on the Faust history – a specifically *Female Gothic* twist" (Davison 2009:38).

Returning to Victoria's cluelessness in relation to the details surrounding her relationship with Zofloya, from this moment forward Dacre's protagonist is assailed by disturbing emotions, that could perhaps be interpreted as her conscience, if it were not for the numerous instances in which she reaffirms her intentions: "Her mind as now in a chaos of agitation and horror, from which she found it difficult to recover." (137). Due to his company, she becomes "gloomy and abstracted, from the mere inability to develop her own sensations; but to be gloomy and abstracted, had of late ceased in her to become remarkable" (138). The confusion about her feelings enables Zofloya to get into her mind: "she had been most inexplicably interested about him, nor could she for any length of time banish his idea from her mind." (141). Victoria's confidence vanishes the more she relies on Zofloya. His prowess induces her to seek direction for the first time in her life: "Oh, say – can *you* instruct me? Can you arrange? Can you direct the confused suggestions of my brain?" (149). She even becomes submissive: "Victoria obeyed; the manner of Zofloya was such as inspired involuntary awe." (150), fearful "the soul of Victoria was a stranger to fear, yet uncommon sensations filled her bosom." (150), doubtful "Victoria hesitated." (151), and even "ashamed, confused" (155). Nonetheless, Zofloya offers her the means by which she will attain Henriquez and destroy Berenza and Lilla. Her ambition, nourished by Zofloya's words of encouragement, clouds her better judgement and renders her oblivious to these

emotions: “Scarce had Zofloya opened his lips, ere uneasiness [...] vanished from the mind of Victoria. As he proceeded, the most agreeable sensations fluttered through her frame, and in her brain floated fascinating visions of future bliss” (151).

However, a question arises: Why does Victoria become so dependent on the servant? This question leads us to consider what would have happened if Victoria had never received the assistance of the satanic envoy. Would she had renounced her wishes? Certainly not. I would venture to say she would have pursued them, and, in the fashion of gothic villainesses, would have murdered Berenza and Lilla by her own means. Why does Victoria need Zofloya, then? The answer to that question might be that she does not. Perhaps Zofloya is there not to help her but to condemn her. Perhaps institutionalized power –which is mentioned only once, by Victoria herself (161)- is deemed not strong enough to control, let alone judge, a woman like her. Is Dacre, then, suggesting that her protagonist’s wickedness is so remarkable that she may only be judged by supernatural powers? This idea might be supported by the fact that Zofloya’s interest in her arises in his perception of her depravity. When questioned about the motivations behind his involvement with her, Zofloya answers “*Your friendship,- your trust,- your confidence- yourself, Signora!*” (200). The destructive outcome of Zofloya’s evil scheming --that is, Victoria’s eventual death-- might, therefore, carry a moral meaning: the unchecked overflow of her libidinal impulses lead to a fateful destruction. However, this argument would suggest Dacre wrote *Zofloya* as a moral tale, which is certainly not the case. Although it is true that in her novel the murderous protagonist suffers a horrible demise, so do Berenza and especially Lilla, who, moreover, is portrayed as a model of virtue.

Interestingly, in terms of the performance of masquerade, there is a role reversal between Zofloya and Victoria. It is Zofloya who plays a part, and Victoria who is naïve

and disarmed before him. There is no textual evidence to support the notion that Victoria masquerades her femininity before the servant, but there are instances in which the narrator hints at Zofloya's pretence: "in *apparent* consternation" (147), "*seeming* suddenly to recollect himself" (147), "*appeared* struck with confusion" (147).<sup>2</sup> In contrast, Victoria's reactions become more transparent and in accordance to her character. She is portrayed as eager "say, say quickly" (152), irritable "oh Zofloya, Zofloya' impatiently cried Victoria 'this is irrelevant'." (153), and straightforward with her feelings "covering her face with her hands, she heaved a deep sigh." (148). Victoria abandons her masquerade as far as to cry, which she had regarded as a weakness, shedding "tears, spontaneous tears" upon Zofloya's bosom (198). The reason behind this change cannot be put down to their social difference, since, although it is initially pronounced, this clash fades away. Victoria is overwhelmed by the physical appearance and rich attire of the servant: "anger lightened through her mind, that an inferior should thus presume to intrude upon her [, this anger] however, faded in an instant before the majestic presence of the moor." (146). Against her will, she is compelled to trust him because he appears to her as a "superior being": "she was now on the point of betraying her inmost thoughts, [...] of betraying them, too, to an inferior and an infidel! The idea was scarcely endurable, and she scorned it; but, in the next instant, she cast her eyes upon the noble presence of the Moor: he appeared not only the superior of his race, but of a superior order of beings." (149). Zofloya's power overcomes her and she is "impelled to reveal to thee every movement of my soul." (151). This feeling of inferiority culminated in the scene when Zofloya, for the first time, appears as the closest to his original form. Victoria reacts in a surprising way "her proud rage subdued, her eyes were cast on the earth and she trembled" (172). The narrator

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<sup>2</sup> Emphasis mine.

emphasises Zofloya's power over Victoria with this striking reaction, a reaction that even surprises Victoria herself: "Victoria, who had never before trembled in the presence of a mortal being, who did not tremble to agonise and insult a father, to revile a mother, and consign a husband to the grave, trembled now. To herself even, the sensation she experienced was inexplicable" (172). Another possible explanation for her boost of confidence might be that their collaboration makes them associates, a relationship Victoria feels more at ease with. Pretending, in the face of Zofloya, does not translate into productive results. However, this change makes the protagonist seem more human, more vulnerable, which might be a narrative strategy to induce the reader to transfer the moral blame from Victoria to Zofloya, blaming the satanic envoy for her wickedness. Nonetheless, as previously stated, if that is the author's intention, it is not as successful as it should be: Zofloya is merely a catalyst for Victoria's natural depravity.

Victoria's confidence shifts from total trust in her abilities to almost absolute reliance on Zofloya, in what Davison defines as "a horrifying shift in status from that of tyrannical master to terrified slave" (Davison 2009:39). Upon their first meeting she claims to be ready to go as far as needs be to seduce Henriquez: "Are you of a firm and persevering spirit, Signora? "This heart knows not to shrink" she answered, forcibly striking her bosom, while her eyes flashed fire; "and in its purpose would persevere, even to destruction!" (152). She is, indeed, relentless, a quality that can be found in most of the author's female protagonists. According to Dunn, this trait is crucial in Dacre's female characterisation and is once again proof of the author's will to make her women active subjects of desire. Dunn claims that "foremost in Dacre's imagination is [the female] experience of desiring; her women remain ferociously true to their desires" (Dunn 1998:318). She is also remorseless "with unshrinking soul, and eye unabashed by

the consciousness of guilt” (157). Even so, due to fear for the outcome or the failure of her enterprise, she progressively becomes the more reasonable of the two, which is the first time she makes reference either to the consequences of her actions or the socio-political system she is embedded into. Discussing the plans for the murder of Berenza, Victoria alludes to Il Consiglio di Dieci:

“Victoria appearing violently agitated, as if overcome by some sudden thought or recollection remained silent. [...] ‘Zofloya, Venice will never do for the seat of action; it would be folly, it would be madness to make the attempt. [...] nothing can remain concealed from Il Consiglio di Dieci [...] No, Zofloya, the attainment of my object avails me nothing, if destruction follows the momentary triumph.’” (161).

This is a key instance that demonstrates Victoria’s awareness of the consequences of her actions and the terror those consequences awake in her. This fear of being discovered is reasserted when, after successfully murdering Berenza, she is terrified that Henriquez might discover the telling marks on Berenza’s body, and, although Zofloya asks her to trust him, the narrator informs us that “on the word of the moor she had strong reliance, for she had never found that he had deceived her; but his ambiguous promises [...] threw her again into fits of doubt and consternation.” (191). This rational fear correlates to her lack of self-confidence: “Pity the distraction of a wretch, whose mind is rendered imbecile by misery, and who of herself is incapable of an effort towards her own happiness” (162). This lack of self-trust drives her into a state of helplessness and vulnerability, which make her easy prey for Zofloya. However, this does not excuse, or justify, her crimes. Although it is true that Victoria seems to grow weaker, this frailty goes hand in hand with her despair and the escalating violence she inflicts, of her own volition, on her three victims. Therefore, Davison’s claim that Victoria shifts from master to slave would be flawed according to this reading. There is indeed a power transference, and that Zofloya is reaffirmed in his role of master over her, but defining

Victoria as a slave implies that she has no will of her own and that her actions are directed by the sorcerer. This is not the case, Victoria remains “ferociously true” to her desires, and, in fact, those desires increase with the weakening of her agency. She might become hesitant and dependant on Zofloya or no longer trust her own abilities, but her motivations and her crimes are her own, and they are all –arguably, with the notable exception of Lilla’s murder- premeditated and meticulously planned. As Kim Michasiw suggests: “however disastrously Victoria’s giving in to her desire may end, she *does* give in without regrets or repinings and is unrepentant to the novel’s final page.” (Michasiw 1997:viii). By remaining true to her own desires and murdering Berenza and Lilla, Victoria asserts herself as a strong willed, active subject, female protagonist. An amoral, psychopath one at that, but one with definite agency nonetheless. As Michasiw claims: “If Victoria suffers, [...] she refuses the position of victim. Like the Byronic hero, Victoria achieves –through sin and through a willingness to accept, even cultivate pain- selfhood on a grand scale” (Michasiw 1997:xxx).

### Chapter 3

#### **Collapse: And Now Tore, by Handfuls, the Hair from Her Head**

Victoria's changing physical descriptions in *Zofloya* go hand in hand with the development of her psyche. For the first book and the first half of book two, Victoria is portrayed as a beautiful heiress, with an emphasis on her temperamental, mischievous character. It is not until the second half of book two that both suffer a dramatic change: at the same time that she is assailed by doubts and lack of confidence in her former self, Victoria undergoes a process of progressive masculinization. The more violent she becomes, the farther she stands from any representation of female passivity, and the closer she is to masculine violence. This shift is portrayed in the novel as a defeminisation. However, Victoria's physical transformation does not seem to be limited to the gender binary: it is not a clear cut transition from female to male, but rather a dematerialisation that goes beyond not only the gender and sexual binaries but also the human, into the abject, supernatural grotesque.

Since I am undertaking an analysis on sexual boundaries, it is important to begin with a brief historical account of the human conception of the body and its evolution. A good starting point is Thomas Laqueur's study *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. Laqueur claims that the sexual binary (man/woman) as we understand it is an eighteenth-century idea. According to the author, before the Enlightenment, the two sex model did not exist: "To be a man or a woman was to hold a social rank, a place in society, to assume a cultural role, not to *be* organically one or the other of two incommensurable sexes" (Laqueur 1992:8). The two-sex model, then, arises from a modern necessity for "a single, consistent biology as the source and foundation of masculinity and femininity" (Laqueur 1992:61) and, as Laqueur explains, is based on



“cultural claims about sexual difference” (Laqueur 1992:175). The basic difference between the two models is that whereas the one-sex model believed the female body to be the inversion of one essential body, the male one; the two-sex model conceived the male and female body to be two opposite entities. This *normativisation*, was translated into –or was probably caused by- a fear of female sexuality. Women, understood as the opposite of men, were consequently supposed to be passionless. Therefore, female desire was regarded as unnatural. It was in that period as well, when gender and sex became one, and “feminine” and “female” became synonymous: “feminine” being the sum of the patriarchal values assigned to a female subject (Poovey 1984:6). In relation to this confusion Poovey claims that “eighteenth century moralists formulated this complexity in various ways. Some, for example, described female passions as external forces that occasionally overwhelm a woman’s essentially “feminine” nature” (Poovey 1984:18). In other words, femininity became intrinsically related to femaleness, and, consequently, female sexual desire was seen as anomalous.

However, Craciun makes a point of the fact that the two-sex discourse did not erase its precedent, and, when discussing the Romantic interest in the body in its most abject<sup>3</sup> forms, she suggests that: “In Romantic period discourses warning of corporeal deformation – in the animated undead body, the unsexed body, and the nymphomaniac body- we can also glimpse the era’s growing realisation that bodies are not immutable or naturally fixed” (Craciun 1995:76). Craciun joins both arguments –the interest in the abject body and the time’s conception of female desire– and claims that Victoria’s defeminisation is “not a metaphor for but a materialization of her unnatural, because unfeminine, desires and actions” (Craciun 1995:78). Dacre had probably read de

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<sup>3</sup> That which does not adhere to the social constructs and is consequently rejected by the social order: “For Julia Kristeva the abject is ‘the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite’, any phenomenon that ‘disturbs identity, system, order’ and that ‘does not respect borders, positions, rules.’ (Hurley 2007:138).

Bienville's *Nymphomania, or, A Dissertation Concerning the Furor Uterinus* (1775) (Craciun 1997:21). In his treatise the French doctor describes this phenomenon as a "metamorphosis" (de Bienville as cited in Craciun 1995:82) and argues that female sexuality is in fact natural, when it is regulated within marriage. When out of control, however, he writes: "these monsters in human shape abandon themselves to an excess of fury" (de Bienville as cited in Craciun 1995:81), thus relegating strong and unchecked female sexual desire to the category of monstrosity. By doing so, Bienville is describing the nymphomaniac's body as an abject. What is most relevant for the purposes of this analysis is to see how a female sexuality such as Victoria's (powerful enough to, in part, drive her to murder) was seen to be reflected –in scientific terms, since de Bienville was a medical doctor- in the female body. Craciun explains that "in the third [...] stage of nymphomania, which is accompanied by sexual aggression and violence towards men, the nymphomaniac [‘s body] undergoes a physiological transformation" (Craciun 1995:82). This degeneration is understood as a process of transformation and it is the consequence of the subject's loss of authority of mind over body, or what is the same, of capacity to restrain their sexual impulses.

According to de Bienville, violence is intrinsically connected to the nymphomaniac. James Dunn writes that Dacre's model of female desire, characterised by the movement from this desire into violence, is unique amongst her female contemporaries: "some of [her contemporaries] see the importance of giving voice to the erotic tensions and even agonies of their women characters but do not insist upon the proximity of feminine desire and violent agency" (Dunn 1998:308). However, insisting on Dacre's uniqueness among the Romantic female canon might be problematic, since, as Craciun proposes, Dacre should be read within the gothic male tradition of de Sade and Lewis: "a tradition in which she consciously situated her works

[...] in order to appreciate the full significance of her fatal women figures and her focus on corporeal pleasure and destruction” (Craciun 2002:111). Dunn’s argument, however, makes a valid point: violent women are different because they offer an alternative – although by all means not the only one– to female passivity, thus subverting the patriarchal feminine ideal: “women who kill [...] radically subvert th[e] order by violating the imperative that women remain passive” (Craciun 2002:15). This subversion, however, comes at a price. Women who reject the passivity attached to the female ideal are, consequently, deemed unfeminine: “aggression and active desire, respectively, [are] qualities that throw [the violent woman] outside her sex” (Craciun 2002:15). Violence, then, in the eyes of patriarchal power, defeminises women. It follows that Victoria’s violence is instrumental in her masculinisation. The role of violence, in relation to female desire, as enacted by Victoria in the novel, is pivotal. In Dunn’s view, however, this violence is chaotic, and the result of a sexual drive that cannot be contained. This is true in certain instances of the novel, especially in Lilla’s murder, which is unpremeditated and the outcome of Victoria’s nearly supernatural rage. Nonetheless, I believe that in most of *Zofloya* Victoria uses violence, as much as the masquerade of femininity, as a tool for self-assertion. Most of these violent acts are not random but premeditated, fitting Victoria’s purposes. This indicates that she does not naturally adhere to either of the genders that the binary offers, rather to a body that makes use of whatever characteristic suits her purposes the best. This is not to say hers is a genderless body, because it is limited socially by its femaleness, a limitation Victoria fights against. However, Victoria uses both typically male and typically female traits at her convenience.

I shall now focus my attention on the textual evidence which attests for a physical defeminisation. Victoria is first introduced as “lovely” (3), of incomparable

physical appeal and richness of garments “no fair venetian had presumed to vie with her, neither in beauty or person, or splendour of decoration” (3), “young, ardent” (9), “a superior and dignified expression” (46). It is said of Berenza that: “he beheld [...] that she was beautiful” (63), and of the venetians who cross paths with her, that: “Victoria excited universal envy in one sex, and she likewise excited universal admiration in the other” (72). Victoria does not fit in the physical ideal neither of Renaissance Italy nor of Dacre’s time –in contrast to her radical opposition, Lilla, as we shall promptly see. Victoria is no *donna angelicata*, however, if we are to rely on the narrator, that does not make her unattractive, on the contrary:

“No, hers was not the countenance of a Madonna –it was not an angelic mould; yet, though there was a fierceness in it, it was not certainly a repelling, but a beautiful fierceness – dark, noble, strongly expressive [...] no mild, no gentle, no endearing virtues, were depicted there; but while you gazed at her, you observed not the want of any charm.” [...] her large dark eyes, which sparkled with incomparable radiance [...] her figure, though above the middle height, was symmetry itself; she was as tall and graceful as an antelope.” (76)

Victoria’s feminine attractiveness, however, goes hand in hand with more typically masculine traits, such as physical strength: she escapes the castle and spends more than twenty-four hours without eating or drinking (67), sleeps in the open (61), and saves Berenza by catching the assassin by the wrist (82). She is even said to possess a “masculine spirit” (189), and “bold masculine features” (213) to what Diane Hoeveler adds that “whereas conventionally bourgeois-coded masculine traits such as reason, calmness and taciturnity are generally presented positively when they are associated with female gothic heroines, here there can be no doubt that “masculine” refers to Victoria’s murderously violent streak, her aristocratic propensity to seize what she wants by wielding the knife as calmly as any man” (Hoeveler 1997:193).

The references to Victoria’s darkness unfold themselves, from her “dark” countenance to her “large dark eyes” and even her “raven hair streaming over her

shoulders” (190), which are indicative of the racial component in the characterisation of Dacre’s protagonist. Victoria’s Italian darkness defines her, according to the cliché, as a woman of passion, both sexual and violent. Her associations with untamed nature and her primitive impulses attest to that. As Felicity Nussbaum states: “the contrasts among the torrid, temperate and frigid zones of the globe were formative in imagining that the sexualized woman of empire was distinct from domestic English womanhood [...] hot climates produce sexual desire, while more temperate climates require greater control and more elaborate ritual” (Nussbaum 1995:7). It is revealing, then, that Lilla represents everything that Victoria is not.

Defined by Hoeveler as “the ultra-feminine ideal” (Hoeveler 1997:192) and “the epitome of an emerging British domestic ideology” (Hoeveler1997:193), Lilla is described as the archetype of virtue, and, naturally, as the complete opposite to the murderous Victoria. She is “pure, innocent, free even from the smallest taint of a corrupt thought” (133), possessor of an “angelic countenance [...] suffused with the palest hue of a virgin rose.” and a “fairy-like beauty” (133) and, against Victoria’s magnificent height, “her person so small” (133). Taking the cue from the narrator’s flawed yet repetitive reference to the faults in Victoria’s education, Lilla is “educated in sentiments of the severest piety” (130). As if she were not ideal enough, she also conforms to the contemporary model by being accompanied by an elder relative as chaperone. Victoria’s hatred for her, narratively supported by Lilla’s position as rival for Henriquez’s love, can be read, then, as Hoeveler suggests, as an attack to the English cult of domesticity. This cult of domesticity was embodied in a female idea. According to Armstrong: “the modern female body comprised a grammar of subjectivity capable of regulating desire, pleasure, the ordinary care of the body, the conduct of courtship, the division of labor, and the dynamic of family relationships” (Armstrong 1989:95). If we

read Lilla's murder as such, we are endowing her death with a political meaning. If Lilla's murder is understood as a vindication of the non-compliant, women who do not fit within the normative female ideal, then it is difficult to conciliate her demise with Victoria's. The generally accepted interpretation is that Victoria's hatred and eventual murder of Lilla stands for a clash against the patriarchal feminine ideal. For Hoeveler, "Victoria senses and hates in Lilla not simply the latter's goodness, but what she recognizes as the arrival of a new feminine ideal, a type that will supplant the volatile Victoria and all her ilk" (Hoeveler 1997:191). As Dunn suggests, adding to this line of argument, Victoria's rage is prompted by Lilla's femininity being favoured before hers: "Victoria's rage is less at Lilla herself than at Henriquez for prizing feminine emptiness [...] the scene of the attack resonates with a symbolic intent to destroy this false feminine ideal." (Dunn 1998:314). This is textually supported by the narrator, who mentions that Henriquez's disgust of Victoria is caused, mainly, by the fact that she is not like Lilla: "her strong though noble features, [...] her boldness, her insensibility, her violence, all struck him with instinctive horror; so utterly opposite to the gentle Lilla" (194). In a particularly revealing exchange between Zofloya and Victoria, the latter wishes she looked like her rival and makes reference to her physical appearance: "He would have loved you, I presume, had you chanced to have *resembled* Lilla." "Ah! Would, cried the degenerate Victoria, 'would that this unwieldy form could be compressed into the fairy delicacy of hers, these bold masculine features assume the likeness of her baby face!" (213). It is not the first time she is described as masculine, the first instance being by Henriquez, but they are Victoria's own thoughts about herself. Up until now, we relied on the narrator to portray her. It might be suggested, then, that the narrator has tricked us by omitting Victoria's masculine traits. What is certain is that the narrator clearly sides with Victoria, and hardly ever condemns her

actions: “though Dacre’s narrator reminds us of Victoria’s corruption on regular occasions, she appears entirely in sympathy with most, if not all, of her protagonist’s actions” (Michasiw 1997:x). This is most clearly seen in the poor attempts of the narrator to justify Victoria’s wickedness through her mother’s adultery.

In examining Lilla’s brutal murder, it is significant that Lilla’s demise is the only instance in which Victoria can be said to have succumbed to her rage and enacted her violent impulses and hatred with her own hands. In Berenza’s murder, she uses poison, a typically feminine tool of assassination and, moreover, relies on Zofloya to supply it, trusting his advice to proceed slowly. As for Lilla’s murder, the opposite seems to be true. She acts unaided and against the better counsel of the servant. Furious at Henriquez’s suicide, which translated into an impossibility to attain him, she is blinded by her rage and focuses that violent passion on Lilla, whom she blames for Henriquez’s death. Her anger is so intense that it transforms her. She tears her hair out: “now she clasped her hands, and twisted her fingers at each other, and now tore, by handfuls, the hair from her head” (222), an attribute, her hair, previously praised and traditionally depicted as an important element of female beauty, thus violently drifting apart from her physical femininity- She becomes the embodiment of the abject, a disturbing inhuman creature with supernatural, certainly evil, powers: “nerved with hellish strength, she ascended the sloping rock [...] the rapidity of her movements increased, scarcely she felt the rugged ground; the mountainous steep appeared a level path, and yawning precipices inspired no dread” (222). This stands out as a moment of extreme emotion and transformation that she experiences as an instant of self-realisation: “she beheld herself where instinctive rage and terrible despair had led her” (222). Victoria’s monstrous transformation is very much in line with Bakhtin’s idea of the grotesque: “for Bakhtin the grotesque involves an act of degradation: ‘the lowering of all that’s high,

spiritual, ideal, abstract' to the 'material level.' (Hurley 2007:138). Following on Hurley's own definition, Victoria would be spiritually lowering as she physically ascends. Lilla's murder is, then, the culmination of Victoria's self-degradation and exposes in a physical sense the progressive degeneration Victoria subjects herself to: she becomes inhuman, and, in terms of gender politics, she becomes *un-female*. As Craciun explains: "the notfemale is neither male nor a utopian androgynous third sex, but like the hermaphrodite suggested by the hyena<sup>4</sup>, points to the limits of the two sex model" (Craciun 1995:79). It is not by coincidence that Victoria is described as an "untameable hyena" (49). Craciun argues that Dacre portrays how "one type of body, that of the proper woman, can degenerate into an unsexed, unfemale and unnatural body through physical and emotional violence. [...] the virtuous and the vicious body, Dacre repeatedly demonstrates, are dangerously mutable, and the catalyst for their degeneration is most often female sexual desire" (Craciun 1997:23). Therefore, female sexual drive is, to Dacre, an element intrinsically related to the body, to the point that, if it is unrestrained, as it happens with Victoria, it has the ability to alter this body. This argument might problematize a feminist reading of *Zofloya*, since the dehumanization of Victoria's body would make female desire less appealing. We may even trace several attempts by the author towards a moralistic slant: most prominently, the asides that focus on education, as well as those that discuss female wickedness as directly attributable to maternal failure (as discussed in chapter one). Another one is the epilogue, in which the narrator appeals to the reader: "reader –consider not this as a romance merely. —Over their passions and their weaknesses, mortals cannot keep a curb too strong. The process of vice is gradual and imperceptible, and the arch enemy ever waits to take advantage of the failings of mankind, whose destruction is his glory!"

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<sup>4</sup> Craciun is here making reference to the "hyena in petticoats" phrase coined by Polwhele in *The Unsexed Females* (1798) in describing Mary Wollstonecraft.



(267). None of those are, however, consistent with the narrator's supportive attitude to Victoria throughout the narrative. The textual evidence, as I hope to have proved, does not support the moralist argument. Therefore, it follows that Dacre's intention in writing this novel was to pen a feminist vindictive portrayal of women as active, desiring subjects and against the contemporary model of submissive, obedient, passionless women. However, there is a third possible interpretation, and one that the inconsistencies and melodramatic tone of the novel seem to support. Perhaps Dacre wrote without a political agenda in mind, and her only objective was to scandalize her readership.

## Conclusions

### Headlong Down the Dreadful Abyss

Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya* is circumscribed to the conventions of the Gothic genre, but it also renders a protagonist with a complex psychology. Victoria di Loredani is by any means a conventional main character in the Female Gothic literature of the Eighteenth century. Victoria navigates the space between the role of villainess and that of heroine. It is true that she possesses no heroic qualities, but it could likewise be argued that Zofloya is the true villain of the novel, especially since his name is also the title of the work. However, the focus on her deeds and in the workings of her mind, as well as the role of the narrator, who remains sympathetic of her crimes, support her position as main focus of the novel. Villainess or not, Victoria is a woman who stops at nothing to attain everything she sets her mind to, a woman who does not falter before murder, on the contrary. While Zofloya provides poison, usually associated to female crimes, Victoria insists she has no patience for it, and demands to stab her husband with a dagger. I have argued that the element that drives Victoria into action is her sexual impetus. This also sets her apart from the prototypical passive heroines of the genre. Victoria's sexual libidinousness makes her an active, assertive subject. She is a woman who desires, and who acts according to that primitive impulse. She conquers. Therefore, Victoria's sexual impulses are a form of self-assertion. However, her self-assertion is not limited to the pursuit of this desire. Victoria's assertive nature is aided as well by her lack of femininity. From the very beginning, she is described both as a beautiful, seductive woman and as a primitive, violent creature. In several instances I have proved, relying on textual evidence, that Victoria's violence could be called masculine. This masculinity is only emphasised as the novel progresses. As the atrocities she commits advance, Victoria's becomes masculinised. The narrator's descriptions of the

protagonist begin changing, becoming less and less those of a female body. By way of an answer to the question posed in the introductory chapter of this MA dissertation, Victoria's characterisation upsets the gender binary. From the very beginning, Victoria's body, and personality, as well her impulses –violent and sexual– blur the lines between male and female. When Victoria behaves in accordance to the passionless female model of the times, she is mimicking an ideal. She masquerades her femininity, uses it to her own advantage. However, what I had not anticipated in my research is that the mutability of Victoria's body does not stop in her masculinisation. Her mere existence poses a threat to the binary: she embodies an alternative gender, one that collapses the boundaries between male and female. That is why, in her last moments, her body, which previously had adopted masculinised forms, becomes dehumanised. She embodies the abject and the grotesque bodies that exist in the outskirts of the normative. Her body cannot contain her, and she dies deformed and stripped of her social identity, that is, gender, neither female, not male.

My study, I believe, opens the door to further analysis of corporeal mutability in Romantic and Gothic literature, as well as the ways in which female writers negotiated gender and sexuality in Eighteenth-century through fiction. The deformed, abject body occupies a central space in gothic literature and this compels us to explore how it is used, and to what purpose, in other genres. Moreover, it would be interesting to see how female characters that pose a challenge to the socially accepted norms of the time are portrayed in the literature by these female authors, either as heroines or as villainesses. I would also be interested in the political and social messages behind those portrayals and their repercussions.

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