1-1-1997

Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya*: A Case Study in Miscegenation as Racial and Sexual Nausea

Diane Hoeveler
Marquette University, diane.hoeveler@marquette.edu

Published Version. *European Romantic Review,* Vol. 8, No. 2 (1997): 185-199. DOI: 10.1080/10509589708570035.

Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya*: A Case Study in Miscegenation as Sexual and Racial Nausea

Diane Long Hoeveler

Zofloya, or the Moor was Charlotte Dacre's second novel, written when she was 24 years old (or so she claimed) and the beautiful toast of London literary circles. Her first novel, *The Confessions of the Nun of St. Omer*, was written when she was eighteen (or 28, depending on what biographical source one credits) and in the grip of an infatuation with the excessive gothicism of Lewis' *The Monk*.[1] Dacre's novels by 1809 were ridiculed as "lovely ROSA's prose" by Byron, who went on to mock the novels as "prose in masquerade,/Whose strains, the faithful echoes of her mind,/Leave wondering comprehension far behind" (*English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, 756-58). Despite their improbabilities or more likely because of them, *Zofloya* was also an early influence on Percy Shelley, whose two youthful gothic novels, *Zastrozzi* (1810) and *St. Irvyne; or The Rosicrucian* (1811), bear a number of clear resemblances to Dacre's works. She and her four novels and two volume book of poetry are virtually forgotten today, but all of these works—most particularly *Zofloya*—are important historical documents for understanding how literature participated in the larger culture's attempt to rewrite appropriate feminine behavior as passionless, passively domestic, and pious. Dacre was no feminist, but as the daughter of a well-connected Jewish banker and supporter of radical political causes who was friendly with William Godwin, she certainly had every opportunity to absorb the gothic and feminist ambiences and she clearly would have had access to Wollstonecraft's writings. We know very little about Dacre's life, but one fact remains: in *Zofloya* she produced a virtual parody of Wollstonecraft's works and as such introduced Wollstonecraft's ideas—albeit in perverted form—to a larger reading audience.

But *Zofloya* is also, however, racist, xenophobic, and misogynistic—as politically incorrect as any early nineteenth-century text could be.[2] And

although the action is set in late fifteenth-century Italy, the novel holds up for our view the popular consciousness of early nineteenth-century bourgeois England. It reveals how thoroughly this class felt besieged by the sexually and financially voracious demands of women. It reveals that this was a culture looking for someone to blame for the social, familial, political, and economic transformation it was experiencing. It choose to blame the devil in league with a sexually demanding woman. Not an original plot-line, to be sure, but one that epitomized a culture's intense dread of maternal and feminine sexuality as so viciously evil and unnatural that as a force it rivals the blackness of Satan's dark deeds.

The novel begins with an address to "the historian who would wish his lessons to sink deep into the heart, thereby essaying to render mankind virtuous and more happy," and there is throughout the entire three-volume text an attempt to advocate a behavioral agenda predicated on appropriate character traits (having the right sort of "virtuous" "heart").[3] But actually Dacre pursues her social agenda by presenting the consequences of a lack of virtue on the family, one's immediate society, and the larger political state. And she begins, as virtually all female gothic authors begin, with the absence or corruption of the mother as the cause for all the subsequent misery in the novel. The mother in this work is named Laurina di Cornari, wife for the past seventeen years of the Marchese di Loredania. Still in possession of "unexampled beauty, and rare and singular endowments," Laurina would appear to be a prime candidate for a seventeen-year-itch. She is vain and in particular suffers from "too great a thirst for admiration, and confidence in herself" (I.3).

Laurina is, in short, flawed, and has failed most grievously to effectively raise and discipline her two children, "the lovely and haughty" Victoria and her handsome brother Leonardo, "ever haughty and turbulent in his manners" (I.2). The two are coded as flawed aristocrats, with the fifteen-year old Victoria described as "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 the ascendancy in whatever she engaged." Leonardo, sixteen years old, is described in equally severe terms: "he was violent and revengeful; he had a quick impatient sense of honor" (I. 5-6). These two naturally violent children should have been carefully educated by a loving and devoted mother, but, alas, their youthful mother, married at the age of fifteen herself, was too busy admiring herself to pay any attention to her children. Dacre tells us that "brilliant examples of virtue and decorum" would have "counteracted the evils engendered by the want of steady attention to the propensities of childhood" (I.6), but these examples the siblings were not fortunate enough to possess. Their natural

vices as aristocrats and Venetians were exacerbated by their mother's self-absorption and neglect.

The mother's most serious fall occurs, however, when she allows herself to be seduced by an experienced rake, Count Ardolph, a German nobleman who travels around Europe on the prowl to break up happy marriages. Although she initially repulses Ardolph's "naturally vicious inclinations," she finally succumbs when he feigns illness at her continued rejections. The affair causes her to leave her husband and children and move to a villa with her lover. One day several months later the innocent husband stumbles on Ardolph, impetuously challenges him to a duel, and is killed by a swift blow from a dagger. That ever-present dagger functions throughout this novel as a sort of required fashion accessory for Italians. Later we learn that Victoria never leaves her boudoir without strategically concealing her dagger on her body.

But Laurina's guilt is not complete. She has not only caused the death of her husband, she has caused both of her children endless misery. Leonardo flees Venice in disgrace, and Victoria swears vengeance on the human race for her mother's fall and her father's death. Playing the sexual mother to her new lover, Laurina sinks into the deepest form of vice imaginable to this society. She not only actively seeks out and enjoys sex with Ardolph, she compounds the perversity of the affair by casting him, at least initially, in the terms of a son dependent on his mother-lover's body. The blatant identification of Ardolph with her children becomes even clearer when Laurina early in the affair confesses to her lover that she would leave her husband if it were not for the children. Ardolph melodramatically responds, "'May those children *witness*—nay, *perpetuate* my destruction, should ever my heart become cold towards thee!'" (I. 30). At the conclusion of the novel, as this piece of heavy-handed foreshadowing indicates, Ardolph is found beating Laurina and is then killed by Leonardo, who has become the king of an outlaw band of robbers. Leonardo dies by his own hand rather than face capture by the Italian police, but his sister Victoria faces an evil more horrendous fate. She quite literally goes to the devil.

Zofloya traces the melodramatic adventures of Victoria, and to a much lesser extent her brother. Whereas Leonardo's fall is gradual and tragically familiar within the gothic universe, Victoria's is spectacular and sublimely ridiculous. Just listen to this scenario. Victoria is initially taken by her fallen mother and Ardolph to an elderly aunt's estate for safe keeping. Ever on the prowl for the main chance, however, Victoria manages to escape by tricking a female servant into exchanging clothes with her and then leading her to the edge of the aunt's wooded estate. From there it is nothing to walk back to Venice where Victoria quickly

sets about seducing a rich aristocrat, Berenza. Ironically, Berenza decides to marry Victoria after she is stabbed trying to defend him against a dagger-wielding assassin. She should have known—the attacker was Leonardo—who was at this time living with Berenza's former mistress, Megalina Strozzi, a Florentine prostitute. Megalina too was prone to using daggers to settle her scores, and she originally sent Leonardo to kill Berenza, not aware that Berenza would be in bed with Leonardo's sister.

But the action has barely begun. Because Victoria was willing to take a knife in the shoulder for him, she earns the undying love and trust of Berenza. He marries her and they spend the next five years in comparative harmony. But all that is shattered when Berenza's younger and more handsome brother, Henriquez, arrives for a visit. Victoria suffers an intense and lustful infatuation for him immediately, but he finds her repulsive. Indeed, on at least two occasions he describes her as odious because she is "masculine" (3.5-6; 3.59). Henriquez instead is enamored of his lovely little thirteen-year old orphaned friend, Lilla, thrown onto his protection by the deaths of both her parents. Lilla is as blonde as Victoria is dark. Lilla is as pre-pubescent, passive, good and obedient as Victoria is the opposite. Lilla, in other words, is the new bourgeois ideal of the "civilized" domestic idol, the professionally feminine girl-woman. Victoria embodies the earlier, uncivilized, aristocratic woman—vain, lustful, libidinously aggressive, actively and openly sexual and violent. According to the code of the ideology, Lilla should live and triumph over Victoria. The opposite occurs in this work, perhaps the most eccentric female gothic ever penned.

Before we move to Lilla's murder scene, however, it is necessary to examine the other protagonist in the novel—Zofloya, or the Moor—the titular and presumably the most important character in the work. Zofloya is initially presented to us as Henriquez's black servant, acquired in Spain after Zofloya's master was killed in a battle. Matthew Lewis had portrayed another powerful and vengeful black servant named Hassan in his gothic drama *The Castle Spectre* (1798), and he had chosen to use Hassan to embody the dualistic characteristics that blacks (and, we might add, Italian women in gothic novels) were thought to possess: a superficial eagerness to please combined with a tendency, when injured, to plot a violent and extreme revenge. Like Lewis' *Journal* about his visits to his own Jamaican plantation, the gothic drama presents black slaves only too quick to flip the master-slave dialectic and deal in Obeah poisonings and slave uprisings. Sensational press accounts of the maroon wars of the 1790s in Jamaica and the bloody revolution in Haiti made the issue all too immediate to ignore. Significantly, when Hassan swears that he will have his vengeance he uses language that implies the sexual threat implicit in

his very presence in this society: "'Am I not branded with scorn? am I not now despised? What man would accept the negro's friendship? What woman would not turn from the negro in disgust? Oh! how it joys me when the white man suffers!'"

Dacre responded to Hassan's query by creating a white woman who would not turn from the black man in disgust. By the conclusion of the novel, Victoria and Zofloya are living together as lovers, Zofloya having first appeared to Victoria in her dreams the night she first met Henriquez and decided that she must sexually possess him or die. Victoria's dreams, which occur throughout the novel and always accurately present the next major action of the text, remind us of the dreams in Radcliffe's *Romance of the Forest*. Dreams in Dacre's work, however, suggest a new level of psychological sophistication we have not seen before in the female gothic. Victoria's dreams present us with the possibility that the character we recognize as "Zofloya" is actually less a real personage than the dark and demonic forces within Victoria's own psyche. The confluence here of the sexually predatory woman and the black male servant is revealing for what it says about early nineteenth-century British attitudes toward both gender and race. A woman who would sexually pursue not simply one but two men—and brothers at that—is a woman who has to be full of the devil. And the devil is not simply represented as black and of a lower class and foreign; he is literally empowered by functioning in league, as one, with a corrupt aristocratic and foreign woman.

But if we can also consider for a moment this novel as a document operating within a larger colonialist project, however, I think we can uncover Dacre's complicity in what Homi Bhabha has labelled as "the strategy of social and political control":

> The black is both savage (cannibal) and yet the most obedient and dignified of servants (the bearer of food); he is the embodiment of rampant sexuality and yet innocent as a child; he is mystical, primitive, simple-minded and yet the most worldly and accomplished liar, and manipulator of social forces. In each case what is being dramatized is a separation—*between* races, cultures, histories, *within* histories—a separation between *before* and *after* that repeats obsessively the mythical moment of disjunction.

Bhabha would appear to be uncannily describing the many shifting roles Zofloya actually plays in this novel toward his alter-ego Victoria, and what we might ask, does such a configuration signify in regard to the female gothic's participation in the colonialist project? In an age that was anxiously confronting the foreign as a threat, blackness was the ultimate fear, while attempts to contain and commodify it emerge in a number of

literary texts, including works like James I's *Daemonology* (1597), Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688), and Edward Long's *History of Jamaica* (1774). It is Long who writes, "[Negroes] are represented by all authors as the vilest of human kind, to which they have little more pretension of resemblance than what arises from their exterior forms." But it is precisely the exterior form, the skin, that draws the obsessive gaze of Victoria to Zofloya. In fixating on his blackness, she defines one aspect of the colonialist discourse as a cross-classificatory, discriminatory knowledge that attempts to objectify and thereby control the object of colonialism's regulatory power; in other words, she attempts to make Zofloya a subject of racial, cultural, and national representation that she and by extension the white bourgeois world could ultimately control.

Zofloya and Victoria are both inhabiting not simply a gothic universe, but what Bhabha has called the "not quite/not white" world of the margins where "the *founding objects* of the Western world become the erratic, eccentric, accidental *objets trouves* of the colonial discourse. . . . [where] black skin splits under the racist gaze, displaced into signs of bestiality, genitalia, grotesquerie, which reveal the phobic myth of the undifferentiated whole white body." The conjunction in this novel of a white woman with a black male servant is most peculiar unless we read it as a sign of the ambivalence that some middle-class white women had toward what they actually recognized on some level as a similarity in their social positions. As Winthrop Jordan has observed in his classic study *White Over Black*, "it is scarcely surprising that Englishmen should have used peoples overseas as social mirrors and that they were especially inclined to discover attributes in savages which they found first but could not speak of in themselves" (40). For Englishmen and women, according to Jordan, the black subject represented essentially three forces they wanted to deny in themselves and their society: first, the beast within themselves; second, illicit desire and the loss of control over the baser passions; and third, the breakdown of proper social ordering (144).

But we also might point out that women, like blacks, have cultivated mimickry and double-consciousness in order to survive. As Bhabha points out, "the ambivalence of colonial authority repeatedly turns from *mimicry*—a difference that is almost nothing but not quite—to *menace*—a difference that is almost total but not quite. And in that other scene of colonial power, where history turns to farce and presence to 'a part' can be seen the twin figures of narcissism and paranoia that repeat furiously, uncontrollably."[4] The farce that is the novel *Zofloya* recapitulates what we can only view as the farcical aspects of an alliance between the hyperbolically feminine and white Victoria and her very black and demonic ally and lover, Zofloya. The menace inherent in the text is not

simply the menace of white women taking black men as illicit lovers. The deeper threat would appear to be the social and economic alliance of dispossessed subject populations working together, recognizing their mutual alientation and objectification and banding as one in a maniacal and deadly pursuit of the great white father and his property.

When the unlucky Berenza proposes to Victoria they have been living together for some time, and he has been hesitant to marry her—not because of her mother's scandalous behavior—but because of the excesses Berenza has observed in Victoria's character. In proposing to her, however, he alludes to his delay in soliciting her hand and attributes it to her "unworthiness" due to her mother's fall. Suffice it to say that Berenza sealed his own death warrant with that statement. Victoria smiled and "harmonized her features," but "sudden hatred and desire of revenge took possession of her vindictive soul .... Unhappy Berenza! all thy delicacy, thy forbearance, and nobleness of mind, will not save thee from the consequences of having proceeded thus far" (2. 84-85). Although she marries him and feigns love and devotion, Victoria is merely waiting for the right moment to hand her husband his punishment—death followed by an adulterous affair with his brother. The fact that she waits for five years, silently nursing her grievances against him, should not surprise us. In Italy a well-known maxim states that revenge is a dish best served cold.

But Victoria is as passionate in her lust as she is in her vengeance, and indeed the aristocracy would appear to be an antiquated breeding ground for such extreme and dangerous emotions. As immediate as her lust for Henriquez is, so is her hatred for Lilla almost instinctual. 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. And considering Dacre's influence on both Byron and Percy Shelley, it is interesting to speculate just how thoroughly and quickly this new feminine ideal made her way into canonical Romantic poetry via Haidee, Emily, Cythna and Asia. Once again Dacre takes this occasion to blame the mother for all of Victoria's weaknesses. We are told that "the curses of Laurina were entailed upon her daughter," or, like mother like daughter. The naturally "fickle and unregulated mind" of Victoria was "from her infancy untaught, therefore unaccustomed to subdue herself"; unable to control her emotions and a stranger to "self-denial," Victoria rushes headlong into her pursuit of Henriquez. But the blame for her behavior is placed squarely on her mother:

> Education had never corrected the evil propensities that were by nature hers: hence pride, stubbornness, the gratification of self, contempt and ignorance of the nobler properties of the mind, with a strong tincture of the darker passions, revenge, hate, and cruelty,

> made up the sum of her early character. Example, a *mother's* example, had more than corroborated every tendency to evil. (2. 101-102)

Because of her stunted emotional faculties and her failure to appreciate let alone even recognize goodness, Victoria can only despise the orphan Lilla, the epitome of an emerging British domestic ideology transplanted rather clumsily to fifteenth-century Italy. Lilla's mind, we are told, is "pure, innocent, free even from the smallest taint of a corrupt thought." She is physically described as "delicate, symmetrical, and of fairy-like beauty," while her soul is possessed of "seraphic serenity and angelic." This paragon of bourgeois innocence and domesticity has "long flaxen hair [that] floated over her shoulder" (2.104). In short, Lilla is just asking to be tortured and murdered by Victoria, and such is her fate in alarmingly short order. But first Victoria has other business to transact. She has to poison her husband, seduce Henriquez, and then cause Henriquez's suicide.

The slow murder of Berenza occurs in his remote castle, Torre Alto, in the Appennine mountains (reminiscent of *Udolpho*), where Victoria has persuaded the family to relocate in order to better conceal her assault on Henriquez and Lilla. But the murder of Berenza by a series of increasingly potent poisons provided by Zofloya is a most diabolical act, meant to prey on the anxieties of Dacre's readers about the innate perversion of sexually predatory wives. When Victoria first forms the idea of killing Berenza she does so in a dream, suggesting that her unconscious has slipped the slight yoke of social control that her conscious mind has managed to cultivate. In this first dream she sees Henriquez and Lilla first in a garden and then in a church on the point of marrying. The black Moor suddenly appears and asks Victoria, "'Wilt thou be mine? . . . and none then shall oppose thee . . . . and the marriage shall *not be*!'" The moment Victoria assents she is transported into Lilla's position as bride and "Berenza, suddenly wounded by an invisible hand, sunk covered with blood at the foot of the altar!" (2. 111-13). All of these events come to pass, although the murder of Berenza by a series of incrementally stronger poisons introduced by Victoria into his wine results in his bloodless but immensely painful and disfiguring death. Leaving the body of Berenza at the foot of the altar suggests that in Victoria's mind his crime has been to marry her, to enslave her.

But even more ominously we are told that Victoria possesses a "masculine spirit" (2. 275) and "bold masculine features" (3. 65), and whereas conventionally or 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. It is Lilla, the ultra-feminine ideal, who is coded in the text as the appropriate female role model, and yet she is Victoria's next victim. The ideology goes something like this: if women fail to be effectively educated by their mothers, if they fail to embrace their proper feminine roles as docile, passive, and dependent on the rightful claims of the patriarchy, then we will witness women as monstrous as Victoria—masculine and destructive of both men and women. This particular maternal ideology, as I have suggested, merely exaggerates in its extremely crude form the celebration of the mother and the centrality of the mother's role as educator that Wollstonecraft had advocated in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.[5]

After poisoning both Berenza and Lilla's elderly aunt-chaperon, Victoria is ready to dispose of her rival Lilla, whom she and Zofloya drug and then carry to a remote stone cavern for safe keeping. In this dark and ominous cave there just happens to be "a massy chain, which though fixed to the opposite side of the wall, extended in length to the sloping irregular accent." The chain is affixed to Lilla's wrist and she, like the besieged wife in Henry Siddons' melodrama "The Sicilian Romance" (1794), finds herself yet another female victim chained in the stone cavern of a corrupt patriarch, slowly starving to death. But such a fate does not satisfy Victoria for long. She procures another magical potion from Zofloya, this time one that causes Henriquez to confuse Victoria for Lilla. After a wedding banquet and a night of wild sexual revelry, Henriquez wakes up to discover the loathed Victoria in his bed. When he realizes that he has been duped and has betrayed his beloved Lilla, he promptly falls on his sword.

Victoria now stalks her real prey, the orphan Lilla chained and defenseless in the stone cave. The confrontation between the two women is one of the most bizarre in the history of the female gothic, almost campy in its self-conscious and hyperbolic posturings. The scene between the two of them is coded in stereotypical gendered terms, loaded with representations of an intermingling of feminine sexuality and perversity. When Victoria descends on the innocent Lilla, she finds Lilla sleeping on the floor of the cave surrounded by "coarse fragments of scanty food" and clothed only in "a mantle of leopard skin, brought her by Zofloya." The leopard skin, so incongruous in fifteenth-century Italy, represents the descent this very civilized domestic paragon has made into the animal realm: "Upon awakening, Lilla clasps her thin hands upon her polished bosom, and with some of her long tresses, still in pure unaltered modesty, essaying to veil it, she raised her eyes, of heavenly blue, to the stern and

frantic countenance of her gloomy persecutor, appearing, in figure, grace, and attitude, a miniature semblance of the Medicean Venus." (3. 93-94)

Lilla here is presented as an icon, a statue, "polished," that is, too polite or civilized to survive, a "Medicean Venus," while at the same time she is coded as the embodiment of domestic virtues and characteristics: modest, blue eyes, long blonde hair. Her iconic, fetishistic qualities are furthered accentuated as she attempts to beg Victoria not to murder her as if she were negotiated forgiveness for a piece of broken china: "'Alas! Victoria, in what then have I offended you, that you should hate me thus?—Ah, consider I am but a poor and friendless orphan, who can never do you ill.'" Lilla's presentation of herself as an orphan, bereft of patriarchal protection, reminds us of Charlotte Smith's Emmeline and the entire tradition of orphaned female gothic heroines struggling to defend themselves against the terrific forces of a corrupt patriarchy.

The fact that Lilla is killed, not by a corrupt monk or a greedy usurping uncle, but by a lustful, vengeful, and passionate aristocratic woman suggests that by 1806 the female gothic genre had shifted sufficiently to present women as inveterate enemies of each other. Competing for the same man, Victoria and Lilla are archetypal female rivals, both pursuing the same limited goods—the same man. But the "Castle" is no longer the object of the orphan's struggle for ascendancy; the focus now is on the man and marriage to him, possession of his body. It is interesting that Victoria disposes of her own husband, the heir to several large holdings in Italy, in order to sexually pursue the younger son, who represents no wealth or estates in his own right. Both dispossessed women shun property and wealth in favor of the sexuality of Henriquez himself, suggesting a significant shift in the history of women's fiction. When sexual passion is viewed as more important than economic gain and social status, then women have become openly sexualized to a degree found dangerous and threatening to a culture that is predicated on their sexual discipline and control.

Victoria drags her victim to the top of a cliff, leaving Lilla's "blood red traces at every step," and announces that she will "push thee headlong" because "no art could root [thee] from the breast of Henriquez." Terrified by the view, Lilla makes her next appeal to Victoria, the sentimental one: "'Oh, sweet Victoria, remember we have been friends.—I loved thee! nay, even now I love thee, and believe that thou art mad!—Oh, think, think we have been companions, bedfellows!'" (3. 97). Bedfellows? Somehow one cannot imagine any reason why Victoria would have crawled into bed with Lilla. This appeal to the cult of female friendship is also scornfully rejected by Victoria, who now announces to Lilla that Henriquez is dead.

Lilla now makes another appeal to Victoria. She asks that she be killed the same way Henriquez was, by a stiletto through the heart, and to this Victoria agrees. The first plunge wounds "only her uplifted hand, and glanc[es] across her alabaster shoulder, the blood that issued thence, slightly tinged her flaxen tresses with a brilliant red" (3. 100). As much is made of Lilla's shed blood as is made of her blonde tresses. The imagistic mingling here of the two is significant as a representation of soiled innocence. The horror of the scene has to be located in its unnaturalness, the violent murder of one woman by another. And again we are reminded that this nightmare of women feeding voraciously on the flesh of each other resulted because of a mother's sexual fall into an adulterous affair.

Thinking that all verbal appeals will be in vain, Lilla resorts to her final option, she starts running. But she is no match for Victoria, who catches up to her on the uttermost edge of a ridge of mountains. The two women now grapple hand to hand, and Lilla makes yet one final appeal, reminding Victoria that she is Lilla's hostess:

> 'Barbarous Victoria!—look down upon me, behold what thou hast done, and let the blood thou hast shed appease thee. Ah! little did I think, when a deserted orphan, invited by thee to remain beneath thy roof, that such would be my miserable fate! Remember *that*, Victoria—have pity on me—and I will pray of heaven to forgive thee the past!' (3. 102-103)

But appealing to codes of hospitality means nothing to a woman who would serve poisoned wine to her own husband. And the appeal to God and a religious system of belief is equally ineffectual. Victoria has sold her soul to the devil for one night in Henriquez's bed. When Lilla sees there is no hope, she flings her final taunt in her rival's face: "'Take then my life Victoria—take it at once,—but kill me I implore, with that same dagger with which you murdered Henriquez, because he loved me more than he did you!'" This final accusation fires Victoria's arm and the murder is described in a sort of pornographic frenzy:

> With her poignard [Victoria] stabbed her in the bosom, in the shoulder, and other parts:—the expiring Lilla sank upon her knees.—Victoria pursued her blows—she covered her fair body with innumerable wounds, then dashed her headlong over the edge of the steep.—Her fairy form bounded as it fell against the projecting crags of the mountain, diminishing to the sight of her cruel enemy, who followed it far as her eye could reach. (3.104)

Although victorious, Victoria has a difficult time returning to the castle. She cannot escape the feeling that she is haunted and pursued by the "mangled form of Lilla, risen from the stream . . . . those fair tresses dyed in crimson gore, that bleeding bosom" (3.105). The bloody hair and bosom have functioned throughout the entire scene as fetishistic part-objects of the besieged commodity Lilla. To despoil the blonde hair and the white bosom of Lilla is to attack the domestic feminine ideal at its most potent core—the promise of innocent and nurturing motherhood. Dacre intended her readers to see that the crime of Laurina affected not only her own children, but untold other children, who now will be unborn because their potential mother has been destroyed most cruelly.

By this time Victoria has no hope of escaping the consequences of her many crimes. Her husband's body, which Zofloya had hidden in an old casket in a deserted wing of the castle (and again we are reminded of *The Romance of the Forest*) has been discovered, as has Henriquez's. Victoria has no choice but to beg protection from Zofloya, who now makes her his mistress. Dacre's sexual and racial nausea as well as her ambivalent attraction to such a situation can barely be concealed, and much is now made again of Zofloya's "blackness." We are reminded at this point of Edmund Burke's discussion of the association of blackness with the sublime. Burke tells us the "very curious story of a boy, who had been born blind and continued so until he was thirteen; he was then couched for a cataract, by which operation he received his sight . . . . some time after, upon seeing a negro woman, he was struck with great horror at the sight." For Burke, the boy's horrifying response is proof of the power of blackness to cause terror and by extension to produce a sense of the sublime.[6]

The unfortunate Victoria and her black lover Zofloya have sunk as low as living beings can and they now find themselves living in the Italian mountains with a band of banditti, led by Victoria's brother Leonardo and his analogously dark mistress Megalena. To make the dysfunctional family circle complete, Laurina and Ardolph suddenly arrive as captives, and Leonardo murders Ardolph when he realizes who he is and that he has been beating his dying mother. The only earthly authority figures feared by Victoria are the Venetian council of ten, Il Consiglio de Dieci, the powers of the Roman Catholic Church as represented by the Inquisition (*The Italian* and *The Monk* are recalled here). Whenever Zofloya wants to threaten or intimidate Victoria, he refers to the "familiars of the holy inquisition," and Il Consiglio as the one legal force from whom he could never protect or shield Victoria. Even the devil, it would appear, hesitates to tangle with the Inquisition. Of course, these very forces

descend on the mountainous hideout and Leonardo and Megalena both kill themselves rather than be taken alive.

Once again Victoria asks Zofloya to save her, and this time he announces that he can only do so if she will travel with him to his abode, hell. He strips away the appearance he has assumed on earth, and appears before her as he actually is: "a figure, fierce, gigantic, and hideous to behold!—Terror and despair seized the soul of Victoria; she shrieked, and would have fallen from the dizzying height, had not his hand, who appeared Zofloya no longer, seized her with a grasp of iron by the neck!" (3. 232). Racism demanded a demonization of difference, and, as H.L. Malchow has suggested, the gothic genre offered "a language that could be appropriated, consciously or not, by racists in a powerful and obsessively reiterated evocation of terror, disgust, and alienation. But the gothic literary sensibility itself also evoked in the context of an expanding experience of cultural conflict, the brutal progress of European nationalism and imperialism, and was in part a construct of that phenomenon" (3).

But sexism also demands a demonization of difference, and this we can see when Victoria quite literally goes to the devil. The moral Dacre pens on her last page makes the mother's guilt and responsibility for all this clear: "Over their passions and their weaknesses, mortals cannot keep a curb too strong . . . . Either we must suppose that the love of evil is born with us (which would be an insult to the Deity), or we must attribute them (as appears more consonant with reason) to the suggestions of infernal influence" (3. 235-36). If the devil is an active presence in the world, then the angelic mother, sexless and nurturing, must do battle with him for the souls of not only her children, but for future generations of children. If the mother indulges her sexuality and scorns her educational duties to her children, then she is actively working in league with the devil. Wollstonecraft may not have put the maternal ideology so crudely, but its popularized extension—its "dumbing down"—led to works like *Zofloya.*

Parody or camp, self-conscious deflation or hyperbolic ideological ruminations run amock, female gothic authors found themselves resorting to such extreme and extravagant positions largely, I would claim, because the idealized maternal ideology was so potent, so socially and sexually charged. Control of the female body through marriage, and then the regulation of the mother's sexuality were the basic foundations on which bourgeois Britain constructed its hegemony. In Dacre's novel the parodic Victoria embodies every vice that bourgeois Britain found itself repulsed by in the safely distanced Italians. Victoria is the excessive and hyperbolic aristocratic woman who has finally waged open war on bourgeois values and received her just punishment. Aristocratic and sexually threatening women will surface again in Charlotte Bronte's portraits of Blanche

Ingram and Bertha Rochester in *Jane Eyre*. But the type of femininity that this woman represents—sexually promiscuous, passionately aggressive, openly adulterous—was consigned to the nether reaches of hell in 1806 when Victoria descended into the "awful abyss" in the arms of her demon lover.

Marquette University

Notes

1. We know little about Charlotte Dacre, not even her birth or her death dates. A summary of the contested biographical sources surrounding her life is provided in Adriana Craciun, "'I hasten to be Disembodied': Charlotte Dacre, the Demon Lover, and Representations of the Body," *European Romantic Review* 4 (1995), 90-91. The standard sources on her life include the contradictory introductions provided for her works by Montague Summers, Devendra Varma, Donald Reiman, and Sandra Knight-Roth. The most recent and extensive work on Dacre appears to be the unpublished doctoral dissertation by Knight-Roth, "Charlotte Dacre and the Gothic Tradition," Dalhousie U, 1972.

2. There are scattered and brief discussions of *Zofloya* throughout the gothic bibliography, as well as the recent and very brief analysis in Eugenia DeLamotte's *Perils of the Night*, 184-85. She makes the interesting observation that "[w]hen women in the Gothic are actually associated with a combination of the sublime and action . . . the sublime in which they partake is the grand, amoral sublime: they are wicked women, and their projects are horrifying schemes" (184). Also see the discussions of Dacre and *Zofloya* in Ann Jones, *Ideas and Innovations: Best Sellers of Jane Austen's Age* (New York: AMS, 1986); and Robert Miles, *Gothic Writing 1750-1820: A Genealogy* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

3. Charlotte Dacre, *Zofloya, or the Moor: A Romance of the Fifteenth Century*, 3 volumes; rpt. of the 1806 ed. (New York: Arno, 1974), I:1. All quotations will be from this edition, with volume and page numbers in parentheses in the text.

4. See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 90-92; Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1969); and H.L. Malchow, *Gothic Images of Race in Nineteenth-Century*

Britain (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996), for provocative background material on the role of race and colonialism on British traditions.

5. See Diane Long Hoeveler, "Vindicating *Northanger Abbey*: Wollstonecraft, Austen, and Gothic Feminism," *Jane Austen and the Discourses of Feminism*, ed. Devoney Looser (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 117-35.

6. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford U P, 1990), 131-33. See the more extensive discussion of this connection between race and gender and the sublime in Barbara Claire Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1995).