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Abstract

This essay argues that Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya* (1806) presents an interracial sublime in the form of the dissolution of the European home/family. Dacre, I suggest, traces this dissolution to the European woman's assertion of agency by stepping outside spatial, familial, racial and sexual boundaries. In the first section it examines the crisis of European domesticity where the family and the parent/s fail in their responsibilities toward the children. In section two I suggest that within the dissolving home/family we see the European woman, Victoria, subverting further the dissolution. The arrival of the Moor within the house compounds the blurring of hierarchies and ordering. In the final section I trace the features of the interracial sublime. I conclude by proposing that Dacre's interracial sublime serves the purpose of demonstrating the permeability of European borders – a permeability that wreaks disaster. Dacre's tale therefore ultimately functions as a caution against the woman's emancipated and agential actions.

Keywords: Dacre, *Zofloya*, sublime, interracial, gender, agency, domesticity

La Sublime Interracial: Género y raza en *Zofloya* de Charlotte Dacre

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Resumen

Este ensayo argumenta que Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya* (1806) presenta una sublime interracial en forma de disolución de la casa / familia europea. Sugiero que Dacre traza esta disolución a la afirmación a la agencia de la mujer europea por salirse de los límites espaciales , familiar , racial y sexual. En la primera sección se analiza la crisis de la domesticidad Europea , donde la familia y el padre / s no cumplen con sus responsabilidades para con los niños. En la segunda sección sugiero que dentro de la disolución de la casa / familia vemos a la mujer europea, Victoria, subvertir aún más la disolución. La llegada de los moros dentro de la casa agrava la difuminación de las jerarquías y el orden. En la sección final trazo las características de lo sublime interracial . Concluyo proponiendo que la sublime interracial de Dacre sirve al propósito de demostrar la permeabilidad de las fronteras europeas - una permeabilidad que da rienda suelta al desastre. El cuento de Dacre, por lo tanto, en última instancia funciona como una advertencia contra las acciones emancipadoras y de agencia de la mujer.

Palabras clave: Dacre, *Zofloya*, sublime, interracial, género, agencia, domesticidad.

Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya, or the Moor* (1806) has seen a major revival within Gothic and gender studies. Distinguished critics such as Diane Hoeveler (1997), EJ Clery (2000), Anne Mellor (2002), among others, have examined the sexual, racial, gender and aesthetic politics of the novel and debated its feminist (or not) ideology. My own argument here is that, like other cases of the 'Empire Gothic' (Davison, 2003, 2009), Dacre's *Zofloya* is concerned with the permeability of the English/European home to the advent/invasion of the racial Other.

Zofloya instantiates the English Romantics' cosmopolitan and transnational interests and concerns (see Fay & Richardson, 1997), concerns that often manifest in the form of anxieties over influences, impacts and cultural encounters. This is not new to the Romantic age. James I in his *Counter blasted to Tobacco* (1604) had warned of the pernicious influence of the New World product to English bodies and minds. John Donne's 'Elegy 11: The Bracelet', argued a case against foreign coins and currency that, according to Donne, damage English economy and habits. Foreign products like tea are cause for concern over national character. William Congreve's *The Double Dealer* satirizes women who drink tea as the ladies retire to 'tea and scandal, according to their ancient custom'. This suggests that the entire ritual of women's tea-drinking and gossip marked a disruption of quiet, quiescent English domesticity (Kowaleski-Wallace, 1994, p. 132). John Gay's 'To a Lady on Her Passion for Old China' mocked the craze for chinoiserie and china among the English upper and even middle classes (Porter, 1999, 2002; Chang, 2010). While these instances precede Dacre's text, the tradition of the literature of anxiety over foreignness would gather strength with the Gothic, the adventure tale and the horror story. Thus in Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* revolves around the corruption and disaster that arrives in an English house as a result of the precious stone, whose origins are in India. We therefore need to see Dacre's novel as engaging with a national theme: of the invasion and slow erosion of Englishness through England's transnational exchanges and role in global trade.

However, it is not the nation qua nation— although it might be argued that the home or family serves as a metaphor or functional equivalent of the nation – but the domestic realm that is under immediate threat from the racial Other in the novel. Although Dacre presents, towards the end of the tale, the Moor as Satan in human form, the metaphysical dimension does

little to alter our interpretation of the black man's role in the ruination of the European home through the character of Victoria. The novel, I propose, moves outward from the home/family to interracial horror. The 'interracial sublime', as I see it, is the horror of a European family's dissolution due to an interracial sexual relation, invited and initiated by the European woman who asserts sexual agency, and which climaxes in the annihilation of the European woman. Thus Dacre's interracial sublime, in a truly Burke (1757) an sense, is beyond borders and boundaries, is about transgression and excess, and is ultimately a moral tale about the dangers of the European woman leaving home and family.

In order to examine the theme of transnational transgression in the novel I unravel three interrelated discourses, each being the subject of one section in the essay. The first discourse is of domesticity wherein Dacre presents the European home and family and its eventual collapse. This discourse is, I shall demonstrate, is intertwined with the discourse of intrusion and foreignness where the house/family is itself in the grip of a dynamic libidinal economy. The second discourse is of in-between zones and borders. This discourse, I argue, locates the protagonists on the margins – of home and family. As Dacre's discourse of spaces begins to present a borderlessness, it merges with the aesthetic discourse of the sublime, and this is the third major discourse of the novel. The aesthetics of terror, awe, borderlessness (of space but also of race and ethnicity) generate the novel's interracial sublime, I demonstrate in the third section.

The essay has three sections. In the first I examine the European domestic scene as Dacre presents it. Section Two examines the border zones wherein Dacre maps Victoria's movement toward the interracial relation that would eventually prove to be her nemesis. In the final section I turn to the interracial sublime in all its aspects.

The Crisis of European Domesticity

Set in fifteenth century Venice and its neighborhood, *Zofloya* is a novel about European domesticity and its slow erosion. I argue that Dacre is upholding a certain ideology of familial domesticity where particular virtues of fidelity, parenting and discipline are seen as constitutive of a 'good

home'. In the novel the tragic and evil events involving the interracial encounter are attributed to the collapse of the European home.

The novel opens with the house and family of Marchese di Loredani, married to Laurina who is initially described as 'a female of unexampled beauty' (p. 3), whose one 'foible' was a 'great ... thirst of admiration' (p. 3). But we are also told that the couple lived a near-perfect life. His 'ardent love appeared to suffer no diminution' and, since 'no temptations crossed her path – it required ... no effort to be virtuous' (p. 4). They have two children. The daughter, Victoria, is 'proud, haughty and self-sufficient ... wild, irrepressible ... indifferent to reproof, careless of censure ... of an implacable, revengeful, and cruel nature, and bent upon gaining the ascendancy in whatever she engaged' (p. 4). The son, Leonardo, is 'violent and revengeful'. Dacre points to faulty motherhood – and, by extension, the dysfunctional family – when she describes these as 'ill-regulated' (p. 4). It is the absence of a proper parenting and pedagogy, suggests Dacre, that results in such children:

Such were the children whom early education had tended equally to corrupt; and such were the children, whom to preserve from future depravity, required the most vigilant care, aided by such brilliant examples of virtue and decorum as should induce the desire of emulation. Thus would have been counteracted the evils engendered by the want of steady attention to the propensities of childhood. (p.5)

The grounds for the collapse of the European family/house are already prepared in this theme of inadequate education and parenting. Even though there is virtue and beauty in the house, Dacre suggests, these would not be 'emulated' by the offspring unless they are trained to do so. After Laurina's elopement scene Dacre would emphasize this theme vis á vis Victoria:

A firm and decided course of education would so far have changed her bent, that those propensities, which by neglect became vices, might have been ameliorated into virtues ... haughtiness might have been softened into noble pride, cruelty into courage, implacability into firmness... (p. 14)

Victoria and Leonardo are both clearly spoilt children growing up in the lap of luxury.

Later, a few pages into the tale, Dacre tells us of the seduction of the virtuous Laurina by the rake Count Ardolph. Ardolph, we are told, takes a ‘savage delight’ in ‘intercept[ing] the happiness of wedded love’ (p. 7). He likes to ‘wean from an adoring husband the regards of a pure and faithful wife – to blast with his baleful breath the happiness of a young and rising family – to seduce the best, and noblest affections of the heart’ (p. 7). It is important to note that this seduction is conducted within the confines of the Marchese’s home, and Ardolph abuses the fundamental laws of hospitality when he does so. The garden, the scene of domestic serenity where Laurina wanders, is also the place where, in Dacre’s words, she ‘advance[s] one step in the path of vice’ (p. 11). When Laurina ponders over what would happen to her children were she to succumb to Ardolph, he responds: ‘May those children witness – nay perpetrate my destruction, should ever my heart become cold towards thee!’ (p. 13). Ardolph here plays on Laurina’s feeble sense of dutiful motherhood itself as a mode of seduction. After Laurina elopes Leonardo rushes out of the house, and is never seen again (p. 13). Victoria turns into a tyrant with ‘unlimited scope for the growth of these dangerous propensities’ (p. 14), and becomes, soon, ‘obnoxious to the young nobility of Venice’ (p. 15). She of course attributes it to ‘the disgrace brought upon her by her mother’s conduct’ (p. 15).

Domesticity then, instead of rearing Victoria and Leonardo in a certain way, moulds them into vengeful, obnoxious creatures. Dacre attributes the flaws in the children’s character to the absence of appropriate education within the home. The theme of the pedagogic failure of parents, and especially the mother, is therefore the source of the novel’s main theme: the corruption of European womanhood. Thus, toward the end of the novel Victoria asks the Moor, Zofloya, to ‘teach’ her (p. 240). Dacre, I propose, traces all the evils of Victoria’s character – she is the main protagonist of the tale – to the erosion of values in the home: of parenting, values of virtue and fidelity. In what is a gendered theme, this erosion is always attributed to Laurina’s actions and flawed character, what Dacre would later describe as ‘the baleful effects of parental vice upon the mind of a daughter’ (p. 28). This discourse of domesticity and concomitant hospitality and guestification

(embodied in the Loredani-Berenza homes and Ardolph-Victoria respectively) is central to the horror of the tale.

This theme of the collapse of European domesticity is amplified with two other events. In the first, Laurina and Ardolph, along with Laurina, are living in Monte Bello. There Berenza sees and is attracted to Victoria. Laurina is appalled at the possible liaison and accuses him: ‘is it thus you recompense the hospitality of Count Ardolph...?’ (p. 30), to which of course Berenza responds with ‘you are indeed well qualified to arraign those who trample on the rights of hospitality!’ (p. 30). After this incident Laurina endorses, after some mild protest, Ardolph’s proposal to incarcerate Victoria at the house of Signora de Modena (pp. 40-42). We thus find that Victoria leaves behind one home – which had already been instrumental in shaping her character in particular ways – for another, in which she is a mere prisoner. Once again we witness the erosion of the space of the home: the daughter, driven into imprisonment by her mother’s lover.

Years later, the events of the Marchese’s house repeat. Victoria is living with Berenza and develops a strong passion for his brother Henriquez. It is within Berenza’s house that Victoria seeks to seduce Henriquez, aided in her efforts by the potions and unguents furnished by the Moor, Zofloya. Dacre writes of Victoria’s passion: ‘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...’ (p. 133). In order to attain her goal, Victoria poisons Berenza. It is within the confines of his own home that Berenza wastes away due to the slow poisoning. Replicating, after a fashion, her mother’s ‘crimes’ – essentially sexual attraction to another man, who is a guest in her home – Victoria declares to Zofloya, ‘I desire, oh, ardently desire, the death – the annihilation of Berenza’ (p. 155). The discourse of the libidinal economy that undermines the domestic arrangements is woven into the discourse of hospitality and guestification: as hostess Victoria, suggests Dacre, violates the law of hospitality just as her mother did. Dacre therefore seems to indicate a certain inheritance of the transgressive habit when she presents this discourse of domesticity-libidinal economy.

Thus we can see how domesticity is in crisis in *Zofloya*. If in the first events the crisis is of parenting and infidelity, in the second it is of infidelity

combined with murder. It is this crisis of and in domesticity that leads naturally to the invasion by the Moor/Satan.

Toward the Sublime¹

The crisis of domesticity results in two significant actions on the part of the characters. With their mother's infidelity, Leonardo leaves home, and never returns. Years later we discover he has joined a group of bandits, roamed the countryside and eventually become their leader. His exile into the unfriendly, initially into the arms of a prostitute and later the group of bandits, Dacre traces to his mother's desertion from their home. It is in the presence of Leonardo that Victoria screams at her mother, who has been rescued, with no knowledge of her true identity, by Leonardo:

Why didst thou desert thy children? ... For these crimes ... arising out of thy example, I am now a despised exile in the midst of robbers – of robbers, of whom the noble son who support these in his arms is Chief!' (p. 250)

As the domestic space breaks down the unhappy inhabitants seem to seek solace and safety elsewhere. Border zones, as I see it, are spaces within the home, where pockets of subversion, resistance and intrigue exist. In Dacre's discourse of space and spatiality, these are spaces of potential, where the possibilities that would eventually flourish as the terrifying (interracial) sublime begin to first manifest.

First, Victoria herself does not fit in with conventional models of femininity. Berenza notes her 'wild imperious character', her 'strongly-marked character' (p. 27). She is 'above middle height' (p. 76), Dacre writes,

Hers was not the countenance of a Madona– 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, every lineament bespoke the mind which animated it. True, no mild, no gentle, no endearing virtues, were depicted there [. . .]; her air was dignified and commanding, yet free from

stiffness; she moved along with head erect, and with step firm and majestic. (pp. 76-77).

Henriquez sees her as ‘strong though noble features ... [with] an authoritative tone, her boldness, her insensibility, her violence’ (p. 194). Lilla is of course the contrast to Victoria’s awkward femininity:

Pure, innocent, free even from the smallest taint of a corrupt thought, was her mind; delicate, symmetrical and of a fairy-like beauty, her person so small, yet of so just proportion; sweet, expressing a seraphic serenity of soul, seemed her angelic countenance, slightly suffused with the palest hue of the virgin rose. Long flaxen hair floated over her shoulders: she might have personified (were the idea allowable) innocence in the days of her childhood. (p. 133)

Critics have noted the clear distinction that Dacre makes between these models of femininity – although, by killing off both Lilla and Victoria she does not leave much to choose from – in the novel (Mellor, 2002; Moreno, 2007). It is this ‘misfit’ between Victoria’s femininity and the requirements of the house/home/family that is at the heart of the novel, and which makes me interpret the text as one asserting the need for a return to a patriarchal model of the feminine in order to safeguard the safety of the European home.

A crucial border zone exists in the house of Berenza, and is the first space where we see Victoria being drawn to the Moor. Dacre prepares the ground for the Moor’s sublime by proposing that Victoria is beyond boundaries – of honor, codes of hospitality or virtue and even of reason. She writes: ‘transported nearly beyond the bounds of reason ... in the wildness of her distempered fancy’, Victoria fantasizes about Henriquez’ (p. 135). Transgression of borders begins within the space of the house and family, yet again. In the zone between dreams and reality, Victoria also perceives Zofloya for the first time: ‘he appears in her dream (137). As Dacre puts it: ‘his exact resemblance ... of polished and superior appearance, had figured chiefly in her troubled sight’ (p. 137). I propose the dream-waking state as a border zone because not only is Victoria’s *fantasy* of infidelity (with Henriquez) a violation, in Dacre’s anxious tale of eroded domesticity, of a moral border, it also signals the arrival of something that exists beyond the

racial-cultural border, namely, the Moor. It is a border zone because the Moor, whom Victoria identifies clearly as ‘the servant of Henriquez’, blurs categories. While only a servant he appears in the dream as ‘polished and superior’. Next day, at a meal, she pays closer attention to the Moor, and finds out that her dream of his appearance was not bizarre:

the first object that caught her attention was the tall, commanding figure of the Moor ... she almost started as she beheld him, and, the image in her dreams flashing upon her mind, she marked how exact was the similitude, in form, features, and in dress. (p. 137)

Upon seeing him, writes Dacre, ‘strange, incongruous ideas shot through her [Victoria’s] brain, ideas which, even to herself, were indefinable’ (p. 138). Border zones are spaces that approximate to Foucauldian heterotopias wherein the social order and hierarchy are inverted or at least called into question. Kim Michasiw points out that Zofloya’s actual social status and rank are never made clear: is he a free man acting as a servant? (2003, p. 49). The house or Berenza is such a border zone where Zofloya’s ‘indefinable’ social location troubles the hierarchy within the house. Dacre tells us: ‘Zofloya, though a Moor, and by a combination of events, and the chance of war ... reduced to a menial situation, was yet of noble birth’ (p. 141). It is precisely this ‘indefinable’ quality of his that enables Zofloya to at once claim to be Victoria’s slave and her equal.

In his opening exchanges with Victoria Zofloya pretends to be humble and lowly, always asking her for permission ‘May I then approach, Signora?’ (p. 148) But then, writes Dacre, ‘he presumed to take the hand of Victoria’ (p. 148), soon after showing obsequiousness. He is in turn ‘respectful’ (p. 150) but would also ‘bid her’ (p. 152). He declares he is ‘the lowest of [her] slaves’ (p. 153). These exchanges continue till the very end when Zofloya eventually takes full command of Victoria, and begins to command her.

The sublime is anticipated in the breakdown of borders in the spaces of the Berenza home and its environs. Victoria, lured out to meet Zofloya, herself transgresses the social and spatial borders of her home. Within the spaces of the home, she makes overtures and threats toward Henriquez and his betrothed Lilla. When Victoria sits down at the ‘innocent family circle’ (p. 157) she is already beyond the pale of guilt or shame: ‘eye unabashed by

the consciousness of guilt ... her eyes sparkled, but it was with fiend-like exultation' (p. 157). Dacre seems to suggest that what eventually follows by way of torture (of Lilla) and murder (of Berenza, Lilla and indirectly of Henriquez) may be attributed to the subversion of the space of the family.

I therefore disagree with the reading of the radicalized evil in the novel (Michasiw, 2003; Schotland, 2009; and others) because I see the radicalized evil as a general outcome of the collapse of the European home and family. What Dacre foregrounds is not, I suggest, the threat of invasion by the racial Other but the erosion, from *within*, of the European 'family values' of fidelity that leads to the invasion. In other words, the blurring of social boundaries, the collapse of familial relations and parenting norms are Dacre's focus. It must be noted that Zofloya – who, incidentally, first appears on page 137 of the novel – does not initiate the collapse of the Berenza home. He does not, in my view, constitute the threat. Rather, he helps an already collapsing structure to its full and total ruin. Zofloya makes use of the opportunity presented by Victoria's temperament and desires in order to wreck the Berenza home. In this, of course, Zofloya reverses the master-slave dialectic, as Diane Hoeveler notes (1997, p. 188), but this reversal follows (but does not initiate) a process well underway much *before* he arrives at the house of Berenza. The full terror of the collapse of Berenza's home and Victoria's final annihilation is without doubt engineered by Zofloya but this has nothing to do with the collapse of the ideal European family – a collapse which, in my opinion, is the focus of the tale.

Further, by suggesting that the collapse of the two houses (of the Marchese, and later of Berenza) is entirely due to their women, Dacre is pointing to the woman as place-holder and 'boundary-marker' (Anne McClintock's term, 1994). In this, of course, Dacre's novel continues the theme of English femininity under threat from the African, Arab or Asian male. The novel, ultimately, calls for a reassertion of the gender roles in the upholding of the home and family – race, as far as I can see, is only a threat when the European woman goes 'loose', so to speak. It is when the woman seeks pleasure and agency outside the boundaries of her home, relations and race that true horror begins.

The Interracial Sublime

Edmund Burke (1757) writing his famous tract on the beautiful and the sublime half a century before Dacre's text identified darkness with the sublime. In a notorious analogy Burke defined terror as the condition of the blind boy who regains sight after a cataract operation and sees, for the first time in his life, a black woman.² Zofloya who, as already noted, blurs the boundaries of black slave and white gentleman by possessing an admirable appearance and extraordinary skills in science and the arts, embodies the interracial sublime and its terror and annihilator powers. Victoria dreams of walking with Zofloya over 'beds of flowers, sometimes over craggy rocks, sometimes in fields of the brightest verdure, sometimes over burning sands, tottering on the edge of some huge precipice, while the angry waters waved in the abyss below' (p. 143). In contrast with the traditional black slave's body, Dacre gives us Zofloya's:

a form ... most attractive and symmetrical ... of superior height ... the graceful costume of dress ... a countenance ... endowed with the finest possible expression ... his eyes ... sparkled with inexpressible fire; his nose and mouth were elegantly formed, and when he smiled, the assemblage of his features displayed a beauty that delighted and surprised. (p. 145)

The interracial sublime has its origins, besides the inverted spaces of the home and gender roles, in this mix of terror and beauty, of 'indefinable' features in a black body. The 'interracial' here therefore is not only about the mixing of races in terms of sexual relations but also in the mix of racial features within the black body. Zofloya is unlike a black body, combining within himself the qualities of the black skin and white man's poise, education and wisdom. In the course of a conversation he asks Victoria: 'does the Signora believe, then, that the Moor Zofloya hath a heart dark as his countenance? Ah! Signora, judge ye not by appearances!' (p. 151). This is a particularly illuminating line. Zofloya simultaneously asserts and denies his lineage: he claims his blackness and yet calls attention to the inappropriateness in judging him by his skin color. If blurred borders and indistinct boundaries are a marker of the sublime (Weiskel, 1986) then Zofloya embodies such a condition.

There is a further point with regard to racial identity. Kim Michasiw points out in the introduction to the Oxford World Classics edition of *Zofloya* that the Moors occupied an ‘ambiguous position in the European imaginary’. They were ‘Africans who had ruled in Europe, who had created a vastly civilized and sophisticated society’ (2000, p.xxi). The Moor is a ‘figure for the displaced aristocracy of the global aristocracy’ (p. xxii) and a ‘transracial aristocracy’ (xxiii). Elsewhere Michasiw claims that by ‘insisting on Zofloya’s racial difference, on his blackness, and on the cultivation of his cultural heritage, Dacre’s text wrests Africans out of the primitive realm’ (2003, p. 49). Michasiw goes on to note that Moorish culture in the novel is predicated upon science and art, and not, by implication, on savagery and animism (p. 49). Zofloya is indeed such an ambiguous figure – part servant and part master. He represents what Felicity Nussbaum has perspicuously identified as the ‘portability’ of race in eighteenth century England.³ The blurring and indistinctness of Zofloya is central to the imagining of an invasion of the European home, family and perhaps country itself, I argue.

The interracial sublime has a topographical aspect as well. Victoria, writes Beatriz Moreno, ‘feels more at ease in sublime landscapes than in beautiful, harmonic ones’ (2007, p. 423). Having determined to kill Berenza with Zofloya’s help, she persuades Berenza to move to the Castella di Torre Alto, nestled in the Apennines. When she sets her eyes on the location she realizes that it was appropriate as a setting for what she wanted to do. This is the first description of the Castella where Berenza would die:

Victoria observed herself, with a gloomy and secret delight, enclosed within the profoundest solitudes, for no town, no hamlet was even near the Castella ... which was situated in a deep valley, on the borders of a forest. On either side huge rocks towered above its loftiest spires, and half embosomed it in terrible but majestic sublimity, while no sound disturbed the solemn silence of the scene but the fall of the impetuous cataract, as it stumbled from the stupendous acclivity into the depths below, or the distant sound of the vesper-bell tolling solemn from the nearest convent, with, at times, when the wind blew towards the castle, the murmuring peal of the lofty-sounding organ... seeming more like the mysterious

music of the spirits of the air, than sounds from mortal haunts...
(p. 165)

She regards the scene as ‘beautifully terrific’ (p. 165) and hails them ‘since they perhaps may first witness the rich harvest of my persevering love; and for such a love, perish – perish, all that may oppose it’ (p. 165). Exploring the sublime in person, Victoria is far from being awed:

She bent her steps towards the thickest of the forest; where the gloomy cypress, tall pine, and lofty poplar, mingled in solemn umbrage. Beyond, steep rocks, seeming piled on one another, inaccessible mountains, with here and there a blasted oak upon its summit, resembling rather, from the distant point at which it was beheld, a stunted shrub; huge precipices, down which the torrent dashed, and foaming in the viewless abyss with mighty rage, filled the most distant parts of the surrounding solitude with a mysterious murmuring, produced by the multiplied reverberations of sound. (p. 177)

Dacre writes: ‘the wild gloom seemed to suit the dark and ferocious passions of her soul’ (p. 177), thus suggesting that for Victoria the landscape’s terrifying sublimity is home. It is in such settings that she conspires with Zofloya (of which we have examples elsewhere in the novel, p. 213, p. 216, pp. 233-5). The above scene is of course vintage sublime: mountains piled on mountains, overflowing rivers and spillage are markers of the sublime’s excess (on spillage and overrunning as sublime see [Weiskel, 1986, p. 26](#); [Mishra, 1994, p. 22](#)).

Later the setting becomes the space of torture for the ultra-feminine Lilla. Dacre writes of the second murder in the sublime settings:

She [Victoria] proceeded a considerable way up the rock, when the loud solemn roar of the foaming cataract, dashing from a fissure on the opposite side into the precipice beneath, broke upon her ear. She fearlessly advanced, however, till she gained the summit, while louder and more stunning become the angry sound of waters ... Hastening onwards with rapid strides along the winding paths

she had so lately traversed, she beheld the gigantic figure of the Moor, gigantic even from the diminishing points of height and distance... (pp. 202-203)

The Moor is carrying on his shoulder, Lilla, drugged and vulnerable, the second victim of their interracial conspiracy:

Her fragile form lay nerveless, her snow-white arms, bare nearly to the shoulder ... hung down over the back of the Moor; her feet and legs resembling sculptured alabaster ... her languid head drooped insensible, while the long flaxen tresses; escaping from the net which had enveloped them, now partly shaded her ashy cheek, and now streamed in disheveled luxuriance on the breeze. (p. 203)

While Victoria thrives in the sublime setting, Lilla's femininity is destroyed. Victoria's triumph is partly due to her own near-masculine features and characters, as we have already seen. But is also partly due to the interracial conspiracy – and sexual relationship – she forges with Zofloya in the mountains. In other words, I am proposing that while the sublime seems to be a fit setting for Victoria's mind and character, the sublime is rendered interracial because it at once façade and an act ant in the liaison between the Moor and the European woman. One cannot, I propose, see the Apennine's sublime in Dacre as mere setting. It possesses its own topographical character that is then rendered more horrific because of the actions performed by the Moor and Victoria: the incarceration of the delicately feminine Lilla. Later, it is in the midst of such a sublime that Victoria stabs Lilla to death, a scene frightening in its violence:

With her poniard she stabbed her in the bosom ... 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... (p. 226)

Here, in such terrifying solitudes, Zofloya asks her: ‘Is not that heart mine, Victoria?’ Her response, ‘It is indeed, gratefully bound to you, Zofloya’ is not adequate and he insists: ‘I say it is *mine*, Victoria’ (p. 181, emphasis in original). Later he would state unambiguously that she was in his power: ‘remember poor Victoria, that independently of me, thou canst not even breathe’ (p. 227). He often displays ‘an ineffable grace’ and a ‘native grandeur’ (p. 233) in such a horrifying setting. The ‘native grandeur’ is that of his race, and it is precisely what attracts Victoria.

The interracial sublime is the combined effect of the Moor’s obvious physical charms and his manipulative charisma. It is also the shifting boundaries in the Moor himself: now slave, now master, now servant to Victoria, now her owner. The interracial sublime climaxes, in my view, not in the conclusion where Zofloya reveals himself as the Devil, and then flings Victoria into the falls. Rather, the interracial sublime’s climax is the revelation that he controls Victoria’s mind, her imagination and even her emotions.

Have my faculties been so long suspended? ... and it is to you alone that I am now indebted to their restoration? ... I perceive too clearly, how much, how completely I am in your power! (pp. 233-234)

And it is at this very moment that thunderclaps sound in the mountains.

Victoria’s firm bosom felt appalled, for never before had she witnessed the terrible phenomena of nature, in a storm among the Alps. She drew closer to the proud unshrinking figure of the Moor ... (p. 234)

It is in the awe-inspiring sublime of the mountains that Victoria discovers the true nature of the interracial sublime:

Never, till this moment, had she been so near the person of the Moor – such powerful fascination dwelt around him, that she felt incapable of withdrawing from his arms; yet ashamed ... when she remembered that Zofloya, however he appeared, was but a menial

slave, and as such alone had become known to her – she sought, but sought vainly, to repress them; for no sooner (enveloped in the lightning’s flash as he seemed, when it gleamed around him without touching his person), did she behold that beautiful and majestic visage, that towering and graceful form, than all thought of his inferiority vanished, and the ravished sense, spurning at the calumnious idea, confessed him a being of superior order. (p. 234)

Victoria’s recognition of her dependency and Zofloya’s complete control here is in keeping with the sublime’s effect on women, an effect not seen in Victoria’s case *before* this moment.

This is the point at which the critique of the woman’s sexual agency that Dacre wishes to foreground comes alive. Adriana Craciun (1995) reading the poetry of Charlotte Dacre has suggested that the possession of the English woman by the demon lover disturbs the corporeal integrity of the woman’s body (eventually leading her to her death), and this is central to the Gothic. In the poetry, says Craciun, we can see an ‘unnatural mingling of the living and the undead’ which is also – and this is crucial for Victoria as well – a ‘coded version of female sexual pleasure and agency, for the Mistress herself conjures the object of her affection, the demonic lover, and urges him to pursue her’ (p. 86). It is Victoria who ‘conjures’ up Zofloya: he first appears, as noted earlier, in her dream. Diane Hoeveler notes that ‘the character we recognize as “Zofloya” is actually less a real personage than the dark and demonic forces within Victoria’s own psyche’ (p. 189). I propose that even if we were to see Zofloya as the conjuration of Victoria’s diseased mind, the racial identity of what she conjures up suggests an interracial sublime.

The European woman who ‘wavers’ and loses her way morally and sexually is likely to conjure up a threat. That Victoria conjures up a black man as seductive lover and eventual threat suggests that when Victoria (like her mother whom we meet again, bruised and abused in the same mountains, [chapter XXX](#)) subverts the space of the family and home she *invites* the interracial sublime into her life. She abandons the safety of the Berenza home for the pleasures of the Apennine castle and Zofloya’s company. Thus it would be wholly inadequate to say Victoria is simply seduced by the Moor. What Dacre seems to do is to demonstrate the woman’s quest for

sexual agency even at enormous costs to herself. She abandons the safety and security of her home, husband and family and pursues her desires.

The interracial sublime here is therefore a *feminine sublime* in Barbara Freeman's 1997 sense of the term where, while Victoria is acted upon as a passive subject, she is also presented by Dacre as a subject who asserts agency even at the cost of self-annihilation. Freeman writes:

What is specifically feminine about the feminine sublime is not an assertion of innate sexual difference, but a radical rearticulation of the role gender plays in producing the history of discourse on the sublime and the formulation of an alternative position with respect to excess and the possibilities of its figuration. (p. 10)

As noted earlier, Victoria is presented to us not as a weak and vulnerable woman but as near-masculine, of strong will and a tyrannical disposition. She thus overturns the feminine ideal (represented in the novel in Lilla). Setting herself on the path of seduction, murder and ultimately self-annihilation, Victoria is the very embodiment of the feminine sublime where the woman's agency is to be asserted at all costs. Dacre remains, however, anxious about such assertions of agency.

Anne Mellor (2006) postulates an 'embodied cosmopolitanism' of the Romantic woman writer where a 'cultural harmony' might be attained through romance (Mellor adapts the phrase 'cultural harmony through romance' from Peter Hulme). I propose that it is precisely such a harmony that Dacre is anxious about, *if* it gives considerable agency to the English/European *woman*. In other words, embodied cosmopolitanism when gendered in favor of the woman might pose a certain risk. Dacre's is ultimately a defense of the European family and the rigid codes of female sexuality when she underscores the threat of the interracial sublime as wreaking havoc in the European home – not because the sublime (even the embodied sublime of the Moor) is inherently invasive but because it is invited in when the European woman asserts sexual agency.

Victoria's death at the hands of the lover she 'conjured' seems, therefore, a moral lesson. Dacre desists from blaming Victoria entirely. She has Zofloya admit to his agency: 'I it was [who] appeared to thee first in thy dreams, luring you to attempt the completion of thy wildest wishes' (p. 267).

In the note appended to the end of the tale, Dacre warns us of the ‘love of evil ... born with us’ or to the evil that comes due to ‘infernal influence’ (p. 268). By making Victoria the vehicle of the devil’s actions, she suggests that it is the woman who needs to guard against either the evil within her or the evil that comes in from outside influences. Once again this is a cautionary tale, for women: against giving in to their wishes and desires. Thus, one can see considerable ambivalence in Dacre about female agency. On the one hand there is the value of Victoria’s feminine sublime that asserts sexual agency at the cost of self-annihilation, and on the other there is the destruction of the woman as a result of asserting this agency. Dacre, I propose, is unclear about her loyalty to the question of woman’s agency.

The interracial sublime’s horror is of the ambiguity and possible racial masquerades of black men. If racial identity were indistinct across various categories of ‘blacks’, as Nussbaum (2009) has argued when identifying the ‘portability’ of race, then all origins, ethnic or class, are indeterminate. Blacks masquerading as knowledgeable aristocrats, savants dressed as servants or slaves who become masters pose a threat because they do not fit into categories. Dacre’s novel deploys the interracial sublime to capture the horror of such a portability and fungibility of racial types and class affiliations. (It is also possible that Dacre wants to demonstrate the vulnerability of the black race to the devil: the devil takes possession of those races and individuals who are most ‘open’ to such a possession (Schotland 2009, p. 130). The European woman needs to stay within the confines of her home and family and not be taken in by the black man who claims science or distinguished ancestry, as Zofloya does. She has to assume that the black man cannot possess such advanced knowledge of medicines and chemicals nor possess such a noble visage. The interracial sublime is the horror of unlimited desires, especially sexual, of the attempt to break free of the ‘secure’ confines of family and home, especially by women. It is the horror of interracial liaisons of European women and black men, but more importantly it is the horror of such liaisons being invited and desired by the women themselves. The interracial sublime encodes, to conclude, a fear of the transnational in English Romantic-Gothic writing.

Notes

¹ Feminist critics have noted how for male writers the sublime is ‘an allegory of the construction of the patriarchal (but not necessarily male) subject, a self that maintains its borders by subordinating difference and by appropriating rather than identifying with that which presents itself as other’ (Freeman, 1997, p. 4). Barbara Freeman sees the feminine sublime of Mary Shelley, Toni Morrison and others as depicting women ‘as subjects who exert will, even at the cost of self-destruction, and thus not merely as victims who are acted upon’ (p. 6).

² Burke would speak of how ‘darkness is terrible in its own nature’.

³ Felicity Nussbaum writes:

representations of people of colour in the eighteenth century mutate through the spectrum of tawny, sallow, olive, mulatto, sooty, and ebony of East Indian, West Indian, American Indian, Pacific Islander, and North and sub Saharan African, all of whom are at times designated in British (if not American) parlance as ‘black’. In some cases we can assign the muddles to historical accident, and in others to geographical confusion ... In the imaginative geography of the eighteenth century, Ethiopia (often a synonym for Africa) seems to migrate from Africa to Arabia and back again.

It is sometimes contiguous to Egypt and sometimes depicted on the western side of the continent, though Ethiopia eventually comes to represent a lost and unrecoverable premodern glory in the later Ethiopianism movement. (2009, pp. 143-149)

This ‘portability’ (as Nussbaum calls it) of the category ‘black’ through continents and cultures means that we can treat English literature’s representation of numerous racial and ethnic Others as resulting from a category confusion, but also an immanent feature of the concept of ‘race’.

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