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Charlotte Dacre (1772–1825) built her literary career on expressions of doomed desire, adulterous relationships, and the consequences of acting on feelings unsanctioned by nineteenth-century society, depicted in her novels as the paramount Gothic patriarch. In Dacre's four novels, hyper-sexual characters (especially women) struggle with predefinitions imposed upon them, and see themselves cast aside as threats to a cultural hegemony that seeks to assert its dominance and repress its unruly subjects. Those threats seem doubled with a notion of 'pestilence', as they are mostly figured as contagious agents, sources of a form of disease that threatens to corrupt the integrity of its host. Unruly women threaten households by contaminating wives with their lewd behaviours, Satan in the guise of a Moorish servant threatens both family and nation by contaminating the housewife with his taste for murder, and young girls reading romances run the risk of being contaminated by a seducer's radical philosophy.

As contemporary critics figured Dacre's texts themselves as contaminating agents, putting their readers at risk to contract the same 'fever' that prompted Dacre to write her licentious novels, these cultural anxieties revolving around contagion as presented in her narratives can be traced into the reception of her works, and even into Dacre's convoluted style.[1] Indeed, Dacre's narratives tend to contradict themselves: they generally open and end on highly didactic moral statements from an authoritative narrative voice, yet the main focus rests almost too extensively on the characters whose examples should precisely not be followed. I would contend that this simultaneity of competing discourses, this 'infection' of the text by that which it claims to shun, also allows Dacre to create and use a space of narratorial duplicity and irony to play on anxieties around perceived threats to British culture.

[1] *Literary Journal*, n.s.1 (June 1806), Appendix B, in Charlotte Dacre, *Zofloya,* ed. by Adriana Craciun (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2006), p.265. All further references to contemporary critical reception and anxieties of contagion are to this text.

Thus, her first novel *Confessions of the Nun of St Omer* (1805) is the story of Cazire Arieni, framed as being written by Arieni for her son (born out of wedlock) to understand the life and struggles of his mother — and more broadly those of any woman in her situation. Dacre's most famous novel, *Zofloya, or the Moor* (1806), presents itself as a cautionary tale, reprising the themes of unruly female sexuality. The novel depicts a young and haughty aristocrat working with a black servant in order to kill her husband out of desire for her brother-in-law. Although the Gothic aesthetic of these two novels is of a lesser nature, in the following work *The Libertine* (1807), the Gothic themes of a heroine's struggle for legitimacy are enacted by the character Gabrielle in her quest to retrieve her lover and marry him to protect her illegitimate children from being social outcasts. In this quest, the major antagonists are Angelo's mistresses, hyper-sexual women competing against one another for his hand and the economic stability that comes with it. Dacre's last novel, *The Passions* (1811), is an epistolary collection retracing the story of a group of friends shattered when one of the characters, Julia's desire for her husband's friend, Darlowitz. As this illegitimate desire grows, so do its consequences, culminating in the melodramatic death of Darlowitz's wife and their unborn child. A few pages before his suicide, Darlowitz laments: 'I am a pestilence, and spread ruin wheresoever I pass!', a statement that could easily be applied to many of Dacre's characters as the dominating symbol of her depiction of social relations.[2] Sometimes deplored by characters, sometimes held up as a symbol of pride in destruction and a Sadean will to power, this 'pestilence' is at the core of all four novels by Dacre and seems to play on deep-rooted anxieties in nineteenth-century English culture.

In the wake of the rise of the middle class, gender roles and identities in the early nineteenth century became more strictly defined, with an emphasis on domesticity and child-rearing for women, as well as a discipline and regulation of sexuality on which the stability of the household depended. The omnipresence of such cultural principles very often transpires in literature by women, as a shift in critical perspectives has made manifest. Diane Hoeveler mentions in *Gothic Feminism* how our understanding of the 'female gothic genre' shifted from a more psychological type of fiction regarding female anxieties of a sexual nature, to a

[2] Charlotte Dacre, *The Passions, Vol. III* (London: Cadell & Davies, 1811), p. 53. All further references to *The Passions* will be taken from this edition.

set of 'elided representations of the political, socioeconomic, and historical complexities of women's lives under a newly codified bourgeois ideology'.[3]

As modern critical perspectives on works by women writers have evolved, it becomes clear that women writers in Dacre's time were already grasping the interconnectedness of household and nation. In their political and philosophical writings as well as in their fiction, these writers were addressing something already at work in the founding texts of what we might call feminist theory, criticising and refashioning the cultural matrix posed by philosophers of the time. Anne Mellor traces in Mary Wollstonecraft's imagery of the nation 'a benevolent family educating its children for mature independence and motivated by "natural affections" to ensure the welfare of all its members', as opposed to an image of the nation as 'a ravished wife in need of virile protection', as previously used by writers such as Burke.[4] In this light, the notion of domesticity and motherhood becomes a symbol for propriety and virtue, and the home becomes itself a place of hegemony that sees its disrupters heavily punished, not only through the sanction of their peers, but also by institutions. In her study of unmarried cohabitation in the nineteenth century, Ginger Frost notes:

> A woman who lived in adultery could expect little help from the disapproving middle class. The authorities were unsympathetic to 'homewreckers', men or women, though they were harder on the latter.[5]

As the middle class thus developed and built a new political and cultural model of virtue and domesticity on the figure of the housewife and mother, the expanding British empire was beginning to face rebellions in its colonies and to see its hegemony (its Burkean 'virile' power) threatened. In the wake of the Saint Domingue massacre during the Haitian revolution, in which 100,000 enslaved people rebelled and destroyed thousands of plantations as well as their owners, a new terror took possession of Britain and changed the image of the black 'slave' in a dramatic manner. In his study of discourses on slavery, Marcus Wood shows how 'a flood of publications giving detailed accounts of the most horrific violence changed the popular perception of blacks in England', adding that 'what resulted was one of the most extreme reactions to the Slave Rebellion to emerge from London'.[6]

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[3] Diane Hoeveler, *Gothic Feminism: The Professionalization of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), p. 5.
[4] Anne Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 32.
[5] Ginger Frost, *Living in Sin: Cohabiting as Husband and Wife in Nineteenth-Century England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), p. 113.
[6] Marcus Wood, *Slavery, Empathy and Pornography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 157.

Thus, on top of rigid expectations imposed upon women to be the 'Angel in the house' (even before such a figure was crystallised in Coventry Patmore's 1854 poem) and subsequent punishment of non-compliant women, reinforced fears regarding non-white individuals — what Wood calls 'fictions of racial difference — were added to an ever-evolving culture, threatening to weaken its expansion and legitimacy.[7] It is in light of this historical context that Dacre's *Zofloya* was published and consequentially understood by some of its first modern critics as an inherently conservative and racist text. This assessment was not only because the novel stems from a cultural matrix that was essentially racist itself, but because the resolution of the novel (the immoral woman being punished and the revelation of the black man as the devil) allows this racist ideology to be restored. Diane Hoeveler's reading develops the notion that Dacre 'attempts to make Zofloya a subject of racial, cultural, and national representation that she and by extension the white bourgeois world could ultimately control', and sees *Zofloya* as a 'farce', a 'dumbing down' of Wollstonecraft's argument in favour of the importance of motherly examples.[8] In the wake of this major critical work on Dacre, Sara D. Schotland picked up on the characterisation of Zofloya, and on what she reads as 'the slave's revenge'.[9] Schotland concludes that as the text represents the brutal potential of the slave's revolt in the mastery that Zofloya acquires over Victoria:

> It would be a mistake to conclude that this novel is not a racist text. Rather, Dacre fans the flames of phobia by heightening the threat that Zofloya represents: he is foreign, he perverts the sexuality of a white woman, and he is Satanic.[10]

Writing in the same year as Schotland, Carol Margaret Davison suggests that Dacre's text appears as a more complex work thanks to a narrative voice that:

> Manages, despite the rigid race and gender prescriptions in her culture, to advance a progressive, feminist agenda that challenges the roles of both women and blacks as they have been typed in the cultural imaginary.[11]

In the context of this reflection on moral contagion as a threat to cultural hegemony, my reading of *Zofloya* is situated right in the middle of these two contradictory interpretations of

[7] Wood, p. 144.
[8] Diane Long Hoeveler, 'Charlotte Dacre's Zofloya: A Case Study in Miscegenation as Sexual and Racial Nausea', *European Romantic Review* 8.2 (1997), 185–199 (p. 190).
[9] Sara D. Schotland, 'The Slave's Revenge: the Terror in Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya*', *Western Journal of Black Studies,* 33.2 (2009), 123–131.
[10] Ibid., p. 129.
[11] Carol Margaret Davison, 'Getting their Knickers in a Twist: Contesting the "Female Gothic" in Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya*', *Gothic Studies*, 11 (2009), 32–45 (p. 35).

Dacre's sulphurous novel. It is true, as both Schotland and Hoeveler noticed, that *Zofloya* 'fans the flames' of racism, and knows exactly the type of anxieties it creates in its readership, in light of all the contextual elements I have presented. Yet, I would agree with Davison's reading of *Zofloya* as a more complex work, especially regarding its author's engagement with Wollstonecraft's text. I am suggesting that the 'flames of phobia' are fanned by Dacre and her demonic couple precisely in order to reactivate anxieties about British cultural hegemony, using this shock tactic to playfully point at the limits of Britain's cultural empire and sense of superiority. It is therefore no surprise that *Zofloya* received such a negative critical reception. Interestingly enough, in the light of this reflection on contagion, *Zofloya* is the novel that led critics to diagnose Dacre with 'the dismal malady of maggots in the brain', and sought to 'quarantine' her in order to protect young readers from her infectious powers.[12] As a whole, Dacre's novels explore further the anxieties of her century regarding the threat of contagion and disruption, notably those related to literature and reading themselves, sometimes seen as a contaminating agent that needed to be controlled.

The notion of 'fictions of difference' I borrowed from Wood is here of paramount importance. Not only were those dynamics of 'Othering' (both of 'unruly' women and racially marked individuals) intellectual constructions, but they were at the same time upheld and undermined by fiction and literature as a whole — often used by writers as a way to negotiate (and perhaps in certain cases redefine) these changing cultural guidelines, and their repercussions on the day-to-day lives of individuals. It is therefore no wonder that novel reading, seen as a form of unhealthy escapism from one's duty, was already considered as a threat to these two forms of hegemony. Indeed, reading for women was considered an ambiguous activity — whilst women physically remained in their homes, they were also communicating with the outside world, and so the duality of literature 'threatened subversion of an ideology of separate spheres'.[13] The dangers of reading in women are not only presented as threatening a new-found social order. Indeed, its effects are also to be located in the body:

> While men's reading was shown to facilitate intellectual development, women's tended to be located in the female body, represented as a physical not an intellectual act. Consequently it was believed to have a direct effect not only on female morals but also on the female body, girls being urged to limit their 'reading' because it was an enemy to 'health and beauty', likely to 'hurt [the]

[12] *Literary Journal*, n.s.1 (June 1806), in *Zofloya,* p. 265.
[13] Jacqueline Pearson, *Women's Reading in Britain, 1750–1835: A Dangerous Recreation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 2.

> eyes' or 'spoil [the] shape' of the woman reader. Immoderate reading caused fainting and even dangerous changes in pulse rate.[14]

Reading was thus perceived as an activity able to jeopardise women's physical integrity, which led to an active policing of the type of books available to them. However, even in an age obsessed with taxonomy and classification (a habit that was applied to literature and forms of knowledge as well as gender roles and behaviours), the boundaries set between 'proper' and 'improper' literature could be porous, and the worst of books could be accidentally read, under the guise of morality.[15] Pearson notes that:

> 'Bad' women, self-apologists and scandal-writers, could easily appropriate the cachet of 'good' books as camouflage, or even as ways of challenging the distinction between good and bad models of femininity.[16]

Such a description seems to perfectly fit Charlotte Dacre, and the dynamics of moral perversion through books that she depicts in her novels, which in spite of their popularity at the time, were dragged down by numerous critics and reviewers. A recurring element of this criticism was that the proverbial 'delicacy' of the 'female mind' should have prevented her from writing, let alone imagining, such horrors.[17] Presented as moral pieces which intended to depict examples of vice that ought not to be followed, Dacre's four novels precisely play with this notion of 'pestilence': of disease and of moral contagion. These novels, and the various unworthy women and their destructive behaviours within them, are situated at the crux between reality and fiction, between imperial conquest, the risk of cultural collapse, and the rise of domesticity. Focusing on the notions of domesticity, race, and reading in the nineteenth century, this paper will demonstrate how the dynamics of moral contagion presented in Dacre's novels play on the intense sources of cultural anxiety which I have outlined in this introduction, and how they revel in the threat posed by a variety of individuals to a cultural hegemony in constant need of reinforcement. In the light of Dacre's contemporary critical reception, and the horror felt by critics reading texts that supposedly should never have come from 'a woman's pen', my contention is that Dacre harnessed these

[14] Pearson, p. 4.
[15] Ibid., p. 9.
[16] Ibid., p. 7.
[17] *Monthly Literary Recreations,* 1 (July 1806) 80, Appendix B, in *Zofloya*, pp. 261–262.

very cultural anxieties in a form of shock tactic and cynical playfulness bordering on the taste for scandal and sensation.[18]

Through the notion of contagion — of an image of invasion and corruption of a sane body by a malevolent parasite — Dacre not only demonstrates the weaknesses of the cultural fictions of her century, but also seemingly fingers the wound, we might say, of a culture striving to assert its superiority and supremacy. As the wives and mothers at the centre of the household prove to be inefficient guardians of the values that it represents, the threat of moral contagion that they are unable to prevent extends to the values of the nation and of a 'white supremacy' upheld by the cultural hegemony that Britain strives to maintain at home and in its colonies. Finally, the contradictions in and around the novels as well as the metatextual comments that Dacre includes within her narratives suggest the writer's playfulness and knowledge of the anxieties of the time, on which she constructs her Gothic narratives of unruly women. Added to this study of Dacre's play on moral contagion, this essay offers a critical re-evaluation of Dacre's works, moving away from a conservative bourgeois perspective, and instead reading the novels as a more ironic and detached approach to literature, which manipulates the codes and traditions of its cultural matrix.

Infectious Philosophy, Sensibility, and the Household

Dacrean identities (especially female ones) are often depicted as porous and constantly subjected to a threat of contamination. As the heroine and narrator of *Confessions* meets her neighbour Fribourg, the first of her lovers, they discuss 'philosophy' through the railings that separate both their properties. The word 'philosophy' itself had already become suspicious by 1790.[19] Indeed, Fribourg's 'philosophy' is not of the socially sanctioned kind, as the Godwinian undertones of the seducer's arguments perverting the young lady present 'the new philosophy of radicalism as a threat to the very foundations of British society', in the fashion of many anti-Jacobin novels of the time.[20] At first a simple activity for Cazire Arieni to avoid *ennui* in her mother's gloomy house, she gradually lets herself be seduced not only by Fribourg himself, but by this very philosophy (advocating free love and individualism, among

[18] *Zofloya*'s gesturing towards the sensational novel is discussed in Elena Emma Sottilotta, 'Diabolical Crossings: Generic Transitions Between the Gothic and the Sensational in Dacre and Alcott', *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies,* 14 (2015), 81–99.
[19] Pearson, p. 77.
[20] Lucy Cogan, 'Introduction', in Charlotte Dacre, *Confessions of the Nun of St Omer,* ed. by Lucy Cogan (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. ix–xxiii (p. xiii).

other things). These scenes of philosophical seduction are commented upon by a remote observer calling himself 'Ariel', who leaves Cazire letters to warn her against the seducer, and prevent her falling a victim to Fribourg's philosophy:

> [...] religion is a farce with him, therefore can he never feel compunction; he believes in no law, divine or human, therefore never imagines he can break any; the avenue to his sophisticated heart is guarded with the strength of hell — like a pestilential vault, in seeking to purify it you will yourself become infected.[21]

Ironically, 'Ariel' seems to point at the limits of nineteenth-century middle class ideology, putting women at its centre and charging them with the 'domestication' of men and the upbringing of children:

> If the marketplace driven by male labor came to be imagined as a centrifugal force that broke up the vertical chains organizing an earlier notion of society and that scattered individuals willy-nilly across the English landscape, then the household's dynamic was conceived as a centripetal one. The household simultaneously recentered the scattered community at myriad points to form the nuclear family, a social organisation with a mother rather than a father as its center.[22]

That centripetal movement of domesticity, the woman's attempt at 'purifying' the male seducer/philosopher, is here reversed: the 'curing' gesture expected from women would be fruitless, in the case of Cazire and Fribourg, to no avail as he would be the one contaminating her (and by extension, the entire set of values that framed women's domestic responsibilities). Ariel's letter seems to unintentionally reveal that the 'recentering' force of womanly domesticity is actually no match against the strength of infectious philosophy and seduction, announcing Cazire's attempts at 'taming' her lover as doomed to fail right from the start.

The underlying radicalism of the seducer's philosophy contaminating and disrupting proper households is also linked with economic matters. In Cazire's original household, her pining mother is abandoned by an already morally corrupt husband, who lives in an adulterous relationship with the countess Rosendorf, one of the first *femme fatales* of Dacre's novelistic career. The Countess is depicted as a woman of a 'vicious character'(p. 7) who 'followed the motto of *liberty*' (p. 7); the italicized word in the text referring, according to Lucy Cogan's introduction to that novel, to the French revolutionary motto, and therefore to

[21] Charlotte Dacre, *Confessions of the Nun of St Omer,* ed. by Lucy Cogan (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 52. All further references to *Confessions of the Nun of St Omer* will be to this edition.
[22] Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 95.

the Jacobinic and revolutionary anxieties to which it called.[23] Moreover, in trying to convince Arieni to forget his wife, Rosendorf appeals to both his and her own economic situations: '*remember,* that our fortunes are *shattered;* that together we may restore them, and that she who offers you her friendship and her person, is possessed at once of spirit to *conceive,* and promptness to *execute*' (p. 8).

This presentation of the Countess Rosendorf (occurring within the first pages of the novel) seems to set the template for various other licentious women in Dacre's novels, and their connection to a wish to control one's economic situation. Milborough, the perverted governess of Dacre's third novel *The Libertine*, will also shatter Gabrielle's hopes of marrying the father of her illegitimate children (and thereby of restoring them to a proper social situation) out of jealousy for her social rank. Her way of doing so is by undermining Gabrielle's authority on her young son, and 'poisoning' his mind by telling him about his mother's improper situation as an unmarried woman: 'while she [Gabrielle] considered as the wandering of the head merely, the errors of her child, they sprang from a heart corrupted and contaminated by the baneful influence of surrounding circumstance'.[24] This nefarious influence on Gabrielle's young son will later lead him to band with his governess in order to steal his mother's jewels and his father's money, and run away together, leading to the family's ruin. The trope of the seducer's philosophy is therefore not limited to male figures. Dacre's licentious and hypersexual women are also 'philosophers' in their own right (often 'revolutionary' ones, tinged with Jacobinic undertones), and take economic matters into their own hands, thereby granting themselves a form of power through the corruption of the British household and the values of propriety and legitimacy which it upholds.

The hyperbolic consequences of such moral contagion, however, are met with little resistance from the proper guardians of those households. Indeed, mother figures in Dacre's novels often fail to provide sufficient protection against these moral contaminations from licentious philosophy and economy. Thus, Cazire's mother is depicted as her husband's:

> [...] enthusiastic admirer — she contemplated his talents with the same awe-struck wonder as a child views the ascension of a sky-rocket: — she was innocent, young, and romantic to a fault, easily swayed, and too soft to be energetic, or repel by dignified perseverance the influx of oppression. (*Confessions,* I, p. 6)

[23] *Confessions*, ed. by Lucy Cogan, footnote 14, p.62.
[24] Charlotte Dacre, *The Libertine, Vol. III* (London: Cadell & Davies, 1807), p.4. All further references to *The Libertine* will be to this edition.

Moreover, Amelia Arieni's lack of resistance is seen as the starting point of Cazire's downfall:

> Had my mistaken mother, in lieu of listening to the mad dictates of *imaginary* enthusiasm, attended to its milder opponent *reason,* and been swayed by common sense, how much misery might have been avoided! (p. 17)

Such emphasis on the role of the mother as an example for a daughter's behaviour will later be repeated — and accentuated — in Dacre's famous *Zofloya*, where the heroine's adulterous mother is constantly accused of perverting her daughter by a highly moralising narrative voice. In *Confessions,* sentimentalism and one's 'imaginary enthusiasm' for a love object are presented as diminishing women's (and particularly mothers') range of action, paving the way for moral contamination of their children: it is, after all, to escape the gloom of her lovesick mother's house that Cazire engages in the philosophical jousting with Fribourg that will lead to her contamination.

Although Dacre was often understood to be a fairly conservative writer, and even 'no feminist' by critics such as Diane Hoeveler, this victimisation of her female characters through sentimentalism, and their lack of resistance to the moral infection of heir households seem to tell a different tale.[25] Indeed, the notion of victimisation through sentimentalism as depicted through some of Dacre's characters is completely in line with the political implications of Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women.*[26] Contrary to Hoeveler's dismissal of the importance of Wollstonecraft's philosophy for Dacre, I would contend that her works were the basis for Dacre's narrative, and, if anything, were considered not radical enough by the Gothic writer, as recent criticism such as Jennifer Airey's study of male narcissism in the novels of Dacre has suggested.[27] Published thirteen years after Wollstonecraft's arguments for an education of women against an exaggerated form of sentimentalism, Dacre's first novel (as well as her three others) seems to provide discreet

[25] Hoeveler, p.185.
[26] In this study of Dacre's *Zofloya*, Hoeveler interprets the narrative voice's constant emphasis on the importance of a mother's example as a 'dumbing-down' of Wollstonecraft's philosophy. However, other critics such as George Haggerty argue against that notion of parody, in a favour of the centrality of the mother-daughter relationship and of maternal loss in the text. See George Haggerty, 'Mothers and Other Lovers: Gothic Fiction and the Erotics of Loss', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 16.2 (2004), 157–172. Even though a development of (and comment on) those critical debates fall beyond the scope of that article, discussions on Dacre's engagement with the feminist theory of her time are nevertheless very much alive in the Dacrean critical landscape.
[27] Jennifer Airey, '"He bears no rival near the throne": Male Narcissism and Early Feminism in the Works of Charlotte Dacre', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction,* 30 (2018), 223–241.

examples of such an education in her depiction of love-sick, failing mothers, and the consequences of their lack of agency and assertiveness.

Yet, in spite of these clear Wollstonecraftian influences, Dacre's female characters are known for indulging in extreme forms of desire which not only pervert the proper bourgeois household, but to a certain extent also affect the nation and empire through the contamination of values. This is one of the most prevalent themes of her second novel *Zofloya*.

The Foreign Threat

Beyond the sublime character of Zofloya, the eponymous antagonist of Dacre's most (in)famous novel, a variety of racial Others are also present in her works, and are presented as disruptive elements — a disruption that is always initiated on sexual grounds. Hence *Zofloya*'s Megalena Strozzi and *The Libertine*'s Oriana (both courtesans and antagonists) are designated respectively as 'the Neapolitan' and 'the Genoese', which implicates their moral impropriety with a notion of foreignness.

The Libertine provides another example of foreignness that is perhaps more telling from a British perspective. When Gabrielle dresses as a man to leave her home and find her lover Angelo, she assumes the identity of Eugene, a Creole servant for whom Angelo will feel an 'unnatural' attraction:

> 'How lovely he is!' mentally ejaculated Angelo as he gazed; 'yet though he appears lovely, how little do those fine and tender features seem to assimilate with that dark complexion; what delicacy of shape too! — what elegance!'
>
> As thus he viewed the supposed youth, again he felt the warmest sensations of affection for him rising in his bosom. 'No wonder,' said he uneasily to himself, 'he is formed to inspire friendship and interest in the coldest heart; whoever sees him must *admire*; whoever knows him must love.' (*Libertine* I, p. 242)

Luckily for Angelo, his attempt at reassuring himself on this attraction will later be validated by the revelation of Eugene's true identity as Gabrielle (a white woman). However, Eugene's supposed masculinity appears as less of an impediment for Angelo's desire than his 'dark complexion', a motif that was already visible in *Zofloya*, as the eponymous character's beauty (and Victoria's desire for him) is always represented 'in spite' of his complexion, or his social status. Whether as both the object and source of homosexual desire, or as the devil

in disguise (Zofloya's true identity) prompting a woman to murder her husband and drug her brother-in-law in order to rape him, Dacre's racial Other manifests a threat of disruption to the proper heterocentric monogamy of British middle class ideology.

Indeed, beyond a threat of disruption, the character of Zofloya also plays with a threat of contagion, putting the moral supremacy of British values at risk. As several critics have already noted, Victoria herself comes to physically resemble Zofloya, becoming 'taller', 'darker', and more 'masculine' as the text unfolds and her crimes pile up under the influence of her devilish master. I would like to turn to Marcus Wood's *Slavery, Empathy and Pornography* and its focus on European discourses regarding colonisation and slavery to illustrate this context of anxiety regarding the notion of the 'contamination' of whiteness. It is my contention that Victoria's obvious attraction to the eponymous Moor calls to mind nineteenth-century texts dealing with the state of British colonies, according to which 'sexual relations between blacks and whites constitute a terrifying cultural disaster', and Spanish America is threatened by 'what a vicious, brutal, and degenerate breed of mongrels has been there produced between Spaniards, Blacks, Indians and their mixed progeny'.[28]

The potential threat of a 'mixed progeny' seems to become even more sickening when the white woman is the instigator of the sexual relationship. The anxiety that this potential generates in writers such as Cobbett is not only limited to seeing the union of black and white people (and by extension, cultures and civilisations it seems) as a state 'outside culture, and outside humanity', and something 'beastly'.[29] According to Wood, Cobbett saw real horror in a white woman choosing a black man, and the consequences of such a choice were indeed to have repercussions far greater than just domestic disruption:

> This is a crime not only against sense and decency, but more crucially against family and Nation [...] Cobbett was to go even further and suggest that blacks themselves in the colonies should stop reproducing, because the growth of their population was a threat to the development of mankind.[30]

In her piece on 'interracial sexual desire' in *Zofloya,* Anne Mellor notes the presence of such racial prejudice from the beginning of the novel, and in the dialogue that the novel opens with, the texts of Edward Long, particularly a passage in which Long declares that 'in the course of a few generations more, the English blood will become so contaminated with this

[28] Wood, p. 144.
[29] Ibid., p. 161.
[30] Ibid.

mixture [...] as even to reach the middle, and then the higher orders of the people'.[31] However, Mellor mainly focuses on the impropriety of Victoria's illicit desire and its importance as a token of subjectivity and agency in the feminine Gothic landscape of the time, rather than on the anxieties of cultural collapse which this image of a 'contaminating mixture' reactivates.

Beyond a threat to the household and nation then, Victoria's desire for Zofloya seemingly rekindles anxieties about a vision of whiteness, and of a certain 'development of mankind' needing protection from the moral and physical contamination of the racial Other — a contamination that her physical transformation as the text unfolds seems to manifest. Victoria, after her transformation and 'infection' by Zofloya, seems to become herself this unwanted progeny, this threat to imperial hegemony — not only through her unruly desire and her obvious breeches of the notion of domesticity and hospitality (as she kills her husband and sexually assaults her guest), but through her very desiring body which becomes tinged with the marks of Otherness. This Otherness is figured as transmissible, contagious, and can invade Britain and cause the collapse of its values through the home, and even more insidiously, through (at first) seemingly innocuous day-to-day activities such as reading.

Literature and Desire: A Self-Contaminating Discourse

Women's reading posed more than one philosophical problem in the nineteenth century. Both perceived as the basis for women's education and a source of idleness and self-indulgence, this cultural ambivalence of literature allowed Dacre to play on these anxieties, and to point at her texts as examples of being of that nefarious sort, in a form of playful meta-textual comment. In *Confessions*, as Cazire is sent to the convent of Saint-Omer by Rosendorf, her servant brings her some books, out of compassion, but her lack of discernment prevents her from effecting a nobler literary selection:

> These, like the poisonous poppy, affected my brain with their dangerous influence, and dazzled my senses with the vivid strength of their colouring. Under the fallacious mask of conveying *virtue* to the heart, the most subtle and agreeable emotions were infused: passionate scenes were depicted in all the glowing imagery of voluptuous language, to show the wonderful escapes of innocence. (p. 20)

[31] Anne Mellor, 'Interracial Sexual Desire in Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya*', *European Romantic Review,* 13.2 (2002), 169–173 (p. 171).

That motif of the 'poisonous' book, hiding its venom under the garb of 'virtue' is also repeated in *The Passions,* where a jealous Appollonia Zulmer tries to corrupt the wife of the man who has rejected her. She attempts to do so through a selection of books, including Rousseau's *Heloïsa* — already a staple in terms of 'dangerous' books, susceptible to corrupt young women.[32] When Julia falls in love with her husband's friend, Appollonia sees herself as having succeeded in her enterprise, but recent criticism reads this triumph of perversion through literature as a convenient receptacle for the blame of Julia's downfall. Indeed, Jennifer Airey's work on male narcissism in Dacre's works advocates that a man's libertinism is the cause of Julia's demise, but that the female antagonist and the novel which she offers are thought to be responsible by the other characters (and the readers).[33] Still, the motif of literature corrupting its readers plays a huge part in this last — and least successful, on both publishing and critical terms — of her novels.[34]

Indeed, Adriana Craciun noted that *The Passions* can be read as a rewriting of Bienville's *Nymphomania, or a Dissertation Concerning the Furor Uterinus,* a medical treatise concerning the symptoms and causes of nymphomania.[35] According to Bienville's definition of nymphomania, that disease does not only create sexual frenzy in its host, as the symptoms of nymphomania can also be located in language and discourse. He notes, as he describes in his treatise:

> It is from this general overthrow of all their relations to each other, that a delirium arises to destroy the order of ideas, and impels the person afflicted to affirm what she had denied, and to deny what she hath affirmed.[36]

This destruction of the 'order of ideas' seems in line with Dacre's own unstable narrative voices. Indeed, Dacre's novels systematically open and end on a very didactic and moralising discourse, presenting the author as an 'historian who would wish his lessons to sink deep into the heart, thereby essaying to render mankind more virtuous and more happy' (*Zofloya*, p. 39). Alternatively, Dacre sums up another of her texts as a 'conscientious' portrait of 'the fatal consequences attendant on the disregard of a system so glorious, rational and

[32] Pearson, p. 73.
[33] Airey, p. 240.
[34] Helen Small, *Love's Madness: Medicine, the Novel, and Female Insanity, 1800–1865* (Kettering: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 81. Small suggests that 'the absence of further editions of *The Passions* probably reflected a change in the confidence of her publishers, as much as a change in the taste of her readership'. She also adds that Dacre's last novel 'probably strayed too far' from the line followed by her 'fashionable but polite' editor (p. 82).
[35] Adriana Craciun, *Fatal Women of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 136.
[36] Ibid., p. 121.

indispensable' as marriage (*The Libertine*, p. 224). Yet it has been duly noted by many critics — from her century as well as our own — that her antagonists are depicted with such flamboyance that they tend to pull the focus from the more morally acceptable characters, resulting in a 'contradiction in Dacre's writing, between the impulse to revel in the overwhelming power of passion and the moral orthodoxy those works claim (rather tenuously) to embody.[37] This contradiction thus results in making Dacre's texts the very type of book that Cazire decries, 'infusing' emotions under the 'fallacious mask of conveying *virtue* to the heart' (*Confessions*, p.20). Those novels are therefore themselves duplicitous in that they present narratives of moral contagion through literature, but contradict these statements of narratives as poisonous (as the 'true' cause of moral contamination and change in female characters is always lost and drowned in a variety of potential causes, including male indulgence in sexuality according to Airey's example above). And within this dynamic of contradiction, they also adopt the very corrupting devices that they pretend to decry.

The contradictions in which Dacre's texts are situated also provoke controversies present within critical perspectives. As we have seen, her texts are either debated as being conservative, anti-feminist, and racist, or championed as almost progressive, giving a new representation of subjectivity and sexuality for women in an age of rigorous discipline and codification. Once again, my contention would be that both these classifications, as strange as it may appear, can coexist within Dacre's works. This is a simultaneity that is made possible by her slippery narrative voices and her narrative manipulations, a 'nymphomania' of sorts that allows her to play on both sides of the stage (and which resulted in the high popularity of her novels among the public, as well as their poor critical reception caused by her novel's 'impropriety'). These complex narratorial manipulations and contradictions call to mind what Jerrold E. Hogle reads as Shelley's 'Gothic Complex', and the way in which his Gothic romances (among others, inspired by Dacre) 'point, as the Gothic always has, to a "world in which traditional beliefs and values have eroded" but also one where the pull of those past ideologies remains'.[38]

The same could be said of Dacre's texts and her economy of contradiction and simultaneity: the present ideology is infected with the past one, narratives of moral righteousness are infected by what they claim to shun, leaving the Dacrean novel a place of

[37] Cogan, p. xi.
[38] Jerrold E. Hogle, 'The "Gothic Complex" in Shelley: From *Zastrozzi* to *The Triumph of Life*', *A Romantic Circles Praxis Volume,* (Nov 2015) <https://romantic-circles.org/praxis/gothic_shelley/praxis.gothic_shelley.2015.hogle.html> [Last accessed 3 February 2022].

chaos and instability that the critics of her time did not fail to see. One of the reviewers of *Zofloya* published a rather violent review in the *Literary Journal*, calling Dacre diseased, and her brain rotten:

> Now the effects of this disease of maggots in the brain are somewhat similar to those of brain fever. The patient raves incessantly, sees things that never were seen before, and says things that were never before said. In short he creates a world of his own, which he fills with everything but what is rational and human.[39]

The symptoms of this 'fever' strongly echo the definition of nymphomania given by Bienville, but they are also strangely in line with the very essence of creative writing. Indeed, what writer, male or female, can escape the madness of 'creating a world of [their] own', if they ever wish to write? It then becomes clear that in the minds of Dacre's contemporary critics, writing and reading were perceived as two sides of the same coin, as our reviewer in the *Literary Journal* claims that:

> The ravings of persons under its influence [of the malady of maggots in the brain], whenever they are read or heard, have a sensible effect upon brains of a weak construction, which themselves either putrefy and breed maggots, or suffer a derangement of some kind. It might be a charitable thing to have an hospital for the reception of these unfortunate people while under the influence of the disease, where they might be confined in such a manner as not to infect others.[40]

This critic was certainly being playful in his attack on Dacre's 'malady' and his wish to confine authors such as her. Nonetheless, his choice of words proves interesting: the rhetoric of contagion and isolation is indeed present in this discourse, reminiscent of a body trying to preserve its healthy cells from the attack of a disease, as well as a culture striving to maintain its hegemony by isolating its unruly elements. Ironically enough, the theme of confinement and isolation seems to revert to the discussion opening this paper: Cazire's isolation and *ennui* in a love-ridden household is, after all, one of the causes that prompted her to author a complex narrative. The *Confessions* that she dedicated to her son as a pretended justification also expatiate upon the protagonist's feelings of desire and the various lovers whom she knew, and contradict themselves and the intents they claim to have. Confinement and sanitary isolation in Dacre's novels seem not only to be ineffectual against the dynamic of moral contagion which she presents, but even sometimes to be its very origin.

[39] *Literary Journal,* June 1806, in *Zofloya*, p.265.
[40] Ibid., p. 267.

It thus seems that Charlotte Dacre's involvement with the Gothic extends far beyond *Zofloya* alone, and manifests itself in a much different form from the traditional castles and haunted convents — in the presentation of an 'erosion from within' of British imperialistic values.[41] If the themes of moral corruption and the destruction of the household by Victoria's illicit desire have already been thoroughly studied by other critics, this essay has demonstrated that those notions are also present in her other novels, even if in a less Gothic form. Or rather, it seems that the Gothic stems from these very anxieties that range far beyond the destruction of households and of the notion of 'European womanhood'.[42]

Indeed, as I have presented in the introduction to this paper, the notion of femininity and the upholding of British values were very much connected — and already threatened by the violence and sexual licentiousness of a text such as *Zofloya*, but a form of contagion of discourse through discourse also comes into play to shake the cultural foundations of Britain. Through the depiction of a sexuality connected with the frightening notion of a 'philosophy' tinged with Jacobinic undertones, as well as a contradictory discourse infecting itself with what it pretends to seek to repudiate, the instability of Dacre's texts proves their reading to be an unsettling experience. Through her disguised attacks upon the ideal of proper femininity, on the supremacy of a 'white' culture of imperialism, or even on the consistency of narrative (and cultural) discourse itself, it seems that reading Dacre (either in the nineteenth century or even in our own time, in the light of recent race- or gender-related political considerations), reveals the limits of a cultural hegemony that has always been taken for granted, by playing on the underlying anxieties regarding the threat of moral contagion.

[41] Pramod K. Nayar, 'The Interracial Sublime: Gender and Race in Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya*', *GENEROS: Multidisciplinary Journal of Gender Studies,* 2 (2013), 233–254 (p. 243).
[42] Ibid., p. 238.

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