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Bracegirdle, Nadia John Clarum

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Otherness and Ambiguity: Coding Difference in British Gothic and Sensation Novels

Nadia Bracegirdle

ORCID: 0000-0003-3907-1618

Master of Arts

Submitted March, 2020

Faculty of Arts

School of Culture and Communication

The University of Melbourne

Submitted in total fulfilment for the degree of
Master of Arts

ABSTRACT

This thesis reads British gothic and sensation novels through their historical contexts, examining Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya, or The Moor* (1806), and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860) through the themes of cultural and social transgression, examining how transgressive experiences of religion, gender, sexuality, race, and class are registered in these novels through coded rather than explicit modes of representation. My analysis illuminates these novels' indirect engagement with contemporary discourses – about Catholicism, Orientalism, femininity, sodomy, tribadism, and domestic violence – through the utilisation of similar modes of language and theme.

With this combination of literary and historical analysis, I examine how these texts reflect change across time and genre. In particular, I focus on gothic uses of excess and violence in *The Monk* and *Zofloya*, and how this facilitates the inclusion of other, more coded, transgressions and marginalised cultural Others in the texts. I then apply the same framework to a central text of the sensation genre, *The Woman in White*. By analysing this novel alongside its gothic forebears, I examine the different approaches taken by these genres and their authors to the same cultural issues, as well as how they are strikingly similar, in order to unpack the changes caused by shifts in setting and plot from the distant and outlandish, to the familiar, domestic, and contemporary.

The thesis utilises a non-binarist approach to analysis that allows for contradiction and inconclusiveness, resisting a critical history which relies on false or restrictive methods of classification and opposition. I emphasise the complexities of the novels, particularly within the full context of cultural debates, rather than attempting to define them as radical or conservative on particular social issues. By allowing the texts to stand within their contradictions, the thesis seeks to illuminate how we can gain a greater understanding of both text and history, and how these dynamic and powerful texts resist categorisation.

DECLARATION

This is to certify that:

- (1) this thesis comprises only my original work towards the Master of Arts,
- (2) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used,
- (3) the thesis is fewer than 50 000 words in length, exclusive of bibliography.

Nadia Bracegirdle

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INTRODUCTION

My interest in the gothic lies in the genre's indulgence in excess, particularly violent excess. This is most obvious in gothic plots, which tend to circle around murders, sexual crimes, incarceration, and depictions of corruption and hypocrisy at the highest levels of respected institutions like the church and family. Yet facilitated by these extremes – and by the habitual distancing processes of writing about far-off times and places – are examinations of cultural concerns which were otherwise disallowed by more “realist” novels. Like dark secrets and wax corpses, themes of female power, women's sexuality, miscegenation, sodomy, and tribadism are veiled by the hyperbole common to the gothic, seemingly less inappropriate when presented alongside violence, abuse, solitary travels, sublime landscapes, and the supernatural in medieval Spain or Italy.

This thesis examines Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya, or The Moor* (1806), and Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860) through such themes, circulating around marginalisation and transgression. I aim to unpack how the excesses and violence of the gothic mode allowed for interrogations of illicit subjects like non-normative femininities and sexual alterity, and assumptions about race, ethnicity, religion, and class, those Others against which mainstream British society constructed and projected its normative ideals. Importantly, I am also interested in the development of these excesses across time and genre: how the themes of the gothic were adapted into the contemporary and domestic settings of sensation novels. These precedents have long been acknowledged by critics, but I wish to examine them more deeply, utilising close readings across the (admittedly blurry) generic divide. By highlighting the continuities of plot, atmosphere, and technique, we can better understand both the gradual nature of literary and historical change, and how those changes manifested. The powerful women of the gothic, for example, look very different to those of sensation in dress, voice, and action, and in the flamboyance of their transgressions and punishments, as their incarcerations shift from alpine castles, conventual dungeons, and Italian villas to English country estates and private asylums. Yet they share a rebellious energy which highlights how women in their contemporary societies were pushed to the margins, and how their resistance to this might threaten key

conservative ideals.

My primary method of analysis here is to examine how these gothic novels conveyed their most dangerous thematic transgressions under the surface. In this way, I seek to identify how – and perhaps why – those methods were used by later writers of a same-but-different kind. Hence coding, by which I mean a novel or author's use of specific language and themes which were used to talk about cultural anxieties, linking the two in the reader's mind. This is not dissimilar to, for example, Gary Dyer's work on codes in Byron's works; but where Dyer seeks (in part) to translate obfuscating words developed by a specific subculture to refer to illicit things, the coding I analyse refers more to an author's use of theme and language rather than slang or ciphers.¹ “Pl & opt C” refers in Byron's letters, via Latin texts, to sex with men, but in gothic novels, allusions to other texts, real events, and cultural debates raise the spectre of cultural transgression without obfuscating a surface reading or requiring a dictionary of slang. The code cannot be directly translated, nor does it advertise itself as a code; it merely places a theme or atmosphere alongside characters and events, and leaves interpretation up to the reader.

This allows authors to represent the most contentious parts of society without inviting censorship, or being restricted to the purely condemnatory terms of discriminatory systems. For example, while there is no outright sodomy in *The Monk* – as there is explicit rape and incest – themes of male homoeroticism are included through the parallel use of romantic tropes between different- and same-sex pairs. In *Zofloya*, the heroine is never depicted as sapphic, but the languages of loss, excess, and destruction which surround her echo those used in contemporary conversations about tribadism, hermaphroditism, and sodomy. With this awareness, we can see that not all transgressions are created equal, and unpick the layers of coding around more contextually complicated inclusions. This is not an attempt to come to definitive conclusions about the morality of a text, but to excavate cultural connections and identify where the permeable and shifting boundaries of ideal propriety were being drawn around a society.

This mode of reading resists categorisation of the text. Particularly since the late-twentieth-century rise of feminist criticism, literary and historical analysis has tended to focus on dividing novels on either side of one cultural debate or another: text or author

1 Dyer, 'Thieves, Boxers, Sodomites, Poets'.

is racist or not, feminist or not, an example of progressive or conservative cultural change. Gothic fiction especially has been divided into “Male” and “Female Gothic” categories, from Ellen Moers onwards, supposedly determined by the gender of the author (and often protagonist), and by the presiding themes, anxieties, and events of the novel.² The core idea of Moers's work – approaching women's writing through a particularly female lens – was obviously vital, but this approach was taken to extremes of codification throughout second-wave feminist criticism, which tended to elide the intersections of many women's work in favour of constructing a particular narrative of women's literary history. Elaine Showalter's chronological categories of “feminine, feminist, and female” literature – after which much feminist analysis was written – distinguishes between a “female literature” and merely “books that happen to have been written by women,” and excludes pre-Victorian women and numerous outliers in order to identify “an imaginative continuum, the recurrence of certain patterns, themes, problems, and images from generation to generation.”³ In search of a literary history, this kind of work tended to identify absolutes rather than allowing for specificities, deviations, and intersections, constructing a history of “women's literature” which was overwhelmingly white and middle-class, even beyond the social restrictions on women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. (Jewish-born Charlotte Dacre, for example, was not included in feminist criticism until the late 1990s, even when their analyses did stretch to the pre-Victorian gothic.)

My goal here is to disrupt these categories and continuities, and open them up to intersections, blurred categories, and multiplicities, even contradictory ones. As a non-binary scholar, I apply a non-binary ethos to this work, deconstructing either-or modes of thinking about identity politics, culture, and popular fiction. I deliberately cross the boundaries of period and genre, reading *The Monk*, *Zofloya*, and *The Woman in White* through the marginalised experiences against which a normative, ideal national identity was formed, acknowledging that these delineations were more blurry than retrospect or ideology might make them seem. This is not to dismiss the important work of feminist, queer, and post-colonial critics – far from it, their work forms the basis of much of my analysis – but to open up these methods to a more complex approach, resisting the inadequacy of labels and their tendency to erase contradictions and ambiguities with the

2 Moers, *Literary Women*, pp. 90-110, 122-140.

3 Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, pp. 4, 11.

neatness of hindsight.

My work is deliberately historicist, focusing on reading the text through its historical contexts, as an artefact which can tell us something about a culture (and vice versa). I acknowledge the value in unhistoricism and analysis which allows for a multiplicity of meanings across time, such as Wai Chee Dimock's championing of resonance and the "unresolvable" text, whose "semantic universe ... cannot be contained in a finite interpretive frame but keeps moving on, risking disagreement with other readers."⁴ However, Dimock and other critics tend to construe historicism as necessarily restrictive, as though the act of identifying the historical context of a text is about "lock[ing] that context into place" and "capturing" the text in "a discrete slice of the past" in an act of "chronological containment."⁵ This view misrepresents history as knowable and finite, rather than a complex and ongoing project as our understanding of the past continually develops. We will never be able to recreate the exact nuances of the social and cultural circumstances under which a text was created, and therefore examining a text in relation to its context is itself a course of analysis which is very possibly never ending; history, like Dimock's relative and continuous text, "cannot be contained in a finite interpretive frame."⁶ I agree with Rita Felski's assertion that there is "no compelling intellectual or practical reason why original context should remain the final authority and the last court of appeal" in determining meaning.⁷ But I do find original context fascinating. Historicism has its potholes, of course: it requires the constant resistance to periodisation as anything more than arbitrary starting and stopping points, and Felski expresses important doubts about the hermeneutics of suspicion, and resorting to context to identify "original meaning." But to reduce history to a "box" or "slice" into which a text is restrictively placed does an injustice to both historicist criticism and the complexity of past human lives.

Instead, I advocate understanding history as a web, layered and ever-expanding. To read a text within this web is to take hold of some of the infinite strings which cross through it, and follow them as far as evidence and patience allow. Within this web, popular fiction – by its very nature as readable across classes, quickly consumed, and often intentionally scandalous – has the capacity to be interwoven with ever more

4 Dimock, 'A Theory of Resonance', p. 1065.

5 Ibid, pp. 1061-1065; Felski, "'Context Stinks!'", p. 576.

6 Dimock, 'A Theory of Resonance', p. 1065.

7 Felski, "'Context Stinks!'", p. 581.

strings, representing and responding to the most personally and culturally flammable issues. In following these webs, I utilise a generally constructivist approach, in which sexuality, gender, class, and ethnicity are socially constructed and interpreted rather than innate. I share Michel Foucault's emphasis on act over identity (though as more of a guideline than a hard and fast rule), and his concern with how the bourgeoisie was "occupied, from the mid-eighteenth century on, with creating its own sexuality and forming a specific body based on it, a 'class' body with its health, hygiene, descent, and race,"⁸ focusing on how this process was expressed and reacted to in fiction. David Halperin's gloss is apt here: like Foucault, my work is not a social history, and I am more concerned with "discursive and institutional practices, not ... what people really did in bed or what they thought about it."⁹

I also take pointers from Donna Haraway's theory of "situational knowledge," the attempt to accommodate paradox and embrace a viewpoint which is necessarily specific rather than aiming for a false sense of transcendent, detached vision. Haraway argues for "partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections," for conversations from split, even contradictory, subjectivities, and "epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims."¹⁰ Embracing situated knowledge in examining older texts is an acceptance that the texts and authors in question were complex agents within a web of cultural, political, and personal contexts – as are we in our examinations of them – and that our understandings of them must be similarly situated and complex instead of pronouncing final "objective" judgements.

As such, I focus on researching and understanding, as best as possible, the historical circumstances of a text in its own language, reading widely and deeply – under practical limitations – around the text itself. I eschew as much as possible modern categories and understandings, particularly of identity politics, for although it is undeniable to say that, for example, women, black people, and people who had sex with persons of the same gender were discriminated against on personal and structural levels, it would be ignorant to apply twenty-first century gender, racial, and sexual political

8 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p. 124.

9 Halperin, 'Forgetting Foucault', p. 97.

10 Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges', pp. 584, 589.

understandings to these discriminations. Parallels to and forebears of modern categories (gay, lesbian, white, female) are legible in these texts, but the categories remain anachronistic, and I instead defer as much as possible to contemporary terms and categories. Though examples of historical existences are vital to our understandings of ourselves as modern individuals and communities, we must resist the urge to identify exact parallels to our own political and cultural contexts.

This requires often clunky terms to describe without categorising identities and behaviours, especially in the discourse around queerness (a particular focus of this thesis), using terms such as hetero-/homosexual, -social, and -erotic rather than defaulting to gay, lesbian, transgender, etc, in order to simply describe behaviours considered transgressive. I similarly use “queer” as a necessary umbrella term to refer to behaviour or emotion which exists outside of the socially acceptable and encouraged modes of a cisheteropatriarchal system, however different to our own. Like Valerie Traub, I embrace the alterity of history rather than identifying similarities to modern understandings of queer life, in order not to create categories, but to “[seek] to explain such categories' constitutive, persuasive, and persistent force” in both the past and present.¹¹ To acknowledge the constructedness of both the tribade and the gay man is to encourage an inclusive queer sensibility that allows for variation, and for previous and future states, evolution and devolution.

In this manner, I examine how Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* engages with Catholicism in the simultaneous contexts of enfranchisement, and both old and recent repression, reflecting the complex milieu of both anti-Catholic traditions and contemporary pro- and anti-Catholic movements. I argue for the inclusion of anti-papery traditions in other considerations of the text, examining how it affects Lewis's engagements with sexual repression and liberty. This informs my reading of the gendered transgressions of the novel, complicating readings of the text as feminist or otherwise, also affected by a closer examination of the female villain's simultaneous power and disempowerment by her narrative role. Finally, the text's engagements with sodomy and queer subtexts requires the most inclusive thinking, as it interacts with widely differing contemporary mob actions, from the anti-papery Gordon Riots, to the radical French Revolution, and the casual violence of the pillorying of sodomites. In my reading of mob violence in *The Monk*, I emphasise our inability to extricate these

¹¹ Traub, 'The New Unhistoricism in Queer Studies', p. 36.

discourses from each other, and encourage a reading which accepts them all despite their contradictions, and takes a holistic idea of the episode's energies.

In chapter 2, I examine Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya, or The Moor*, and how the narration is belied by the text itself, encouraging an understanding of the narrator as unreliable and ironic rather than conservatively didactic. I read Dacre's text as radically and powerfully villainous, and embracing a Romantic approach to Satanism which champions the justice of violent rebellion, and the liberty offered by a violent, feminine expression of the sublime. Under these auspices do I read Dacre's extreme anti-heroine and her foil, as well as her engagement with various, often conflicting, representations of femininity and race/ethnicity, which utilise uncanny themes and express sometimes conflicting messages about contemporary anxieties such as (anti-)slavery, imperial expansion into the Middle East and Asia, and intra-European notions of ethnic morality and character, to inconclusive political ends. I then engage with the text's encoding of queer excesses, and how it appropriates the language and themes of loss, excess, and violence associated with tribadism, hermaphrodism, and sodomy without explicit condemnation, utilising them in a larger project of expressing social discontent.

Finally, I follow the thread of these trends through to Wilkie Collins's sensation novel, *The Woman in White*, and its relocation of gothic themes to a contemporary English setting. Through this cross-genre reading, we can better identify the continuities between texts, and how sensation novels, through their more familiar representations, responded to similar concerns in more immediate, less extreme ways. Domestic abuse is brought into English homes – the same places newly examined by legal and social changes around divorce – and is thereby constrained into primarily financial and emotional abuse, and incarceration within the home and asylum rather than castles and convents. Similarly, the text's representations of women and feminine ideals circle around more “realistic” attractions and (dis)empowerments: the eavesdropping spinster relegated to the domestic sphere rather than the witch or poisoner sent to hell. In all of these instances, the persistent theme of violence in the previous texts is both reduced and intensified, as Collins's discourses of class, domestic violence, and the intersections of femininity, insanity, and childishness more literally represent contemporary cultural debates while remaining complex and inconclusive. In the struggle between feminist and bourgeois male impulses, sensation – like the gothic – never comes down hard on

one side or another of cultural debates, complicating a smooth narrative of literary history and growing conservatism across the nineteenth century.

What these texts all have in common – besides their conflicting engagements with contemporary anxieties – is a latent sense of unease, of discomfort with some aspect of the status quo. This is not to say finally that they are radical texts, but to identify what I believe to be a defining aspect of gothic and sensation novels: the expression, to varying degrees, of power not available to the marginalised of the time. These expressions vary between the celebration and condemnation of forms of power, but these contradictions must be taken as they are, rather than being weighed against each other in order to identify a conclusively radical or conservative tone.

This is how I understand the persistent issue of closure in these novels: as inherently inconclusive. Much critical attention has been given to the endings of novels, trying to determine to what extent they affect the previous however many pages. This work is certainly interesting, analysing texts' engagements with time and futurity, how Satanic violence or domestic bliss leave the reader, and whether or not they undo whatever transgressive themes and actions have preceded them.¹² Once more, however, this kind of analysis tends towards a binary, or series of classifications, which remain both insufficient and unproductive. My interest, therefore, is not in whether or not a conclusive-seeming ending does or does not shut down transgressive energies, a reductive question which assumes much about the imagined readership as a collective whole. Instead I wish to focus on *the impulse to closure itself*. Every novel must end somewhere, of course, and violent deaths and promises of happiness are as good a way as any to do so. The question is about how these endings *try* to withdraw power from transgressive characters and plots, about understanding punishments and rewards as in continuity or contrast with the text as a whole. The manner and tone of these endings are more important than whether or not the lesson sticks, and we must take their ambiguities – as with the other ambiguities that mark the texts under discussion – in all of their paradoxical implications.

12 See for example Haggerty, 'The Failure of Heterosexuality'; Cregan-Reid, *Discovering Gilgamesh*; Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*; Torgovnick, *Closure in the Novel*.

CHAPTER 1: VILLAINS OR VICTIMS? CATHOLICISM, FEMININITY, AND SODOMY IN *THE MONK* (1796)

Introduction

Matthew Gregory Lewis's 1796 novel *The Monk* was both popular and infamous for its violence, sex, incest, supernaturalism, and general aura of corruption, attracting “much notice, and considerable disgust,” according to *The Gentleman's Magazine*.¹³ As with many gothic texts, these excesses gave licence to representations of more charged cultural transgressions, including the representation of non-normative religious practices, mis-gendered behaviour, and criminalised sexuality. Yet these very categories were unstable, complicated by their many intersections with each other and a variety of influences. Further, these marginalised experiences are not treated equally by the text, included at different levels of explicitness or coding. By attending to these complications and methods, we can see what late-eighteenth-century British culture considered most fearful or repulsive, and so what was least able to be explicitly included, identifying the boundaries of acceptable impropriety.

The most explicit of Lewis's marginalised inclusions is Catholicism, signposted by the titular prominence of monks and monasteries. Critics have variously argued for the text's tendency towards either Catholic tolerance or anti-Catholic discrimination, but I argue that Lewis's use of anti-Catholic stereotypes is more complex than such a binary opposition allows. With almost all of his characters being Spanish Catholics, and the novel opening with the “abbey-bell”¹⁴ and steeped in Catholic spaces like the cathedral, monastery, and nunnery, the text gives space to these religious others as heroes, victims, and villains. It also casually repeats centuries-old anti-papery tropes of Catholic hypocrisy, cowardice, and violence, an engagement which cannot be straightforwardly deployed, especially in the context of the French Revolution, with growing British exposure to Catholic refugees, and the desire to distance themselves from the anti-religious revolutionaries who attacked Christian (Catholic) authority. With the text going to such extremes that it too was viewed by some contemporaries as anti-Christian

13 Anonymous, 'Matthew Gregory Lewis, Esq.', *The Gentleman's Magazine: and historical chronicle* (August, 1818), p. 183.

14 Lewis, *The Monk*, p. 39 (further references will be given in in-text parentheses for this chapter).

or anti-religious, it is clear that no pro- or anti-Catholic conclusion is possible.

These conflicting energies affect the text's other, more coded, transgressions, impacting cultural assumptions about non-normative performances of gender and sexuality. The enabler/witch Matilda is granted violent, sexual, and masculinised power, “ris[ing] superior to the foibles of [her] sex” (235), but her position as a woman outside her assigned role is complicated by her inheritance from her disguise as a novice monk, and subordinated to the narrative of the male anti-hero Ambrosio, who is in contrast feminised by the narrative. Any attempt at weighing these two themes against each other to find the victor is rendered pointless by their inter-implications with Catholicism and sodomy: contemporary national and cultural assumptions overlap so thoroughly that they cannot be separated into discrete judgements for and against certain issues, to say nothing of the text's conflicts of representation.

The issue of sodomy is where *The Monk* offers its greatest, and most obscure, challenge. Despite his indulgent dramatisation of vice, Lewis hints at but avoids male homoeroticism, refusing the spectacle usually made of criminalised male-male sexual activity in a move which both censors and protects. Furthermore, the novel's scenes of mob violence blur the lines between anti-Revolutionary fear, anti-Catholic anger, and anti-homophobic revenge, themes left in contradiction without resolution towards one political angle. The novel stands in the complex middle-ground between the exploration of marginalised experiences and the cultural drive to extinguish them, and by understanding Lewis's use of textual coding, and the various historical and cultural contexts in which he wrote, we can better understand – without categorising – both text and author.

(Anti-)Catholicism

From the outset, *The Monk* presents a place foreign to the average British Protestant reader. It opens with a quote from Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (c. 1603), set in Vienna and steeped in religious extremism,¹⁵ and then moves to a Capuchin church in historical Madrid, where young, innocent Antonia has come to see the famous

15 See Ellison, 'Measure for Measure and the Execution of Catholics'; and Salter, 'This demon in the garb of a monk', for Lewis's inversion of morality and religion in Shakespeare's play, emphasising the link between Catholicism and violence.

abbot Ambrosio. So, the web of the “Romance” (33) begins: Antonia feels an immediate, vague attraction to Ambrosio, and Don Lorenzo falls for Antonia, while Lorenzo's pregnant sister Agnes plans to escape from the convent of St Clare with her lover, Don Raymond. At the abbey, the novice monk Rosario reveals himself as a woman, Matilda, in disguise, and professes her love for Ambrosio, who is quickly seduced. In a lengthy inserted narrative, Raymond describes his history with Agnes, including a near miss with murderous bandits, the vengeance of an unrequited baroness, and a haunting by the ghost of a bleeding nun. But Agnes is reported dead, and Lorenzo is refused the blessing of Antonia's cautious mother Elvira. In the meantime, Ambrosio grows tired of Matilda and becomes attracted to Antonia; and with the help of Matilda's witchcraft, he almost rapes her, but is stopped by Elvira, whom he murders. His next plan is more successful, drugging Antonia so that she appears dead and can be kidnapped.

At the nuns' procession in honour of St Clare, the prioress' apparent murder of Agnes is revealed, and the crowd riots, killing the prioress and destroying the convent, while Lorenzo flees into the crypt and discovers the imprisoned Agnes with her baby's corpse. In the same crypt, Antonia wakes and Ambrosio rapes her, killing her when she tries to escape; and as Matilda arrives to warn him about the riot, they are discovered by Lorenzo and arrested. Agnes and Raymond marry; Lorenzo – though grieving for Antonia – marries another woman, Virginia; and Matilda and Ambrosio are tortured by the Inquisition and sentenced to death. Matilda escapes with the help of the devil, and Ambrosio is at last convinced to sign over his soul for freedom, but Lucifer instead reveals that Elvira was his mother and Antonia his sister. Finally, “darting his talons into the monk's shaven crown” (362), he throws Ambrosio off a cliff, leaving him to die after six days of torture.

The novel, then, is littered from first to last with the not-Protestant, alongside its extremes of psychology and violence, as Lewis utilises sensational gothic tropes – and Catholic bogeymen – prominent in popular Protestant British culture, including the decadence of Catholic idolatry in procession, the secret lust and violence of nuns and monks, and the mysteries and tortures of the Spanish Inquisition. In establishing the setting, Lewis immediately undermines its moral purpose:

Do not encourage the idea, that the crowd was assembled either from motives of

piety or thirst of information. But very few were influenced by those reasons; and in a city where superstition reigns with such despotic sway as in Madrid, to seek for true devotion would be a fruitless attempt. The audience now assembled in the Capuchin church was collected by various causes, but all of them were foreign to the ostensible motive. [39]

A city “such as” Madrid, the phrasing itself indicating notoriety – a religion “such as” Catholicism – is presented with a sense of moral superiority. The reader will later learn that this narrating voice, when it intrudes on the novel, is not always trustworthy or unbiased; but at this early stage, it is the first thing the reader encounters, setting the scene with a heavily ironic, patronising tone which the presumably Protestant reader is invited to share. The true motives of the Spanish crowd are voyeuristically relayed, revealing their vanity, lust, curiosity, boredom, social niceties, and competition (39). For the rest of the novel, Catholic authorities are almost invariably lecherous, violent, and cruel, Ambrosio in particular repeating a history of “evil gothic monk” figures traceable to Shakespeare, the literature and propaganda of the British Reformation, anti-clerical French texts, and French satirical pornography of both the *ancien régime* and the Revolution.¹⁶ The disdain of the opening oration is repeated throughout, casually and in longer polemics, emphasising Madrid's superstition and the monks' hypocrisy. Lorenzo in particular fulfils the role of the nominally Catholic, yet Protestant minded figure familiar from other gothic writers like Ann Radcliffe,¹⁷ an updated version of the “virtuous pagan” who expresses a desire “to unmask the hypocrites, and convince his countrymen, that a sanctified exterior does not always hide a virtuous heart” (294).

This denigration of Catholic corruption and decadence is capped with the final depiction of Ambrosio despairing of divine forgiveness, satirising the Catholic claim that all have the right to absolution. Having spent hundreds of pages describing Ambrosio's moral and physical sins and crimes, Lewis does not make it clear that, with enough penitence, Ambrosio might secure God's pardon. The monk admits to being an “abandoned hypocrite! inhuman parricide! incestuous ravisher!” (361), who “Before he committed his crimes, ... had computed every scruple of their weight, and yet he had committed them” (351), with any remaining sense of tragedy subsumed by an awareness of how much suffering he has caused. Elizabeth Napier rightly identifies Ambrosio's duplicity and hypocrisy as “one of his major offences against heaven,”

16 Hoeveler, *The Gothic Ideology*, p. 124; Hunt, ‘Pornography and the French Revolution’, p. 305.

17 Sage, *Horror Fiction*, pp. 30-31.

leading to the “moral impetus” of unmasking and undoing concealment in the novel,¹⁸ as from the beginning, he is more concerned with “the consequences of discovery” than crime itself (204). The reader's satisfaction at seeing Ambrosio finally revealed as a villain, then, justifies his excessive moral torment, torn between the punishments awaiting him whether he confesses or not, as we as well as Ambrosio know “how justly he ought to dread Heaven's vengeance” (351). The fear of torture compels Ambrosio to use Matilda's book, his initial defiance only raising tension and dramatic irony, and his final capitulation is not tragedy, but proof of the cowardice Matilda earlier identified:

'Tis not the crime which holds your hand, but the punishment; 'tis not respect for God which restrains you, but the terror of his vengeance! ... Now shame on the coward soul, which wants the courage either to be a firm friend or an open enemy! [238]

After all this, Maria Purves's description of the Inquisition as “reasonable in its [pardoning] of the erring monk” is too generous to Ambrosio.¹⁹ His crimes are more than errors, and he always had the capacity for them, as the devil implies (“Scarcely could I propose crimes so quick as you performed them” [362]), and as Charlotte Dacre will emphasise in her rewriting of Lewis's themes in *Zofloya*. That the Inquisition would then forgive the crimes of a prominent public face of Catholicism is a miscarriage of worldly and divine justice, justifying Ambrosio's damnation, refusing universal absolution, and proving that Catholic institutions are corrupt.

This negative representation of Catholicism has its roots in political history. For centuries, England, Wales, and Scotland were legally, politically, and culturally Protestant nations, internally divided but united by “a strong sense of dissimilarity from those without,” especially their perpetual enemy the Catholic French.²⁰ The national self was constructed against Catholicism, whose differences and defeats were repeated in religious and secular contexts so that the Protestant worldview became “so ingrained ... that it influenced people's thinking irrespective of whether they went to church or not, [or] whether they read the Bible or not.”²¹ The threat of “popery” was both overt and

¹⁸ Napier, *The Failure of Gothic*, p. 113; see also Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, pp. 140-158.

¹⁹ Purves, *The Gothic and Catholicism*, p. 7.

²⁰ Colley, *Britons*, p. 17.

²¹ Ibid, pp. 31, 20-22; see also Haydon, *Anti-Catholicism in eighteenth-century England*, pp. 9, 31-32. When Catholic relief movements did occur, they were primarily to avoid civil war or revolution (especially in Ireland), and were viewed as a loss of Protestant power; see McDowell, *Ireland in the*

disguised, and Catholics were not people but “Papists,” their worship outlawed and enfranchisement refused, “half-citizens” under penal laws.²² As late as 1778, state support of Catholic toleration inspired rioting and petitions, revoking the Relief Act, blocking a Scottish version, and resulting in the incendiary Gordon Riots of 1780, which required military intervention. Significantly, the instigators of this violence saw themselves as not only unradical, but patriotic, doing what the authorities could or would not do to protect their nation.²³

This constant and largely unquestioned alienation of Catholicism made it a seemingly natural conduit for the representation of violent and sexual excesses in gothic fiction, generating intrigue and excitement through illegal religions and sexualities supposed not to reside in England. British cultural rhetoric often linked Catholicism, continental Europe, decadent aristocracy, and sodomy, links which were easily exploited in the swirling excesses of gothic fiction.²⁴ Yet it is a mistake to take Lewis's use of Catholic Spain merely as a tactic for distancing extreme events from the contemporary British reader. As Joseba Gabilondo argues, the critical trend of identifying Spain and Italy as exotic spaces for British writers to examine their own issues fails to account for the geopolitical realities of contemporary Europe, repeating the northern-European-centric, humanist standpoint that such texts try to establish as the norm. It is important that horrors occur in these specific places:

[T]he choice of Italy and Spain ... is not simply a matter of otherness or exoticism, but rather a matter of geopolitical history ... defined by its European frame and, at the same time, [creating] a mirroring game, by which southern Europe is contemplated as the location of past imperialist powers that were feared ... but now have become a decadent, eroticized space.²⁵

The setting is a “mirror stage of English imperialism” with which the British reader “identifies but ultimately wants to disidentify,” and the assumption that it is merely unmarked exoticism only repeats the novel's attempts to distance itself from its own context and enforce a “geopolitical unconscious” of modernity as inherently northern European, industrial, and imperialist.²⁶

Age of Imperialism and Revolution, pp. 242-244, 281-288, 391-393.

22 Haydon, *Anti-Catholicism in eighteenth-century England*, p. 48.

23 Ibid, pp. 31, 47-50, 207, 223-229, 236.

24 See Sedgwick, *Between Men*, pp. 93-94; Crompton, *Byron and Greek Love*, pp. 53-57.

25 Gabilondo, 'Geo-Bio-Politics of the Gothic', pp. 159-160.

26 Ibid, pp. 160, 165.

As such, we must read Lewis's use of anti-Catholic literary staples in a more complex light, allowing for the nuances of conflicting cultural pressures. For example, as Purves argues, Lewis utilises a standard Abélard and Héloïse “cloister-theme” narrative, which originated in 1616 and usually featured greedy, aristocratic forces which prevent the marriage of a loving couple, with one or the other often reported as dead. Both end up in a monastery/nunnery, taking their vows in adjoining cloisters and only later discovering the lie, most commonly when the man becomes the woman's confessor or when a novice reveals himself to be the woman in disguise. These tragedies were sentimental, romantic stories which laud the heroes' chivalric suffering for love, with the moral often upheld by a final movement from worldly love to chaste, divine adoration and the superior joy of spirituality rather than earthly (sexual) fulfilment.²⁷

This narrative is included in the early chapters of *The Monk* through Ambrosio and Rosario/Matilda, as they play out its later stages of the novice revealed as a woman in disguise, accompanied by professions of love and devotion. Purves reads the resurgence of these paeans in British gothic literature as revealing a pro-Catholic “climate of sympathy,” casting suffering Catholic lovers and communities as “brothers-in-orthodoxy” with Anglicanism against the threat of violent Revolutionary secularism.²⁸ However, Protestant uses of these themes cannot be disentangled from their usual reliance on anti-Catholic rhetoric, and Purves, in failing to distinguish between “positive” and “pro-Catholic” representations, mistakes sentimentalism for endorsement. There remains a dissociative power to the nostalgia of these narratives not eclipsed by Anglican-Catholic ties or growing sympathy in response to Catholic refugees fleeing the French Revolution and resettling in England (including monastic/conventual communities). They are, after all, romances, ideals which indulge the emotions with piety but refuse any representation of Catholicism as something real to, or experienced by, contemporary Britons. This sentimentalism reflects William Gilpin's ideals of the picturesque in Gothic ruins, where beauty is possible “only once [a

²⁷ Purves, *The Gothic and Catholicism*, pp. 61-83.

²⁸ Ibid, pp. 132, 30; compare Hoeveler, *The Gothic Ideology*, pp. 28, 132. It must be noted that Purves's evidence focuses on clerical, government-sponsored, and elite productions, part of the educated Enlightenment culture that constituted the majority of pro-Catholic or pro-toleration thinking, rather than the working-class, rural, less literate popular culture which Hoeveler identifies as the main consumers of gothic literature, and Colley as the tens of thousands of signatories on anti-Catholic petitions.

site or text's] medieval Gothic past has been purged, repressed and even exorcised," celebratory evidence of anti-Catholic and anti-Jacobite victories.²⁹ In these constructions, even foreign Catholicism could be stripped of meaning, exaggerated and fetishised as in *The Monk* and "treated as a background against which an excess of passion can be safely played out."³⁰

Except that Catholicism was *not* merely alien paraphernalia to the British nation: Catholics did exist in Britain, and had for centuries, though not respected as British citizens. But instead of confronting a Catholic subject, gothic authors purged them of theological and experiential significance, exoticising Catholic symbols as performance at the same historical moment in which Catholics' right to worship was being debated. Instead of humanising and sympathising with contemporary British or European Catholic struggles, British cloister-theme texts – and their gothic siblings – pose the threat as aristocratic greed or Catholicism itself (often conflated because of the relative wealth of English Catholic families),³¹ rather than contemporary Protestant, or even Revolutionary, intolerance. The sentimentality of the cloister tale makes Abélard and Héloïse pitiable but not necessarily sanctioned, and if they discover something good from their situations, the fact remains that their lives would have proceeded with much less suffering were it not for aristocratic and Catholic institutions. They make the best of a bad situation – unthinkable in contemporary, Protestant England – and honour vows which never should have been made, while the Protestant English reader disidentifies with real anti-Catholic threats.

It is telling, then, that *The Monk* not only inherits this ambiguous cloister tale, but further undermines it, with no prior relationship and thwarted marriage in Ambrosio and Matilda's past: her revelation is not that she is anyone in particular, but merely "a woman" (79). Further, the results of the unveiling are not pious, romantic, and tragically celibate, but semi-pornographic, fatal, and diabolical, as Ambrosio does not recognise "that his vanity was flattered," nor "that he felt a secret pleasure" at Matilda's sacrifices, and "his heart throbbed with desire" at her touch (82). Matilda's stock protestations of pure intentions are false, and after their consummation of passion, Ambrosio does not find earthly love or divine joy, but tires of Matilda: "The delirium of passion being past,

29 Townshend, 'Ruins, Romance, and the Rise of Gothic Tourism', p. 378; see also Stewart, 'Political Ruins', p. 400.

30 Fincher, *Queering Gothic*, p. 103.

31 Sage, *Horror Fiction*, p. 32.

he had leisure to observe every trifling defect; where none were to be found, satiety made him fancy them. ... A week had scarcely elapsed, before he was wearied of his paramour” (212). Lewis both repeats anti-Catholic tropes, and distances his text from “pro-Catholic” narratives which still belie Britain's own culpability in Catholic persecution and suffering.

This extremity and ambiguity was read by some as entirely anti-religion. According to the *European Magazine*, “Neither *morals* nor *religion* will acknowledge themselves benefited [*sic*]” by the novel, and the “Author's intention” was clearly “to attack religious orders, and, of course, religion itself, by exhibiting the extreme depravity of its most eminent disciples.”³² Particular offence was taken at Elvira's editing of the Bible – probably a satire of the Catholic Latin monopoly over God's word³³ – and the narrator's assertion that it “inculcates the first rudiments” of vice with “improper passages” and narratives more indecent than “the annals of a brothel” (230-231). “The impiety of this falsehood can be equalled only by its impudence,” wrote the *Critical Review*, comparing Lewis to an “infidel ... in his endeavours first to inflame the fleshly appetites, and then to pour contempt on the only book which would be adequate to the task of recalming them.”³⁴

As James Whitlark argues, opinion in the 1790s was strongly divided, with politics and religion an “explosive mixture,”³⁵ and it would be a mistake to use these responses to erase the conservatism of Lewis's rhetoric. Evidently, his use of anti-Catholic conventions was broad enough to either be mistaken for, or intentionally convey, anti-Christian sentiment, particularly in the fragile culture of 1790s Europe where, in the words of the *European Magazine*, an “*oblique attack upon venerable establishments*” was reminiscent of “the presses of the Continent teem[ing] with compositions of this character while the Revolution was preparing in France.”³⁶ By 1796, Catholic sympathy was certainly emerging in Britain in response to the Revolution from which Britons wished to distance themselves, accepting Catholic refugees who in other circumstances would have been attacked as spies. It is also clear

32 Anonymous, review, *European Magazine* 31 (February, 1797), quoted in Lewis, *The Monk*, Appendix C.2, p. 396, emphasis original.

33 See Colley, *Britons*, p. 43.

34 Anonymous, review, *Critical Review* 2nd series, 19 (February, 1797), quoted in Lewis, *The Monk*, Appendix C.3, pp. 401-402.

35 Whitlark, 'Heresy Hunting', para. 17.

36 Review, *European Magazine*, p. 397, emphasis original.

that, in Lewis's gothic excess of language and theme, his denigration extended beyond anti-Catholic specifics to Christian icons shared by Protestantism, at which point (and no earlier) Protestant critics found fault with the text. In this new, shifting context, the patriotic anti-popery of the previous two centuries was beginning to sour, but if Lewis's deployment of it echoes radical anti-religion stances, it does not cancel out the powerful hold of conservative ideals and insular tropes over the British imagination, nor erase the ambivalence surrounding his use of Spanish Catholic subjects and settings which haunted concepts of modernity as innately British.

Femininity and Gender

The close connection between perverse religion and sexuality is heightened by what Steven Blakemore calls a “black mass” of inverted religion and gender/sexual norms, challenging conservative ideals through the combination of witchcraft and illegal or “unnatural” gender and sexuality in captivating villains.³⁷ Matilda in particular is ambiguously gendered, as both the gentle novice Rosario, and the aggressively seductive and powerful Matilda, who co-opts Ambrosio's masculine skills of oratory, her “scoffing tone” and “bold impious language ... horrible in every mouth, but most so in a woman's” (238).³⁸ In her role as demonic enabler, she “assume[s] a sort of courage and manliness in her manners and discourse” (210), and crosses easily between male and female roles, spaces, and appearances. As William Brewer notes, Matilda is most powerful in the ambiguity and darkness of the catacombs beneath the convent/monastery, in which “[t]he definitions of gender which prevail in the sexually segregated institutions above her have no currency.”³⁹ She lacks pity, “a sentiment so natural, so appropriate to the female character, that it is scarcely a merit for a woman to possess it” (210), and acts and is described as both “the *femme fatale* tempting Ambrosio to commit adultery, break his vows, and betray the wifely Church ... as well as the masculine seducer who wants to stain Ambrosio's 'virtue' and mock his chaste spouse.”⁴⁰

In contrast, and at a more implicit level, Ambrosio also acts “wrong” for his

37 Blakemore, 'Matthew Lewis' Black Mass'.

38 See Fincher, *Queering Gothic*, p. 96.

39 Brewer, 'Transgendering in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*', p. 199.

40 Blakemore, 'Matthew Lewis' Black Mass', p. 525.

gender, particularly around the issue of sex. Though he is not explicitly described as feminine, he fulfils the role of the victimised heroine, sexually pursued by Matilda and staking his reputation on celibacy and virtue.⁴¹ His sexual ignorance and innocence make him vulnerable to Matilda's seduction, in the same way that Antonia's ignorance later makes her vulnerable to him, so that Ambrosio is both the seducer and the seduced, a masculine ravisher and a “fallen woman” struggling to preserve his public reputation.⁴² In this way, Matilda and Ambrosio are linked as dual, forceful seducers: she tells him “I must enjoy you or die” (103), just as he tells Antonia “mine you must, and mine you shall be” (318).

Such transgressive gendered behaviour may highlight the oppression of normative British culture (transplanted to historical Spain): Matilda is uniquely powerful through her rejection of feminine ideals, and Ambrosio can be read as “the victim ... of a repressive ideology that he can neither conform to nor entirely reject.”⁴³ But there are distinctions between these representations which complicate such readings. First, the level of coding differs between the genders: Matilda explicitly adopts a powerful “manliness,” while Ambrosio's ambiguities play out on the level of theme and comparison, and lead mostly to his own violence and loss as he struggles to keep his secret. Lewis textually obscures and makes harmful Ambrosio's feminisation, perhaps speaking to greater cultural anxieties surrounding non-normative men. Furthermore, Matilda's representation seems at odds with Lewis's overtly misogynistic narrative voice: he *tells* the reader that women should be silent, submissive, weak, and full of pity, but *shows* a woman who is aggressive, powerful, ruthless, and gets what she wants, from Ambrosio to freedom from the Inquisition.

Critics have read in this disjunction Lewis's admission that, despite the importance of feminine submission, it is possible for a woman to break these norms and still be acceptable – even enviable – in the transgression, a symbol of female autonomy and freedom.⁴⁴ There is an element of subversion, with the transgressive protagonists

41 Ibid, p. 522.

42 Ibid, pp. 522-528. Although Blakemore's examination of Ambrosio's feminisation is vital to an understanding of the novel's transgressive energies, I disagree with his conclusion that “the novel's latent homoeroticism is displaced and transvestised into thematic female fallenness” (p. 535), and will argue for the presence of non-normative sexuality *in itself* in the novel.

43 Brewer, 'Transgendering in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*', pp. 201-202.

44 See for example Brewer, 'Transgendering in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*', pp. 193, 198, 200; Paulson, 'Gothic Fiction and the French Revolution', pp. 536-537; Haggerty, 'Literature and Homosexuality', p. 349.

uncomfortably intimate to the reader, and the stories of Agnes, Marguerite, and Antonia defending an ethos that, “at least for some women, nonconformist and even transgressive behaviour is not inconsistent with virtue.”⁴⁵ But this inconsistency between narrative and narrator is not so distinct as it would seem, and not merely because of Matilda's eleventh-hour revelation as a demon. For Matilda's actions are never really her own: Rosario, to some extent, fulfils his own cloister-theme narrative, but Matilda is present solely to facilitate Ambrosio's moral descent: “I live but to serve you” (284). She uses and enjoys power, but her actions – saving Ambrosio's and her own life, seducing him, accepting his preference for Antonia, using demons and magic, enabling his lust and rape, even appearing in his Inquisitorial cell – only further Ambrosio's narrative and ensure his downfall, lending ambivalence to Lewis's already complex endorsement of non-normative female embodiments and power. Matilda's freedom is condemned by an unreliable narrator, but also qualified by its subservience to the male protagonist, her power subsumed by her narrative duty to enable Ambrosio's story.

Finally, it is a mistake to laud these characters as radically empowered, for they are not struggling against Christian patriarchy, but a specifically Catholic oppressive regime, complicating any interpretation. As with Abélard and Héloïse, they have been put in situations which would supposedly never occur in Protestant, “enlightened” England, and their struggles offer a sense of superiority as much as vicarious subversiveness, a pride in Protestantism's perceived freedoms as opposed to Catholic hypocrisy and repression. It is not merely “hierarchies” which “create repressive conditions, which, in turn, precipitate their subversion or destruction,”⁴⁶ but specifically Catholic ones, this ambivalent implication either a forewarning to, or a victory for, British Protestantism.

Sodomy and the Mob

Gendered transgressions in *The Monk* are compounded by the presence of sexual subversion, as Lewis utilises heteroerotic tropes in the service of male homoerotic possibilities. He erases the usual heteroerotic backstories of “cloister-theme” narratives,

⁴⁵ Brewer, 'Transgendering in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*', p. 194.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 204.

with Rosario's pious addresses underlined by desire and followed by a revelation which is not a reversion to a previous relationship. Rosario's introduction also mirrors Antonia's at the opening of the novel, revolving around the desire to unveil beauty: to Don Lorenzo, Antonia's "features were hidden by a thick veil; but struggling through the crowd had deranged it"(40); one chapter later, Rosario is "continually muffled up in his cowl," offering the temptation of a striptease in "such of his features as accident discovered," which are "the most beautiful and noble" (66). Rosario exhibits "a respect approaching idolatry" – again emphasising perverted Catholic piety – while "Ambrosio ... did not feel less attracted towards the youth" (67). Antonia's voice has an "unexamined sweetness," while "no voice sounded so sweet" as Rosario's (40, 67). Rosario brings flowers to Ambrosio's cell, complains of his "sufferings," fears the loss of Ambrosio's "friendship" and "affection," and admits that his true nature would repel Ambrosio: "You would hate me for my avowal! you would drive me from your presence with scorn and ignominy!" (68). Applicable to a woman in disguise, yes, but also to a sodomitical desire whose fulfilment, in the time and place of the novel's writing, was punishable by pillorying, imprisonment, fines, or execution.

After being revealed to be a woman, Matilda argues that Ambrosio need only "Forget that I am a woman, and [temptation] no longer exists" (83), but temptation has been present from the beginning. Once their heterosexualised lust has been expressed and consummated, and Matilda asserts her masculinity, Ambrosio misses not only the old, feminine Matilda, but Rosario too: "what she gained in the opinion of the man, she lost with interest in the affection of the lover. He regretted Rosario, the fond, the gentle, the submissive; he grieved that Matilda preferred the virtues of his sex to those of her own" (210). Lewis moves from figuring Ambrosio as a man, to figuring him as a lover, to a reminder of Rosario with a hint of pederasty, and the same, attractive compliance is desired from both Rosario and Matilda. This occurs in the same scene which features a conjured devil, expected to be a "dreadful apparition" but instead "a figure more beautiful than fancy's pencil ever drew," "a youth seemingly scarce eighteen, the perfection of whose form and face was unrivalled," "perfectly naked" with "a wildness in [his] eyes," whom Ambrosio watches "with delight and wonder" (243-244).

David Salter proposes that "it is possible to see the friar as a projection of those aspects of Lewis's own identity that contemporary society deemed unacceptable,"

particularly his homosexuality,⁴⁷ but I believe that the connection is not quite so straightforward. After all, as Clara Tuite argues, male homoeroticism is the one thing which Lewis does *not* present to the reader: the one sin not indulged, represented, and “laid bare” in “[libidinous] minuteness” is sodomy.⁴⁸ The monastic homoeroticism of Rosario and Ambrosio evades explicitness, “introduced only to be buried,” despite a tradition of French anti-clerical pornography which was “predicated on the repressive monastic setting as pornotopia.”⁴⁹ In this sense, Rosario's unveiling as a woman “is in fact ... a re-veiling in female costume,” allowing the novel to avoid outright homoeroticism even as the “gender-switch functions retrospectively to explicitly sexualize the relation between the Abbot and the Novice.”⁵⁰ As Graham Robb puts it, a fictional male lover “may turn out to be female but, as far as emotional realities are concerned, this is a mere technicality.”⁵¹

This evasion may be “a gesture of *protective* closeting in the wider cultural context of homosexual persecution,” with Catholicism and sodomy linked as outlaws, one indulged, the other avoided.⁵² After all, anti-Catholic and anti-sodomite rhetoric often overlapped, and both were troubled by confusion and paradox. The enemy Catholic threatened from without and lurked within, destroying Protestant society with military force or by infiltrating the court and Parliament, always present and growing in strength and numbers even when the evidence proved otherwise. Similarly, the figure of the sodomite was all things at once, relying on old stereotypes and fulfilling contradictory roles, “a highly flexible figure of signification, allowing for the mobilisation of a variety of ideas in opposite directions.”⁵³ Yet in the 1790s, as there began a religio-political shift towards Catholic toleration (anti-Catholic aesthetics being purged of meaning; anti-Catholic laws only intermittently implemented), the vilification of sodomites still saw men hanged and pilloried, subject to violence, scandal, ruin, and death, in a pattern of increasing convictions and penalties.⁵⁴ The executions, arrests,

47 Salter, 'This demon in the garb of a monk', pp. 63-64.

48 Tuite, 'Cloistered Closets', para. 11.

49 Ibid, para. 16.

50 Ibid, para.s 12, 15.

51 Robb, *Strangers*, p. 214.

52 Tuite, 'Cloistered Closets', para.s 20, 22, emphasis original.

53 McFarlane, *The Sodomite in Fiction and Satire*, pp. 59-60.

54 The increasingly virulent anti-sodomy culture across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries may be attributed to the increasing codification in discourses of sex and sexuality and their (perceived) aberrances; the rise of gay male subculture in a growing, urbanised population; and/or a doubling down on Protestant nationalism during periods of unrest. This is visible in an increase in convictions

finer, and pillorying of mollies and sodomites in late eighteenth-century Britain are recognisable as what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick identifies as disproportionate, terroristic structures of violence and oppression, with unpredictable shows of power and disproportionate punishments.⁵⁵ Eighteenth-century records are filled with “the nonhuman monsters of the popular imagination ... quite irrevocably foul”:⁵⁶

The mollies were regarded as the lowest of the low by many of the decent upper-middle-class citizens of eighteenth-century Britain. They were reviled as monstrous sinners and beastly wretches, creatures so like dogs that even the most inhumane treatment of them could be tolerated. ... [S]odomy was a crime set apart, wholly different in nature from all other crimes, a crime committed by a different race from mere mortals, a crime which merited a severer form of punishment than even the most violent murder or rape.⁵⁷

Importantly, as George Haggerty argues, sodomy in eighteenth-century Britain was “framed not as a private scopic event, but as a public spectacle,” voyeuristically described in novels and court testimonies, a transgression spied upon and retold as a “cultural primer” on an implicit threat.⁵⁸ These descriptions acted as literary reproductions of the pillory, public spectacles of identification which were used “to give these creatures an identity that is culturally controlled” and render them “hideously and horrifyingly recognizable.”⁵⁹

Little wonder then that Lewis – himself, in Sedgwick's words, “probably” homosexual⁶⁰ – felt the need to protect the homoerotic elements of the novel, utilising a “closeted plotting” of desire “in defiance of the culture which relentlessly specularizes the homosexual and the cloister.”⁶¹ *The Monk* refuses not only punishment but exposure, avoiding encoding queer men as they were stereotyped: there are none of the class concerns, predators, criminals, hermaphrodites, fops, dandies, or effeminate aristocrats which were satirised, scapegoated, and condemned in literature, satire, and the stage.⁶²

of the misdemeanour of sodomitical assault and the full penalty of execution; raids on molly houses; and the rise of anti-sodomy blackmail and extortion. See Macdonald, *Monk Lewis*, pp. 75-76; Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House*, pp. 11-12, 54-69, 134-145; Sedgwick, *Between Men*, pp. 86-90; Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, pp. 36-40; Crompton, *Byron and Greek Love*, pp. 15-18, 53-62.

⁵⁵ Sedgwick, *Between Men*, pp. 88-90; see also Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House*, pp. 187-198.

⁵⁶ Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House*, p. 122.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 129.

⁵⁸ Haggerty, 'Keyhole Testimony', pp. 178, 169.

⁵⁹ Haggerty, 'Dung, Guts and Blood', p. 36.

⁶⁰ Sedgwick, *Between Men*, p. 92.

⁶¹ Tuite, 'Cloistered Closets', para. 31.

⁶² For such queer stereotypes, see McFarlane, *The Sodomite in Fiction and Satire*, pp. 45-49; Haggerty, *Men In Love*, pp. 46-53.

Indeed, Ambrosio is first described as an attractive figure, “not only emphatically masculine but emphatically phallic.”⁶³ As a protective move, his fear of exposure is tied up in Catholic hypocrisy and feminine victimisation rather than legal and social persecution for sodomy, with the novel's queerness lying in symbolised monastic homoeroticism which refuses to develop into a pornographic, sodomitical spectacle.

Further, as Steven Bruhm argues, we must be hesitant in how we approach these texts to identify queer or homosexual forebears. After all, if the gothic refuses to present scenes of sodomy, it therefore avoids identifying the sodomite as a villain and thus an easy target for “a graphic and predictable scene of phobic punishment.”⁶⁴ Whatever latent or internalised disgust may reside in these texts, they never depict their “homophobia with the object lesson of the homosexual,” so that the gothic is as “profoundly reticent about the spectacle of direct homophobia ... as it is about the spectacle of homosexuality.”⁶⁵ Bruhm warns against “the search and rescue mission of detecting gays and lesbians as victims of homophobia in the Gothic” which can leave critics “trapped in a hermeneutic circle that can only assuredly provide us with what we have been looking for: evidence of phobic persecution.”⁶⁶ As I see it, the monastic homoeroticism of the novel includes all of these energies: coded, avoided, and protected, indulged as both unmarked narrative and Catholicised vice.

It is with Bruhm's warning in mind that I read what may or may not be *The Monk's* most direct involvement with a culture of anti-sodomy. During the procession of the nuns of St Clare, Mother St Ursula accuses the prioress of Agnes's murder. At St Ursula's tale, the “great crowd” becomes an indignant “mob,” and although the heroes try to stop them, “popular phrensy [*sic*]” rules, and they “take upon [the prioress] a most summary and cruel vengeance” (294, 301, 302):

The rioters heeded nothing but the gratification of their barbarous vengeance. They refused to listen to her: they shewed her every sort of insult, loaded her with mud and filth, and called her by the most opprobrious appellations. ... They ... dragged her through the streets, spurning her, trampling her, and treating her with every species of cruelty which hate or vindictive fury could invent. [302]

She is eventually killed by “a flint, aimed by some well-directing hand,” but “the rioters

63 Macdonald, *Monk Lewis*, p. 77.

64 Bruhm, 'The Gothic Novel and the Negotiation of Homophobia', p. 274.

65 Ibid, emphasis original.

66 Ibid, p. 285.

still exercised their impotent rage upon her lifeless body” (302).

D.L. Macdonald and Kathleen Scherf compare this scene of popular violence to the 1810 pillorying of the sodomitical Vere Street Coterie, in which the “mob” so attacked the prisoners that they “resembled bears dipped in a stagnant pool.”⁶⁷ Though the example is from over a decade after *The Monk*'s publication, it is representative of the violence met by men convicted of sodomitical assault throughout the late eighteenth century: “the fury of the mob [displayed] itself in showers of mud and filth of every kind,” and before reaching the pillory, “the wretches were so thickly covered with filth, that a vestige of the human figure was scarcely discernible” and “their whole persons appeared one heap of filth.”⁶⁸ Such details are reflected in the violence against the prioress, attacked in procession on the street, “loaded ... with mud and filth,” and reduced to a “mass of flesh, unsightly, shapeless, and disgusting” (302) even before she reaches the end of the parade (the pillory). The detail of the stray flint, which “struck her full upon the temple” (302), is further reminiscent of the death of William Smith at the pillory in 1780: after being “very severely treated by the populace,” Smith, by one report, “received a blow by a stone under the right ear, which killed him instantaneously.”⁶⁹

Especially important is the specification in such accounts that “particularly the women” attacked sodomites in the pillory,⁷⁰ in a tradition which, Louis Crompton speculates, allowed “some of the most abused members of British society [to revenge] themselves for the contempt they received from others.”⁷¹ This perception and/or reality of the particular violence of women against convicted sodomites might explain why Lewis fictionally turned that violence on a powerful woman, placing the punishment back on the (unjust) punisher and once more shifting the balance of power. In displacing the time, place, and victim of anti-sodomy violence, perhaps Lewis played out a “revenge fantasy,” metaphorically killing his oppressor.⁷²

However, the scene which follows more closely recalls fears sparked by the

67 *The Trying and Pillorying of the Vere Street Club* (1810), quoted in Lewis, *The Monk*, Appendix B.3.a, p. 393.

68 Ibid.

69 *Public Advertiser and Morning Chronicle, and London Advertiser*, 11 April 1780, quoted in Norton, ed., ‘Burke Proposes Abolition of the Pillory, 1780’, *Homosexuality in Eighteenth-Century England*. Most reports agree that Smith strangled to death, too short to reach the pillory hole, but the detail is notable regardless of its accuracy.

70 *The Trying and Pillorying of the Vere Street Club*, p. 393.

71 Crompton, *Byron and Greek Love*, p. 22.

72 Macdonald, *Monk Lewis*, p. 80.

Gordon Riots and French Revolution than the violence of procession and pillory. Lewis's crowd escalates out of control as it attacks the convent itself, forcing open the gates and "[exercising] their vengeance upon every thing which found itself in their passage," attacking innocent nuns, destroying buildings, and "[producing] the most decisive desolation" (303). Similarly, in the first week of June 1780, anti-Catholic supporters of Lord George Gordon in London became violent after the passing of the Catholic Relief Act, breaking into buildings, burning and demolishing property, and opening and burning prisons. The riots erupted suddenly, grew out of control, and were so violent that critics have seen in them the seeds of anti-mob and anti-Revolutionary fear in Edmund Burke and gothic novelists.⁷³ They were also marked by the use of fire, as rioters demolished chapels and the homes of suspected Catholics or their sympathisers, creating street bonfires out of pillaged books, art, vestments, and furniture. Witnesses compared the riots to the Great Fire of London, and described "the sky glowing on every side with the light of different conflagrations."⁷⁴

When Lewis's mob attacks a Catholic/state building and "set[s] fire to the pictures and valuable furniture" (303), the comparison is unavoidable. The storming of the Bastille in 1789 was more recent, and its influence significant (and Lewis was only four in 1780), but the Gordon Riots left a lasting impression on the British cultural imagination. Lewis describes "volumes of fire rising from amidst the convent's massy walls, ... the noise of some heavy arch tumbling down in ruins, ... [and] the mingled shrieks of the nuns and rioters" (304); compare this to dramatist Frederick Reynolds's account of the storming of Newgate Prison in 1780:

The mob fired the Jail in many places before they were enabled to force their way through ... The wild gestures of the mob without, and the shrieks of the prisoners within, ... the thundering descent of huge pieces of building, the deafening clangor [*sic*] of red hot iron bars, ... and the loud triumphant yells and shouts of the demoniac assailants ... formed an awful and terrific scene.⁷⁵

Unlike the extended violence and eventual military intervention in 1780, Lewis's crowd

⁷³ See McCalman, 'Mad Lord George and Madame La Motte', pp. 343-367; Paulson, 'Gothic Fiction and the French Revolution'.

⁷⁴ Sir N.W. Wraxall, Bart., *Historical Memoirs of My Own Time*, and George Crabbe Jr., *The Life and Poetical Works of the Rev. George Crabbe*, quoted in de Castro, *The Gordon Riots*, pp. 28, 92; see also pp. 43-68, 88-109

⁷⁵ Frederick Reynolds, *The Life and Times of Frederick Reynolds*, quoted in de Castro, *The Gordon Riots*, pp. 90-91.

is only stopped by their own destruction turning against them. Mob violence loses sight of its primary object, with the “incensed populace, confounding the innocent with the guilty” (302), a moral condemnation familiar from British reactions to both 1789 and 1780.

These two scenes – homophobic violence done to the homophobe, and indefensible rioting against state/Catholic institutions – are closely connected in the text, and it is difficult to parse how Lewis utilises the imagery and cultural memories on which he draws, his significations in apparent contradiction. If the prioress' death is justified queer vengeance, how do we interpret the mob, which turns to injustice in the riot against the convent? Considering the rest of the novel, it seems unlikely that Lewis is defending Catholicism by condemning a stand-in for the Gordon Riots or Revolution, but nor does he triumphantly repeat their violence. On the other hand, British abhorrence of mob violence was conveniently forgotten when it was turned against the national enemies and “monsters” seen in sodomites, and perhaps Lewis is highlighting this hypocrisy in a novel already concerned with the theme. (When Edmund Burke condemned the pillory – not anti-sodomy laws – after William Smith's death, he was labelled a “modern Cataline” trying to cause “rapacity and rebellion” and linked to “republicanism and treason.”)⁷⁶ By deploying images which haunted the British imagination on multiple fronts, Lewis achieves an emotional effect without settling on one or another side of a false moral binary, reflecting the ambivalence, malleability, and complexity of contemporary, apparently contradictory tropes of anti-Catholic, anti-Revolution, and anti-sodomy politics. The physical response of fear of violence, and a distinctly British anti-mob outrage, affect the reader, along with the seemingly opposite joy of injustice punished, in a contradiction borne out by the rest of the novel's transgressive intimacy with breaking taboos, while possibly holding an extra level of anti-homophobic satisfaction. Like Burke, Lewis condemns mob violence even when it is turned on a “worthy” victim destined for punishment; however, while for Burke that victim is the sodomite, for Lewis, it is the religious woman who might be his most vicious attacker. Perhaps violence itself is not defensible in any cause; but in *The Monk*, unlike London, there is at least a deserving criminal amidst the destruction.

⁷⁶ *Morning Post, and Daily Advertiser*, 14 April 1780, in Norton, ed., 'Burke Proposes Abolition of the Pillory'.

Conclusion

In the excess of its vice, and the detailed, subjective descriptions of Ambrosio's crimes, Lewis inscribes a certain amount of vicarious enjoyment for the reader. Such excesses and uncomfortably intimate details of sex and violence have been read as camp, queer, or “queer-camp,” as playing up masculinity in a drag show and revelling in misreadings of the body and gender.⁷⁷ Lewis may condemn Catholicism, lust, violence, and transvestism, but he also “seems to revel in – and identify with – the very forces of subversion and transgression that the novel ostensibly condemns,” allowing vicarious enjoyment and an imaginative escape for “those who found themselves either marginalized by or opposed to the moral values and social mores of mainstream English society.”⁷⁸ As Haggerty argues, narrative closure cannot undo this identification and indulgence, in a failure not of the gothic form, but of (hetero)normativity:

No attempt to dispel the demons raised by this kind of fictional transgression is ever fully successful. Marriages in last chapters might attempt to dispel the ghost of sexual threat, and cataclysmic endings might attempt to reassure readers that the unsettling experiences have been contained, but the queer excess of the gothic experience can never be entirely resolved.⁷⁹

Yet the fact remains that there is no happy ending, nor even an ambiguously hopeful one, for the novel's transgressors. *The Monk* links desire, queerness, power, and violence to Ambrosio, a victim of “his own desire” and “a fear of sexuality that makes it possible for him to express himself only in violent terms,” until there remains “no position of safety ... no 'subjectivity' not shaped by violence and defined by loss.”⁸⁰ The extent to which the novel's transgressions – Catholic excess, gender subversion, and homoerotic frisson – are relegated to coding and subtext reveal the cultural boundaries drawn by social and perhaps personal pressures, what implicitly may and may not be written. *The Monk* provides a space for transgressive exploration, enjoyment, identification, and empowerment; but to read from certain margins requires ever more interpretive effort, and in reality – as the novel is fatalistically aware – the power it

77 See Brewer, 'Transgendering in Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*'; Fincher, 'The Gothic as Camp'; Gentile, 'Sublime Drag', pp. 16-31.

78 Salter, 'This demon in the garb of a monk', pp. 63-64.

79 Haggerty, 'The Failure of Heteronormativity', p. 132.

80 Haggerty, *Queer Gothic*, pp. 27, 30.

offers will not be allowed to last. Marginalised experiences only exist on an inevitable path to self-destruction, already decided by the dominance of a culture which vilifies and dehumanises its Other.

The Monk offers not mere persecution, then, but a complex engagement with a demonstrably phobic culture which is far from endorsing either bourgeois fantasies of social acceptance *or* the power of refusing normativity by embracing sterility and loss.⁸¹ There is a critical and political power in taking this last position, but it is equally anachronistic to try to find “proto-homosexuals” as it is to identify a subversive death drive in a text published in an era which promoted the execution of sodomites, by state or citizenry. The complexity that I have examined rather emphasises the necessity for a non-binarist analysis which is not so much open-ended as it ends in ambiguity, embracing the text's multivalent contradiction of meanings. In this understanding, it is entirely possible for *The Monk* to express both the impossibility of normative closure, and the cultural impetus to demonise and excise transgression.

81 See Bruhm, 'The Gothic Novel and the Negotiation of Homophobia', pp. 284-285.

CHAPTER 2: CORRUPTION OR REVENGE? FEMININITY, RACE, AND QUEERNESS IN *ZOFLOYA, OR THE MOOR* (1806)

Introduction

Charlotte Dacre's 1806 novel *Zofloya; or, The Moor* challenges both contemporary cultural boundaries and the devised, gendered boundaries of how later critics approach a text. Feminist literary critics after Ellen Moers theorised the so-called “Female Gothic” as opposed to “Male Gothic” spectacles of the violent, evil Other, designating a genre which either opens up a picaresque space of adventure for its heroines or locks them into a system of patriarchal abuse. It is said to explore the brutality of patriarchy from the victim’s point of view, favouring rationality, sensibility, and egalitarianism alongside themes of childbirth, parenting, suppressed sexuality, and the “terror of the familiar.”⁸² Yet *Zofloya* combines elements of both “Male” and “Female Gothic,” including Faustian themes, a focus on education, and spectacles of shock, horror, death, deceit, and violence, now utilised and experienced by women.⁸³ As Carol Margaret Davison argues, rather than trying to identify the buried “Female Gothic” tropes in *Zofloya*, or placing it in opposition to the genre, we can offer a more responsive reading of the text if we understand that the category of the “Female Gothic” did not exist at the time of Dacre’s writing, and instead read her novel as a “conscientious engagement” with a developing genre and as a challenge to assumptions about women.⁸⁴ *Zofloya* responds to its cultural and literary contexts, and rather than judging the limits, or expanding the definition, of a category constructed in hindsight, it is more productive to dispense with binary definitions altogether. Instead, I read *Zofloya* through the dominant practices and ideals of its era regarding gender, race, and sexuality (and transgressions thereof) in order to analyse how Dacre works and reworks contemporary tropes and language.

Zofloya stars an unusual anti-heroine – violent and manipulative – who

82 Winter, 'Sexual/Textual Politics of Terror', p. 91; see also Moers, *Literary Women*, pp. 137-167; Craciun, 'Introduction', p. 10; Spacks, *The Female Imagination*; Hoeveler, *Gothic Feminism*; Clery, *Women's Gothic*; Ellis, 'Can You Forgive Her?'; Massé, *In the Name of Love*; Beauvais, 'Domesticity and the Female Demon'.

83 See Moers, *Literary Women*, pp. 140-148; Craciun, 'Introduction', pp. 10-11; and compare Hoeveler, *Gothic Feminism*, pp. 5-21; Clery, *Women's Gothic*, p. 107.

84 Davison, 'Getting Their Knickers in a Twist', p. 34.

exaggerates, defies, and satirises the moralistic, gendered expectations of early nineteenth-century culture and genres. It is a knowing rewrite of *The Monk* that subverts ideals of modesty, power, and gender relations, and explores the heroine's non-normative desires – for the husband's brother, the black male servant, and the uncanny young woman – on both surface and subtextual levels. Dacre gothicises desire through parallel, uncanny doubles for her heroine, and engages with the tropes and language through which her culture described, minimised, and vilified black men, and queer female bodies, sex, and desires.

As with Lewis's buried portrayal of sodomy, Dacre's tribade and sodomite stop short of her otherwise frank depictions of violence and desire. Yet by empowering her women through the sublime and uncanny, and encoding the tribade and sodomite through her heroine, Dacre still conveys a powerful expression of anger from the margins, and dissatisfaction with a heteronormative patriarchy which refuses women's agency and creates tyranny through domestic spaces. She utilises various, often conflicting, elements of dominant rhetoric through themes of villainy, sublimity, and morality which complicate any attempt to place her on one or another side of cultural debates.

Genre and Narration

Published under the pseudonym “Rosa Matilda,” *Zofloya* follows the di Loredani children, Victoria and Leonardo, and their descent into destruction. Having lavished their children with love and attention, the parents – particularly the mother, Laurina – have fostered bad habits and evil natures in them, and “to preserve [them] from future depravity, required the most vigilant care, aided by such brilliant examples of virtue and decorum as should induce the desire of emulation.”⁸⁵ But after seventeen years of happy marriage, Laurina is seduced by her husband's guest, the German Count Ardolph. Her husband dies in a duel with Ardolph, and Leonardo flees in shame, while the protagonist Victoria begins her journey into vice, moving through stock gothic landscapes of Venice, villas, forests, a castle in the Appenines, and mountain caves and cliffs. She falls passionately in love with Il Conte Berenza, but they are deceived by Ardolph, who secludes Victoria with her cruel relation. She manipulates her way to escape through a

85 Dacre, *Zofloya*, p. 5 (further references will be given in in-text parentheses for this chapter).

forest in which she sees none of the sublime beauty of a Radcliffean landscape, but merely freedom, with “no boundaries, nothing to retard her” (57); and if the spectre of sexual violence lingers in the gondolier she meets (“Canst thou pay, my pretty one?”), it is diverted into “fellow-feeling” (62-63).

After manipulating Berenza into marriage, and five unhappy years, Victoria meets and immediately falls in love (or lust) with his younger brother Henriquez, despite his being affianced to Lilla, thirteen years old and a picture of domestic feminine purity. Henriquez's Moorish servant Zofloya – presumed dead after a jealous servant's attack – appears to Victoria in a dream, then miraculously returns, and the two embark on a quest of destruction, murdering Berenza by poison (tested on Lilla's chaperone), imprisoning Lilla in a cave, and drugging Henriquez to think that Victoria is Lilla returned. She finally gets her night with him, after which he falls on his own sword in horror, and an enraged Victoria murders Lilla. Zofloya spirits her away to a distant mountain, where they take shelter with a group of *banditti* led by Leonardo in disguise, and their mother appears, beaten by Ardolph and near death. Leonardo murders Ardolph, and Zofloya transports Victoria to a mountaintop, where he reveals himself as Satan and throws her off a cliff.

Such a summary (detailed but still incomplete) underlines the novel's extraordinary excesses, which prompted confusion and distaste from critics. The belittling, ironic tone of the *Literary Journal* reviewer expresses both disapproval and bewilderment: to them, Dacre uses the devil as “a very convenient scape goat” and “ill used gentleman,” Victoria's infatuation is “mature consideration,” and Satan's destruction “uncivil” and “rudely” done.⁸⁶ Blame is laid on “the seeds of nonsense, bad taste, and ridiculous fancies, early sown” in the author's mind, leading to a diagnosis of infectious “maggots in the brain.”⁸⁷ The *Annual Review* is more straightforward about the difficulty of classifying the text: “shielded by the broad title of a *Romance*, ... no extravagance of character is too extravagant, to be pourtrayed [*sic*]; no absurdity of action too absurd to be narrated.”⁸⁸ The novel and its author's gender are a contradiction,

86 Anonymous, 'ART. X. Zofloya; or, The Moor: A Romance of the Fifteenth Century, by CHARLOTTE DACRE, better known as ROSA MATILDA, Author of the Nun of St. Omers, Hours of Solitude, &c., 3 vols. 12 mo. 12s Longman & Co., London, 1806', in *Literary Journal* 1, no. 6 (June, 1806), pp. 631-633.

87 Ibid, pp. 633.

88 Anonymous, 'ART. IV. Zofloya, or the Moor: a Romance of the Fifteenth Century. By CHARLOTTE DACRE, better known as ROSA MATILDA. 12mo. 3 vols.', in *The Annual Review and History of Literature* 5 (January, 1806), p. 542, emphasis original.

with its “voluptuousness of language and allusion ... which we should have hoped, that the delicacy of a female pen would have refused to trace” and “the delicacy of a female mind, would have been to shocked to imagine.”⁸⁹

But author and heroine alike overcome their femininity and embrace unusual modes. Michelle Massé's feminist framework of the role of masochism in female-authored gothic expertly unpacks the genre, arguing that the repetition of gendered, often sexual, violence against women is less an expression of a heroine's true desires, and more a learned, psychological response to the trauma of oppression, “an attempt to recognize, not relish” male violence.⁹⁰ Women – and gothic heroines – are taught that power, autonomy, and subjectivity are attainable through passivity, family, and (heterosexual) love, but upon marriage still find themselves oppressed and denied: “What *is* gives the lie to what they are told *should be*, and they are haunted by the discrepancy.”⁹¹ Massé identifies multiple methods of resistance, each with its own self-defeat: the rebellious masochist's self-defence is punished; the aggressor who turns the violence they have suffered onto others merely repeats oppressive violence; and the subversive who knowingly performs “good” femininity only achieves a limited autonomy.⁹² This last, subversive tactic – also identified by Diane Hoeveler as “professional femininity” – is common in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century gothic fiction, in which modest, patient, feminine behaviour exchanges suffering for uncorrupted survival and the rewards of love and inheritance. By outsmarting and co-opting patriarchy, these heroines represent a fantasy of female power through passive-aggression, subverting patriarchal authority and “retreat[ing] to studied postures of conformity whenever they risk exposure to public censure.”⁹³

Under this framework, Victoria falls under – indeed, exceeds – the unusual category of the aggressor, turning violence back onto the world around her and defying the expectations of a gothic heroine. Neither a pure but persecuted Radcliffean maiden, nor a victimised Lewisean Antonia or Agnes, Victoria's motives are impure, her actions ignoble, and instead of merely “ring[ing] the changes between love, fear, joy and grief,” she experiences pride, envy, hatred, and revenge, classically male passions.⁹⁴ She

89 Ibid.

90 Massé, *In the Name of Love*, p. 12.

91 Ibid, pp. 3, 15-18, emphasis original.

92 Ibid, pp. 241-261; see also Miles, *Gothic Writing*, pp. 78-82.

93 Hoeveler, *Gothic Feminism*, p. 6.

94 Clery, *Women's Gothic*, pp. 110-111.

indulges lust and anger, and the narrator emphasises her “bold and towering spirit, haughty, [and] fond of sway” and “persevering and remorseless cruelty” (14, 32). Though it is too simplistic to categorise *Zofloya* as merely a “Male Gothic” novel with a female protagonist,⁹⁵ it is undoubtedly a rewrite of *The Monk*, exaggerated to the point of subversion. Dacre turns Ambrosio into Victoria and Matilda into Zofloya, obscures Lewis's supernaturalism, and highlights the hero's original vices, posing the question of responsibility: if Victoria's fatal pursuit of lust reflects Ambrosio's, her desires predate meeting her diabolical enabler, and her crimes are more extreme. In their respective rape/murder scenes, while Ambrosio is swept up in lust and emotion, there is a “premeditated murderous glee” in Victoria's destruction of Lilla, whose Antonia-like innocence is entertainment as well as incitement.⁹⁶

In its discourse on education, *Zofloya* again both aligns itself with *The Monk* and deliberately departs from convention. Ambrosio and Victoria are each ruined by their poor upbringing, but while Ambrosio's “[monastic] education had impressed his mind with fear” and “repressed [his] virtues,”⁹⁷ *Zofloya* is concerned with children given *too much* license. This parental blame similarly departs from “Female Gothic” novels like *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, in which Emily St Aubert's parents are old and wise, and her education a blend of piety, stoicism, reason, and benevolence from a father who believes that “A well-informed mind ... is the best security against the contagion of folly and vice.”⁹⁸ Instead, Laurina married at fifteen “in the delirium of passion, ... in the madness of youth!” (3), and the fondness and indulgence of these “youthful parents” (4) leave their children proud and impassioned.

Laurina in particular is blamed for Victoria's actions, by herself, her dying husband, Leonardo, and Victoria: “Ah, mother, mother! ... all is attributable to thee” (258). The narrator ascribes Victoria's corruption to “the curse of Laurina,” and “[m]aternal imprudence, and maternal indiscretion” (132, 244), culminating in such diatribes as the condemnatory end of chapter XV, which closes with “Tremble, unfortunate and guilty mother, for longer and more gloomy becomes the register of thy crimes!” (124). These diatribes are repeated to the point of absurdity, and exaggerated until the children seem to have no control over their own actions, the moral effect

95 As Craciun tends toward ('Introduction', p. 11).

96 Haggerty, 'Mothers and Other Lovers', p. 169.

97 Lewis, *The Monk*, p. 213.

98 Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, p. 6.

deadened into satire. This is exacerbated by the novel's inability – or perhaps unwillingness – to commit to any one theory of evil. As Robert Miles notes:

Four discourses offer competing explanations for the origin of Victoria's evil: a religious one of fallen nature and satanic temptation; a sentimental, libertarian one of nature/nurture; its Sadean variant [that the self is an animal] ...; and one of parental and class responsibility. Typically, these explanations are left in a contradictory and irresolute condition.⁹⁹

Dacre simultaneously blames Laurina and dwells on Victoria's innate pride and corruption, “the wrong bias of her character” and “naturally evil” heart (14, 40, 244, 259). With these damning descriptions, it is hard to believe that “the guard which should be constantly kept over the wanderings of the heart, should never be suffered to slumber on its post” (26), for what good could any guard do against a corrupt soul?¹⁰⁰ This contradiction creates dramatic irony which undermines the narrator's didacticism, a view supported by other ironic instances in the novel, such as when Count Ardolph tries to deny his role as the persecuting surrogate father. He describes how “easy” it would be to banish Berenza and imprison Victoria, but insists that “we shall have recourse to no compulsory measure” (33); then proceeds to do precisely that. These satiric turns reveal how we should read the rest of the novel's exaggerations, encouraging disbelief in the narrator's condemnations, and close analysis of Victoria's departures from typical gothic femininities.

Power, Desire, and the Sublime

In the popular vein of Walpole, Lewis, and Radcliffe, the gothic heroine was fair, pure, sensitive, and reserved, while the rising cultural ideal for women was passive, submissive, and caring. Instead, Victoria is dark, violent, proud, adventurous, even inhuman, with a “vain ambitious heart” (72). She is “slender and elegantly proportioned,” “beautiful and accomplished as an angel,” but also “proud, haughty, and self-sufficient ... bent upon gaining the ascendancy in whatever she engaged” (190, 4). As Berenza sees it, “hers was not the countenance of a Madona [*sic*] – it was not of

⁹⁹ Miles, *Gothic Writing*, p. 169.

¹⁰⁰ Glen Brewster also identifies these moral and character contradictions, reading them as a Romantic reworking of the ambivalence of *Paradise Lost* ('Monstrous Philosophy', pp. 611-613).

angelic mould,” but it contains “a beautiful fierceness” which “bespoke the mind which animated it” despite the lack of “mild,” “gentle,” and “endearing virtues” (76).

Moreover, Victoria is powerful and knows it. Her “strong and resolute mind, [is] capable of attempting any thing undismayed by consequences,” her air “dignified and commanding,” her step “firm and majestic” (76-77). She responds “haughtily” to Zofloya, and defies Catau's physical strength, even nature itself (“heed not the storm!” [214]). The narrator's ideal is self-denial – Laurina's fault is a moment's weakness, “admitting to her *thoughts, even for an instant, any other man than her husband*” (11, emphasis original) – but Victoria rejects “the proud triumph of mind over the weakness of the heart” (132), seeking control over others and the power to gain her desires. She is quick to escape confinement, admires Zofloya for achieving “That which [he] willed,” and would annihilate “the whole world ... if it stood between her and the attainment of her object” (154, 135).

Such activity and resolution were considered virtues in a man, and indeed, Victoria is described in masculine terms, possessing “*fiercé*” (27, 69), a “masculinizing” French word for pride, courage, and ferocity.¹⁰¹ She has “bold masculine features” and a fearless “masculine spirit” (189, 213), always dangerous: she is “the murderer ... [fondling] the beauty of the babe, whose life *he* intended to take,” and the “tyrant, who condemns *his* subjects to torture, that *he* may laugh at their agonies” (143, emphasis added). By re-gendering and exaggerating male virtues, the “jarring fusion of honorable masculine characteristics and a female body” contributes to the uncanny tone,¹⁰² as Dacre exchanges spectacles of female suffering for power and a Lewisean horror response “ordinarily the prerogative of the *male* subject.”¹⁰³

As a woman and a gothic heroine, Victoria's greatest virtue should be her modesty. Yet as Rousseau, Milton, and Wollstonecraft accidentally exposed, the modest ideal was self-defeating, both a natural feminine instinct and carefully taught within female communities. “Woman” was constructed as the untrustworthy Other to a presumed male subject because of her – as Miles puts it – “natural artful artlessness, her artificial naturalness,”¹⁰⁴ a position into which she was forced by societal demands on her sexuality, but which patriarchy blamed on her inherent fallenness. This is prominent

101Michasiw, ed., in Dacre, *Zofloya*, n. 27, p. 273.

102Chatterjee, 'Charlotte Dacre's Nymphomaniacs and Demon Lovers', p. 87.

103Chaplin, *Law, Sensibility and the Sublime*, pp. 6, 138, emphasis original.

104Miles, *Gothic Writing*, p. 79.

in *The Monk*, where Antonia's ignorance and innocence make victims of unwilling men: her veil provokes its own disarrangement, and when Ambrosio watches her undressing, her “inbred sense of modesty induced her to veil her charms.”¹⁰⁵ Antonia seems to invite Ambrosio even when unconscious: “Her mouth half-opened seemed to solicit a kiss,” and “there was a sort of modesty in her very nakedness, which added fresh stings to the desires of the lustful monk.”¹⁰⁶ Antonia is both perfectly innocent and able to defend herself, so ignorant that she “knows not in what consists the difference of man and woman,” yet knowledgeable enough to be “sensible of her danger.”¹⁰⁷ In this formulation, desire is “the destiny, the true identity of the modest female, and something she cannot articulate in language.”¹⁰⁸

Yet Victoria is unabashed about her desires, and if the modest woman's – or, pejoratively, the coquette's – body is more legible and desirable than her artful words,¹⁰⁹ Victoria is illegible to others. Duplicity and artificiality, often monstrous or the heroine's only shield, are her weapons.¹¹⁰ Imprisoned with the Signora di Modena, Victoria deliberately suppresses her indignation and performs docility in order to escape, “[learning] the most refined artifice, which, by practice, became imbued into the mass of her other evil qualities” (50). When Berenza does not believe her professions of love, assuming that “in her air and in her eyes he would read every movement of her soul,” he is unable to decipher her “air of innocence” (70, 74). Instead, Victoria is the superior reader, her gaze able to “[penetrate] Berenza's inmost soul” (83): “she watched, with scrutinizing eye, every movement, every look; she listened to and weighted every word he spoke; then, combining the whole, discovered ere long the secret which pressed upon his feelings” (77). By putting on “an *appearance* equally ardent and sincere,” and imitating his behaviour, “the artful Victoria,” in a conscious example of Hoeveler's “professional femininity,” recreates a scene of romance with a carefully escalating series of sighs and utterances (78-80, emphasis original). Like an embodiment of male fears, she takes the oppressive modesty that would be her virtue and destruction, and uses it as a weapon to gain social power.

¹⁰⁵Lewis, *The Monk*, pp. 40-41, 129. Olivia Ferguson analyses Lewis's use of the Venus de Medici and tropes of connoisseurship in *The Monk* as possibly satirical, complicating Lewis's objectification of women and utilisation of the rhetoric of modesty ('Venus in Chains').

¹⁰⁶Lewis, *The Monk*, p. 262.

¹⁰⁷Ibid, p. 47, 320.

¹⁰⁸Miles, *Gothic Writing*, p. 157; see also Binhammer, 'The Sex Panic of the 1790s', p. 419.

¹⁰⁹Miles, *Gothic Writing*, pp. 79-81.

¹¹⁰See Sottilotta, 'Diabolical Crossings', pp. 96-98.

This resistance to dominant, gendered structures is again evident in Dacre's undermining of philosophies of beauty and power. In Edmund Burke's influential 1757 treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, he stated that “we submit to what we admire, but we love what submits to us,” and what is to be loved – what is to submit to the (implicitly male) subject – is Woman.¹¹¹ Burke's ideal woman was beautiful, elegant, sensitive, unthinking, and weak, and these aesthetic ideals were absorbed by contemporary gender politics, identifying femininity with the “softer virtues” of compassion and kindness “as opposed to the higher qualities of mind, those virtues which cause admiration such as fortitude, justice and wisdom.”¹¹² Meanwhile, male writers conceptualised the opposite – the sublime – as masculine empowerment through a confrontation with the divine, or the mastering of feminine-coded fear, bodies, nature, and emotions.¹¹³ By this logic, women were merely beautiful objects, and “could neither be an object of sublimity nor could they have an inborn feeling for the sublime.”¹¹⁴

But some critics have identified an older association between the sublime and *femininity*, through their shared qualities of excess, fertility, imagination, and passion.¹¹⁵ As Thomas Lacquer argues, the eighteenth century saw a fundamental shift in European (especially British) ideas of gender and the body, from a one-sex model – in which female bodies were an unformed or inverted version of the perfect male body – to a two-sex model, in which male and female bodies were two distinct types of anatomy; a shift from one hierarchical, vertically-ordered framework, to a set of two incommensurable, horizontally-ordered opposites.¹¹⁶ These shifts in the understanding of gendered physiology were accompanied by a shift in gendered social roles. In an older, “civic humanism” model, humanist (implicitly masculine) ideals of rationality, stoicism, discipline, and self-control might be sought by both sexes, but women were less likely to achieve them, being fundamentally imperfect, passionate, and fertile: the very qualities which associated women with the sublime power of the uncontrollable.

¹¹¹Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, quoted in Craciun, *Fatal Women of Romanticism*, p. 139.

¹¹²Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender*, p. 108.

¹¹³Ibid, pp. 85-87, 91-96.

¹¹⁴Moreno, 'Gothic Excess and Aesthetic Ambiguity', p. 422.

¹¹⁵See Elfenbein, *Romantic Genius*, pp. 30-31.

¹¹⁶Lacquer, *Making Sex*, pp. 10-11. Lacquer's account requires some problematisation, but for the current purposes, I will be accepting the broad basis of his argument; see Park and Nye, 'Destiny is Anatomy'.

The new, “civil humanism” model, however, distinguished between masculine and feminine virtues – between the ideal man and the ideal woman, as opposed to the ideal (masculine) citizen – with women's distinct ideal being small, elegant, sensible, domestic, and controlled.¹¹⁷

Burke's formations fail to properly distinguish between these two models. The feminine sublime lingers behind the polarisation of feminine beauty and masculine sublimity, and it is in this disjunction, I argue, that Dacre was writing: between opposed cultural models of bodies, behaviours, and aesthetic ideals. She refuses the new feminine ideals of civil humanism and sensibility, and returns not only to Burke's masculine sublime, but to the older, feminine sublime underpinning it, writing perverse, excessive power and desire back into the feminine. Her anti-heroine is “made to be admired, not loved,”¹¹⁸ while her men are overawed into inarticulacy, such as Megalena Strozzi's first meeting with Leonardo, asleep, blushing, and stammering (103-104). Victoria bears physical wounds with equanimity, and dispassionately sketches sublime landscapes, where solitude offers “a gloomy and secret delight” (164), but when provoked she is deliberately uncontrollable, “no longer mistress of her actions, *nor desiring to be so*” (226, emphasis added). Her emotions are wild and selfish, “the *stormy* passions of the soul, goading on to ruin and despair,” compared to Berenza's “mild, philosophic, though proudly tenacious” feelings: “His were as the even stream, calm, yet deep – her's [*sic*] as the foaming cataract, rushing headlong from the rocky steep, and raging in the abyss below!” (78, emphasis original).

These artful, sublime women are also a foregrounding of the corrupt, ambitious, lascivious characters who more often made cameo appearances as ghosts, moral lessons, or mad nuns in gothic novels. Such doomed characters – Laurentini, Madame Montoni, the Bleeding Nun – were usually seen on the sidelines or at the end of their life, monuments to the inevitable suffering of sexually aggressive women. (In *Zofloya*, they are the farcical Signor Zappi's wife, the passive adulteress Laurina, even the subtle predator Megalena.) But for Victoria – like Ambrosio – aggressive desire is almost her fatal flaw, making her vulnerable and irrational, the protagonist whose decline is followed intimately and at length. Dacre drags the Bleeding Nun out of her tangential moral tale, and repositions the sidelined *femme fatale* as central, “subject rather than

¹¹⁷See Marshall, *Romanticism, Gender, and Violence*, pp. 20-27.

¹¹⁸Craciun, *Fatal Women of Romanticism*, p. 138.

object,” with agency and complexity.¹¹⁹

The narrator insists on Victoria as a figure of revulsion rather than admiration, critiquing her perverted masculine qualities. But we have already seen that their moral lessons are not to be taken at face value, and when Victoria finally submits to another's power – ceding control to Zofloya – it is stifling and abject. Her eyes “fell beneath his fiery glances,” she is “incapable of withdrawing from his arms,” and when “she beheld herself in his power, ... in the abjectness of her guilt, she trembled” (181, 234). Her downfall from glorious mastery is a weakness, caused by “a growing sensibility which results in the failure of any response to sublime terror that would stress empowerment over submission,” a self-abasement “conventional ... of the female subject disciplined by male power.”¹²⁰ In mimicking submission and sensibility, Victoria suffers a “loss of self” which leads to her diminution and destruction by Zofloya.¹²¹ This gradual, almost supernatural, submission warns that Zofloya is not what he seems, as the language of his romantic mastery is combined with otherworldly descriptions of him as a “demi-god,” “of a superior order,” and “more than human” (164, 234, 239), hinting at something diabolical and unnatural in sensibility and submission: “Yes, Victoria, who had never before trembled in the presence of a *mortal being*, ... trembled now, in the presence of Zofloya” (172, emphasis added).

Final proof of the novel's stance on contemporary gendered moral values can be seen in Berenza, whom the narrator describes as a virtuous victim while the narrative depicts a villain. E.J. Clery and Jennifer Airey are among the few critics who identify the negativity of Berenza's representation behind the narrator's ironic praise, describing him as “that most dangerous of Dacrean types: the philosophical sensualist, ever ready to ensnare and destroy women with his dazzling arguments and lofty soul,” with a supercilious, “libertine willingness to take advantage of a woman deemed unworthy of marriage.”¹²² Simply put, he is a conceited man who “demands a wife who lacks independent thought,”¹²³ courting Victoria purely to gain power over her and change her into an “ideal” woman. He first appears visiting Monte Bello with “an investigating spirit” to “increase his knowledge of the human heart” by examining Laurina and

119Clery, *Women's Gothic*, p. 112; see also Dunn, 'Charlotte Dacre and the Feminization of Violence', p.

318; Davison, 'Getting Their Knickers in a Twist', p. 39; Michasiw, 'Introduction', p. xvi.

120Chaplin, *Law, Sensibility and the Sublime*, pp. 141-142.

121Beauvais, 'Domesticity and the Female Demon', para. 5

122Clery, *Women's Gothic*, p. 109; Airey, 'He bears no rival near the throne', p. 235.

123Airey, 'He bears no rival near the throne', p. 234.

Ardolph (26-27), contemptuously concluding that their conduct is a voluntary evil. Under these auspices, he meets seventeen-year-old Victoria (he thirty-five), believing that he has “never yet ... beheld a female whose character he had imagined so formed to constitute his happiness,” while “pride” stops him marrying her due to her mother's dishonour (27). For the narrator, Berenza is a figure of both veneration and pity, a “refined” and “calculating philosopher” with an “ever-reasoning” mind, virtuous but “misguided” in admiring Victoria (125, 67, 69, 27). As they sum it up: “How few in character resemble Berenza!” (76).

But these descriptions undermine themselves. The keen thinker is also “a philosophical, delicate, and refined voluptuary,” his “delicate and fastidious mind ... [taking] for ever a pleasure in repining upon itself” (70, 71). The upright moral philosopher becomes a laughable “man of feeling,” consuming himself in self-absorbed reflection.¹²⁴ He also seeks to eradicate Victoria's most admirable qualities: “her *fierté* he would have softened, and her boldness checked” (27). Requiring not only “perfection” in body and mind, Berenza wants to “[make] her his wife upon speculation,” believing he has “power ... over the human mind for modelling her afterwards, so as perfectly to assimilate to his wishes” (70, 27). In other words, he considers the heroine an object of material wealth, and wishes to change her, to “new model the object” (70) to his selfish and impossibly high standards:

She whom Berenza can love must tower above her sex; she must have nothing of the tittering coquet [*sic*], the fastidious prude, or the affected idiot: she must abound in the graces of *mind* as well as of *body*; for I prize not the woman who can yield only to my arms a lovely insipid *form*, which the veriest boor in nature can enjoy in as much perfection as myself. My mistress, too, must be *mine* exclusively, heart and soul: others may gaze and sigh for her, but must not dare approach. It is she too, who, while her beauty *attracts*, must have dignity sufficient to repel them. If she forfeit for a moment her *self-possession*, I case [*sic*] her for ever from my bosom. [75, emphasis original]

Berenza's wife must be everything and nothing, and adhere to the double-bind of modesty, irresistibly attractive but completely exclusive, neither prudish nor coy. He narcissistically declares that it takes “courage” to be his mistress, and considers “imperfect” Victoria's declaration of love “Not certain – not *enough*” (69, 75, emphasis

¹²⁴For the “man of feeling” trope, see Elfenbein, *Romantic Genius*, pp. 23-30; Andrews, ‘Men of Feeling’; Wetmore *Men of Feeling*.

original). His need to be perfectly, “*rationally* happy” (69, emphasis original) satirises the Enlightenment ideal of the companionate marriage so venerated by the likes of Radcliffe, in which lovers are equal and compatible in body, mind, and soul. For Dacre, this is a false ideal, a condescending, self-aggrandising male fantasy which demands that a woman must change to be perfect, and perfectly his, in order to be “fettered” to him (146). It is also a false ideal in that it – like middle-class, Wollstonecraftian feminism – suggests that patriarchy can be defeated through the right marriage, when in reality female suffering is caused by a misogynistic culture in which men “dehumanize women, view them as extensions of their own minds and wills, or value them only for their sexual functions.”¹²⁵ Despite what Radcliffe and Wollstonecraft might argue, there is no way for women to successfully rebel against or conform to male expectations: as Airey concludes, “The married woman and the single, the educated woman and the ignorant, the villainous woman and the virtuous – are all barrelling towards destruction in a patriarchal system that cares nothing for them.”¹²⁶

Therefore, when Berenza lets slip that “he had deemed [Victoria] unworthy to become his *wife*,” she sees through him to the “mean, calculating philosopher” and “philosophic sensualist, whose conduct towards her had been solely actuated by selfish motives” (126, 146, 134, emphasis original). For “the crime of having ever dared to view her in an inferior light,” Victoria uses “[a]rtifice on her side, and natural self-love on his” to convince him to marry her (127, 79). His hypocrisy leads to her triumph, assuming that she is “a stranger to the turnings and windings of [her] *own* heart” while unaware that her “graceful elegant form, and animated countenance” most attract him (75, 27, emphasis original). Man is ignorant of his emotions, and woman in control, a power dynamic which the rest of the novel reinforces: Henriquez is helpless before his love for Lilla, Ardolph powerless over his emotions for Laurina, and Leonardo unable to see Megalena's corruption.¹²⁷

So when Berenza “flatter[s] himself” that he possesses Victoria's affections (80), the reader knows the opposite to be true, and Victoria “triumph[s] ... over his stern and detested pride” (127). Similarly, Megalena gains ascendancy over Leonardo, reversing

¹²⁵Airey, 'He bears no rival near the throne', p. 223.

¹²⁶Ibid, pp. 228-229.

¹²⁷A similar dynamic also occurs in the ironic role reversal which Christine Crockett calls “Medical Drag,” reversing the gendered power of medicine and exposing a masculine profession as uncanny and horrific (Crockett, 'Medical Gothic').

the violence of Antonia's "fatal beauty" as the queen of a "*fatal* empire" (115, emphasis original).¹²⁸ They are the sublime subjects of awe and admiration, while Berenza and Leonardo are beautiful, abject lovers, the narcissistic philosopher no longer "haughty" but brought down under Victoria's "dominion," ashamed "that he could ever have deemed unworthy of his honorable love ... the creature to whom he now thought himself inferior" (125). In a world and genre full of the rationalised cruelty of husbands,¹²⁹ Dacre rejects passive femininity and violent modesty, and insufficient modes of feminism, embracing the power of the sublime. After all this, the narrator's declaration of "Unhappy Berenza!" (127) is as much a statement of just revenge as one of tragic irony.

Uncanny Femininity

In contrast to her anti-heroine, Dacre presents Victoria's sexual rival and aesthetic opposite, Lilla. Victoria is commanding, ambitious, and sexual, tall, with dark eyes and hair, and an "orient tint" in her cheek (55); Lilla is small, innocent, and passive, pale and blonde, with eyes "of heavenly blue," thirteen years old and "blooming" (223, 203). She embodies Burke's beautiful woman, "the new bourgeois ideal of the 'civilized' domestic idol, the professionally feminine girl-woman" who ought to triumph over the threatening Victoria.¹³⁰ They are so opposite that only a diabolical potion from a mysticised foreigner can cause "[Victoria's] unwieldy form to be compressed into the fairy delicacy of hers, these bold masculine features assume the likeness of her baby face" (213-214). Henriquez loves Lilla's "trembling delicacy, her gentle sweetness" (194), and views Victoria "with almost absolute dislike" and "instinctive horror," "so completely ... the reverse of that pure and delicate being, [that] he ... failed to view them as two creatures of the same class" (138, 194). Victoria is a sublime subject to whose love Henriquez "should not have yielded only, but should have gloried in" (146), while Lilla is a beloved object because she submits to him, and the sight in his bed of "those raven tresses hanging unconfined" instead of "the flaxen ringlets of the delicate Lilla" (221) drives him to suicide.

¹²⁸Lewis, *The Monk*, 318.

¹²⁹See Massé, *In the Name of Love*, p. 26.

¹³⁰Hoeveler, *Gothic Feminism*, pp. 147-148.

Naturally, Victoria despises and eventually murders Lilla, throwing her body into an abyss. Critics have interpreted this in various ways: due to her own pathologised female masculinity, or her inability to possess or imitate Lilla's normativity, destroying the personification of the “false feminine ideal.”¹³¹ But these examinations do not account for the fact that, in the repetitive emphasis on her unblemished innocence, Lilla appears as inhuman as the diabolical Zofloya. Her youth is given uncanny prominence, creating a discomfiting sense of agelessness: the novel criticises Laurina's marriage at “scarcely fifteen” (3), and Victoria regards the age difference between her and Berenza as “most unworthy” (134), yet Lilla is betrothed at thirteen, both childlike and old enough to marry.

Moreover, Lilla is contrasted at extremes with Zofloya. She is undersized, a “baby,” “minion,” “pigmy,” and “immaterial speck” (146, 196, 168); on the other end of the scale, Zofloya is enormous, “a height scarcely human,” “towering as a demi-god” (190, 164). Lilla hardly speaks before her “shrill and piercing scream” (205), while Zofloya is eloquent, his voice like “the music of the spheres” (239). Victoria's emotions are confused around both, with Lilla inspiring “the most unprovoked and the bitterest hate” and “the furor of conflicting passions” (133, 134), and Zofloya an “inexplicabl[e]” fascination (141). Vitally, Zofloya is described in other-worldly terms: his “luminous” eyes “shone with lambent fire, as a dark thunder-cloud emits the vivid flame” (239, 228), he appears and disappears when Victoria thinks of him, and moves with “the rapidity of a passing shade” (232). What begins as eroticised interest becomes a “resistless fascination,” “awful and indescribable,” until Victoria is bound to him by “magic arts” (239, 150-151, 246). Victoria believes that “the future is exposed to [his] view” (229), and in a thunderstorm, “[c]ommon objects seemed to shrink in his presence, the earth to tremble at the firmness of his step” (233).

In contrast, Lilla is described as uncorrupted, angel- or fairy-like, statuesque, with “seraph beauty,” a “sylph-like” form, and “fairy delicacy” (223, 194, 213), her “angelic countenance” “expressing a seraphic serenity of soul” so that “she might have personified ... innocence in the days of her childhood” (133). She is “a miniature semblance of the Medicean Venus,” with limbs like “sculptored [*sic*] alabaster” and a “polished” bosom, her cheek “fair and enamelled” where Victoria's is “dark and

131 Chatterjee, 'Charlotte Dacre's Nymphomaniacs and Demon Lovers', p. 87; Dunn, 'Charlotte Dacre and the Feminization of Violence', p. 314; Marshall, *Romanticism, Gender, and Violence*, pp. 77-78.

animated” (223, 203, 221). Compared to Victoria's determined human walk (60-61) and Zofloya's teleportation, Lilla flies and bounds, like “the beauteous and timid spirit of the solitude” or “an aerial spirit” (225, 168). Henriquez's obsession with her even bears some of the uncanny marks of Victoria's for Zofloya: “his soul was enslaved,” and he “ador[es]” and “idoliz[es]” her to the point of “madness” (194, 168). Lilla is also less easily annihilated than expected. Her hair covers her “in pure unaltered modesty” (223) even in extreme circumstances, the classical, domestic ideal of the demure, unchanging body now uncanny and inhuman compared to Victoria's mutable mortality.¹³² Her murder scene is full of delays, and afterwards Victoria fears that “the mangled form of Lilla, risen from the stream, should be pursuing her,” the “lovely form, bounding from crag to crag” (226). She is the “beautiful, unconquerable Lilla” (224), incorruptible as marble, but her deathlessness, like Zofloya's, is obscured by conventionality. He transforms into a demon, she into a ghostly spirit, but hints of their true natures are disguised, Zofloya's by supernaturalism, racism, and campy Orientalism,¹³³ and Lilla's by the cultural ideal of femininity as pale and passive.

Cynthia Murillo is the rare critic to have identified Lilla's uncanny haunting as parallel to Zofloya, reading both as doppelgängers, monstrous Others haunting the protagonist. Both attractive and repulsive, Zofloya facilitates Victoria's “dark” desires, while Lilla is her spectral double, the version of herself bound by patriarchy, both unachievable ideal and horrible reflection.¹³⁴ This supernaturalism coalesces into a biting, gothicised critique by Dacre of normative femininity, raged against not merely as Victoria's opposite, but as impossible and stifling. Moreover I argue that, as twin doppelgängers, Zofloya and Lilla embody emotional, sexual bonds which transgress acceptable British, bourgeois, female desire.

Slavery and Orientalism

The uncanny and supernatural lend a particularly gothic thrill to the undertones of inter-racial sex in the relationship between Victoria and Zofloya,¹³⁵ in a novel which both supports and defies English tropes and assumptions of blackness. As James Walvin

¹³²See Beauvais, 'Domesticity and the Female Demon', pp. 9-10.

¹³³See Cass, 'Milton's Satan and Dacre's Zofloya', p. 71.

¹³⁴Murillo, 'Haunted Spaces and Powerful Places', pp. 77, 81-87.

¹³⁵See Mellor, 'Interracial Sexual Desire', pp. 169-173; Nayar, 'The Interracial Sublime', pp. 235-254.

examines, the late eighteenth century saw increasing anxiety in England over black immigration and settlement, with a fixation on the social consequences of sex, marriage, and reproduction between white (often working class) women and black men. It was also a period in which black people's humanity was under debate: *Zofloya* was published the year before the Slave Trade Act of 1807 prohibited the trade in the British Empire (though not slave labour itself), and despite abolition movements and the black population's efforts, "English legislation, English common law and the Crown, had assisted and agreed to the ultimate dehumanization of the African" in the normalisation of, and economic reliance on, slavery.¹³⁶ Enlightenment and Romantic constructions of the British or European subject were founded on the dehumanisation of colonial and racial Others.¹³⁷

As the "dark abettor" of Victoria's crimes (177), Zofloya is an obvious villain, potentially reifying British racism, but this process is complicated by the novel's relationship to villainy itself. To the narrator, Satan is "the arch enemy" who "ever waits to take advantage of the failings of mankind" (268), but by 1806, Satan (especially via *Paradise Lost*) was often conceived of by radical and Romantic writers as humanised, sublime, and even heroic, while waning literal belief in the Devil (especially among the literate middle and upper classes) invited his desacrilisation and deployment as a political and artistic figure.¹³⁸ Gothic and Romantic writers transplanted and selectively reinterpreted (Milton's) Satan to "mythicize the human struggle against various forms of oppression and limitation," examining questions of free will, self-determination, and selfhood;¹³⁹ though as Glen Brewster argues, this was rarely a straightforward process, with Milton's already ambivalent representation being re-examined to no clear moral conclusion.¹⁴⁰ Especially for female writers, this was often a construction of subjectivity against the traditional victimised, sexualised struggle of Eve, claiming "a vision of outcast female genius, hurled from the celestial sphere for having claimed equality."¹⁴¹ In this sense, Zofloya as Satan is more hero than villain, unjustified in his violence but with the sublime apotheosis of subjectivity, shared by Victoria. His beauty is stripped away to "a figure fierce, gigantic, and hideous to behold" (265-266) but all-powerful, a

¹³⁶Walvin, *Black and White*, pp. 47-55, 40.

¹³⁷See Yancy, 'Colonial Gazing', p. 3; Makdisi, 'Romantic Cultural Imperialism', p. 603.

¹³⁸Schock, *Romantic Satanism*, pp. 1-6.

¹³⁹Ibid, pp. 31, 36.

¹⁴⁰See Brewster, 'Monstrous Philosophy'.

¹⁴¹Craciun, 'Romantic Satanism', p. 700.

vicarious victory in which self-control and submission are unnecessary, and Zofloya/Satan(/Victoria) represent a rebellious expansion of human consciousness and desire.¹⁴²

Written against a backdrop of slave rebellion, then, Zofloya's disloyalty and violence towards his masters "evokes a specter more terrifying than fiction, the clear and present risk of slave revolt,"¹⁴³ but it is not necessarily an undeserved retribution. Sara Schotland examines the fear evoked by this spectre, but Dacre also emphasises the sublimity of black violence, illustrating that Britain's arrogance towards, and abuse of, its colonies and slaves will backfire, and spectacularising the "terrifying potential" of the slave's revenge.¹⁴⁴ Similarly, as Anne Mellor examines, by hyperbolising fears of relations between white women and black men, and the anxious myth of black male sexual prowess, Dacre supernaturalises the "horrificed disgust" usually expressed towards contemporary interracial relationships, making gothic and sublime Victoria's attraction to a black servant who repeatedly describes himself as Victoria's "slave" but later shows "more the condescension of a superior than the devotion of a lover" (153, 160, 246).¹⁴⁵

Dacre also gives Zofloya remarkable agency, reversing abolitionist rhetoric which dwelt on black suffering and disempowerment. The conventional figure of the "Dying Negro" insisted that "Africans are always victims, are always rendered the passive recipients of torment," with death the only form of rebellion, and justice against white slave-owners "better carried out by hurricanes and volcanoes, than by armed African insurgents."¹⁴⁶ In these texts, the (almost always male) African slave is merely a call to action, "the occasion for sympathetic tears and righteous indignation" from the white British public, never saved or the subject of his own freedom.¹⁴⁷ But as both Schotland and Kim Ian Michasiw point out, by casting her rebellious West African slave as the more outdated figure of the Moor, Dacre allowed herself the "freedom to escape the convention of the powerless Negro and instead to fashion a terrifying, gigantic and

¹⁴²Schock, *Romantic Satanism*, p. 39.

¹⁴³Schotland, 'The Slave's Revenge', pp. 123-125. Schotland cites rebellions in Jamaica (1795-1796), Granada (1795), Cuba (1802, 1805), North America (Gabriel, Sanch, 1800-1802), and especially Saint-Domingue (1791-1795) as influences on Dacre's writing.

¹⁴⁴Ibid, p. 126; see also Davison, 'Getting Their Knickers in a Twist', p. 39.

¹⁴⁵Mellor, 'Interracial Sexual Desire', p. 170; see also Walvin, *Black and White*, p. 53.

¹⁴⁶Michasiw, 'Charlotte Dacre's Postcolonial Moor', p. 38.

¹⁴⁷Ibid, p. 39.

ultra-potent threat.”¹⁴⁸ As the conquered internal Other of Europe, the Moor could inhabit “numerous qualities that ... even the most committed of anti-slavery activists, would have denied to Africans,” and “[negate] any number that they would have asserted.”¹⁴⁹ Zofloya is polite but solitary, beautiful, dispassionate, intelligent, and refined by his Moorish heritage and Spanish cultivation, instead of prone to pathos, vengeance, indolence, and debauchery.¹⁵⁰ His “elegant person” is sometimes – but not always – qualified with “though [he is] a Moor,” his “countenance, spite of its colour, endowed with the finest possible expression” (138, 141, 145), contradicting the condescension of the reviewer who, noting Victoria's infatuation with “a Moor [who] appeared to her a very fine fellow,”¹⁵¹ suggests that, by their standards, such a thing seemed ridiculous.

However, this Moorish identification also complicates a mapping of British fears of black slaves onto the text. Zofloya the dominating figure is equally expressive of the fear of Middle-Eastern and Muslim tyranny, revealing the impact of imperial expansion into Asia on British subjectivity. His class and religion are emphasised as much as his colour, dwelling on pearls and turbans, “an inferior and an infidel” (149) who fits a particular type of the European-written Moor “of noble birth” but reduced to a servant by “the chance of war” (141). Through texts like *The Arabian Nights* (first published in English around 1706-1721), Britons primarily understood only a pseudo-Orient – Arabia and Islam repeatedly filtered but perceived as authentic – against which British, Christian modernity defined itself,¹⁵² and London stages had long represented black Muslim men with varying degrees of agency, dignity, pathos, and violence.¹⁵³ Dacre complicates these tropes and their racial significations, recasting the noble Venetian Moor of William Shakespeare's *Othello* as the evil Venetian Victoria, and her scheming white ensign as the Moorish servant. Later dramas such as Edward Young's *The Revenge* (published 1721 and performed well into the nineteenth century) are also in play, tragedies of Moorish slaves' vengeance on European generals, as with Young's protagonist Zanga. Although Zanga and Zofloya are both enslaved Moorish noblemen

148Schotland, 'The Slave's Revenge', p. 128.

149Michasiw, 'Charlotte Dacre's Postcolonial Moor', p. 45.

150Ibid, pp. 45-46. As Michasiw points out, however, Zofloya's very introduction is a eulogy, the original Zofloya appearing in the novel with his own death, “an art in which ... the literary negro specialized” (p. 46). This may attest to Dacre's complacency, or irony.

151'ART. X.', p. 633.

152Nussbaum, 'Slavery, Blackness and Islam', p. 159.

153See Parker, 'The Moor's Progress', pp. 172-195.

who enable murder, Zofloya only aids Victoria's thirst for violence, complicating the racial (and gendered) dynamics of vengeance. Young's play opens on Zanga enjoying the "horrors" of sublime nature – "Rage on, ye Winds, burst Clouds, and Waters roar! / You ... suit the gloomy Habit of my Soul"¹⁵⁴ – but it is Victoria, not Zofloya, who does the same, "the wild gloom" of forests and mountains "[suited] the dark and ferocious passions of her soul" (177). Furthermore, Zanga's vengeance focuses on being struck by Alonzo, while Satan-Zofloya is "the sworn enemy of all created by nature" (267), and Dacre echoes Young's climactic question/answer dynamic with much more power:

ZANGA: Look on me. Who am I? I know, thou say'st,
The *Moor*; a Slave, an abject, beaten Slave,
... Has six Years cruel Bondage
Extinguish'd Majesty so far, that nought
Shines here, ... ?¹⁵⁵

Behold me as I am ... SATAN! [267]

Dacre makes black, Muslim villainy sublime and heroic, supernaturalising the stage Moor via *The Arabian Nights'* association between blackness and magic,¹⁵⁶ and literalising his demonic associations: while Othello futilely "looks down towards [Iago's] feet" for cloven hooves,¹⁵⁷ Zofloya really is the devil.

Further complicating matters, Victoria is not English, but insistently Italian and Venetian.¹⁵⁸ The novel opens by describing Venetians as "a proud, strict, and fastidious people," "Sanguinary and violent by nature, climate, habit, and education" (5-6). Leonardo is goaded as "not half a Venetian!" (123); Megalena Strozzi – with her famous Renaissance Florentine surname – is consistently defined as "the Florentine" or "fair Florentine" (104); and Signora di Modena is satirised as a hypocritical Italian Catholic, a "worthy and pious catholic" who takes irreligious joy in punishing Victoria (47). With Victoria already an ethnic Other, her affair with Zofloya cannot be said to precisely map British fears of white women's assault/contamination by, or preference for, black men, and this unresolved tension between discourses of European ethnic types, and colonial

¹⁵⁴Young, *The Revenge*, p. 1.

¹⁵⁵Ibid, p. 60, emphasis original.

¹⁵⁶Nussbaum, 'Slavery, Blackness and Islam', p. 161.

¹⁵⁷Shakespeare, *Othello*, 5.2.284.

¹⁵⁸For a more complex discussion of how British writers utilised Italian/Spanish settings and stereotypes, see chapter 1; Demata, 'Italy and the Gothic'; Sage, 'Black Venice'; Gabilondo, 'Geo-Bio-Politics of the Gothic'.

racial ones, is indicative of the “transitional state of racial thought at the turn of the nineteenth century” identified by Eugenia DeLamotte.¹⁵⁹ The dark, Italian Otherness of Victoria, and the class and religion which initially mark Zofloya, gradually give way in the novel to an obsession with race, the colour of Zofloya's skin “increasingly salient, increasingly exoticized and eroticized, and increasingly an index both of his evil and Victoria's.”¹⁶⁰ These unstable markers and meanings fit with “the novel's historical position at a time of flux in conceptions of race,” indicating a “fundamental political and epistemic shift” between Enlightenment and Romantic modes of thought, and an Otherness based on ethnic/national, and evolutionary/racial, definitions.¹⁶¹

Dacre also does not take her radicalism to its logical endpoint. As Stephanie Burley argues, although the text consistently utilises and lauds knowledge as rebellion (especially by women against men), the black slave or imperial victim is not similarly allowed to talk back to the implicitly white British audience. As Satan inhabiting a body, Zofloya the ex-slave's experiences are not explored, and though he “would be an ideal site of rebellious knowledge,” his “body must be emptied out, transformed from a *man* into a fascinating *thing* so that Satan can use it as a disguise to entrap Victoria.”¹⁶² Zofloya/Satan's rebellion is justified, cathartic, and successful, but filtered through Satanism and Orientalism, conflating his body, desirability, and diabolism, and indulging in fantasy, without truly confronting readers' bigotry. The potential knowledge of the real (dead) Zofloya is the “final limit placed on the insurrectionary possibilities of subjugated knowledge,” and his “epistemological standpoint – what he knows about slavery, seduction, power, and the capitalist transformation of black people into fetishized things – is what this work *cannot* articulate, to itself or to its audience.”¹⁶³

So: is *Zofloya* an uncritical engagement with racial stereotypes to further exoticise a narrative, or a knowing engagement which utilises Orientalist trappings as signposts to Zofloya's otherworldly nature? Or is this binary missing the point? Like Lewis and his anti-Revolutionary, anti-homophobic mob, Dacre both has her cake and eats it. At the same time, like Matilda, the question of whether Zofloya is read as himself or Satan, exoticised because black or diabolical, is irrelevant. Until the final few

¹⁵⁹DeLamotte, 'White Terror, Black Dreams', p. 22.

¹⁶⁰Ibid, p. 23.

¹⁶¹Ibid, p. 24; see also Makdisi, *Romantic Imperialism*, pp. 113-116.

¹⁶²Burley, 'The Death of Zofloya', pp. 204-205, emphasis original.

¹⁶³Ibid, pp. 205-206, emphasis original.

pages, he is a powerful, exotic, magical Moor whose darkness, menial status, and un-Christian beliefs are emphasised, no matter how ironically, and whose reveal as Satan “hardly serve[s] to undo the novel's long work of establishing what we thought was the 'real' Moor's darkness as an index of evil.”¹⁶⁴ If Dacre's text “wrests Africans out of the primitive realm where both pro-slavery and abolitionist texts preferred to lodge them,” restoring dignity, power, culture, and agency to a figure usually defined by primitivism and pathos, it is at the risk of another mode of damnation, replacing the “Dying Negro” with the immoral revenger.¹⁶⁵ Nevertheless, Victoria's European, female desire for a black man is unquestionably transgressive, and though Dacre's utilisation of racial, ethnic, and national rhetorics are complex and inconclusive, her primary impulse seems to be the reversal of dynamics of power, granting violent subjectivity to women and black men.

Tribadism, Excess, and Loss

If Victoria's desire for Zofloya is inexplicit, her parallel desire for Lilla is further coded. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick reads the gothic as a genre which “richly thematizes male paranoia,” concerned with doubles and opposites, where the “primal human essence of originary truth” is in a violent, homoerotic pursuit and rape between two men.¹⁶⁶ She draws on triangular relationships and erotic male-male rivalries over the exchange of women – that “the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved” – and uncovers their gendered power balances and homoeroticism in light of “the radically disrupted continuum, in our society, between sexual and nonsexual male bonds.”¹⁶⁷ Dacre touches on this formulation in Berenza's narcissistic insistence that “*my mistress should be admired by men; they must envy me in their hearts the possession of her*” (75, emphasis original), explicitly drawing focus from his relationship with Victoria to how she affects his relationships with other men. More prominently, however, we also see the dynamic translated to a female-female-male erotic triangle in the rivalry between Victoria and

164DeLamotte, 'White Terror, Black Dreams', p. 23; see also Cass, 'Milton's Satan and Dacre's Zofloya', p. 68; Michasiw, 'Charlotte Dacre's Postcolonial Moor', p. 49.

165Michasiw, 'Charlotte Dacre's Postcolonial Moor', pp. 51-52; see also Nayar, 'The Interracial Sublime'.

166Sedgwick, *Between Men*, p. 97; Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, pp. ix-x.

167Sedgwick, *Between Men*, pp. 21, 26.

Lilla over Henriquez, containing a literal/figural female chase/rape. As the perfect, innocent child-woman, Lilla is disallowed from desire, but as critics have noted, Victoria's fixation, though "articulated as a desire for Henriquez and a hatred of Lilla," plays out as obsessive, confrontational desire for Lilla.¹⁶⁸

For example, though we know almost nothing about Henriquez's appearance, Lilla's body (like Zofloya's) is extensively described, while Victoria's condescending epithets for Lilla (orphan, child, minion, puppet, speck, wretch) fail to effect her lack of importance. Her obsession with Henriquez is matched by her "immediate hatred" for Lilla (132), her dreams of possessing him necessarily including Lilla's destruction (135-136), and expressions of love for him are frequently accompanied by rage towards Lilla: "To see him, and to see him bestowing upon the envied Lilla marks of the tenderest attachment, made her wild with the furor of conflicting passions" (134). Henriquez functions as the object of exchange between the two women, and Lilla as *doppelgänger* haunts Victoria in similarly erotic ways to Sedgwick's male-male hauntings. Furthermore, Lilla's construction as a "passionless woman" raises in Victoria the spectre of Lilla's own opposite, a specific understanding of the same-sex attracted woman which emerged to "take on the burden of all the female sexual feelings that [were] now seen as monstrous in women."¹⁶⁹

The hyperbole of the clifftop confrontation, then, rises from a frustrated same-sex desire which cannot be expressed in any way other than violence, as Victoria finally confronts the object of her desire rather than triangulating it through a man. Victoria is maddened by "frantic rage," "keen disappointment," and "terrible despair," while Lilla's "seraph beauty ... excited her jealousy and renewed her rage," the scene dwelling on bodily details: "pale cheek," "snowy arm," "flaxen tresses," "thin hands"(222-223).¹⁷⁰ The scene is constantly delayed, as if Victoria cannot bring herself to commit the act: she holds Lilla over the cliff, repeatedly threatens to push her over, and quibbles over the manner of her death. Victoria's first blow only wounds Lilla's hand, Lilla flees and clings to a tree, Victoria tries to shake her down, then she finally stabs her "in the

¹⁶⁸Haggerty, 'Mothers and Other Lovers', p. 168.

¹⁶⁹O'Driscoll, 'The Lesbian and the Passionless Woman', p. 108; see also Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*, p. 218.

¹⁷⁰Again, there is no comparable description of Henriquez's, or even Berenza's, body in Victoria's seduction of them, nor in Henriquez's suicide. This might be attributable to a cultural preoccupation with women's appearance but men's agency, but it is also notable as part of Victoria's physical obsession.

bosom, in the shoulder, and other parts,” continuing after she sinks then throwing her off the cliff and watching her fall (226). This frantic, extended confrontation overflows with imagery of sexual violence and symbolic rape, with Lilla fetishised into her constituent, bloodstained parts, and the passionate, penetrative violence of stabbing as at the climax of *The Monk*, especially in the elusive “other parts.” If Victoria's desire for Zofloya “remains unconsummated, hence all-consuming,” her death at his hands a figural erotic consummation,¹⁷¹ the same could be said of her all-consuming hatred/desire for Lilla, also consummated in death.

Dacre further eroticises the relationship between Lilla and Victoria by reference to the stage tragedies already brought to mind by their starring Moors. Lilla's delaying excuses and pleas echo Desdemona in *Othello*: “O banish me, my lord, but kill me not! ... Kill me tomorrow, let me live to-night! ... But half an hour? But while I say one prayer?”¹⁷² Dacre again adjusts the formula, with the dark, masculine Victoria unrepentantly fulfilling the role of Othello murdering his white wife, likening them to a married couple and recasting Othello's jealousy of rivalry as Victoria's in it. *The Revenge* also echoes here, as Victoria/Alonzo – aided by Zofloya/Zanga – murders her wife in a Lilla/Leonora who goes willingly, Leonora by stabbing herself, and Lilla by inviting Victoria to “Take then my life” (226).

Such violent queerness attests that the female homosocial continuum is and was not as “relatively smooth and palpable” as Sedgwick claims.¹⁷³ Women's lives and relationships in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were less public, less powerful, and therefore less policed than men's, but they still involved a “coercive double bind” of homophobia.¹⁷⁴ Like the ideological fissure between idealised male friendship and publicly condemned sodomy, representations of women's desire existed “on the unstable boundary between *philia* and *eros*, ” with increasing pressure placed on women's sexuality as the basis of white, English, bourgeois virtue.¹⁷⁵ Under growing scrutiny, the virtuous Englishwoman was increasingly haunted by her sexual Other – the homosexual (or sapphic) friend, often linked to national/racial/colonial Others such as French, Turkish, African, or Indian women – and by the late eighteenth century, there

¹⁷¹Mellor, 'Interracial Sexual Desire', p. 173.

¹⁷²Shakespeare, *Othello*, 5.2.80-84.

¹⁷³Sedgwick, *Between Men*, p. 23; compare Robb, *Strangers*, pp. 115-119; see also Smith, *Lesbian Panic*, which addresses disruptions in the female homosocial continuum in twentieth century texts.

¹⁷⁴Sedgwick, *Between Men*, p. 89.

¹⁷⁵Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*, pp. 18-19.

was a fine but distinct cultural line between the “female friend” and the “female fiend.”¹⁷⁶

Enlightenment understandings of female intimacy, homosociality, and homosexuality varied between medical, philosophical, and fiction writers, but a common theme, as with sodomy, was paradox. The sodomite was bestial but super-civilised, noticeably effeminate but hiding in plain sight, passive but tyrannical, foreign but domestic, the unnameable crime made into public spectacle.¹⁷⁷ Meanwhile, female homosexuality was unthinkable, but intentionally kept out of the press to avoid women getting ideas, while also a major theme in medical writing. As with modesty, it was better to be ignorant/innocent, but a woman was supposed to recognise any threat. Writers could not decide whether female homosexuality caused or was caused by abnormal anatomy (inverted vaginas, or enlarged clitorises or labia), or corrupt knowledge (inherited from servants or older women, traceable to Sappho), or overstimulation due to women's inherent sexual intemperance (temporarily wrongly directed).¹⁷⁸ In a “paradoxical state of knowledge,” British writers alluded to female homosexuality in innuendo, effect, and metaphors of pollution, unnaturalness, sin, and criminality, but evaded explicitness, so that representations of female homoeroticism were “governed by tensions between visibility and invisibility, possibility and impossibility, significance and insignificance.”¹⁷⁹ Importantly, female homosociality was most harshly condemned when it impinged on the masculine, patriarchal order: anatomical excess, penetration, the use of a dildo – and, by the nineteenth century, outward signs such as exclusive interest in women, or masculine clothing or behaviour – crossed the line from innocent and acceptable, into monstrosity. Female homoeroticism which remained impotent, unsatisfying, and non-penetrative could be dismissed or ignored, but women seen to be usurping the privileges and prerogatives of men sparked anxiety, outrage, pathologisation, and prosecution.¹⁸⁰

176Moore, *Dangerous Intimacies*, pp. 4-12; see also O'Driscoll, 'The Lesbian and the Passionless Woman'.

177McFarlane, *The Sodomite in Fiction and Satire*, p. 59.

178Donoghue, *Passions Between Women*, pp. 8, 25-36, 139, 197, 254-256; Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*, pp. 188-215, 321; Elfenbein, *Romantic Genius*, p. 25.

179Donoghue, *Passions Between Women*, pp. 16, 6; Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*, p. 33; see also Jagose, *Inconsequence*.

180Trumbach, 'London's Sapphists', pp. 129-130; Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*, pp. 180-182; Donoghue, *Passions Between Women*, pp. 59-61. Although female homosexual practices were not illegal in Britain, women were accused of fraud, theft, and bigamy, and even a chaste, feminine friend's desire could be considered untenable due to a failure to contribute to the patriarchal structures

Vilification focused on the figures of the hermaphrodite and tribade. The first – often pathologised as the “macroclitoride” by the late eighteenth century – was a physically abnormal woman, a biological category to explain same-sex behaviour.¹⁸¹ As per Lacquer's constructions, she was unusual in the one-sex model (physically reaching closer to the perfection of maleness), and monstrous in the two-sex model (an aberration from a biological norm), with abnormal or ambiguous genitalia either caused by, or the cause of, excess heat, excess sexual desire, masturbation, or homosexual desire or activity.¹⁸² The tribade – from the Greek for “to rub” – was a homosexually active woman, sometimes interchangeable with the hermaphrodite, and often but not always assumed to have enlarged genitalia for friction or penetration. These figures and their meanings were shifting and inconclusive, scientific or vitriolic, and did not always refer to the same desires, bodies, or acts; but what ties together most concepts of such transgressive female sexuality is a discourse of excess, in anatomy, activity, desire, and/or behaviour. From the seventeenth century, homoerotic bonds were understood as women loving “more than [they] ought to,” with an “excess of amity,” or “beyond what *Nature* design'd,” while one woman noted in 1795 that it was “common to suspect Impossibilities” (note the paradoxical knowledge) “whenever two Ladies live too much together.”¹⁸³

These discourses are legible in *Zofloya*. As a non-normative woman, Victoria's primary faults are in her excessive masculinity, violence, and, I argue, homosocial bonds. Some of her most important and intense relationships are with other women: her mother Laurina, her rival Megalena, and her doppelgänger/rival/lover Lilla. She is thematically linked to the tribade by her excessive passions, ambition, and violence, and is dark, Italian, and connected to a Moor, like the foreign women to whom hermaphroditism and tribadism were often credited. Her body is physically large, and

of the home, family, and transmission of property/wealth. By definition, non-white and lower-class women with no property or title to convey were already considered unvirtuous, and were vilified as the source of miscegenation or female homosexual knowledge/anatomy (see Traub, p. 181; Donoghue, pp. 139-141; Walvin, *Black and White*, pp. 52-55).

181 Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, p. 59; see also Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*, p. 278; Donoghue, *Passions Between Women*, pp. 49-53.

182 Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, pp. 59-60; see also Lacquer, *Making Sex*; Donoghue, *Passions Between Women*, p. 53; Trumbach, 'London's Sapphists', pp. 117-121; Braunschneider, 'The macroclitoride, the tribade, and the woman'.

183 Margaret Cavendish, *The Convent of Pleasure* (1668), and Delarivier Manley, *The New Atlantis* (1709); quoted in Lanser, *The Sexuality of History*, p. 94, emphasis original; Hester Lynch Thrale Piozzi, *Thraliana: The Diary of Mrs. Hester Lynch Thrale (Later Mrs. Piozzi), 1776-1809*, quoted in Donoghue, *Passions Between Women*, p. 147.

she is masculine in features and behaviour, not just unfeminine but falling into the category of the violent, “unsexed” woman, “notfemale,” neither woman, man, nor utopically androgynous.¹⁸⁴ She is associated with the supernatural and demonic, finding power, cohesion, identity, and freedom through her wilful artifices and transformations – feared as sources of nymphomania and homosexuality¹⁸⁵ – and is compared to the “antelope,” “slumbering lion,” “scorpion,” “untameable hyæna,” “basilisk,” even “the terrible volcano, pregnant even in its beauty with destruction” (239, 76, 28, 31, 49, 150, 143). Similarly, by the late eighteenth century, violent, hermaphroditic, or tribadic women were often considered unsexed or animalistic, “violat[ing] the category of woman,” situated not opposite but outside the binary altogether.¹⁸⁶

Further, while most romantic and sexual relationships in the novel are linked to violence, the intensity of Victoria and Lilla's relationship is particularly expressive of an erotics of violence and loss. George Haggerty identifies this with the rejection of the mother's bond, and Nowell Marshall with Victoria's failure of normative femininity,¹⁸⁷ but I argue that it is at least as expressive of the always already lost nature of female homosexual bonds, denied and excluded from the cultural narrative. The connection between queerness and gothic texts often resides in their expressions of excess, lack, transgression, and invisibility, mimicking and haunting the heterosexual self as an ambivalent, spectral Other;¹⁸⁸ and this haunting reflects what Valerie Traub calls the “homoerotic lament,” through which Victoria's frustration can be understood: the melancholy response to the cultural denial of queer modes of being before ever being allowed existence.¹⁸⁹ Zofloya may be all-powerful, “but thou canst not – no, thou canst not charm love for *me* into the heart that loves another” (198, emphasis original). The repetition and emphasis here, and the momentary acknowledgement that Victoria has already lost the battle of desire, seem to admit an erotic loss, with desire for Lilla even

184Craciun, 'I hasten to be disembodied', p. 79; see also Craciun, *Fatal Women of Romanticism*, pp. 110-111.

185Craciun, “‘I hasten to be disembodied’”, pp. 80-83.

186Craciun, *Fatal Women of Romanticism*, pp. 11, 142; Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, p. 61. Hyenas themselves were often thought to be hermaphroditic (Lacquer, *Making Sex*, p. 19); and compare the cultural connection made between female prostitutes – lower-class, overly-sexed – and the unfeminine/ungendered woman, with whom Victoria may be linked by her implied hypersexuality (Nussbaum, *Torrid Zones*, pp. 99-101).

187Haggerty, 'Mothers and Other Lovers', pp. 168-169; Marshall, *Romanticism, Gender and Violence*, pp. 73, 78.

188Palmer, *The Queer Uncanny*, pp. 7-8; see also Rigby, 'Uncanny Recognition', pp. 46-57.

189Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*, pp. 174, 276-325.

more unachievable than the one she explicitly pursues. This is again visible in Victoria's desire to be *like* Lilla: "Ah! would ... would that this unwieldy form be compressed into the fairy delicacy of hers, these bold masculine features assume the likeness of her baby face! – Ah! what would I not submit to..." (213-214). Repetition and juxtaposition acknowledge an irrecoverable erotic as well as physical conjunction, the success of which will be short-lived and fatal. Female-female sex was often thought to be impotent and unfulfilling,¹⁹⁰ and Victoria is frustrated throughout the novel, her buried desires remaining unsatisfied. She may have extraordinary power over others' lives, but she is also incapable of seducing Henriquez, resisting Zofloya, or forcing Lilla into the same degeneration as herself, to say nothing of her lack of consummation with Lilla or Zofloya, with whom sexual fulfilment is synonymous with submission and death.

The sheer disgust with which Henriquez views Victoria also speaks to this erotics of violence and loss, as well as his instinctive understanding of the threat she represents, recognising her violence and lust but also her masculine and queer transgressions. Her forwardness makes "disgust [rise] in his soul," he considers her presence "tainted," and he flees from her embrace, declaring that "death *will* be the consequence" should she claim him (201, 212, emphasis original):

... I could never have returned your flattering partiality. – I feel that we are dissimilar in every respect; nay, more, – whether from a fault of my nature I know not – but I feel likewise, that I could sooner poignard [*sic*] myself, ... than bring myself to entertain for *you* the slightest sentiments of tenderness! [211-212, emphasis original]

But the fault is not in Henriquez's nature, but Victoria's. After all, death *is* the consequence of their sexual union. But his repulsion also speaks to a deeper fear of her sexuality which hints at an underlying cause beyond the threat of adultery.

Sodomy and the Destruction of the Family

A large part of Victoria's violence is focused, directly or indirectly, at marriage and the family, paralleling that other queer social destroyer, the sodomite. As we have seen, the sodomite, the tribade, and Victoria are all plagued by similar paradoxes; but

¹⁹⁰Ibid, pp. 174-181, 292-295; Donoghue, *Passions Between Women*, pp. 184, 198; see also Lanser, *The Sexuality of History*, p. 238.

beyond this, the sodomite was also a scapegoat for social disorder, an enemy to the nation, economy, and family.¹⁹¹ He first haunts *Zofloya* as Count Ardolph, who destroys not a specific woman, but the family itself, taking “higher and more destructive aim” (7) at Laurina's husband:

[His] was the savage delight to intercept the happiness of wedded love – 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, the noblest affections of the heart, and to glory and to exult in the wide-spreading havoc he had caused. [7]

Handsome, charming, and fascinating, Ardolph disrupts heteronormativity, ruining husbands and children as well as wives, causing destruction, and interrupting “wedded love.” Paradoxically (appropriately), in his pride and misogyny, he quickly tires of these conquests and seeks out new “crime” and “diabolical triumph,” yearning to “disfigure the beautiful fabric of a family's happiness, and to scatter around him misery and devastation” (7, 9). Ardolph's desires track smoothly from the expected target, “the young, the ardent, and self-confident Victoria,” to “her lovely and attractive mother,” then to the true object of his attention, “his hospitable host,” specifically targeting Loredani's wife as a stand-in for the man himself: “It was *his* honour and *his* happiness that he sought to blight – it was *his* offspring whom he sought to destroy and disgrace – it was *his Wife* whom he sought to seduce!” (9, emphasis original).

Traitor, monster, wife-beater, and devil, Ardolph – like the stereotypical sodomite – is overly civilised and luxurious, misogynistic, brutal, tyrannical, and barely human, destroying the happy, heteronormative marriage and family supposed to be the seat of bourgeois virtue. When Leonardo kills him, it parallels Lilla's death: each killed by a raging Loredani sibling in a homoerotic chase/rape, Lilla's “other parts” become “unnumbered [stabs] in different parts of his body” (250), their contrasts exaggerating their differences – virtue/depravity, passivity/violence, aerial/physical, dispassionate/seducing – and linking them in the novel's figurations of queerness, violence, and death. Ardolph is a threat to order itself, like any non-normative embodiment of gender and sexuality, unnatural “not because they violated natural heterosexuality but because they played out – literally embodied – radical, culturally

191McFarlane, *The Sodomite in Fiction and Satire*, pp. 25-26, 33-60, 68, 78-80, 106-107.

unacceptable reversals of power and prestige.”¹⁹²

Despite Victoria's wishes to “be situated *like* that unhappy mother” (28, emphasis original), then, in action and character she is more like the seducing, sodomitical Ardolph than the tragically seduced Laurina. (If anything, it is Leonardo who follows their mother, seduced by the vicious, insatiable Megalena into a life of crime.) Like Victoria, Ardolph is ruined by “inclinations naturally vicious, and the contamination of bad example,” and seeks power over others, declaring that “we must not bend to circumstances, we must make them subservient to us” (7, 34). Both violate the rules of hospitality (pursuing the host's wife and the husband's brother and guest), murder without hesitation, and fall victim to their own desires, with Ardolph becoming “enslaved” to Laurina, “no longer master of his violent emotions” (10).

Under this framework, we can read Victoria's pursuit of Henriquez as, like Ardolph, truly aiming to destroy a happy marriage. She hates Lilla “because she was dear, because she was beloved” (131-132), and finds her domestic, heterosexual bond painful. She despises her own marriage, “enslaved” and “fettered, by the hated name of wife” (146), and seeks not only consummation with Henriquez, but the destruction of his marriage and family. In dreams, it is the promise that “the marriage shall *not be!*” which makes her agree to Zofloya's demands, and bringing horror and violence into the church meant to sanctify heteropatriarchal marriage inspires “a sensation of pleasure” and “Exultation” (135-137, emphasis original). Henriquez's lament that his brother will never join in his happiness as “the father of a blooming progeny, the delighted husband of a beauteous wife,” is followed by a warning that such “fairy visions of love and happiness were never, never to be realised, but to end ... in reduplicated horror and despair” (201), and the reader knows that this will be by Victoria's actions, destroying insubstantial dreams of marriage, family, and lineage, and the normative order they represent. Such heightened political and social implications of violence and excess mirror the contemporary language of anti-sodomy, without expressing the class concerns unique to anti-sapphism, with its obsession with female servants and broken class boundaries.¹⁹³

Pramod K. Nayar identifies in *Zofloya* “the horror of a European family's dissolution due to an interracial sexual relation, invited and initiated by the European

¹⁹²Lacquer, *Making Sex*, p. 53.

¹⁹³See Lanser, *The Sexuality of History*, pp. 93-99, 103-104, 161.

woman who asserts sexual agency,” and certainly the novel represents hospitality and domesticity in crisis.¹⁹⁴ However, Nayar (and Jennifer Beauvais) fail to read the irony in Dacre's narrator, believing the novel's ostensible moral and reading it as endorsing the preservation and reassertion of normative gender roles. Instead, I believe that Dacre's implication is that the home is a patriarchal space which subjects women to tyranny and a refusal of their subjectivity, and therefore *must* be destroyed. As we have seen, she understands Massé's “discrepancy” between ideal and reality, the lie of domestic female happiness and freedom, and criticises the ineffectuality of feminist systems which laud the home as safe and sacred; as Airey argues, “Education and domestic virtue ... intellect and morality mean nothing to men who place no value on female companionship.”¹⁹⁵ Gothic literature often reveals the “nuclear family ... as an unhomely, violent site,” held together by “the familiar, the linear and the domestic [which] are revealed to be fragile constructions,”¹⁹⁶ and in this understanding, Laurina and Victoria's crimes are not impositions on a pure reality, but symptomatic of, and fighting against, the corruption, violence, and control which define it.¹⁹⁷ Berenza's selfish, restrictive expectations of companionate marriage are recognised and destroyed with Zofloya's help, in a sublime, liberating display of violence and power. No marriage survives the novel, good and evil are both destroyed, and no British, bourgeois morality endures. By glorifying this destruction through sublimity and reversed modes of villainy, Dacre encodes her anti-heroine with the same terms by which society vilified the queer cultural spectres of the hermaphrodite, tribade, and sodomite.

Conclusion

Nineteenth-century literature was used to explore new, bourgeois ideals of mixed gendered values, but in trying to stay on the “right” side of the line, they were always close to slippage, a double bind in which “the admired behavior of the man of feeling and the energetic heroine was only a hair's breadth away from the most despised

¹⁹⁴Nayar, 'The Interracial Sublime', pp. 235, 239, 243.

¹⁹⁵Airey, 'He bears no rival near the throne', p. 224; see also Nussbaum's examination of Wollstonecraftian feminism relying on the subjugation of colonial and lower-class women: if the middle-class Englishwoman was climbing to liberty “on the backs of the Egyptian, the Turk, the African slave, and the servant” (*Torrid Zones*, p. 193), Dacre might have added the Jewish to that list.

¹⁹⁶Watkiss, 'Violent households', pp. 157-158.

¹⁹⁷*Ibid*, p. 162.

behavior of the sodomite and sapphist.”¹⁹⁸ In *Zofloya*, Dacre embraces this slippage – the space between civic and civil humanism, the transitional period between dominant schools of thought – turning exploration into transgression and danger into power, and rejecting control and conservatism. It is therefore impossible to regard this text as either feminist or anti-feminist, racist or anti-racist, queer or homophobic, or “Male” or “Female Gothic.” The hyperbole with which Dacre works gives scope for not only radical plots and themes, but a complex moral and aesthetic atmosphere which refuses categorisation, and if the didactic lesson is that “Over their passions and weaknesses, mortals cannot keep a curb too strong” (267-268), the novel itself is a lesson in “how thrilling it can be to defy those curbs and give in to those passions.”¹⁹⁹ Instead of fear, Dacre meets patriarchal violence with violence, and a tyrannical resistance to authority which “just Heaven” (251) is not powerful enough to curb.

The conservative, condemnatory ending, then, does not shut down Victoria's crimes, but seems to celebrate them. If Victoria “stands a sacrifice to female desire,” her extraordinary demise “makes her achievement even more palpable,” and once (hetero)normativity is disturbed, “it is nearly impossible ... to contain the spirit of transgression to which gothic fiction has given rise.”²⁰⁰ As with *The Monk*, not all transgressions are made equal, and by attending to the levels of coding and allusion, we can identify what it may be that Dacre and/or her culture most feared or refused, namely, gendered transgressions and queer intrusions. Yet it is noteworthy that Victoria, however anti-heroic, cannot actually win: she may be allowed more scope than Emily or Agnes, but the fatal caveat is that it does not come with happiness, survival, or futurity. Dacre gives agency to non-normative figures of gender, sexual, and racial otherness, but they must end in death and “desultory frustration,”²⁰¹ sacrificial indulgences whose extravagant boundary-crossings serve to mark such boundaries.

Nevertheless, *Zofloya* is a power fantasy of the rebellious woman and revenging slave. Mary Robinson wrote in 1799 of the injured woman, who “talks of punishing the villain who has destroyed her: he smiles at the menace, and tells her, *she is*, a WOMAN,”²⁰² but Victoria defies such condescension, and achieves those punishments.

¹⁹⁸Elfenbein, *Romantic Genius*, p. 27.

¹⁹⁹Haggerty, 'The Failure of Heteronormativity', p. 142.

²⁰⁰Ibid, pp. 142, 135.

²⁰¹Haggerty, *Unnatural Affections*, p. 177.

²⁰²Mary Robinson, *A Letter to the Women of England* (1799), quoted in Craciun, *Fatal Women of Romanticism*, p. 115, emphasis original.

The novel's contradictions express a culture in flux, between dying eighteenth-century forms of thought and unsolidified nineteenth-century ones, exploring the spaces between the one- and two-sex models, civic and civil humanism, sublime and domestic femininity, criminal acts and sinful pathologies, national hierarchies of ethnicity and “scientific” ones of colour and race. It cannot be considered through binary generic or gendered rules, because, even more so than most gothic novels, its very ethos is of excess, refusing definition. If the text's values – what it defends or defends against – are rarely clear, one thing is certain: it is not satisfied with the state of things.

CHAPTER 3: SAFETY OR CONFINEMENT? CLASS, DOMESTICITY, AND THE ASYLUM IN *THE WOMAN IN WHITE* (1860)

Introduction

The mid-nineteenth century rise of “sensation” fiction brought gothic excesses of theme, character, and plot out of a semi-supernatural historical Europe and into contemporary Britain. Old terrors were “grafted ... from exotic Italian palazzos onto the bourgeois English fireside,” while authors focused on realism and interiority rather than shocking ghosts.²⁰³ What had once happened to other people over there, was now being written about people in the here and now, in recognisably domestic if dramatised settings. Wilkie Collins in particular was noted for his representations of “stern reality” over supernatural romances, his “works of science” not quite the true sensation of Mary Elizabeth Braddon: “Instead of the terrors of *Udolpho*, we were treated to the terrors of the cheerful country-house and the busy London lodgings. And there is no doubt that these were infinitely the more terrible.”²⁰⁴

Collins's *The Woman in White*, first serialised in 1859-60, is vital as both an early exemplar of sensation fiction, and for its immense popularity, influencing the genre and its reputation. It also shows how, in the shift to a contemporary setting, sensation fiction both subdued and strengthened the concerns of gothic novels. As many critics have detailed, Collins revelled in plots and themes of transgression similar to Lewis and Dacre's, and created tension through familiar gothic tropes: threats tinged with Catholic aesthetics, secrecy, subversion, female victimisation, and dominating settings updated for narratives of detection and urban environments, rather than sublime mysteries.²⁰⁵ However, where Collins's gothic precursors went to moral extremes, his own transgressors are more familiar and restrained, as his women rebel through detective work and marital resistance rather than murder. If the immediacy of sensation fiction gave its anxieties a sense of reality that demanded a less outrageous approach, those characters which *The Woman in White* deems transgressive are nevertheless

²⁰³Sanders, 'A Shock to the System', 62.

²⁰⁴[Henry James], 'Miss Braddon', *Nation* i (9 November 1865), quoted in Page, ed., *The Critical Heritage*, pp. 123-124.

²⁰⁵See Griffin, 'The Yellow Mask'; Heller, *Dead Secrets*, pp. 2-3, 8; Bernstein, 'Reading Blackwater Park'; Ascari, 'Deception and Detection'.

delineated, along lines which seem harmless compared to their gothic forebears. This contrast is clearest in an examination of the three central women of the text: Anne Catherick, Laura Fairlie, and Marian Halcombe, variously half-sisters, lookalikes, portents, and rescuers. The threateningly ill and knowledgeable Anne is pushed to the margins and dies of (almost) natural causes, and the active, masculine Marian is punished and repressed, but only through fever and the gradual decline into a domestic, even praiseworthy, role. Meanwhile, the perfect heroine Laura endures a brutish husband as per the usual conventions, but is irreversibly changed by her imprisonment in a private asylum, before being allowed to marry happily. Collins's moral thematisation is reminiscent of the ambiguous, inconclusive modes with which we are now familiar, and by examining sensation fiction as a continuation of the gothic, we gain an understanding of how the genre absorbed, rejected, and re-purposed its confusions and profusions, and identify a more gradual, less dramatic, and thereby more innocuously violent, swing against marginalised experiences.

Domestic Violence and Class

The Woman in White is primarily concerned with the marriages and identity of Laura Fairlie, a young, upper-middle-class, white woman with some very strange half-sisters. It is told through a series of documents – official records, diary entries, and recollections – presented by the hero, the lower-middle-class painter and tutor Walter Hartright, “as the story of an offence against the laws is told in Court by more than one witness.”²⁰⁶ The first thrilling incident is Walter's midnight encounter on the road to London with a strange woman dressed in white, who is later revealed to be Anne Catherick, Laura's unknown, illegitimate half-sister. Having escaped from an asylum, Anne tries to warn Laura away from her fiancé Sir Percival Glyde, an apt and aspirational match arranged by Laura's now-deceased father, though Laura herself prefers Walter. Once married and at his country estate, Glyde turns from an amiable baronet to an abusive husband, emotionally, psychologically, and physically trying to manipulate Laura into signing documents that he will not let her read, in order to immediately turn her fortune over to him. With the help of her dark, spinsterly half-

²⁰⁶Collins, *The Woman in White*, p. 5 (further references will be given in in-text parentheses for this chapter).

sister Marian Halcombe, Laura refuses, until Marian is debilitated by an illness contracted while eavesdropping, and Laura is whisked off to London and her death announced, her body swapped with Anne's.

In the search for answers, Walter reveals that Glyde is not only penniless but illegitimate, his claim to his loving but unmarried parents' estate based on his forgery of church records. Glyde perishes in a fire while trying to cover his tracks, so that the only hope of proving Laura's true identity rests with Glyde's co-conspirator/handler Count Fosco, Italian, effeminate, childless, and the controlling husband to Laura's previously feisty aunt Eleanor. Marian rescues Laura from the asylum, and it falls to Walter to track down Fosco, as Laura is rendered helpless and amnesiac by her experiences. Walter's amiable Italian friend Pesca provides information about Fosco's past with a radical Italian political society called the "Brotherhood," with which Walter blackmails him into a grandiose confession that proves Laura's identity once and for all. Walter and Laura marry and inherit the Fairlie estate, Marian becomes a devoted aunt, and Fosco is dispatched by the Brotherhood, while Glyde's estate is passed to a more legitimate heir, an unnamed East India Company officer.

It is a domestic, landed ending more worthy of a Radcliffe novel than Lewis or Dacre, but Collins prefaces it with enough suspense and horrors to match the thrills of these writers' extremes. Yet he also restricts them slightly into the new setting: however gloomy, Glyde's Blackwater Park estate has nothing on a crumbling Alpine castle, and there are no disguised demons or enchanted music, only the haunting presence of a familiar-looking escaped "lunatic." The novel's terrors lie in its interactions with contemporary social change and anxieties about divorce, domestic violence, women's freedoms, and ideal femininity, no longer presented at a remove.

With its three half-sisters as foils and contrasts – to say nothing of the predetermination of the title – *The Woman in White* is consistently preoccupied with femininity: what it is to be a woman, correctly or incorrectly, in Victorian society, in the home, and under the law. In particular, *The Woman in White*'s publication followed on the heels of the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, which shifted divorce from an ecclesiastical to a civil concern, and caused an explosion of journalism on these cases. Legally and socially, women were meant to be silent, protected extensions of the men in their lives (as daughters, then wives), but now the worst of women's domestic lives was

under scrutiny. Lisa Surridge and Marlene Tromp both examine how debates about infant custody, property rights, and domestic violence were disseminated through divorce court journalism and contemporary fiction, particularly sensation novels,²⁰⁷ as what had been assumed to be the inviolable privacy of the home and unquestionable conduct of husbands were dramatically laid open to the British public.²⁰⁸ Particularly scandalous and intriguing was the number of women – especially middle-class women – petitioning for divorce on the grounds of cruelty, exposing male marital violence as a far more prevalent issue than supposed, and a crime typical not only to lower-class, “brutish” husbands, but to the respectable middle and upper classes.²⁰⁹ Instead of pitiable, drunk working men inflicting violence upon their unfaithful wives, lords and bankers were exposed as victimising the gentle, dutiful protectors of English virtue, and divorce – initially considered protection for working-class women – was now a threat to the men of Parliament.²¹⁰

There is no doubt that *The Woman in White* is partly a response to these concerns. As Surridge's study shows, the novel's domestic disputes are no more extreme than those of real, reported trials, and are structured in much the same way: “As the judge might once have heard [the story], so the Reader shall hear it now” (5). Collins participates in contemporary social debates, “sharing in the formal properties and structure, the ideological challenges, disturbances, and social revelations of divorce court journalism,”²¹¹ while the reader is confronted with a horrifying story of domestic abuse conducted in a genteel country estate by a seemingly-respectable gentleman against the epitome of Victorian femininity.²¹² Walter describes Laura as “The woman who first gives life, light, and form to our shadowy conceptions of beauty” (50), and as the primary interpreter of the facts, the reader is encouraged to believe him, despite his bias. Appealing to a presumably-male reader, Walter encourages us to “Think of her as you thought of the first woman who quickened the pulses within you,” to “Let the kind, candid blue eyes meet yours, as they met mine,” and “Let her voice speak the music that you once loved best, attuned as sweetly to your ear as to mine” (50). Laura is the Platonic ideal of (white, bourgeois, cisheteronormative) woman as romantic object, with

207Tromp, *The Private Rod*, pp. 71-72.

208Surridge, *Bleak Houses*, p. 146.

209Ibid, pp. 135-7.

210Tromp, *The Private Rod*, p. 73.

211Surridge, *Bleak Houses*, p. 152.

212Tromp, *The Private Rod*, p. 75.

Walter drawing from the reader's own experiences to frame her as the kind of woman every man *must* fall in love with. As such, her mental and physical brutalisation by a gentleman cuts all the more closely, as Collins presents the class confrontations of the divorce court with the social detail and psychological intimacy of the novel form.

But halfway through, the text doubles back, revealing that Glyde, despite his (admittedly faltering) appearances, is no baronet, but an illegitimate son making claims to a title, estate, and reputation not his due. The text plays with various interpretations of this twist, but claims none of them. Glyde's real status has the potential to confirm for conservative middle- and upper-class readers what they have assumed all along: that male violence is reserved for “the brutal lower orders of the people” (330), and Glyde's cruelty is his “real” self on show. His villainy is established through stereotypically lower-class actions, rather than the decadence and absence of a bad aristocratic husband, his attempts to “shore up a failing genteel identity” just making him seem more like a working-class brute, “the only kind of violent man Parliament defined.”²¹³

On the other hand, there is little suspicion of Glyde's lie before the reveal (Anne's warnings are speculated to be about his past actions against her, as ex-husband or illegitimate father), and his smoothly playing the part of a baronet undermines the British ideal of inherent class distinctions: if *he* can fake it, anyone could. Aristocratic pretensions to inherent moral and social superiority are mocked, as Glyde's British peers (and the middle-class Fairlies who support him) are proved to be fools. Furthermore, the reveal comes a significant way into the novel, after Glyde is established in the reader's mind as aristocratic, undermining assumptions and calling for “a reinspection of an overdetermined cultural text.”²¹⁴ Glyde's lies may represent another layer to his upper-class corruption and an indictment against the hierarchy itself, or prove the reality of the system, confirming that domestic violence is endemic only to the poor and bad-blooded. Once more, we see the problem which plagues Matilda and Zofloya: to what extent do their eleventh-hour reveals undo a novel's worth of problematisation? The difference for Glyde is that the reveal is concurrent with his death, neither at the climax of the plot nor as a supernatural explanation, giving the characters and reader ample time to reflect on the implications before the novel is set aside.

To further understand these class implications, we can examine the text's

²¹³Ibid.

²¹⁴Ibid, p. 77.

engagement with Count Fosco's nobility, and its heroicisation of the middle classes. Fosco is a confident aristocrat from the continental old world who “rejoiced in the title of Count” (151), praised for his lifelong assertion of “the rights of the aristocracy, and the sacred principles of Order” (641). His past remains mostly a secret, and he rules over his wife, pets, friends, and enemies with an iron fist disguised by his fatness, effeminacy, and childish delight in sweets.²¹⁵ He holds significant influence over Marian and Glyde, and his mastery over Madame Fosco is that of an authoritarian husband who rules not with Glyde's obvious brutality, but with a “rod of iron” which “never appears in company – ... a private rod, ... always kept up-stairs” (224). “He looks like a man who could tame anything” (219), and although Laura and Marian describe the change in their aunt as “for the better” (203), there is something chilling in her obedience, silently rolling cigarettes “like a quiet child” (268) and waiting for her husband's opinion to be delivered. We are told of her youthful feminism, advocating “the Rights of Women” and “always worrying the unfortunate men with every small exaction which a vain and foolish woman can impose on long-suffering male humanity” (236, 218), but although Marian suspects the “suppression” of “something dangerous in her nature” (219), it never appears, the feminist spinster transformed “into a civil, silent, unobtrusive woman, who is never in the way,” all the better for “the common purposes of society” (218-219).

This praise for Fosco's authoritarianism produces a scepticism which belies Marian's playful conservatism, his inversion of domestic ideals (such as his many pets instead of children) concealing subtle violence, thus creating an uncanny negative image of domestic bliss which reveals what Monica Flegel describes as “the centrality of dominance to the patriarchal home.”²¹⁶ His masculine confidence is linked to his class, and to Austrian imperial ambitions over Italy, resistance to which Fosco betrayed in his abandonment of the Brotherhood.²¹⁷ Fosco combines nobility, “bad” imperialism, and brutality, yet Marian casually admires him, a charismatic villain whose use of private violence – as opposed to the witnesses and bruises Glyde allows – keeps him, as Tromp argues, “outside the bounds of legislative and social authority,” only conquerable

²¹⁵See Flegel, 'A “Strange Family Story”'; Huffels, 'Tracing Traumatic Memory'; Huff, 'Fosco's Fat Drag'.

²¹⁶Flegel, 'A “Strange Family Story”', p. 106.

²¹⁷See Nayder, 'Agents of Empire'. This Brotherhood further links *The Woman in White* to both the contemporary context of Italian political upheaval in the 1840s and 50s, as well as the more “gothic” circumstances which led to them, such as the Carbonari revolutionaries of the earlier 1800s.

through private means.²¹⁸ And Collins does not let this threat be externalised: as Fosco argues, he was married in England, where “a woman's marriage obligations ... charge her unreservedly to love, honour, and obey [her husband]” and be “self-immolated on the altar of his life” (628). British society, by “allowing the gaps through which a criminal might escape and offering material reward and social sanction for those who act in their own best interest,”²¹⁹ is Fosco's accomplice, as he utilises its hypocrisies and knowingly avoids the appearance of “working-class” domestic violence, achieving its affects while avoiding its punishments.

These aristocrats (real and fake) are contrasted with Walter Hartright, middle-class hero. As the first narrator, overall editor, and nominal protagonist, his genteel poverty is presented as familiar to the reader, his ongoing newspaper position at the end the reward for years of freelancing and teaching. His “heart” is in the “right” place, and, insipid as he sometimes seems, he is nevertheless our hero, gentle with women (see his bewildered kindness to Anne on the road), and determined to find justice for Laura. As Lillian Nayder argues, Walter's imperial leanings – in contrast to Fosco – are presented as praiseworthy, a mark of bravery and a necessary trial for him to return strong enough to pursue the villains.²²⁰ Marian's prophetic dream about his trinity of close escapes casts him as a “pilgrim” among the pagan ruins of Central America, speaking in chant-like repetitions and with pseudo-biblical authority of his life as “the instrument of a Design that is yet unseen” (278-279). This colonial enterprise picks up the threads of Spanish Catholic colonialism in the Americas which concerned earlier gothic writers, now given divine, British sanction, a pre-ordained trial for Walter which relegates a colonised people and culture to instruments in his story.

Walter also enacts similar kinds of violence to Glyde and Fosco, without inviting the same condemnation. He nearly strikes Anne on the road, is strongly implicated in Glyde's death, threatens Fosco with exposure and violence in order to extract his signature, and lies to Laura, especially after her incarceration, to more easily manipulate her moods. Yet unlike the noble Fosco, or the aristocratic/illegitimate Glyde, Walter's violence is framed as justified rather than corrupt or unethical; as Tromp notes, he is “sanctioned and screened by a moral code based on the economic and social

218Tromp, *The Private Rod*, 83.

219Ibid, p. 86.

220Nayder, 'Agents of Empire'; see also Hsu, 'The History of Liberal Violence'.

enfranchisement of the growing middle class.”²²¹ Walter is rewarded for his violence and manipulation with security, happiness, and Laura's upper-middle-class position and fortune, which Glyde and Fosco also sought, and were condemned for seeking. By “[labouring] effectively and within the moral constructs of the novel,” Walter receives these rewards without corruption, implying that his middle-class morality outweighs the potential dangers of wealth and power, and proving how nineteenth-century, British, middle-class violence was merely “transplanted through the frame of class and finance as a moral and worthy enterprise.”²²²

As Tamar Heller and Rachel Ablow have shown, *The Woman in White* toys with radical themes of structural women's oppression, but ultimately shores up a professional, white, middle-class, male identity which was defined by its distinctions from the rebellious lower classes and an oppressive aristocracy. The mid-nineteenth century – the period during which Collins's career was developing – saw a growing cultural gap between perceptions of “high” and “low” fiction, associating popular genres with the working classes, femininity, and sexual fallenness, as opposed to the white masculine realist novels of the literary elite. Male “professional” writers emphasised “the moral and aesthetic value of writing and ... the professionalism (not the wage slavery) of the novelist,” as opposed to contributors to magazines and periodicals, while sensation novels were considered to be low and radical in their content and depictions of moral, social, and gender ambiguities.²²³ Collins's own political leanings were evidently progressive: he rejected marriage, wrote for radical journals such as *The Leader*, and sympathised with the Indian Rebellion in 1857, and one cannot help but read a wink in how he writes the lawyer Gilmore's over-the-top reaction to Mr Fairlie's accusation that he is “a Radical”:

A Radical!!! I could put up with a good deal of provocation, but, after holding the soundest Conservative principles all my life, I could *not* put up with being called a Radical. My blood boiled at it – I started out of my chair – I was speechless with indignation. [161, emphasis original]

Yet Collins also sought the security of a masculine, middle-class, professional identity, and concerned himself, in *The Woman in White*, with “a fantasy of male self-

221Tromp, *The Private Rod*, p. 89.

222Ibid, pp. 91-92.

223Heller, *Dead Secrets*, pp. 83-88.

invention”²²⁴ centred around an artist who utilises and detaches himself from women's lack of social identity in order to rise from genteel poverty to a professional career among the landed gentry.

This conflict of interests between “marginality and professionalism, resistance and suppression,”²²⁵ raises an unsolvable problem, both in Collins's personal conflict and the wider historical and literary context. Collins raises the spectre of class instability, domestic violence, and upper-middle-class corruption, then swings back towards recovering the reputation of “good” middle-class men like Walter, however much their moral superiority rests on the suppression of others. Walter's emasculation through economic marginality – his lack of power compared to Mr Fairlie, Count Fosco, and Sir Percival Glyde – rather than allying him with other disenfranchised characters, is resolved through the restoration of hereditary property rights through his inheritance by marriage of Limmeridge House, legitimising the gender and class roles earlier criticised. Conservative closure is not synonymous with a firm ideological standpoint, yet this relatively clear swing is notable for how it stands out from the more ambiguous gothic endings of earlier novels.

Femininity, Insanity, and Childishness

Surrounding Walter's professional ascendancy is a trio of narratives which revolve around the domestic suppression of problem women. Anne, Laura, and Marian, though in many ways treated as embodiments of valuable femininities, all cross the boundaries of propriety in one way or another, and are punished accordingly by the end. What sets this process apart from the extremities of the gothic, however, is these women's relative conformity to social standards, and the novel's use not of violence or degradation to neutralise their transgressions, but familiar spaces such as the home and asylum. Anne Catherick, coded throughout as mentally unstable but without the “absolute insanity” associated with “the very name of an Asylum” (28), is a plot linchpin and haunting figure, with her veiled warnings to Walter, Marian, and especially Laura. Her previous, questionable incarceration in an asylum by Glyde and her unpleasant mother gestures towards the truly false institutionalisation of Laura and

²²⁴Ablow, 'Good Vibrations', p. 174.

²²⁵Heller, *Dead Secrets*, p. 168.

contemporary fears of disciplinary psychiatric techniques and wrongful confinement, which would play out in sensation fiction of the 1860s and 70s as, in Elaine Showalter's words, the "cynical sense that the asylum was a prison masquerading as a retreat."²²⁶

Yet this criticism of psychiatric practices stands in uncomfortable contrast with the text's treatment of its most prominent "mad" character. Heroes and villains alike describe Anne as "queer," "crazy," "weak," and "half-witted," (94, 549, 624, 548), obsessive, prone to fits, and with an animalistic instinct for danger, though not "an idiot" (59; a specific medicalised term). There is nothing to indicate that this is an ironic profusion, rather it is an apparently apt description supported by other characterisations, particularly of Laura. Anne's incarceration may have been a mistake, but her diagnosis was not, and she is continually dismissed by being compared to a child, or described as an unfortunate, forlorn, or "poor creature." She is barely considered a woman, with her resemblance to Laura lying in basic physical traits without the "feminine" humanity of her "delicate beauty" (96), while in parting from Walter on the road, "the first touch of womanly tenderness" comes to her trembling voice, though "no [womanly] tears glistened" in her eyes (22).

This condescension to Anne climaxes in the revelation that the dangerous knowledge to which she made claim, and for which she was incarcerated, kidnapped, and killed, was only the vague idea of some "Secret" of Glyde's (485). The other characters assume an air of superiority to her "delusions," with Mrs Catherick dismissing her "crazy notions ... about her dignity" (549), and Walter presuming to be an expert on her mental state, identifying the assumption as "perfectly in character with Anne's mental affliction" (485) despite being neither educated nor experienced with mental illness, nor very well-acquainted with Anne. Her disability is considered a weakness, decipherable by "normal," "healthy" people and easily decoded, when she is, in fact, correct: her distrust of Glyde, despite its lack of hard evidence, is well-founded, and could have helped Laura to avoid trauma and violence. But the characters – and moreover the text itself – are loathe to give a madwoman that much credit, and the confirmation/dismissal of Anne's suspicions creates an effect of dramatic, tragic irony rather than distrust of the text itself, especially after five hundred pages of Anne's instability and hyperbole, and the gothicisation of her role into a semi-supernatural portent rather than an active, human agent. The text's criticisms of psychiatric

²²⁶Showalter, *The Female Malady*, pp. 101-102, 126.

institutions do not extend to the dismissive social and medical systems which support them.

Anne's lack of subjectivity is further upheld by the novel's treatment of her death. Walter writes of her as an inhuman figure, a mystery to be solved, who retreats into irrelevance once the riddle of her parentage, and thus her similarity to Laura, are explained:

So the ghostly figure which has haunted these pages as it haunted my life, goes down into the impenetrable Gloom. Like a Shadow she first came to me, in the loneliness of the night. Like a Shadow she passes away, in the loneliness of the dead. [569]

Her death is recounted after the fact, at a remove through official documents, and explained in Fosco's confession, including the apparently unremarkable admission that he was willing to “have assisted worn-out Nature in finding permanent repose ... and [to] have extended to the captive (incurably afflicted in mind and body both) a happy release” (628); that is, to murder Anne and call it mercy. Collins takes the gothic, ghostly woman and domesticates both gender and genre, repatriating her excessive, uncanny effects into the contexts of illness and asylums, and laying her to rest with sentimental ease. Although Fosco's treatment of Anne almost certainly lead to her death, with the stress of kidnapping causing fits and heart failure, this manslaughter-at-best is ignored in favour of relief: at least it was not Laura; at least it was not someone healthy, and therefore worthy. Denied authority and agency, Anne is a necessary sacrifice for her middle-class, legitimate sister, her death a relief to everyone involved, and only her primary antagonist Glyde respects her enough to consider her a threat: “She's just mad enough to be shut up, and just sane enough to ruin me when she's at large” (337).

Anne's uncanny illness sets the reader up for the text's representation of Laura, the romantic heroine. At first glance, she is the ideal white, bourgeois, English wife in the making, a pinnacle of passive femininity: young and beautiful, a “fair, delicate girl” with “a light, youthful figure”, her hair plainly done and not blonde enough to be garish, with “soft, limpid, turquoise blue” eyes (48-50). She is not entirely perfect – “too delicately refined” in the chin, her nose erring from “the ideal straightness of line” (49) – but these quibbles only lend to her reality. As we have seen, Laura is presented as the personification of woman as an object of heterosexual romantic desire, but she is also

quintessentially feminine, plagued by headaches (that “essentially feminine malady”), posing “a woman's ... questions,” and crying “easily” (33, 117, 166).

However, Collins also insists on the “sensation” which mars Laura's perfection: an “impression ... of something wanting,” either in Laura or Walter, “which hindered me from understanding her as I ought” (50-51). It is soon revealed that this startling effect is due to her “ominous likeness” to Anne, which “seems like casting a shadow on [her] future” (61), for the “one sad change” (96) that differentiates the two women is that of illness and hardship: “If ever sorrow and suffering set their profaning marks on the youth and beauty of Miss Fairlie's face, then, and then only, Anne Catherick and she would be ... the living reflexions [*sic*] of one another” (97). This foreshadowing is very gothic in its impressions of semi-supernatural foreboding, but Laura, unlike many gothic heroines before her, does not endure her allotted horrors only to emerge stronger and relatively unscathed. Her abusive marriage, drugging, and wrongful incarceration leave her permanently ill and fragile, “sorely tried and sadly changed; her beauty faded, her mind clouded; robbed of her station in the world” (422). Even before this, Laura – the archetypal, perfect woman – is described as nervous and childish in a manner which both mirrors Anne's descriptions, and emphasises her attractions. In his rapturous introduction, Walter notes that her “sweet sensitive lips are subject to a slight nervous contraction, when she smiles” (49), and she is frequently pale, with “cold fingers” and a “sweet anxious face” (120-121). Ill health seems to follow her: she is “rather nervous and sensitive” like her hypochondriac father, catches a cold every winter, and grows weak under the stress of Marian's illness, news of her recovery sparking a “violent reaction” and “state of debility and depression” (36, 202, 380). Laura's nervous beauty is framed in a manner which makes her trauma seem predestined, until her similarity to Anne is finally confirmed by her time in the same asylum: “sorrow and suffering ... *had* set their profaning marks on the youth and beauty of [Laura's] face; and the fatal resemblance ... was now a real and living resemblance” (443, emphasis original).

This sense of nervous illness ties in with Laura's other characterisation as innocent to the point of childishness. Her “restless fingers” have a habit “of always playing with the first thing that came to hand,” a habit we are specifically told originated in childhood (170, 143). Like Anne, Laura is described as a “gentle, innocent, affectionate creature,” looking “sometimes with the pity of an angel, sometimes with the

innocent perplexity of a child,” and having “preserved ... the child's subtle faculty of knowing a friend by instinct” (305, 66, 204). These descriptions are tied to her beauty: as Walter falls in love with her, she confesses her ignorance in painting “very prettily and simply ... with quaint, childish earnestness” (51), and when separated from her future husband, she keeps his drawings “half hidden under her pillow, ... where she used to hide her favourite toys when she was a child” (167). Other characters treat her like a child as well, creating a cumulative effect on the reader: Marian calls her a “poor child – for a child she is still in many things,” and steals a look at Laura the night before her wedding “in her pretty little white bed ... she has occupied since the days of her girlhood” (187, 196).

This confusion of trauma and childishness, attraction and innocence, reflects at an angle the double-bind of modesty and innocence/ignorance which victimises Antonia and makes Lilla uncanny. In a contemporary context, Laura is even further restricted by paradoxical courtesy: by allowing her the chance to call off the engagement, Glyde obliges her to accept, bound by her promise to a dying father. His response to Anne's warnings clears him of suspicion “[in] the eyes of law and reason,” but his insistence on Laura's right to refuse only strengthens the sense of being forced (140-141). More subtextually, however, the interconnections of helpless modesty, beauty, and violence are differentiated from gothic modes by their explicit links to childhood and illness, an insistent and perhaps uniquely Victorian infantilization of women which not only fails to protect Laura, but seems to direct her towards a predatory heterosexual marketplace.

Erily, Fosco comments on this same theme of women's childishness, with his statements framed as cruel and misogynistic as opposed to Marian and Walter's fondness. Marian's unease around Fosco, and his subtle, dangerous entanglement in the plot against Laura, prime the reader to be confronted by his declarations, either of moral relativism and English hypocrisy (237-239), or that a “taste for sweets” is “the innocent taste of women and children” (294). His comments and uncanniness build up, until the tense, fearful scene where Marian risks her health to overhear him lumping women, children, and animals together in the same category of beings whom “Human” – read, male – “ingenuity” can “manage” through physical brutality or “Quiet resolution” (329-30). Atmosphere is everything, and despite the disturbing similarities, Walter's “loving” condescension towards Laura as childishly innocent helps bring about the happy, settled

ending of the novel, a staple of their conventional love affair: after her rescue, Laura “laid her poor head innocently and trustingly on [Walter's] bosom” (422), just as she will do after accepting his marriage proposal (576).

The condescending trend only worsens after Laura's rescue, where she takes on Anne's narrative impotence. Weak and traumatised, Laura's mind is “too evidently unfit to bear the trial” of remembering the asylum (436), leaving the vital dates of her departure from Blackwater Park and arrival in London unknown, and the proving of her true identity up to Walter and, to a lesser extent, Marian. Although they encourage her to remember “little trivial domestic events,” she reacts badly to “the painful impressions of her past life,” and her wrongs “must be redressed without her knowledge and without her help” (443-444, 570). Marian and Walter tip-toe around her, fostering her “faltering thoughtfulness” with an “innocent deception” that she is helpless to resist, making her feel useful by pretending to sell her “poor, faint, valueless sketches” (443, 490). This ruse of feminine work, conducted in a domestic space, is reminiscent of contemporary psychiatric practices analysed by Showalter, where female asylum inmates were encouraged to dress “properly” and engage in “feminine” household tasks in order to regain “sanity” through bourgeois, feminine behaviour,²²⁷ but without the implicit criticism of the horror of wrongful incarceration, as she is now in the “right” hands. Walter and Marian “[amuse] her ... with children's games at cards” (444), and Laura responds appropriately: “She spoke as a child might have spoken; she showed me her thoughts as a child might have shown them” (446). Little wonder that Laura is driven to exclaim, “Oh, don't, don't, don't treat me like a child!” (489), though the protestation makes little difference.

Martha Stoddard Holmes's examinations of disability and femininity open up ways of thinking about Collins's work, positing that his inclusion of disabled women in the normative sexual economy through romance, marriage, and domesticity was unusually subversive for the period. Where disabled women were normally excluded from, or relegated to the margins of, contemporary literature, in *Hide and Seek* (1854), *The Moonstone* (1868), and *Poor Miss Finch* (1872), Collins – though often conventional or sentimental – “never pathologizes a disabled woman's entry, through marriage and motherhood, into the definitionally anti-exotic realms of domestic life.”²²⁸

227Showalter, *The Female Malady*, pp. 80-98.

228Holmes, 'Bolder with Her Lover in the Dark', p. 61.

Predominant scientific models would have denied these women agency and desire before they could reproduce and pass on their “defects,” preferring to represent them as “prepubescent children or as models of womanly self-discipline,” but Collins simply used these fears to create tension, “and then dismissed them as nonproblems.”²²⁹

In light of this, it is all the more interesting that, in *The Woman in White*, Collins adheres to the stereotype. He may allow Laura to marry and reproduce, yet he denies agency to Anne, whose mental instability is more explicit, and present since childhood, more likely to be passed on. Both women also embody dismissive tropes of the “adult consigned to eternal childhood, [or] a celibate version of the 'fallen' woman,” used to “generate emotion and moral development in others” through tragedy, innocence, and death.²³⁰ There is even a sense that, in order to be a proper, bourgeois wife, Laura *must* be institutionalised, traumatised, and negated. She only finds peace after being rendered dependent on a man,²³¹ and again, Walter writes of her illness as an inevitability, and takes joy in her helplessness:

[T]he devotion I had promised, the devotion of my whole heart and soul and strength might be laid blamelessly, now, at those dear feet. In the right of her calamity, in the right of her friendlessness, she was mine at last! [422]

Laura's weakness and illness are attractive, and her narrative revolves around Walter's role as protector, in which he can only succeed once Laura needs rescuing: once she is “mad.”

As Lauren Chattman argues, the “gendered organization of middle-class culture in fact *requires* that women remain economically useless and visibly irrational,” a requirement reinforced through Laura's helplessness and instability as a wife and mother while Walter gains order, professional success, and moral and intellectual superiority.²³² Walter the “good,” middle-class husband relies on a Romantic, Victorian ideal of equal, companionate marriage, but the reality of Laura's reliance on him recreates at one remove Fosco's maxim that he and his wife “have but one opinion ... and that opinion is [the husband's]” (246). He proves his love for Laura with his own sensations, and gains the social advancement Glyde sought without leaving the evidence which proved his

229Ibid, pp. 81-82.

230Ibid, p. 60.

231See Huffels, 'Tracing Traumatic Memory', p. 45.

232Chattman, 'Diagnosing the Domestic Woman', pp. 137, 139, emphasis original.

downfall, gaining social advancement by the use and abuse of women.²³³ Meanwhile, despite being the near-perfect woman, Laura is made dependent on her husband, while her problematic memories – of suffering at the hands of upper- and middle-class men, and a destructive psychiatric system – are relegated to Anne's consciousness and removed with her death, Laura's helplessness preferable to Anne's threatening instability.²³⁴ Ideal femininity is childish and weak, gothicised and pathologised as haunting, defective, and even degenerate, but only this femininity leads to heroinism and a happy conclusion. Agency and inclusion for disabled female characters are subordinated to Walter's narrative, demanding the removal of Anne and Laura from subjectivity in order to complete the plot, reward the hero, and restore order.

Female Masculinity and Domestic Incarceration

In contrast to her half-sister, Marian Halcombe is the pinnacle of the non-normative yet admirable woman. She is an active player for the first sections of the novel, as intent as Walter to uncover Anne's identity and rescue Laura from her abusive marriage. She is intelligent, sociable, opinionated, and resolute, and writes one of the longest portions of narration. In contrast to Laura's nerves, Marian devotes her “whole energies to the business of discovery” (37), while other characters note her “natural energy and courage,” “quick eye,” “frank, fearless face,” and “hearty indignation” (429, 47, 140). Her typically masculine qualities are emphasised through both contrast with the hyper-feminine Laura, and explicit references: Marian's hands have “the strong, steady grasp of a man,” and are “as awkward as a man's” in domestic labour (125, 233); she carries a “horrid, heavy, man's umbrella” (214); and Count Fosco proclaims that “she has the foresight and resolution of a man” (330). When Laura cries, her tears “gathered in her eyes, and dropped over her cheeks slowly,” but Marian's “come almost like men's tears, with sobs that seem to tear me in pieces, and that frighten every one about me” (171, 166). When Walter first sees her from behind, he is “struck by the rare beauty of her form”, with a “comely” figure “visibly and delightfully undeformed by stays” (31). However, when she turns to face him, “never was the fair promise of a lovely figure more strangely and startlingly belied by the face and head that crowned

²³³Ablow, 'Good Vibrations', pp. 168-174.

²³⁴Huffels, 'Tracing Traumatic Memory', pp. 48-50.

it,” for Marian is “almost swarthy,” with “a large, firm, masculine mouth and jaw,” brown eyes, thick black hair, and “dark down on her upper lip [which] was almost a moustache” (31). In short, “The lady is ugly!”, her expression “altogether wanting in those feminine attractions of gentleness and pliability” (31-32), though she may still “[soften] and [grow] womanly” by smiling and pitying (32, 125).

Marian's masculinity is also contrasted with her social status as a woman, creating a half-uncanny juxtaposition of gendered performances. She frequently bemoans her lack of power, especially as Laura's only support, with “No father, no brother – no living creature but [a] helpless, useless woman” (197). Her common refrain is “If I had been a man”: she would strike Glyde or Fosco, or ride out to meet Laura, but unfortunately she is “nothing but a woman, condemned to patience, propriety, and petticoats, for life” (249, 559, 200). She both accepts and distances herself from her femininity through her constant mild misogyny, proclaiming that “I don't think much of my own sex” (33) and declaring women to be quarrelsome, talkative, inattentive, deceitful, impulsive, and weak to flattery, accusations often made to explain her own behaviour, especially her susceptibility to Fosco's charisma.

Marian thus embodies gendered contradictions, her transgression that of the spinster who never marries or enters the heteronormative reproductive market, and whose most important relationship is with another woman. Her dedication to Laura is prominent, staying at Blackwater during her disastrous first marriage, and determined to rescue her and recover her reputation and identity. Combined with her masculinity, this dedication seems more than sisterly, as Marian mourns for Laura's marriage as much in itself as for her suspicions about Glyde, for “she will be *his* Laura instead of mine!” (187, emphasis original). She equates herself with Glyde as prospective husband when noting that Laura “looked so irresistibly beautiful ... that no man alive could have steeled his heart against her” (173), and positions herself as his “woman rival” in Laura's confidence, disallowed from the honeymoon and relying for her continued presence in Laura's life on “not arousing Sir Percival's jealousy and distrust by standing between them” (188). The intensity of this homosocial bond is exacerbated by Marian's misandry in romantic contexts, rejecting all husbands and male egos:

Who cares for [Glyde's] causes of complaint? Are you to break your heart to set his mind at ease? No man under heaven deserves these sacrifices from us

women. Men! They are the enemies of our innocence and our peace – they drag us away from our parents' love and our sisters' friendship – they take us body and soul to themselves, and fasten our helpless lives to theirs as they chain up a dog to his kennel. And what does the best of them give us in return? [183]

Reading Marian as a queer-coded woman is not an unusual critical angle, but it is important to note that, for all her non-normatively gendered looks and behaviour, she was an immensely popular character. As Ardel Haefele-Thomas argues, Marian could have been depicted as monstrous for her gender ambiguity, but she is sympathetic, complex, and admirable, showing that “Victorian definitions of womanhood and gender roles were far more complex than we might think.”²³⁵ In her embodiment and performance of gender, Marian resists neat classification as kind sister or lesbian fiend, occupying a position clearly not unthinkable or distasteful to contemporary readers.²³⁶

Despite this, Marian's non-normativity is punished by the time of the conventional ending, with the boundaries she pushed re-established and her agency diminished. She is the most prominent female narrator by a wide margin, wielding the (masculine, meaning-making) pen and infringing on Walter's role as primary editor as well as Fosco's desired power, but her narration is silenced before the end. Her most obvious infringement on male power, however, is her eavesdropping on Fosco and Glyde at Blackwater, undressing and sneaking onto the roof in the rain in order to overhear their plans for Laura. It is her most active moment in the plot, and utilises a level of deceit and invasion which she otherwise avoids, crossing respectable and physical boundaries – stripped to her underwear and spying on men from the in-between space of in/outside – literalising and exaggerating her usual liminality, and letting the reader in on “doubly private information.”²³⁷ For this rebellion, she is debilitated by illness and incarcerated in Blackwater Park, with her narration devolving into gibberish and coming to an end with Fosco's usurpation of her diary in what many critics read as a kind of “textual rape.” Marian “incurs punishment of both her physical and textual bodies” by claiming not only a narrative voice, but agency over the plots of men, acting beyond her assigned feminine role.²³⁸

After this silencing, the novel continues to subdue Marian, her narrative role

²³⁵Haefele-Thomas, *Queer Others in Victorian Gothic*, p. 17.

²³⁶See Gaylin, 'The Madwoman Outside the Attic', p. 314.

²³⁷Ibid, p. 316.

²³⁸Ibid, p. 317; Rintoul, *Intimate Violence*, pp. 108-109.

reduced to housekeeping and caregiving while Walter investigates the mystery and confronts the villains. As Sarah Anne Brown notes, despite Marian and Laura's loving and important relationship, Marian's financial and social sacrifice for, and rescue of, Laura is curiously downplayed, reported after the fact and at a double remove as Walter recounts to the reader what Marian reported to him; "What ought to be a central text of sororal rescue and sacrifice gives us only a curiously muted version of the trope."²³⁹ Brown suggests that the novel's dismissal of the episode may be due to the sisters' mutual devotion, with no tension caused by prior competition or imprudence, but amongst the many ways in which Marian's role is subdued, it is clear that there is more at work here, denying her narrative prominence after her major transgression.

So Marian takes a passive, domestic role, described as weak and subdued compared to her former self. She does housework "as her own right," her once manly and awkward hands doing "What a woman's hands *are* fit for," while instead of unfeminine sobs, "big tears rise thick in her eyes, and fall slowly over her cheeks" (441, emphasis original). Walter writes of the "faint reflexion [*sic*] of her old good spirits" and the "bright firmness of bygone days" (442, 442), and describes her "unaccustomed tenderness," exhibiting the "sublime self-forgetfulness of women" (564, 558). He prevents her from joining the confrontation with Fosco, though Marian passionately justifies her place: "Let me go with you. Don't refuse me because I'm only a woman. I must go! I will go!" (597). Walter physically holds her in place, instructing her to "have the courage to wait till I come back" and fleeing before she can speak again (598). Like Eleanor Fairlie, whatever "something dangerous" might have been in her has been "suppressed," a former self only exhibited in fruitless flashes; as Judith Sanders writes, she is "gelded into a nanny, nursemaid, and angel-in-the-house."²⁴⁰ Like Laura in the asylum, Marian is incarcerated in the home, disallowed agency in the main narrative and reduced to a domestic role she has hitherto resisted.

Some critics have read Marian's ending in a positive light, with her inclusion in the domestic sphere a generous ending for what might have been a "mad" or monstrous stereotype of the dark, unfeminine, lesbian sister. Laurel Erickson reads her as a liminal figure who presents the value of difference, her final place in the domestic sphere an acceptance of the queer woman as-is: her "odd-woman desire is harnessed within the

²³⁹Brown, *Devoted Sisters*, pp. 44-45.

²⁴⁰Sanders, 'A Shock to the System', p. 63.

domestic sphere and sagely rechanneled into maternal desire,” while (implicit) same-sex female desire is positioned as “part of a larger economy of desire and/or domesticity.”²⁴¹ Similarly, Haefele-Thomas reads in Collins's works a defence of queer figures as vital to the success of heterosexual romance plots, and hence to reproduction and social cohesion, with Marian's position on the margins giving her a unique insight into both Laura's subjectivity, and the corruption around her, a stabilising force for Laura and Walter's relationship.²⁴²

However, like Collins's attitude towards disabled women, this provisional inclusion in the domestic sphere requires the disempowerment of marginal figures and the reduction of their non-normative expressions. It is the same gothic construction that we have already examined: ambiguous closure – here a domestic ending – is not conclusive, but it is telling of Collins and his culture's values that, in order to remain alive, happy, and relevant, Marian's most transgressive qualities must be subdued and relegated to a past self. At her introduction, she describes herself in comparison to Laura with casually sublime demonism: “In short, she is an angel; and I am ---- Try some of that marmalade, Mr Hartright, and finish the sentence ... for yourself” (34). In the domestic mode of sensation fiction, the ending sees Marian's boldness and unconventional power reduced not with the glory of Victoria di Loredani's cliff-top demise, but with her subjugation into the opposite role of the “good angel” (643) in the Hartright household. According to the framework established in the opening line of the novel, Marian has learned to take on the passive, feminine role: “This is the story of what a Woman's patience can endure, and what a Man's resolution can achieve” (5).

241Erickson, 'In Short, She Is an Angel', pp. 111, 113.

242Haefele-Thomas, *Queer Others in Victorian Gothic*, pp. 8-32.

CONCLUSION

The sensation genre, in its shift to contemporary settings and terrors, exhibits a shift from the excessive transgressions of gothic fiction to more anxious but restrained Victorian sensibilities. The queer-coded woman Marian is allowed significantly more sympathy, virtue, and survival than, for example, the tribadic Victoria, but this is balanced by disempowerment, her demise occurring not at the hands of Satan – nor even an uncanny, Orientalised, vengeful slave – but from typhus and the domestic sphere. She is allowed to survive, but like shifts in broader cultural discourses of madness and sexuality, as religiously-inflected criminalisation became civil pathologisation, the Other was treated with sympathy rather than outrage, controlled and pitied rather than imprisoned and executed.²⁴³ Even more interestingly, however, Laura – who does nothing wrong according to feminine ideals – is nevertheless traumatised, incarcerated, and altered before being left with the dubious reward of bourgeois domestic happiness. Her abuse is at the hands of an English baronet, in a country house and private asylum, rather than by a rapacious monk or in an Alpine castle; the adjustment in setting, horrors, and villains requires an adjustment in the restraints that sensation novels set for their transgressive women, refusing them violent or sublime power even in their demises.

Vitality, the disempowerment of these women functions in *The Woman in White* to facilitate male control over narrative and identity. Though they confront the audience with images of upper-class domestic abuse and improper medical practices, none of these women are allowed to actually speak of the violence they have endured at the hands of men and male systems: Anne is dismissed as mad and dispatched before she can reveal what she knows; Marian is left with her suppressed temper and stiff, shaven upper lip; and Laura is deliberately barred – or protected, as Walter would have it – from her memories of abuse. Even minor female characters are refused reflection, muzzled (Madame Fosco), or dismissed as bitter and shrewish (Mrs Catherick). The silence of these women contrasts with the angry outbursts and otherworldly power of Victoria and Matilda, and – like the silence of the original slave Zofloya – “reveals the threat of something their text might have produced, something that must be excluded

²⁴³See Showalter, *The Female Malady*; Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*.

from the novel.”²⁴⁴ Ostensibly about restoring Laura's subjectivity, *The Woman in White's* women are written and interpreted by men, with male writers – within and without the text – determining where and when it is “every man's duty, mercifully to control them” (29).²⁴⁵ Whatever form of critique the text approaches of normative class assumptions, imperialism, marriage, and the concealment of abuse, are gradually forgotten in favour of the stabilisation of a male professional identity.

This process raises paradoxes and unresolved contradictions which highlight points of cultural, and perhaps personal, tension. Foremost is the discomfort with the liberation of the mentally ill and/or disabled: despite the gothicised critique of a psychiatric system which allows cruel families to wrongfully incarcerate women in an institution which irreversibly damages them, Collins and Hartright have little concern for the “really” disabled Anne, denouncing part, but not all, of a harmful system of medicalisation and incarceration which disproportionately targeted “dangerous” women. Similarly, although Collins presents Fosco's “reverse colonisation” as a negative mirror image of the British empire, as well as the sins of Austrian imperialism in Italy, he mythicises British imperialism when it serves Walter's narrative. Fosco's will to power on the grounds of scientific and moral superiority is eerily reminiscent of British imperialist justifications, but as Nayder argues, Collins uncritically repeats these justifications in Walter's ideologically pure mission to Central America which allows his empowerment from wage slave to gentleman professional, acknowledging and then relieving British imperial guilt.²⁴⁶

Finally, in focusing so hard on contemporary changes in marriage laws, Collins overlooks the real restriction of surviving coverture laws. Anne functions in part as a metaphor for coverture, elusive, veiled, and identity-less, but by allowing her to stand in for Laura's erasure, Collins ignores the law's real effects; as Surridge notes, despite her class, Laura still would have faced “legal death” in marriage, particularly one which – as Collins is careful to establish – has no legal settlement.²⁴⁷ The entire plot is pointless: Glyde and Fosco never needed to abuse Laura into giving up her inheritance, as Glyde would have been given full ownership of her fortune under coverture. But Collins “seems to have been unable to grasp that the wife of a baronet really could be powerless

²⁴⁴Tromp, *The Private Rod*, p. 99; compare Burley, 'The Death of Zofloya'.

²⁴⁵See Gaylin, 'The Madwoman Outside the Attic', pp. 309-311.

²⁴⁶Nayder, 'Agents of Empire', pp. 1-4.

²⁴⁷Surridge, *Bleak Houses*, p. 154.

in the face of her husband's greed,"²⁴⁸ and I do not think it is a deliberate paradox.

Yet readers were still gripped by the plot, ignoring that even upper-class women were subject to their husbands' financial control. Sophia Hsu argues that this contradiction is utilised to reveal the disavowed violence at the heart of English institutions, highlighting that the right to freedom and privacy "depends on disenfranchising women ... so as to affirm the liberties preserved, implicitly, for men."²⁴⁹ But *The Woman in White*'s marital critique stops short of the institution itself: it is bad when Fosco and Glyde do it, and one should be suspicious of unjust laws, but domestic bliss is still possible under these laws if done "properly." This reinforces Ann Cvetkovich's reading of affect in sensation novels, as Walter's emphasis on love, fate, chance, and melodrama conceal his interest in Laura as a commodity, a body whose attractiveness lies in the chance she offers for his own social mobility.²⁵⁰ The limpness of offering personal solutions to social problems – the construction, as Cvetkovich reads it, of the middle-class woman as a "feeling subject" whose suffering can be relieved by emotional expression rather than social change²⁵¹ – resides especially in Collins's tendency to assert specific rather than institutional issues. "Bad" imperialism oppresses an advanced people; "good" imperialism brings civilisation to the New World and knowledge and experience to the Old. "Bad" marriages – abusive, lower-class, aristocratic – rob women of their property and identity; but "good" ones – companionate, protective, bourgeois – are a morally justified idyll, particularly if they facilitate a man's professional advancement.

It is tempting to compare this approach to that more common in female-authored sensation novels, in which female identity and reinvention invite a more sublime and powerful engagement with women's (lack of) power within the confines of a familiar setting, as critics such as Rachel Ablow argue.²⁵² We might even theorise a framework of "Male" and "Female Sensation" which deal with opposing themes of individual versus structural oppression and liberation. Yet, as we have learned to recognise, such categories are needlessly restrictive, and closures do not undo their novels' prior transgressions. These texts exist on a spectrum, influenced but not defined by their

²⁴⁸Ibid, pp. 157-158.

²⁴⁹Hsu, 'The History of Liberal Violence', p. 122.

²⁵⁰Cvetkovich, *Mixed Feelings*, pp. 73-95.

²⁵¹Ibid, p. 7.

²⁵²See Ablow, 'Good Vibrations', pp. 173-175.

positions on contemporary political and cultural concerns, positions which are often confused or even contradictory, and which convey overall meanings more complex than their endings appear. It is vital to examine them within the full richness of their contexts, individually and in relation to each other, their authors, and their cultural moments. As gothic anxieties are extended into sensation, their changes reveal the tensions that worried at their societies; and if the fates that meet the transgressive women of *The Woman in White* are less violent than those of *The Monk* or *Zofloya*, that same realism can raise a sense of liberation: at least Marian is still alive at the end. But again, it is not merely survival which determines the effect of gothic closures. We must examine the manner, tone, and context of final suppressions, as well as their very existence, in order to gain an accurate understanding of both text and culture.

By fully and deeply comparing Collins to his gothic forebears, we have uncovered complications of domestication, suppression, and liberation which illuminate an image of cultural continuity and adjustment, an image which can help us to interpret our history as well as our present. The greatest transgressions which Lewis and Dacre can barely express are the experiences of the sodomite and the slave, but the voice that Collins marginalises is that of a married woman. Although these two genres express similar extremes of circumstance, and the same atmosphere of horror and thrilling secrets, the boundaries of acceptable existence shift and tighten across them, so that their transgressions move from violent and criminal expressions of gender and sexuality, or rebellions against the family and state, to womanhood itself, corrupted from the start.

At the same time, by fully investigating the coded and contextualised transgressions of the gothic, we gain a greater understanding of contemporary discourses, and begin to discern a part of the function of the genre's notorious excesses. The abundance – to varying degrees – of slaves, sodomites, tribades, and Catholics in gothic texts are facilitated and indulged by excesses of plot, theme, and language, while these excesses and their concurrent transgressions are subdued in *The Woman in White*, more familiar but also less powerful. What Katherine Binhammer writes of the 1790s only becomes stronger in the nineteenth century: “the confinement of women to the new domestic space” required that their bodies be “literally and ideologically restrained” into an apparently natural passivity which was rigorously policed.²⁵³ The core of this process

253 Binhammer, 'The Sex Panic of the 1790s', p. 433.

applies across the board to the marginalised selves constructed against the ideal national self, in complex, inconsistent processes of medicalisation and domestication which codified and suppressed cultural transgressions. Binhammer concludes that “the discursive productivity of women's sexual passivity is made possible by the prior assumption that female sexuality is active and potentially threatening,”²⁵⁴ that the fear of otherness produces the insistence on illegitimacy, impotence, and immorality by means of which oppression is justified. This is abundantly clear in a comparison of *The Woman in White* to its forebears *The Monk* and *Zofloya*, where the threat of female sexuality is no longer construed as residing in women's potential power, violence, and homoeroticism, but in their very existence. Gothic others are destroyed to stop their violent subversion of normativity; sensational others are suppressed before the fact.

²⁵⁴Ibid.

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