

From Victoria to Villanelle: The Representation of Female Serial Killers and their Motivation to Kill in Dacres Zofloya (1806) and Waller-Bridges Killing Eve (2018-2022)

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Consuming fiction with serial killers is becoming more and more popular; violent crimes are being marketed as something to be watched, read, and listened to (Jarvis 3). It is discussed in some disciplines that violence might be an inherently masculine trait, both in culture and in society. This point of view has been questioned in literature, culture, and film; including in *Zofloya* and *Killing Eve*. To be looking at representations of female serial killers and their motivation to kill draws the ground for this text. I will focus on representations of female serial killers, only referencing to studies of society or representations of male serial killers to supply on information when needed. Critics such as Igl (2022) and Hoeveler (1998) have discussed the topic of representations of female serial killers in fiction before, other critics such as Jarvis (2007) has discussed the topic of representations of male serial killers. I will mainly use these critics to build my points on the representation of female serial killers, their motivation to kill and their relationship with femininity and masculinity. There is a possible discussion of whether the representations of female serial killers I have chosen to analyse is in fact ‘serial killers’, they might be spree killers, assassins, or something else entirely. Without defining the word ‘serial killer’ the definition of a serial killer I will be using is an expansive one, and both female representations I have chosen are serial killers for the sake of this text.

The two female representations of serial killers I have chosen to focus on is Victoria and Villanelle, they are two different representations of female serial killers from literature and film. Victoria in *Zofloya* from the early 1800’s and Villanelle depicted in the TV-series ‘Killing Eve’ from 2018-present day. *Zofloya* was written by Charlotte Dacre and was published in 1806 where Victoria, the heroine of the novel, as I will explain in detail later is a quite unique heroine for her time. The desire and agency Victoria shows in this novel was unlike any other at the time. Her relationship with masculinity, as she turns more masculine when she acts violent and starts to kill is also an interesting aspect I will discuss. Villanelle is certainly also an interesting character, in 2018 a female killer was not as unheard of as in 1806, but the lack of remorse in Villanelle is still striking to watch to this day. Villanelles relationship with femininity is also an interesting factor that I will discuss. According to The Internet Movie Database (imdb.com) there are over 1000 films with serial killers in them, most of these movies have been made after the 1990’s and only 94 of these movies feature a female serial killer. This tells us that looking at cultural representations of female murderers is quite important; women are still underrepresented as violent people in culture. According to Natalia Igl (2022) when talking about an essay titled “Why the serial killer novel is the new feminist fiction” by Chelsea G. Summers, we rarely see female violence presented as an indulgence, the female killers are often manipulated through a third party or a ‘victim turned

perpetrator' (Igl 6). I have chosen to specifically look at Victoria and Villanelles motivation to kill, to see what 200 years of literature, culture and history has done to representations of female serial killers in literature and film, and their relationship with femininity. Another interesting aspect of Victoria and Villanelle is their looks, particularly Victoria gaining more masculine traits as she kills, and Villanelle's relationship to fashion, femininity, and consumer culture. Jarvis (2007) wrote about the connection between serial killers and consumer culture. Presenting the big business serial killing has become, mainly focusing on representations of male serial killers and the connection between consuming serial killer fiction and consuming other goods. However, Jarvis is also looking at Patrick Bateman from *American Psycho* and his consuming habits, which is my main inspiration for looking at Villanelles consuming habits.

One of my chosen representations of female serial killers is from a novel, and the other from a TV-series. When analysing a character in a book, looking at the whole novel will be relevant, so Victoria in the entirety of *Zofloya* will be used when discussing her motivations and her turning more masculine. However, when using a TV-series, to use the whole series is not always necessary. I have therefore decided to look at two episodes in the first series, more specifically the first episode titled "Nice Face", and the second episode called "I'll Deal with Him Later". I will also look at one episode from the third series in *Killing Eve* where we learn more about Villanelle's background, her family situation, and we get to see her evolution from season one. Specifically, episode five titled "Are You from Pinner?". Looking at a TV-series is quite different than looking at a novel, they are different mediums, so different approaches when analysing are necessary. The TV-series is an audio-visual medium, and I will therefore also consider colours, visuals, composition, placement, and music that would not be relevant when analysing a book. Since I am not analysing the plot of the series, and instead one character from the series; I will mainly take a good look at specific scenes from the mentioned episodes, rather than the full episodes.

The thesis will be structured in this way: I will first shortly present some history for female serial killers in society, to better be able to understand and analyse the perception of female serial killers. I will then separately define Victoria and Villanelle's motivations to kill and their connections to femininity and masculinity. Lastly, I will further compare and analyse the two female representations of serial killers.

In Peter Vronsky's book *Female Serial Killers: How and Why Women Become Monsters* (2007) Vronsky introduces the topic of female serial killers by discussing why most people do not think female serial killers exist, when in fact about one in six serial killers are

female (Vronsky: 11). Vronsky has stated: “I was conditioned to perceive the serial killer as a “he” and “she” as “his” victim (12).”, which is a quote I think many can relate to. He talks about the primal fear many women have when finding themselves alone with a male stranger, and how the presence of a woman, also a stranger, often can relieve this fear. Female murderers most often kill family members or lovers, or they murder at work where they are seen as trusted caregivers. The collective awareness of female serial killers was only in 2003 discussed to a new level, because of the movie *Monster* about Aileen Wuornos (14); who probably is the most infamous female serial killer to this day. Aileen Wuornos was a woman, but she was not very feminine. Vronsky says: “As a serial killer, it is easier to correlate Wuornos’s violence with an overabundance of the masculine rather than with any intrinsic femininity gone awry. (15)” This is why I think to look at female serial killer’s relationship with femininity and masculinity is important. The representations of female serial killers I have chosen to analyse are both women, but are they allowed to be feminine?

In the book *The Gothic Quest – A History of the Gothic Novel* by Montague Summers (1938), Summers states that after editing *Zofloya* in 1928 it was made clear that the Gothic should attract the ‘attention of the academic and the amateur’ (Summers: 5). *Zofloya* is also described as “terror-gothic” (24) and being inspired by Matthew Lewis’ *The Monk*, it is also reminiscent of a ghost story (143). The story of *Zofloya* takes place in the end of the fifteenth century and ‘commences upon the birthnight of Victoria de Loredani’(Dacre:39). Before her mother makes a fatal mistake that will punish Victoria for the rest of her life, she is described with (among others) these adjectives: haughty (39), wild, ardent, implacable, revengeful, and cruel (40). So even before Victoria turns out to be willing to commit murder, the reader already has a picture of Victoria as a cruel female character. The character type Victoria is, proves to be quite different from another type of heroine from the same time period. Anne Radcliffe created what we today recognise as the ‘female gothic’ (Hoeveler: 103). Radcliffe’s female lead in *Romance of the Forest*, is a good example of a typical passive female gothic character (121), which is highly contrasted to the assertive Victoria. Hoeveler (121) presents “the carnivalesque vs *homo clausus*”. On one side: the female character who intensely releases emotion, challenges political or social systems, and shows sexual desire vs. on the other side: the harmless. In *Zofloya* we see this as Victoria vs Lilla. So, where Lilla might be the typical Radcliffean heroine, Victoria shows some opposition towards this Radcliffean heroine (Miles 174). Victoria’s motivation to kill can be because of her personality (cruel, revengeful), it can be because of the punishment of her mother’s actions, it can be because of the direct influence from Satan himself, and it can be (and probably is) a combination of all

these factors. When firstly looking at her personality, she is from the first pages of the novel described as a young cruel girl. Her mother leaving her perfect marriage with Victoria's father does not help, it seems to lead to a series of unfortunate events, her father is killed, Victoria is forced to leave her home, forced to leave her lover, and ultimately runs away to him. Even when she has what she wants she never seems satisfied and grows to hate her husband. When her husband's brother and his wife visit them a deep found jealousy arises in Victoria. She turns out to be willing to do anything in order to make her husband's brother her own, even murder. Although, as Igl (6) says: "Even in fiction, female violence is hardly ever presented as an indulgence, if at all then mostly as either an aberration, as a result of manipulation through a third party, or as a scenario of 'victim turned perpetrator'" Victoria does not act alone, she is directly influenced by Zofloya, who turns out to be Satan himself. What is Victoria's motivation to kill? She might be flawed from birth, but her mother's actions punish her, and when she sees what she wants, she is willing to do anything to get it. Her clearest motivation might be jealousy, and all these factors might be a part of explaining why she is so jealous of Lilla. Lilla might be who Victoria would have been if she had the perfect personality and the perfect mother.

Victoria also turns more masculine as she kills. In the beginning of the book, Victoria is described femininely: "her brother [...] had acknowledged that she outshone every female present" (Dacre: 39). Near the end of the book, she is described quite differently; and more masculine: "[...]Victoria he viewed with almost absolute dislike; her strong though noble features, her dignified carriage, her authoritative tone – her boldness, her insensibility, her violence, all struck him with instinctive horror; so utterly opposite to the gentle Lilla[...]" (196). Griffin Wolff (104) said: "the figure who embodies explicit sexual tension is always repudiated." The heroine in a gothic novel could not show sexual desire without getting punished for it, as if to enforce the social definition of women as pure and passive (104). The sort of feminine sexual desire Victoria shows in *Zofloya* can therefore only exist in fiction. Brakke (184) states that in many early Christian works, long before the gothic female was a thing, virtuous women were portrayed as "becoming men". Although Victoria is not virtuous, but she does turn masculine. Brakke (184) further uses this quote from *The Gospel of Thomas*:

"Mary [Magdalene] should leave us, for females are not worthy of life," Jesus replies, "I am going to attract her to make her male so that she too might become a living spirit that resembles you males. For every female that makes herself male will enter the kingdom of heavens."

Whenever a woman showed masculine courage, she became a male, because females were simply not capable of such devotion and courage. When a woman possesses masculine roles

and traits, she is no longer a woman (185). The assumed weakness of women requires that God (or in Victoria's case Satan) grants them strength (185). Victoria is as mentioned not virtuous, but she does not gain Godly strength either. The monastic literature and way of thought has been reversed in some way. The factor that remains is that when a woman can not adhere to her gender roles, she is no longer a woman. This is what we see happen to Victoria in *Zofloya*. It is not womanly to be obsessive and possessive, it is not womanly to kill. Therefore, Victoria cannot be a woman, she must become masculine. In 1806, a representation of a woman was not allowed to not adhere to the gender roles of her time, and still be feminine; her time did not allow her to be an obsessive, jealous killer, and at the same time be a woman.

Villanelle is as previously mentioned quite an interesting character. The premises of the character of Villanelle in the TV-series *Killing Eve* is her relationship with the investigator Eve Polastri. The two characters become obsessed with each other, both in catching each other and a tension of sexual nature (De Carli, Indrusiak: 2020: 49). The series presents to the viewer the crimes committed by Villanelle, and then Eve Polastri and MI6 attempt to catch the assassin. Villanelle's motives from the start seem to be money, as she is a paid assassin (50). In the pilot episode of *Killing Eve*, titled "Nice Face", the viewer is surprised by Villanelle's lack of remorse as she uses a little boy to kill his grandfather; seemingly playing a game with this little boy, and using him to lure his grandfather towards her. She kills him almost as if it were a game and looks to be amused as she does it. Before she kills her victim, she manages to ask him who designed the throw on the bed she is sitting on, a question that is also quite off putting for the viewer, not because of the grotesqueness of it, but because of the lack of it. Villanelle flirts with the victim before she kills him with a poisoned hairpin to his eye. A close-up shot of her face reveals the pleasure she gets when her victim dies (Waller-Bridge 'Nice Face': 2018). Villanelle is reckless, extravagant, and seemingly without a conscience. Killing seems to be a game for Villanelle, but why? We know that Villanelle is motivated by money, but her 'artistic liberties' (if you can call using a poisoned hairpin that?) and seemingly the pleasure she gains from killing is unsettling for the viewer. Although Villanelle never actually admits that she thinks it is pleasurable to kill, the viewer might guess so; a humane assassin (if there is such a thing) might allow their victims to calmly fall asleep and never wake up, but Villanelle plays with her victims, as a cat plays with a mouse.

On BBC America's official website, Villanelle is described as having a cold interior, which is in high contrast to her exterior, which seems innocent, flamboyant, and even childish at times (De Carli, Indrusiak: 59). In the second episode in the first season, called "I'll Deal

with Him Later” Villanelle is famously depicted in a big pink flamboyant dress (Waller-Bridge: 2018). This dress is very feminine, and almost childlike; the innocence of her appearance and the brutal coldness of her interior is striking. Even the colour of the dress, pink, is associated with femininity, this shows that femininity is not something Villanelle is afraid of. As the viewer watches Villanelle in this huge pink dress, it does not seem off-putting that she is feminine, she just looks (femininely)cool. The contrast of her interior and exterior could be a means to attract the viewers’ attention.

When it comes to Villanelles further motivations to kill, in addition to money to support her luxurious life, her background is interesting. Another time we see Villanelle in her own apartment; an apartment that is very large, full of expensive clothes and furniture. Villanelle sits down in front of a mirror, pulls at her face and hair, and blurts out: “Beautiful!”. This shows that she cares about her appearance. Not only that, but she is also actually quite fond of how she looks. Something that might not be very feminine, and I would not say masculine either, but rather feministic. Perhaps feministic in the same way that literature about representations of female serial killers is feministic. Caring about appearance is feminine but admitting to liking what you see in the mirror might not be. As in; women are feminine but killing is not. Villanelle is a representation of both these statements, and not only does she kill, but she also seems to be enjoying it. Nonetheless the viewer gets the impression that Villanelles main motivation to killing is money, even though the enjoyment she seems to be getting from her kills definitely is present (and also off-putting). In the third season of the series, the viewer learns a bit about Villanelles background. She believed her family was dead, but learns that they are alive, and living in rural Ukraine where she grew up. It is in the episode “Are You from Pinner?” Villanelle finally meets her family. The viewer learns that she was sent to an orphanage because her mother could not care for her, not only because of money, but because her mother was afraid of her, Villanelle had a violent reputation from the start. In this episode, Villanelle also ends up killing her own mother without being paid for it which further shows that money is not her only motivation for killing (Waller-Bridge: 2020). It is in prison for murdering her first lover’s husband she is recruited by the group she works for as a paid assassin. Her background could be a reason for her monetary desires, she is perhaps craving something she never had as a child. She has been thought from an early age that if she wants something, she must get it herself.

When she suddenly gets paid (a lot) for what she previously did for free, an obsession with purchasing designer goods and a luxurious lifestyle seems important to Villanelle. I previously mentioned, as Villanelle does her first kill visible to the viewer, she mid

interaction with her victim asks him who designed the throw on the bed she is sitting on. She is later in the episode depicted buying, and then putting a replica of the bed throw from her victim's home on her own bed. Jarvis (328) states that: "The serial killer will be unmasked as a gothic double of the serial consumer." And as mentioned earlier, Jarvis uses Patrick Bateman from *American Psycho* as his example of a serial consuming serial killer. Much like Bateman, Villanelle is a sort of merger between these two categories; 'consuming' in Villanelle's case is both purchasing and destroying. Serial killing is a male affair, but the paradigmatic consumer is female (333). Women have been the main target of advertising since the 19th century, physical self-obsession was encouraged, which we have seen is a trait that Villanelle also possesses. According to Jarvis (333) it is noticeable that representations of serial killers often involve androgyny and gender crisis. And although Villanelle is feminine, she also is childlike and brutal at times, which in grown human beings might be character traits associated with males. She also seems to have a sexual tension with Eve Polastri, and not to say that sexuality and gender is the same thing, but in fiction if you are a serial killer with sexual feelings towards a female detective, the viewer might associate the killer with something masculine. On the other side there are Villanelles feminine traits; her consumption and her obsession of beauty. One might say that these are only superficial feminine traits, but Villanelle is nonetheless a representation of a female serial killer allowed to be feminine. Jarvis (333) states that "According to the binary logic of patriarchy, the killer/victim dyad produces a polarization of gender norms: the killer embodies an über-masculinity while the victim who is dominated, opened and entered personifies a hyper-femininity (irrespective of biology)." Villanelle might be killing so she can consume goods, but after a while she also seems to be killing as a form of consuming, especially when she kills without being paid for it. The über-masculinity of the killer, and the femininity of the consumer is perfectly misplaced in the character of Villanelle. Even though Villanelle possesses some masculine traits in addition to her violence and serial killing, she is a woman, and she is allowed to be feminine.

It seems like Victoria in *Zofloya* is masculine in order to increase similarities between the dark, the masculine, and the murders she commits. What I mean by this is that Victoria is presented as more and more masculine throughout the novel, to enhance the fact that she is a killer. As stated before, this might have something to do with the fact that to be an assertive character you had to be masculine. Femininity and childishness are factors used to enhance contrast with Villanelle in *Killing Eve*. The contrast between what she looks like, and how she acts like is used as an instrument to attract attention; it shows that murder and violence might

still is to be found as a masculine trait, even in present day society and culture. It is just represented differently in Victoria and Villanelle. The usage of contrast and enhanced similarities are means found in both literature and film. These means are used to underline the same point in two strikingly different ways. Victoria is a striking character because of the agency she shows, and Villanelle is a striking character because of the contrast she inhabits, a feminine, childish woman and still; a cold-blooded serial killer. So, even if Villanelle is allowed to be feminine, and Victoria is not; the representation of Villanelle is still affected by violence being seen as a masculine trait. Victoria is described as cruel from her first moments in the book. The viewers first impression of Villanelle is striking as she kills playfully and without remorse. Two complex and cruel female characters, motivated by money, or by sexual desire. As Victoria kills, she grows to be masculine, and Villanelle is a cold brutal killer still possessing feminine traits. Villanelle is a consumer in all the definitions of the word, and her love for purchasing designer goods might be a part of why she is allowed to look feminine, but it is not the only factor. Villanelle is nonetheless perceived as a feminine woman. Because of her time Victoria could not kill alone, and not be punished for it, she needs help from someone, and the most believable character to be helping her is weirdly enough Satan himself, which is also the character that ultimately punishes Victoria for her crimes. A woman with masculine traits in the early 1800's was doomed; not only could she not be a woman, she could not be alive either. Villanelle on the other hand gets to keep being a woman, she gets to be feminine. Some of Villanelles feminine traits could be owed to consumer culture, and consuming fashion as a feminine trait. Even though consuming consumer goods might be a feminine trait, violence might be a masculine trait, and all this makes Villanelle is a woman with some feminine, and some masculine traits. Victoria loses her rights to be a woman when she starts possessing masculine traits like sexual desire and jealousy, whereas Villanelle does not.

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