



The Oppression of Women Through Moral Ideal: A
Look at British Society and Morality Through
Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya, or the Moor* (1806)

LEKTORS BACHELOR THESIS

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Introduction

There is, and have been, a multitude of different reviews of Charlotte Dacre's work. One such example is *The General Review of British and Foreign Literature* which designated it as a work which: "[...] has no pretension to rank as a moral work" and finished their review by summarizing it:

"Thus ends this mass of unqualified vice and unqualified mischief, begun without plan, continued without preparation, and terminated by death in all its several parts, with little of contrast and still less of judicious arrangement"

While their review is harsh, it portrays the values which is deemed central by these reviewers: vice and morality. While the Gothic genre has seen as a move away from the traditional need of having a clear moral tale (Shapira, 2018, p. 178), this review at the time still shows a focus on these aspects as important when perceiving the book in the 19th century. In her thesis "The "Brute" Pair: Faux British Delicacy and Superiority in Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya, or The Moor*" (2014), DeLisa D. Hawkes argues that *Zofloya* illustrates the British empire's need to oppress and alienate what it perceived as a threat to the "pure and strong" British identity, whether it was outside influences on their culture, or the upheaval of older gender norms (Hawkes, 2014, pp. 12-14, 29). To do so a renewed focus on what was considered "moral" was introduced. I will argue how Charlotte Dacre, through *Zofloya, or the Moor*, critiques the patriarchal and sexist society she lived in. More specifically the "angel in the house"-trope, along with the notion of generational sins and its undermining of individuality, and finally how although critical of the morality suppressing women were not necessarily anti-religion despite the institutions or religions part in fronting the morality around the separation of the female and the masculine.

Historical Context

Forming the backdrop of *Zofloya, or the Moor*, published in 1806, and the early 19th century is the French revolution and a British empire at a state of halt from its previous expansion. The French revolution led to a political upheaval in Britain as the upper parts of British society feared a similar revolution happening to them (Kent, 2001, p. 124), while the lower and middle classes causes were invigorated, among these the inequality between the sexes and women's suffrage. This in turn led to an escalated campaign to separate the perception of what was

properly masculine and what was perceived as feminine (Kent, 2001, pp. 114-115). The domestication of women and the masculinization of the political sphere was meant to dissuade both women and men from participating in furthering these ideals and eventually led to the crystallization of the “angel in the house”-trope (Kent, 2001, pp. 74, 124). Another aspect at the time, fueled by the fear of instability in British society was the fear of racial uprisings. More specifically the fear of the “pure” British culture and identity being sullied by the exotic “others” through relationships between British women and these racial “others” (Hawkes, 2014, pp. 1, 5). The racial discrimination thus added onto the campaign of suppression of women’s rights and sexuality.

The elite of British society attempted to stay a dominating power and colonizer by trying to consolidate what they perceived as a British identity. Sadly, this in turn increased the need to extend the divide between the British and the “others” (Hawkes, 2014, p. 26). One major part of attempting this was to give the impression of the French as an immoral and depraved people, given that many now looked to the French Revolution as an example of social change. This, along with reinforcing the piety and morality of adhering to the spheres of the masculine and feminine would give the political want, and need, for stability a religious aspect. Religion has often been used as a tool to uphold the status quo or suppress certain groups. In fact, during the 17th and 19th century it was quite common to quote parts of the bible e.g., the fall of man, in which Eve convinced Adam to partake of the forbidden fruit. This led to the idea that women needed to be subjugated to ensure the safety of men. This deepened the divide between the genders, as women suffered a demonization and infantilization similar to the one used to justify and suppress the colonized people of the empire (Hawkes, 2014, p. 13). Colonists in the British empire often used explanations like the need to help and suppress the “half-child and half-devil” nature of those they colonized. This was used as moral justification for their right to rule over those they deemed inferior (DeLamotte, 2004, p. 91), and their right to suppress the genders into the approved roles they were assigned. Hawkes states that “Britain’s religious and stately control over “proper” womanly decorum contributed to xenophobic and racist ideas on racial and exotic “Otherness” existing in Zofloya’s setting” (Hawkes, 2014, p. 26). This shaped the idea of appropriate feminine conduct to one that is without passion, who is pious, as a refuge for her husband, and one who is very domestic in their roles in society.

Female Virtues and the Mother's Responsibility

Victoria, the main character of *Zofloya*, is not a woman that adheres to the ideals of her time. In fact, Victoria spends most of the book being wild, evil, and blatantly opposes the virtues and portrayal of the ideal woman and the “angel of the house” -trope. However, she still suffers her downfall at the end of the book. While she does keep her “evil” and monstrous nature, she is eventually subjugated by Satan, in the form of a man. This has led to some people reading *Zofloya* as both feministic and anti-feministic. While Hawkes mainly references the general oppression of women through patriarchal society, I believe Dacre uses the ending of the book to specifically reference the fear of repercussions from stepping out of their roles of “the angel of the house” (2014, p. 10). Victoria is at first described as beautiful and accomplished as an angel, although also as “[...] proud, haughty, and self-sufficient—of a wild, ardent, and irrepressible spirit, indifferent to reproof, careless of censure—of an implacable, revengeful, and cruel nature, and bent upon gaining the ascendancy in whatever she engaged” (Dacre, 1806, p. 4). At the start we thus see that Victoria embodies some typical female virtues such as beauty, but also many masculine virtues such as boldness (or an irrepressible spirit), and her cruel, revengeful, and violent nature (Özkan, 2021, pp. 303, 314). The narrator telling the reader that had only Victoria had a proper teacher of virtues in her early life these characteristics might have been turned into something more noble and appropriate, is a reoccurring occurrence throughout the entire book (Dacre, 1806, p. 236). This can be read both as a reference to the idea of the mother as a moral teacher, which will be discussed later in the text, but also can be seen as the voice of the society, critiquing Victoria for transgressing the roles put on her by the very same society. During the book we see Victoria become increasingly depraved as she indulges her non-feminine virtues. The “moral failings” and lack of virtues for women in this book is a major theme, not only those of Victoria, although she is the most prominent example. It is often mentioned how Victoria's mother, Laurina, and her early moral failings by being vain and seduced away from her faithful and loving husband is at fault for the vices and moral failings of her daughter, both by the narrator and by Victoria herself (Dacre, 1806, pp. 236, 243-248).

On page 236, we see the reinforcement of these gendered stereotypes by the narrator laying the blame of Victoria's corruption at her mother through:

“Maternal imprudence, and maternal indiscretion, by destroying the bonds of respect, rendered victim of premature corruption. – Thus, too, noble emulation was perished, and with the character became identifies as cureless habits, errors which time and strict

education would have withered in the germ. In moments of solitude, which occurred but seldom, the wretched Victoria, reflecting upon her early youth, what she *might* have been, and what she *was*, cursed, (terrible to say), the mother that first had weakly indulged, and then, by her own example, tempted and destroyed her.” (Dacre, 1806)

In the late 18th century and early 19th century, the role of woman as a moral teacher at home was both challenged and strengthened. While the French revolution had given many women a drive to partake in politics and “the spheres of men”, i.e., violence and revolution, it also created a sense of fear for the leading elite of Britain. If a violent revolution could happen in what was perceived as a feminine nation, then it could very well happen in their nation as well (Kent, 2001, p. 129). It was therefore published several manuals for the purpose of female conduct, clergymen were utilized for moralizing sermons, and articles were written for newspapers, all to ensure the separation of the male and female spheres (Kent, 2001, p. 129; Hawkes, 2014, p. 27).

As mentioned by *The General Review of British and Foreign Literature*, *Zofloya* is not classified as one of these factors, on the contrary, it is often seen as a critique of this mindset, supporting the transgression of exactly the supposedly “separate spheres”. However, current critical readings of *Zofloya* see the book as quite contradictory, given its support of the transgressions of gender norm, but Victoria still being punished for these transgressions all the same. The quote above may be seen as a critique of her disregarding her own autonomy over her situation and instead acting like a spoiled child, blaming everyone for her own mistakes. If that is the case, one may argue that the quote argues in favor of more independent women, able to make their own decisions. If this is correct, the manuals for the “proper” conduct of women are somewhat ridiculed for their assertion that women are incapable of choices or actions deemed masculine, as Victoria becomes quite adept at transgressing these norms throughout the book. All the same we clearly see the role of the mother as an educator of morality and nobility. This introduces us to the idea of generational traits, or generational vices/sin. The sins of the mother taints the possible more noble version of Victoria’s wild and vile nature. This may be a reference to the Original Sin committed by Eve in the Garden of Eden, which often was used as an argument for subjugating women as mentioned above. However, *Zofloya* can also be seen as referencing the ability to take responsibility for one’s own actions.

Individuality or Familial Predisposition?

““[...] hast thou been in thine own conduct so faultless, and so pure, that thou: should'st deny to thy mother the assurance of love and pardon in an hour like this?”

“Hah!—that is the very point,” exclaimed Victoria, with a wild frightful laugh,—“that which I have been, my mother made me!”” (Dacre, 1806, p. 246)

In this quote, almost at the end of the book, the reader encounters a dying Laurina asking forgiveness from her children, but Victoria instead scorns her mother and blames her for her mistakes and wrongdoings. She references how Laurina, by example, showed her that marriage can be disregarded if one is tempted, and since Laurina gave into her passions, Victoria followed into her footsteps. This reflects the idea mentioned above, of generational sin and the mother's role in the house as a moral teacher to her children. However, her brother, Leonardo, is also present at this moment in the book and scorns her for assigning her own vile deeds to their mother. His quote of “[...] hast thou been in thine own conduct so faultless, and so pure, that thou: should'st deny to thy mother the assurance of love and pardon in an hour like this?” is also interesting as it in essence covers the same message that John 8:7 in the bible does, “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her”. If Dacre meant to reference this bible verse is hard to say, but the thought behind the quote is important, nonetheless. She raises the problem of people in charge, or simply someone outside of the situation itself, ascribing sin and virtuousness to others, often judging, when they themselves commit similar sins.

While Leonardo is far from the puritan ideal of the British society, he is repeatedly described as being more virtuous than Victoria. Despite his sins, being a leader of a gang of banditti among them, he is also able to forgive and shows restraint towards Victoria when she aggravates him for his failings. I believe this is to show the fallacy of the generational sin argument discussed above. While he does sin, he does not commit the same sins that his mother and Victoria commits. He is also able to take credit for his own sins somewhat, blaming Ardolph, the seducer of Laurina, only for his initial fall from honor and not for his situation as a bandit chief. This stands in stark contrast to Victoria, who blames her mother when confronted by her, but often during her actions she describes her burning passions and claiming her heart would “[...] persevere, even to destruction” (Dacre, 1806, p. 159). It is also mentioned how Victoria was born with certain disposition towards vices, commented among others by her brother “thy base mind was naturally evil;—a mother's example might have checked thy

depravity, but could never have rendered thee virtuous!” (Dacre, 1806, p. 247). This message, repeated throughout the book, being repeated once more at the climax of the book, where it is contrasted by her brother, I believe is to finally disband the notion of generational sin. While it can be read as an argument that if Laurina had indeed raised her as a good traditional “angel in the house” mother, Victoria would not be as depraved as she is. However, I think it instead highlights the faults of this train of thought, given how it states that Victoria could never be considered virtuous, not even with an ideal example to guide her. Furthermore, I believe this passage is utilized by Dacre to show the absurdity of the fear that women would turn into deprived people controlled by their vices unless instructed otherwise. Given how her brother does not commit the same sins as both Victoria and Laurina, but also how Victoria, a quite unsympathetic character, acting like a spoiled child refusing to take responsibility for her actions.

As mentioned above, the review by *The General Review of British and Foreign Literature*, Dacre have written a text that is not what they considered a “moral work”. However, this may simply be because Dacre did not adhere to the same moral standards that they idealized, and instead critiques the reduction of individuality, and the natural parts of women’s sexuality, to sins committed by a supposed failed mother. By problematizing the idea of generational sins and critiquing her protagonist for her failure to take personal responsibility, Dacre argues for individualism and against the reduction of female freedom. Townshend also references how societies that mix state and “pastoral powers” can be damning for individuality, as overlying threat of a strict and invasive, moral police often follow these kinds of arrangements. In *Zofloya* this threat towards individuality and its moral police is represented mainly by the Inquisition, but as will be discussed in the next paragraph, moral police can also be any member of society.

Consequences of Transgressions

With the separation of the spheres having become more defined, and with state and religion becoming closely entwined in their effort to ensure the imagined purity of their people, transgressions from these roles were heavily discouraged. This were, as mentioned above, used against all who betrayed their role in this society, both women who step out of the “angel of the house”-trope or others failing to conform to the masculine and feminine ideals. In *Zofloya*, the fear of the consequences of transgressing actions is portrayed through the mention of the

Inquisition. Although it is mentioned only a few times, they are an ever-present threat to the schemes of Victoria.

““But you commit no crime against the state, Signora; you are no heretic.” “True, but the pretended accusation for these crimes are frequently the vehicles of punishment for other offences; hatred, suspicion, or malice, conveys an anonymous line into the lion’s mouth; the familiars of the holy inquisition are every where, and, though summoned before its awful tribunal upon false grounds, the torture soon wrests from you a confession of those offences of which you have been really guilty.” (Dacre, 1806, p. 167)

In this passage we see Victoria worry about the consequences of poisoning her husband in Venice, as it is too populated, and someone may figure out that she is guilty of the crime. However, in this passage we also see the fear of being prosecuted, not by the state, but by the church. While *Zofloya* is set in the 15th century Italia, and the Inquisition never had a major presence in England, one may interpret it as a looming fear or critique of a state power and religious institution blending into one another. Through this excerpt, Dacre also comments on the dangers of mixing state and religion through “the pretended accusation for these crimes are frequently the vehicles of punishment for other offences; hatred, suspicion, or malice, conveys an anonymous line into the lion’s mouth” (Dacre, 1806, p. 167). Raising the problem of false accusations, which can be made by anyone, when one’s crime simply is “moral degradation”. Once accused of moral degradation it may be hard to disprove, and easy to admit to when threatened with harder punishment for denying it. Also, by the strict standards of what was considered moral and right for the different genders, what was considered a moral transgression changed.

Many lower- and middle-class women needed to work to be able to put food on the table, and since this contradicted the idea of a good stay-at-home mom, many “plebeian women came by the end of the eighteenth century to be regarded as coarse, profligate, and degraded; portrayed as shameful, suspect, and even criminal” (Kent, 2001, pp. 70-71). Women who worked, both in lower and middle classes were looked down upon as morally corrupt for their transgressions, suffering social judgement. This also affected the men, who were expected to be the sole worker and provider of the house, but there was trouble to find work paying well enough for only the men to provide. This in turn led to a shame and psychic stresses for the men, which in turn led to an increase in alcoholism, domestic violence, and desertion (Kent, 2001, p. 74). Many women at the time thus suffered no matter their supposed morality, whether

it be from poverty, violence at home, or suffering social degrading by the moral policing of their neighbors and church. Given the horrible situation, either suffering extreme poverty or suffering abuse in the home, Dacre critiquing the system of linking morality regarding sexuality to the politics of the state and the reduction of female individuality seems a likely interpretation. This shows how no matter how one acted, there was negative consequences, leading to suppressed and desperate people.

Anti-Religion or Anti-Abuse?

Given the involvement of religion and the idea of pious morality, it is understandable that some saw the problems this blending of state and religion had caused and thus critiqued it. The gothic genre has often been interpreted as somewhat hostile towards religion, or at least taking a step away from it, there are also interpretations that support the idea that it is not necessarily against religion, but rather against the growing power religion had on people's lives during these times. Lisa Tennfjord Vadset argued this in her master's thesis "Religion, society and the Gothic in Radcliffe, Hawthorne and Hogg" (2015). In Vadset's thesis she used Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian*, James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* to argue that religion were often a major theme in gothic novels and was not portrayed negatively in itself, but rather the misuse of religion for one's own gain (2015, pp. 48, 52, 64). I argue that this is a possible reading in *Zofloya* as well, given the societal pressures of the correct virtues and the religious undertones it is presented with, and the threat of the Inquisition as mentioned above.

The idea that Dacre, like her fellow gothic authors, was not opposed to religion, but the misuse of it, is supported by the fact that she later in life became protestant, instead of atheist (Hoeveler, 2005, p. 176). Hoeveler argues that Dacre writes different characters, mainly Zofloya, the character not the book, to be a representation of the negative parts of being Jewish that she identified with her own father. Being Jewish at Dacre's time was far from easy, given that antisemitism was quite commonplace at the time, shown by the rejection of the Jewish naturalization bill in 1753 (Hoeveler, 2005, p. 166). However, Dacre's father and his growing number of scandals created much embarrassment for Dacre while she attempted to establish herself as a woman writer, and as a respectable wife to her eventual husband, Nicholas Byrne (Hoeveler, 2005, p. 169). While Hoeveler argues that *Zofloya* is written as a demonization of the Jew, more specifically Dacre's own Jewish identity and a representation of her own flawed

father, Hoeveler also argues that this is not necessarily the Jewish identity nor religion as a whole, but rather the identity created and represented by her own father. Dacre eventually took on a protestant identity in favor of her Jewish one, therefore I believe the final scenes can be read as more of a condemnation of the ugly stereotypes, perpetuated by her father and British society, rather than a negative view of the Jewish religion as a whole. This in turn would support the idea that Dacre critiqued what she saw as abuse of religion as a tool for morality rather than being hostile towards religion as a whole.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have looked at some of the historical context surrounding the British society during the time *Zofloya, or the Moor* was written. An empire at a standstill, with a grand upheaval in a similar European country, felt threatened that a similar situation might happen in their own society. This in turn led to an attempt to consolidate what they perceived as the proper and strong British identity. Sadly, this meant suppressing the rising number of women who wished for a change in gender norms. This was done with help from different institutions in the British society, and when combining state and religion, the new separate spheres of masculinity and femininity emerged. During this thesis I have brought up how I interpret Charlotte Dacres book as a critique of this form of morality, especially the reductionist image of women as domestic teachers, who had to be contained from their own sexuality and actions in fear of corrupting the British ideal society. She also rejects the notion of “generational sins” through her representation of Victoria and her brother, by showing arguing for individualism and personal accountability, and satirizing the idea of women and men as completely shaped by the bad actions of their mother. By writing about Victoria, a protagonist who repeatedly transgress the moral ideal for women at the time by being a violent, proud, evil, and driven young woman she is able to portray a complex character with positive and negative traits, directly opposing the view of what proper womanhood entailed. However, by critiquing the aspects of Victoria who reiterate the moral teachings of society around, her she manages to critique some of the major aspects of the sexist morals pushed by British society at the time. *Zofloya, Or the Moor* thus represents a multitude of critiques towards the moral standards put on women at the time.

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