

Varieties of Female Gothic

Erotic Gothic

Edited by
Gary Kelly



VARIETIES OF FEMALE GOTHIC



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General editor:
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INTRODUCTION

Charlotte Dacre has been seen in her time and since as one of a group of women Romantic writers who made their subject the erotic. In *Ideas and Innovations: Best Sellers of Jane Austen's Age*, Ann H. Jones declares that 'Charlotte Dacre's style was always to be fevered and sexual relationships were to be of paramount importance in all she wrote', and she cites Dacre's contemporary Sarah Green's inclusion of Dacre among 'the most licentious writers of romance of the time'.¹ Compared to erotic fiction today, Dacre's *The Libertine* (4 vols, 1807) may not seem very sensual, since it never describes sexual activity directly and refers to it very obliquely. Like M. G. Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), *The Libertine* is 'erotic' in the sense that it represents desire, specifically in terms of sexual desire. The sexual here, however, as in *The Monk* and elsewhere in Romantic literature, is a figure for the passions and desire as generalised and paradoxical attributes of individual subjectivity, and a supposed part of human nature. The erotic is a paradoxical or ambiguous attribute of self because it has two contradictory aspects. On the one hand, it is the force impelling individual self-realisation across a diverse range of activity, from self-fashioning to imperial power, from artistic self-expression to capitalist accumulation, from commercialised consumption to participation in the fashion system, from acquisition of social status to career success, and even political power. On the other hand, as was demonstrated daily in contemporary history and current events, in scandal sheets and *romans-à-clef*, in newspaper lists of bankrupts, in accounts of the rise and fall of governments, and in biographies of Revolutionaries, the erotic could destroy not only oneself, but also family, party, nation and empire.

In short, the erotic was highly suitable for the Gothic novel's engagement with central concerns of its predominantly middle-class reading public. Robert Miles, following recent historians of sexuality, points out that the sexual erotic is central to major Gothic texts, including Sophia Lee's *The Recess* (1783–5), Charlotte Smith's *Emmeline* (1788), Lewis's *The Monk*, Radcliffe's *The Italian* (1797), Coleridge's 'Christabel' (written 1797–1800), Dacre's *Zofloya; or the Moor: A Romance of the Fifteenth Century* (1806) and *The Libertine*, Mary Ann Radcliffe's *Manfroné* (1809) and Keats's 'Eve of St Agnes' (1820). All of these

1 Ann H. Jones, *Ideas and Innovations: Best Sellers of Jane Austen's Age* (New York: AMS Press, 1986), p. 224.

texts, Miles argues, incorporate ‘conflicts between fathers and daughters, mothers and sons, authority and youth, and almost always the conflict shapes itself as that between the demands of alliance (the preservation of “blood”) and the urgency of personal choice, of sexuality at sea with a multitude of choices, of a desire that has slipped its moorings.’¹ This conflict may be seen as an enactment of the central themes of the Gothic novel, and Romantic literature generally. As an increasing number of critics have insisted, representation or invention of a certain kind of subjectivity was a central project of Romantic and Gothic writing and culture – not a discovery of something already there, or in human nature, but constructed and developed to serve certain interests.² Among these interests were class interests. As I argued in the General Introduction to this series, during the heyday of the Gothic romance a certain model of individual subjectivity became the basis for a wide range of related claims and demands made by the middle classes who comprised the reading public. These included claims to ‘rights’ of all kinds, including private and public rights; the expectation of freedom of choice, from consumption to the electoral franchise; the demand that social, economic and political institutions be reformed and based on merit, not ascribed status; and mobilisation to achieve constitutional state structures based on representative democracy by and for (adult male) sovereign subjects. The erotic Gothic expresses and addresses these claims in relation to forms of class conflict of that time. For in the erotic Gothic, subjectivity is represented as a field of struggle between desire for the social other, in particular the hegemonic aristocratic other, and the need for self-discipline, for ‘reason’, ‘virtue’ and ‘duty’, to control desire, or rather – in religious terms invoked frequently – to direct desire to good rather than evil. In this introduction, I will first give some account of Dacre as a leading woman writer of the literary erotic, then describe the literary, cultural, social and political contexts of the erotic and erotic writing in her time, then consider the complexities of her development of the erotic through her literary career, and finally place Dacre’s work in the history of writing the erotic, from Revolution and Romanticism to psychoanalysis and post-modernism.

Who Charlotte Dacre was is not known with complete certainty. There is more certainty, however, about the literary persona she maintained through her poetry and novels as a woman writer within a certain contemporary development of the literary erotic. She may have been born in 1783, since the note ‘To the Public’ in her *Hours of Solitude: A Collection of Original Poems* (1805) states that she is ‘at the age of three-and-twenty’. One way to place her is this book’s

1 Robert Miles, *Gothic Writing 1750–1820: A Genealogy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 27.

2 See Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Clifford Siskin, *The Historicity of Romantic Discourse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); and Andrea K. Henderson, *Romantic Identities: Varieties of Subjectivity, 1774–1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

dedication to John Penn, grandson of William Penn, proprietor of Pennsylvania. John Penn built a fine country house at Stoke Poges, served as sheriff of Buckinghamshire and MP for Helston, Cornwall, and in 1805 was governor of the Isle of Portland, Dorset.¹ Byron, in his career as a satirist of his contemporaries, started the claim that Charlotte Dacre was the daughter of John King (i.e., Jacob Rey 1753–1824), moneylender and associate of leading writers, intellectuals and aristocrats, and a notorious person in the late eighteenth century. Dacre, under her pen name of Rosa Matilda, is mentioned in successive editions of Byron's *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (first published 1809), where he associates her with the notorious Della Cruscan poets who, led by Robert Merry ('Della Crusca') and largely answered by Hannah Cowley ('Anna Matilda'), had caused a sensation in the late 1780s with a series of epistolary poems published in the magazine *The World*. The Della Cruscans' work emphasised the tormented subjectivity of the poet and was highly expressive, irregular in form, erotically suggestive, and critical of 'the world', or the dominant order of power, rank and social convention. In a note to the second edition of his poem (1809), Byron declared that 'this lovely little Jessica' (a common term for a Jewish woman) was a daughter of the man known colloquially as 'Jew King' and that she seemed to follow the Della Cruscans in her poetry and Lewis's *The Monk* in her fiction.² Byron's claims regarding Dacre's literary parentage are sound, but controversy clouds his other assertions.

Donald H. Reiman argues that there is no evidence for the claim that Dacre was King's daughter, or even stepdaughter.³ Ann H. Jones, in *Ideas and Innovations*, argues that evidence does exist, including marriage and burial records that would have Dacre born in 1771 or 1772.⁴ Furthermore, Adriana Craciun, in her 1997 edition of Dacre's novel *Zofloya; or, The Moor* (1806), asserts that Dacre must be King's daughter because she republished in *Hours of Solitude* poems earlier published by Charlotte King, with those of Sophia King, in *Trifles of Helicon* (1798), dedicated to Charlotte and Sophia King's father John King.⁵ The entry on Dacre in *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English*⁶ also points out that

1 Charlotte Dacre, *Hours of Solitude*, ed. Donald H. Reiman (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1978), p. x.

2 Reiman (ed.), *Hours of Solitude*, p. vi.

3 Reiman, (ed.), *Hours of Solitude*, pp. vii–ix.

4 Jones, *Ideas and Innovations*, pp. 224–7.

5 Charlotte Dacre, *Zofloya; or, The Moor*, ed. Adriana Craciun, (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1997), pp. 35–6. The complete dedication, dated 14 January 1798, reads: 'To John King, Esq. Instead of the mature fruit of the Muses, accept the blossoms; they are to show you that the education you have afforded us has not been totally lost: – when we grow older, we hope to offer you others with less imperfections. Your Affectionate Daughters Charlotte King, Sophia King.'

6 Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements and Isobel Grundy (eds), *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English: Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

some of the poems in *Hours of Solitude* are acknowledged to be reprinted from a novel entitled *The Fatal Secret; or, Unknown Warrior: A Romance of the Twelfth Century, with Legendary Poems* (1801); this was by Sophia King. Another of Byron's references, to Dacre having 'married the Morning Post',¹ has been taken to indicate that Dacre married or formed a connection with either William Pitt Byrne, editor of that newspaper, or Nicholas Byrne, a printer and possibly its manager. Montague Summers, Zofloya's earlier twentieth-century editor, opts for the former version.² Jones and Craciun opt for the latter version and accordingly build a biography of Dacre based on what is known of Nicholas Byrne and his wife, including the birth of a son in 1806, another son in 1807, a daughter in 1809, baptism of the three children in 1811, and marriage of the couple in 1815, apparently after Byrne's wife died. Meanwhile, Charlotte Dacre and 'Rosa Matilda' became commonplace figures of satire.³ She is credited with a work entitled *George the Fourth* (1822), perhaps a commission offered to a still notorious woman author in the aftermath of the 'trial' and death of George IV's notoriously libertine queen, Caroline. If Charlotte Dacre was the woman Byrne married in 1815, then she died on 7 November 1825 in London after a long illness, according to an obituary in *The Times* newspaper. If Dacre was not in fact the spouse, married or unmarried, of either Byrne, then none of this is true. The possibility that it is true has obvious appeal – it makes Dacre a socially marginal, sexually transgressive, culturally avant-garde woman writer who can be readily identified with the subject matter of her published work.

Such an identification is consistent with strong cultural and political ideologies developed in Dacre's day, by her among many others, and continuing to the present. These are the Romantic and liberal ideology of the author, the view that literature is inherently autobiographical, and the liberal feminist ideology that protest is authenticated by personal experience, summed up in the maxim that 'the personal is the political', and vice versa. This is a maxim which has, in the past few decades, been applied to the life and literary career of many women writers of Dacre's time, such as her older contemporary Mary Wollstonecraft, as well as her younger contemporary, and Wollstonecraft's daughter, Mary Shelley.⁴ The case of another contemporary should cause us to hesitate in assuming these ideological models, however. A major contributor to the Della Cruscan

1 In a manuscript note of 1816 to *English bards and Scotch Reviewers*; see Reiman (ed.), *Hours of Solitude*, pp. vi–vii.

2 Charlotte Dacre, *Zofloya; or, The Moor*, ed. Montague Summers, (London: Fortune Press, [1928]), p. v; see also Montague Summers, 'Byron's "Lovely Rosa"', *Essays in Petto* (1928, Freeport: Books for Libraries, 1967), pp. 57–73.

3 See Lisa M. Wilson, 'Female Pseudonymity in the Romantic "Age of Personality": The Career of Charlotte King/Rosa Matilda/Charlotte Dacre', *European Romantic Review*, 9:3 (Summer 1998), pp. 393–420.

4 See Helen M. Buss, D. L. Macdonald, and Anne McWhir (eds), *Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley: Writing Lives* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2001).

writings was ‘Anna Matilda’, whom Dacre would claim as her literary mother by adopting the pen name ‘Rosa Matilda’. Through many months of torrid verse correspondence in *The World* ‘Anna Matilda’ concealed her identity. The reading public and ‘Della Crusca’ himself, Robert Merry, were agog to discover who she was, with speculation rife that, based on her poetic persona and the poetics of autobiographical authenticity that permeated the Della Cruscan correspondence, she must be an ‘interesting’ female with a colourful, transgressive and sorrowful life appropriate to her published verse letters. In fact, when the moment of revelation came, ‘Anna Matilda’ turned out to be a thoroughly domestic middle-aged wife and mother and hard-working playwright with the unromantic name of Hannah Cowley, who wrote for money and took up the Della Cruscan rhetoric to promote her work.¹ The vogue for the Della Cruscans never recovered. Nevertheless, ‘Rosa Matilda’, or Charlotte Dacre, took on the Della Cruscan poetics and politics, along with those of Lewis’s erotic Gothic, in the literary and public culture of her day, as Byron indicates in his comments and notes in *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*. The association of Della Cruscan poetry and Lewis’s version of Gothic romance formed only a part, however, of a complex, controversial and rapidly developing discourse of the erotic and especially the sexual erotic in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain and Europe.

This discourse around the erotic was thoroughly implicated in the larger public debates of the time. Since the work of Michel Foucault, at least, sexuality has been pluralised and sexualities have been seen as socially and historically particular rather than as transhistorical constants or anthropological universals.² Historians of sexuality argue that the late eighteenth century saw a marked redefinition of sexuality, especially within middle-class culture.³ Up to the late eighteenth century, particularly in many parts of the middle classes, various kinds of erotic activity, between partners of opposite or same sex, as desire or opportunity offered, were considered to be sexual and were more or less tolerated by the peer group. In the lower classes, at least, pregnancy seems to have been considered a fertility test – essential to a potential conjugal unit who would be part of an extended family and have to rely in turn on children for support in sickness and old age. In the middle and upper classes, female sexuality was more controlled because of the legislated connection between marriage and property and between legitimacy of children and the secure, uncontested

1 See W. N. Hargreaves-Mawdesley, *The English Della Cruscans and Their Time, 1783–1828* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967).

2 See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 2, *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), pp. 4–5.

3 See Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage: The Family and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979); Miles, *Gothic Writing*, pp. 18–29; and Tim Hitchcock, *English Sexualities, 1700–1800* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Press, 1997).

transference of property from one male to another and one generation to another. Historians of sexuality seem to find a shift in the late eighteenth century to defining sexuality more narrowly, tending to restrict it to heterosexual 'penetrative' intercourse within marriage, while other forms of sexual expression tended to be reclassified as 'perversions'. Social historians and historians of the family identify certain associated developments. These include the narrowing of the family circle, the separation of the 'home' from the workplace (resulting in the invention of suburbs), the idealisation of the domestic sphere as nurturer of authentic sovereign subjectivity and refuge from a conflicted social and public sphere, greater stress upon affective relationships between parents and children, and the redefinition of 'friendship' from a bond of mutual and practical self-interest to a bond of intersubjective cultural, intellectual and affective sympathy.¹ These developments may be linked to broader ones in the progressive middle classes' movement toward social and cultural hegemony, and political power, and may be seen as forms of resistance to historic patterns and institutions of power. All of these issues and developments appear, fictionalised and Gothicked, in the work of Charlotte Dacre.

Freer kinds and definitions of sexuality had long been associated by moral and social commentators with the upper classes on the one hand and the lower classes on the other. In the domain of state politics, court monarchies of the kind that characterised Europe, and even Britain in a modified form, were widely seen to operate through 'backstairs politics' or the 'mistress system'. Since royal and many aristocratic marriages were for dynastic and property reasons, or reasons of state and estate interest, many men and women in these classes sought affective and sexual satisfaction in extramarital relations. Male and even female monarchs were widely thought to be influenced or controlled through their mistresses or lovers by certain factions or interests at court, especially in operating the patronage system by which state offices, emoluments and monopolies were distributed. Notorious examples ranged from the court of the Empress Catherine of Russia to the court of Louis XVI of France. Despite some scandals in the British royal family, many in Britain seem to have believed that the British court was relatively free from the vices, including sexual vices, considered typical of more despotic court regimes on the Continent, and also in regions such as Asia – from Turkey to China. 'Oriental' decadence, including certain forms of eroticism and sexuality, whether at the court of the king of France or the court of the Mogul emperor of India, was seen as 'not British', yet a temptation to British youth, and it was condemned and warned against in a stream of conduct and advice books and in all forms of literature, including Gothic romance.

1 See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1989); Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, revised edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), art. 'Family'.

Middle-class moralists and social critics generally viewed lower-class sexuality as a version of upper-class extravagance, vice and decadence. Such critics viewed as simply immoral and undisciplined the lower classes' reliance on peer group and local community standards for acceptable sexuality, their relative openness in defining what constituted sexual activity, their practice of premarital sex as fertility test, the tendency of many couples to ignore the formalities of legal marriage, and the apparently high number of children in lower-class families (in most cases, and as in other classes, probably a hedge against high child mortality rates). Middle-class social reformers would associate lower-class sexuality with other forms of personal and social indiscipline – opportunistic approaches to work, tendency to stop working when enough had been made for immediate personal and family needs, tolerance or even glamorisation of certain kinds of crime, engagement in forms of socially ritualistic violence such as blood sports and boxing, strong adherence to a separate set of standards for times of festival and carnival, and propensity for what seemed 'mob' violence. Late eighteenth-century moralists saw such behaviour, along with lower-class sexuality, as bad ways acquired by the lower classes in emulating their 'betters', in this case the historic hegemonic class – the aristocracy. As modern social historians have argued, however, these elements of lower-class social culture, including sexuality, were complex responses to historic conditions of imminent, and often actual, subsistence crisis, and of the futility for most of the working poor of acquiring a reserve against hard times. In fact, the lower classes relied instead on a moral economy of mutual interest between classes, in which labour would be offered when the well-to-do needed it, and the well-to-do would offer occasional succour to the lower classes in lean times, as occasional charity or as the more traditional customary doles.¹

In other words, late eighteenth-century middle-class moral and social commentators saw a dialectic between upper- and lower-class vice. Reinforcing this view was a belief that the power of the upper class corrupted the lower class by robbing them of independence and self-reliance, and that in response the powerless lower classes eagerly flattered and corrupted their 'betters', in their own self-interest and for their own self-protection, if not indeed out of social envy and hatred. In terms of sexuality, lower-class and even middle-class women were widely considered fair sexual game for socially superior males, and representation of such exploitative relationships is almost ubiquitous in eighteenth-century literature, from Defoe's *Roxana* (1724) and Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) through Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1748–9) and Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall* (1762) to Wollstonecraft's *The Wrongs of Woman* (1798) and Mary Hays's *The Victim of Prejudice* (1799). In *Pamela*, however, and increasingly through the century, the lower-class (or apparently lower-class) female victim of

1 See Bob Bushaway, *By Rite: Custom, Ceremony and Community in England 1700–1800* (London: Junction Books, 1982); E. P. Thompson, *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (New York: The New Press, 1993).

courtly aristocratic libertinism is a figure for the middle-class reading public's idealised version of itself, persecuted and preyed upon by, but virtuously resisting, the hegemonic upper class and its systems of patronage and patriarchy. This self-idealised image as 'virtue in distress' was especially characteristic of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Gothic fiction.¹

Such corrupt and corrupting relationships were seen as even more characteristic of the highest levels of society and state, and especially of a royal court. A commonplace of European views of 'oriental' despotism, East or West, was the corruption of dependents by court despots and the responding corruption of despots, and especially young despots-to-be, by the flattery and sycophancy of dependents. Since the Renaissance, at least, plays, novels, histories, secret court memoirs, and *romans-à-clef* represented monarchs corrupted by courtiers' flattery and mistresses' blandishments, against the national and public interest, weakening resistance to external enemies, creating division in the state down to the level of the ordinary family. Many middle-class educators and moralists warned that the same thing could happen in the private and domestic sphere, and by the late eighteenth century parents were increasingly warned against leaving children alone with servants, who, like self-interested courtiers, would use flattery and immediate gratification to gain influence or power over their future masters and mistresses. In the process however, such domestic courtiers would undermine the youths' development of the moral self-discipline, intellectual capital, and ability to defer immediate gratification that were considered necessary for middle-class professions, trades, business, and domestic security and stability. Such domestic corruption, as a parallel to, result of or allegory for similar corruption in the public political sphere, was represented often in literature, indicating a continuing anxiety about it among the middle-class reading public. On the threshold of the French Revolution, these situations were fictionalised for British readers in Dr John Moore's highly regarded, quasi-Gothic 'philosophical' novel, *Zeluco* (1789). In the middle of the Revolutionary decade they were fictionalised again in Lewis's widely read, if not so highly regarded, Gothic novel *The Monk*. All of these relationships are represented in the writings of Dacre, too, particularly in *The Libertine*.

Such were the social and cultural contexts of Dacre's novel, and indeed much of the literature of the time. Events of the French Revolution, its aftermath and the Napoleonic era exacerbated these anxieties around historic and changing patterns and cultures of sexuality, and the erotic more generally. The Revolution and Napoleonic period presented observers in Britain with a continuing spectacle of the interplay between the political and the sexual erotic; similar kinds of interplay could be observed in Britain itself. Britons had long associated France and French culture with the decadently erotic, largely through

1 On the figure of 'virtue in distress' see R. F. Brissenden, *Virtue in Distress: Studies in the Novel of Sentiment from Richardson to Sade* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1974).

scandals surrounding the French royal court but also through French literature, which, as Britons would have seen it, was more permissive and characterised by upper-class libertinism of a kind that Britain had not seen since the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, after the Puritan Commonwealth, and the reign of the 'merry monarch', Charles II. Many in Britain ascribed the outbreak of the French Revolution to the excessive decadence, including sexual license, of the French court and ruling class. In the early years of the Revolution, the sexual intrigues of various Revolutionary figures and factions attracted notice, and in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, published in November 1790, Edmund Burke offered a chilling yet titillatingly erotic image of the Revolutionary 'mob', led by a band of disreputable women, breaking into the royal 'home' (the palace of Versailles), and threatening the Queen of France with physical violence and perhaps sexual violation. Many in Britain knew the character of Marie Antoinette and her reputation for sexual complaisance, if not libertinism, and would have found Burke's image ludicrous.

Some in Britain, at least, however, would have known that pornography was used very broadly by Revolutionaries to ridicule and attack the queen, the court, the aristocracy and the monarchy's historic supporters in the church.¹ English Gothic novelists' depictions of licentious monks and nuns can be read as an attenuated version of such anti-clerical, anti-Catholic use of pornography. Revolutionary Gothic horror and grotesque could certainly be read into such infamous incidents as the lynching and dismemberment of, among others, Marie Antoinette's 'notorious favourite',² the Princesse de Lamballe, and public parading of her genitals, stuck on a pike, during the September Massacres in Paris in 1792. Yet the Revolution, in certain aspects and at certain times, represented itself as a rejection of the libertinism and license supposedly characteristic of the *ancien régime*. The Jacobin regime and Terror of 1793–4 proclaimed a republic of virtue, and leading figures such as Robespierre affected a Spartan and Roman republican puritanism, but other figures in the government were known libertines. The overthrow of the Jacobins in the Thermidorean reaction of 1794 and the government of the Directory during the mid-1790s saw a recrudescence of what seemed like courtly sexual license and intertwining of political and sexual intrigue of a kind that had been thought characteristic of the *ancien régime*. The rise of Bonaparte, who was united with and then married to a famous erotic character of Revolutionary circles, Joséphine de Beauharnais, gave British observers further excuse to characterise the Revolution as a courtly regime disguised behind hypocritical assertions of bourgeois virtue, and as libertinism in a masquerade of liberty.

1 See Lynn Hunt, 'Pornography and the French Revolution', *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500–1800* (New York: Zone Books, 1996), pp. 301–39.

2 William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 192.

In fact, throughout the Revolution in France and the Revolution debate in Britain, there was frequent play on associations of 'liberty' with 'libertinism', and 'liberty' with 'licence'. 'Liberty' and 'libertine' are in fact cognate: in English, 'libertine' first meant a 'freedman', 'one manumitted from slavery', after Latin usage. It later came to mean a 'religious free-thinker' or 'sceptic', 'someone who freely followed inclination', or 'someone who is morally unrestrained', especially in sexual matters and usually male. 'Licence' in English originally meant 'liberty, 'freedom', after the Latin for 'lawful, permitted'; later it came to mean 'excessive liberty', including 'libertinism'. In the British Revolution debate, which tracked the process of the Revolution itself through the 1790s, many who wished to support moderate reform, or to excuse themselves once the Revolution that they had welcomed turned increasingly violent, declared that they supported 'liberty' but not 'licence'. These political usages were complexly involved with sexual ones, and not just in following the course of the French Revolution; Britons were able to make the associations at home, over the span of Charlotte Dacre's career as a writer of the erotic. As the early war against the Revolution stalled, as Revolutionary armies then spread across Europe, and later still, as British forces and subsidised allies repeatedly failed to halt Napoleonic imperialism, counter-Revolutionary propagandists in Britain blamed national sinfulness for this apparent divine disapproval. Days of national atonement were proclaimed and anti-vice campaigns were organised – at least against lower-class vice. The relation of 'liberty' and 'libertinism' in this national debate was more complex than the public rhetoric indicated, however.

On the one hand, the rhetoric was turned against certain political elements in Britain. Counter-Revolutionary propagandists smeared British reformers and Revolutionary sympathisers with charges of political hypocrisy in proclaiming virtue while practising transgressive sexuality, and with undermining the national character by their attacks on religion and morality, particularly directed at young women. Leading English feminists such as the late Mary Wollstonecraft were pilloried in the loyalist press, especially after the publication of a revealing biography of her in 1798 by her widower, William Godwin. Anti-Jacobin novels such as Elizabeth Hamilton's *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* (1796) and *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800) and Isaac D'Israeli's *Vaurien* (1797) portrayed French Revolutionaries as ambitious libertines and English Revolutionary sympathisers as hypocrites or as dupes of the wily foreigners. In such novels young women are portrayed as the victims of these men, with their virtue sapped by Revolutionary freethinking, anti-clericalism and spurious egalitarianism, then seduced, and finally abandoned to ruin, prostitution and death. As in Gothic fiction, the female victim was a figure for the middle-class reading public itself, misled by revolutionary propaganda, seduced by the self-styled intellectual aristocracy of revolutionary philosophers, and left to fall into the abyss of lower-class non-identity. At the same time, ideological crusaders such as Hannah More, who had led a print campaign against upper-class vices in the 1780s and early 1790s, and against lower-class street literature in the mid-

1790s, now proclaimed, in such works as *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799), a role for middle-class women as national redeemers. To save the nation, More argued, women would have to work within the home to reject fashionable upper-class vices, decadence, freethinking, libertinism, and especially a wide range of modern literature, most of it foreign or imitating foreign writers, and much of it Gothic.

On the other hand, many also blamed the nation's ills on the libertinism and decadence of the British ruling class, including some members of the royal family, for setting a bad example all too readily emulated by the middle and lower ranks in society, thereby facilitating a wide range of national problems. These ranged from espousing reformist or even revolutionary sympathies to advance their own power and influence, thereby encouraging dissidents in other classes, to misusing power for their own rather than the national interest, thereby weakening Britain's ability to resist external threat. The royals and the aristocrats certainly gave these critics much to complain of, over a long succession of years. The royal family itself suffered from the usual conflict between the generations, with the Prince of Wales alienated from his father George III, destabilising the political order. As part of his rebelliousness, the Prince associated with the parliamentary opposition, led by Fox and Sheridan and, until 1790, at least, Burke, who advocated political and institutional reform. He also rejected his father's often satirised domesticity, bourgeois economy and marital fidelity. The Prince was profligate, extravagant and a libertine. Even when he showed some conjugal steadiness, secretly marrying his mistress Mary Anne (or Maria) Fitzherbert, a Catholic, in 1785, he broke the law, and had to deny the relationship when he tried to persuade parliament and his father to pay his enormous debts. Nevertheless, the connection continued off and on for many years and was a constant source of scandal. For a real life parallel to Dacre's fictional libertine and gambler, readers had only to open their newspapers.

There were even worse problems. When George III became insane in 1788 there was a political crisis, because if he remained disabled the Prince would be declared regent and would therefore have the patronage, power and influence to bring the opposition into office. This crisis passed, but the possibility of a regency remained, and became more alarming to conservatives when many in the opposition welcomed the French Revolution, at least in its early stages. In order to get his debts paid once again, the Prince married an obscure and eccentric German princess, Caroline, in 1795, and together they produced the long desired heir to the throne in a daughter, Charlotte. The royal couple soon separated, however, and their relationship would continue to produce scandal and to rock the ship of state for another 25 years. In general, the public sided with the Princess and against her notoriously profligate husband. He feared that in case of his own incapacity, perhaps through madness such as his father's, she would be made regent and guardian of the royal heir, and so a struggle ensued over care and custody of young Charlotte. Caroline herself lived a life of libertinism in private. In 1806, a year before Dacre published *The Libertine*, reports of

Caroline's scandalous behaviour were widely circulated and the King appointed a commission of inquiry. The commission exonerated her and the public again sided with her, but the taint of scandal remained. Elements of these events may be found fictionalised in various works of the time, but certainly in Dacre's novel. There were other royal scandals, and in 1820–1 the conflict between Caroline and her husband would bring the country, as many thought, to the brink of revolution.

These are the public and political contexts of Charlotte Dacre's literary career, of erotic Gothic fiction in general, and of *The Libertine* in particular. The literary contexts were not separate from, but, as this account has tried to show, part of the public and political contexts. Charlotte Dacre, whoever she may have been in reality, constructed a literary persona and career designed to address and exploit these contexts, in specific ways. She situated herself in the line of Della Cruscan poetics and politics, as 'Rosa Matilda'. She reinforced this identity by comparing herself explicitly with Mary Robinson, former mistress of the infamous Prince of Wales, occasional participant in the Della Cruscan poetic correspondence, and the woman writer who most successfully exploited her own public identity as a fallen woman. Finally, in her novels, Dacre constructs herself as a female version of the reformed libertine adopted as a persona by Lewis in *The Monk*.

If Charlotte Dacre was the erstwhile Charlotte King, then her first known publication in book form was *Trifles of Helicon*, a slim volume of poems by her and her sister Sophia (later Sophia Fortnum), in 1798. As its title suggests, it represents the kind of the amateur belletrism practised by many late eighteenth-century middle-class men and women as a sign of possessing genteel literary culture. In that case, Dacre's second publication was a novel dedicated to M. G. Lewis, entitled *Confessions of the Nun of St. Omer: A Tale* (3 vols, 1805), by 'Rosa Matilda', published by the somewhat downmarket firm of Hughes. It combines elements of several different successful novels of the day, including the Anti-Jacobin novel, the erotic Gothic, and the sentimental tale of a seemingly endless series of situations of distress. It recounts the disastrous amorous career of Cazire Arieni, the 'nun of St Omer', addressed as a warning to her son. Like the heroines of such novels as Mary Hays's *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796) and Amelia Opie's *Adeline Mowbray; or the Mother and Daughter: A Tale* (3 vols, 1804), Cazire is formed by a fatal combination of parental neglect, romance reading and Enlightenment philosophy, leading her to ignore the conventions and institutions of society. It could be argued that the novel's heroine is a Gothification of the afflicted, estranged, alienated, erring subject of the Della Cruscan poetic canon. The novel suggests that for a woman to attempt agency in a corrupt and decadent society is to invite disappointment, disaster, alienation and exile. For a woman to attempt, like a man, a life of 'liberty', thematised here as erotic desire and transgression, or 'libertinism', is to court condemnation and exclusion. In such a society, the sexually self-aware, emancipated and 'free' woman will end, paradoxically, by being incarcerated, or at least secluded, and

celibate. Though implicit, the feminist argument nevertheless informs *Confessions of the Nun of St. Omer*, while not preventing the middle-class male reader from reading himself into the confessions.

Dacre's determination to develop the transgressive project of the Della Cruscans, Lewis's *The Monk*, and Mary Robinson is made clear in Dacre's next work, *Hours of Solitude*, published the same year as *Confessions of the Nun of St. Omer*. The volume contains exchanges of verse epistles in the manner of the original Della Cruscan verse correspondence in *The World*, along with some Gothic poems, some Romantic art ballads, some humanitarian poems, some imitations of 'Ossian', many moralising poems and many poems about love. These deal with two aspects of love – physical or superficial love and love informed by authentic subjectivity. In 'The Female Philosopher', for example, the poetic voice declares:

Yet pride must save me from a dastard love,
A grov'ling love, that cannot hope return:
A soul like mine was never form'd to prove
Those viler passions with which some can burn.
(vol. 1, p. 135)

Another poem, 'The Kiss' opens:

The greatest bliss
Is in a kiss –
A kiss of love refin'd,
When springs the soul
Without controul,
And blends the bliss with mind.
(vol. 1, p. 22)

As Jerome McGann points out, poeticising the kiss was a Della Cruscan specialty.¹ As in Dacre's poem, however, it is a certain kind of kiss, posing the subjectively authentic against the superficial and merely social. It is contact of desiring bodies informed by beautiful and meritorious souls, in contrast to the merely bodily kiss of meretricious and decadent courtly society.

It is highly suggestive, then, that *Hours of Solitude* also includes a poem 'To the Shade of Mary Robinson' (vol. 1, pp. 130–3), who had died in 1800, who was perhaps the most famous former royal mistress of the day, who had been a minor contributor to the Della Cruscan moment and who made a career of her reputation as a fallen woman and victim of courtly decadence. Dacre refers to this career in her poem, and closes with a double apostrophe:

Ah! around thy sad tomb not a weed gaily flaunting
Could Matilda's devotion permit there should be;
But vile weeds thy path were *once* cruelly haunting,
To blight the fair rose that they sicken'd to see.

1 Jerome McGann, *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 83–4.

Yet the thorns of contempt, with mild dignity arming,
 Kept aloof the base upstarts that sought to molest:
 Contempt is to cowards the power disarming,
 Turns each shaft to a feather, each sting to a *jest*.

Then grant, O great God! since to Mary 'twas given
Most perfect among erring mortals to be,
 That chief of thy slaves she may serve thee in heaven,
 And bear, when I die, my frail spirit to thee.

(pp. 132–3)

At a time when women of doubtful chastity or reputation were not to be visited, associated with, or even mentioned without some of the taint being transferred, Dacre's poetic gesture would be deliberately provocative, and strongly suggestive. The gesture accords with the Della Cruscan's self-construction as beautiful souls and people of merit too subjectively rich and complex (as evidenced, presumably, in their stylistically extravagant and thematically transgressive writings) for a corrupt and decadent society, and hence wounded, alienated and forced into a kind of invisible, subjective exile. The gesture also hints that the author knows herself what Robinson went through. Most important, however, Dacre's characterisation of Robinson as '*Most* perfect among erring mortals' asserts the transcendent (indeed, heaven-bound) superiority of inner worth, or merit, against social status, identity, reputation and character. Implicitly, Dacre here stakes her claim to the same kind of merit. She would make representation of such women a central element in her fiction.

In doing so, she was far from alone. The paradoxical figure of the fallen woman of transcendent merit became commonplace in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century literature, fascinating to the men and women of the middle-class reading public. Though commonplace, this is a complex figure, however. Otherwise, presumably, it would not be a commonplace, that is, a trope open to investment with varying meanings derived from readers' individual experience of the common conditions that the figure addresses. Among other things, this figure could represent several aspects of the reading public's self-identity in a period of social conflict. The fallen woman could represent that public's sense of their own disregarded and yet exploited merit in a social, cultural, and political order dominated by the apparently glamorous and seductive upper class. The figure could also represent the middle classes' sense of their precarious financial and social position, working in intellectual service industries from education through the clergy to law and administration, in business, and in commerce, when momentary loss of self-discipline could lead to rapid descent into the lower classes, who earned a living by selling their physical labour, in one form or another, licit or illicit. Thus the sexually exploited and commodified body represented for the middle classes a nightmare loss of self-control, self-direction, self-determination, self-assigned identity and status. It represented a loss of the very sovereign subjectivity, or perhaps any subjectivity, that was central to middle-class identity and culture. In a society where the

lower classes were always the vast majority, were all around, even in the home as domestic servants, and could be dangerously unpredictable or disloyal, that nightmare haunted everyday life. The spectacle of the French Revolution disclosed that the nightmare could also become a public, political reality. Thus the figure of the meritorious fallen woman could serve as a warning, as a consolation, or as a representative for social classes fearing that seduction by or selling out to the higher social classes would lead to ruin, in which nevertheless a form of self-determined identity could still, heroically, be preserved.

Another set of complexities in the figure of the meritorious fallen woman involves self-recognition by the middle-class reading public. It was in large part the consumer revolution of the latter part of the eighteenth century that benefited the middle classes, and that went along with the assertions of sovereign subjectivity, economic individualism, freedom of choice and individual political rights. These forms of individualism in turn drove modernisation in a wide range of cultural and economic activities. Unleashing or at least loosening of desire was essential to these processes. At the same time, however, there was recognition that too much loosening of desire in a capitalist and consumerist culture could lead to personal and family ruin, and descent into the abyss of commodified labour and the merely communal identity and desire characteristic, supposedly, of the lower classes. In addition, it was desire – for upward mobility, status, hegemony – which drove the middle-classes in their push for progress which would benefit them, open institutions and careers to merit, and in the long run produce a revolution in society, economy and the state. Another version of this desire was the erotics of power at the state and global level, manifested in the careers of numerous Revolutionaries in France and elsewhere, and in the unprecedented career of Napoleon – a career still in progress as Dacre was publishing her work. Yet the destructive consequences of this kind of desire, for the individuals concerned, for others around them, and for the nation and indeed humanity at large, could be found described in the daily newspapers through Dacre's adult life. The plot of aspiring individualism turning to bad ends, resulting in unwanted consequences, and defeated by circumstances is commonplace in Romantic literature, manifested in a wide range of texts from Goethe's *Faust* (published in 2 parts, 1808, 1832) to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818).

There are further complexities. On one hand, the paradoxical figure of the meretricious yet meritorious subject could be interpreted as the middle-class reading public's own self-understanding of their paradoxical identity and social and economic situation. These classes sold their intellectual, social and business services and so had to practise a prudent servility toward those who employed them, yet in a sense they were also independent out of necessity, having to rely on inner qualities and acquired knowledge and skills, and on moral and intellectual capital acquired through years of self-discipline and deferral of desire and immediate gratification. On the other hand, the figure of the meritorious fallen

woman could also serve as both protest and defiance – protest against the dominant social order that excluded and yet lured good middle-class subjects, and defiance of the plebeian social abyss that awaited good middle-class subjects unwary or undisciplined enough to succumb to the seductions of the socially superior other. The historical sociologist Norbert Elias describes the contradictions in what he calls such ‘dual-front’ classes, or classes facing two different social others, and who therefore ‘run the risk of undermining the ramparts protecting them from the pressure from below if they undermine those securing the privileged position of the higher-ranking classes’. Such conflicts, Elias argues, produce art works with a ‘romantic twilight quality’, with ‘crystallization of genuine longing and real distress in unreal phantoms, in Utopian illusions which are often partly recognized as such and perhaps clung to the more stubbornly for fear of becoming fully conscious of their illusoriness’.¹

In fact, the paradoxical, contradictory dimensions of the figure of the fallen woman could be combined, in a defiant disclosure or openness about self-commodification. Since the paradoxes of middle-class identity applied with additional force to women, such a defiant posture was perhaps especially appealing to those women of the middle classes, including writers, whose education constituted preparation for the marriage market, who were often traded or in effect sold for family advantage (as any reader of novels such as Richardson’s *Clarissa* would know) in an exchange of property or financial capital, who may have experienced sex and child-bearing as a further commodification of their bodies and their selves, and who knew that the law and the state did not protect them from the consequences of failing to please men. There is good reason why the figure of the meretricious yet meritorious subject in literature and culture was female. Yet a woman could, in certain circumstances, also exploit the contradictions of meritorious meretriciousness.

As critics have recently pointed out, this was what Mary Robinson attempted to do.² Dacre advertises her intention to do likewise in her poem ‘To the Shade of Mary Robinson’. She also does so at the very opening of her book. The frontispiece to Dacre’s *Hours of Solitude* is revealing in a double sense. It is a bust

1 Norbert Elias, *The Court Society*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), p. 264.

2 See Jan Fergus and Janice Farrar Thaddeus’s pioneering essay, ‘Women, Publishers, and Money, 1790–1820’, *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, vol. 17, eds John Yolton and Leslie Ellen Brown (East Lansing: Colleagues Press, 1987), pp. 191–207; also Jacqueline M. Labbe, ‘Selling One’s Sorrows: Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, and the Making of Poetry’, *The Wordsworth Circle*, 25:2 (Spring 1994), pp. 68–71; Judith Pascoe, ‘Mary Robinson and the Literary Marketplace’, *Romantic Women Writers: Voices and Counter-voices*, eds Paula R. Feldman and Theresa M. Kelley (Hanover, NH, and London: University Press of New England, 1995), pp. 252–68; and Anne K. Mellor, ‘Mary Robinson and the Scripts of Female Sexuality’, *Representations of the Self from the Renaissance to Romanticism*, eds Patrick Coleman, Jayne Lewis and Jill Kowalik (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 230–58.

portrait of the author, captioned 'Rosa Matilda', looking demurely sideways at the viewer and with prominent breasts barely veiled. Such catchpenny illustrations can be found in other books of that time, and were perhaps designed to suggest an erotic content or association, and perhaps also a progressive, unconventional or anti-conventional, transgressive, avant-garde authorial persona. This suggestion, too, would conform to the general Della Cruscanism of Dacre's collection of poems. Taken with the poem 'To the Shade of Mary Robinson', addressed to one of the most scandalous women of the late eighteenth century, who had died only five years earlier, the frontispiece would also suggest a satirical self-commodification similar to that by which Robinson had turned the tables on the reading public and her own infamy, and in the process marketed herself successfully. This was a risky move, of course, given the widespread public and political reaction against looseness and licence, especially erotic and sexual, especially in women, associated at once, paradoxically, with revolutionary indiscipline and with courtly, aristocratic decadence. Furthermore, women writers generally had an ambiguous position. In a culture that did not allow respectable women a public identity, women writers inevitably made themselves public and thus came close to association with the infamous form of public, self-commodified, meretricious woman – the prostitute.¹ Mary Robinson had negotiated those ambiguities skilfully and to her own benefit; Charlotte Dacre clearly intended to do likewise. The erotically provocative frontispiece suggests meretriciousness; the contents of the book suggest merit, in a certain sense – possession of a 'poetic' soul, or a subjectivity which, in Della Cruscan as well as Romantic discourse, is manifested in expressive yet artistically formed language – poetry – produced from the subject itself, in, as the book's title has it, 'hours of solitude', away from society, where the subject is free. Dacre's collection of poems thus engages in complex ways with the politics of literary discourse, in this case poetry, in the context of a national and international cultural and political crisis. She does so by taking up, after Mary Robinson, the complex and paradoxical figure of meritorious meretriciousness, and using it to assert the paradoxes and problems of identity particular to women.

One aspect of such a literary endeavour for Romantic women writers, from Mary Robinson and Mary Wollstonecraft to Felicia Hemans and Lady Caroline Lamb, was to demonstrate generic and discursive versatility, a kind of feminine genius. Like them, Dacre has central themes in her work, but she addresses and readdresses them in a variety of forms, or variations on certain genres. Dacre now turned, or returned with a difference, to the Gothic novel. Most of the recent interest in Dacre as a writer of the Romantic and Gothic erotic has focused on the novel she published a year after *Hours of Solitude*. In *Zofloya*; or,

1 For two valuable accounts of the contradictions of female authorship, see Cheryl Turner, *Living by the Pen: Women Writers in the Eighteenth Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992); and Catherine Gallagher, *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace 1670–1820* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994).

the Moor: A Romance of the Fifteenth Century (3 vols, 1806) Dacre turns from the Della Cruscan erotic to the Gothic erotic of Lewis's *The Monk*. The parallels between *Zofloya* and *The Monk* were noticed as early as contemporary reviews, but as Ann H. Jones argues, *Zofloya* is a revision, not just an imitation of *The Monk*, and she instances Dacre's subtler handling of the supernatural, her more modest use of it, her sparing use of other Gothic effects, and her avoidance of extremes of the grotesque deployed by Lewis.¹ Furthermore, Dacre makes a female rather than a male the novel's central erotic subject. It could be argued, then, that Dacre poses a feminine or even feminist erotic Gothic against Lewis's masculinist one. Another major difference, however, concerns the two novels' treatment of embodied evil. Both novels adduce a Romantic Manichaeism, ascribing agency and determining effect on the plot to an embodiment of evil – Satan himself. This figure is a *diabolus ex machina* parallel to the *deus ex machina* often found in Sentimental novels of the late eighteenth century, and meant to register a post-Revolutionary protest against the pious optimism inherent in the pre-Revolutionary culture of Sensibility and the benevolent agents found in Sentimental literature. There is a political implication to this replacement of benevolent with malevolent agents, one directly related to the Revolution debate.

In general, the English Jacobin writers sustained the optimism and belief in humanity's ability to improve itself that were inherent in Sensibility, as illustrated in novels from Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story* (1791), Robert Bage's *Man As He Is* (1792) and *Man As He Is Not; or Hermsprong* (1796), and Thomas Holcroft's *Anna St Ives* (1792) through Godwin's *Things As They Are* (1794), Holcroft's *Adventures of Hugh Trevor* (1794–7), and Inchbald's *Nature and Art* (1796), to the less optimistic but still progressive vision in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Wrongs of Woman*, Mary Hays's *The Victim of Prejudice* and Godwin's *Adventures of St Leon* (1799). Meanwhile counter-Revolutionary Anti-Jacobin writers insisted that humanity was fallen, that evil existed and was divine punishment for erring humanity, and that progress and material improvement by human means alone was a delusion. Anti-Jacobin novelists satirised Revolutionary optimism repeatedly, in such works as those by Hamilton and D'Israeli, mentioned earlier. After 1800, even writers formerly associated with the English Jacobins, like Amelia Opie, warned in novels such as *Adeline Mowbray* against putting too much faith in Sentimental and Revolutionary optimism about changing the world. For many pious observers, Satan was already triumphing in what Ronald Reagan would no doubt call the 'evil empire' and George W. Bush the 'axis of evil' created by the Revolution and Napoleon. For many others, especially among the lower and lower-middle classes, Satan's triumphs in contemporary events was part of a millenarian vision of imminent apocalypse, the harbinger of the 'fifth monarchy' of peace, prosperity, equality and justice prophesied in the Bible and now superseding the failed promise of the Revolution. Lewis's *The*

1 Jones, *Ideas and Innovations*, pp. 238–40.

Monk and its Satanic supernaturalism were a little early to address this shift in the Revolution debate, though once Lewis had cleared out some of his novel's eroticism, the novel's supernatural embodiment of evil perhaps helped sustain its popularity. In fact, in 1801 Charles Lucas could publish an Anti-Jacobin novel entitled *The Infernal Quixote: A Tale of the Day*, directly associating Revolutionary ideology with the devil.

Dacre's *Zofloya* also addresses the neo-Manichaeism of the unfolding Revolution debate and aftermath of Napoleonic and Romantic diabolism. It does so less as a counter-Revolutionary gesture, however, than in continuation of the Della Cruscan and English Jacobin critique of a decadent, corrupt and corrupting aristocratic and courtly hegemonic order. In its opening paragraphs *Zofloya* gives a concise account of the social formation of individual character, and thereby grounds in cultural sociology the novel's later recourse to a supernatural embodiment of evil. This account of Venice's decadent culture and how it creates decadent, libertine citizens would do credit to many an Enlightenment philosophical and political treatise. As any well informed reader of the time would recognise, the very first pages of *Zofloya* place the work in a line of Enlightenment and Revolutionary thought used to explain widespread social evil and justify attempts to eradicate it by various programmes of reform or revolution. This was also the political sociology that informed a number of progressive movements of the time, including Della Cruscanism and English Jacobinism. Just as the English Jacobin novelists moved from philosophical statement to fictional illustration, in such novels as Godwin's *Things As They Are*, so Dacre moves from her opening theoretical position to illustration in the story of Victoria de Loredani and her involvement with the Moorish servant Zofloya. Dacre's story begins in Venice, a rare republic among European states, and one much in the news during the 1790s. In the fifteenth century, the time of the story, Venice was at its height as a mercantile and naval power, but by the late eighteenth century it was notoriously feeble, decadent and corrupt, and Dacre portrays it as such. As Dacre's readers would know, too, in 1797 Venice's independence had been extinguished by Napoleon.

The parents of Victoria and her brother Leonardo are represented as typical of their decadent society – passionate, self-indulgent and indifferent to wider responsibilities; their children necessarily take after them, and prove to be even worse. The mother, Laurina, is seduced by the villain Ardolph, and cultivates her illicit erotic passions rather than properly nurturing her son and daughter. Consequently undereducated, neglected and hence overly self-willed, and with this bad example, Victoria and Leonardo grow up desiring complete freedom to indulge their own passions. Victoria becomes powerfully attracted to Count Berenza and throws herself at him. Eventually he succumbs to her beauty and character and marries her. Meanwhile, her brother has fallen under the spell of the peasant and courtesan Megalena Strozzi who, discarded by Berenza, seeks revenge by having the infatuated Leonardo attempt to assassinate Berenza, not realising he is his sister's lover. After a time, Victoria tires of Berenza and

becomes infatuated with his brother Henriquez who, however, loves the morally perfect and ultra-feminine Lilla.

Tormented by erotic desire, manifested in dreams of violence, Victoria finds that Henriquez's Moorish servant Zofloya seems to understand her thoughts and feelings, and to imply that his secret knowledge of poison and philtres can help her to obtain her desires. Zofloya seems almost like the emanation of Victoria's desire, an aspect of her self as erotic subject, leading her where she wants to go. To reinforce the literary, historical, and indeed cosmological resonance of this plot, Dacre drops allusions to the temptation and fall of Eve in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Like Satan in legend and the serpent in *Paradise Lost*, Zofloya answers Victoria's questions, requests and demands by ambiguities, which the reader can see through but Victoria apparently cannot. Thus a critical distance is created between reader and villainess—heroine, and this distancing in turn creates tension with the reader's interest in the presentations of Victoria's subjective self, conflicted with desire. Berenza is to be slowly poisoned, Lilla disposed of, and Henriquez drugged with a love potion – all arranged by Zofloya. Experienced readers of fiction of the day would recognise poisons and potions as conventional Gothic figures for secret, ideological forms of manipulation and control.

To facilitate this criminal conspiracy and escape the vigilance of the authorities, Victoria has the entire party remove to the castle of Torre Alto in the savagely sublime landscape of the Apennines. Far removed even from the decadent civility of Venice, in wild nature, both social relations and the characters' subjectivities disintegrate under the force of Victoria's unrestrained desire and Zofloya's enabling collusion. Berenza at first seems to recover in the mountains, but the poison gradually kills him, in its progress arousing suspicions. Lilla is abducted, imprisoned in a cave, and tormented and eventually stabbed to death by Victoria in a fit of rage. By drugging Henriquez, Victoria has him make love to her under the delusion that she is Lilla. When conscious of himself, however, he rejects Victoria and kills himself. By now, too, Zofloya seems to have absorbed all of Victoria's will, motivation and desire, and she becomes passive as he leads her to flight and into the final movement of the downward spiral of her desiring. Fleeing the castle and the approaching officers of government, Victoria and Zofloya are captured, along with Victoria's mother and her lover Ardolph, by a fractious gang of banditti. The bandit leader stabs Ardolph and is revealed to be Victoria's brother Leonardo, still accompanied by the vengeful Megalena. Victoria's mother, who has been abused by Ardolph, dies, and Megalena kills herself at the approach of soldiers. In the confusion, Zofloya offers to save Victoria and magically transports her away to a summit. Awed by his sublime power, she finds that she now desires him, and, making yet another erotic bargain, agrees to be his in return for protection from all misery. Having conquered, Zofloya reveals himself as Satan, and triumphantly hurls her to destruction in a foaming river far below. The novel closes with the narrator's musing:

Reader – consider not this as a romance merely. – Over their passions and their weaknesses, mortals cannot keep a curb too strong. The progress of vice is gradual and imperceptible, and the arch enemy ever waits to take advantage of the failings of mankind, whose destruction is his glory! That his seductions may prevail, we dare not doubt; for can we otherwise account for those crimes, dreadful and repugnant to nature, which human beings are sometimes tempted to commit? Either we must suppose that the love of evil is born with us (which would be an insult to the Deity), or we must attribute them (as appears more consonant with reason) to the suggestions of infernal influence.

No conduct book of the day designed for young middle-class women or men could have put it better. Whether the ‘infernal influence’ is supernatural or social, or both, or one through the other, is left to the reader to decide.

The moral could seem trite, but its very conventionality leaves it open for filling with complex, even contradictory possibilities. By admonishing the reader not to dismiss the story as ‘merely’ a ‘romance’ – a story characterised by extravagance and improbability – the narrator invites an allegorical or ideological reading. The reader is warned against reading the story as a representation of the reader’s ‘real’ world, and is invited to decode the story as an interpretation of that ‘real’ world. Recent critics have certainly taken up this warning and invitation. Ann H. Jones, for example, argues that ‘if Zofloya is seen as really part of Victoria’s mind and the novel a poetic image of the growth of evil, much falls into place’; she concludes that ‘Zofloya is no concocted spectre but the embodiment of Victoria’s own worst impulses, which finally destroy her.’¹ Rather than this kind of psychological reading, Adriana Craciun, using Michel Foucault’s theorisation of power relations, gives the novel a social, or psycho-sociological interpretation. Craciun points out that Zofloya uses the language of romantic courtship and that the narrator describes Victoria’s eventual submission to him as a marriage: ‘The story of Victoria’s downfall is thus also the story of the loss of social identity, mobility, and independence that a woman suffers in marrying her lover, who then becomes her legal master after having acted the part of her devoted and enthralled servant’.² In ‘Charlotte Dacre and the Feminisation of Violence’, James A. Dunn argues that Dacre’s fiction deliberately reverses the pattern of female victimisation seen in most Gothic novels, and he finds a feminist exploration, if not argument, in *Zofloya*’s representation of its protagonist’s erotic aggression and violence, normally represented as masculine traits: ‘It is Victoria’s capacity to leap to the “other side” of gender behaviours that signals alternative destinies available to women.’³

These readings do not seem to exhaust the possibilities of the novel, however, especially in the way it addresses social difference, and they do not account for the moralistic elements in the text. It could be argued, for example, that *Zofloya*

1 Jones, *Ideas and Innovations*, p. 237.

2 Craciun, ed., *Zofloya*, p. 16.

3 James A. Dunn, ‘Charlotte Dacre and the Feminization of Violence’, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 53 (Dec. 1998), p. 314.

uses plot, character and other elements of Gothic novel form to show that transgressing social convention, value and order in pursuit of a personal or individual subjective absolute – the erotic of any kind – leads to disruption of social relations and order, loss of autonomy and independence, and descent into the abyss of the lower social other. In *Zofloya* this ‘other’ has at least three dimensions. Zofloya is a servant, and thus below Victoria socially. He is also a Moor, and thus other to Victoria in more complex ways. He is non-European and presumably non-Christian, and in European historical experience the Moor was associated with a long-standing and formerly energetic and dangerous racial and religious enemy. Paradoxically, this enemy was also presumed to be not only other but also doubly inferior to Christian Europe. In Enlightenment culture and literature, the Moors, though recognised as North African in origin, were still associated, as they had been for centuries, with the Orient. To Europeans, the ‘Orient’ extended from Muslim North Africa and southern Spain to Japan, and was the figural and actual site of once vital and crescent civilisations but all in decline by the eighteenth century. It was seen as a place of despotism and therefore deviousness and decadence, of tyranny on the one hand and corresponding abjection and subjection on the other, of unrestrained erotic desire and corresponding physical violence. Moors and ‘Orientals’, along with similar, supposedly primitive peoples, were also represented in European literature and culture as having a collective rather than individual identity. In Dacre’s day, the Moor could be a figure for the subjectless person, and thus other to the individualism of Revolutionary and Romantic culture and ideology.

It could be argued, then, that Dacre’s Moor represents kinds of otherness that are even more challenging and disturbing than these identifiable kinds of social otherness. In many novels of the period, including Gothic novels, lower-class and ethnically different characters are usually represented as having little or no individual subjectivity, and are treated in a variety of ways, from the sympathetic to the comic, and are usually marginal figures. Dacre’s Zofloya, however, is a central character, as the novel’s title indicates, and consistently represented in terms of the sublime. Zofloya is not so much lacking individual subjectivity as a figure whose subjectivity is concealed, even from the reader – obscure, ambiguous, indeterminate, unknowable, and therefore sublime, according to late eighteenth-century aesthetic theory. Figures such as the fallen woman – here, Victoria – have a subjectivity that is, if not meritorious in this case, at least complex and highly active, as disclosed to us by the narrator. Zofloya, however, remains opaque, at best ambiguous. In fact, as the reader learns near the end, he is not only socially or psychologically other, but ontologically and even cosmologically other.¹ Rather than a fallen woman, he is a fallen angel. This is a further, complex, and radically challenging kind of alterity, and if horror is the rhetorical effect or response to that which radically challenges the known, the

1 See Gary Kelly, *English Fiction of the Romantic Period 1789–1830* (London and New York: Longman, 1989), pp. 105–8.

explicable and the comprehensible, then Zofloya's otherness is a particular kind of Gothic horror. This horror may be accounted for in several, perhaps overlapping or connected ways; this horror may also be related to the Revolutionary and Napoleonic cataclysm and the challenge it presented, not only to the established social and political order but also to the cultural and discursive order. Zofloya, in other words, may represent a specific kind of Romantic sublime.

It could be argued that in his radical unknowability Zofloya stands for all the 'others' of the Romantic subject, or the middle-class subject of the Romantic period. As I argued earlier, this was the subject on which middle-class revolutionary and reform movements around the world were based and would be based. Accordingly, Zofloya could stand not so much for the subjectless lower classes waiting to absorb the undisciplined, overly desiring middle-class person, as in the case of the figure of the fallen woman. Rather, Zofloya may stand for the 'mob', the 'common people', the 'lower orders' – classes long associated with violence, but never as much or as spectacularly as in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century revolutions. In light of events of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic period, these classes seemed unpredictable, unreadable, unknowable, with a culture and, apparently, a politics of their own, incommensurate with the emergent middle-class ideology of the sovereign subject and the middle classes' vision of new social, cultural, economic and political order informed by that ideology. As the spectacle of plebeian Revolutionary violence had made clear repeatedly – and as *Zofloya's* conclusion puts it – this 'arch enemy ever waits to take advantage of the failings', if not 'of mankind' as a whole, then certainly of the upper and middle classes, 'whose destruction is his glory'. From the Revolutionary and Napoleonic period on, and as never before, the possibility that the inscrutable and abject other could rise up to cast their betters from the heights to the abyss haunted and haunts liberal political cultures. These cultures developed from the very ideology and culture of subjectivity that *Zofloya*, the Gothic romance, and Romantic literature generally represented for their reading public.

There may be a further, related dimension to this reading of Zofloya, and the demonic, satanic and supernatural generally, especially in the Gothic. Zofloya's sublimity is, as readers of the time would understand from contemporary aesthetic theory, inherently unspeakable, unrepresentable, except perhaps in terms of a cultural tradition and convention – for example, as Satan, or evil. This is one meaning of horror. Many other Romantic writers addressed the problem of the sublime, especially as that which lies beyond language and cannot be assimilated by culture. Some, like Wordsworth and his followers, insisted on assigning the sublime a power to constitute and to renovate the human and social by virtue of the very fact of lying outside them. Others, such as Percy Shelley but including Wordsworth at times, ascribed a darker significance to the sublime. These responses to or preoccupations with the sublime may be seen as psychic or cultural constants, and this line of interpretation has been followed often in recent criticism, constituting one of the currently dominant approaches to the

Gothic.¹ It is also possible, however, to take a more radically historicist view of the Gothic sublime, relating it to the dominant events of Dacre's time.

The Revolution and ensuing Napoleonic ambition for global empire, with their accompanying violence and resulting mass death, were widely seen as unprecedented in history, and unrepresentable except perhaps by analogy or hyperbole. Revolutionary and Napoleonic ambition, whether philanthropic or imperialistic, was also represented as a form of desire – excessive, transgressive individualism, disrupting established orders of all kinds, from the political to the discursive. In this respect, Revolutionary and Napoleonic desire opened an abyss of unmeaning where there had been structures of significance and value – or perhaps they disclosed the abyss of unmeaning that had always been and is always there at the heart of the apparent order of culture, literature, art, institutions, beliefs, social practices, laws and coherent individual identity. Put another way, middle-class revolutionary desire could be seen to have produced not a new order of meaning and value, but sublime unmeaning. If Victoria's erotic passion represents undisciplined middle-class subjectivity in excess and in transgression, then Zofloya the inscrutable, ultimate other may indeed represent an emanation of her self – and of her readers' selves, as they grasped their complicity in revolutionary desire, transgression and resulting disclosure of the sublime abyss of unmeaning. Such an interpretation would help to explain the novel's resort to the diabolical supernatural as a way of representing the unrepresentable.

It would also help to explain the novel's style – indeed, the style of many Gothic novels and other texts of this period. *Zofloya*'s style was commented on – adversely – in its time and since. Ann H. Jones summarises the charges, 'The greatest defect of the novel ... is its language, which *The General Review* referred to as "inflated," *The Monthly Literary Recreations* as "bombastical," and *The Literary Journal* as "extravagant."² Jones characterises the style of *Zofloya* as 'either shrilly melodramatic or stiltedly formal'.³ Of course, the style of *Zofloya* is not uniform. At times, for example, the style has the character of Enlightenment philosophical history, especially in the opening socio-political account of fifteenth-century Venice and the ways its governing structure shaped, or misshaped, its citizens. Certainly *Zofloya* offers many examples of passages that could be characterised as 'inflated', 'bombastical', or 'extravagant'. Such terms cannot be objective or even merely descriptive, however. Their meaning must be

1 See, for example, Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), ch. 4, 'The Logic of Terror'; Vijay Mishra, *The Gothic Sublime* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994); Andrew Smith, *Gothic Radicalism: Literature, Philosophy and Psychoanalysis in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press; New York: St Martin's Press, 2000).

2 Jones, *Ideas and Innovations*, p. 241.

3 Jones, *Ideas and Innovations*, p. 242.

relative, referring to other kinds of available styles, in a culturally and temporally particular literary–discursive order. Inevitably, too, these terms have moral overtones, and in Dacre’s day they would also certainly have political overtones. The style of *Zofloya*, indeed of all Dacre’s novels, continues the Della Cruscan literary–political project. This involved deliberate transgression of received generic, stylistic, and linguistic conventions as part of a broader challenge to the established cultural, social and political order, through challenge to the literary–discursive order that, it seemed, sustained and reproduced that order.

The association of certain stylistic traits with particular politics became even more strongly fixed in the 1790s. Immediately after publication of the Della Cruscan verse correspondence in *The World*, styles also disparaged as ‘inflated’, ‘bombastical’ and ‘extravagant’ became part of the discursive order of the day in Revolutionary clubs, councils, legislatures and proclamations. Jean Starobinski has read these traits as a rhetorical enactment and anticipation of revolutionary transformation.¹ In fact, both pro- and anti-Revolutionary critics found similar stylistic traits in counter-Revolutionary polemics such as Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*; but Burke had spent his career until 1790 associated with reform interests in Britain, and after 1790 he remained a figure uneasily accommodated in counter-Revolutionary ranks. More characteristic of counter-Revolutionary and Anti-Jacobin polemic was attack on Revolutionary and English Jacobin writing precisely in the terms applied to Dacre’s *Zofloya* in the reviews cited by Jones. In short, a similar and negative moral and political valuation was placed on the style of Della Cruscan poetry, French Revolutionary rhetoric, English Jacobin writing and the erotic Gothic of Lewis and Dacre.

This fact could not but interest some younger writers with reformist, Jacobin or Bonapartist sympathies. Percy Shelley was especially taken with Dacre’s style and imitated it, and perhaps plagiarised elements of *Zofloya*, in his early Gothic novel *Zastrozzi* (1810).² John Keats, too, probably learned from the Della Cruscans, if not from erotic Gothic novelists such as Lewis and Dacre. On the other hand, the young Felicia Hemans, who would become the most widely read woman poet of the nineteenth-century English-speaking world, had liberal sympathies but was vehemently anti-Bonapartist and, unlike her contemporary Letitia Landon, was wary of association with the Della Cruscan project. In the context of these debates, then, the style of *Zofloya*, as much as its erotic subject matter and representation of the diabolical sublime, develops the literary–political project of the Della Cruscans and, to some extent, Revolutionary rhetoric, the erotic Gothic, and certain elements of English Jacobin writing.

1 Jean Starobinski, ‘Eloquence and Liberty’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 38 (1977), pp. 195–210.

2 Walter E. Peck, *Shelley: His Life and Work*, 2 vols (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1927), Appendix A: ‘Shelley’s Indebtedness in *Zastrozzi* to Previous Romances’, vol. 2, pp. 305–9.

In her next novel, however, Dacre shifts her ground within the formulations of the erotic Gothic, continuing to develop the genre from *Confessions of the Nun of St. Omer* and *Zofloya*. In this respect, Dacre showed an interest in formal experimentation that was characteristic of the work of many women writers of the time, and which may have been motivated as much by conscious artistry as by desire to keep up an appropriately commercial level of innovation in a market where novelty, within discernible limits of formula and convention, was almost everything. The very title of *The Libertine* indicates its participation in the contemporary discourse around the erotic. Unlike *Zofloya*, however, *The Libertine* contains no supernatural elements, let alone diabolical ones, though there are, as often in Gothic novels, some spectacular coincidences. There is extravagance in narrative style, dialogue, characterisation, actions of the characters and plot, though these seem toned down when compared to those in *Zofloya*, and otherwise *The Libertine* lacks many of the fixtures and furnishings of the Gothic romance from *The Castle of Otranto* to *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Monk*. Among its Gothic predecessors, *The Libertine* resembles *The Recess* more than the novels of Walpole or Reeve, Lewis or Radcliffe. *The Libertine* resembles *The Recess* in its emphasis on sexual, conjugal and familial relations in a claustrophobic private world of personal errors resulting in frequent betrayals, repeated victimisation, unremitting punishments, unrelenting remorse and eventually death.

In this respect *The Libertine* also takes after recently published fiction of Amelia Opie. Opie had just emerged as a commercially and critically successful novelist, after having been associated with the English Jacobin writers during the 1790s. Through the first two decades of the nineteenth century she was, with Maria Edgeworth, the most respected woman novelist in Britain. Opie's *The Father and Daughter: A Tale, in Prose* (1801) and *Adeline Mowbray; or, The Mother and Daughter: A Tale* (3 vols, 1804) brought her quickly into literary prominence, and both works centre on the figure of the fallen woman, discussed earlier. Opie combined elements of several popular kinds of fiction to achieve a form distinctively her own. These included the Sentimental tale, focusing on a situation of aggravated social and subjective distress; the late eighteenth-century monodrama, which had a similar focus; Romantic social protest poetry of the kind written by Wordsworth, Coleridge, and others in their circle during the 1790s; the English Jacobin novel of social injustice, from Godwin's *Things As They Are* through Inchbald's *Nature and Art* and Wollstonecraft's *The Wrongs of Woman* to Mary Hays's *The Victim of Prejudice*; and Gothic fiction that dealt less with the supernatural than with persecution and victimisation.

The central situation in much of Opie's work, in both poetry and prose fiction, presents a female who is fallen or appears to be fallen and consequently endures a succession of difficulties, disasters and punishments. In some of Opie's later fiction the appearance of meretriciousness is eventually cleared up, though in these early works the heroine eventually dies. The heroine endures with a particular kind of female heroism, and there is a Sentimental or Roman-