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Article

# From Exhalation to Transformation: The Female Body in the Orientalist Romance

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THIS PAPER EXAMINES THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE FEMALE BODY WHEN HEROINES IN THE ORIENTALIST ROMANCE EXPERIENCE SEXUAL DESIRE. The release of breath, in many forms from sigh to speech, is an early indication of corporeal change; interpreted as either a process of self-destruction or liberation of the senses. The figure of the non-Western and non-white male love interest encourages this transformation. These heroes, or anti-heroes, raise questions about the natural body, sexuality and race. The 'Orient', as Edward Said famously announces, is 'almost a European invention [ ... ] a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes' and has the 'deepest and most recurring images of the Other'.<sup>1</sup> How is this unreal image of the 'Orient/Other' associated with romantic desire, especially from a white European female experience? I will consider two romances by female authors, which share this phenomenon, but with different results.

Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya* (1806) is set in fifteenth-century Venice. The protagonist, Victoria, is a character filled with anger and ambition, which lead her to torture and kill others. Seduced by Satan, disguised as a handsome young Moor called Zofloya, she is inspired to commit multiple crimes until he throws her into an abyss. Before her death, Victoria's body begins to mirror Zofloya's, becoming darker and unwieldy.

Written during the terror of the First World War, E. M Hull's escapist *The Sheik* (1919) is about the abduction of a free-spirited English woman, Diana, by a tyrannical Sheik, who enslaves her in the desert. After the Sheik's continuous rapes and Diana's resistance, they eventually recognise their love for each other. After giving in to her desire for the Sheik, Diana's demeanour becomes more conventionally feminine and compliant.

I wish to prove the heavy thematic connections between these novels and dissolve the separations they have in terms of time, place and historical context. Both texts engage with the interchange of gender traits in relation to sexual desire, and present the non-white 'Other' as a monstrous and attractive figure. They also had similar reception: both publications were popular in print while being heavily criticised for their immoral content and pornographic style, or rather their potential to corrupt female readership especially as texts written by women. However, whereas Victoria is punished for her transformation, Diana lives happily ever after.

### Victoria: Embracing the Monster Within

Both heroines have an inner nature that is caged. For Victoria, her true and 'sinful' character is incompatible with society: '-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'.<sup>2</sup> This description prefigures an overflow of speech waiting to burst out. The shortened clauses and reiteration mirrors a quickening of pulse and frustration. It is the events in her life, beginning with the abandonment of her mother that only exacerbate her change, or rather her real self. After her mother leaves the family for a lover, Victoria is inspired to run away and marry an admirer called Berenza. However, she falls in love with his brother, Henriquez. His manservant, Zofloya, helps her kill off Berenza and Henriquez's fiancée, Lilla.

After her mother's disgrace, Victoria mulls with a 'haughty' and 'sullen silence' (49), whilst her family home collapses around her. Stabbed by his wife's lover, her father expresses, with his dying breath, a wish for an end to the contaminating influence of the mother: "'- now swear to protect and cherish thy daughter, to preserve her from evil and from the contamination of bad example!" "I swear, I swear!" articulated Laurina, in a voice drowned by sobs, and pressed convulsively her daughter to her bosom' (53). Her mother's crime not only results in death and suffering, but in verbal excess. Despite her promise, her embrace passes on the 'disease' of deception and desire nonetheless, as Victoria will have the same consequence. Berenza's attention, the opportunity for romance, animates Victoria from silence to self-talk: "'At length, then," with secret exultation, she exclaimed- "at length, I too have found a lover"' (60).

For all of Dacre's women, the area of the bosom is the central fibre from which passions leak out, exiting through the mouth. There are endless references to the female chest as a separate alcove: 'awakened breast feelings' (59), 'enthusiasm which burnt in her bosom, lighted up every feature with lambent and ethereal fire' (60). The chest as a furnace that is fuelled and enraged conjures an image of a human machine: 'the sigh was electric fluid through her breast, and fanned the fires which were raging in her heart' (108). The reader is overwhelmed when imagining the smell of fuel, the sounds of crackling flame and the painful release of breath as smoke and steam. This strikingly mechanical image draws attention to the extreme change of a woman's body when overcome

by strong emotions. It also re-enforces the passiveness of the female character that can be easily activated and combustible.

During this period, the female body as an automaton was a departure from popular Enlightenment thinking, such as Julien Offray de la Mettrie's *L'homme Machine*,<sup>3</sup> which offered forward-thinking possibilities of science. The woman-machine connection refers to a beautiful but empty being, rather than one of power and rational thought. In the previous description, the chest is put into overdrive when filled with personal thought and passionate feelings, and breaks down as a result.

Fire is an image used repeatedly in M.D.T. Bienville's medical treatise, *Nymphomania*, published in 1775. In her introduction to Dacre, Adriana Cracuin aptly suggests that this misogynistic text illuminates many descriptions in *Zofloya*. Sexual passion is described as a mental and nervous disorder that attacks young women and widows, especially those who have been influenced, like Victoria.<sup>4</sup> This illness is described as an uncontrollable brightness that 'glow[s]', 'sparks', 'devour[s]' 'consume[s]',<sup>5</sup> leading to bouts of melancholia and violence. This analysis also corresponds to recognitions of tuberculosis and cancer during this time, acutely detailed by Susan Sontag: 'both are, and were, understood as diseases of passion. Fever in TB was a sign of inward burning'.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, Sontag also likens cancer to a 'demonic pregnancy' which can certainly be applied to Victoria's state of being "invaded" by alien cells.<sup>7</sup>

Bienville also deploys reptilian imagery to describe the inner monster: 'serpent [...] glided into her heart'<sup>8</sup> which corresponds to many descriptions of *Zofloya*'s female characters with a 'forked tongue' (62), 'basilisk eye' (131) and 'sting of a scorpion' (210). There is a contradiction, or in fact a combination, of fire with the cold reptile image to suggest the lustful woman as an otherworldly mutation. The idea of being consumed by a burning source relates to the concern of consumption itself, mental and physical. According to Bienville, corruptible literature, strong wine and chocolate contribute to a degenerate appetite in life.<sup>9</sup> One thinks of Madame Bovary reading feverishly until dawn and screaming from 'bizarre books, full of orgiastic set-pieces and blood thirsty adventures';<sup>10</sup> a description that points to a novel just like *Zofloya*.

In terms of food, Helena Michie writes about hunger in Victorian culture, claiming that 'delicate appetites are linked not only with femininity, but with virginity'<sup>11</sup> She draws on lifestyle manuals that follow Bienville's disapproval of rich and spicy foods, which were thought to increase the sex drives in young women.<sup>12</sup> It seems that opening the mouth as well as the eyes is a dangerous affair for women. The transformation into the hungry and promiscuous she-monster is considered a grotesque punishment for women who roam away from social acceptance. However, as I will prove through Victoria, this new 'being' also wields frightening power and strength, and is not so much attacked by nymphomania but has the ability to attack.

*Zofloya* represents Bienville's 'beautiful youth' who becomes the distorted object of desire, glittery but malicious (259). Victoria's first meeting with the Moor is through a dream, in which he emerges as an unreal but vivid spectacle: 'He was clad in a habit of white and gold; on his head he wore a white turban, which sparkled with emeralds, and was surmounted by a waving feather of green' (145). His majestic clothing and jewellery are exotic and rather phallic markers that conjure up exaggerated images of a 'timeless, unchanging Orient'.<sup>13</sup> The description lingers on each part of his body: 'his arms and legs, which were bare, were encircled with the finest oriental pearl; he wore a collar of gold round his throat, and his ears were decorated with gold rings of an enormous size' (145). Victoria and the reader's eyes widen with each gaze that slips up and down,

finding bare skin and big jewels. He is displayed as a sparkly distraction and wields this power to influence the protagonist, representing 'some superior and unknown power' (145). Victoria's attraction is towards mysterious grandeur, one that also femininely flamboyant or even 'camp'.<sup>14</sup> Zofloya, as we will also find in the Sheik's description, is subject to a perverted female gaze and is desirable when gender binaries are questioned.<sup>15</sup>

Victoria is possessed with fear and fascination when contemplating Zofloya: 'as she gazed, he bent his knee, and extended his arms towards her [...] she looked upon him with dread, and essaying to fly, she stumbled and awoke' (146). This scene anticipates the ending in which Victoria is thrown 'headlong' off the summit of a large Friedrichesque rock (254).<sup>16</sup> To recognise desire is an awakening that is subsequently related to death. The Moor's continual infiltration of both her subconscious and conscious life takes a physical toll: 'her heart beat violently, her brain throbbled [...] she found herself no longer capable of motion' (152). One step further than a sigh, the paralysing swoon is a passive yielding to passion and illness. Zofloya represents psychological incisions that induces an endless half-life, where breath gradually leaves and diminishes the body.

His presence also provokes uncontrollable bursts of exclamation and confession. Private expressions like sigh and self-talk turn into public speech. Gazing at Zofloya's 'noble' physique instantly dissuades any notion of him as an 'inferior and infidel' (156). Victoria finds herself admitting to the Moor her secret love for her brother-in-law, Henriquez: 'he appeared not only the superior of his race, but a superior order of beings. Her struggles gave away [...] she involuntary exclaimed- 'Oh Henriquez! Henriquez!'" (156). It is Zofloya's racial difference, and the 'beauty' in this distinction, which encourages her trust and reckless surrender of emotion (153). His physical, spiritual and non-human superiority both impresses and encourages Victoria's hidden thoughts and true self to emerge. Hegel's discourse on the 'Other being' can illuminate this interaction. In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the 'Other' is a form of self-consciousness: 'in the other sees its own self'.<sup>17</sup>

Ann Jones notices that the Moor initially appears submissive, but becomes fearsome and more sexually attractive as a result:<sup>18</sup> 'a faint exclamation of pain escaped the lips of Victoria [...] illumined as it was with wild and singular expression, she attributed his violence to uncontrollable ardour' (235). The fusion of pain and lust refers to the image of a combustible and consumed female body. Zofloya's 'towering figure [...] increased to a height scarcely human' (190-91) noticeably contrasts with the 'tender' (168) and 'mild' (171) manner of Berenza, whom she later poisons with help from the Moor.

Anne Williams asserts that in the Female Gothic plot, the male 'Other' may seem monstrous but will eventually be transformed by love: 'It is version of 'Beauty and the Beast''.<sup>19</sup> However, for Victoria and we shall also see for Diana, it is not the Prince, but the Beast himself the heroines want. As Cracuin rightly confirms, for Victoria it is also 'the Beast in herself'.<sup>20</sup> The inner fire and snake rooted in her chest, had always existed, waiting to be released. This is what truly alarmed contemporary readers; that the influence of her mother and Zofloya were mere contributors to Victoria's actions.<sup>21</sup> The heroine connects Zofloya to the centre point of passion and monstrosity, confirming their likeness: 'seizing his hand, she pressed it to her bosom' (59). As I will discuss, Victoria gradually morphs into her demon. However, despite this, there remains a desire for Zofloya's greater male strength and the need to be controlled by him.

The social relationship between the married gentile woman and manservant is erotically reversed: 'she [Victoria] felt incapable of withdrawing

from his arms; yet ashamed [...] and blushing, when she remembered that [he] was but a menial slave' (227). Hegel's theory of the master and slave dynamic can also be applied here. As he declares, only through a 'life-and-death struggle', then the identity of the master and slave can be proven and freedom won.<sup>22</sup> At the point of physical threat, Victoria realises that she is in fact the 'menial' servant and is seduced by this knowledge.

Many critics contextualise the xenophobic connection between dark skin and Satan during the eighteenth-century: 'the sexual energy of the black male and fear of miscegenation were subjects of intense anxiety'.<sup>23</sup> Carol Davison believes that Zofloya could be read as a cautionary message about colonial uprising, 'an Empire Gothic' that explores anxieties about the degeneration of British institutions.<sup>24</sup> The revengeful Zofloya raises two images: the 'spectre of the aggressive, conquering African' to detest and fear, and a justifiably triumphant one.<sup>25</sup>

The suspicion of miscegenation is confirmed through Victoria's corporeal change. After killing her husband and imprisoning Lilla, her body grows larger, more masculine and darker. Like a fairy tale witch, she is grossly compared to the delicate 'snow-white' Lilla (203). Her love rival symbolises the frail, the weak and therefore the ideal femininity that Michie describes, while plumpness is a sign of 'fallen nature'.<sup>26</sup> Lilla also appears to be suffering from symptoms of tuberculosis but in a favourable way compared to Victoria's burning and expansive figure: 'the tubercular look, which symbolized an appealing vulnerability, a superior sensitivity, became [...] an ideal look for women'<sup>27</sup>-perhaps for its lack of threat to men.

Victoria acknowledges this contrast: 'would that this unwieldy form be compressed into the fairy delicacy of hers, these bold masculine features assume the likeness of her baby face' (211). This observation contrasts to an earlier description of the heroine being 'beautiful and accomplished as an angel' (40). Zofloya grants Victoria's plea with a drug that fools Henriquez into thinking she is Lilla, but when he wakes up he gazes in horror at the 'black fringed eyelids', 'cheek of dark' and 'raven tresses' (217), then kills himself.

The fluidity and confusion of gender corresponds to 'the period's suspicion that the natural, naturally sexed body, was not fixed but mutable'.<sup>28</sup> This is true when Victoria imitates Lilla for a drugged Henriquez, confirming that gender traits are performative and synonymous with exercising power.<sup>29</sup> This action aligns with Judith Butler's dismantling of distinctions between sex and gender: 'gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex'.<sup>30</sup> From Zofloya's influence, Victoria not only grows physically, she is bolder, more manipulative and cruel. Dacre successfully recreates the traditional male gothic villain as a sadistic female villainess, particularly through Victoria's reaction when she kidnaps and imprisons Lilla: "why there is certainly a pleasure", with a fierce malignant smile, observed Victoria, "in the infliction of prolonged torment [...]" (205).

Victoria also grows louder. From the haughty sullenness she began with, she constantly shrieks, cries and laughs in the last part of the text, especially during the climatic murder of Lilla: "'Minion- accursed child!" wildly shrieked the maddened Victoria, "prepare for death!" (218). In her insightful lips and labia theory, Emma Rees uncovers the mythic connection between female speech, promiscuity and sanity: 'an assertive, articulate woman is an unruly, transgressive one'.<sup>31</sup> Exhalation and consumption are also linked with exclamation. Considered as a womanly illness since antiquity, hysteria was diagnosed by Jean-Martin Charcot in nineteenth-century France as an inherited neurological disorder, however he still proceeded to concentrate on women in

his research.<sup>32</sup> Victoria's affliction is another stage towards her degeneration and death.

Compared to the death of her husband by poison and the suicide of Henriquez, Lilla's murder is bodily graphic. Victoria shakes the tree in which Lilla seeks refuge, holding on with her 'slender arms', which bleed as the victim eventually falls down (220). She grabs the girl's 'streaming tresses' and stabs her multiple times: '-the expiring Lilla sank to her knees- Victoria pursued her blows- she covered her fair body with innumerable wounds, then dashed her headlong over the edge' (220). Many have commented on the sexual and rapacious nature of this scene, as if Victoria is working over her 'obsessive erotic fascination' of Lilla with brutal intensity.<sup>33</sup> The focus on individual body parts relates to Victoria's perverted gaze of Zofloya, and her destruction of them is a rejection of the feminine ideal: 'the destiny of feminine passivity in the scheme of masculine eroticism'.<sup>34</sup>

### Diana: Taming the Monster

*The Sheik's* heroine, Diana, undergoes an opposite transformation. She is described by resentful men at the start of the novel as independent, boyish and averse to marriage: 'the coldest fish in the world'.<sup>35</sup> After being kidnapped by the fearsome warlord Ahmed, her rigid contours, 'her scornful mouth and firm chin' dissolve and she embraces an inner femininity and changes her behaviour (3).

Like Victoria, her first encounter with her exotic lover is through a dreamy haze when he secretly visits her bedroom: 'a half-conscious vision [...] of a shadowy something that had seemed to fade away' (18). His ghostly presence confuses Diana's understanding of reality. He is both vapour and stone, described as a phallic vision and experience, 'tall and white and solid, and I [Diana] *felt* it' (19). Supernatural and sensual, this mental invasion represents the psychological (and sexual) awakening from an 'Other' being. Just as Victoria stumbles in her sleep, Diana feels an unknown and disturbing touch. This experience follows Cracuin's analysis on 'Demonic bodies' of the Gothic period, which can be applied to both Zofloya and the Sheik: '[the anti-hero] is an impossibly contradictory series of senses: corporeal, immaterial, aural, imaginary [...]'.<sup>36</sup> Jeffrey Cohen's definition of the monsters also partners with this description: 'they are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration'.<sup>37</sup>

Diana's actual encounter with the Sheik is also a nervous and physical experience: 'Her body throbbed with the consciousness of a knowledge that appalled her' (49). Her body also undergoes a destructive process, 'shaking' and then 'shrinking' at his appearance (49). This deflation is caused by brute sexual aggression, the Sheik squeezing and crushing like Zofloya, but also implanting 'savage kisses' which directly suck the air out of the heroine (50). Here the release of breath is forced.

The image of fire is also prevalent. The Sheik's burning eyes and scorching lips oppress and induce Diana into a hallucinatory state. She drifts in and out of reality: 'with a great sob her eyes closed wearily, the hot mouth [...] was like a narcotic, drugging her into insensibility' (49). The world of the Sheik and the landscape of desert are an 'ugly dream' (243). Like Zofloya, he belongs to a timeless and vague space that contemporary readers identified with the 'East'. When Diana is captured and carried ferociously by horse, she loses sense of time and direction as if moving through an alternate dimension (47).

The fluidity of gender traits is also at play. The Sheik wears an effeminate exotic dress over a hyper-masculine body: 'tall and broad shouldered, dressed in

white flowing robes, a waistcoat embroidered in black and silver' (48). The point of the heroine's gaze compares solid physicality to the soft whiteness of the hero's attire; both features heightening the other. During the scene of her capture, Diana is fixated on his long heavy cloak (47). When it was finally cast aside to reveal the dazzling and decorative dress underneath, there is a strange erotic frisson: 'Her gaze was drawn instinctively to his' (48).

The instant attraction is created not just from costume but from the darkness of his skin. Like Victoria, Diana's gaze moves slowly and savours: '[her eyes] rested on his brown, clean-shaven face [...] close-cut brown hair. It was the handsomest and cruellest face that she had ever seen.' (48). It is his difference that both attracts and repulses her. She also sees herself through his eyes and her own difference is exposed and enjoyed: 'beautiful white body bare under his passionate stare' (48). Diana not only gazes, but enjoys watching her being inspected. Her eyes are reflective, encouraging a self-appreciation of desire.

It is Diana's androgyny that attracts the Sheik, but also spurns his desire to 'bring out' the woman in her: "You make a charming boy' [...] 'but it was not a boy I saw in Biskra. You understand?" (69). Forced to cast aside the boyish clothes, in which she found comfort and confidence, she puts on a dress implying that gender traits are as easily interchangeable in the Butlerian sense. As Amira Jarmakani suggests, each character needs the other sex to bring out their innate sexuality, the primitive desert being the perfect setting for this natural reinforcement.<sup>38</sup> The confusion of gender appearance in fact solidifies binaries rather than dissolves them. Succeeding where the English men had failed, the Sheik is able to unearth Diana's femininity as well as enjoy her masculinity: 'the slim boyish figure that rode with him had a charm all its own [...] but it was the woman in her that sent the hot blood racing' (139). The novel suggests that Diana's androgynous features, her rebellion against marriage and the English feminine ideal, is actually suppression. The Sheik persuades her that marriage is possible if she is willing to look outside her social norm. He also expresses (aggressively) that he enjoys both her masculine and feminine sides, being interested in her sex rather than her gender; and encourages her to accept this. The violent underpinning of this persuasion, and Diana's pleasure in it, can be likened to Victoria's pull towards Zofloya's frightening behaviour. Both women are drawn towards a force potent enough to offer escape from their socially imposed identities.

The actor Omar Sharif, who starred in *Lawrence of Arabia*, once claimed that to 'make a woman happy in bed, you've got to be half man and half woman. The converse is equally true'.<sup>39</sup> The two aspects of the Sheik's appearance fuse together to create a new type of masculinity that contradicts and perhaps threatens a conventional Western ideal. This is particularly emulated by Rudolph Valentino's portrayal of the hero in the 1921 silent movie version. The Hollywood icon gathered leagues of female fans, while male critics were left disparaging over the decline of the American red-blooded male. The *Chicago Times* described the clean shaven, spritely Italian actor as a 'pink powder puff'.<sup>40</sup>

Laura Mulvey acknowledges that aspects of 1920s' cinema upset the male/active versus female/passive tension [she] evolved in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", in which the female character caters for the gaze of a male director and audience.<sup>41</sup> Valentino, the fictional Sheik and Zofloya are indeed subject to a certain sexual 'female gaze', apparently caused by their blend of gender appearance. Mica Nava makes an apt point that affluent women during the early twentieth century were 'buyers, as subjects not objects of occidental fascination'.<sup>42</sup> This challenges Said's trope of Orientalism, in which the domination of the East is compared to the sexual domination of Oriental

women by Western men.<sup>43</sup> The interactions we have considered in *Zofloya* suggest that Nava's analysis is not restricted to a time. The relationships are not even a reverse of Said's notion; Victoria and Diana do not dominate but experience a mixture of curious yearning and fear towards their Oriental men.

The tortuous and melodramatic embraces from the Sheik are constant, testing the tolerance of a modern reader. Diana not only reacts in swoons and shouts, she also weeps 'scalding tears' and perspires 'great drops' (47-50). Compared to the expansion of Victoria's body, Diana wilts and becomes more pliable as she repeatedly sinks and leans into the divan or cushions that are always at hand: 'with a bitter cry, she dropped to the floor, her arms flung out across the wide luxurious bed' (49). The softness of the divan contrasts to the harshness and rigidity of her former demeanour. Before her capture her actions would be brisk, she would 'sit still' and haughtily 'stare' down any challenger (35). The divan also engages with the lascivious image of an Oriental harem. Nineteenth-century paintings by Ingres and Delacroix conjure up the Western male fantasy of lounging and sexually available women basking in the heat. Coincidentally, the modern cover image of both texts used in this paper display this; *Zofloya* with the photograph *Odalisque* by Roger Fenton and *The Sheik* with the painting *Leila* by Sir Frank Dicksee.

Hsu-Ming Teo contextualises the mesh of passion and violence as part of the social and sexual context of post-war Britain.<sup>44</sup> The brutalisation of society and the return of traumatised men were connected to the increase of domestic abuse and divorce: 'it explained why female sexuality in this novel is so fraught with confusion and contradiction'.<sup>45</sup> The Sheik as an abhorrent and alluring rapist also plays into similar fears of miscegenation as in *Zofloya*. Hull mitigates part of this by revealing that Ahmed is in fact half Spanish and English with a revengeful hatred of the latter (204). However, Diana had fallen in love with the Sheik before learning his actual heritage: 'loved him for his very brutality and superb animal strength. And he was an Arab! A man of different race and colour; a native [...] She did not care.' (113). However, Diana's embrace of the 'Other' does not lead to death but life in her dreamy desert and marriage to a 'devil husband' (248). Here, the Beast loves her back, but does not entirely give up his monstrosity. With 'tender strength' he embraces her, claiming 'you know the worst of me, poor child' (248).

## Conclusion: Choosing Difference

Both novels, with their loud and passionate heroines, have been accused of pornographic style and content at the time of publication. In contemporary reviews, Dacre has been accused of using 'bombastic' and 'voluptuous' language such as using the indelicate and medical word 'furor'.<sup>46</sup> 'Furor Uterinus' is used by Bienville as the technical term to describe nymphomania.<sup>47</sup> This direct referral to the female body, as well as 'exhibition of wantonness of harlotry',<sup>48</sup> despite Victoria's ending punishment, has left reviewers describing Dacre as deranged and having a 'malady of maggots in the brain'.<sup>49</sup> Jones describes Dacre's style as her biggest flaw, with the use of hackneyed expressions and switches between being too melodramatic and stilted: 'attempts to be dramatic or dignified are not infrequently accompanied by errors of syntax, grammar or spelling'.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps, the instability of prose reflects Victoria's violent passions.

Hull also received a flood of criticism, most interestingly from D.H Lawrence who described the novel, and the genre of popular romances to which it belonged, as morally and culturally degenerate.<sup>51</sup> Despite the lack of overt graphicness, Laura Frost remarks upon the repetitive clichés and episodic pacing



as pornographic.<sup>52</sup> Each rape scene is recycled as if it were happening for the first time, which Frost dubs as 'renewal virginity': 'an almost naïve faith that the same scenario told again and again [...] is sure to incite arousal'.<sup>53</sup> Not only does the reader have a voyeuristic closeness with the characters, they are also coerced into forced seduction. This would not take effect if a reader, like Lawrence, is not engaged with the erotic motive of the text.

What baffled Lawrence and other modernist critics is the popularity of this 'bad' piece of fiction, scorning the readership as mindless typists.<sup>54</sup> *The Times Literary Supplement* missed the point completely, concluding that 'young European women are not to ride alone in the Sahara.'<sup>55</sup> What has been overlooked, is the language of female sexuality and desire. There are no clear progressive or political readings for *The Sheik*, other than it being a text designed for pleasure. After 108 reprintings by 1923, *The Sheik* is agreed by many as the predecessor of popular romance and the sub-genre of desert romances.<sup>56</sup>

*Zofloya* had a successful beginning, selling 754 out of 1,000 prints in the first six months, inspiring a chapbook and a French translation.<sup>57</sup> Dacre begins and ends with a note of warning about the evil within and 'infernal influence' (255), suggesting that her tale is strictly cautionary. It is unclear whether this preface reflects the author's true intentions, given the salacious content of the text. Victoria's embrace of the monster and her inner monster is no doubt enticing, given the novel's popularity. Even though Victoria is killed, critics were still infuriated by the plot. Jones praises the author's ability to rework the psychological Gothic genre through a female character 'reminding the reader of some women's potential for passion and violence.'<sup>58</sup> One cannot help but find the image of a robust and bold Victoria as powerful rather than weak. After all, these qualities were, and still are to some extent, associated with masculinity and the only form of power and strength.

Anne Mellor sees Victoria's attraction to *Zofloya*, during a time in which a white woman's desire for a black man was inconceivable, as offering 'more sexual options, a more aggressive libidinal subjectivity,'<sup>59</sup> even if it ultimately failed. The same could be said about Diana. Opposed to the idea of marriage in her own society and unable to escape this expectation, she chooses an alternative route with the Sheik and succeeds in making him fall in love with her. 'Humble' and 'quiver[ing]', the tyrannical Sheik breaks down into a 'hard sob' during the ending confession, mimicking Diana's initial bodily state (247). Through her own strength, she has managed to partially tame the beast and create her ideal lover.

Despite having different readerships, both texts were widely enjoyed through a complex mix of sadism and masochism. For the heroines, the Orientalist fantasy is the need for the alien, the distant and physically strong. It is not so much a desire for subjugation but the ability to choose. Outside strength, the opposite and the strange, embodied by Victoria and accepted by Diana is a force felt necessary to escape the 'straitjacket of gender conformity and cramped morality' as well as divisions of dream and reality.<sup>60</sup> Realising this, the culturally constructed mind breathes out, through the modes of sigh, swoon, weep, cry and shout, so the body can contemplate options of identity and sexuality.

Williams claims that, compared to the Male Gothic narrative, the female gaze is creative rather than destructive: 'her perception enlarges her world, opens up the possibility of discovering good, and of finding what she seeks', especially love and marriage.<sup>61</sup> For our heroines, it is not just a search for 'goodness' but a way of making sense of the appalling. These outrageous women find power in this, daring to open their eyes and mouths to release and communicate. They,

along with their demon-lovers de-materialise and re-materialise, proving that the body is unfixed, can be adapted and always a process; as flexible as air.

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## Notes

- 1 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 1.
- 2 Charlotte Dacre, *Zofloya; or The Moor: A Romance of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. by Adriana Cracu (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2003), p. 40. Page numbers hereafter will be given in line.
- 3 Julien Offrey de La Mettrie, *Man A Machine*, trans. by Gertrude Carmen Bussey (Chicago: Open Court, 1912). The Project Gutenberg ebook (2016).
- 4 Bienville M.D.T and Edward Sloane Wilmot, *Nymphomania or A Dissertation Concerning the Furor Uterinus* (New York: Garland, 1985). Cited in Dacre, *Zofloya*, p. 257.
- 5 M.D.T and Wilmot, pp. 258–59.
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