She was of "the Devil's party": Female Devilry and the Pleasure of Transgression in Charlotte Dacre's Novels

Adriana Craciun in her *Fatal Women of Romanticism* places Dacre's novels within a male pornographic and obscene tradition of literature. She considers Dacre's novels in the same category of novels that were published around the late eighteenth century and seized and condemned under England's Obscene Publication Act 1857.[1] According to Craciun, Dacre consciously situated her works within this tradition of pornographic and sensationalist literature "in order to appreciate the full significance of her fatal women figures and her focus on corporeal pleasure and destruction" (111). Besides these, she wanted a huge readership to support herself financially. Her sensational novels made her instantly popular. Her *Zofloya* became so popular that it was pirated in a chapbook form as *The Daemon of Venice* (1820). However, the first reason pointed out by Craciun is more important and appears to throw some light upon Dacre's decision to write within a pornographic tradition of literature chiefly dominated by the male writers like M.G. Lewis, William Beckford, et al. The first reason also contradicts the second reason raising the question whether Dacre was really interested in any kind of feminist transgression, or she was merely writing for financial gain. However, the fact that she was not a moralist and was never brought up in a morally conservative environment can be observed in the detailed study of her life. Her personal life gives us insight into the second reason. Charlotte Dacre's personal life, though very little known, offers us some insight into the psychology of the demonic heroines of her novels. Charlotte Dacre was born to Jonathon King, Jewish banker, writer and supporter of radical causes and Deborah Lara whom he divorced later to marry a countess. He was a colourful and even a scandalous figure in England. He had connections with notable literary figures of his time like Shelley,

Byron, and Godwin et al. His bankruptcy and financial misdealings were all well publicized in contemporary newspapers. King in his many writings like *Oppression Deemed No Injustice* (1798), *Mr. King's Apology; or, a Reply to His Calumniators* (1798) tried to defend himself against all the accusations and scandals, but scandals always followed him. He also got the ill-reputation of being a womanizer. Notable of his admirers was the famous writer of the time Mary Robinson with whose husband he had financial dealings. In 1798, King was charged with the crime of sexually assaulting two women. Again in the same year, another charge of sexually assaulting two prostitutes arose against him though the charge was later withdrawn. Thus, Dacre from her early life was accustomed to such situations due to her father's scandals and radical political association. She seemed to be a little disturbed by it and sympathized with her father. Instead, her writing is populated with people like her father, "who have moved beyond human dignity and into extreme emotional and physical states" (Craciun 112). Charlotte and her sister Sophia's volume of verse *Trifles from Helicon* (1798) appeared after King's financial scandal. The fact that they dedicated it to their father testified to their devotion to and sympathy for their father. Scandals also followed her in her own life as she began to write profitable erotic literature to become financially independent after her father's bankruptcy. Her controversial affair with Nicholas Bryne, editor of *The Morning post*, resulted in three children long before their marriage. Her choice of career as a writer of erotic literature and her private life as a mistress of Nicholas Bryne with three illegitimate children can be seen as a sign of compromise for supporting herself financially. However, these are also signs of libertinism and transgression of social mores. Some lines written by Byron in his satirical poem "English Bards and Scotch Reviewers" (1809) appear to

throw some light upon the circumstances under which Dacre was writing. Byron wrote:

> Far be't from me to upbraid
> The lovely ROSA'S prose in masquerade,
> Whose strains, the faithful echoes of her mind,
> Leave wondering comprehension far behind. (427)

Here ROSA refers to Rosa Matilda, the pseudonym of Charlotte Dacre. In the 1816 edition of the book, he added some more lines to the poem: "She since married the Morning Post – exceeding good match" (427). Byron seems to be ironical when he considers their marriage as "exceeding good match." This becomes clearer when Byron added a further note in pencil in his own copy: "and is now dead – which is better" (427). Death for her, in Byron's words, was better than her marriage with Bryne. Here lies the vague indication that her marriage with the Tory editor of *The Morning Post* was a compromised one. Her adoption of the pseudonym Rosa Matilda is often regarded as a transgressive intention as Matilda, the female devil in M. G. Lewis' novel, *The Monk is* taken as the feminist icon by the critics, but this is often regarded as a means to escape her scandalous past. M. G. Lewis, her predecessor in libertine and erotic literature, seems to have considerable influence upon her. She even dedicated her first work *Confessions of the Nun of St. Omer* (1805) to Lewis, and many of the characters of her novels and poetry bear semblance to that of Lewis'. Therefore the adoption of the pseudonym Rosa Matilda might be her conscious choice to identify herself with a transgressive literary character created by her literary predecessor. She lauded another predecessor, an actress and a writer of *Morning Post* - Mary Robinson whose life and works became a resource for the study of eighteenth-century feminism. Robinson was a popular figure not only for her literary

achievement but also for her private life that was full of sexual scandals and illicit affairs. Dacre's own father was one of her first lovers. Robinson's ten-year liaison with the military hero Colonel Balastre Tarleton earned enough notoriety for her. Dacre's own life to some extent resembled that of Robinson. Both of them chose writing as a career to ward off poverty, both of them wrote for *The Morning* Post, and both of them went beyond the social norms appropriate for genteel sensible women of their time in their private lives. Dacre in the poem "To the Shade of Mary Robinson" eulogized Robinson describing her angelic virtues, unflinching spirit and the world's cruel treatment of her. She writes:

> Oh, thou! whose high virtues, angelic, yet glorious,
>
> At once more my wonder, my pride, and my tears,
>
> Still, still in the grave dost thou triumph victorious,
>
> Thy fame sounding loud in thine enemies' ears! (131)

The cruelty of the inhuman world which inflicted pain upon lonely Robinson is described with adequate words by Dacre: "Oh, world, cruel world! How I shrink, how I tremble/ An angel so gracious should be so forlon" (131). She also narrates how Robinson put up her brave fight against her detractors and all the odds of life:

> Like a cedar amid the rude desart high soaring,
>
> And looking contempt on the shrubs that surround,
>
> Enduring for years the tempest loud roaring,
>
> And scorning to yield until broke to the ground (131)

Dacre's idolatry to Robinson leads her to reflect upon her own unhappy state of existence and to beseech power and inspiration from Robinson:

> Oh! why not, sometimes, when I wander in sadness,
>
> Glide distant before me—seen dim thro' the trees?
>
> Or how would my heart bound with mystical gladness
>
> If thy voice were heard, sounding sweet in the breeze! (132)

Dacre is so overwhelmed with Robinson that she is ready to serve her as a slave: "That chief of thy slaves she may serve thee in heaven, / And bear, when I die, my frail spirit to thee" (133). Such hero-worship of a transgressive figure points towards Dacre's own latent desire for transgression. Dacre's novels are replete with such transgressive women characters whose demonic desire leads them to their destruction as well as the destruction of the other characters around them. Their destruction should not be taken as a moral warning of Dacre for the transgressors as both the virtuous and the vicious are destroyed in this game. Adriana Craciun in her study of Dacre's novels opines that she is not sure whether Dacre intended any subversion on the sub-textual level in these novels that usually end with moralistic tone, but Craciun confirms "the subversive effect in the pleasure She (Dacre) clearly takes, and her fatal women clearly take, in the vivisection of virtue" (115). She creates a Sadean world in her novels where conventional virtue becomes vice as it is against the destructive principle of nature and is harmful for the self as well the others. According to Marquis De Sade, virtue is one kind of Aristotelian "golden mean"[2] between scarcity and extreme, which one can never attain. Either one falls short of it or gets excess of it. Insufficient or excess virtue is also a defect of personality. Virtue does not pay off, but wickedness, according to Sade, is a grand phenomenon that provides glory, creativity, and pleasure. However, Sade is against any official kind of violence and wickedness perpetrated by the state or any authoritarian institution. Instead, he privatizes it and makes it a personal attribute, but wickedness is banal in the absence

of virtue. One needs the norms of virtue to derive subversive pleasure by destroying it. In his novels, Sade creates a world of counter-ethic, where wickedness prevails, and wicked persons commit objective harm with complete self-knowledge. Dacre's heroines and some women characters act like Sadean villains who commit evil with complete awareness of it. They seem to take pleasure in it without any regret. Dacre herself seems to take subversive pleasure in the destruction of virtues and the virtuous at the hand of her demonic heroines who also destroy themselves at the end of the novel. Their destruction is often mistaken as the moral warning of Dacre for the transgressors as she, as an intrusive narrator, comments on the action of her heroines in a moralizing tone. However, one should ask why she needs to depict the victory of evil so horribly to do it. Possibly, her answer, one may imagine, could echo what her predecessor Marquis De Sade wrote in defence of his scandalous writing:

> Never, I say it again; never shall I portray crime other than clothed in the colors of hell. I wish people to see crime laid bare, I want them to fear it and detest it, and I know no other way to achieve this end than to paint it in all its horror. (Airaksinen 9)

This is how he justified his writing, but subsequently in the same book he denied the authorship of his clandestine book, *Justine*:

> Given which, let no one any longer
> ascribe to me the authorship of J [Justine], I have never written any such works, and surely I never shall. (Airaksinen 9)

This appears quite self-contradictory as Sade wants the readers to detest crime by portraying it in a horrible manner. That is what he has done in *Justine*, but in the next moment, he denies the authorship of it. In *A Note on My Detention*, he gives two

arguments. Firstly, he argues that writing such a book is dangerous as he might be prosecuted for it. Secondly, he argues that his other books and stories, like *Aline et Valcour*, are didactic. It is difficult to know why Sade denies the authorship of his book through these argumentations. It may be the fear of legal prosecution, or he wants to play a psychological game in which he asks his readers to turn away from evil but directing them towards it in a disguised manner. In this context, Timo Airaksinen writes:

> According to the principles of perverse action, an attempt to turn people away from evil is more apt to attract them towards its acceptance than any direct recommendation. It is therefore not so strange that Sade, who insists on his indecency, denies authorship of his clandestine books like Justine. He first boasts about his wickedness and then denies it. (10)

Dacre echoes Sade when at the end of her novel *Zofloya*, she intrudes in the narrative to warn the readers in a moralizing tone:

> Reader – consider not this as a romance merely. – Over their passions and their weakness, 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 failing of mankind, whose destruction is his glory. (267-268)

She warns her readers against vice, knowing the fact that “the love of evil is born with us” (268), but she lets her readers access the dark recess of the mind of her heroines like Victoria in *Zofloya* and Appollonia in *The Passions*. These texts give details of the sadistic pleasures and torments of unbounded passions felt by these women when they want to love or destroy others. There are references in these novels where concerns are expressed over the reading of a certain kind of novels by women as these

books have immense power to contaminate a woman's mind and lead her to depravity. Such concerns are sometimes expressed through the characters of these novels which themselves fall in this category. These are also subversive games that Dacre plays with her readers, especially female readers. She warns them against vice showing how it can destroy one through the characters of her novels. She describes in detail how to reach such depravity and how to derive pleasure from it. Adriana Craciun writes, "The true subversive potential of Dacre's heroines lies in their mutual annihilation, and in the pleasure Appollonia and Victoria found in such destruction" (153). Her novels end with the destruction of both innocent and evil. Dacre thus shuns the possibility of any standard norms for women. Instead, she takes pleasure in destroying the existing norms that reward the virtuous and punish the evil. She also wants to share this pleasure with her female readers as most of the transgressors in her novels are female. Adriana Craciun opines that "Dacre's most important contribution to the critique of the proper woman of her time is not in creating a new vision of female subjectivity (as Wollstonecraft had done with the rational woman, for example), but in destroying the possibility of a stable subject identity, and even of a natural corporeal identity" (153). Apart from pleasure, another important aspect of her heroines is their will to power. They are depicted as powerful and dominating as contrasted with the weak and submissive male characters in the novels. These male characters often represent the cold rationality of the Enlightenment as opposed to the unbounded passion of her demonic heroines. Two novels *Zofloya* and *The Passions* will be examined to justify the arguments.

Demons of Venice in *Zofloya*

Zofloya tells the stories of several female transgressors who violate the norms appropriate for genteel women of the society either for power or pleasure or for both.

First of them, stands the heroine of the novel Victoria di Loredani. Dacre gives a detailed description of her at the beginning of the book:

> Victoria, though at the age of fifteen, beautiful and accomplished as an angel, was proud, haughty, and self-sufficient – of a wild, ardent, and irrepressible spirit, indifferent to reproof, careless of censure – of an implacable, revengeful, and cruel nature, and bent upon gaining the ascendancy in whatever she engaged. (4)

From the beginning, Victoria is presented to the readers as a foil to the “fair,” “pure,” “innocent” Lilla. Lilla is depicted like an angel and is repeatedly described with the adjectives like “innocent” and “pure”: “Pure, innocent, free even from the smallest taint of a corrupt thought, was her mind” (133). Description of her physical appearance also attests to her purity of mind. The fairness of her body and mind is contrasted with the darkness of Victoria’s body and mind. Dacre describes Lilla’s physical beauty in the following way:

> …delicate, symmetrical, and of fairy-like beauty, her person so small, yet of so just proportion; sweet, expressing a seraphic serenity of soul, seemed her angelic countenance, slightly suffused with the palest hue of the virgin rose. Long flaxen hair floated over her shoulders: she might have personified innocence in the days of her childhood. (133)

Fairy-like blonde beauty of Lilla is contrasted with the semi-dark complexion and dark hair of Victoria. Henriquez makes a clear comparison between the appearances of both when he expresses his disgust seeing Victoria in place of Lilla after waking up from a drug-induced sleep:

> …those black fringed eye-lids, reposing upon a cheek of dark and animated hue – those raven tresses hanging unconfined – oh, sad! oh, damning proofs! – Where was the fair enamelled cheek – the flaxen ringlets of the delicate Lilla. (221)

Lilla with her all feminine delicacies stands as an ideal woman in patriarchal imagination. She reminds one of Sade's Justine who was punished for her virtues. Amelia and Julia in *The Passions* fall in the same category of women who despite their angelic beauties and virtues suffer at the hand of evil.

The novel from the beginning is preoccupied with the question – whether the evil in human mind is innate or it is induced by the circumstance. Even the concluding statement of the novel rouses this question to the mind of the readers. The "reasoning philosopher" (71) Conte Berenza in the novel, who has come to Venice to observe human life, is concerned with the same question:

> …he came from an investigating spirit, to analyse its habitants, and to discover, if possible, from the result of his own observation, whether the mischief they had caused, and the conduct they pursued, arose from a selfish depravity of heart, or was induced by the force of inevitable circumstance. (27)

The same question is raised when Dacre as a narrator goes to assess the character of Victoria. She says,

> …though Victoria in childhood gave proofs of what is termed, somewhat injudiciously, a corrupt nature, yet a firm and decided course of education

> would so far have changed her bent, that those propensities, which by neglect became vices might have been ameliorated into virtues. (14)

She seems to oscillate between these two theories of evil while judging the character of Victoria. Dacre means to say that both nature and environment contribute to the formation of her evil nature, but at different times in the novel, she seems to stress the evil nature of Victoria rather than the external influences. Until chapter XVI, Victoria does not commit anything so-called evil. Rather, she acts like a Radcliffean heroine who is plucky, adventurous, and intelligent. Like a Radcliffean heroine, she undertakes hazardous journeys to escape from the confinement in her aunt Signora di Modena's house and to meet her lover Berenza. She uses her reason and intelligence to win the love of Berenza, but from chapter XVI, her gradual transformation into the so-called evil occurs. After five years of her marriage with Berenza, Berenza's brother Henriquez comes to visit his bother Berenza. When Victoria sees Henriquez, she feels an uncontrollable passion for him. Unlike a rational Radcliffean heroine, she is now unable to restrain her passions. The narrator says,

> Victoria dwelt with unrestrained delight upon the attractions of the object that had presented itself to her fickle and ill-regulated mind. From her infancy untaught, therefore unaccustomed to subdue herself, she has no conception of that *refined* species of virtue which consists in self-denial; the proud triumph of mind over the weakness of the heart, she had ever been unconscious of; education had never corrected the evil propensities that were by nature hers: hence pride, stubbornness, the gratification of self, contempt and ignorance of the nobler properties of the mind, with a strong tincture of the darker passions, revenge, hate, and cruelty, made up the sum of her early character. (132-133)

Here, Dacre subverts the traditional concept of virtue as an inherent quality in human beings. Instead, the existence of virtue depends upon the existence of vice. Virtue consists in the ability to inhibit one's desires and passions, not in any innate goodness of human nature. In the existing system of value, Victoria is evil because she cannot curb her desires and passions. Rousseau's philosophy would consider Victoria a "noble savage" guided by "uncorrupted morals." According to Rousseau, honest living consists in the true revealing of inner nature. Education and culture teach hypocrisy to men. So instincts and feelings are more reliable than reason and intellect. In his essay "Discourse on Science and Arts," Rousseau refers to the Greek philosophers who used to say, "…since learned men appeared among them, honest men had been in eclipse" (7). In "A Dissertation on the Origin and Foundation of the Inequality of Mankind," Rousseau remarks following the same line of thought, "…I venture to declare a state of reflection is contrary to nature; and that a thinking man is a depraved animal." Thus, Kantian virtue that originates from a pure *a priori* rational self is interrogated here by Rousseau. This so-called virtue is also deflated by Dacre's subtle judgment as she italicizes the word "refined" in the sentence: "she (Victoria) has no conception of that *refined* species of virtue which consists in self-denial" (132). Here Wollstonecraftian rational woman who represents "that *refined* species of virtue" is possibly under Dacre's attack. Her heroine has no conception of this conventional virtue as she is driven by her impulses. Her bold and uninhibited spirit is disliked by the rational male characters of the novel. Firstly, her father Marchese is unhappy with her daughter's character hoping that "time, by maturing her reason, and improving her ideas, would correct the wrong bias of her character" (14). However, things do not turn up as he expects:

> With saddened eye the Marchese traced occasionally the progress of his daughter's character; but he endeavoured to disguise from himself the suspicion that her heart was evil. (15)

The same suspicion haunts Berenza, Victoria's lover, and prevents him from marrying her until her character becomes apparently refined. When Victoria meets Berenza after escaping from the confinement in Modena's house, he finds the boldness of her character as an impediment to their happy union: "…he beheld at once her pride, her stubbornness, her violence, her *fierté*. 'Can I,' asked himself, 'be *rationally* with a being imperfect as she is now?'" (69). Rather, he decides to rectify the imperfections of her character: "No; unless I can modify the strong features of her character into the *nobler* virtues, I feel that all her other attractions will be insufficient to fill up my craving heart" (69). Victoria understands the cause of Berenza's hesitation to accept her as his wife. So she plans to feign an air of modesty and refinement to win the love of Berenza:

> She saw only that it would be necessary and politic to answer his sincere and honorable love at least with an appearance equally ardent and sincere. The peculiar cast of Berenza's disposition was in reality melancholy; somber, and reflective…she then must become melancholy, retired, and abstracted. (78)

The same thing happens when she goes to propose Henriquez. She has to become Lilla in Henriquez's eye by using Zofloya's magical drug to win his love. He likes Lilla's "trembling delicacy," "gentle sweetness," and above all, "her sylph-like fragile form" (194). These are characteristics of a subjugated woman taken as ideal in patriarchal ideology. Such type of women, according to patriarchal norms, is

detrimental to the individual as well as society. They are not only disliked but also feared by the patriarchs. So Henriquez fears and hates Victoria strongly:

> …Victoria he viewed with dislike; - her strong though noble features, her dignified carriage, her authoritative tone – her boldness, her insensibility, her violence, all struck him with instructive horror, so utterly opposite to the gentle Lilla. (194)

Victoria's passions are enkindled by Zofloya, a male servant of Henriquez, who later in the course of the novel reveals himself to be Satan. He alone in the novel praises Victoria for her boldness of spirit: "…noble intrepid Victoria! mark me, for truly do I love, and glory in your firm unshrinking spirit" (215). He encourages her to break the shield of feminine delicacy and reveal her true passions for Henriquez:

> Nothing is to be gained by lopping the branches which arise therefrom. Thus, should you resolve to overstep common boundaries, and that which is termed female delicacy, by openly declaring your passion to Henriquez. (155)

The reviewer for *Monthly Literary Recreations* found the role of infernal agent Zofloya useless as Victoria "is sufficiently black and depraved naturally, to need no temptation to commit the horrid crimes she perpetrates" (Craciun 146). Many critics argue that Zoflyoa is a projection of Victoria's own destructive desire as Matilda is of Ambrosio in *The Monk*. Craciun in this context comments, "…thus the submission of the protagonist to the infernal agent, through the selling of the soul, is in both texts a liberation of repressed desire" (146). Per Faxneld in his book *Satanic Feminism* considers Satan as a liberator of women in eighteenth and nineteenth-century literature. In his study of various texts of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, Faxneld deconstructs the biblical myth of the great Fall to show Eve as a heroine and

Satan as an ally in her struggle against patriarchy ruled by God. Faxneld's counter reading of biblical myth, in which Satan's collusion with Eve had been used by Christian theologians to subjugate women, subverts this notion. Faxneld aptly remarks,

> Making a hero of Satan therefore makes sense in that it turns this narrative on its head, consequently inverting the misogynist Christian inferences drawn from it. With a benevolent Satan, woman's action in the Garden become laudable, and woman superior instead of inferior to her husband for being the first to heed Satan's advice. (160)

In *Zofloya*, the temptation scene, that echoes the biblical temptation scene, also occurs in a garden, but it occurs in a dream seen by Victoria. Zofloya appears in a majestic form in her dream to offer fulfillment of her desire on the condition that she must surrender to him: "Wilt thou be mine…and none then shall oppose thee" (136). This recalls the common motif of Faustian bargain with the Devil where one sells his soul to the Devil in exchange of worldly pleasure and power, but this motif is also interpreted as a transgression of human limitation and a rebellion against narrow religious and social values that impose limitations upon the individual. Though the literary masterpieces written on these over-reachers usually bear moralizing warning for the readers), they celebrate such transgression. For some Romantics like Blake, Byron, Godwin, and Shelley in England, the Devil became a symbol of primal energy, creativity, and romantic rebellion against social institutions. Peter A. Schock in his book *Romantic Satanism* has explored different stances of Romantic Satanism taken by these writers, but their works also contain some cautionary warning in a moralizing tone. In this context, Per Faxneld comments:

> …many of the texts that have been considered examples of Romantic Satanism also display a great deal of ambiguity in their portraits of Satan. Frequently, even the idealisations of Satan contain minor caveats…Such dulling of Satanic edge was probably partly due to the fear of the harsh blasphemy law of the time. (136-137)

Zofloya, to some extent, celebrates such transgression under a veneer of moral warning. This morally edifying message and Victoria's destruction at the end are the sad necessities of the genre. Victoria's transgression from the beginning is doomed like the transgression of a romantic over-reacher, but there would have been readers who never failed to appreciate her unflinching spirit and take pleasure in her transgression. Per Faxneld in this respect aptly comments,

> Gothic rebellion, just like Satan's, is always doomed from the outset. This did not stop more or less antinomically disposed readers - like Byron, Percy Shelley and many others – from appreciating these unsuccessful anti-heroes as glorious rebels. It seems likely Victoria should have been received similarly by some. (237)

It also subverts the existing model of "proper" femininity by showing the destruction of Lilla. Victoria's ruthless stabbing of Lilla, according to James A. Dunn, is symbolic of destroying the false feminine ideal. Dunn in his essay "Charlotte Dacre and the Feminization of Violence" remarks,

> …there is a real ideological liberation achieved as Dacre sets her woman free from the destiny of passive suffering so widely represented and accepted by Gothic conventions; on the other hand, her women shed their "feminine"

> destinies in search of some form of sexual justice only to find themselves "masculinized", selfishly lusty and aggressive. (326-327)

As the novel progresses, the darkness of Victoria's mind and body is emphasized more prominently. Zofloya, too, gradually begins to shrug off his mantle of human appearance and grows more demonic. Victoria feels irresistible passion towards Zofloya though with a little shame as Zofloya was a menial slave. When she looks at his "beautiful and majestic visage, that towering and graceful form, than all thought of his inferiority vanished" (234). Victoria's passion for Zoflyoa is transgressive not only because of the fact that he comes from an inferior social stratum but also because of her knowledge of his demonic nature. This recalls the demon lover motif of Dacre's poetry. In Dacre's *Hours of Solitude. A Collection of Original Poems* (1782), poems like "Death and the Lady," "The Skeleton Priest; or, the Marriage of Death," "The Apparition," "The Power of Love," and "The Mistress to the Spirit of Her Lover" are examples of Dacre's bizarre treatment of demon lover theme. These poems play on the border between corporeal and ephemeral, body and spirit, life and death. In "The Mistress to the Spirit of Her Lover," the mistress realizes the inhuman life-in-death like nature of her lover. She can feel his cold, deathly breath upon her cheek: "sometimes me thinks upon my glowing cheek I feel thy breath, but it is cold and damp" (32). Their union can only bring her destruction, yet she cannot help craving for him as she wants to inhale the demonic spirit of her lover within her: "I inhale it with ardent, melancholy delight, for it is impregnated with thy spirit" (33). Being aware of Zofloya's inhuman nature, Victoria realizes that he is the cause of her destruction, but she also knows that she cannot fly from him:

> Zofloya! Thou hast helped on my destruction – yet am I now so bound, so trammeled to thee (by what magic arts I know not,) that though at this moment

> I feel strong wish to fly thee, yet it is counteracted by conviction that the attempt is impossible. (246)

Thus, Victoria voluntarily chooses her own destruction and embraces the consequent suffering and pain. Her suffering, according to Kim Ian Michasiw, attains the dignity of a Byronic hero. According to Michasiw,

> Dacre derives from the Gothic novel an antithetical anatomy of female desire, one that shrugs off both the patriarchal construct of the proper lady and the earnestly didactic maternalism of Wollstonecraft and her circle…Like the Byronic hero, Victoria achieves – through sin and through a willingness to accept, even cultivate, pain – selfhood on a grand scale. (xxx)

Dacre's narrator never fails to remind the readers of Victoria's crimes. She commits three cold-blooded murders. Only one of them can be considered to have been provoked by violent fits of passion. She is the direct cause of a suicide. She rebukes her dying mother at her deathbed and watches her final convulsion with a smile of contempt. She kills her husband for her illicit love for her husband's brother and later leaves the polite society to live among the banditti with the servant. However, the narrator at times seems to be in sympathy with her. Dacre's erasure from the literary canon, according to Michasiw, is possibly due to the fact she has created such anti-heroines. Michasiw remarks,

> …though Dacre's narrator reminds us of Victoria's corruption on regular occasions, she appears entirely in sympathy with most, if not all, of her protagonist's actions. The suspicion that Dacre's narrator is of the devil's party and knows it perfectly well is unavoidable and has done much to justify Dacre's consignment to literary oblivion. (x)

Though Dacre was not writing for any feminist causes nor her heroines conform to the feminist model of our time, but in the words of Michasiw, “lines of affiliation are there” (xxx).

Besides Victoria, Dacre has populated her novel with a number of transgressive women. Megalena Strozzi is one of the notable characters among them. Like Victoria, Megalena commits actions that would be regarded as “improper” feminine behaviour in Dacre’s time. Her adulterous passions for her husband’s friend Berenza, attempt to initiate a man into erotic relation and tempt him, plan for murder, sadism and above all her tendency to dominate males using physical charms are not accepted feminine behaviours. Before the reader directly confronts her, he/she gets an account of her from Berenza who remarks, “…I know the irregularity of her life, and that her undisciplined passions hurry her into the most abject excesses” (74). Berenza, her husband’s friend with whom she was engaged in an adulterous relationship, puts the blame squarely upon her for seducing him though he confesses that he was accustomed to visit her: “I yielded, I own, to the witcheries of Megalena” (73). Like Victoria, she is also driven by her unbounded passions, but unlike Victoria, her passions are not fuelled by any external influence like Zofloya. Unlike Victoria, she is able to conceal her violent passions under the mask of artificial delicacy and refinement: “…she knew better how to disguise, beneath an artificial delicacy and refinement, the tumultuous wishes of her heart” (105). However, both of them transgressed the limit imposed upon women in Dacre’s time. As Victoria’s demonic nature is contrasted with that of angelic Lilla, Megalena, too, is contrasted with another angelic woman considered as ideal according to the patriarchal ideology. Megalena is shown as a foil to young Amamia with whom Leonardo fell in love. The passions which Leonardo cherished for Amamia were

> …innocent, peaceful, and refined; for Megalena, turbulent, painful, wild: *her* charms kindled his soul; Amamia's had filled it with halcyon tenderness: her sensations for the one were like the burning heat of a fierce meridian sun; for the other, like the gentle calmness of a summer eve. (105)

Throughout the novel, Dacre presents these binaries between angel and demon, refined and vulgar, delicate and bold, proper and improper models of woman through different characters. However, Dacre subverts these binaries herself showing the destruction of women of both categories in her novel. Probably Dacre wants to show that these binaries are the products of dominant patriarchal ideology that tends to categorize women either as angel or as demon, but both aspects may be the two sides of the same woman. Megalena's seduction of young Leonardo reverses the conventional norms of love and courtship where a man takes up the dominant position to dictate the action of a woman. From their first meeting, Megalena takes the dominant position. When she first sees him lying exhausted near her villa, the reader gets a detailed description of an adolescent boy's physical beauty through the eyes of a woman. The description is fraught with sensuality and has erotic overtone. Moreover, Leonardo is subjected to the female gaze here:

> …young Leonardo, however, arrested her attention, and she softly approached to contemplate him–his hands were clasped over his head, and on his cheek, where the hand of health had planted her brown–red rose, the pearly gems of his tears still hung–his auburn hair sported in graceful curls about his forehead and temples, agitated by the passing breeze–his vermeil lips were half open, and disclosed his polished teeth–his bosom, which he had uncovered to admit the refreshing air, remained disclosed, and contrasted by its snowy whiteness the animated hue of his complexion. (103)

Such an erotic description of a young man from a female perspective gives not only free play to female fantasy but also titillates the female readers and probably encourages them to think in the same way in their private lives. In Dacre's time, such an uninhibited expression of female fantasy was possibly not acceptable. Megalena's relation to Leonardo is not that of love and affection but of domination and submission. She, through her artifices, gains control over him. It is a delightful triumph for her, and she feels voluptuous pleasure for it. She feels:

> …she had sown (as she believed) the first germs of love and passion in a pure youthful breast; she had seen those germs shoot forth and expand beneath the fervid rays of her influence, and she enjoyed the fruits with voluptuous pleasure. (106)

Leonardo, for her, becomes a trophy of her victory which she wants to exhibit to her society. Here Megalena takes the active role to control the action of passive Leonardo. Here one can find the complete reversal of masculine and feminine roles. In this context, Craciun remarks, "Megalena is temporarily masculinized through the husbandry image and Leonardo is feminized as pure and fertile" (149).

The other transgressors are Laurina Loredani, mother of Victoria and Leonardo, and wife of Zapi who gave shelter to Leonardo after he fled from his house. Driven by their reckless passions, both of them violate the norms for women. Both of them commit adultery. Moreover, they fail to hold their passions in check and act like proper women. Though Zapi succeeds in recovering her image of the proper woman after falling prey to her violent passions for Leonardo, Laurina loses it forever and is regarded as an example of a fallen woman in society. The wife of Zapi is described as having "an intriguing spirit, and a profligate heart" (89). She is

attracted to the physical charm of Leonardo. Her passions for him increases to such extent that she can no longer hide it, but when she is rejected by him, passion for vengeance fills her heart. Then she acts like Megalena, and her heart craves to "destroy and blacken the youth whose virtue she had failed to corrupt" (92). She puts on the mask of a proper woman again. She tears her own clothes and injures herself to show to her husband that Leonardo has tried to seduce her. On the other hand, though Laurina is described as a caring and loving mother, devoted wife at the beginning, she cannot resist herself to the temptation that comes to her in the form of Ardolph, a friend of her husband. The narrator says, "Earnestly did Laurina desire to be virtuous, earnestly did she pray for fortitude to preserve her from the power of temptation, but she had not strength to fly from it" (11). Dacre's detailed description of Laurina's falling prey to the temptation exemplifies Craciun's "vivisection of virtue." She is blamed throughout the novel for the death of her husband and the destruction of her children as Victoria accuses her at her deathbed: "thou taughtest me to give reins to lawless passion" (258). To be virtuous, Laurina needed to control her passion with reason, but she could not do it. She was also unable to maintain a facade of a gentle and refined woman while secretly cherishing her passions like Megalena. Virtue thus is nothing but the ability subdue or to masquerade instincts. Here Dacre strips virtue of its glory and subverts the dichotomy between virtue and vice showing that everything is vice and virtue is a mask to hide it.

The Passions

The Passions, Charlotte Dcare's final novel published in 1811, is written in epistolary form. Epistolary form, that became popular in the eighteenth century, was a helpful tool for the writer to give the readers access to the innermost recess of the characters' mind without narratorial intrusion. For this reason, *The Passions* could depict the

working of passions upon different characters with more details than *Zofloya*. Joanna Baillie in her *Plays on Passions* (1798), selected each tragedy for the exploration of each passion and traced the development of "those strong and fixed passions" in her characters' minds. Dacre here has done a similar task in exploring the progress of primarily one passion - sexual desire, particularly of women. Though the characters are affected by other passions like revenge, jealousy, pride etc, all these stem from one passion - sexual desire. Craciun remarks, "Women's sexual desires are clearly and spectacularly the central concern of Charlotte Dacre's writings, and of much of the Gothic as a whole" (135). It is the driving force of the action of most of her novels. *The Passions* deals with the story of revenge of Appollonia Zulmer, a young and attractive widowed countess. Count Weimer fails to reciprocate the passion of Appollonia whose passion then is transformed into hatred and quest for revenge. She then makes an intricate plan to destroy the peaceful domestic life of Weimer by initiating Julia Weimer, wife of Count Weimer, into the path of illicit sexual passions.

The story of *The Passions* is simple and common – the degeneration of a virtuous woman, but it explores and even interrogates the socially constructed nature of conventional concepts like virtue and vice even more effectively than *Zofloya* as it does it without any clear authorial intrusion with moral warning. Though there is a character like Baron Rozendorf whose letters appear to maintain the *status quo*, there are other characters like Appollonia, Madame De Hautville whose contrasting ideologies are expressed in a way that no stable authorial message can be confirmed. The novel shows with clear examples how weak and frail the borderline between virtue and vice is, and how both can interact with each other with considerable overlap within a single character. It exemplifies through the character of Julia Wilmer how a supremely virtuous character can degenerate into a fallen one. While Amelia

and Julia embody the angelic qualities, Appollonia possesses the demonic. However, the novel subverts patriarchal conviction that there can be no meeting point between the two. Weimer's following belief actually proves wrong when he finds his angelic Julia's degeneration:

> …the points of difference in the character of each are so strong, that it is morally impossible they should ever assimilate; as well could Appollonia acquire the virtues and softness of Julia, as Julia the animation and bold independence of Appollonia. Nature formed them in different moulds; they may associate with as little danger of combination as any two opposites in existence. (1: 144)

Thus, Dacre subverts this binary showing how an angel can easily be transformed into a demon in patriarchal eye. Both angel and demon are destroyed to subvert the conventional notion that virtue is rewarded and vice is punished. Besides this, the concept of virtue as an inherent quality in human being is also interrogated in the novel. Virtue is the ability to control instinctive impulses. Appollonia writes in a letter to Julia when the later confides to Appollonia her guilty passion:

> I would wish to evince to you that it is opinion which reconciles every thing, and fixes the stamp of Vice or Virtue upon actions which thus appear to be but indefinite terms…*virtue is happiness*, say the stoic moralists, having so said, they proudly entrench themselves as behind the impenetrable shield of Achilles. I then, Julia, it were virtue in you to subdue the passion you feel, you necessarily become happy in consequence. (2: 96-97)

She frequently draws the philosophies of naturalist philosophers like Rousseau and Voltaire to vindicate her points.

In the novel, Amelia Darlowitz and Julia Weimer appear to represent the ideal feminine principles according to patriarchal ideologies. Weimer in his letter to Baron Rozendorf delineates the picture of his ideal woman:

> Behold my picture of a perfect woman: chaste simplicity, retiring charms – diffidence, modesty, reserve; tender sensibility, yet strong reason; elegant genus, but no eccentric flights; a due estimation of the dignity of female character, without fastidiousness; a heart, formed for love – but to love only one, to seek after marriage no pleasure beyond the sphere of her duty or the wish of her husband; to be ever, under every ill, his tender consoler, not an imperious reprover; to have no passion, or excess in aught, but love for him. (1: 31)

Amelia appears to him "a concentration of every benign female, virtue, grace and perfection" (1: 32). She is described as "an angel shedding benign influence over one! Refining, purifying, and exalting him, with whom she holds communion. (1: 34). Julia, his own wife, with her "sylphid form – the same bewitching softness and grace" too appears to him "the visionary maiden" (1: 107) of his boyish dream. She possesses a "rare charms and perfections, with all that simplicity and ignorance of society, necessarily resulting from her seclusion" (1: 108). According to Weimer, Julia got such Edenic simplicity as she was brought up in the pure and pristine lap of nature, in rural Switzerland far from the contamination of city life. Rural Switzerland, for Weimer, stands for an ideal state of existence, full of tranquility, peace and freedom. Weimer's Rousseauesque ideals of return to nature, that find expression in his first letter written to Rozendorf, form the basis of his model of ideal femininity. He writes,

> I am delighted with the inhabitants of Switzerland: with the utmost simplicity of manners, they combine a refinement of idea, and a degree of native genius which seems at first surprising. Many of them are acquainted with the best authors, ancient and modern, and a tinge of philosophy runs through their character. The rudest mountaineer among them is not ignorant; it is nothing uncommon to see a herdsman with a volume of Voltaire or Rousseau in his hand. They are universally benevolent, kind-hearted, and hospitable; their women are handsome, modest, and reserved. I do not think I shall very soon quit a spot where I appear to tread more proudly; where, in the midst of these primitive people of the vast solitudes which surround them, I feel more independent, and seem to breathe more freely than in the busy world. (1: 12-13)

Weimer's idealization of the rural people of Switzerland fails to describe the material condition in which they are living. They only serve the purpose of popular Romantic fantasy. However, Weimer's Rousseauesque ideals of innocence and simplicity can hardly survive outside the rural surrounding of Switzerland. Adriana Craciun in this context remarks,

> *The Passions* leaves no such natural or desirable model of subjectivity intact. All the women in the novel are destroyed – the libertine Appollonia, the degenerated Julia, the completely passive Amelia (wife of the man Julia falls in love with) – leaving no viable position for any woman, subversive or not, in a world regulated by such Rousseauesque definitions of the natural. (140)

In contrast to innocent and submissive Julia, Appollonia is described as a powerful and dominating figure. Weimer describes her in the following manner:

> …she does not endeavor gently to steal into the heart, but attacks it by storm…she discusses opinions, combats errors, exposes systems, detects folly; in each and all she appears great; in every part of her character, full of power. Her fierce and penetrating eyes seem to look into the heart, with a glance so quick, so piercing, that other eyes are unable to meet them...Soaring, and eccentric in her flights, she leaves her wondering sex far behind, who gape and stare after her as at a portentous sign in heaven. (1: 28)

Weimer describes her as a fascinating combination of contradictory qualities, "a rare assemblage." He says, "…her character is so various, there is no point, as it were, round which affection could rally" (1: 143). Possibly, he wants to refer to the confusion regarding Appollonia's sexual identity as she is a rare and fascinating combination of masculine and feminine qualities. Weimer fails to locate any central point in her character that can give her stable identity. This reminds one of Judith Butler's theory of the chaotic nature of gender identity. According to Butler, gender is "performativity" that determines identity. Butler comments, "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory framework that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (43-44). Victoria in *Zofloya* is portrayed also as a strange mixture of masculine and feminine qualities. According to Adriana Craciun, this identity confusion is common to the *femme fatales* of Romantic literature. Geraldine's sexual identity is not clearly confirmed in *Christabel*. Mystery also shrouds the identity of Keats's Lamia and La Belle Dame Sans Merci. M. G. Lewis's Matilda also causes gender confusion acting both as male and female. Craciun aptly remarks, "Dacre's fatal women in both *The Passions* and *Zofloya*, along with Keats's Lamia, Coleridge's Lady Geraldine, and Lewis's Matilda, are examples of the Romantics' fascination

with and fear of women who defied the age's insistence on sexual difference as a "natural" ordering principle, and instead revealed the hidden disorder within" (145). Appollonia's ambiguous sexual identity as well as orientation is adumbrated at different times in *The Passions*. It is Rozendorf who at first refers to her internal deformity and her power to corrupt women. According to Craciun, it might be a phallic deformity that involves nymphomania and lesbianism which is often accompanied with large clitoris (142). It might prevent her to be called proper woman in patriarchal normative discourse. Rozendorf describes her in the following manner:

> Appollonia is calculated to do more mischief to her sex than the most abandoned libertine of ours…She is an enchantress – a Circe; and her arts enable her to conceal her deformity under the mask of the most seducing beauty. (1: 150)

He also adds,

> The moment Appollonia appears, the dullest party is enlivened. Frigid matrons, women of profound virtue, who bye the bye are not always remarkable for the profundity of their intellect, are delighted in her society…these dignified females simper at the approach of the countess, who like a fair Euphrosine, advances towards them – the goddess of mirth and smiles. (1: 149)

These remarks are implicitly suggestive of Appollonia's transgressive lesbianism and her ability to violate sexual classification based on patriarchal discourse. Appollonia's relationship with Julia might be interpreted as homosexual, but Craciun is in favour of labelling their relation as homo-social contributing to the emancipation and empowerment of women. Though Appollonia is a fascinating figure, and her presence

is desired in society, she is being watched with admiration, awe, and wonder from a distance. Weimer says, "…she is admired, imitated – and when she descends from her altitudes, at humble distance followed" (1: 28). This distance leads her to be admired only but not loved as Weimer says, "she obtains admiration, astonishment –but not love" (1: 27). In another place he says, "I admire her…but love her you cannot, for she is not made to be loved" (1: 143). Weimer's failure to love Appollonia stems for his fear of female autonomy and power. Appollonia knows that "he (Weimer) dreads my power" (1: 178). She too realizes the reason of Weimer's fear as she says to Madame De Hautville, "Weimer, I am now certain, could never tolerate greatness in a woman; no extra-ordinary powers, - no boldness of mind – greatness with him would be an unpardonable crime" (1: 168). This leads Appolonia to make a general observation upon the pride and vanity of man: "…the pride and vanity of man – in other words his *self-love* causes him to dread *superiority in woman*, he bears no rival near the throne" (1: 169). Again in her letter to Julia, she again mentions the true reason of male fear of female superiority and autonomy:

> …they know not how to forgive a woman for possessing a superior intellect. It galls them not a little, and they prefer to view her at a distance as some curious phenomena…rather than run the risk of approaching too near, while they fly with avidity to those from whom they can have dread of being eclipsed. (2: 17)

Weimer's decision to admire but not to love Appollonia reminds one of Edmund Burke's conception of sublime. Burke in his *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* remarks,

> There is a wide difference between admiration and love. The sublime, which is the cause of the former, always dwells on great objects, and terrible; the latter on small ones, and pleasing; we submit to what we admire, but we love what submits to us. (103)

According to Burke, sublime dwells on strong features like roughness, loudness, vastness, hardness, and jaggedness while beautiful dwells on the relatively smaller and delicate aspects of life. Thus Appollonia with her boldness, strength, and power becomes the Burkean version of the sublime while women like Julia and Amelia with their delicate feminine qualities represent the Burkean concept of beautiful.

Per Faxneld in his study of eighteenth-century Gothic novels describes gothic world as "a fallen world…where mankind always succumbs to temptation" (209). Faxneld in his study shows how the archetypal myth of the Great Fall manifests itself in different Gothic novels. Just like *Zofloya, The Passions* represents a story of temptation and fall. Appollonia here takes the role of Satan as a temptress. Appollonia as a romantic transgressor reminds one of Milton's Satan when she is ready to embrace the consequences of her deed:

> ...so will I now equally sell myself to destruction to destroy him...Toppled from my high eminence, I will not singly fall, others shall be dragged down, and struggle with me in the depths of my despair. (1: 282-283)

She in his letter to Madame De Hautville repeatedly compares herself to Satan:

1. …that fatal night on which I was rejected by thee (Weimer), I hated thee as Satan hated the inmates of Paradise. (1: 279)

2. …thy (Weimer) punishment shall be proportionate – like Satan will I aim at thee. (1: 280)

Appollonia's tempting of Julia should not be taken as a mere vengeance for the unrequited love. Rather, it attains the dignity of satanic rebellion against the patriarchy that tends to subjugate women and make them internalize masculine values in a way that appears natural to them. Appollonia feels pity for Julia's subjugated condition: "The poor creature! I really felt compassion for her" (1: 171). She can clearly perceive how the hegemonization of women by the dominant patriarchy takes place, and how Julia has internalized male ideology unknowingly:

> You see that nothing is forced – that it is not in her nature to be otherwise than she seems – that she was born, not to lead, but to be led, and tamely to yield to the destiny which marks woman for slave of man! (1: 169)

Thus, for Appollonia, the woman becomes "happy slave" and the man "most excellent master" (1: 172). According to Appollonia, though the woman absolutely possesses powers, "man subjects her to his dominion among other animals" (1: 172). So, the woman needs to know the truth – the truth about her own power and the secret of her slavery. Appollonia in her satanic speech says, "The secret of your slavery must be unfolded to you. You shall taste of the tree of knowledge" (1: 173). The allusion to "the tree of knowledge" has sexual connotation. It suggests sexual as well as intellectual liberation of women. Appollonia comes down heavily upon man's attempt to prevent woman from knowledge:

> …why this alarm? This unceasing watchfulness over female mind, to arrest it in its first, least step towards knowledge if it is not from a servile dread, that

> their eyes should become opened…they should (rebelling) throw off the iron yoke of slavery and never more consent to wear it. (1: 169-170)

She herself takes the task of enlightening Julia to make her aware of her own power to rule over men:

> …should no female be found to take upon herself the pleasing task of enlightening her, I volunteer, and pledge myself to do it…I will initiate you! I will show you the extent of your dominion, and how infinitely you are sovereign over the fate of him you obey. (1: 173)

Like Satan, she favours the sphere of mind over physical. Julia's physical presence is unimportant to her. What she needs to conquer is her mind and soul. Thus, she can, in her own her words, enlighten her as she writes to Hauteville:

> The presence of the person is unnecessary – mere matter, and but a gross drug in the sublimated system of my proceedings. My aim is the empire of the mind and soul – the jewel which is within the casket. (1: 281)

It seems that she, like Milton's Satan, believes in mind's ability to make heaven out of hell and hell out of heaven. Appollonia's speech echoes Milton's Satan when she values mind and mental pain over anything physical:

> What are the tortures of Tantalus, labours of Sisiphus, miseries of Ixion, agonies of Prometheus; what are they all, compared to the new species of suffering devised by my evil genius for me?... I am sadly free from physical pain – all, all is soul, the nerve of mind. (1: 41-42)

Thus, Appollonia's revenge and her spoiling of Julia attain the dignity of Satanic, even of Promethean rebellion against patriarchal oppression. Dacre's attribution of

Satanic heroism to Appollonia makes her a proto-feminist figure committed to emancipation and empowerment of women. For Dacre's contemporary readers, she might be a source of inspiration and even an initiator as she was to Julia. Adriana Craciun aptly remarks:

> Appollonia (and, as we shall see, Zofloya's Victoria) thus takes her place beside Marie Antoinette as an allegory of women's ambition and fall from power, an allegory that clearly intrigued Romantic women writers, and inspired a hitherto unacknowledged Satanic Romanticism deeply concerned with the war between, even within, the sexes on earth. (142)