

SGF

STUDIES IN GOTHIC FICTION

ARTICLE

Feminist Disability Studies Goes Goth: The Hyperability of Female Monstrosity in Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya*

by Norma Aceves

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18573/sgf.16>



Cardiff University Press
Gwasg Prifysgol Caerdydd

Copyright © Norma Aceves

Date Accepted: 1 May 2018

ISSN: 2156-2407



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Feminist Disability Studies Goes Goth: The Hyperability of Female Monstrosity in Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya*

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18573/sgf.16>

Norma Aceves

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses Charlotte Dacre's 1806 text *Zofloya*, and I argue that the lead character's monstrosity stems from being constructed as mentally ill and then physically inferior in the text. However, I argue that Victoria's monstrosity is not a disability, but rather a hyperability in that her strength becomes a threat to patriarchal power. Using a bridge between Barbara Creed's theory of the monstrous feminine and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's intersectional feminist disability theory, I argue that female monstrosity can also be understood as a hyperability. While the heroine, Victoria, may appear to be an able-bodied woman to the reader, the confinement of her body at her aunt's, her openness about her own sexual desire, and the descriptions of her lover as "inferior" construct Victoria's body as disabled and sexually deviant by her society. However, I read her later monstrosity—the murders of her lovers and of the servant, Lilla—as an empowering tale of a perceived disabled woman who shows the instability of British social mores and normalcy by subverting them using her perceived monstrosity. Her various acts of rebellion ultimately show that Victoria's perceived disability is also the source of her empowerment. They show that her perceived disability is a strength she uses as a weapon for destruction.

KEYWORDS:

Charlotte Dacre, Disability Studies, Hyperability, Monstrous Feminine, *Zofloya*, Monstrosity.

[No] longer mistress of her actions, nor desiring to be so, seized by her streaming tresses the fragile Lilla, and held her back.—With her poignard she stabbed her in the bosom, in the shoulder, and other parts. [...] Victoria pursued her blows—she covered her fair body with innumerable wounds, then dashed her headlong over the edge of the steep. (Dacre 220)

This infamous scene in Charlotte Dacre's 1806 *Zofloya* portrays one of the most diabolical characters of the early nineteenth century. At the height of her monstrosity, Victoria reveals two things: her commitment to seeking revenge against those who stand in her way and her incredible strength with which she carries out the task of murdering these aggressors. In "The Sex Panic of the 1790s" (1996), Katherine Binhammer argues that female deviance functioned like a plague on British soil after the French Revolution because moral behavior was associated with the "health of the nation" (416). Gothic writer Charlotte Dacre wrote novels that challenged prescribed gender roles insofar as she portrayed many of her heroines as both sexually deviant and monstrous. Dacre's novel narrates the story of a young girl named Victoria di Lore-dani who gives into her sexual desires and feelings of vengeance that then lead her to deceive and murder her perceived aggressors, her parents who have tried to restrain her, and a rival for the love

of a man who had seduced her. The more Victoria accepts her deviant desires, the more her, literal body becomes stronger and more masculine. Victoria's monstrous body is a product of the various patriarchal forces represented by the masculine narrator, her parents, and her lover Berenza, who construct her as mentally ill and then physically inferior for her emerging sexual desire. When Victoria learns of this perception, she becomes empowered by her anger and this empowerment produces Victoria's hyperabled monstrous body. In this paper I argue that, even though Victoria's body is constructed as mentally ill and then physically inferior in the text, Dacre's *Zofloya* suggests that monstrosity is not a disability, but rather a hyperability in that her strength becomes a threat to the patriarchal order.

DEFINING FEMALE MONSTROSITY AND INTEGRATING DISABILITY STUDIES

A disability studies reading of female monstrosity requires a reconceptualization of Barbara Creed's "monstrous feminine" as the abject that must be removed, not only to reinforce patriarchal structures, but also to enforce normalcy (Davis 23). Doing so will help solve the many critiques disability scholars see of using psychoanalytic theory when discussing disability. For example, scholars like Dan Goodley have argued that the field of disabil-

Articles

ity studies sees using psychoanalytic theory as a splitting of the subject when disability studies aims to make the subject whole by discussing how society disenfranchises the disabled person (721). However, I believe disability studies can help solve the problem by discussing the disabled body as a whole subject. In the context of the monstrous feminine, I argue that this requires materializing the abject body by examining what makes the female monster an unacceptable being. In her famous essay “Horror and the Monstrous Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection” (2008), Creed befittingly argues that the monstrous in the horror genre consists of ancient religious and historically perceived abominations such as “the feminine body and sexual immorality and perversions; corporeal alteration, decay, and death; human sacrifice; murder; the corpse; bodily wastes; the feminine body; and incest” (245). She believes these “abominations” often take the form of the feminine, which, according to Julia Kristeva as cited in Creed, are often associated with waste within a woman; the blood, the milk, and the shit are all bodily waste we must rid ourselves of in order to “re-draw the boundaries between the human and nonhuman” (251). In other words, these perceived feminine abominations must be abjected from society in order to reinforce the dominating patriarchal structures. However, the limitation with using Creed’s work, or any psychoanalytic lens, to investigate non-normative bodies is that all too often the female monstrous body becomes abstracted and no longer discussed as a complete human body with needs and desires. I believe that using disability studies in the discussion of psychoanalytic theory can solve the challenges scholars have. Using disability studies is important to an understanding of Creed’s “monstrous” feminine because it allows for a more nuanced understanding of abject bodies as socially constructed and not biologically determined.

I argue that Creed’s “monstrous feminine” must be fleshed out through disability studies in order to show what about physical bodies is so threatening to a normative patriarchal order that then necessitates abjection. Much like disabled bodies, “the monstrous feminine” is constructed as an embodiment of the non-normative. Creed argues these bodies are “shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject” because they represent a threat to those in power so much that they must be abjected from society (243). She uses Kristevan psychoanalysis to “explore the different ways in which abjection, as a source of horror, works within patriarchal societies as a means of separating the human from the nonhuman and fully constituted subject from the partially formed subject” (244). This division is what allows the able-bodied patriarchy to maintain power and continue normalizing society at the expense of the disabled. Creed believes the first division is marked when a mother gives birth because doing so makes her “an abject at the

moment when the child rejects her for the father who represents the symbolic order” (244). After this first rejection, the monstrous woman continues to make choices that further separate her from the maternal. Thus, Creed mostly understands the non-normative body through its various abjections rather than her physical embodiment. Delineating how the patriarchy constructs the female monster will provide a nuanced understanding about how her body is threatening to a patriarchy that privileges normalcy. In this article, I use Dacre’s *Zofloya* to show that her deviant desires are constructed as monstrous because they are perceived as a threat to a patriarchal society that privileges normalcy. Society’s attempt to suppress her desires produces in her the non-normative “monstrous feminine” that must be eliminated to prevent the moral damage such a character could do to a society worried about the health of the nation.

Tracing the body of the “monstrous feminine” requires the field of disability studies¹ because it adds a nuanced understanding of how drawing divisions between normative and non-normative female bodies to serve the patriarchy is also a conversation about how the same structure privileges able bodies over disabled ones. That is to say, they privilege socially constructed able bodies by oppressing and rejecting disabled bodies. According to Lennard Davis in his *Enforcing Normalcy* (1995), disability is a term “more broadly used to indicate any lack of ability—fiscal, mental, legal and so on” (xiii). Davis also includes an important caveat in his definition: “The term ‘disabled’ is often used to obscure or repress the fact that disability is not a static category but one which expands and contracts to include “normal” people as well” (xv). Since this category is so capacious, discussions about disability may include conversations about the able body and the hyper-abled one, just as queer theory discusses heteronormativity in addition to queerness. In this article, I define hyperability as any extra physical or mental abilities beyond what is considered normal by society. I contend that people with hyperabilities are treated as abject, too, because they also threaten the delicate boundaries of what defines the normal. I argue Creed’s “monstrous feminine” is an example of the hyper-abled body, especially if this figure has extraordinary strength or supernatural power. The monstrous woman with exaggerated physical strength is a threat to the patriarchy, especially if she is depicted as having the ability or potential to harm men physically. Davis argues that “our construction of the normal world is based on a radical repression of disability, and that given certain power structures, a society of people with disabilities can and does easily survive and render

¹ For more scholarship about the body in the context of disability studies, read: Tobin Siebers, Jasbir K. Puar, Tom Shakespeare, Margaret Price, Ellen Samuels, and Robert McRuer.

Articles

'normal' people outsiders" (22). This power structure is why the conversation of female monstrosity must also be one about ability and disability, since non-normative feminine bodies do threaten normalcy in the same ways they threaten the patriarchy. Whether intentionally or not, I contend that *Zofloya* portrays disability as empowerment for Victoria when she uses her perceived weakness as strength to live out her desires and murder those she believes have wronged her. Though I do sustain that Victoria is an able-bodied woman who is not actually mentally ill in the first half of the text, I will show that her perceived disability is not as big a threat to the patriarchy and to normalcy as her hyper-abled body in the second half of the text.

FEMINIST DISABILITY STUDIES GOES GOTH

Victoria's status as a woman in a society that rejects the sexually deviant woman demands the intersectional lens of feminist disability studies to understand that her oppression is a symptom of nineteenth century notions that women's bodies are inferior to men's bodies. Much like disability studies, feminist disability studies views disability as a social construct that does not follow a "medical model" which understands disability as an inconvenience to be diagnosed and cured. Founding scholar of feminist disability studies,² Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, contends that "using *disability* as a category of analysis allows us to see that what was normative embodiment in her native context became abnormal to the Western mind" (19). This theoretical framework also helps scholars "challeng[e] the premise that unusual embodiment is inherently inferior" (19). Feminist disability studies engages with various discourses by interrogating the intersections of oppression that disabled women experience. Some of these intersections are "the unity of the category of *woman*, the status of the lived body, the politics of appearance, the medicalization of the body, the privilege of normalcy, multiculturalism, sexuality, the social construction of identity, and the commitment to integration" (Garland-Thomson 16). The "monstrous feminine" is a useful figure to interpret these intersections because the monster frequently occupies liminal spaces, many of which have to do with the body. For example, monstrous characters' bodies or identities can border between life/death, natural/supernatural, feminine/masculine, and able/disabled. Thus, non-normative people do not have one monolithic experience and require an intersectional approach to understanding their experiences. For example, in *Zofloya* Victoria is a woman with deviant desires that, according to Adriana Craciun, are pathologized as nymphomania. Therefore, I

bridge Creed's theory of the "monstrous feminine" with feminist disability studies to show how the construction of Victoria's body as mentally disabled is rooted in a patriarchal desire to normalize women's desires within Dacre's Romantic Gothic novel.

Romantic Gothic, as a literary genre, explores the struggle between patriarchal power and resisting non-normative literal and figurative bodies. As a Romantic Gothic text, Dacre's *Zofloya* is an ideal novel to discuss how non-normative bodies are oppressed by the patriarchal need for normalcy. According to Hoeveler and Teller, this period is replete with discussions about the clash "between the individual and social order" (xi). For example, examining Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* as Manfred's pursuit for power allows for a reading of the ghosts, dark passageways, fallen body parts and flight of the young Isabella as impediments to his goal of power. According to Angela Wright and Dale Townsend, the terms "Romantic" and "Gothic" already have a fraught relationship with each other; there is a clash between liminal spaces and identities. Certainly, Romantic Gothic texts show the intellectual growth of the individual, the decline of an era, nostalgia for the past, and anxieties about the future. One of the central concerns of Romantic Gothic texts is the anxiety about the future. *Zofloya* is situated within the anxieties surrounding the future of women's bodies and thus exemplifies the inevitable disruption of patriarchal power by the normalized female body. Fred Botting argues that during this period "writing began to move inside, disturbing conventional social limits and notions of interiority and individuality" (91). Dacre's text challenges the limits of a woman's power and her ability to accept and act on her desires, despite all attempts to suppress them by constructing her as a monstrous woman.

Adriana Craciun's important work, *Fatal Woman of Romanticism* (2002), has already done much to ground constructions of the female monstrous body within early nineteenth-century scientific and medical conceptions of biological sex.³ In this article, I move away from these debates to focus on the stigma of the female deviant to show that even though a character such as Victoria would be considered "unsex'd" for acting outside of what would be considered nature's law, her body does not demonstrate a lack as the term suggests. Through the character of Victoria,

² For more reading on Feminist Disability Studies theory, see Alison Kafer, Ellen Samuels, Elizabeth Donaldson, Abby Wilkerson, Kim Q Hall, and Susan Wendell.

³ Drawing from the work of Thomas Laqueur, she argues that the femme fatale was unnatural because her behavior deviated from biological sex in a time when society was still adjusting to the change from the one-sex to the two-sex model, and the concept of woman as separate from men was still new. She also argued that writers like Charlotte Dacre who wrote about the femme fatale did much to "disturb the natural boundaries of bodies" (11). Craciun's study of how scientific debates about the body play a role in the construction of women as "unsex'd" are crucial to an understanding of the importance of science to the construction of deviance.

Articles

Dacre certainly challenged scientific static notions of women as suppressed and physically unchanging, as Craciun argues; however, Dacre also brought to the forefront the notion that bodies that wield power are a threat to normalcy. Instead, I argue Victoria's body demonstrates hyperability that is threatening to society, and this is why Victoria is constructed as a monstrosity; it is an attempt to minimize her power and threat as a non-normative woman.

Victoria's treatment as monstrous for her perceived disabled body shows how Dacre's Gothic text demonstrates the oppression of disabled bodies by a society that privileges both the patriarchy and normalcy. After all, according to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "The historical figure of the monster, too, invokes disability, often to serve racism and sexism. Although the term has expanded to encompass all forms of social and corporeal aberration, monster originally described people with congenital impairments" (21). By this, it is understood that monstrosity can be read as society's way of categorizing the abject in bodily terms and "how the concept of disability has been used to cast the form and functioning of female bodies as non-normative" (19). This theoretical framework is useful within the Gothic and can serve as a tool to flesh out Creed's "monstrous feminine" instead of discussing the abject as a floating signifier.

These intersections of gender studies, psychoanalytic studies, Gothic studies, and disability studies serve to show that the monster can represent disability as strength insofar as this figure possesses the strength and power to destabilize a social order. Despite the avid denigration of the female monster as non-normative, some portrayals of these characters can and do challenge the normalization of their bodies. Even within feminist disability studies, Garland-Thomson notes this theory "can press far its critique of the pervasive will to normalize the nonstandard body" (26). Within the Gothic, this subversion occurs when the monster fights back against societal oppression with violence. For example, in *Zofloya*, Victoria engages in a systematic and violent destruction of those who have oppressed her or those who stand in the way of her happiness. This is also evident as Victoria's body resists her oppressive construction as she becomes hyperabled and aggressively masculine. This change in her body is a reaction to the attempted oppression by the many patriarchal figures in her life. In this article I will show that the treatment of Victoria's body as mentally and physically weak produces in her an empowerment that creates her hyperabled body and becomes a threat which is abjected by her society.

CHARLOTTE DACRE'S ZOFLOYA AND MONSTROUS FEMININITY

Dacre's *Zofloya* provides the perfect character to discuss "the

monstrous feminine" within the context of feminist disability studies because Victoria's monstrosity develops when her desires are repressed. The character Victoria was inspired by Dacre's fascination for Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796), in which the character known through most of the text as Rosario reveals himself as a woman named Matilda, the demonic character who manipulates and seduces the lead character, Ambrosio, into his own destruction. The influence of this character inspired Dacre to both take up the pseudonym of Rosa Matilda and develop the plot twist of *The Monk* in *Zofloya*. In Dacre's novel, it is the black moor, Zofloya, who reveals himself as the devil and Victoria who is then seduced into giving into her own lascivious desires. Scholars like George Haggerty and Diane Hoeveler have already noted that revising this trope moves Dacre's text from women's Gothic to male Gothic because her plot is more similar to Lewis than Radcliffe. Elena Sottillotta argues that *Zofloya* challenges traditional notions of women in Radcliffe's texts as moral and virtuous. She states that Dacre "rejects the passivity of Ann Radcliffe's heroines, opting for an active, ruthless female protagonist, who, as the novel progresses, becomes as diabolical as her demoniac counterpart, a mirror image of her demon lover (87)." Victoria's construction as diabolical rather than passive and morally driven is what demonstrates her resistance to those in power. However, this was not an organic development. Victoria is depicted as non-normative by the patriarchal figures in her life and by the text itself via the narrator, her parents, and her lover, Berenza. Victoria is first treated as mentally ill in the beginning of the text, and, when she realizes she is perceived as inferior, she begins to embrace her desires and become the dangerous woman who eliminates those who stand in her way. Rather than feel sympathy for herself at this discovery, Victoria finds empowerment in her perceived disability and, as her body becomes stronger, she uses her strength to fuel her desire to destroy those who wrong her.

PATRIARCHAL CONSTRUCTION OF VICTORIA AS MENTALLY ILL

Both the narrator and Victoria's parents construct Victoria as a non-normative body from the beginning of the text. Some of these portrayals of Victoria come from the omniscient narrator, who functions as a patriarchal figure in the way he seems to freely cast Victoria as deviant in descriptions of her throughout the text. The narrator also frames Victoria's story as a cautionary tale for women. It is from the narrator that the reader discovers Victoria is a girl with transgressive desires. From the first description of Victoria, the reader is told she is a fifteen-year-old girl who is both uncontrollable and naturally deviant:

Victoria, though at the age of fifteen, beautiful and ac-

Articles

complished as an angel, was proud, haughty, and self-sufficient—of a wild, ardent, and irrepressible spirit, indifferent to reproof, careless to censure—of an implacable, revengeful, and cruel nature, and bent upon gaining the ascendancy in whatever she engaged. (40)

While this description does cast Victoria as the normative woman who is good-looking and even angelic, the narrator suggests that her behavior is non-normative in that she allows her desires to control her excessively. She has an “irrepressible spirit,” does not censor herself, and she becomes self-righteous because she is “bent” on fulfilling her desires. With this description, the narrator suggests Victoria is naturally deviant even though most of the other characters later suggest that she is sick from the “contamination of bad example” of her mother (53). This description of Victoria and others that will follow show how much of Victoria’s non-normative body is a product of her society and not a biological product.

Victoria’s parents also construct Victoria as non-normative through their decision to treat her medically for her perceived mental illness. Laurina and Victoria’s stepfather, Count Ardolph, take her to a distant aunt, Signora di Modena, whose job is to confine Victoria as an attempt to cure her. Nowell Marshall argues that this confinement is a form of prison because the Signora acts as Victoria’s jailer who teaches her “to follow socially sanctioned rules first by inflicting actual punishment,” while I contend that this confinement, instead, is a form of makeshift mental asylum (68). The language used to discuss the terms of the agreement between Victoria’s parents and the Signora suggests more so that they perceive that she has a mental illness that needs to be cured, which is an attempt to normalize her. Ardolph explains that he wishes to leave Victoria at the Signora’s house for her perceived mental disability:

I am to inform you, then, that the young girl [Victoria] [...] I am desirous to commit for a certain period to your care. Naturally evil disposed, of a haughty and audacious temper, she has been nearly by flattery and indulgence destroyed. Her ideas are entirely corrupted, and, child as you may think her, for she is scarcely eighteen, there have not been wanting those of the other sex who have sought to undermine her principles. (68-69)

In this passage, Ardolph not only describes Victoria’s behavior, but also continues the narrative that Victoria’s sexual desires are deviant. He reinforces what the narrator and the Marchese de Lore-dani mentioned before, that she is “naturally evil,” and suggests there is something inherently defective about her that Berenza sought to exploit when he courted her (49). We know this corruption is Victoria’s sexual desire because she has already admitted

to having these feelings “that burnt in her bosom” (60). However, these sexual desires are only non-normative because they are portrayed as desires that must be treated with confinement. In other words, these desires are deviant because this society considers sexual desire in women non-normative.

The narrative continues, then, to explain Ardolph’s plan to cure Victoria’s mind through isolation and control. He also assures Laurina that the Signora will treat Victoria “as circumstances may require; to her conduct and discretion you may safely commit your daughter, when by a due course” (69). Ardolph then asks the Signora to punish Victoria when her symptoms manifest, first through solitary confinement and then through food deprivation. He says, “I would have you confine her, if it be necessary, to the solitude of her chamber, for a short time” (69). If Victoria were to manifest any violence or excess of feeling, Ardolph gives the Signora permission to treat her as though she were a mental health patient in an asylum: “[O]f restraint, and privation of every incitement to evil, a change for the better shall be perceptible in her disposition, we will withdraw her hence, and you, Laurina, may again receive her” (69). In other words, the Signora’s job is to cure Victoria of her perceived nymphomania, or “the furor”, which we later discover is her perceived mental illness (144). The act of describing Victoria as naturally inferior and mentally ill and then treated medically for these perceived weaknesses shows how far the patriarchal figures in her life will go to control Victoria’s sexual desire. It also shows that Victoria’s society is one that treats this perceived mental disability as a deficiency in need of a cure.

The treatment of Victoria’s perceived mental illness is typical of mental asylums at the time. Michel Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization* (1965) outlines the kind of punishments confinement facilities had used since the seventeenth century. He explains, “[f]inally, every fault ‘will be punished by reduction of gruel, by increase of work, by imprisonment and other punishments customary in the said hospitals, as the directors shall see fit’” (60). Ardolph gives the Signora the same power asylum directors have over their patients to cure Victoria’s mind from her perceived natural weakness. However, Victoria’s confinement is only an attempt to normalize her as the socially acceptable virginal woman who suppresses her desires.

The various patriarchal constructions of Victoria as naturally inferior and then mentally ill produce Victoria’s monstrosity. When Victoria realizes her parents have deceived her when they leave her at Signora Di Modena’s house, the reader witnesses a moment foreshadowing the real threat of allowing Victoria to give in to her desires and her monstrous potential. The narrator describes her reaction as a moment of excessive emotions: “The rage of Victoria knew no bounds; she gazed wildly round the

Articles

apartment; the whole truth rushed through her mind at once—the base, unpardonable artifice that had been used—she struck her head violently with her clenched hand, and passionately exclaiming—“I am deceived and entrapped!” (72). The detail with which Victoria’s rage is portrayed here shows how much her parent’s betrayal affects her. She becomes agitated and this changes her into a violent person. This anger at being betrayed also pushes her to plot against her parents, it motivates her to act on her desire for violence: “An ardent desire for revenge followed; and thus from the conduct, misjudging and inexcusable, that had been pursued towards her, did every violent and evil propensity of her nature become increased and aggravated” (72). Even though Victoria’s parents attempt to pathologize her deviant desires by confining her at the Signora’s house, this confinement and the construction of her as mentally ill only make her more willing to give in to these desires. She becomes “like the untameable hyaena that confinement renders only more fierce” (75). In other words, betrayal produces in Victoria the monstrous behavior that pushes her to progressively become more lethal as the text progresses. However, the construction of Victoria as “naturally evil” and mentally ill are not only what produce the monster in Victoria, but also her realization that Berenza has also betrayed her.

VICTORIA’S TRANSITION INTO LITERAL MONSTROSITY

Much like her parents and the narrator, Berenza also does his part to construct Victoria as non-normative by treating her as mentally inferior for her lascivious desires. This becomes clear to the reader when he reveals that he never intended to marry Victoria, but rather desired to make her his mistress because he did not consider her both mentally and physically worthy. Through the narrator, the reader becomes privy to some of Berenza’s internal conversations about his feelings towards Victoria. He asks himself if he can “be *rationaly happy*, with a being imperfect as she now is? No; unless I can modify the strong features of her character into nobler virtues, I feel that all her other attractions will be insufficient to fill up my craving heart” (90). This passage reveals Berenza’s discomfort with Victoria’s non-normative desires, and he wishes he could change her into a nobler version, much like her parents felt when they left her with Signora di Modena. He continues to explain more explicitly that much of why he views Victoria as inferior is because “it was not the perfection of *body* only that he required, but the perfection also of *mind*” (91). This perceived weakness is why, “while the proud Venetian deemed her *worthy* of becoming his *mistress*, he conceived her unfit for the high distinction of becoming his *wife*” (100). With these words, Berenza again becomes another patriarchal figure in Victoria’s life who polices her behavior and her body. Even though he does not pathologize

the young girl’s perceived disability like her parents, his belief that she is mentally inferior is what drives his decision to make Victoria his mistress and not his wife. However, he still, to some extent, punishes Victoria for not meeting his expectations of her.

When Victoria realizes Berenza had viewed her as inferior, she becomes so unsettled that she allows her more violent desires to grow. Her changes become noticeable on her face and later in her actions. The narrator describes this change in her as dangerous and a viable threat to Berenza’s life:

Here Berenza erred; [...] his last insinuation, though broken and obscure, darted like lightning through her brain, and struck to her proud heart as a three-edged dagger! That proud heart had now indeed taken an alarm far beyond any that Berenza’s imagination could have conceived. Her brow lowered, she turned of an ashy paleness, as sudden hatred and desire of revenge took possession of her vindictive soul. The conviction flashed upon her, that she had till this moment been deemed by Berenza unworthy of becoming his wife. (138)

Not only does her face become pale as she understands that Berenza perceived she was inferior, but her violent desires begin to consume her. She is portrayed as capable of enacting revenge and this makes her a threat to Berenza. She makes it clear that his actions will have consequences by thinking that “thy delicacy, thy forbearance, and nobleness of mind will not save thee from the consequences of having proceeded thus far” (139). This shows that Victoria is now willing to act on her feelings for revenge with this secret threat she has placed on the unknowing Berenza. Unlike the last time she was fooled by her parents, Berenza will not escape as easily because “Victoria could not forget that he had once deemed her unworthy of ranking on an equality with himself” (139). It is this realization that makes Victoria no longer willing to sacrifice her desires, and she allows herself to become consumed by them after this moment. The more she allows these feelings to take hold of her, the more these feelings manifest as changes in her body into a more masculine and hyperabled form.

VICTORIA’S HYPERABLED BODY AND THE “MONSTROUS FEMININE”

Victoria’s transformation into the “monstrous feminine” begins when her desires intensify in response to Berenza’s betrayal. After this betrayal, Victoria fully accepts her deviant sexual desires and nurtures a plan for revenge. Victoria and Berenza skip the “honeymoon phase” of their marriage when her love for him develops into blind hatred. She rediscovers her sexual fantasies upon meeting Berenza’s brother, Henriquez, who comes to visit the couple’s Venetian home with his betrothed, Lilla, and his black servant,

Articles

Zofloya. Victoria almost immediately begins to fantasize about Henriquez. Her desire becomes an obsession that consumes her much like her feelings for Berenza did much earlier in the text: “[t]he most wild and horrible ideas took possession of her brain; crimes of the deepest dye her imagination could conceive appeared as nothing, opposed to the possibility of obtaining a return of love from Henriquez” (144). Like her feelings of revenge, making Henriquez love her becomes an obsessive priority because he awakens in her “the furor,” or what Craciun has noted is a sexist French medical term, the *furor uterinus*, which was intended to demonstrate women’s “imbecility” (22). Seeing Henriquez with his beloved Lilla “made her wild with the furor of conflicting passions: now it was, that she truly felt she had never loved the injured Berenza” (144). This passionate desire for Henriquez not only shows Victoria was not “cured” of her deviant desire as her parents had hoped, but also that it has intensified and “made her wild.” Rather than normalize Victoria, her confinement and subsequent experiences push her to fully embrace and cultivate her perceived mental disability.

Victoria not only embraces her sexual deviance, she also allows her obsession for revenge to grow and manifest itself as violent and monstrous behavior; this obsession makes her dangerous and decidedly more masculine. This violence begins as destructive thoughts and culminates in a series of murders throughout the novel. The narrator allows the reader to see that her desires become destructive against those who stand in her way when he explains that she “[s]ecretly wish[es] that Berenza, that Lilla, nay, even the whole world, (if it stood between her and the attainment of her object,) could become instantly annihilated” (145). As Victoria nurtures these desires to “annihilate” her perceived aggressors, the narrator begins to describe Victoria’s violent desires in very masculine terms: “Hers was not that innocent vivacity which springs at once from the *purity* and *sanity* of the heart; it was the wild and frightful mirth of a tyrant, who condemns his subjects to the torture, that he may laugh at their agonies; it was the brilliant glare of the terrible volcano, pregnant even in its beauty with destruction!” (151). This passage suggests Victoria is willing to enact destruction mercilessly in the same way as the Gothic tyrant Ambrosio from Lewis’s *The Monk*. According to Sottiolotta, “the more transgressive Victoria grows, the less feminine is the gothic mode, and the closer it resembles the male gothic of Lewis” (98). I agree and would add that equating Victoria with the male tyrant is necessary as Victoria becomes the “monstrous feminine.” This portrayal represents her rejection of the maternal in favor of a more patriarchal order, especially as she strives to gain power over those she believes have wronged her. She embodies characteristics of the patriarchal order like Creed’s monstrous feminine

insofar as she asserts her dominance over those she views as inferior. This rejection of the maternal also manifests itself as Victoria become more dangerous.

However, the monstrous feminine within Victoria will always desire the maternal realm, even though returning to this realm is impossible. Victoria’s desire for the maternal is represented in the text through bloodlust and bloodshed. The narrator’s descriptions of Victoria in the latter half of the text suggests that Victoria’s non-normative desires are vampiric in the way he portrays her revenge as a thirst and desire for blood that borders on need. For example, the narrator writes, “[t]he wildest phrensy of passion, the most ungovernable hate, and thirst even for the blood of all who might oppose her” (184). This thirst for blood indicates Victoria has nurtured her desire to the point where she is unrecognizable. This desire becomes so consuming that it resembles a vampiric need for blood. For example, the narrator describes how consumed Victoria is by her desires, “[y]et revenge, thirsting revenge, was the predominant sensation of her soul, swallowing up every other!” (191). It is evident Victoria allows herself to become empowered by these desires for vengeance. The descriptions of her thirst are something she takes pride in and has no problem allowing to consume her. The narrator states Victoria felt “Outraged pride [that] swelled her heart to bursting, and its insatiable fury called aloud for vengeance, for blood, and the blood of the innocent Lilla” (199). This pride comes from a character we are told also has “sanguinary soul” (202), which points to the extent to which Victoria now desires the death of her rival, Lilla. Though Victoria is not a literal vampire, the descriptions of her as vampiric show that Victoria’s desires have grown to supernatural proportions and are now a danger to society. Before her confinement at Signora di Modena’s, Victoria had not allowed herself to become consumed by her desires to the point where she would consider murder. This new and empowered Victoria grew out of the treatment of her as mentally disabled by her parents and Berenza. Her unrelenting pursuit of her desires is exacerbated by the unreliable narrator’s menacing descriptions of her overwhelming desire as “sanguinary” (202). These descriptions of Victoria again show the extent to which Victoria’s desires are non-normative and even supernatural. Victoria also echoes “the monstrous feminine” as her thirst for blood is metonymically associated her thirst with a fantasy of the maternal to which she can no longer return. I would argue that her thirst for blood represents, in psychoanalytic terms, the fantasy of the maternal that she simultaneously accepts and rejects by exerting her own power over Berenza and then Lilla. She simultaneously accepts it through her obsession with the blood and rejects it by choosing the patriarchal realm and acting on her desires when she kills Berenza and later Lilla.

Articles

By the end of the text Victoria's hyperabled body embodies her sense of empowerment through her physical strength that is capable of murdering Berenza and Lilla. As this happens, she allows herself to satiate the thirst she has for Lilla's blood. According to Craciun's introduction to the Broadview edition of the novel, "Victoria's body actually begins to grow larger, stronger, and decidedly more masculine" (10). Victoria's extraordinary strength is what allows her to complete the feat of carrying Lilla up the mountain in the same way Zofloya had before. It suggests her body has changed physically by becoming larger and stronger: "Now nerved with hellish strength, she ascended the sloping rock; now the cataract foamed loud in her ears; the rapidity of her movements increased, scarcely she felt the rugged ground; the mountainous steep appeared a level path, and yawning precipices inspired no dread" (218). Victoria's strength is hellish, or supernatural, because she is able to carry the same weight as Zofloya, who himself has a body that is "so gigantic" while Victoria's body was described as being "slender" (191). It demonstrates the great deal of strength Victoria's body has acquired and that her abilities have strengthened beyond what is normal. Her physical strength is also evidenced by her ability to torture Lilla in the cave: "[S]eizing her by the arm, dragged her over the rugged ground, and up the irregular ascent, while her delicate feet, naked and defenseless to the pointed rock, left their blood red traces at every step!" (219). This passage also demonstrates that Victoria was able to satiate her thirst for Lilla's blood as it leaves marks across the floor. This extended murder scene shows that she is a monster because Victoria enacts revenge on Lilla and relishes her slow demise. Victoria is described as having a "masculine spirit" and "bold masculine features" many times throughout the latter half of the text (190, 211). Diane Long Hoeveler argues that this description stems from her position of power, "that 'masculine' refers to Victoria's murderously violent streak, her aristocratic propensity to seize what she wants by wielding the knife as calmly as any man" (152). I agree, and would add that her violence does not only give Victoria patriarchal power, but it also demonstrates her hyperabled body is powerful and threatening to the normative bodies in her society because she is capable of murder.

However, it is not Victoria's desires nor her perceived mental illness that make her a threat to society as much as the threat her monstrous femininity poses. That Victoria is able to throw Lilla's body off a cliff demonstrates that her body has actually grown stronger. Sottillotta, Dunn, and Hoeveler have all argued that destroying Lilla was a destruction of the ideal woman. I agree and would add that destroying Lilla represents Victoria's ability to destabilize a society that privileges normalcy. She physically destroys the text's greatest example of a "normal"

feminine body. Beatriz González argues that "Lilla is symbolically raped by Victoria's dagger and her death becomes representative of the artificial woman patriarchal society has constructed" (431). By this point, murdering the ideal also represents Victoria's empowerment because eliminating Lilla allows Victoria to become the new norm within her society as she embraces her desires and turns to the patriarchal realm. As the text shows, there are innumerable ways in which Victoria proves she is not just an average able-bodied woman, but rather that she demonstrates a hyperability, whether it be her strong will to fulfill her needs or the almost supernatural strength of her hypertrophic body. However, the "unsex'd" body of Victoria still poses a threat to her society just as much as it would have in early nineteenth century Britain for Charlotte Dacre. This threat, to the patriarchy and to normalcy, is the reason the "monstrous feminine" is not allowed to survive in *Zofloya*, because she must be made an example for other young women who give in too strongly to their sexual desires.

ABJECTING THE HYPER-ABLED MONSTER

The construction of Victoria's monstrosity in *Zofloya* demonstrates that her hyperability is what threatens societal power. In order for patriarchal structures to maintain their control, they must subjugate those people society believes are a threat to the established order in the same way many subjugate Victoria's body. In the British nineteenth century, one threat to society was women's sexual agency because lack of control over women's bodies could symbolize the weakness of the country as a whole. Charlotte Dacre interprets this threat in *Zofloya* through Victoria, who represents this fear of women's sexuality. A feminist disability studies perspective argues that the fear of the monster comes from a fear of bodies that do not represent the norm. A feminist disability studies and Creed's theory of "the monstrous feminine" agree that society will always abject those who pose threats to society in order to maintain the boundaries of those in power. Victoria's body poses a very serious threat for her sexually deviant desire and then for her ability to destroy even men to exert her power. Throughout the text, she is constructed as "[n]aturally evil," (236) by both her parents and the patriarchal narrator, but she is not described as a monster until the very end and by her own brother, Leonardo: "Kneel, monster of barbarity!" (246). By this time, Victoria truly has embodied the monster through her various murders and through the growth of her perceived non-normative body. Zofloya, who reveals himself as Satan in the end, makes it clear that Victoria has committed serious social indiscretions: "Thou hast damned thy soul with unnumbered crimes, rendering thyself, by each, more fully mine" (254). These crimes are the reason Victoria must die in the end, because her actions pose a

Articles

threat to her society with her strength and deviant desires. Creed states that “[t]he ultimate in abjection is the corpse” (246), which we see in the end as Zofloya throws Victoria into an abyss: “a mangled corse, she was received into the foaming waters below!” (254). Creed argues that death is the inevitable fate of every monstrous feminine, which is the only time such a monster is allowed back into the maternal realm of the imaginary order. This return shows that even though Victoria dies in the text, she leaves with some degree of empowerment because she finally escapes the patriarchal order. However, scholars of the Gothic have read this ending in a more conservative manner.

Scholars like Hoeveler read this ending as an example of Victoria’s disempowerment, but I argue this ending does not preclude the passages where she’s allowed to act on her desires and murder those who stand in her way of power. Marshall argues Victoria’s ending “served her Romantic readers, many of whom were young women, as a warning of the consequences of non-normative femininity” (78). I agree with this statement because, in order for Dacre to have a readership, she needed to comply with at least some acceptable norms for writing fiction. I also side with Haggerty, who believes that Gothic endings “are unconvincing—they intensify discomfort rather than dispel it—precisely because of the degree to which the gothic fiction itself has been able to unsettle the status quo” (135). Gothic texts are meant to react and challenge social norms, especially in the aftermath of the French Revolution, when there was a real anxiety about those who challenged the nation. Dacre’s *Zofloya* challenges gendered norms of the body through Victoria’s character, particularly in the way she embraces her sexual and violent desires and goes to extreme lengths to meet her objectives. Her body itself manifests her empowerment insofar as her body becomes hyperabled and dangerous to those who oppose her. This is why, as a “monstrous feminine,” she must be abjected from her society. Even though Victoria dies in the end the novel still depicts the empowerment of non-normative female bodies because of how fiercely Victoria fights against those who undermined her through most of the text.

CONCLUSION: MONSTROSITY AS EMPOWERMENT

Ultimately, Victoria is punished by her society for her illicit sexual and violent desires, and also for her hyperabled body that kills those who stand in the way of her desires. Victoria’s monstrous feminine is rooted in her inability to conform to standards of healthy women’s bodies in the text, to become Lilla. However, rather than be deterred by societal attempts to oppress/suppress her, she allows herself to nurture her desires and use her strength, to fulfill her desire of murdering those she perceives have wronged her. Haggerty does not find Victoria’s ending unusual. He con-

tends that: “[o]f course, she is cast into the abyss and plunges into the water a mangled corpse, but even in the fall, there is a kind of triumph. She remains herself even to the end. ‘Her desires are realized’” (142). Victoria’s monstrosity is a product of a society that privileges both the patriarchy and normalcy. As her desires begin to reflect as aberration and aggressive masculinity, she chooses to adopt patriarchal power as her own instead of allowing it to defeat her easily. Though she is constructed as a mentally disabled character throughout the text, she is actually hyperabled because as she allows herself to fulfill her desires, her body itself is portrayed as stronger and more supernatural. Even though Victoria is sent to hell in the end as punishment for her non-normative behavior, she remains an empowered figure because she did not allow those around her to suppress her desire to destroy those who oppress her and it symbolized her return to the maternal realm. Her ending was necessary in order to give the illusion of compliance to social norms, though it will never erase the radical ways in which Dacre challenged her society through Victoria’s monstrous body.

REFERENCES

- Binhammer, Katherine. “The Sex Panic of the 1700s.” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol. 6, no. 3, 1996, pp 409-434. JSTOR.
- Botting, Fred. *Gothic*. Routledge, 1996.
- Craciun, Adriana. *Fatal Women of Romanticism*. Cambridge UP, 2003.
- Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. Routledge, 1993.
- Dacre, Charlotte. *Zofloya; or, the Moor*, edited by Adriana Craciun, Broadview, 1997.
- Davis, Lennard J. *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*. Verso, 1995.
- Dunn, James A. “Charlotte Dacre and the Feminization of Violence.” *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, vol. 53, no. 3, Dec. 1998, pp. 307-327. <https://doi.org/10.1525/ncl.1998.53.3.01p00317>. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2903042>.
- Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Pantheon Books, 1965.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. Columbia UP, 1997.
- . “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory.” *Feminist Disability Studies*, edited by Kim Q. Hall, Indiana UP 2011, pp. 13–47.
- Goodley, Dan. “Social Psychoanalytic Disability Studies. *Di-*

Articles

sability & Society, vol. 26, no. 6, pp. 715–28.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2011.602863>.

González Moreno, Beatriz. "Gothic Excess and Aesthetic Ambiguity in Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya*." *Women's Writing*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2007, pp. 419-434.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09699080701644931>

Haggerty, George E. "Mothers and Other Lovers: Gothic Fiction and the Erotics of Loss." *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 16, no. 2, Jan. 2004, pp. 157-172.

---. *Queer Gothic*, UP, 2006. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ecf.2004.0041>

Hoeverler, Diane Long. *Gothic Feminism: the Professionalization of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Bronte's*, Pennsylvania State UP, 1998.

Hoeverler, Diane Long, and Tamar Heller. "Introduction." *Approaches to Teaching Gothic Fiction: the British and American Traditions*, Modern Language Assoc. of America, 2008, pp. 35–38.

Marshall, Nowell. *Romanticism, Gender, and Violence: Blake to George Sadini*. Bucknell UP, 2013.

Sottolotta, Elena Emma. "Diabolical Crossings: Generic Transitions Between The Gothic And The Sensational In Dacre And Alcott." *Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, vol. 14, 2015, pp. 81-99. https://irishgothichorror.files.com/2008/03/diabolical_crossings.pdf. November 28, 2016.

Wang, Orrin N. C. *Romantic Sobriety: Sensation, Revolution, Commodification, History*, Johns Hopkins UP, 2011.

Wright, Angela, and Dale Townshend. "Gothic and Romantic: An Historical Overview." *Romantic Gothic: an Edinburgh Companion*, Edinburgh UP, 2016, pp. 1–34.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

NORMA ACEVES

naceves@ufl.edu

Norma Aceves is a doctoral student at the University of Florida, at Gainesville, who specializes in nineteenth-century British literature, with an emphasis on the Gothic, media studies, and disability studies.