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The Devil Wears a Turban: Constructing Satanic Moorish Identity in *Zofloya*

What exactly is a Moor? Although tossed around loosely in historical literature, the term has come to define a very specific type of individual. In Charlotte Dacre's 1806 novel, *Zofloya*, Moors are denoted as specifically referring to the Muslims of Spain and their descendants. Keeping in mind the fifteenth century time period of the plot, Dacre's choices of place become extremely deliberate. In the book, the place of Moorish Granada lingers on the peripheries of the plot, and stands in stark contrast to the more explicit setting of Venice. Additionally, Dacre's choice for the title character (a Moor himself) to be a vessel for Satan indicates a very specific Romantic vision of the Moorish race. Alongside the opposition placed between the Muslim place of Granada and the ambiguously Catholic place of Venice, Dacre intentionally uses specific imagery to demonize the figure of Zofloya in order for him to stand for England's perception of the mystical (as in Orientalized), threatening, Islamic/Moorish Other.

In historical literature, Britain characteristically utilizes the image of the Islamicized Moor in order to express English fears and prejudices. Kim Hall acknowledges "[t]he links of Moors with blackness and/or Islam" (360), and goes on to articulate the Orientalist tendencies of the West by specifying that "these theories of difference become a significant means by which England articulates its sense of place in the world" (364). Thus, the images of Moors that English authors (such as Dacre) construct represent a distorted, antithetical mirror image of England in

their inherent Otherness. Many Moorish characters, in consequence, are mysterious figures with questionable (and sometimes "backwards" moral codes). Hence their association with darker skin and the major opponent of Christianity: Islam. As the novel *Zofloya* shows, these prejudices can often lead to extremely caricatured portrayals. For example, Zofloya is characteristically dressed in a "snow white turban" and gives a short overview of his compromised morals when he talks about how he "wreaked [his] vengeance" on his rivals via poisoning (Dacre 158, 160-161). Here, Zofloya is the vengeful antithesis of European ideals, topped with a stereotypically Islamic piece of clothing. This Orientalized struggle between East and West – not always geographical but also metaphorical – is ever present in the background of these portrayals of the Moor.

From early on in the novel a physical sense of place is established which, in conjunction with the aforementioned Orientalist sentiments, significantly colors the characters and the plot. According to Daniel Vitkus, the city of Venice was historically a region of ambiguously defined religion and cultural allegiance. On one hand Vitkus argues for the perception of Venice as a symbol of tolerance, but also relays the fact that "the Venetians' willingness during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to allow free passage in the Adriatic to the Turks in exchange for trade concessions and access to Ottoman ports had placed them in a controversial position in the eyes of their Christian co-religionists" (162). In this way, Venice became tainted with Islam in the eyes of Europe. Thus, the Venetian setting of the book, although still Catholic in the late fifteenth century, would have been perceived with double scrutiny by later Romantic Protestant English eyes: one point being this Islamic inundation of the place (before the author's time period) and the other being the barbaric, dated Catholic religion as opposed to English Protestant ideals. Thus, Victoria and her family would have been viewed as unclean (because tainted with these

religions) and prone to sin (because of the Christian villainizing of Muslims). Hence the success of Dacre's Satan, disguised as an Islamicized Moor. This point will be developed further in the essay, but already the effect that Venice as a setting has on the characters is very much apparent.

In contrast, the city of Granada lurks in the background of the tale as an ominous threat to European identity. Diego Saglia paints a vivid picture of the medieval city. Before the expulsion of the Moors from Spain in the late 1400s, "[t]he kingdom of Granada was the last strong hold of Moorish power, and the favourite abode of Moorish luxury" (Saglia 194). Thus, Dacre's description of Zofloya is one of a begrudging respect. Coming from a collapsed yet once very powerful empire, the Moor is regarded with a deferential air, both by the narrator and by the other characters. Zofloya appears quite knowledgeable, coming as a product from the great seat of learning that once was Moorish Spain: he explains, "I had, from early youth, been addicted to the study of...botany, chemistry, and astrology" (Dacre 160). Additionally, the fact that Dacre chooses to include his relation to the Abdhulrahmans, a Middle-Eastern family (in origin) noted specifically for its European-like physical characteristics (Desjardins), shows that the Moor as he appears in this novel is certainly not from Sub-Saharan Africa, as many scholars would believe. Like the place of Granada, Zofloya is thus simultaneously European and "other" at the same time. This image of Zofloya's character that Granada as a place suggests, then, is one that is certainly a rival, not only to Venetians, but to European identity as a whole.

Adding onto this idea, Zofloya's impression on other characters, based upon religious and historical biases (constructed by England/Europe), shapes the way that Moors are collectively viewed in the novel. For example, fellow-servant Latoni's jealous heart is full of "envy and hatred… in contemplating the superior qualities of Zofloya" (Dacre 148), and later goes on to

admit that he is specifically envious of "his beauty, his accomplishments, and… for the admiration which they obtained him" (Dacre 149). The Moor, therefore, is not an abhorred slave, such as a sub-Saharan African would have been viewed as at the time. Instead, he is admirable in the eyes of Europeans. But Zofloya's homeland of Granada, being technically a part of continental Europe, is nevertheless decidedly Other with regards to its Muslim culture. Saglia astutely articulates this point when he says that "Granada and Islam were another, even more exotic culture enclosed within an already quite peculiar Spain" (Saglia 196). In fact, the act of exiling Moors from Granada and the rest of Spain was in effect an act committed in self-desperation and envy: an attempt to completely whitewash and Christianize the European continent. The Muslim people of Spain brought with them knowledge and customs from the "East" that flourished for many generations, hence Zofloya's learned history (Dacre 160). In contrast to the dark and ignorant characteristics of the rest of Europe during the medieval period – specifically the Italian peninsula (i.e. Venice), which was still under the influence of the lasting legacy of the Roman Empire – Muslim Spain was a bright light of wisdom. Thus, Zofloya is a bright light in the novel which some characters, like Latoni, jealously seek to extinguish, and others, like Victoria, flock to with the vivacity of moths.

The implications of Dacre's choice for a Moorish, Muslim body to be the vessel for Satan are alarmingly indicative of a certain kind of European (specifically British) ideology that subsumes the Moor under the same category as Satan. Adriana Craciun notes that "Satan 'personified the evil of the opposition, whether revolutionary or reactionary'" (701). As seen in *Zofloya* itself, this opposing threat sometimes took the form of a Moor. Perhaps Dacre chose an Islamicized Other for the body used by Satan precisely because of this applicability. Zofloya, a

handsome, noble threat to Latoni, is, in his most stereotypically Moorish manifestation, a perfect candidate for the dashing, clever Satan. Adding onto that, the history of the expansion of the Ottoman Empire into Europe could contribute to this decidedly negative – yet in a certain sense respectful – English/European view of Moors. Although not necessarily a threat in Dacre's time period, the Ottoman Empire still existed and thus the notion of the Muslim as the Other in regards to Christian Europe would still have been prevalent. This notion can easily be applied to Zofloya (although a Spanish Moor), since he comes from a Muslim Empire. Overall, then, prejudices like these shape the way that people of Zofloya's race are seen in European eyes.

Additionally, in line with the Romantic trend of Orientalism, Western ideologies have indeed historically set up the figure of the Muslim as inherently demonized. Vitkus mentions Edward Kellett, who, in a 1627 sermon, referred to Mohammed as having "a very sinfull soule, in a very sinfull body" (155). Although from an earlier time than *Zofloya*, it definitely suggests a deep-seated European Christian prejudice against Muslims. It also suggests that Muslims were allied with Satan. Islam, the religion of the East, was prevalent in Moorish Spain, so again Zofloya would have been Islamicized and necessarily demonized in the minds of the novel's intended audience, regardless of his actual religious status, which is never explicitly revealed in the book. Notably, one of his conversations with Victoria reveals a striking parallel to this sermon: "Does the Signora believe, then, that the Moor Zofloya hath a heart dark as his countenance?" (Dacre 158). Here the emphasis is less on the actual color of Zofloya's skin (it has already been stated that he is almost certainly not Sub-Saharan African). Rather, the dark quality spoken of, when considering the eventual identity reveal of Zofloya, is most likely in reference to his otherness and inherent sinfulness. The Moor, because not a Christian European, is thus

tainted by his supposed association with demonized Islam. This darkness is sharply juxtaposed with the aforementioned light that also pervades his character, suggesting that Zofloya is a character of contradiction and deception. Therefore it becomes alarmingly apparent that Dacre's choice of Satan's disguise quite possibly might have been influenced by and may actually be directly feeding into European stereotypes associated with the Islamic Other.

The construction of Satan in Romantic literature also had a more general purpose in Europe's construction of the Other. Peter Schock argues that because of the focus on realism in the Romantic period, "the myth of Satan is displaced, ridiculed, or lingers in vestigially demonic human characters" (85). *Zofloya* clearly abides by this, especially since the character of the Moor isn't revealed to be Satan until the final chapter. Similarly, Zofloya is also a rather marginal character (despite the book bearing his name), since he shows up halfway through the book and sits craftily on the peripheries of the plot, intervening when he can but ultimately letting Victoria take the lead in effecting her own destruction. In this sense, the Devil lingers in a liminal space throughout the novel, simultaneously present but also absent. At one point, Victoria "had not seen, neither had she heard his approach" (Dacre 166), suggesting that the Moor (as Satan) occupies a transcendent plane of existence. This thinking seems to conjure up an image of the Moor as "Europe's internal Other" (Michasiw 44), at once European and non-European but also both Western and Eastern (in terms of location and lineage, respectively) as well. Therefore, Dacre's decision to have Satan possess the body of a Moor makes sense given the associations and conventions of Satan in the Romantic era.

Dacre's use of vivid imagery in *Zofloya* supports the view of Muslims/Moors as inherently demonized. If Zofloya can be understood as a kind of light, cultivated from the glory days of

Granada, then the decision of Satan to inhabit his body for his own means may not be so random. His appearance indeed seduces Victoria. As she sits beside him under an acacia tree, she is struck with "involuntary awe," at "his form and attitude… [which appear as]… majestic, and solemnly beautiful – not the beauty which may be freely admired, but acknowledged with sensations awful and indescribable" (Dacre 158). The figure of the Moor, then, is one which begs, not for superficial admiration, but for a sublime reverence. Victoria's awed feelings towards the Moor may in fact be brought about because it is really Satan whom she sits by; however, it is equally (if not more) probable that the figure of Zofloya may strike Victoria so strongly because of his connection with the fallen beauty of the Islamic Empire. Satan may be said to deftly exploit this perception of Moors that Victoria (and subsequently Europeans in general) have. The "majestic" nature of Zofloya exoticizes him in Victoria's eyes: he is enchanting, and rightfully so, for he comes from Granada, or more broadly, the "East," a land of magic and wonder in the eyes of Europeans. It is for this reason, perhaps, that Victoria so easily buys into the Moor's assumed persona. Lucifer, quite literally the light-bringer, makes use of the dazzling form of Zofloya in order to realistically ensnare the heroine of the novel. Thus, "like the sun beaming from a gloomy cloud" (Dacre 224), Zofloya shines fabulously despite his evil identity.

This demonization of Zofloya is consistent with Miltonic descriptions of Satan. Quoting a passage of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Glen Brewster brings attention to "Satan's previous status in Heaven, where he [is] 'in the happy realms of light'" (616). How eerily similar this account of Satan's history sounds to that of the Spanish Moor, once too in a "happy realm" until the fall of Granada. As mentioned earlier, although the Moor's "darkened figure" is tainted with prejudices concerning the evil of Islam (Dacre 158), Zofloya's "eyes emitted sparks of lambent flame"

(Dacre 159), tricking his beholders into believing him to be full of his long-lost light. This light can then be understood as having two meanings: on one hand it represents the remnants of Satan's heavenly characteristics, and on the other hand it represents Zofloya's downgraded but not entirely lost grandeur. Both combine in the devilish Moor, making him tempting to characters like Victoria. Dacre's choice of Miltonic imagery shows that she is deliberately constructing a view of the Moor himself as a type of person who is more accessible to Satan because of the similarities inherent in their existences.

Being presented with the character of the Moor in this way, constructed through stereotypes and allied with the supernatural figure of Satan, leads readers to view Zofloya in a mystical, threatening light that mirrors how people of this same ethnicity were being viewed by Europeans before and during the Romantic period. It is clear, from Dacre's descriptions, that a reading of the text which subsumes Moorish identity under a sub-Saharan African label is far from being a correct interpretation. The Moor belongs to a particular people. Only by understanding the unique roles that the places (especially Moorish Granada) play in the novel can one begin to construct an identity for Zofloya and similar Moorish individuals that correctly reflects the reality of the period. Dacre's novel, by demonizing and Orientalizing the figure of the Moor, feeds into age-old Islamophobic stereotypes. From an accurate reading of *Zofloya*, these portrayals can help to correct existing notions of what Moors represented to Romantic England. Thus, Dacre's novel, ignored and dismissed for so many years, is finally starting to be given the recognition it deserves as a signifier of Romantic Orientalist ideas.

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