

Interracial Representation in Romantic Literature

At the turn of the Romantic literary tradition, the pre-existing discourse on concepts such as gender and sexuality were being critiqued and realigned with a more ‘modern’ form of expression. As a result, authors from the period were known to invoke radical sex and taboo concepts of desire far more often, as to dramatize and challenge foregoing social boundaries and regulations (Zigarovich 387). In the midst of this, the expression of female desire and its correlation to femininity were both heightened and exposed at a far more risqué rate than ever seen before. Despite its already-growing form of controversy, these same texts often explored these concepts in association with intersectionality and interracial relationships. In the English discourse, narratives followed the most poise and elegant members of British society and their non-normative sexual relationships with people of color. Unbeknownst to writers of the time, what stemmed from this was a subgenre of Romantic literature in which interracial representation was at the forefront of most narratives. The following essay will explore two texts from the literary tradition that represent bi-racial relationships in a time that did not support the integration of people of colour into British society. In Charlotte Dacre’s *Zofloya, or the Moor* and Anonymous’ *The Woman of Colour: A Tale*, both Victoria and Zofloya, and Olivia and Augustus, represent racially diverse pairings. Although the conventions of these two relationships are treated radically different, each text uses the intersectionality of their pairings to explore themes of miscegenation, female sexual desire, and feminine virtue. Thus, this paper will analyze these three areas in correlation to interracial representation, and what kind of impact that controversy left behind on the literary tradition of the time.

In each respective novel, the interracial relationship between Victoria and Zofloya, and Olivia and Augustus, are treated radically differently. Through the lens of miscegenation, Dacre’s

pairing represents everything that British society fears for the traditional English female, whereas the pairing of Olivia and Augustus represents the integration of mixed-race individuals into British society. What rises from this is the idea of gender in conjunction with race: Victoria and Zofloya are so controversial because, as a white female, Victoria is expected to represent traditional English femininity. However, Olivia's racial heritage flips this narrative to realign Olivia as the damsel in distress who gets to be saved by the honorable, white Englishman. Most of the texts from this time that represent interracial alliances confine themselves to legitimating a white male's desire for the black female body, as dependent on the practice of sexual liaisons between white male slave-owners and their black female slaves (Mellor 169). We see this in Olivia's illegitimacy as a mixed-race child, born from a black female slave and her white male master, as well as in her marriage to Augustus, her white, British cousin. However, the very possibility that a white female might sexually prefer the black male body was one that British culture in the late eighteenth century either denied or abhorred (Mellor 170). As a result, having Victoria's sexual appetite in *Zofloya* extend not only beyond what was thought of as proper at the time, but to a male of 'exotic-Otherness' was controversial, if not outright refused by society. The racial coupling of Victoria and Zofloya contests patriarchy at its most fundamental level. Regarding British anxieties about keeping white women's sexual desires in check, the miscegenation of Victoria and Zofloya brings rise to the fear that white women will give birth to the next generation of British heirs (Hawkes 63), which, in their case, would represent racially "impure" genes. What is interesting here, is how this narrative is flipped almost entirely on its head in *The Woman of Colour*. In Olivia's case, she is embedded in a marriage plot that is designed to produce whiter progeny than herself with a husband who is not only related to her father, but who looks like him as well (Chaskin 210). As a result of this potentiality, the

miscegenation between Olivia and Augustus is celebrated directly because it would result in children whose Black difference is diluted, literally as well as figuratively. The fusion of Victoria and the Moor in *Zofloya* represents the exact shift that Olivia and Augustus embody in *The Woman of Colour*. As a result of the intercontinental marriage arranged by her father, he, and the person he chooses to marry his daughter off to, subjugate Olivia to a life of permanent white male authority (Jafarzadeh 28). In direct contrast, Victoria's refusal to conform to societal standards blurs the boundaries of that power dynamic in which British culture at the time depended upon. As Gueorguieva states, "The novel symbolically blurs the boundaries between male and female, normal and deviant, pure and defiled by fusing together the white and black bodies of the Moor Zofloya and the libidinous Victoria" (105).

Additionally, the interracial relationship between each pair in their respective plots speaks to different sides of female sexuality. In *Zofloya*, Victoria's internal sexual desire for Zofloya is not only highly controversial, but is used by Dacre as a vehicle for representing Victoria's spiral into the gothic villain. In *The Woman of Colour*, however, Olivia is portrayed as morally plighted in her marriage to a white man that she loves and is devoted to, but cannot experience sexual desire for. Because of their gender and race, the racial pairings of each couple treats female sexual desire as a taboo subject in two different ways: where one leans into the controversy to tell an invigorating tale, the other just outright refuses it. What makes *Zofloya* such an enticing tale of female desire is that Victoria, as a character, embodies everything that British society refuses. She is "vain, lustful, libidiously aggressive, [and] actively and openly sexual and violent" (Hoeveler 188). In contrast, *The Women of Colour's* Olivia is placed in a very traditional role of being unexpressive in her own desires. As "the partner of his bed – but not of his heart!" (Anonymous 120), Olivia becomes completely subjected to Augustus' desires in a way that turns

her away from her own. At the onset of her marriage, she entertains no naïve fictions about what will come of her union. As Lubey states, “She recognizes it does not guarantee affection and that her primary function is to transfer capital” (114). This is a very different representation of female desire than what is shown in *Zofloya*, which, as a novel, functions as both an interpretation and indulgence of Victoria’s desires from start to finish. Her “female rage” and “uncontrollable passion” (Gueorguieva 28) drive the plot forth, and she is in no way satiated, or controlled. What forms, then, is a dichotomy between Victoria and Olivia that condemns them for their sexuality in extremely different ways. As a novel, *Zofloya* constructs a discourse of sexual freedom, only to ultimately condemn and execute its female transgressor (Gueorguieva 28). As an overtly sexual female figure, Victoria inevitably sacrifices herself for her sexual indulgences, as the novel ends with her falling to her death in Satan’s arms. In contrast, Olivia is sacrificed to the confines of domestic tranquility after she marries Augustus. She gains sexual experience without intimacy and passion, since her marriage provides only cold connubial comfort (Barr 93), and at the novel’s end, refuses all intimate connections and crosses back over the ocean to “live a life of sensual denial” (MacDonald 77). Neither is a very fortunate end for Victoria, or Olivia, thus setting forth a cautionary tale of female sexual desire in a period that is predicated on sexual discipline and control.

The portrayal of interracial relationships in *Zofloya* and *The Woman of Colour* also treat concepts of feminine virtue in different ways. In Dacre’s novel, Victoria uses her relationship with Zofloya as a vehicle for breaking free from her more traditional function as a virtuous woman of British society. In almost direct opposition, Olivia becomes the picture-perfect portrait of respectable femininity, not only in her marriage to Augustus, but in her functionality as a female character as well. As a character, Victoria is infamously known to be “unrepentant and

unapologetic” in her actions and desires (Zigarovich 79). Through her union with Zofloya, and the arguably one-sided sexual fantasies she possesses for him, she increasingly goes against what is expected of her. Contrastingly, because Olivia is a woman of colour, she must be exceptional in her virtue and in her femininity in order to be perceived as virtuous at all (Chaskin 187). Despite her marriage proving to be a farce, and the perpetual racism that she faces, she remains perfectly poised and genteel. In this sense, Olivia embodies the ideology of rationality and domesticity, where Victoria rejects it for a more autonomous path of agency. Even as British society proves to racially outcast Olivia, she continues to represent herself as a picture-perfect portrait of British femininity. She liberally cites British male authors and the Bible and defends British morals and mannerisms (Chaskin 198). This is an extremely different portrayal of virtue from Victoria, who consistently goes against the grain with her murder, torture, and sexual promiscuity. In fact, her feminine virtue is almost completely replaced by masculine spirit. In this sense, the “masculinity” in Victoria refers to her “murderously violent streak, [and] her aristocratic propensity to seize what she wants by wielding the knife as calmly as any man” (Hoeveler 193). Additionally, feminine virtue is portrayed differently in Victoria and Olivia through the lens of religion and spirituality. In the midst of her illicit sexual behaviour, Zofloya mocks Victoria’s devotion to him when he states, “Are you not a holy Catholic, Signora? – yet to love so much an early being” (Dacre 149). In questioning Victoria’s faithfulness to her Catholic religion, Zofloya is illustrating her propensity for aligning herself with her sensual desires over her spiritual salvation (Hawkes 70). As readers, we understand Victoria’s journey as one completely devoid of the faith and spirituality that British society clings so desperately to. Not only does this further perpetuate the idea that she cannot be virtuous in her desire for Zofloya, but it also speaks to the taboo of turning away from religious virtue as well. On the other hand,

Olivia holds onto her Christianity as a pillar of strength against the gendered, racial, and social injustices that are imposed on her character (Barnett-Woods 619). She only becomes increasingly virtuous and thus, stapled in her femininity as the plot continues to not unfold in her favour. The dichotomy between virtue as portrayed by Olivia and the same virtue that is rejected by Victoria thus represents the space that Victoria has, as a white female, to go against the very same norms that Olivia is constrained by, as a black female. This interesting relationship between gender and race tells a constructive tale of female nature, and how characters like Victoria can be seen as the direct opposite of feminine virtue even when portraying a more realistic portrait of the authentic female self.

Through intersectionality and the interracial relationships that make up both *Zofloya*, and *The Woman of Colour*, themes of miscegenation, female sexual desire, and feminine virtue are held under a microscope. In this way, the literary norm is simultaneously critiqued as well as reinforced. *Zofloya* is highly controversial in the way that it represents the relationship between Zofloya and Victoria, the unruly sexual desire that she holds for him, and the traditional scope of femininity that she rejects. In contrast, the interracial pairing of Olivia and Augustus in *The Woman of Colour* represents a sort-of integrative “white-washing,” sexual denial, and the kind of feminine respectable virtue that British society could concur with. As a result, both novels fuse together gender and race in a way that challenges the narrative of non-normative relationships. Not only is each novel told from a largely female perspective, but both those females equally engage with intersectionality in their relationships; a concept not often explored in pre-existing literary traditions. In what Gueorguieva refers to as “a major node of power production in the sex/gender system” (28), both Victoria and Olivia represent what it means to be each one-half of an overall controversial whole. While it can be argued that Victoria contests against conservative

femininity more effectively through her relationship with Zofloya, there can also be value found in Olivia's marriage plot to Augustus as well. Both bring forth the racialized stereotypes of the time, as well as the controversial role of a woman in society. What stems from this, then, are two powerfully enforced female protagonists who destabilize the boundaries of the race/gender system by participating in interracial connection, and thus, staple them as works of interracial discourse.

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