Chawton House Library:
Women's Novels

Confessions of the Nun of St. Omer

by Charlotte Dacre

Edited by
Lucy Cogan

ROUTLEDGE

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INTRODUCTION

> Of ROSA MATILDA I have but few words to say. How the absurd trash of this fair 'libertine' has obtained so much notice, I cannot divine. How absurd, how ludicrous, how contemptible are sentiments of morality and religion from the pen of such a weak enthusiast! – But I have not patience to remain a minute in her company . . .
>
> – from Sarah Green's *Romance Readers and Romance Writers: A Satirical Novel*.[1]

This has largely been history's judgment regarding Charlotte Dacre, or Rosa Matilda as she was better known in her day. Indeed, Dacre's reputation as a notorious writer of trash went more or less unchallenged up until the late-twentieth century. The upsurge in interest in Dacre's work in recent decades is not so much due to a change in attitude towards the quality of her writing, but rather an awareness that its value to literary criticism lies in other areas. Notable for her portrayal of sexually self-possessed and powerful female villains, Dacre's novels explore corners of the female psyche left untouched by the more conventional novelists of the Romantic era. Yet even today assessments of Dacre tend to rest almost entirely on her boldest and most scandalous work *Zofloya* (1806). Read in isolation, it is easy to assume from its excesses that Dacre never aspired to a more respectable career. However, though it is largely forgotten by literary history, Dacre's first novel *Confessions of the Nun of St. Omer* (1805) is in many ways a work that strives to exemplify the moral and social orthodoxies of its time. Concerned with themes of education, passion, seduction and the dangers of the radical 'new philosophy', in it Dacre attempts to claim exactly that high moral ground Green and her ilk would seek to deny her. That said, although it is constrained by a more conventional plot, *The Nun of St. Omer*, like Dacre's later fiction, exhibits an irresistible fascination with the power of female desire.

Charlotte Dacre, Charlotte King, and the 'Lovely Rosa'

For so infamous a writer, curiously little of Dacre's true biography was known to the public she courted so arduously. Under the pseudonym Rosa Matilda, Dacre

was the resident poetess of the conservative-leaning newspaper *The Morning Post* in the early decades of the nineteenth century.[2] The name was clearly chosen for its highly suggestive resonances. On the one hand it evoked the popular and mildly salacious poetry of the Della Cruscans, whose literary effusions graced the pages of newspapers such as *The World* in their heyday of the 1790s. The Della Cruscans gained notoriety by engaging in flirtatious and very public exchanges of poetry under the cover of Italianate pseudonyms. Among the most famous of this loosely affiliated group were female poets, like Hannah Cowley writing as 'Anna Matilda' and Mary Robinson as 'Laura Maria', who poured forth sentimental and erotic verse that was later lampooned for its stylistic excesses and whiff of unladylike impropriety.[3] But Dacre's pen-name also had darker associations. M.G. Lewis's scandalous 1796 novel *The Monk* featured a cross-dressing, devilish seductress by the name of Matilda, who went by Rosario when masquerading as a man. A novel from the pen of 'Charlotte Dacre, better known by the name of ROSA MATILDA' would therefore have come laden with certain expectations from the reading public when it was published in the spring of 1805. Just months later she published a collection of poems, *Hours of Solitude*, which included a number of pieces that previously featured in *The Morning Post* along with a portrait that showed a pretty, dark-haired young woman gazing alluringly out at the reader. In the preface she claimed to be just twenty-three years old. Over the course of the next decade, three further novels followed that would venture into the kind of highly-sexualised, feminocentric territory rarely charted by novels of the early-nineteenth century. *Zofloya* (1806), a lurid Faustian tale of female desire run rampant; *The Libertine* (1807), a story of innocence corrupted by aristocratic licentiousness; and *The Passions* (1811), a novel of sexual jealousy and disastrous love, would seal her reputation as the 'female Lewis'. At *The Morning Post*, she continued to produce a steady stream of poetry and in 1822 towards the end of her career she published a poetic encomium to George IV.[4] After that Dacre faded from view though 'Rosa Matilda' went on to become a by-word for a certain brand of overwrought and overly 'feminine' literary production, which later critics sought to expunge from the literary annals of the Romantic era.[5] Critics, in this respect, were taking their cue from the overwhelmingly male literary establishment of Dacre's day, which firmly rejected her lurid romances.

In *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809) Byron takes a satirical swipe at the 'Lovely Rosa', 'whose strains, the faithful echoes of her mind, / Leave wondering comprehension far behind'.[6] Jerome McGann goes some way towards puncturing his sneering superiority by identifying a poem once mistakenly thought an early work of Byron's, 'The Mountain Violet', as one of Dacre's.[7] Furthermore, McGann argues that Byron's *Hours of Idleness* (1807), a collection criticised by contemporary critics for its sentimentality, mimics not just the title but the style of Dacre's poetry, suggesting there was a time Byron did not think so little of her writing. Percy Shelley's juvenilia also shows evidence of Dacre's influence. He used the name of the protagonist of *The Nun of St. Omer*, Cazire, in the title of his first collection of poetry and his early Gothic novels are modelled on *Zofloya*.[8]

The gendered division between canonical literature and worthless trash is therefore not so easily sustained.

Furthermore, a gossipy footnote to Byron's poetic put-down hinted that there might have been a personal dimension to the literary scorn heaped on Dacre:

> This lovely little Jessica, the daughter of the Jew K[ing], seems to be a follower of the Della Cruscan School, and has published two volumes of very respectable absurdities in rhyme, as times go; besides sundry novels in the style of the first edition of the *Monk*.[9]

The 'Jew' King was John King, money-lender, bankrupt, and sometime radical, who cultivated a fashionable clientele that included Byron, Mary Robinson and many other members of the *haut ton* of the day.[10] If Charlotte *Dacre* was indeed born Charlotte *King* then she was engaged in a complex double-layered play of pseudonymity in her representation of her public persona.[11] The precise date is unknown but Charlotte King was probably born around 1772, meaning she was close to a decade older than the twenty-three she claimed in 1805 in spite of her meticulously constructed image of herself as a literary prodigy. King had in fact published a collection of poetry entitled *Trifles of Helicon*[12] with her sister Sophia, also a novelist,[13] seven years earlier in 1798. The collection came with a dedication to 'John King' signed, 'Your affectionate daughters', yet later Dacre would deliberately distance herself from King's legacy. Adriana Craciun speculates that Dacre may have been motivated by a sex scandal involving her father to conceal her true identity.[14] Whatever the truth, the name 'Charlotte Dacre' would become as synonymous with scandal as 'John King' once was, though of a different kind. The connection between Charlotte King, daughter of the infamous Jewish money-lender, and Dacre has led to further even more surprising, if rather less certain discoveries by Ann H. Jones.[15] According to Jones, Charlotte King (spinster) married Nicholas Byrne, editor of *The Morning Post*, in 1815. Furthermore, Jones relates that parish baptismal records list three children born to Nicholas Byrne and Charlotte Byrne née King in 1806, 1807 and 1809, meaning, if these records are indeed correct, they were the product of a prolonged if very discreet extra-marital affair that was only formalised upon the death of Byrne's first wife in 1815.[16] Byrne's second wife died in 1825 and there is no mention of any literary career in her respectful but rather generic obituary[17] – if she was Charlotte Dacre this truth was kept well hidden. Byrne himself was murdered at his desk in 1833 in what could have been a politically-motivated attack due to his opposition to the Reform Act, which had passed in 1832.[18] The contradiction in Dacre's writing between the impulse to revel in the overwhelming power of passion and the moral orthodoxy those works claim (rather tenuously) to embody seems to have been carried over from her own eventful life.

In March of 1805 when *The Morning Pos*t trumpeted the publication of its own Rosa Matilda's first novel *Confessions of the Nun of St. Omer*, her affair with Byrne was just at its beginnings if it had indeed begun. Within days of publication

The Morning Post carried a puff piece that congratulated the author most particularly 'as it appears by Rosa Matilda's Introduction . . . that it was written at the age of eighteen. It bears, however, all the features of a mature understanding, a vigorous mind, and a refined and elegant taste.'[19] With its conspicuous reference to the young age of the author the article could very well have been written by Dacre herself. The piece goes on to apologise for the 'several typographical errors and misprintings' in the work, blaming them on the absence of the 'fair author' from town at the time of printing, though no further reprints or editions correcting these mistakes appear to have been produced.[20] A review of the novel in the conservative *British Critic* was more mixed, calling it:

> A very fine, sentimental, and improbable story, written in turgid and affected language. For example, 'at length I married; it was a step of desperation, and failed of yielding me the solace I expected; it smoothed not in its placid even chain, the effervescence of my soul,' &c. &c.
>
> If this be not nonsense, it is certainly very like it. The moral, however, is good, for it teaches the mischiefs which arise from the neglect and violation of social duties.[21]

Though hardly glowing, this is a far cry from the accusation that Dacre had 'maggots in the brain' as *The Literary Journal* put it following the publication of *Zofloya* just a year later.[22] The comment regarding Dacre's writing style is also largely fair; her mannered, over-heated style would remain a feature of her work throughout her career.[23] Despite this burst of publicity, it was her collection of poetry *Hours of Solitude* that made the bigger splash, understandably enough since the public knew her first and foremost as a poet. Advertisements for *The Nun of St. Omer* continued to appear through the summer of 1805 but with the publication of *Zofloya* in 1806 Dacre had a more attention-grabbing work to sell and the effort to present herself as a respectable novelist came to an abrupt end. Even so, *The Nun of St. Omer* had a considerable afterlife as a staple of the circulating libraries for decades to come.[24]

Ironically, it was with the sensationalist *Zofloya* that Dacre moved to the more upmarket publishing house of Longman while the publisher of *The Nun of St. Omer* was J.F. Hughes, a rather rackety figure who specialised in popular fiction aimed squarely at feeding the public's voracious appetite for novels. In the years 1805–8 Hughes advertised countless homages (to put it kindly) to the Gothic works of Radcliffe and Lewis, such as *The Monk of Udolpho*, *The Monk of Martelli and his Daughter*, *Montoni; or the Confessions of the Monk of St. Benedict* and *Legends of the Nunnery*.[25] The star of the show was undoubtedly Lewis himself and in 1806 Hughes was advertising no fewer than three of his works at once.[26] Much has been made by critics of the dedication to Lewis that appears in *The Nun of St. Omer*, but this may be less than it seems. Often read as Dacre's brazen attempt to ride Lewis's coat-tails and signal the sensationalist character of her writing, it is just as likely to be a product of Hughes's canny eye for publicity

since another of his publications, *Three Monks!!!* (1803), translated by H.J. Sarrett from the French by Elisabeth Guénard, carries a very similar dedication to Lewis. Never one to miss a trick Hughes, as Peter Garside notes, was in the habit of exploiting marketing synergies of any and all kinds.[27] Indeed, on the basis of its title alone, *Confessions of the Nun of St. Omer* looks perfectly at home among the many nuns and monks on Hughes's books, yet it is in fact largely free of the Gothic influence this implies. The convent of St. Omer is the setting for just a few chapters in the novel and the protagonist's life as a nun functions as a kind of limbo from which she describes the events of the novel while receiving almost no attention within the narrative itself. Most surprisingly, there is little to no anti-Catholic rhetoric in the text, an almost reflexive feature of popular fiction in the period.[28] Readers anticipating the usual cast of tyrannical Abbesses and sexually-victimised young novices from a work with a title that echoes not just Radcliffe and Lewis's works but Denis Diderot's hugely-popular *The Nun* (translated into English in 1797) would therefore have been sorely disappointed.

An anti-Jacobin novel

Alongside these literary pre-conceptions Rosa Matilda's position at *The Morning Post* aligned her publicly with the conservative establishment, which would have meant that her debut novel came fraught with certain ideological assumptions. However, as Adriana Craciun has commented, Dacre's politics are more difficult to pin down than her association with *The Morning Post* suggests.[29] In some ways *The Nun of St. Omer* is typical of anti-Jacobin novels of the era, presenting the new philosophy of radicalism as a threat to the very foundations of British society, as in this passage in which the heroine, Cazire Arieni, rejects her would-be seducer who is co-incidentally a radical philosopher:

> You remind me of those sanguinary rebels who sought to hurl a peaceful monarch from his throne to establish a monster of their own creation, whose vices and whose indolence render them obnoxious to society, and who willingly profited by the general devastation to attain a guilty eminence on the mangled bodies of their fellow-creatures; blood alone could satisfy their thirsty souls; heated by dwelling on the fancied injustice they experienced, they longed to wade through the purple current, to gorge their hearts with murder, and sink to their own gloomy level those whom they could not rise to equal (p. 36).

There is a strong Burkean flavour to this indictment in which radicalism is presented not merely as a political threat, but a threat to all forms of social order and stability.[30] Furthermore, the frequent invocations of Rousseauvian and particularly Godwinian philosophy in the novel are typically tied to moments of moral crisis or sexual transgression in the narrative. Fribourg, the radical philosopher, like a Gothic villain is variously described as a 'fiend', a 'demon' and a 'monster',

whereas the saintly St. Elmer, his rival for Cazire's love, preaches Christian forbearance and submission to social 'prejudices'. Nonetheless, while Dacre may have intended an explicitly anti-Jacobin message the narrative thrust betrays an undeniable fascination with that which she seeks to condemn, a persistent issue with her writing that would metastasise in the moral and sexual confusion of *Zofloya*.

For many contemporary readers Fribourg's beliefs would have marked him out instantly as a purveyor of the most insidious sophistries. He is a self-professed atheist and necessitarian, a doctrine associated with William Godwin that denied the existence of free will and considered all human action, good or bad, to be the product of circumstance or society rather than morality. Yet the narrative struggles to persuade the reader that his critique of society's sexual hypocrisy is wholly mistaken, particularly when Cazire experiences it first hand after she is abandoned while pregnant. Matthew Grenby argues that the conservative approach when attacking Jacobinism, whether in novels or other media, was generally to avoid as far as possible engaging in a debate over ideas. This might seem counter-intuitive but as he points out, 'denying new philosophy any serious treatment . . . was a powerful comment in itself'.[31] For example, Dacre's sister Sophia King's novel *Waldorf; or the Dangers of Philosophy* (1798) is much more hostile to radicalism but leaves its precise nature largely to the reader's imagination. Caricature and ridicule were after all much more potent weapons than sincere intellectual engagement. That Dacre lingers on the debates between Cazire and Fribourg (these conversations make up a significant proportion of the first and longest of the three volumes) is therefore rather unusual among conservative novels of the period. Moreover, while Fribourg may be manipulative and amoral he is also easily the most charismatic figure in the text. If he is wrong, he is grandly, extravagantly so. Like Dacre's later works, then, the ostensible moral cannot disguise the fact that all the energy and force of the narrative lies on the side of the supposed evil-doers.

Confessions of the Nun of St. Omer and the sentimental novel

However much it borrows from political discourse, the highly-emotional tone and melodramatic structure of the narrative of *The Nun of St. Omer* owes more to the female tradition of the sentimental novel, and its subgenre the seduction novel, than any philosophical treatise. In a story that was repeated again and again throughout the long-eighteenth century, *The Nun of St. Omer* tells the tale of a young woman who, due to a combination of parental neglect and exposure to the wrong sort of books at an impressionable age, is led astray by a series of predatory rakes, falls, and repents her transgressions. By 1805 this plotline had become a familiar formula but, as critics such as Susan Staves, Toni Bowers and Katherine Binhammer have argued, to dismiss it as a cliché is to miss the ways in which many female authors manipulated the details of the hackneyed plotline to address

a wide variety of social and political concerns.[32] Moreover, Bowers contends that the focus on the slippery nature of sexual consent in seduction narratives made them the site of two significant innovations in the period: the convincing representation of female interiority for the first time in literature, and the covert exploration of the various political struggles that defined the era.[33] Exemplifying these developments, in *The Nun of St. Omer* Cazire struggles with the morality of her desire for a married man while the dangerous new philosophy of Jacobinism acts as the principal means by which she is persuaded to give in to temptation. Dacre, however, departs in an important way from the established model. According to Staves, what distinguished the 'pathetic seduced maidens' who garnered the sympathy of readers at the end of the long-eighteenth century from the more 'easily-persuaded' girls like Fanny Hill and Moll Flanders of the earlier part of the century was that the latter submitted to seduction at least in part to satisfy their own carnal urges.[34] Sentimental love was forgivable but base desire was not. In Dacre's version of the seduction narrative Cazire is clearly positioned as a 'pathetic' heroine, devoted albeit imperfectly to the values of virtue and chastity, but at the same time she is presented as a desiring woman readers would normally have been encouraged to condemn.

To ensure the reader's continued sympathy for Cazire, Dacre paints her fall as one that is inexorable, pre-determined by the prejudices of the world she is born into and the failings of those who should have guided and protected her, the details of which she seems to have drawn at least in part from her own life. Cazire's mother is a weak-willed 'enthusiast' who is cast aside by her husband, just as Dacre's mother Sara was by her father. In her despair the mother is unable or unwilling to guide her daughter through the moral thicket she must navigate as a young woman. Meanwhile her father, the flashy Marquis Arieni – in a portrait that surely owes something to John King – at first dotes on his daughter but then turns his back on the affective bonds of family when he meets 'the Rosendorf', a beautiful but immoral German Countess and a likely stand-in for King's long-time lover Lady Lanesborough.[35] Usurping the maternal role the Rosendorf tears husband from wife and parent from child in the selfish pursuit of her own pleasure; the archetypal monstrous, unfeeling woman, she is a forerunner of the wicked anti-heroines of *Zofloya* and *The Passions*. As a result of the Rosendorf's machinations, Cazire is cast out by her father and sent to boarding school at the convent of St. Omer where, she comments sardonically, 'I was instructed in all that is necessary for a *female* to know' (p. 22). The implication is that Cazire receives the kind of standard female education that would have included dancing, singing, drawing, sewing, and modern languages but little considered to be of practical use and nothing that would render a woman off-puttingly 'learned'. Though she skates over Cazire's experiences at school, Dacre makes it clear that the inadequacy of her education is not merely a missed opportunity but actively injurious, since it fails to give her a proper moral and intellectual foundation, making her easy prey for manipulators and rogues in later life. In *A Vindication of the Rights*

of Woman (1792) Mary Wollstonecraft warns that the consequences of educating women only to please actively precipitates the kind of fall Cazire suffers:

> many innocent girls become the dupes of a sincere affectionate heart, and still more are, as it may emphatically be termed, *ruined* before they know the difference between virtue and vice:—and thus prepared by their education for infamy, they become infamous.[36]

The campaign to improve female education in the period transcended the divide between progressives and conservatives, drawing together thinkers from all across the political spectrum from the radical Wollstonecraft to the evangelical Hannah More.[37] Novels by writers as diverse as Amelia Opie, Elizabeth Hamilton and Mary Hays among countless others trace the same path from a deficient education to ruin for their passionate young heroines.[38]

While novels dramatised in a uniquely personal way the moral quandaries that faced young women with regard to issues of sex and marriage, the role that fiction played in the wider debate surrounding female education was viewed with scepticism at best by moralists of the day. The growing enthusiasm for novel reading among young people, especially young women, had been a particular cause of concern for the best part of a century by the time Dacre published *The Nun of St. Omer*. What underlay these fears, as Jacqueline Pearson remarks in *Women's Reading in Britain, 1750–1835*, was a tendency to conflate 'textuality' with 'sexuality' and to read the enchanting powers of fiction as a metonym for sexual seduction.[39] Of her youthful enthusiasm for novels Cazire portentously declares, 'reading was my chief delight; dangerous, though charming power, capable alike to improve or to destroy!' (p. 20). Left to her own devices, she falls under the spell of the 'fairy regions of fiction and romance' (p. 22) and in a chapter entitled 'Dangerous Reading', in case her point had not been made clearly enough, Dacre describes how Cazire is captivated by romantic representations of love, which 'was painted happy only when *unfettered*' (p. 23). This early indoctrination proves the fatal weakness in Cazire's naturally good and virtuous nature when her seducers use her romantic notions to overcome her scruples. To make this point even more explicit, Dacre has one of her seducers read from Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, a novel synonymous with scandalous passion, at a crucial moment in their dalliance. The cognitive dissonance that attends a novel of seduction that criticises novels as seduction is especially blatant in such moments and Dacre, unlike many other writers keen to burnish their moralist credentials, does little to resolve this ambivalence, showing that even at her most respectable she was still willing to flirt with scandal.

This is not to suggest that Dacre's treatment of female reading and morality was consciously insincere. That Dacre intended *The Nun of St. Omer* to be a conventional addition to the discourse can be judged from the way she positions the text. There are two epigraphs included on the title page – one an unremarkable quotation from Thomson's *The Seasons*, a text which according to Pearson was widely

considered 'an antidote to passion'.[40] The other, from the popular mid-eighteenth century play by George Lillo, is more noteworthy:

> Virtue is arbitrary, nor admits debate.
> To doubt is treason in her rigid court.
> But if we parly with the foe
> We're lost.[41]

The implication is clear, even to engage with the immoral ideas associated with radicalism is to be doomed. If this is the case then Cazire, desperate for intellectual stimulation, stands little chance of escaping with her virtue intact. Dacre's sister Sophia used the same quotation as the epigraph to her anti-Jacobin novel, *Waldorf*, and yet the effect in each work is quite different. In *Waldorf* the subversive ideas of the new philosophy spread like a disease destroying everything they touch and the punishment for those who succumb is relentless, with death the only escape. While the consequences are likewise disastrous in *The Nun of St. Omer* Dacre shows much more compassion for her wayward characters, especially young Cazire, who resists abandoning her principles for as long as she can.

Seduction and female desire

Dacre's sympathetic treatment of Cazire's suffering, even though she admits to being a slave to a 'fatal passion' (p. 51), has the effect of calling the rigidity of contemporary moralism into question whether or not this was Dacre's intention. Though she is passionate, Cazire is no Emma Courtney ready to be carried away on the tide of feeling;[42] she clings to principles of virtue but they evidently have little to offer a woman in her predicament.

After leaving school Cazire is sent to live with her mother in a picturesque cottage in the countryside, but this turns out to be merely another form of exile, a place for her father to dispose of his unwanted women. Cazire's sexual awakening occurs in the garden near the cottage, a richly symbolic Eden in which innocence, sexuality and nature come together. Alone and isolated on the cusp of womanhood, she longs more than anything for companionship and conversation, which the appearance of the free-thinking Fribourg promises to deliver. The disparity between Fribourg's worldliness and her innocence is immediately apparent, with his true intentions signalled by his liberal use of plant-themed metaphors of budding, blossoming, ripening and plucking, the subtext of which the naïve Cazire does not recognise. All too easily she allows herself to be drawn into debate on the hypocrisy of conventional sexual mores without understanding the full import of the argument. Soon it is revealed that Fribourg is a husband and father, and therefore strictly off limits for any virtuous woman. Yet for every objection Cazire raises regarding the 'criminal' nature of their love, Fribourg has a ready answer for her. When he asks her bluntly why they feel such passion at all if it is so wrong,

she can reply only that it is so they will 'conquer' it (p. 54), but eventually she agrees to meet him away from prying eyes and gives in to the illicit passion:

> For the first time our lips met – it thrilled in liquid fire to my heart – I felt the ardent blushes of my cheek, and returned with transport hitherto unknown, the kiss of Fribourg. – Amazed, delighted, he pressed me closer to his throbbing bosom – his head sank on mine – for some minutes we remained in the first ecstatic trance of love * * * * * * * * * * * * (p. 49).

The erotic charge of the language is clear and it is obvious from the blushing 'ecstasy' she describes as well as the string of suggestive asterisks that the desire she feels for him is physical as well as sentimental. Though she and Fribourg pull back from the brink (Cazire even facilitates a reconciliation between Fribourg and his wife), the narrative implicitly treats this moment of erotic initiation as the definitive turning point in Cazire's 'fall'.

Cazire's second lover, Lindorf, is a more ordinary 'son of pleasure' (p. 77), and the narrative takes pains to point out that he is merely an opportunistic follower of Fribourg's philosophy. In a moment of honesty Lindorf dismisses Cazire's notions of sentimental love as 'the romantic dream of novel-reading misses' (p. 78). Offered a chance to escape her dreary life by running away with him, Cazire at first refuses but his departure triggers a mental breakdown, described in morbid, Gothic detail that is reminiscent of the depiction of the madhouse in Wollstonecraft's *Maria* (1798). When he returns Cazire, torn between the strictures of morality and a desire for freedom, finally gives in and elopes not for love but out of desperation at the limited options available to her. Lindorf, however, proves himself unworthy of her love and leaves her pregnant and abandoned, prey to an unscrupulous woman who tries to manipulate her into selling herself to a physically-repulsive Italian count. Yet female friendship also comes to represent a possible path to redemption for Cazire. In her hour of need and on the point of starvation she is saved by the kindness of Janetta, a poor widow living in the same boarding house. Genuinely selfless, Janetta provides Cazire with food and shelter asking nothing in return. Though they are poor, they plan to raise Cazire's baby together, supporting themselves through one of the few traditionally female sources of income, needlework. This development echoes one of the possible endings of Wollstonecraft's unfinished *Maria* in which the titular heroine and her lower-class friend Jemima form a female community in which to raise Maria's daughter. Cazire's hard-won peace does not last, however, and she is thrown unjustly into debtor's prison.

This comparatively realistic phase of the novel comes to an abrupt end with the appearance of an anonymous male saviour. Whisked off to a well-appointed Italian villa where she is treated like the mistress of the house, it seems Cazire will finally have her happy ending. Her rescuer turns out to be St. Elmer, a friend of her father's who had attempted to provide her with moral instruction as a child. At

first St. Elmer's actions seem purely altruistic, but inevitably his heroism comes at a price: he is in love with her and, rather improbably, wishes to marry her even though she has borne a child out of wedlock. Thus, unlike the vast majority of the unfortunate heroines of seduction novels, it seems Cazire has been given a second chance. Yet the love St. Elmer offers her, while perfect in its idealised purity, is also paternalistic and devoid of the spontaneity of what he calls 'the delusions of sentiment or passion' (p. 130). Indeed, although his name is modelled after St. Preux, the tutor who seduces his pupil Julie in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's best-seller *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), St. Elmer has more in common with the benevolent but coldly rational Wolmar, the sensible choice Julie eventually marries. Cazire, however, is no Julie and cannot accept such a passionless union. The total lack of physical compatibility is underscored when, after St. Elmer's proposal of marriage, Cazire cannot even bear to touch him: 'he took my hand, which I attempted, in convulsive agony, to withdraw from his pure and honourable touch' (p. 132). For a time, the narrative maintains the integrity of Cazire's decision to refuse him on the basis of this incompatibility. Her ultimate and very reluctant capitulation to his wishes only heightens the impression that he has placed her in a gilded cage and robbed her of what little agency she had enjoyed as a penniless wretch.

After enduring years of 'happiness' with St. Elmer, while internally racked by guilt that she cannot return his love and shame that someone so saintly should adore a fallen woman, the re-emergence of her old flame Fribourg signals that the story can end only one way. On St. Elmer's insistence, Fribourg, grieving at the death of his wife, stays as a long-term guest in their home. Too virtuous to experience real desire himself, St. Elmer fails to comprehend the power of the attraction between Cazire and Fribourg. Trusting that the reformed Cazire will prove faithful, he repeatedly leaves the two alone together overnight while he tends to a dying friend, going so far as to claim 'I mock the power of temptation' (p. 141). Though the narration emphasises the destructive nature of their passion, the energy of the writing acts as its own justification for the characters abandoning themselves to it. Amidst the raucous crowds of the Venice carnival,[43] Cazire comes upon Fribourg in another sensuous and secluded garden, and in a sequence that sees Dacre indulge in an unapologetic example of the desiring female gaze Cazire gives in to passion:

> Reclining on a sofa, with his mask off, (the glow of exercise and pleasure on his cheek, his dark ringlets shading his forehead, and the dress of his bosom partly open to admit the refreshing air,) lay Fribourg. He started at my entrance; but taking off my mask, smilingly I requested him not to be alarmed (p. 154).

Here, Cazire is in control and it is she who makes the fateful decision to consummate the affair, although the centre of power shifts back and forth between them in their sexual encounters. Musing on her attraction to Fribourg, Cazire admits that