

Mary Ward's *Lady Connie* (1916) and the Decay of Only Connecting

Exploiting the fact that Mary Augusta Ward was related to Matthew Arnold, Oscar Wilde in *The Decay of Lying* famously characterised her best-known book, the very earnest *Robert Elsmere* (1888), as "simply Arnold's *Literature and Dogma* with the Literature left out." Thirty years later, Uncle Matt's novel-writing niece produced a book called *Lady Connie* which by the same token might qualify as *Culture and Anarchy* with the volume turned down. Though of course completely safe in 1916 from the barbs of Oscar Wilde, Ward was not safe from having her heroine's name strangely taken in vain by another writer capable of causing her acute—and by now posthumous—embarrassment. D. H. Lawrence was destined to make *Lady Connie* look like a pre-watershed *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. He may not have meant to, but he did. If Mellors is a gamekeeper, could Lawrence be a poacher?

Ward's prescription for wholeness is naturally very different from Lawrence's. She embraces what he will discard, and vice versa. In essence hers is still the Arnoldian prescription, projected back into Victorian Oxford. The Oxford of which the novel goes in search brings Barbarians up against Philistines, and Hellenic intelligence up against Hebrew single-mindedness. Having entered it as the viper in the bosom of the academic family which takes her in, Lady Constance becomes the boa connector that coils around all of these contradictions and contains them. Ward clearly wants to write about the kind of "perennial antagonism" which, at least in the world of art, it is possible to resolve. She is writing, however, in time of the breaking of nations. In that sense, history hurt her more than Wilde ever could. But out of the discrediting of Ward's dogma comes an opportunity to see, even 100 years on, whether her work can live as literature.