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Shame, Marie Corelli, and the "New Woman" in Fin-de-Siecle Britain fin-de-siecle Britain

Abstract

Phenomenally popular fin-de-siecle celebrity Marie Carelli, in her fictional and nonfictional writing, repeatedly affirmed that the era's iconic New Woman represented not the promise but the threat of "modernity." Modernity, as represented by the New Woman, did not extend the civilizing process. Rather, it jeopardized it. By challenging rules of behavior that were integral to the civilized state, the New Woman threatened a return to a previous state of barbarianism. Indeed, by refusing to allow a proper feeling of womanly shame to regulate her thoughts and actions, this icon of modernity seemed to counter Norbert Elias's understanding of the symbiotic relationship between advancing frontiers of shame and the progression of civilization. Given that this New Woman's improper behavior threatened to destabilize English society and interrupt British imperialism-Britain's international role of bringing "civilisation" to others-as self-appointed "guardian of the public conscience," Carelli took it upon herself to attempt to shame her. More accurately, she took it upon herself to elicit "proper" feelings of guilt and shame from her readers, particularly her female readers, whose sympathies dared to stray too closely toward the damaging feminist aspirations of the unseemly and unwomanly New Woman, and the decivilizing process she apparently championed.

Carelli unambiguously opposed what she saw as the transgressive New Woman's decivilizing drive; nevertheless her writing demonstrates her era's accommodation of a complex attitude toward the notion of human progress and its inevitability or otherwise. By the early decades of the twentieth century, Britain had reached what Carelli termed a state of "over-ripe civilisation." So, while this celebrity writer railed against the New Woman's threatened instigation of a decivilizing process, she simultaneously, and somewhat paradoxically, promoted a limited reversal of civilization. Importantly, she only advocated a partial, controlled rolling back of "progress" to a time when human relations were not threatened by an attempted obliteration of sexual difference. In the endeavor to restore civilization to a state of balance-to reverse cultural change-Corelli worked to reinstate the frontier of shame: specifically, womanly shame. Given her role as "queen of the bestsellers" for almost three decades-given that her writing was such an integral and ongoing part of the era's public debate-her large body of work casts light on just how accepted her literary technique of using emotions to attempt to effect wider cultural change was at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century.

Keywords

siecle, de, britain, fin, shame, corelli, woman, maria

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Shame, Marie Corelli, and the New Woman in *fin-de-siecle* Britain

Sharon Crozier-De Rosa

1. Introduction

Phenomenally popular *fin-de-siècle* celebrity, Marie Corelli's fictional and non-fictional writing repeatedly affirmed that the era's iconic New Woman represented not the promise of, but the threat of "modernity".¹ Modernity, as represented by the New Woman, did not extend the civilising process. Rather, it jeopardised it. By challenging rules of behaviour that were integral to the civilised state, the New Woman threatened a return to a previous state of barbarianism. Indeed, by refusing to allow a proper feeling of womanly shame to regulate her thoughts and actions, this icon of modernity seemed to counter Norbert Elias's understanding of the symbiotic relationship between advancing frontiers of shame and the progression of civilisation. Given that this New Woman's improper behaviour threatened to destabilise English society and interrupt British imperialism – Britain's international role of bringing "civilisation" to others – as self-appointed "guardian of the public conscience", Corelli took it upon herself to attempt to shame her. More accurately, she took it upon herself to elicit "proper" feelings of guilt and shame from her readers, particularly her female readers, whose sympathies dared to stray too closely towards the damaging feminist

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Corelli unambiguously opposed what she saw as the transgressive New Woman's decivilising drive; nevertheless her writing demonstrates her era's accommodation of a complex attitude towards the notion of human progress and its inevitability or otherwise. By the early decades of the twentieth century, Britain had reached what Corelli termed a state of "over-ripe civilisation". So, while this celebrity writer riled against the New Woman's threatened instigation of a decivilising process, she simultaneously, and somewhat paradoxically, promoted a limited reversal of civilisation. Importantly, she only advocated a partial, controlled rolling back of "progress" to a time when human relations were not threatened by an attempted obliteration of sexual difference. In the endeavour to restore civilisation to a state of balance – to reverse cultural change – Corelli worked to reinstate the frontier of shame; specifically womanly shame. Given her rule as "queen of the bestsellers" for almost three decades – given that her writing was such an integral and ongoing part of the era's public debate – her large body of work casts light on just how accepted her literary technique of using emotions to attempt to affect wider cultural change was at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century.

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2. Shame, popular fiction and Marie Corelli (1855-1924)

Historians and literary scholars have been increasingly turning to popular culture, particularly popular fiction, for what these have to reveal about popular mentalities and collective emotions. As cultural historian Jeffrey Richards argues: "For the historian concerned with the real spirit of an age, the collective *mentalité*, the popular culture is of the greatest value; the high culture often misleads."² Implicit in this assertion is an understanding of the shared

mental world of the writer and readers, of their shared values and assumptions. That the text serves as a “mediator between two interiors, the reader’s and the author’s, interiors that literary theorist Georges Poulet remarks “would otherwise be inaccessible to each other”, is highly important, as it is into this shared consciousness that the historian of mentalities and emotions can enter.³ Not only is it the recorded conversations and the obvious actions of the text, then, that allow historians a pathway into a particular society’s “manners” and “feelings”, even when, or especially when, they are not obvious to readers distanced from the era or society in which the text was produced; but it is also the “silences” in those texts. For it is here, in these unwritten but assumed understandings, that common, shared values and emotions lie.⁴

Analysing emotions as articulated in popular fiction of late nineteenth-century Britain is particularly rewarding, for not only was this society labelled “a nation of avid novel readers”, but it was during this era that the “modern” bestseller emerged, spawning a category of literary works boasting unprecedented levels of commercial success.⁵ Enabling such phenomenal degrees of commercial success was a necessarily broad and diverse readership whose shared “interior life”, to borrow historian Bernard Bailyn’s term, subsequent historians have been able to access.⁶ In using bestselling fiction to attempt to understand the era’s reaction to such a gendered emotion as shame, contemporary perceptions of reading – particularly low-brow reading – as a gendered (female) practice is extremely useful as it offers greater access to how emotions like shame were packaged for women.⁷ And this notion of packaging or articulating emotions is significant here for these texts do not help us to build an accurate picture of how people actually “felt” about a particular situation. Rather, they help us understand how emotions were used, “how people articulated, understood, and represented how they felt”. For, as emotions historian Barbara Rosenwein argues: “This, in fact, is all we can know about anyone’s feelings apart from our own.”⁸ That the repeated

emotional utterances characteristic of so many phenomenally popular late Victorian and Edwardian novels, such as those written by *fin-de-siècle* celebrity Marie Corelli, appealed, and continued to appeal throughout the era, to such a large, widespread and diverse readership is highly indicative of accepted or familiar emotional standards and expressions, if not of likely individual feelings.

Corelli's status as one of the highest selling and most famous writers of her age is undisputed. She reigned as bestselling writer and celebrity in Britain and the Empire, as acknowledged "Queen of the Bestsellers" and "Idol of suburbia"⁹, for nearly thirty years up to the advent of the First World War.¹⁰ During that time, at least thirty of the novels she published were "world best-sellers" (she was one of only two women who in the 1900s appeared in both British and Colonial "top ten" reading lists, for example) and she sold an average of 100,000 copies of her books per year, achieving a level of commercial success that went unrivalled during her own era.¹¹ Accompanying this unprecedented commercial success and stemming from the rise of a relatively new "mass" audience combined with a new era of mass media (including photojournalism), was a unique level of popularity that we would today describe as "superstar status".¹² Not only did hordes of admirers clamber to see her, some even fighting to touch her gown at public appearances, but her renown and influence were also recognised by the fact that she was invited to share her views via lectures organised by highly esteemed organisations such as the Edinburgh Philosophical Society and the Royal Society of Literature.¹³ On a more spiritual note, Corelli achieved something close to the status of national moral guardian – indeed one of her biographers, Brian Masters, describes her as the self-appointed "guardian of the public conscience".¹⁴ This reputation was further strengthened by the fact that a number of her works were used in an official capacity by prominent members of religious institutions to promote popular religion.¹⁵ In both her fiction and non-fiction, Corelli revelled in the sordid dimensions of the modern world while

simultaneously bitterly condemning them. She blamed and shamed transgressive modern women while indulging in their decadence. This approach – along with her phenomenal level of popularity – recommends her vast body of work to historians trying to gauge the era’s reaction to the use of shame to effect social and cultural change, especially with regards to understandings of gender.¹⁶

How then, did she use emotions, particularly shame, to attempt to effect cultural change? In the first place, Corelli tapped into existing anxieties about the moral and physical condition of Britain, the Empire, and by extension, “civilisation” itself. Britain’s “civilising mission” had been strained both by recent anti-colonial protests in places like India, Ireland, Afghanistan and Africa, and by fears at home about racial degeneration brought about by contact with those who were “racially inferior” abroad.¹⁷ A substantial aspect of this imperial anxiety, however, was also to specifically draw on concerns about gender, as for various reasons anxiety about gender crossed many of these larger national and imperial worries.¹⁸

In the second place, Corelli’s heavily didactic writing clarified a traditional code of morality that people individually and society collectively were expected to live by, thereby outlining something of an “emotional community” to use Barbara Rosenwein’s term; “emotional community” here referring to a social group “whose members adhere to the same valuations of emotions and their expression.”¹⁹ The problem was that in *fin-de-siècle* Britain that code of morality was increasingly under attack. More specifically, as one fictional character put it, “Morality has always been declared unnecessary for men, - it is fast becoming equally unnecessary for women!”²⁰ That men were immoral was timeless, Corelli argued. But if women were to give up their appointed role as moral guardians of men, nation, race and empire, then civilisation itself was at great risk.

Thirdly, Corelli traced the many and varied transgressions of those codes, indulging as much in such displays of immorality as condemning them, a factor that doubtless

contributed overwhelmingly to her mass appeal. And, finally, in order to prevent the fall of civilisation, in the attempt to arrest the march of “progress”, she attempted to shame those guilty of such transgressions, alienating them from the emotional community that she championed if they refused to feel proper shame. Importantly, this technique of shaming was reserved overwhelmingly for women in Corelli’s texts; again, women being identified as the main instigators of the potential fall of civilisation by virtue of their collective position as protectors of the nation and Empire.

None of this is to argue that Corelli was unique in her linking of anxieties about gender and civilisation. Across the Empire, many Victorians and Edwardians did so, although their views were not necessarily as condemning as those of Corelli. In the far-flung peripheries, for example, when debating the merits of reforming divorce legislation to lessen the burden on women, the South Australian Legislative Council argued that “by maintaining the “rights of women” they would not be retrograding in the scale of civilization”.²¹ Irish New Woman writer Hannah Lynch wrote later that, contrary to feminist advancement threatening the regression of civilisation, not providing for the education of girls and instead preparing them for useless and dependent lives bore “no resemblance to the ideal of civilisation”.²² And, Corelli’s peer, the English social commentator Lady Jeune, although she agreed that a nation’s level of prosperity and progress should be measured in terms of the virtue and strength of its women, disagreed that the level to which *fin-de-siècle* English women had sunk was so low that it threatened the downfall of civilisation.²³

Nor, of course, is this to contend that Corelli was alone in her linking of shame and the civilising process, particularly her use of shaming as a technique for controlling social and cultural change. As numerous scholars have pointed out, Norbert Elias most prevalent among them, shame and “progress” or “civilisation” have been understood to have had, and continue to have a symbiotic relationship. In *The Civilizing Process* – the book

criminologist, John Braithwaite, describes as the “most important work on shame in Western history” – Elias explained the progression of civilisation as a product of the advancing “frontier of shame and repugnance”, a frontier he claimed that began to advance quite rapidly from the sixteenth century onwards.²⁴ This process of civilisation, Elias clarified, did not entail the diminishing of external pressures or fears, such as that represented by physical violence. Nor did it witness the emergence of internal fears or “automatic internal anxieties”. Rather, the main outcome of this civilising process was a change in “the proportion between the external and the self-activating fears, and their whole structure”.²⁵ Shame, then, defined in this ground-breaking study as “a specific excitation, a kind of anxiety which is automatically reproduced in the individual on certain occasions by force of habit”, was to varying degrees intrinsically bound to the external community or society.²⁶ “Considered superficially”, Elias elaborated, shame is “fear of social degradation or, more generally, of other peoples” gestures of superiority.”²⁷

It takes on its particular coloration from the fact that the person feeling it has done or is about to do something through which he comes into contradiction with people to whom he is bound in one form or another, and with himself, with the sector of his consciousness by which he controls himself. The conflict expressed in shame-fear is not merely a conflict of the individual with prevalent social opinion; the individual’s behaviour has brought him into conflict with the part of himself that represents this social opinion.²⁸

Sixty years later, Thomas Scheff extended this understanding of the relationship between internal and external factors, arguing that the “large family of emotions” included under the term shame, a family that includes cognates and variants such as embarrassment, humiliation, feelings of rejection and failure, all have in common “the feeling of a *threat to the social bond*”.²⁹ Shame worked on individuals by instilling in them a fear of losing the love or

respect of someone or some community they were attached to or to whom they attached value. Shame connected internal anxieties to external influences, inner values to social standards.

It is with both Elias's "superficial" consideration of shame and Scheff's sociological understanding in mind, as opposed to the often "deeply hidden" inner experience of this painful emotion, that I approach Marie Corelli's bestselling texts for what they reveal about popular attitudes towards *fin-de-siècle* feminist transgressions. As stated earlier, shaming is one of Corelli's most important tools for attempting to impose social and moral conformity. Throughout her journalism and her fiction, she attempted to evoke a fear of social exclusion among her readers, particularly her female readers, whose thoughts threatened to stray too close to those of the socially disruptive feminist or New Woman. She drew readers' attention to the fact that it was actually these New Women who brought shame and ostracism on themselves, for it was they who knowingly broke the bonds of social cohesion. So, although she often employed the terms "shame" and "ashamed" in her literature in order to invoke that emotion – referring, for example, to the notion of "burn[ing] with shame at being associated, as members of a common sex" with women like the Suffragettes³⁰ or the "many women in society" who were atheists, and who "made no secret of their shame"³¹ – in many other instances she did not refer to the emotion directly, preferring instead to elicit feelings of shame by expounding women's role in the shameful state of modern England and their apparent culpability in the imminent fall of civilisation.

Corelli's linking of shame with female weakness reflected her society's understanding of that emotion. The notion that shame was a regressive emotion – an emotion to be levelled at women and children and "savages" – has a long history (even though this, in many ways, runs counter to Elias's argument that shame was the emotion of the civilised, so-called

“savages” or primitive people being more susceptible to the imposition of external fears than self-constraints or internal anxieties such as those triggered by shame). Nevertheless, commentators from Aristotle to Freud have characterised shame as an emotion “suitable for youth” and “womanish”; as a “feminine characteristic *par excellence*”.³² And this is a tradition that has not abated if we are to take John Braithwaite’s assertion that even today shame remains “profoundly gendered”.³³ Indeed, one only has to look to current debates surrounding the effectiveness or otherwise of feminist shaming, for example, to see that gender and shame intersect in many, multifarious ways.³⁴ Certainly, Corelli and her contemporaries considered it appropriate to target women as particular objects of shame. However, no matter how reliant on shame as a tool for social control – more specifically for the control of women – that Corelli and her contemporaries were, there is no means of judging just how successful or effective her shaming campaign was. For, as feminist theorist, Jill Locke, has argued in relation to feminist shaming, realisation of how shame and shaming function brings with it recognition of the limited effects of shame as a form of social control, for shaming relies on the target’s or intended recipient’s “ability to engage in shameful self-assessment”.³⁵ Shaming, then, Braithwaite adds, may produce uncertain outcomes. Whereas in some instances it may act to bind the recipient to the group or community to which they belong – bringing them back to the fold as it were – in others it may do the opposite, alienating and ostracising the shaming target.³⁶ In line with Locke’s and Braithwaite’s cautions, Corelli’s “shaming” of unwomanly New Women would only be successful if those unwomanly New Women had the “ability”, and no doubt the desire, to engage in “shameful self-assessment”.

3. Corelli’s texts and anti-feminist shame

Women, Marie Corelli declared, were wholly responsible for the low position they held in late nineteenth- and early twentieth century society. It was as a result of their own self-degradation that they were regarded so lowly. If they were to assess their actions they would recognise the nature and extent of their faults, avert their ways and, consequently, arrest the threatened disintegration of the nation and empire. Thus they could potentially reverse cultural change and restore England and the empire to the state of balance achieved formerly.

In theory, Corelli championed widespread recognition of the substantial, even remarkable, intellectual capabilities of women in the often hostile environment of the male-dominated intellectual world.³⁷ However, she did not endorse the very visible, improper and undignified manner in which feminist activists, like the Suffragettes, went about campaigning for this recognition. In passages equally as bitter and condemning in her fiction as in her non-fiction, Corelli attacked feminists, or what she called her “distracted, man-fighting sisters”, who were inspired to go “clamouring like unnatural hens in a barn-yard about their ‘rights’ and ‘wrongs’”, intentionally attempting to “neutralise their sex”, and at the very least robbing that sex of its dignity. Shamelessly deviant women, like the notorious New Woman and the Suffragettes, only invoked disgrace. Devoid of the womanly feelings of modesty and shame, they alienated their sisters, such as the woman she cites in her pamphlet, *Woman, or – Suffragette?*, who wrote to the publication *Truth* in 1907, declaring that she “burn[ed] with shame at being associated, as members of a common sex” with women like the Suffragettes who behaved more like “drunken men than even the worst feminist viragos”.³⁸ Such indecorous behaviour, Corelli assented, was “indeed a degradation to the very name of woman”, causing pain not only to her fellow women, but also “to their husbands (where they have husbands) as well as to their sons (where they have sons)”.³⁹ The actions of these shameless women, *Woman, or – Suffragette?* continued, were “a scandal to the nation”, making “England a laughing-stock to the rest of the world”.⁴⁰ English women – doubtless led

by the actions of their more deviant sisters – Corelli lamented, were relinquishing all the characteristics that defined English womanhood and made her guardian of the English nation and the British Empire, namely, her home, her faith and her very femininity.

Mass abandonment of domesticity, Corelli declared, represented a pace of cultural change that threatened complete chaos:

For Great Britain is already too rapidly losing many of the noble ideals and institutions which once made her the unrivalled mistress of the world: the sanctity of the private household is being exchanged for the scrambling life of public restaurants and hotels, - preachers of all creeds are reproaching women (and rightly too) for their open and gross neglect of their highest duties, - for their frivolity, waste of love, - the grace of hospitality, the beauty of sincerity, the art of good manners are all being forgotten under an avalanche of loose conduct and coarse speech, - and if the mothers of the British race decide to part altogether with the birthright of their simple *womanliness* [Corelli's emphasis] for a political mess of pottage, then darker days are in store for the nation than can yet be foreseen or imagined. For with woman alone rests the Home, which is the foundation of the Empire. When they desert this, their God-appointed centre, the core of the national being, then things are tottering to a fall.⁴¹

Desertion of the home, abandonment of woman's primary function as ruler of the domestic hearth, then, not only brought pain and shame to fellow women, men and nation, it threatened the continued existence of the nation and the empire.

The New Woman was also readily abandoning another of the essential ingredients of English womanhood, that of religious faith. Women, as metaphoric guardians of nation and empire, had primary, if not sole, responsibility for protecting religious faith. Not only this,

but as mothers, they had the very real responsibility of bringing up new generations of Christians who would ensure the perpetuation of British civilisation. However, as her protagonist in her 1904 novel, *God's Good Man*, John Walden, cries: "Society! why, now, many women in society were atheists, and made no secret of their shame!"⁴² Unfortunately, New Women – or rather, "Christ-scorning female[s]", usually accompanied by "short hair and spectacles", as well as honours from Girton, "eminently fitted to become the mother of a brood of atheists" – were shamelessly prepared to "swallow benefits, and deny the Benefactor".⁴³ What benefits? Those that accompanied the advancement of civilisation and that particularly favoured women, for, Corelli argued,

Women especially, who, but for Christianity, would still be in the low place of bondage and humiliation formerly assigned to them in the barbaric periods, are most of all to be reproached for their wicked and wanton attacks upon their great Emancipator, who pitied and pardoned their weaknesses as they had never been pitied or pardoned before.⁴⁴

The fictional John Walden adds to this, claiming that the "murder" of "Christ in women", as opposed to men, is the cruellest of all modern sins, for if faith is lost in women it is lost in the world: "as woman's purity first brought the Divine master into the world, so must woman's purity keep Him here with us, - else we men are lost-lost through the sins, not only of our fathers, but chiefly of our mothers!"⁴⁵ And, in one of the non-humorous passages in the otherwise satirical 1889 novella, *My Wonderful Wife*, another male character declares:

When women voluntarily resign their position as the silent monitors and models of grace and purity, down will go all the pillars of society, and we shall scarcely differ in our manners and customs from the nations we call "barbaric," because as yet they have not adopted Christ's exalted idea of the value and sanctity of female influence on the higher development of the human race.⁴⁶

The message was unambiguous, whether delivered in fictional or non-fictional form: it was to woman's shame that members of their own sex were seen leading the revolt against religious faith, against civilised life itself.

The loss or deliberate abandonment of femininity and feminine appearance, that other ingredient of true womanhood in Corelli's works, is treated rather more lightly than either domesticity or faith, although the pattern of blame and shame persists. Modern society, Corelli's writing sometimes humorously proclaimed, had spawned a breed of women, ridiculous in appearance, because of their insistence on aping the habits and mannerism of men. This breed included women who smoked cigarettes, such as the vulgar smoking ladies of "fashion" in *God's Good Man*⁴⁷ or *My Wonderful Wife*'s Honoria Maggs, a manly New Woman whose husband informs us, he would have kissed on their wedding day "but that vile cigar stuck out of her mouth and prevented" him.⁴⁸ It also drew in women who rode bicycles, such as *The Mighty Atom*'s "ugly "advanced" young women who have brought their bicycles [to a country gathering] and go tearing about the country all day".⁴⁹ And finally, it included modern young women who used slang, like the "ladies" who may be asked, in *The Passing of a Great Queen. A Tribute to the Noble Life of Victoria Regina* (1901), to "give up smoking and the use of stable slang" or like Honoria Maggs, again, who proves her manliness by writing "a sporting novel, full of slap-dash vigour and stable slang".⁵⁰

Swearing, smoking and tearing about the country on a bicycle might have been characteristics of the New Woman that were easy to poke fun at, but they were also forms of aberrant behaviour that allowed Corelli the opportunity of launching into vast passages on woman's dangerous foolishness in pushing forward an agenda that was to see an obliteration of sexual difference; an agenda that involved not recognising and accepting the privileges that "progress" had given her.

Some men still make “angels” out of us in spite of our cycling mania, - our foolish “clubs,” where we do nothing at all, - our rough games at football and cricket, our general throwing to the winds of all dainty feminine reserve, delicacy, and modesty, - and we alone are to blame if we shatter their ideals and sit down by choice in the mud when they would have placed us on thrones. It is our fault, not theirs. We have willed it so. Many of us are more “mannish” than womanly; we are more inclined to laugh at and make mock of a man’s courtesy and reverence than we are to be flattered by it.⁵¹

Women, Corelli declared in *The Modern Marriage Market* (1898), were “free” “to assert their modesty, their sense of right, their desire for truth and purity, if only they will”.⁵² It was a sad indictment of the state of British femininity that they refused to do so.

Therefore, whether deserting their God-appointed role as mothers of the race or embracing that role in too sentimental a fashion, thereby producing molly-coddled men who would grow to despise them, women, Corelli asserted, were the manufacturers of their own demise.⁵³ As she sensationally stated in *Woman, or – Suffragette?* whatever the “folly and the tyranny of men in regard to woman”, “woman alone is in fault for his war against her”.⁵⁴ Given the abundance of unequivocal, often vitriolic pronouncements on woman’s guilt – and harking back to Braithwaite’s earlier argument regarding the anticipated outcomes of shaming – there is little to suggest that Corelli’s shaming was intended to entice deviant women back into the fold of true womanhood and much to recommend that her preferred result was their confirmed exclusion.

4. “Over-ripe civilisation”

Corelli’s shaming of transgressive New Women offers invaluable insight into one popular author’s use of emotion to attempt to affect social and cultural change; to arrest “progress”.

But, in taking debates about shame, cultural change and the progression and regression of time to such a phenomenally wide and for the most part non-intellectual audience, her writing also offers historians a window on popular attitudes towards the very notion of “progress” and perceptions about the inevitability, even the desirability, of a reversal of the civilising process.

Like many Victorians and Edwardians, Corelli accepted that “civilisation”, as both a process and a state of being, brought with it advantages and disadvantages. Victorian philosopher, John Stuart Mill, for example, although he applauded the advancement of knowledge, decay of superstition, softening of manners, decline of war and personal conflict accompanying “progress”, simultaneously lamented the loss of independence, creation of artificial wants, inequality and monotony.⁵⁵ By the end of the century, English society exhibited an even stronger concern for the varying consequences of the civilising process. Many at this time were plagued by concerns about, as Bradley Deane puts it, “the apparent degeneracy of an England that had grown decadently over-civilised”.⁵⁶ Certainly, William Morris was one of these. In an 1890s paper on socialism, a very jaded Morris, seeing little to recommend civilisation, declared that the “dull squalor of civilization had settled down on the world” creating a “hateful”, “sordid, aimless, ugly confusion” where “simple pleasures” were deemed contemptible.⁵⁷ To a degree Corelli concurred.

Up until the beginning of the Victorian period, there was, Corelli argued, little to say that English history had not followed a rather straightforward trajectory towards greater freedom, greater enlightenment. As she wrote in her tribute to Queen Victoria on her death, England had “just completed a thousand years of historical upwards progress”, making the English nation “steady, glorious, and supreme”.⁵⁸ The march of progress seemed inexorable. However, after the early years of Victoria’s reign, something changed. At this time, the state of equilibrium between the material and the spiritual sides of life disintegrated. From here,

material advancement gathered pace to the detriment of developing human relations.

Victoria, Corelli wrote, “must have watched Progress marching with swift, impetuous strides in one direction, - but Retrogression and Decay marching as steadily, though more slowly in another”.⁵⁹ Progress and Retrogression marching hand-in-hand, resulting in the period defined as “modernity”, had led to what Corelli, in her 1898 essay on “The Modern Marriage Market”, pronounced a state of “over-ripe civilisation” or “ultra-civilisation”.⁶⁰

Like many of her contemporaries, Corelli also came to believe – as Raymond Williams was to later word it – that “civilization, a civilized way of life, the conditions of civilized society may be seen as capable of being lost as well as gained”.⁶¹ A period of “over-ripe civilisation” saw “Progress” and “Retrogression” striding past each other in opposite directions. Civilisation was in fear of being reversed, if not entirely lost. So, how did this self-appointed guardian of the collective conscience propose to amend the situation? Corelli’s proffered solution was two-fold. On the one hand – and despite railing against the New Woman’s threatened reversal of civilisation, her decivilising mission – Corelli’s heavily didactic writing advocated a partial reversal of “civilisation”, just back to the early Victorian years when there was balance between materialism and spirituality. If the “decivilising” process is, as Stephen Mennell defines it, “what happens when civilising processes go into reverse”⁶²; then perhaps the term “uncivilising” process is a much more suitable one to apply to Corelli’s plans for the nation, for contrary to advocating a complete and permanent reversal of civilisation, she preferred an unravelling, an unpicking, a partial undoing of civilisation.⁶³ And she advocated this unravelling process with a conception of civilisation that embraced “inter-personal relations, tastes, modes of behaviour, and knowledge”, not simply “some Victorian idea of moral or cultural progress of which the West would be bearer and beacon”, although, admittedly, this latter understanding did comprise an essential element of her understanding of human progress.⁶⁴

On the other hand, at times Corelli did recommend a kind of decivilising process; one that was only intended to be temporary, that was to be used to facilitate her uncivilising process and that was certainly very different from the dangerous process that she associated with the transgressive New Woman. In her texts Corelli recommended that late Victorians return to the pre-civilised period – but again, only momentarily – and just to borrow some of the innocence, unworldliness, sentimentality and faith that apparently reigned there and bring it back to the modern age. In a time when things had gone so far, when inter-personal relations had been so incredibly altered and sexual difference was almost a thing of the past, returning to that past and borrowing from it was an important step in Corelli's program of re-infusing the cold, stark modern age with the warmer sentiments of love, faith and innocence.

What role did Corelli believe women had played – and what role were they to continue to play – in this movement of time backwards and forwards again? Women, Corelli's highly sensational writing proclaimed, were treated horrendously in the periods before the onset of civilisation; before the time when, according to Elias, the frontier of shame and repugnance began to advance. Her texts – her fictional texts in particular – are littered with allusions to: “barbaric arrangements” where, for instance, women were simply “men's drudges”; to “the early phases of civilization, when women were something less valuable than cattle”; to “barbaric periods” when women were “in the low place of bondage and humiliation”; or even to times when “rough unwashed tyrants...shut up their ladies in gloomy castles where very little light and air could penetrate,-and the adoring and devoted ladies, in their turn, made very short work of the whole business either dying of their own grief and ill-treatment, or else getting killed in cold blood by order of their lords and masters”.⁶⁵ For “centuries”, Corelli preached, “women have been unfairly hindered by men in every possible way from all chance of developing the great powers of intelligence they possess”.⁶⁶

Modernity, then, brought with it much that favoured women. “Why”, Corelli asserted in *God’s Good Man*, “one of the finest proofs of an improvement in our civilisation is the freedom and thought and action given to women in the present day”.⁶⁷ The problem was that in accepting this gift of independence and liberty with what she saw as a mistaken degree of over-enthusiasm, women had rejected other elements of relations between the sexes that Corelli thought they should have retained. Women, she wrote, were responsible for deliberately and stubbornly refusing to conform to Victorian understandings of gender difference, a wilful defiance as displayed by the manly actions of so many modern women. By selfishly pursuing their individual “rights” and purposely rejecting the chivalrous relations of old, these transgressive women were guilty of mass self-degradation. Modern British society was scarred by what she termed the “voluntary and fast-increasing self-degradation of women”; both the nation and the empire suffered.⁶⁸ As one male character points out:

...this England of ours was once upon a time not behind but *before* [Corelli’s emphasis] every nation in the whole world for the sweetness, purity and modesty of its women! That it has become one with less enlightened races in the deliberate unsexing and degradation of womanhood does not now, and will not in the future, redound to its credit.⁶⁹

“[M]en will be most to blame if the next generation of wives and mothers are shameless, unsexed, indecorous, and wholly unworthy of their life’s mission” she declared; but only insofar as they did not work hard enough to prevent woman’s self-degradation.⁷⁰ For, as she stated in her non-fiction, whatever the “folly and the tyranny of men in regard to woman”, “woman alone is in fault for his war against her”.⁷¹

So, given the actions of manly New Women, Corelli was forced to use anti-feminist shaming techniques to attempt to reverse cultural change; not only to push for a reinstating of the conditions reigning in the early Victorian years but also, more dramatically, for a return –

however temporary – to the barbaric periods. The modern age, under the influence of transgressive women, seemed to have forgotten the softer, more sentimental and romantic side of life. In what she called “the tangled ways of over-civilisation”, too many noble mannerisms or beliefs, or “savage and splendid freedom[s]” had been lost; mannerisms or beliefs that “are seldom or never regained”.⁷² The so-called pre-civilised periods, for all their faults with regards to the treatment of women, at least subscribed to sentimentality, superstition and faith, offering an attractive alternative to a cold, stark, disbelieving modern era.

5. Conclusion

The civilising process, Corelli argued, overwhelmingly altered relations between men and women. However, it was women who were most advantaged by this process, their treatment by men in the pre-civilised, and therefore pre-Christian, ages being barbarous, brutal and horrendous. Yet, ironically, and to Corelli bewildering and maddening, it was women who were threatening to reverse this process of relations. Women, then, who had most to lose by a decivilising process, were threatening to instigate exactly that process. Women, especially middle-class women as the standard bearers of late Victorian morality, she continued, were feeding into the decadent beliefs of a “modern” world that was in favour of stripping life bare of all that was emotionally and spiritually nourishing, and replacing it with all that was superficial, material, disbelieving. They, as exemplified by smoking, bicycle-riding “modern” women of fashion and by vulgar, shrill campaigning Suffragettes, were guilty of attempting to deplete all signs of gender difference, a pivotal notion on which rested late Victorian understandings of ideal male-female relationships, those based on mutual respect, complementary value and chivalry.

Corelli wanted to halt this process of cultural change and she deployed shame in the attempt. Her response to the presence of these dangerous and threatening women, then, was to blame them and attempt to shame them into conforming to her ideal of British womanhood. She clearly pointed out what it was that Britain was to lose should these women be allowed to continue their unwomanly, unEnglish, uncivilised ways. Britain, she argued, was already a “laughing-stock of the world”, rendered so by the unwomanly, indecorous and ridiculous actions of its middle-class women. To allow such a downward spiral among the nation’s womankind to continue, was to cement the downward spiral of the nation itself, for it was in the hands of womanhood that “progress” rested, at least progress of a moral kind. Moreover, Britain’s role as imperial leader and therefore as standard bearers of “civilisation” meant that much more was at risk than simply England’s reputation. The process of civilisation, itself, was at risk. The deviant behaviour of England’s womanhood threatened to topple the whole civilised state of being.

Yet, despite Corelli’s vitriolic attacks on a womanhood that was threatening to destabilise, indeed to decivilise, her texts, fictional and non-fictional, also, paradoxically, championed a process of reversal, if only limited reversal. Like many of her contemporaries, intellectual and otherwise given the largely upper-working and middle-class nature of her extremely wide audience, Corelli was doubtful about theories of the inevitability of historical progress and the benefits to be gained by that process. Instead, she fed into concerns about an over-advancement of civilisation, and a looming fall. She had labelled Britain “over-civilised”, or in her words, viewed it to be in a period of “over-ripe civilisation”. Modernity as a stage of historical development had produced something of an imbalance between material and intellectual advancement on the one hand and cultural progress on the other. Such an imbalance had caused unrest, anxiety, indeed, unhappiness. The solution for those suffering under a cold, stark, emotionless blanket of “modernity” was to begin unravelling

civilisation, rolling it back to a point at which material and spiritual concerns aligned.

However, the radical, undignified and essentially unwomanly actions of feminist, modern and New Women threatened a much more severe, damaging and ultimately permanent unravelling, one back to a point of pre-civilisation. Only the proper emotion of shame, then, stood between the complete annihilation of civilisation as the late Victorians and Edwardians knew it, and its continuance, if only British womanhood was womanly enough to feel it.

¹ For a brief introduction to Corelli, see Margaret B. McDowell, “Marie Corelli”, in *Dictionary of Literary Biography. Vol. 34. British Novelists, 1890-1929: Traditionalists*, ed. Thomas F. Staley (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1985): 82-89.

² Jeffrey Richards, “What is the History of Popular Culture?” in *What is History Today?* ed. Juliet Gardiner (Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: Macmillan, 1989), 126-128, 126.

³ See a discussion of Poulet’s theories in James Smith Allen, “History and the Novel: *Mentalité* in Modern Popular Fiction”, *History and Theory* 22 (1983): 233-252, 247.

⁴ For a more detailed discussion of the usefulness of popular fiction for a history of emotions, see Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, “Popular fiction and the “emotional turn”: the case of women in late Victorian Britain”, *History Compass* 8, no. 12 (2010): 1340–1351.

⁵ Richard D Altick, “Publishing”, in *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. Herbert F. Tucker (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1999): 189-304, 303.

⁶ See Altick, “Publishing”, 303; and, Bernard Bailyn, “The Challenge of Modern Historiography”, *American Historical Review* 87, no. 1 (1982): 18-19.

⁷ For detailed discussions of the gendered nature of the reading public, see Joseph McAleer, *Passion’s Fortune. The Story of Mills & Boon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Peter D. McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice 1880-1914*

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and, Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader, 1837-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

⁸ Barbara Rosenwein, "Problems and Methods in the History of Emotions", *Passions in Context I. International Journal for the History and Theory of Emotions* 1 (2010): 1-32, 11.

⁹ Annette R. Federico, *Idol of Suburbia. Marie Corelli and Late-Victorian Literary Culture* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 2000).

¹⁰ For readings on Corelli, see: Federico, *Idol*; Brian Masters, *Now Barabbas Was a Rotter. The Extraordinary Life of Marie Corelli* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1978); W. S. Scott, *Corelli: The Story of a Friendship* (London: Hutchinson, 1955); Eileen Bigland, *Corelli: The Woman and the Legend* (London: Jarrolds, 1953); George Bullock, *Corelli: The Life and Death of a Best-Seller* (London: Constable, 1940); and Teresa Ransom, *Miss Marie Corelli, Queen of Victorian Bestsellers* (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 1999). Shorter readings include: John Lucas, "Marie Corelli", in *Great Writers of the English Language. Novelists and Prose Writers*, ed. James Vinson (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1979): 281-283; and "Corelli" in Sandra Kemp, Charlotte Mitchell, and David Trotter, *Edwardian Fiction. An Oxford Companion* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997): 77.

¹¹ Edna Lyall was the other writer. See Julia Bush, *Women Against the Vote, Female Anti-Suffragism in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 81. See also Masters, *Barabbas*, 3, 6; and, Federico, *Idol*, 2.

¹² Federico discusses this in detail.

¹³ McDowell, "Corelli", 84; and, Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1979 [1932]), 137.

¹⁴ Masters, *Barabbas*, 10.

¹⁵ Leavis, *Fiction*, 137.

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- ¹⁶ See Maureen Duffy, *A Thousand Capricious Chances. A History of the Methuen List 1889-1989* (London: Methuen, 1989), 10.
- ¹⁷ See Iveta Jusová, *The New Woman and the empire* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2005), 3; and, Bernard Porter, *The absent-minded imperialists. Empire, society, and culture in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 252.
- ¹⁸ See Anne McClintock, “‘No longer in a future heaven’: Gender, race and nationalism”, in *Dangerous Liaisons. Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, eds. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, & Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997): 89–112, for a discussion of the effects of challenges to domestic ideals “at home” on the “civilising mission” in the colonies.
- ¹⁹ Rosenwein, “Problems and Methods”, 1.
- ²⁰ Lady Sibyl in Marie Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan* (London: Methuen, 1895), 371.
- ²¹ Debate regarding the introduction of the *Matrimonial Causes Act 1858* (SA). Quoted in *Freedom Bound I. Documents on Women in Colonial Australia*, eds. M. Quartly, S. Janson, and P. Grimshaw (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1995), 70.
- ²² Hannah Lynch, *Autobiography of a Child* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1899), 196-7, quoted in J. W. Foster, *Irish Novels 1890-1940: New Bearings in Culture and Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 277-8.
- ²³ Lady Jeune in Marie Corelli, *Lady Jeune, Flora Annie Steel and Susan, Countess of Malmesbury, The Modern Marriage Market* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1898): 57-94, 68-9.
- ²⁴ John Braithwaite, “Shame and Modernity”, *The British Journal of Criminology* 33, no. 1 (Winter 1993): 1-18, 2; and Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process. The History of Manners and State Formation and Civilization*, Transl. By Edmund Jephcott (Oxford, UK, and Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1994 [1939]), 495.
- ²⁵ Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 498.

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- ²⁶ Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 492. For an extended discussion of Elias's definition and characterisation of shame, see Braithwaite, "Shame and Modernity", 2, 4; and, Thomas Scheff, "A Taxonomy of Emotions: How Do We Begin?" <http://www.soc.ucsb.edu/faculty/scheff/main.php?id=47.html> (accessed April 5, 2011).
- ²⁷ Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 492.
- ²⁸ Elias, *Civilizing Process*, 492.
- ²⁹ Thomas J. Scheff, "Shame and the Social Bond: A Sociological Theory", *Sociological Theory* 18, (March 2000): 84-99, 97.
- ³⁰ Marie Corelli, *Woman, or – Suffragette? A Question of National Choice* (London: Arthur Pearson Ltd, 1907), 18.
- ³¹ Marie Corelli, *God's Good Man* (London: Methuen, 1918 [1904]), 411.
- ³² See Jill Locke, "Shame and the Future of Feminism", *Hypatia* 22, no. 4 (Fall 2007): 146-162, 148; Scheff, "Shame and the Social Bond", 86; and, Thomas J. Scheff, "Elias, Freud and Goffman: Shame as the master emotion", in *Sociology of Norbert Elias*, ed. Steven Loyal (West Nyack, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 229-242, 231.
- ³³ Braithwaite, "Shame and Modernity", 4.
- ³⁴ Locke, "Shame", 146-162; and, Braithwaite, "Shame and Modernity", 16.
- ³⁵ Locke, "Shame", 156.
- ³⁶ Braithwaite, "Shame and Modernity", 15-16.
- ³⁷ As exemplified, for instance, by the characters of Angela Sovrani in Corelli's *The Master-Christian* (London: Methuen, 1900) and the unnamed female protagonist in Corelli's *The Life Everlasting. A Reality of Romance* (London: Methuen, 1911).
- ³⁸ Corelli, *Woman, or – Suffragette?*, 18.
- ³⁹ Corelli, *Woman, or – Suffragette?*, 20.
- ⁴⁰ Corelli, *Woman, or – Suffragette?*, 18.

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- ⁴¹ Corelli, *Woman, or – Suffragette?*, 3-4.
- ⁴² Corelli, *God's Good Man*, 411.
- ⁴³ Marie Corelli, *The Mighty Atom* (London: Methuen, 1912 [1896]), 104.
- ⁴⁴ Corelli, *The Mighty Atom*, 104.
- ⁴⁵ Corelli, *God's Good Man*, 257.
- ⁴⁶ Marie Corelli, "My Wonderful Wife" (1889), in *Cameos* (New York: Books for Libraries, 1970 [1895]), 232.
- ⁴⁷ Corelli, *God's Good Man*, 360.
- ⁴⁸ Corelli, *Cameos*, 199.
- ⁴⁹ Corelli, *The Mighty Atom*, 17.
- ⁵⁰ Marie Corelli, *The Passing of the Great Queen. A Tribute to the Noble Life of Victoria Regina* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1901), 30; and, Corelli, *Cameos*, 181.
- ⁵¹ Marie Corelli in Corelli and others, *Modern Marriage Market*, 9-55, 16-17.
- ⁵² Corelli in Corelli and others, *Modern Marriage Market*, 9-55, 38-39.
- ⁵³ Corelli, *Woman, or – Suffragette?*, 5.
- ⁵⁴ Corelli, *Woman, or – Suffragette?*, 16.
- ⁵⁵ Cited in Raymond Williams, *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1976), 48-50.
- ⁵⁶ Bradley Deane, "Imperial barbarians: Primitive masculinity in lost world fiction", *Victorian Literature and Culture* 38 (2008): 205–225, 213.
- ⁵⁷ William Morris, "How I became a Socialist", William Morris Internet Archive, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1894/hibs/hibs.htm> (accessed May 5, 2011) first published in *Justice*, June 16, 1894.
- ⁵⁸ Corelli, *The Passing of the Great Queen*, 76.
- ⁵⁹ Corelli, *The Passing of the Great Queen*, 16.

⁶⁰ Corelli in Corelli and others, *Modern Marriage Market*, 17.

⁶¹ Williams, *Keywords*, 48-50.

⁶² Stephen Mennell, “Decivilising Processes: Theoretical Significance and Some Lines of research”, *International Sociology* 5, no. 2 (June 1990): 205-223, 205.

⁶³ I do not employ the term “uncivilising” in the same way as Mary Kaldor, for example, who applies it to the links between physical violence and a “negative spiral of incivility”. Rather I use it to refer to a partial rolling back of civilisation. Mary Kaldor, “Cosmopolitanism and organised violence” (First Press, 2000), paper prepared for Conference on “Conceiving Cosmopolitanism”, Warwick, April 27-29, 2000,

<http://www.insumisos.com/lecturasinsumisas/Mary%20Kaldor%20%20sobre%20violencia.pdf> (accessed April 24, 2011).

⁶⁴ Here I am referring to Loïc Wacquant’s understanding of Elias’s use of the term “civilising process” in Loïc Wacquant, “Decivilising and demonizing: the remaking of the black American ghetto”, in *Sociology of Norbert Elias*, ed. Steven Loyal (West Nyack, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 95-121, 97.

⁶⁵ See Corelli, *The Master-Christian*; Corelli, *The Mighty Atom*, 104; and, Corelli, *God’s Good Man*, 249.

⁶⁶ Corelli, *God’s Good Man*, 249.

⁶⁷ Corelli, *God’s Good Man*, 249.

⁶⁸ Corelli, *God’s Good Man*, 430.

⁶⁹ Corelli, *God’s Good Man*, 436.

⁷⁰ Corelli, *God’s Good Man*, 430.

⁷¹ Corelli, *Woman, or – Suffragette?*, 16.

⁷² Corelli, *God’s Good Man*, 538.