

**MARIE CORELLI: SCIENCE, SOCIETY AND THE BEST SELLER**

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## ABSTRACT

Issues which faced Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries include the effects of new scientific theories on traditional religious belief, the impact of technological innovation, the implications of mass literacy and the changing role of women. This thesis records how such issues are reflected in contemporary literature, focusing on the emergence of popular culture and the best seller, a term which conflates author and novel. The first English best seller was Marie Corelli and, by way of introduction, Part I offers a summary of her life and her novels and a critical overview of her work.

Part II of the thesis examines how the theory of evolution undermined traditional religious belief and prompted the search for a new creed able to defy materialism and reconcile science and religion. Contemporary literature mirrors the consequent interest in spiritualism during the 1890s and the period immediately following the Great War, and critical readings of Corelli's *A Romance of Two Worlds* and *The Life Everlasting* demonstrate that these novels – which form the nucleus of her personal theology, the Electric Creed – are based on selections from the New Testament, occultism and, in particular, science and spiritualism.

Part III of the thesis looks at the emergence of 'the woman question', the corresponding backlash by conservatives and the ways in which these conflicting views are explored in the popular literature of the time. A critical examination of the novella, *My Wonderful Wife*, reveals how Corelli uses social Darwinism in an ambivalent critique of the New Woman. Several of Corelli's essays are discussed, showing that her views about the role of women were complex. A critical analysis of *The Secret Power* engages with Corelli's peculiar kind of feminism, which would deny women the vote but envisages female scientists inventing and operating airships in order to secure the future of the human race.

Interest in Marie Corelli has re-emerged recently, particularly in occult and feminist circles. Corelli's immense popularity also makes her an important figure in cultural studies. This thesis adds to the body of knowledge about Corelli in that it consciously endeavours to avoid spiritualist or feminist ideological frameworks, instead using contemporary science as a context for examining her work.

## A NOTE ON THE TEXT

**Parts of this thesis contain close literary criticism of a number of Marie Corelli's works. To assist the reader, references to these works are inserted directly into the text of the thesis. The following abbreviations are used for the works discussed in detail:**

*FOFE:*        *Free Opinions Freely Expressed on Certain Phases of Modern Social Life and Conduct.* Constable, London, 1905

*LE*            *The Life Everlasting: A Reality of Romance.* Methuen, London, 1911

'*Little Bit*':    *My 'Little Bit'.* Collins, London, 1919

*MMM:*        'The Modern Marriage Market' in Marie Corelli et. al., *The Modern Marriage Market.* Hutchinson, London, 1898

*MWW:*        *My Wonderful Wife! A Study In Smoke,* 1889. Rpt: with *Vendetta! The Story of One Forgotten.* International Book Company, New York, N. D

*Romance:*    *A Romance of Two Worlds,* 1886. New edition, Bentley, London, 1887

*SP:*            *The Secret Power.* Methuen, London, 1921

*SS:*            *The Sorrows of Satan, Or, The Strange Experience of One, Geoffrey Tempest, Millionaire,* 1895. Rpt: Peter Keating, ed. Oxford World's Classics, Oxford, 1998

*Suffragette?:* *Woman, or—Suffragette: A Question of National Choice.* C. Arthur Pearson, London, 1907

## **PART I: SCIENCE, LITERATURE AND MARIE CORELLI**

As a writer, she stood quite apart from the rank and file of modern fictionists . . . The public responded to her voice and clamoured for her work . . . Whatsoever munificent and glittering ‘terms’ are dreamed of by authors in their wildest conceptions of a literary El Dorado, were hers to command; and yet she was neither vain nor greedy. She was, strange to say, though an author and a ‘celebrity,’ still an unspoilt, womanly woman.

Marie Corelli, *The Murder of Delicia*, Hutchinson, London, 1896, pp. 3-4.

## **CHAPTER ONE: SCIENCE, LITERATURE AND POPULAR CULTURE**

## **I: THE RISE OF POPULAR CULTURE**

It is always hazardous to attempt to categorise retrospectively any period of time, regardless of the criteria selected. The issues facing the late Victorians and the Edwardians – issues like the effects of new scientific theories and discoveries on traditional religious belief, the impact of massive technological innovation, the need for social reform, recognition of women’s changing role and the implications of mass literacy – are easy enough to identify. Yet the earliest conflicts between science and religion had erupted, long before Darwin, with Copernicus in the 1500s, and the origins of the social upheavals of the late Victorian era are to be found in the agricultural and industrial revolutions. Moreover, just as the seeds of the Great War of 1914-8 lay within the technology displayed at the Great Exhibition in Hyde Park, London, in 1851 and the industrial capitalism it celebrated, so the Great War itself gave rise to the social and technological changes which characterised the twentieth century.

Nevertheless, significant change had been taking place from the middle of the Victorian era. Education was made compulsory by Forster’s Elementary Education Act of 1870 and made free by the Education Act of 1902. Middle class women were demanding access to higher education, with the result that Queen’s College for Women was founded in London in 1848 and Girton and Newnham Colleges in Cambridge in 1869 and 1871.<sup>1</sup> Public libraries, intended to encourage working people to develop sober and refined reading habits, were enabled under legislation and opened in the big industrial centres and in London in the 1850s.<sup>2</sup> The Scottish/American industrialist and philanthropist, Andrew Carnegie, created a trust which contributed significantly toward the establishment of public libraries in every British county.

The railway ‘mania’ of 1846-48 saw hundreds of miles of railway tracks laid every month, engendering unprecedented workforce mobility.<sup>3</sup> The popularity of travel as an educational and recreational activity during the second

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<sup>1</sup> The chronology appended to J. A. V. Chapple’s *Science and Literature in the Nineteenth Century*, Macmillan, Houndmills, 1986, pp. 163-181, is the source of the dates given in the preceding sentences.

<sup>2</sup> Alistair Black, *A New History of the English Public Library: Social and Intellectual Contexts, 1850-1914*, Leicester University Press, London, 1996, pp. 39 and 21.

<sup>3</sup> Kathleen Tillotson, *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties*, Clarendon, Oxford, 1954, p. 107.

half of the century and the simultaneous evolution of the commuter (the first underground railway was opened in 1890<sup>4</sup>) not only extended the social opportunities available to individuals but also had economic repercussions.

An educated, affluent and mobile public which had leisure time on its hands demanded more reading material and there was an explosion in the numbers and variety of newspapers, magazines, journals and novels published in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> The periodicals had huge readerships; *Cornhill Magazine*, for example, sold about 100,000 copies each month.<sup>6</sup> Many of them derived their success from publishing novels in serial form, the best known examples being those by Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell in Dickens's own weekly periodicals *Household Words* and, later, *All the Year Round*.

The increased demand for reading material was recognised by W. H. Smith who, after opening the first railway bookstall at Euston station in London in 1848, went on to capitalise on the railway boom by opening bookstalls all over the country. Smith added lending sections to his bookstalls, but his success was soon eclipsed by that of Charles Mudie, the most influential operator in the circulating library business. Mudie's influence was so pervasive that toward the end of the century it came to be seen as a *de facto* form of censorship, particularly hostile to the new realist novels and to feminist and decadent writing.

Reaction against the circulating libraries and new publishing practices introduced in 1894 marked the end of the triple-volume novel.<sup>7</sup> As Peter Keating points out, popular novelists became a distinctive feature of the 1890s to the extent that a new label, the 'best seller', was coined to conflate the notions of author and book.<sup>8</sup> The term also encapsulates popularisation of the novel and the

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<sup>4</sup> J. A. V. Chapple, *Science and Literature in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 179.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Oval Kent estimates that around 50,000 periodicals appeared in Victorian England – see 'Popular Late-Victorian Fiction', unpublished PhD thesis, University of California, Riverside, 1993, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Robin Gilmour, *The Novel in the Victorian Age: A Modern Introduction*, Edward Arnold, London, 1986, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, George Moore's pamphlet 'Literature at Nurse, or Circulating Morals', 1885; republished with an introduction and contemporary correspondence in *Literature at Nurse, or Circulating Morals: A Polemic on Victorian Censorship*, edited by Pierre Coustillas, Harvester, Sussex, 1976.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Keating, 'Introduction' to *The Sorrows of Satan* by Marie Corelli, Oxford World's Classics, Oxford, 1998, p. ix. The term 'best seller' was first used in America in the *Kansas Times*



democratisation of culture. Literary intellectuals lamented the impact of what they termed the ‘partly-educated’ readership and its apparently insatiable appetite for new books of questionable literary value. In novels like George Gissing’s *The New Grub Street* (1891), clear distinctions are drawn between writers of serious literature and the opportunistic producers of popular fiction allegedly tailored to the taste of milliners’ apprentices and errand boys. Nevertheless, the popular novelists won the day, if not the approval of the establishment, as sales of novels by writers like Marie Corelli far outstripped those of authors like Henry James and Thomas Hardy and well out-sold the adventure stories of Joseph Conrad, Arthur Conan Doyle and Robert Louis Stevenson. Early in the twentieth century, Modernism, with its claim to a return to a classical and elite high culture, emerged as a deliberate and conscious reaction to the pervasiveness of the popular culture that had established itself in the closing years of the nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup>

## II: SCIENCE AND LITERATURE

Popular and serious literature reflected the impact of scientific, social and technological change in a myriad of interconnected ways. After about 1848, for example, trains and railway lines, stations and embankments became symbols of change, mobility, freedom, division, moments of decision, pollution, speculation, assignments and suicide.<sup>10</sup> Whether found in libraries or railway bookstalls, periodicals and novels reflected an increasing public interest in issues like the plight of the industrialised working classes and the emancipation of women. The implications of evolutionary theories were discussed explicitly and implicitly in non-fiction and through the fiction of writers like Thomas Hardy and George Eliot. Professionals such as the doctor became the focus of novels like Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *The Doctor’s Wife* (1864), Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871-2), Ella Hepworth Dixon’s *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894) and Sarah Grand’s

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& *Star* in 1889. Its first use in Britain was in *The Bookman* in July 1895 - see Oxford English Dictionary, Vol. II; second ed., Clarendon, Oxford, 1989, p. 141.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Lyn Pykett, *Engendering Fictions: The English Novel in the Early Twentieth Century*, Edward Arnold, London, 1995, pp. 70 and 112.

<sup>10</sup> Understated yet excellent examples of the growing preoccupation of novelists with trains and of the novel with its own production are to be found in Mrs Gaskell’s *Cranford*, where the train from the big city signifies the ambiguity of progress. The train causes the death of Captain Brown, who ‘was deeply engaged in the perusal of a number of *Pickwick*, which he had just received’ immediately before his death. See Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cranford*, 1853; rpt: Collins, London, 1952, pp. 38-40.

*The Beth Book* (1897). New genres of novel, including Wells's science fiction and the so-called scientific romance of Marie Corelli, became popular. Developments in forensic science led to the publication of clever detective stories and novels like those of Conan Doyle and Wilkie Collins.

Some writers doubted whether scientific innovations were necessarily progressive.<sup>11</sup> Samuel Butler in *Erewhon* (1872) extrapolates evolutionary theory to suggest the frightening possibility that machines might develop a consciousness and then independence from their human creators. Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, published in 1886, examines the abuse of chemistry to produce irreversible personality changes through the use of mind-altering drugs. Wells foretells the wholesale destruction made possible by aircraft in *The War of the Worlds* (1898), which depicts an invasion of earth by Martians fleeing their own cooling planet. The death of She in H. Rider Haggard's novel of the same name (1887) symbolises the evolutionary process in reverse.

The body of critical work exploring the relationship between science and literature is vast. It begins with T. H. Huxley's 1882 essay, *Science and Culture*, includes the 'two cultures' quarrel of C. P. Snow and F. R. Leavis in the mid-twentieth century and, more recently, has been taken up by the Marxist critics, Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton. These build on the work of Michel Foucault to examine in depth the interaction between technological change and mass culture, including literature.<sup>12</sup> In the later part of the twentieth century scholars like Gillian Beer return to an exploration of the complex ways in which the discourses of science and literature complement each other in nineteenth-century literature.

Specifically, Gillian Beer considers the influence of Charles Darwin on nineteenth-century writers, particularly Eliot, Hardy and Charles Kingsley, and George Levine compares the concepts underlying 'Darwinian' novels with the

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<sup>11</sup> As early as in 1818, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (Rpt: Penguin, London, 1992), aptly subtitled *The Modern Prometheus*, had questioned the value of scientific experimentation unrestrained by ethical considerations.

<sup>12</sup> T. H. Huxley, *Science and Culture and Other Essays*, Macmillan, London, 1882. A thorough discussion of the 'two cultures' quarrel is to be found in Daniel Cordle, *Postmodern Postures: Literature, Science and the Two Cultures Debate*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 1999. See also Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society*, 1958; rpt: Chatto & Windus, London, 1967, and Terry Eagleton's *The Idea of Culture*, Blackwell, Malden, MA, 2000.

theories actually espoused by Darwin.<sup>13</sup> Peter Morton traces the impact of the science of biology upon the literary imagination, noting, along lines similar to Levine, that a true reading of Darwin could only lead to the pessimism articulated by Hardy, Charles Reade and Alfred Tennyson and that writers like George Meredith, Algernon Swinburne, Robert Browning and Kingsley were merely ‘Darwinistic’: their misunderstanding of Darwin was the only reason they could remain optimistic about the future of humankind.<sup>14</sup>

Sally Shuttleworth undertakes a close study of Eliot and science, with particular reference to organicism in her novels, whilst Peter Allan Dale engages in a detailed investigation of attempts by Eliot and George Lewes to articulate a new scientific and aesthetic philosophy.<sup>15</sup> Tess Cosslett traces a ‘movement’ in nineteenth-century literature which parallels a ‘movement’ in nineteenth-century science, and Hans Aarsleff looks at how changes to theories of the origin of language both articulated and symbolised developments in science from 1780 to 1860.<sup>16</sup> Other valuable contributions to the study of the influence of science on nineteenth-century literature include those by J. A. V. Chapple, John Christie, Gertrude Himmelfarb and William Greenslade.<sup>17</sup>

The origin and development of science fantasy and science fiction is also well documented, by Brian Aldiss, for example, and Darko Suvin has compiled a comprehensive bibliography of nineteenth-century science fiction.<sup>18</sup> The genre of

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<sup>13</sup> See, in particular, Gillian Beer’s *Arguing with the Past: Essays in narrative from Woolf to Sidney*, Routledge, London, 1989; *Open Fields: Science in Cultural Encounter*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996; and *Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 1983; second ed., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000. See also George Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Ma., 1988.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Morton, *The Vital Science: Biology and the Literary Imagination, 1860-1900*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1984.

<sup>15</sup> Sally Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984 and Peter Allan Dale, *In Pursuit of a Scientific Culture: Science, Art, and Society in the Victorian Age*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1989.

<sup>16</sup> Tess Cosslett, *The ‘Scientific Movement’ and Victorian Literature*, Harvester, Sussex, 1982 and Hans Aarsleff, *The Study of Language in England, 1780-1860*, Greenwood, Westport, 1967.

<sup>17</sup> J. A. V. Chapple, *Science and Literature in the Nineteenth Century; Nature transfigured: Science and literature, 1700-1900*, edited by John Christie and Sally Shuttleworth, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1989; Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Darwin and the Darwinian Revolution*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1959; and William Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel 1880-1940*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994.

<sup>18</sup> Brian Aldiss, *Billion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1973; this text has been updated by Aldiss, writing with David Wingrove, as *Trillion*

detective fiction, too, has received critical attention by scholars like Martin Priestman, Heta Pyrhönen and Ronald Thomas, and Gillian Beer finds many analogies common to detective fiction and evolutionary theory.<sup>19</sup>

However, little critical attention has been paid to the way in which science is dealt with in the works of the most popular writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1906, the first of the new English best sellers, Marie Corelli, sold over 100,000 copies of her books. This compares with Kipling's 40,000, Mrs Humphry Ward's 35,000 and Wells and Conan Doyle at 15,000 each. Corelli's closest rival that year was another popular fiction writer, Hall Caine, who sold 45,000 copies of his novels.<sup>20</sup> Popular novels by Robert Hitchens, Caine and Corelli are no less preoccupied with questions about the implications of recent scientific discoveries and new technologies than are the novels of Eliot and Hardy, for example, yet rarely do they receive serious attention, despite the fact that, at their peak, they were more influential than Henry James, George Bernard Shaw, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence and Hardy, combined.

### III: MARIE CORELLI, PUBLISHING PHENOMENON

From 1886 to 1923, Marie Corelli published twenty-three novels, a novella, two satirical works, three collections of short stories and innumerable essays and journal articles, many of which were republished in collections. Posthumously, a semi-autobiographical work and a book of poems were published. Over half of her novels were world-wide best sellers and it is estimated that for several years over 100,000 copies of her books were sold annually.<sup>21</sup> She gave lectures in prestigious venues and entertained celebrities at expensive private

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*Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction*, Gollancz, London, 1986. See also Darko Suvin, *Victorian Science Fiction in the UK: The Discourses of Knowledge and of Power*, Hall, Boston, 1983.

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Martin Priestman, *Detective Fiction and Literature: The Figure on the Carpet*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1990; Heta Pyrhönen, *Murder from an Academic Angle: An Introduction to the Study of the Detective Narrative*, Camden House, Columbia, 1994; and Ronald R. Thomas, *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999. See also Gillian Beer, Chapter 6: 'Forging the Missing Link: Interdisciplinary Stories' in *Open Fields*, pp. 115-45.

<sup>20</sup> William Stuart Scott in *Marie Corelli: The Story of a Friendship*, Hutchinson, London, 1955, p. 233 and Brian Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter: The Extraordinary Life of Marie Corelli*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1978, pp. 6-7. By comparison, 78,270 sets of Scott's Waverley novels were sold between 1829 and 1849 - see Richard Altick, *The Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public 1800-1900*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1957, pp. 383-4.

<sup>21</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 6.

functions held in her home at Stratford-upon-Avon. She supported numerous and varied beneficent societies and causes. Her income was reported to be £18,000 per annum in 1901, when her popularity was at its height.<sup>22</sup>

Corelli's detractors – and there are many – claim that she was only read in servants' halls, but Queen Victoria requested copies of her books and King Edward VII expressly invited her to his coronation.<sup>23</sup> Her admirers included the Empress of Austria, the Tsarina of Russia, the Queen of Italy, the Maharajah of Kartarpur and Prime Ministers Gladstone and Asquith of Britain and Billy Hughes of Australia.<sup>24</sup> George Meredith praised her writing and so did Oscar Wilde, although Wilde was later to recant.<sup>25</sup> Her most reliable biographer describes her fame in the following fashion:

She was unique in the history of literature. Before the era of broadcasting, no one person had ever secured such a vast audience. While Queen Victoria was alive, Miss Corelli was the second most famous Englishwoman in the world; afterwards, there was no one to approach her.<sup>26</sup>

Corelli's first novel, *A Romance of Two Worlds*, was an immediate success, but her seventh, *Barabbas*, was the first of her spectacular best sellers. Seven triple-decker editions of *Barabbas* were sold in as many months and, when the single volume edition appeared in February 1894, ten thousand copies were sold in one week.<sup>27</sup> By the end of 1894, the book was in its fourteenth edition. It was translated into over forty languages.<sup>28</sup> Sales of Corelli's next novel were even greater: *The Sorrows of Satan*, published in 1895, 'had an initial sale greater than any previous novel in the language, making it the first best-seller in English

<sup>22</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 168.

<sup>23</sup> Kent Carr, *Miss Marie Corelli*, Drane, London, 1901, p. 59, Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 7, and Teresa Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli: Queen of Victorian Bestsellers*, Sutton, Thrupp, 1999, p. 116.

<sup>24</sup> Carr, *Miss Marie Corelli*, pp. 57-62, Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 7, and Bertha Vyver, *Memoirs of Marie Corelli*, Alston Rivers, London, 1930, pp. 228-30.

<sup>25</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, pp. 7, 12, 25 and 60.

<sup>26</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>27</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 130.

<sup>28</sup> Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, p. 75.

history'.<sup>29</sup> It was 'the best-seller of all Marie's best-sellers'.<sup>30</sup> Norman Feltes records that the first three editions of the novel – 25,000 copies at six shillings each – sold out within a week of publication and a total of eight editions, 'presumably 50,000 copies', were sold in its first seven weeks.<sup>31</sup> *The Sorrows of Satan* is also significant because it was the first of Corelli's novels to be published as a six-shilling, single volume and its popularity contributed to the success of the cheaper publishing format and the demise of the circulating libraries.

During her lifetime, Corelli's novels were translated into most European languages and into Gujarati and Hindustani; some were adapted for the stage and cinema.<sup>32</sup> At the time of her death, negotiations were underway for the film rights to *The Sorrows of Satan*, *The Treasure of Heaven*, *Thelma*, *Temporal Power*, *God's Good Man*, *Holy Orders* and *Innocent* and, as late as 1943, film rights were still being sought to *Barabbas* and *The Life Everlasting*.<sup>33</sup> Corelli's short stories are included in anthologies.<sup>34</sup> *Vendetta!* was translated into Japanese and

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<sup>29</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 143. Versions of this phrase recur in Corelli biographies; see also, for example, Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, p. 81: 'The initial sales of *The Sorrows of Satan* in 1895 were greater than any previous novel written in English'. Norman Feltes also writes that *The Sorrows of Satan* had 'an immediate sale greater than that of any previous English novel' but sources this comment to Michael Sadleir's entry 'Mary Mackay,' DNB, 1922-30, 4th suppl., 540 - see N. N. Feltes, *Literary Capital and the Late Victorian Novel*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1993, p. 123.

<sup>30</sup> Scott, *Marie Corelli: The Story of a Friendship*, p. 157.

<sup>31</sup> Feltes, *Literary Capital and the Late Victorian Novel*, p. 123.

<sup>32</sup> Vyver, *Memoirs of Marie Corelli*, p. 197. *The Sorrows of Satan* was adapted for the disastrous 1897 stage production by Captain Herbert Woodgate, friend of Corelli's half-brother, Eric MacKay and, in the same year, six unauthorised stage versions of the novel were produced in England alone - see Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, pp. 151-2. *Vendetta!* (Bentley, London, 1886), *Temporal Power* (Methuen, London, 1902), and *The Treasure of Heaven* (Methuen, London, 1906) were all produced as films - see Scott, *Marie Corelli: The Story of a Friendship*, p. 161. In 1919, *The Sorrows of Satan* provided the basis for a Norwegian silent motion picture entitled *Blade af Satan bogs (Leaves out of the Book of Satan)*, directed by Carl Th. Dryer - see the Firstsearch World Catalogue Database at <http://firstsearch.oclc.org>.

<sup>33</sup> Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, p. 156.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, *Stories by English Authors*, London, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1896; *The Hired Baby and Other Stories by Famous Authors*, Optimus Printing Co., New York, [1899]; *Short Story Classics by English Authors*, Classic Publishing, Toronto, 1907; and *Ghosts for Christmas*, edited by Richard Dalby, Castle Books, Secaucus, N. J., 1988 - Firstsearch World Catalogue Database at <http://firstsearch.oclc.org>.

*Vendetta!*, *Thelma* and *Wormwood* into Thai in the 1960s.<sup>35</sup> *The Murder of Delicia* was republished in Greek in 1970, in 1987 a novel was written in Urdu based on *Wormwood* and *Barabbas* was republished in Russian in 1994.<sup>36</sup> Revived interest in the occult as part of New Age philosophies resulted in most of Corelli's novels being republished in English toward the end of the twentieth century. *The Sorrows of Satan* was republished in 1998 by Oxford's World Classics. Various articles about Marie Corelli are currently to be found on Internet sites dealing with the occult, spiritualism and absinthe.<sup>37</sup>

As Corelli's contemporary biographers report with awe, by 1903 *The Sorrows of Satan* was in its thirty-seventh edition, *The Mighty Atom* had sold nearly 100,000 copies and *The Master-Christian*, published only three years previously, had sales of over 42,000 copies.<sup>38</sup> When Corelli published her last collection of short stories, *The Love of Long Ago and Other Stories*, in 1920, *The Mighty Atom* was in its thirty-sixth edition and *Thelma* and *Barabbas* were in their fifty-first; *God's Good Man* had sold 160,000 copies, *The Master-Christian* 184,000 and *The Sorrows of Satan* 202,000.<sup>39</sup> Four years later when Corelli died, *The Sorrows of Satan* was in its sixtieth edition, *Thelma* in its fifty-sixth and *Barabbas* in its fifty-fourth.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, p. 73. *Vendetta!* is translated as *Khvamphayabat* and published by 'Ongkan Kha khong Khurusapha, Phranakhon, 1964 [1965]; *Thelma* is adapted and translated as *Tenma* and published by 'Ongkan Kha khong Khurusapha, Phranakhon, 1961; and *Wormwood* (Bentley, London, 1890) is translated as *Thao sawat* and published by Phrae Phithaya, Phranakhon, 1967 - Firstsearch World Catalogue Database at <http://firstsearch.oclc.org>.

<sup>36</sup> *The Murder of Delicia* is translated as *He dolophonias tes Delisias* and published by Atlantis Greek Book Co., New York, 1970; *Wormwood* becomes Mirza Mohammad Hadi Ruswa, *K\_huni 'ashiq*, Mu. Mazahirulhaqq: Milne ka patah Ni'matullah Ejukeshnal Sosa'iti, Patna, 1987; and *Barabbas* (Methuen, London, 1893) is translated as *Iuda* and published by "Novaia kniga", Moskva, 1994 - see Firstsearch World Catalogue Database at <http://firstsearch.oclc.org>.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, [www.metaphysical-concepts.com](http://www.metaphysical-concepts.com), [www.parascience.org](http://www.parascience.org) and [www.sepulchritude.com/chapelperilous/absinthe](http://www.sepulchritude.com/chapelperilous/absinthe).

<sup>38</sup> Thomas F. G. Coates and R. S. Warren Bell, *Marie Corelli: The Writer and the Woman*, Hutchinson, London, 1903, p. 11. Masters, however, reports that *The Master-Christian* (Methuen, London, 1900) sold 160,000 copies within two years - see Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 165.

<sup>39</sup> Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, p. 201.

<sup>40</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 8. It is difficult to obtain precise numbers of books sold because of the variations in the numbers comprising an edition. Early editions were often very small, enabling the publisher to 'boom' the book by advertising an immediate sell-out. On the other hand, first editions of novels by very popular authors like Corelli at her peak might comprise 120,000 copies, as in the case of *Temporal Power*, published in 1902 - see Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 202.

*The Marie Corelli Birthday Book* and *The Beauties of Marie Corelli* were published in 1897 and *The Marie Corelli Calendar* in 1913: these are collections of Corelli's epigrams.<sup>41</sup> In the 1920s and 1930s a cult formed around the Lucia novel series by E. F. Benson, whose unabashedly snobbish yet admirable character is partly based on his late friend Marie Corelli.<sup>42</sup> *The Voice of Marie Corelli: Fragments from 'The Immortal Garden'* was published in 1933 by a Dorothy Agnes claiming to write under the influence of Corelli's spirit, and a book of the self-help variety entitled *No Matter* appeared in 1969, published by a Cyril Wild who asserts guidance from Marie Corelli and a Tibetan monk named Lalasal.<sup>43</sup> Brian Masters also reports the publication of '*Paulus Antonius: A Tale of Ancient Rome*, being a true story of some second-century incarnation, by Marie Corelli (in spirit) through the hand of Marie Elfram' (1931), *The Great Awakening* (1948), a book on spiritualism written by a Mrs Pinnegar who claimed to have been instructed in a dream by Marie Corelli to buy the author's own writing table (which she did), and '*Judith*, by Blanche A. Webb, dictated by the spirit of Marie Corelli' (1950).<sup>44</sup>

Because she wrote when the reading public was growing so fast that no-one was able to put an accurate figure on it and when mass culture was creating its own celebrities, it is difficult retrospectively to comprehend the power of a popular writer like Marie Corelli, particularly as, over time, the influence of writers whose literary works have canonical status has come to predominate. Nevertheless, so in demand were her novels that Corelli's publishers produced special 'colonial editions' of her books, with the result that she was as widely read in America, Canada, Australia and South Africa as she was in Britain and Europe.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, copyright laws were difficult to police, so neither Corelli nor

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<sup>41</sup> *The Marie Corelli Birthday Book*, Hutchinson, London, 1897; *The Beauties of Marie Corelli*, G. Redway, London, 1897; *The Marie Corelli Calendar: A Quotation from the Works of Marie Corelli for Every Day*, F. Palmer, London, 1913. On the other hand, Corelli also rates a chapter in Owen Seaman's *Borrowed Plumes* (Constable, London, 1902, pp. 72-7) which is a selection of acts of plagiarism, inanities and absurd generalisations of contemporary writers.

<sup>42</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 11.

<sup>43</sup> Dorothy Agnes, *The Voice of Marie Corelli: Fragments from 'The Immortal Garden' through the Pen of Dorothy Agnes*, Sherratt and Hughes, Manchester, 1933 and Cyril Wild, *No Matter*, Regency, London, 1969.

<sup>44</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, pp. 302-3.

<sup>45</sup> Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, p. 143.



her publishers ever knew how many pirated editions of her books were printed in Europe and the colonies. Corelli's admiring rival, Robert Hitchens, is quoted as saying that she was the 'highest paid living writer and the most notorious figure in literature – discussed, condemned, praised and pilloried by everyone'.<sup>46</sup> Corelli needed to engage a full-time secretary to take down her novels and correspondence in shorthand and she eventually employed a literary agent, A. P. Watt, to manage, insofar as he was able, her literary affairs.

There is no doubt that Marie Corelli was extraordinarily popular for about thirty years. The size of the British reading public exploded with the increase of the urban middle classes, the introduction of compulsory education and reforms to working conditions. Even factory hands and dressmakers' apprentices had the ability and leisure to read. As Wilkie Collins had predicted in 1858:

The Unknown Public is, in a literary sense, hardly beginning, as yet, to learn to read . . . The future of English fiction may rest with this Unknown Public, which is now waiting to be taught the difference between a good book and a bad . . . The largest audience for periodical literature, in this age of periodicals, must obey the universal law of progress, and must, sooner or later, learn to discriminate. When that period comes, the readers who rank by millions, will be the readers who give the widest reputations, who return the richest rewards, and who will, therefore, command the service of the best writers of their time. A great, an unparalleled prospect awaits, perhaps, the coming generation of English novelists. To the penny journals of the present time belongs the credit of having discovered a new public. When that public shall discover its need of a great writer, the great writer will have such an audience as has never yet been known.<sup>47</sup>

Collins was wrong in his prediction that the unknown public would learn to discriminate between a good and a bad book. This failure incited the antagonism of the literary establishment toward popular culture *per se* and to writers like Marie Corelli in particular. Nevertheless, Collins was correct in foretelling the emergence of a reading public that would discover its own writers and provide them with the greatest reading audience yet known, thus rendering the writers themselves great, as well as rich.

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<sup>46</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 164.

<sup>47</sup> Wilkie Collins, 'The Unknown Public' in *Household Words*, cited by Richard Altick, *The English Common Reader*, pp. 5-6.

Marie Corelli was the first such writer. Ignored by many reviewers and scorned or reviled by her critics, by outselling her predecessors and rivals she became the prototype of the modern popular writer. With the advent of the single volume, six-shilling publication, the steadily-growing reading public bought the new cheap first editions of Corelli's novels in droves.<sup>48</sup> Yet factors like the democratisation of education and emergence of mass literacy alone cannot explain Corelli's popularity, as her rivals had the same opportunities but did not achieve the same level of sales or reach such celebrity status. Nor is Corelli's success wholly attributable to the flair she had for attracting publicity. There is no doubt that she was at all times controversial and a good manipulator of her own image, but her impetuosity and rash statements frequently brought her quite the wrong type of exposure. In any case, the depth of commitment of her readers was more than the result of self-publicising. Crowds turned up to her lectures and people would strive just to touch her dress when she made one of her rare public appearances. Visitors to Stratford-upon-Avon, including Europeans, Americans and colonials, flocked to her home to see where the famous novelist lived. One admirer fired a gun in her garden in order to 'see Miss Corelli and bring her out to speak to me'.<sup>49</sup>

Before the invention of radio, Corelli achieved an enormous international reputation, with publication of her books not only in the British colonies, but in places as diverse as Norway and Spain, Nigeria and Latvia, Iceland and Greece.<sup>50</sup> Her novels were read by both sides in the trenches of the Boer War.<sup>51</sup> She received admiring mail from thousands of people in dozens of countries. It is clear that her reading public, diverse as it was, identified with her. Corelli engaged with the issues that troubled her readers: new scientific theories which undermined religious belief and the role of women in a society changed by the impact of a scientific revolution.

Richard Kowalczyk argues convincingly that the career of Marie Corelli provides an insight into popular culture at the turn of the century, 'its common feelings, moral preferences, and psychological needs':

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<sup>48</sup> The first six-shilling novel was George Moore's *A Mummer's Wife* published in 1885.

<sup>49</sup> Vyver, *Memoirs of Marie Corelli*, p. 213.

<sup>50</sup> See the Firstsearch World Catalogue Database at <http://firstsearch.oclc.org>.

<sup>51</sup> Carr, *Miss Marie Corelli*, pp. 62-5.

She carved her niche in fiction as a moralist, enhanced it with the myth of the romantic artist of mysterious origins, and excited her audience with hermetic lore and pseudoscientific formulae which became emblems implying that divine providence was no longer patient with a culture dying because of its formalism and hypocrisy . . . Her fiction was based on one belief; that the artist's powers shaped and sustained the existence of ideals which could not endure in modern life. This theme is central to all of Corelli's works, the key to her biography, and the reason behind her popularity.<sup>52</sup>

## CHAPTER TWO: THE LIVES OF MARIE CORELLI

Nine biographies of Marie Corelli were published between 1901 and 1999.<sup>53</sup> The first is that by Kent Carr, entitled simply *Miss Marie Corelli*. Published in 1901 when the novelist was at her most powerful, it is cautiously crafted in order to avoid offending her. However, a note of ambiguity is

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<sup>52</sup> Robert L. Kowalczyk, 'In Vanished Summertime: Marie Corelli and Popular Culture', *Journal of Popular Culture* Vol. VII: 4 (1974), 850-63, (p. 851). Chester Clarence Huff, Jr., also suggests that writers like Corelli were popular because they dealt with contemporary subjects such as 'science, theosophy, occultism, religion, and women's rights', see 'The Novels of Marie Corelli: Their Themes and Their Popularity as an Index to Popular Taste', unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Colorado, 1970, p. 22.

<sup>53</sup> Chroniclers of Corelli's time also include biographical information about her in their texts, for example, the chapter entitled 'Marie Corelli: The Lady of *Mason Croft*' in Gerald Jaggard's *Stratford Mosaic: The Shakespeare Club and a Medley of Memories*, Frederick Ungar, New York, 1961, pp. 147-58. Gerald Jaggard is a son of the bookseller William Jaggard, Stratford resident and contemporary of Marie Corelli.

introduced from the beginning through the words of the ‘Prefatory Note’ inserted by the editor (identified as ‘B. B.’ only):

Miss Marie Corelli is at once the most popular and the most abused of novelists. Her public is staunch as her critics are bitter. As Miss Marie Corelli divides opinion, so probably will this book. The critics will not like it, but her public will . . . eagerly welcome it. If some of the things it contains are of almost sensational interest from a literary point of view, that is the good fortune of editor, writer, and publisher, who find themselves in a position to give to the world an account of a remarkable personality, the difficulties of the task notwithstanding.

The difficulties referred to are those of presenting a credible account of the novelist and her work without antagonising her, particularly as Corelli was quick to litigate when she considered herself slighted. Carr opens the biography with an attempt to establish his objectivity through acknowledging, not only Corelli’s critics, but also the damage done by her over-enthusiastic admirers, and he justifies his interest in the novelist by remarking that ‘the public have not criticised [her] at all’ and that ‘she stands easily first as the novelist who can win the largest audience to her utterances’.<sup>54</sup>

In her critical text, *Idol of Suburbia: Marie Corelli and Late-Victorian Literary Culture*, Annette Federico labels Carr’s work as ‘Tory hagiography’.<sup>55</sup> In the circumstances, however, he handles his task adroitly. The biography romanticises Corelli whilst acknowledging, and then excusing, instances of her inappropriate behaviour. Her bitter and public feud with her rival, Hall Caine, for example, is passed over with the inoffensive but telling remark that Corelli permitted herself ‘to endorse a story about him . . . which it would have been better perhaps to withhold’.<sup>56</sup> Her altercation with Sir Theodore Martin regarding the location of a large memorial to the actress Helen Faucit opposite a smaller head of Shakespeare in the Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon, and the resultant action in the Court of Arches which she won, is justified on the grounds that Corelli ‘took on her own shoulders . . . a disagreeable duty’ and her critics in the matter are advised ‘to understand that Miss Corelli probably found her task at

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<sup>54</sup> Carr, *Miss Marie Corelli*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>55</sup> Annette R. Federico, *Idol of Suburbia: Marie Corelli and Late-Victorian Literary Culture*, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, 2000, p. 178.

<sup>56</sup> Carr, *Miss Marie Corelli*, pp. 31-2.

least as unwelcome as they would have done themselves, and that she had dared to speak where they had remained silent'.<sup>57</sup> Carr writes mainly of Corelli's connections with royalty, her celebrity status, her publicly stated likes and dislikes and her daily routine, before progressing to a tactful critique of her published works. A key to the attitude of this biographer lies in the statement: 'She had real genius, though of a kind very far removed from the infinite capacity for taking pains'.<sup>58</sup> The ambivalence displayed by Carr characterises most biographies of Marie Corelli.

One exception is that by Thomas F. G. Coates and R. S. Warren Bell, accurately described by Federico as 'downright chivalric' and by Rita Felski as a hagiography of the first order.<sup>59</sup> Published in 1903, *Marie Corelli: The Writer and the Woman* is singularly uncritical. Coates and Bell focus on the early, congenial correspondence between Corelli and her first publisher, George Bentley, and reproduce lengthy extracts from the novelist's public lectures. They discuss her views on topics such as marriage and the education of children. Biographical details are given anecdotally and rarely chronologically. Events are favourably interpreted without a hint of irony.

Coates's and Bell's sympathetic account of a 'journalistic incident' which occurred in Braemar, Scotland, is typical. Corelli complained to *The Daily Express* that her presence as hostess of a party attending a 'Highland gathering' (in the Royal Enclosure) was not mentioned in the paper's social pages, although the names of her guests were published. Corelli's stormy letter to the editor, marked 'private and confidential', was published immediately, to the amusement and delight of her enemies. Coates and Bell fail to question the motivation behind the author's protest or her wisdom in writing to the paper's editor on the matter, and they do not recognise the hypocrisy inherent in such an action by one who professed to be totally indifferent to fame. On the contrary, Coates and Bell enthuse:

The result of her harmless inquiry is well-known. The publication of the communication brought a shoal of letters to the famous author from men and women of 'light and leading,'

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<sup>57</sup> Carr, *Miss Marie Corelli*, pp. 52-3.

<sup>58</sup> Carr, *Miss Marie Corelli*, p. 30.

<sup>59</sup> Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 178, and Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Ma., 1995, p. 229 (n.1).

assuring her of their sympathy in this outrage . . . People hastened to call at Mason Croft and express their indignation at the treatment she had received, and they found her, as usual, busily working, happy and unconcerned. To one friend, an M. P., who expressed his views on the subject with considerable expletive, she said quietly, 'Oh, well, it doesn't matter! The editor has condemned himself by his own actions'.<sup>60</sup>

Coates and Bell do not properly recognise the poisonous relationship between Corelli and the press which is evident through the attacks she makes on newspapers, journalists, photographers and critics in almost all her novels, short stories and journal articles. They would have been aware that *The Silver Domino*, a crude and savage satire directed against the political, literary and journalistic establishments and published anonymously in 1892, was immediately and correctly attributed to Corelli.<sup>61</sup> They would also have known that *The Sorrows of Satan* was written as a sustained attack on the alleged corruption of modern literature, contemporary critics and journalistic practice and that Corelli's antagonism toward the press was so fierce that she broke with precedent and refused to have review copies of the novel sent out, instructing Methuen to insert the following notice at the head of page one: 'NO COPIES OF THIS BOOK ARE SENT OUT FOR REVIEW Members of the press will therefore obtain it (should they wish to do so) in the usual way with the rest of the public, i.e., through the Booksellers and Libraries'.<sup>62</sup> Coates and Bell merely have this to say, again without irony, about Corelli's relationship with the press:

The mistake Miss Corelli has made in the past has been to condemn the Press and pressmen for the shortcomings of individuals who represent only themselves and not a profession. She has been misunderstood on the matter, but her hearty goodwill to journalists is well-known to many of the craft who are proud to be within the pleasant circle of her friends.<sup>63</sup>

Bertha Vyver is Corelli's next biographer. Vyver went to live with Corelli's family in 1876 following the death of the author's mother and the two women remained together thereafter, except when Vyver made regular, short visits to her own family or when, in the earlier years only, Corelli took the

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<sup>60</sup> Coates and Bell, *Marie Corelli: The Writer and the Woman*, pp. 302-3.

<sup>61</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, pp. 115-22.

<sup>62</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 135.

<sup>63</sup> Coates and Bell, *Marie Corelli: The Writer and the Woman*, p. 304.

occasional holiday with other friends. When Corelli died, Vyver remained in the novelist's home at Stratford-upon-Avon until her own death.<sup>64</sup> Teresa Ransom speculates on the possibility that Marie Corelli and Bertha Vyver were lovers, citing as tentative evidence the description of the first meeting between the female narrator of *A Romance of Two Worlds* and the beautiful Zara, but concludes that it is more likely that the two women were merely lifelong companions.<sup>65</sup> Although Vyver herself does not refer to Corelli's sexuality, she tacitly accepts the opinion of J. Cuming Walters, expressed in his 'Epilogue' to her biography:

Readers of Marie Corelli's novels will have been struck by the frequency with which she speaks, sometimes with even a sort of terror, of the mere love of physical beauty, and of unions which are other than spiritual. No doubt we get here an index to her character. Her marriages were ideal, but in a workaday world would be difficult, if not for the majority impossible. But Miss Corelli's repugnance was not confined to what she termed animalism; she had a dread of shattering disillusion, when man and woman awoke from their enchantment and found the angel-aspect turned to clay. There is a shock on both sides; there is suffering both for the man and woman when the glorious vision fades into the light of common day.<sup>66</sup>

All of Corelli's biographers attest to the staunch and faithful nature of Bertha Vyver's friendship; rarely is a critical word directed toward her. It is typical of her devotion that, unlike other biographers, Vyver refrains from evaluating any of Corelli's novels, preferring to quote lengthy favourable reviews by others. Vyver asserts that Corelli was a genius but chooses to dwell on her method of writing, her motivation and the material circumstances surrounding the production and reception of each book. Vyver finds it difficult to account for the way Corelli's novels were received by the critics, 'unless an accepted form of narrative told in an accepted way was their measure for criticism', yet she

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<sup>64</sup> The best histories of Bertha Vyver are those given by Scott, *Marie Corelli: The Story of a Friendship*, pp. 183-90, and Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, p. 15.

<sup>65</sup> Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, pp. 40-1 and 206-7. Ransom seems reluctant to abandon the notion that Corelli and Vyver were lovers. She could have made her case for this argument stronger had she also cited the erotic description of the sleeping Zara written by the narrator of *A Romance of Two Worlds* - see Marie Corelli, *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 1886; new ed., Bentley, London, 1887, pp. 283-4. It was, however, not uncommon at the time for unmarried women to be lifelong companions without being lovers. Corelli refuses to deal with the question of sex in her novels other than in the form of extremely idealised and abstract love expressed through cliché and the notion of 'twin souls'. Her own love for Arthur Severn is expressed in this fashion - see Masters's discussion in *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 252.

<sup>66</sup> J. Cuming Walters, 'A Personal Tribute by way of Epilogue' to Vyver's *Memoirs of Marie Corelli*, pp. 278-9.

prefaces her assessment of the reasons for Corelli's success with the words 'Whatever faults there may be'.<sup>67</sup>

The circumstances which led Vyver to publish a biography of her famous companion are poignant but demonstrate the novelist's success and give some indication of her hubris. In her will, Corelli left her estate in the hands of trustees, of which Vyver was one, with the stipulation that everything in her home, Mason Croft, was to be maintained as it existed during her lifetime. Vyver was left all the manuscripts of Corelli's novels, the intention being that she could sell them should she ever be in need of large amounts of ready cash.<sup>68</sup> Bequests to servants were only to be paid when Vyver died, at which time Mason Croft and its grounds, intact, were to be put 'at the service of any person or persons distinguished in the arts and sciences who would otherwise seek lodging in an hotel in Stratford-on-Avon, who may apply to the Trustees and find welcome'.<sup>69</sup> Paradoxically, the will specifically excluded 'actors actresses and all persons connected with the stage'.<sup>70</sup>

Corelli expected that the royalties from her books would fund the upkeep of Mason Croft and provide Vyver with a substantial income. In fact, although worth over £9,000 in 1924, already by 1925 the annual income from royalties had dropped to £4,871 and in 1941 the total was just £73.<sup>71</sup> The manuscripts were worthless, the estate in debt and Vyver had exhausted her private resources by the time she died in 1942, at the age of eighty-seven, seventeen years after Corelli.<sup>72</sup> Ultimately, Corelli's will was declared null and void as the establishment of an hotel for distinguished foreigners was deemed not to be an acceptable local charity. The contents of Mason Croft were sold and the house requisitioned by the Air Ministry and the WAAF for the remainder of the World War II. Afterwards it

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<sup>67</sup> Vyver, *Memoirs of Marie Corelli*, p. 245.

<sup>68</sup> Scott, *Marie Corelli: The Story of a Friendship*, p. 215. The manuscript of *The Sorrows of Satan* excepted: Corelli had already donated this to the Trustees of Shakespeare's Birthplace - see Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 288.

<sup>69</sup> Vyver, *Memoirs of Marie Corelli*, p. 242. For details of Corelli's will and conflicting interpretations of the motivation behind and repercussions thereof, see Scott, *Marie Corelli: The Story of a Friendship*, pp. 213-22, and Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, pp. 201-20.

<sup>70</sup> For a discussion of this proscription, see Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 285.

<sup>71</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 286.

<sup>72</sup> Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, p. 212.



reverted to the Crown as Corelli was deemed to have died intestate. It currently houses the Shakespeare Institute of the Birmingham University, with a plaque commemorating Corelli in the wall by the front entrance.

Vyver published her biography of Corelli in an attempt to emulate her late companion and to make some money by writing, although her hopes were not realised.<sup>73</sup> Predictably, Vyver's biography is sympathetic to Corelli and presents her in a most favourable light. She glosses over the details of Corelli's birth, beginning with a rather lengthy description of the author's father, Charles Mackay, a journalist, minor poet and ballad writer, before continuing:

His second marriage, a romantic love union, was to Mary Elizabeth Mills, a widow, whom he had known for a number of years, and who was an extremely good-looking woman of Italian colouring and great charm of manner. To them was born at Gloucester Terrace, Bayswater, his daughter 'Marie,' in 1855. Christened Mary, after her mother, she was, however, until she adopted her pseudonym of Corelli, invariably called by its Scottish equivalent, Minnie.<sup>74</sup>

The clue lies in the words 'romantic love union' and it is noteworthy that Vyver, in deference to the memory of her subject, neglects to mention that Charles and Mary were not married until 1861.

Vyver accepts unconditionally the author's details about her own childhood as they are recounted in several unpublished manuscripts, reproduced at length in the *Memoirs of Marie Corelli*. From their life together, Vyver offers personal vignettes and favourable insights, rather than a chronological description of events. She does not mention Corelli's prolonged infatuation with the married minor artist, Arthur Severn. She takes great pains to explain the intentions behind Corelli's writing and attributes the novelist's success to the fact that 'she wrote from the heart and aimed at the hearts of her readers'.<sup>75</sup> Vyver's only criticism of Corelli is mild, but informative:

She was impulsive and, I may say it, sometimes lacking in tact. Once her opinion formed and her mind made up, seeing clearly what she wanted, she took her line of action, and was apt to be impatient of the point of view which was quite genuinely held by her opponents, and many were antagonised when they might have been won over, for her personal charm was great, had she

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<sup>73</sup> See Scott, *Marie Corelli: The Story of a Friendship*, pp. 194-6 for a description of Vyver's rather elaborate preparations for the publication her biography.

<sup>74</sup> Vyver, *Memoirs of Marie Corelli*, p. 39.

<sup>75</sup> Vyver, *Memoirs of Marie Corelli*, p. 246.

but deigned to make use of it to achieve her aims . . . Also it may be that, though a sense of fun she had in plenty, she was somewhat deficient in sense of humour, that rare and subtle sense that can, in a flash, see the humour in a situation (even though it be at one's own expense) and, seeing the humour, soften the opposition and so, turning from frown to smile, win a bloodless victory.<sup>76</sup>

Vyver's remarks are astute as Corelli's impetuosity and lack of humour marred both her writing and her public actions.

There is nothing surprising in Vyver's biography. Her actions bordered on the heroic, not only whilst Corelli was alive, but also afterwards when she refused the other trustees' suggestion that she sell the estate and invest the proceeds in order that she might live comfortably on the income, electing instead to subject herself to years of penury so that Corelli's will might be administered literally. What is open to question, however, is Vyver's posthumous publication of Corelli's *Open Confession: To a Man from a Woman* in serial form in the *Daily Express* in 1924, and her *Poems* in 1925.

*Open Confession* deals with Corelli's feelings toward Arthur Severn and is in the form of a private journal 'written with impassioned sincerity by someone who was experiencing obsessive love for the first time in her life'.<sup>77</sup> Far from being a literary work, it is more akin to adolescent outpourings and it seems unlikely that Corelli would have considered it suitable for publication. In respect of *Poems*, Vyver, educated and well read, would surely have known that, whatever Corelli's merits as a novelist, she is unequivocally a poor poet. Masters claims that at one stage Corelli had prepared the *Poems* for publication but had refused her literary agent's suggestion that she offer them to Methuen. Instead

she approached John Murray herself, to receive the guarded reply that he would be embarrassed if he had to reject them and would therefore rather not read them. After that, she clutched her poems to her breast and would not part with them.<sup>78</sup>

Vyver would surely have realised that publication of *Poems* would reveal personal and poetic weaknesses and that the lack of restraint of *Open Confession* would have embarrassed Corelli had she been living. Vyver needed money, yet she refused to sell Mason Croft, so pecuniary considerations cannot have been the

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<sup>76</sup> Vyver, *Memoirs of Marie Corelli*, p. 245.

<sup>77</sup> Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, p. 173.

<sup>78</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 278.

reason for publishing these works, although it is impossible to discover her motivation. It may be that the mild tone and gentle consideration exhibited in her *Memoirs of Marie Corelli* represent an attempt to compensate for the posthumous publications which exposed her friend's innermost thoughts and failings to the world.

George Bullock published the next biography, entitled *Marie Corelli: The Life and Death of a Best-Seller*, in 1940. Bullock's biography is of the ambivalent variety but an indication of his attitude emerges from the 'Foreward' to his book:

Writers of today's best-sellers evoke little curiosity about their private life in comparison to the disproportionate fame which came to Marie Corelli. For over twenty years she was the most popular woman novelist in this or any other country. A new Corelli book was an enormous event; a complete edition would be sold out in a day. Each of her novels immediately became a gigantic success, and her public was as adoring as her critics were disparaging . . . Marie Corelli's fame rested to a large extent on her dominant personality. Imperious and intolerant, her sense of values clouded by the most unbelievable vanity, she lived in regal style, commanding as an uncrowned queen of literature the homage of a million or more simple souls.<sup>79</sup>

Bullock, however, acknowledges that Corelli's admirers were not all simple souls, naming Gladstone, Tennyson, Canon Wilberforce and the famous contemporary inspirational speaker, Father Ignatius, as examples of intellectuals who praised the novelist. He concludes his 'Foreward':

With a powerful imagination, occasionally melodramatic, she couched her sensational indictments against Society in a language that was as eloquent as it was colourful. She unhesitatingly attacked human types or institutions, undeterred by insufficient knowledge of either. Whenever she felt deeply, a flood of protestation came forth from her without restraint, but at the back of it all was her natural ability to write a good story that held her readers in suspense to the end, and left them feeling so much better.<sup>80</sup>

Bullock is the first biographer to comment upon the lack of information available about Corelli's mother. Illegitimacy was a tremendous burden for a woman in Victorian England and it is not surprising that when Minnie Mackay adopted the pseudonym of Marie Corelli and became famous, she invented a variety of family histories to suit the name. Clouding the identity of her mother

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<sup>79</sup> Bullock, *Marie Corelli: The Life and Death of a Best-Seller*, Constable, London, 1940, pp. xv-xvi.

<sup>80</sup> Bullock, *Marie Corelli: The Life and Death of a Best-Seller*, pp. xvi-xvii.

not only helped to obscure her origins and invest her with a romantic aura, but also assisted her to maintain the fiction of being much younger than she was. Bullock notes: 'Creating, as she did, prejudice and rumour so profusely, it is almost impossible to extricate a single thread from the tangle of legend surrounding her'.<sup>81</sup>

Corelli's half-brother, Eric – Charles Mackay's son by his first wife – also receives more attention from Bullock than from Corelli's previous biographers and it is this biography which first mentions the gossip that Corelli and Eric were lovers. From this point Bullock moves to a discussion of Corelli's sexuality and her inability to accept the physical aspect of love. In contrast to J. Cuming Walters, Bullock argues unkindly that Corelli was a passionate woman whose 'fundamental desire was for a flesh-and-blood lover; but a lust for refinement (springing no doubt from her sudden contact with her father's world . . . after mixing with families of a lower social grade) led to an acceptance of false ideas'.<sup>82</sup> Bullock speculates cynically and salaciously on the relationship between Corelli and her half-brother:

Worshipping at a respectful distance, he gave just the right amount of adoration, aware of the line where daring must cease; whilst she, with money and enthusiasm, stimulated his flagging interest in a life that had become too stale . . . He protested in anguish against the fate that forbade his love, and she – encouraging but regretful – found solace in the bitter-sweet of the situation. It was a harmless way of passing time, but years later, when Marie became very bitter towards her step-brother, we wonder whether she accepted his protestations of love too seriously, and whether play-acting for her became a reality, and aping an emotion too frequently brought the feeling to birth.<sup>83</sup>

Although this rumour is invariably mentioned, it is not supported by any of Corelli's reliable biographers, among whom the consensus of opinion is that Eric Mackay was lazy and unscrupulous, but not incestuous. He failed to earn a living and was supported by his father until the latter's death, thereafter relying on Corelli and Vyver for maintenance. Corelli certainly romanticised Eric and tried to use her influence to secure publication of his execrable poetry. In return, he spent her money, on prostitutes, interfered with her affairs, abused her trust to the extent of suggesting publicly that he was the author of her books, possibly played

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<sup>81</sup> Bullock, *Marie Corelli: The Life and Death of a Best-Seller*, p. 55.

<sup>82</sup> Bullock, *Marie Corelli: The Life and Death of a Best-Seller*, p. 34.

<sup>83</sup> Bullock, *Marie Corelli: The Life and Death of a Best-Seller*, pp. 34-5.

with Vyver's affections and may have been the source of the rumour that Vyver and Corelli were lovers. When Eric died, Corelli was so hurt and incensed by the 'treachery' she claimed to have discovered that she immediately sent a defamatory pamphlet to her friends and acquaintances. As she was able to recover and destroy them, no copies of these remain to explain the reasons for her disillusion.<sup>84</sup>

Bullock's biography includes a comparison of Corelli and Ouida.<sup>85</sup> Other features of the work are an analysis of *God's Good Man* in terms of the novel as an attack on Corelli's enemies in Stratford-upon-Avon, a discussion of the author's attitude toward the female suffrage movement, an outline of her contribution to wartime propaganda and a description of the biographer's own visit to Mason Croft whilst the property was still maintained as a memorial.<sup>86</sup> Bullock concludes with the following patronising comments which, perhaps inadvertently, also convey a real, albeit reluctant, admiration:

Without any subtlety of expression, or a sense of humour, she was unable to judge her own gifts. A woman of talent, she thought herself a genius; and her generosity, determination and principles she mistook for something more noble and inspired . . . Like most idealists, she was unable to accept without bitterness the fact that life must be less than she was capable of imagining. A lust for beauty and expression drove her to the wildest limits of fantasy, and no amount of harsh words from her critics was able to bring her back again to earth . . . In her make-up kindness and pugnacity, sincerity and vanity, disinterestedness and self-advertisement, were all crowded together. There she was, this little woman, dynamically alive; full of herself and her extraordinary triumphs, and yet restless, querulous and dissatisfied.<sup>87</sup>

Eileen Bigland, writing in response to what she describes as 'a considerable revival of interest in [Corelli's] works', published *Marie Corelli: The Woman and the Legend* in 1953.<sup>88</sup> The title implies that Bigland is keen to

<sup>84</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, pp. 154-9.

<sup>85</sup> Ouida is the pen-name of Marie Louise de la Ramée, Corelli's contemporary and a popular novelist whose narratives were also emotional and melodramatic. She was, if possible, more eccentric than Corelli.

<sup>86</sup> Bullock, *Marie Corelli: The Life and Death of a Best-Seller*, pp. 109-112, 173ff., 220ff., 231ff. and 260-3.

<sup>87</sup> Bullock, *Marie Corelli: The Life and Death of a Best-Seller*, pp. 264-7.

<sup>88</sup> Eileen Bigland, *Marie Corelli: The Woman and the Legend*, Jarrolds, London, 1953, p. 16.

distinguish between the legend of Marie Corelli and the real person and, to this end, she dwells at length on the author's illegitimacy. This biography opens with a report of the frenzied speculation about Corelli's origins which broke out in the press following her death. Bigland also interrogates the biography of Kent Carr, which she describes as sycophantic, and that of Coates and Bell, which she finds 'garbled and worthless', and she accuses Vyver of asserting that Corelli was born in wedlock.<sup>89</sup> Such a statement betrays Bigland's prejudice; had she read more carefully, she must have noticed that Vyver meticulously remained ambiguous when recounting the circumstances of Corelli's parentage and birth.<sup>90</sup>

Bigland clearly finds her task frustrating. Corelli irritates her and the tone of the biography is sarcastic. She has difficulty in reconstructing the author's childhood due to 'Marie Corelli's maddening habit of embroidering accounts' and she points to Carr's description of Corelli's education in a 'French convent', which could have taken place anywhere, and Coates's and Bell's report that the author was educated in 'a convent in France', as evidence that Corelli encouraged her contemporary biographers to be vague.<sup>91</sup> She notes that Vyver does not mention the 'breakdown' which caused Corelli's removal from the convent and complains: 'So once again we sense the aura of mystery, compounded from a judicious mixture of evasion and embellishment, that surrounds various stages of Marie Corelli's youthful life'.<sup>92</sup> Bigland's description of Bullock's biography as 'excellent' adds weight to the suggestion that she was hostile toward her subject.<sup>93</sup>

Bigland is also the first of Corelli's biographers to emphasise the shape of the author's body. Conscious of her short stature, Corelli wore gowns with long trains well after these had become unfashionable and she only authorised photographs of herself standing on stairs or in similar positions which disguised her shortness and, as she became older, at angles which concealed her increasing stoutness. Obviously Corelli's concern with her personal appearance, together with the embarrassment she felt regarding the details of her birth, contributed to the way she created and maintained a public persona throughout her life. Unlike

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<sup>89</sup> Bigland, *Marie Corelli: The Woman and the Legend*, pp. 11-16.

<sup>90</sup> Vyver, *Memoirs of Marie Corelli*, p. 39.

<sup>91</sup> Bigland, *Marie Corelli: The Woman and the Legend*, p. 39.

<sup>92</sup> Bigland, *Marie Corelli: The Woman and the Legend*, p. 44.

<sup>93</sup> Bigland, *Marie Corelli: The Woman and the Legend*, p. 35.

later biographers, however, Bigland has no sympathy with this, pitilessly remarking that, although Corelli had short legs, which made curtseying difficult, and a long back, this did not prevent her from imagining herself as a combination of Aphrodite and Pallas Athene.<sup>94</sup> Bigland describes Corelli in Stratford-upon-Avon: ‘The sight of Marie (five feet high and as broad as she was long) . . . must have given intense amusement’, refers to ‘her pouter-pigeon chest’ and makes fun of the fact that Corelli invariably wore masses of flowers.<sup>95</sup>

Even Bertha Vyver does not escape Bigland’s criticism. This biographer implies cunning and hypocrisy when she asserts that Vyver ‘distrusted Eric thoroughly and – though she always professed great affection for him – was well versed in the Doctor’s ways of wheedling what he wanted out of people’. Bigland alleges, in bad prose, that as Vyver ‘had willingly made herself into a doormat for the Mackay family to wipe their boots on she deserved to be used as one’.<sup>96</sup> Her summary of Corelli is brutal and simplistic:

To do Marie Corelli justice her missionizing zeal was fundamentally sincere. The trouble was that she could not help overlaying it by her personal hopes and fears, likes and dislikes, conceits and jealousies. She fulminated against Society women because she secretly yearned to be one; against injustice and corruption because both Dr. Mackay and Eric imagined they had been badly treated by lawyers, editors, and men in important positions; against the ungodly because they did not subscribe to her own rather peculiar brand of faith. In the case of the critics her attitude was a compound of resentment of criticism, mortification that they refused to pay more attention to her, and a lurking awareness (for there was a very shrewd streak in her) that they were justified in their disapproval of her work.<sup>97</sup>

Perhaps the most peculiar biography of Marie Corelli is that published by the Reverend William Stuart Scott, a Congregational minister, in 1955. Titled *Marie Corelli: The Story of a Friendship*, it is an *exposé* of the author’s peccadilloes and weaknesses into which the biographer repeatedly thrusts details of his own life, perhaps in an attempt to create a background of modest,

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<sup>94</sup> Bigland, *Marie Corelli: The Woman and the Legend*, pp. 54 and 136.

<sup>95</sup> Bigland, *Marie Corelli: The Woman and the Legend*, pp. 226 and 244. See also p. 147: ‘but the head-wreaths and corsage-sprays of flowers grew steadily larger until her short body was almost hidden in a bower of blooms’; and p. 148: ‘At parties, her head and shoulders practically eclipsed by an enormous sheaf of Madonna lilies, she was a necessary part of the decoration scheme’.

<sup>96</sup> Bigland, *Marie Corelli: The Woman and the Legend*, pp. 84 and 85.

<sup>97</sup> Bigland, *Marie Corelli: The Woman and the Legend*, p. 87.

reasonable behaviour against which to highlight Corelli's eccentricity. Ostensibly a record of his devotion to the author and of their mutual friendship, it is clearly Scott's intention to capitalise on what was, in fact, a relatively brief acquaintance with Marie Corelli before the memory of the best-selling author was completely lost, together with opportunities to sell his book. His 'Foreward' sets the tone. Asserting that the centenary year of the author's birthday 'called for an up-to-date estimate of [Corelli's] worth to the world by one who knew her personally', Scott suggests that his reminiscences will shed some light on 'an entertaining and demanding personality' and explain 'to some extent why she kept – and lost – so many friends'.<sup>98</sup>

The biography opens with the story of Scott's childhood and youth, emphasising the profound impact upon him of Corelli's pamphlet 'What Life Means To Me' and detailing the order in which, and the circumstances under which, he encountered each of the famous author's novels. Scott relates the beginning of his correspondence with Corelli and offers a critique of her novel, *Innocent*, which, he claims, is a 'passionate defence against the stigma of illegitimacy' and which, together with the discovery of the Coates and Bell biography, inspired him to write a biographical article on Corelli.

Scott did not meet Corelli until 1919, when she was sixty-four years old and, as his report of their first encounter gives a clear indication of the underlying tone of his biography and a description, however uncharitable, of the author, it is worth quoting at some length. The account of the meeting is prefaced and concluded by Scott's preoccupation with his own appearance, the hypocrisy of which is exquisite, given his description of Corelli. Scott explains how he was led through the study at Mason Croft, 'where I noticed sheets of manuscript covered with fine firm handwriting, and the pen lying on a page, as though the writer had been interrupted for my benefit', and into a drawing room, part of which was converted into a conservatory 'where exotic flowers bloomed and canaries sang'. Scott remarks: 'Note that the visitor sees half the house before he meets the owner'. He is then ushered into Corelli's music room, at the far end of which 'stood a grand piano and a harp. And there, seated on this raised dais, extemporising at the piano, was the lady I had come to see'. He continues:

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<sup>98</sup> Scott, *Marie Corelli: The Story of a Friendship*, p. 15.



When I entered, she brought her music to a close, stood up, and paused (or posed?) as I approached the dais. If she believed in the power of first impressions, she certainly 'put on an act' for me. She was clad (how shall I describe it?) in a 'picture' gown . . . which, as she moved, I noticed had a train; this she swept forward – so that it hung down the step of the dais, thus giving her an impression of height. She first met me, therefore, by looking down at me. That was cleverly done.

As she reached my side . . . I was truly astonished to begin with by her diminutive stature. She was such a little lady . . . I feel positive that she looked upon this dwarfishness as a defect; her long train dresses were part of her apparatus for overcoming it . . . When seated, however, her short stature was scarcely noticeable . . . I conclude, therefore, that she was exceptionally short-legged – hence the trains – and, fortunately for her vanity, her day was done when short skirts became the vogue.<sup>99</sup>

Scott is petty and his prose repetitive; he alludes to Corelli's height and her train five times in the space of two paragraphs. The flowers and the canaries exist simply as stage props and he is conscious only of Corelli's posing and putting on an act.

Next discussed is Corelli's reluctance to be photographed other than in situations over which she has total control and her habit of reducing her age by ten to twenty years. Scott continues:

The Marie Corelli who greeted me was, indeed, disillusioning; her little figure bulged at every seam of her frock, her face and hands were an unhealthy red, her mouth slightly twisted, her hair colourless, and her eyes revealing the faintest suspicion of a squint, added up to nothing like – either the beautiful heroines of her books, which she was reported to resemble, or even the authentic photographs which had appeared. It was obvious that if at fifty she looked so charming, the past decade had dealt hardly with her.<sup>100</sup>

In one sentence, Scott manages to imply, not only that Corelli was overweight, but that she was coarse, unladylike, unhealthy, insipid, dishonest and evasive. He justifies his malevolent description of the famous author by stating: 'I know it is of paramount importance to those who in years to come may gather together these scraps of "Corelliana" in order to create a true picture of this Victorian phenomenon'.<sup>101</sup> It is not surprising that Scott agrees largely with Bullock's and

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<sup>99</sup> Scott, *Marie Corelli: The Story of a Friendship*, pp. 72-3.

<sup>100</sup> Scott, *Marie Corelli: The Story of a Friendship*, pp. 75.

<sup>101</sup> Scott, *Marie Corelli: The Story of a Friendship*, p. 75.

Bigland's biographies and, in particular, considers the critical Bigland 'most generous in her estimate of Marie's gifts and character'.<sup>102</sup>

The remainder of Scott's biography is similarly coloured. He writes of Corelli's real or imagined slights to himself and his family, of her insensitivity to his financial circumstances and dilates on the author's own scrap-book of press clippings. He offers a harsh account of the provisions of her will and relates in almost ghoulish detail the auction of the contents of Mason Croft after Vyver's death. He summarises Corelli thus:

She is given a reputation by her biographers of great kindness, but in ten years' friendship I had little evidence of it . . . Nor do I think for a moment she would deliberately lie – except for vanity, and it is only amusing to learn how she kept getting younger and younger as she grew older – but some of her mis-statements are hard to reconcile with her high principles, as when she insisted she invited my family to tea with her – which she did not. I attribute all these weaknesses to the fact that although Marie Corelli's career touched romance and high adventure at so many points, her actual life was a narrow, sheltered, self-engrossed existence.<sup>103</sup>

In 1961 another strange biography of Corelli appeared. Published by Robert Hale, it is entitled *The Lonely Dreamer*, and was supposedly written by a Dorothy Phoebe Ansle, apparently also known as Hebe Elsna. The same text was reissued in 1975 by Collins as a revised edition, but this time the author is a Laura Conway.<sup>104</sup> The narrative is comparable with Corelli's own romances, consisting of dramatised recreations of real events and fantastic imagined episodes together with page after page of invented dialogue. Its dominant theme is a grossly exaggerated and romanticised relationship between Corelli and Eric Mackay, with Bertha Vyver depicted as Eric's adversary and the incest theme constantly bubbling below the surface. Corelli's surgeon, Dr Mary Scharlieb, is accorded the role of close friend and Vyver's co-conspirator against Eric.<sup>105</sup> Corelli's friendship with the flirtatious Prince of Wales, later to become Edward VII, is

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<sup>102</sup> Scott, *Marie Corelli: The Story of a Friendship*, pp. 79 and 211.

<sup>103</sup> Scott, *Marie Corelli: The Story of a Friendship*, p. 173.

<sup>104</sup> First published as *The Lonely Dreamer* by Hebe Elsna, Hale, London, 1961, but catalogued under Dorothy Phoebe Ansle as the author; revised ed., © Laura Conway, Collins, London, 1975.

<sup>105</sup> Conway, *The Lonely Dreamer*, pp. 115-6 and 117.

portrayed in a series of lascivious scenes wherein the Prince attempts to persuade Corelli to become his mistress.<sup>106</sup>

A far more satisfactory biography of Marie Corelli is that by Brian Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter: The Extraordinary Life of MARIE CORELLI*, published in 1978. The title of this work is taken from a newspaper headline announcing the publication of Corelli's first best seller.<sup>107</sup> Master's research is thorough and he has uncovered new sources, such as letters which had belonged to Corelli's secretary Annie Davis, and the diary of George Bentley, Corelli's first publisher and mentor. Masters also found many of Corelli's own letters, including those to Bentley and to Arthur and Joan Severn. Although his biography is accurately described as 'not a scholarly work', it is accepted by scholars as authoritative.<sup>108</sup> In *The Gender of Modernity*, Rita Felski acknowledges Masters's perceptiveness but remarks upon the biographer's 'unfortunate antagonism toward his subject' and his 'patronising sexism'.<sup>109</sup> Annette Federico also describes Masters as 'patronising' and 'condescending' and regrets the lack of a feminist perspective in his writing; nevertheless, she acknowledges that her own work relies heavily Masters's biography and on that of Bigland.<sup>110</sup>

Masters began his research with the biographies of Vyver and Scott, describing Scott's contribution as 'entertaining and valuable'.<sup>111</sup> The influence of these texts on *Now Barabbas was a Rotter* is evident in that, whilst Masters reveals the flaws in Corelli's character and the misguided and often ridiculous actions they engender, he treats them with amusement and some sympathy, and he credits the author with imagination, courage, intelligence and instances of far-sightedness. Masters's ambivalence toward his subject leads him to adopt an ironic tone throughout the biography. Whilst it is true, as Federico claims, that at

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<sup>106</sup> Conway, *The Lonely Dreamer*, pp. 47-55.

<sup>107</sup> Bigland, *Marie Corelli: The Woman and the Legend*, p. 146, and Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 129.

<sup>108</sup> Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 187 (n.1). Peter Keating, in his scholarly introduction to the World's Classics edition of *The Sorrows of Satan* published in 1998, relies on Masters for the sales figure of 100,000 copies per annum of Corelli's books at the height of her fame - see Keating, 'Introduction' to *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. xviii.

<sup>109</sup> Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, pp. 124 and 229 (n.1).

<sup>110</sup> Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, pp. 3, 32, 142 and 184.

<sup>111</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. xi.

times he portrays Corelli as neurotic, and that he is ‘blatantly misogynistic’ as Felski asserts, Master’s frequent descriptions of Corelli’s qualities are whole-hearted and unstinting.<sup>112</sup> Like most of her biographers, Masters is not certain to what extent the Corelli public persona is a deliberate creation or to what extent it is rooted in self-delusion. The following excerpt from the introductory chapter of *Now Barabbas was a Rotter* is indicative (the comments are made in the context of Scott’s report of his first visit to the author):

Of course, she was an ugly old woman, but she had contrived to maintain in the public mind her own personal vision of herself as a timeless beauty, a sweet English rose whom age could not touch . . . for nearly half a century . . . She manufactured a personality, and spent her life in continual rehearsal of the part. It was a superb exercise in self-promotion. And yet, there was a sense in which she was not pretending at all, in which she really did think that she was a prim and pure *ingénue* in spite of the lines on her face and her crooked mouth. For eternal youth was one of the inevitable rewards of the virtuous spirituality which she, and only she, had attained.<sup>113</sup>

For most of 1897 Corelli was ill and she finally underwent an operation performed by Dr Mary Scharlieb in December.<sup>114</sup> Before she had fully recovered, Eric Mackay died of pneumonia and dealt his sister the double blow of bereavement and betrayal. Corelli was devastated and Scharlieb advised her to spend at least two years in the country, advice which resulted in the permanent removal of Corelli and Bertha Vyver from London to Stratford-upon-Avon in 1899. In 1901 they moved into Mason Croft under a long lease which was later converted to freehold. Although initially the famous author was made welcome in the town, her meddlesome ways and assumption of Shakespeare’s mantle soon antagonised many of the leading townsfolk, in spite of her magnificent generosity to schools, theatres and other local institutions.

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<sup>112</sup> Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 120, and Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, pp. 228-9 (n.1), but see also, for example, Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, pp. 1, 3, 6-9, 59-60, 74-5, 130, 143, 147, 256 and 305-8. It seems strange that Felski and Federico, both of whom are sympathetically disposed toward Corelli, are so highly critical of Masters but much less so of Bullock, Bigland and Scott, whose biographies exhibit pique and only reluctant acknowledgement of Corelli’s qualities and achievements.

<sup>113</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>114</sup> Corelli’s choice of a female surgeon is interesting. Masters argues that, although it was an act of courage, the decision was not motivated by Corelli’s feminism but determined by prudery and fear - see Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, pp. 153-4. Ransom, conversely, interprets Corelli’s action as a feminist statement in favour of qualified and independent women as well as a decision to take advantage of the best treatment available - see Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, pp. 91-2.

A brawl erupted when the Mayor of Stratford-upon-Avon asked Andrew Carnegie to donate a free library to the town and, when Carnegie agreed, a site which required the demolition of five cottages adjacent to Shakespeare's birthplace was chosen to house the library. Corelli had been consulted and had opposed demolition of the Henley Street cottages and, when her preference was ignored, launched a campaign among her literary and political acquaintances 'to defend Shakespeare's town and Shakespeare's memory from vandals whose ignorance and conceit is as unbounded as the name they wrong is great'.<sup>115</sup> By 1903, the disagreement had gathered momentum, fired by Corelli's publication of a colourful, single-issue magazine called *The Avon Star* and the subsequent satirical rebuttal, *Errors of the Avon Star*, published by her opposition. Corelli countered with *The Plain Truth of the Stratford-on-Avon controversy*, which, unlike its predecessor, was measured enough to gain a hearing.

The situation was not to be resolved, however, because shortly thereafter the Birmingham Assizes convened to hear a libel action which Corelli had brought against Fred Winter, a local draper. Winter had alleged in the *Stratford-on-Avon Herald* that, prior to the town's approach to Carnegie, Corelli had attempted to purchase a vacant block in Henley Street for the purpose of establishing a free library, but had withdrawn from the proposal because the price did not suit her. It was the final statement in Winter's letter to the *Herald* that provoked Corelli: 'It would have been a "Corelli" instead of a "Carnegie" Library.'<sup>116</sup> The court found that Corelli had been libelled but the jury assessed the damages at one farthing and each party had to pay its own costs.

Masters devotes an entire chapter of his biography to this controversy, pointing out the validity and the pettiness of actions taken by both sides, as well as the discomfort of other parties dragged unwillingly into the *fracas*. He paints the courtroom scene with humour, noting that Corelli stood firm under cross-examination, and recounts the insults exchanged by Corelli and Winter over the payment of the farthing. His final remarks, however ironic, imply that he is pleased to record Corelli's vindication:

Nevertheless, in spite of looking ridiculous even in victory, the result of Marie's efforts on behalf of Henley Street are visible

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<sup>115</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, pp. 185-6. Masters is citing a letter from Corelli to Theodore Watts-Dunton, a friend of Swinburne.

<sup>116</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 193. Masters reproduces Winter's letter *in toto*.

today. She discovered that the Birthplace Trust had been incorporated by Act of Parliament in 1891, according to which the trustees had no power to sell or destroy any property that had belonged to Shakespeare or any member of his family. The cottages belonging to Elizabeth Hall were thereby preserved, and Birch's shop is likewise still there; it now houses part of the records and manuscript library of the Birthplace Trust. The former Technical School is also unchanged, and in it is the library which caused all the bother. The name of Carnegie does not appear on it.<sup>117</sup>

The most recent biography of Marie Corelli is that published by Teresa Ransom in 1999. Its title, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli: Queen of Victorian Bestsellers*, highlights the questions surrounding Corelli's parentage and early life which puzzled earlier biographers and Ransom, like Masters, devotes a chapter of her book to speculation about the author's origins.<sup>118</sup> Ransom introduces different material from the other biographers through a close reading of the works of Charles Mackay, so that her biography offers not so much new facts as a series of new questions. She suggests that Mary – or Ellen, as Ransom prefers to call her – Mills may not have been Corelli's mother and claims that Corelli and Ellen Mills accompanied Mackay when he lived and worked in America for two years.<sup>119</sup> She also highlights the dual identities of the author and the differences between the personas of Minnie Mackay and Marie Corelli.<sup>120</sup>

Federico designates this a feminist biography.<sup>121</sup> Certainly Ransom is sympathetic to Corelli, whom she describes as a 'passionate feminist writer', and she makes the important point that Corelli was 'the leading, if not the only female exponent' of semi-scientific writing.<sup>122</sup> On the other hand, Ransom's biography is not scholarly and she tends to idealise Corelli. Her reading of *My Wonderful Wife* and *The Secret Power* fails to recognise and elaborate upon the strong, if unconventional, feminist sentiments that the author reveals in those texts.<sup>123</sup> The following extract indicates Ransom's attitude toward her subject:

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<sup>117</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 201.

<sup>118</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 309ff. (Epilogue), and Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, p. 225ff. (Appendix).

<sup>119</sup> Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, pp. 227-31 and 11.

<sup>120</sup> Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, pp. 39 and 57.

<sup>121</sup> Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 187 (n.1).

<sup>122</sup> Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, pp. 39 and 61.

<sup>123</sup> Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, pp. 53-5 and 199-200.

To read many of the contemporary newspaper reports of Marie, it is easy to see her as a difficult and cantankerous woman at odds with the world. She was, however, a highly successful and outstanding popular bestselling novelist . . . As she grew older she became less tolerant and fought back savagely, threatening legal action and taking it where necessary. Her friends seldom saw this side of her character. To them she was charming, wonderful company, and generous to a fault. Her servants adored her and remained faithful until her death and beyond.<sup>124</sup>

This view of Corelli as a friend is one with which Scott totally disagrees.

Ransom omits some of Corelli's silliest actions, such as her fuss when she was asked to pay for the binding of a presentation copy of *A Romance of Two Worlds* to be sent to Queen Victoria.<sup>125</sup> She suggests, despite Vyver's assertions to the contrary, that Corelli may not have been the sole author of *The Silver Domino* and glosses over the author's shameful behaviour toward George Bentley.<sup>126</sup> Whereas most of Corelli's biographers paint a comical picture of the author with Bertha Vyver, who was a big woman, driving around town in a small chaise pulled by a pair of Shetland ponies and mock her for importing a gondola and Italian gondolier to travel on the Avon River, Ransom describes these pretensions as the well-deserved fulfilment of the author's dreams and a means of escaping the prying eyes of photographers.<sup>127</sup>

Ransom's attitude toward her subject is encapsulated in the final paragraphs of the 'Afterword' to her biography:

She was a fearless fighter, who sometimes mistook her targets, but who fought with a passion which swept all before her. She came from nothing, and against huge odds became a superstar and one of the most famous women of her time. She lived in Victorian England and yet there is something very modern in the way in which she carefully created her image through selective publicity and so created her own legend . . . She is an example of amazing courage and tenacity, and lived such an extraordinary life that not only does she command affectionate respect, but her work may now be reassessed in the context of the fast-changing Victorian and Edwardian world. The impetus of her writing carried all before it . . . as a mirror of her time,

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<sup>124</sup> Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, p. 157.

<sup>125</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, pp. 104-5.

<sup>126</sup> Vyver, *Memoirs of Marie Corelli*, p. 246, and Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, pp. 69- 78.

<sup>127</sup> Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, pp. 118 and 145.

she reflects the concerns of the generation for whom she wrote.<sup>128</sup>

It is not surprising that Corelli's biographers present such very different views of her life. Evidently she was outstandingly generous with her time and money in support of the causes she espoused and she undertook every campaign with passion and courage, albeit often in ignorance of the full facts and always indifferent to the views of others; sometimes, indeed, in opposition to the wishes of the recipients of her largesse.<sup>129</sup> In some ways, she was well ahead of her time: for example, her attempts to protect heritage buildings from demolition or desecration by those she termed 'vandals', her contribution to the restoration of old buildings, and her efforts to preserve old trees and the open space around Mason Croft as a 'breathing space and air zone for the health of the town of Stratford upon Avon'.<sup>130</sup>

The motivation for her behaviour, however, remains unfathomable. It is impossible to understand how time and time again she could needlessly expose her shortcomings to her critics, unless it was because she truly expected to be indifferent to their opinions. On the other hand, perhaps she was incapable of questioning her own view of herself. Sometimes she seems to have been oblivious to the effect of her words and actions on others; at others, she appears calculating in the use of her very considerable power. For one who attacked others so ruthlessly, moreover, Corelli herself was extremely vulnerable to criticism.

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<sup>128</sup> Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, p. 223.

<sup>129</sup> Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, chap. 6, and Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, pp. 228-9.

<sup>130</sup> See Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, pp. 193, 230 and 284, and Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, pp. 132 and 140.



### CHAPTER THREE: THE NOVELS OF MARIE CORELLI

Marie Corelli told J. Cuming Walters that the ‘Author’s Prologue’ to *The Life Everlasting* contained the essence of her personal philosophy.<sup>131</sup> It is, therefore, appropriate to use this text to review her novels in an effort to see them within the context which she believes – or would have her readers believe – they belong, and to compare this perspective, where possible, with information from other sources.

Somewhat disingenuously, this extremely popular novelist – Corelli was writing in 1911, before her career began to wane – terms herself a ‘Voice in the Wilderness’ in the opening lines of the ‘Author’s Prologue’.<sup>132</sup> The claim behind this affectation is that she has been mysteriously chosen from amongst all others to say, in effect, whatever she chooses. Moreover, like all prophets, Corelli insists that she has no choice in the matter: ‘I cannot pass you by, having peace and comfort for myself without at least offering to share that peace and comfort with you’ (*LE* 2-3). At the time Corelli was secure in the knowledge that her reputation could not be injured by whatever she wrote.

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<sup>131</sup> J. Cuming Walters, ‘A Personal Tribute by way of Epilogue’ to Vyver’s *Memoirs of Marie Corelli*, p. 263.

<sup>132</sup> Marie Corelli, ‘Author’s Prologue’ to *The Life Everlasting*, Methuen, London, 1911, p. 1. Ensuing references to *The Life Everlasting* will be abbreviated and given in parentheses in the text.

Having established her authority, Corelli makes a passionate argument for the existence of God and for Nature as the working-mind of the Creator. Expressing a typically nineteenth-century opposition to the notion of predestination, she argues that the will of humankind is at perfect liberty, unconstrained by God and therefore responsible for the evils and sorrows that afflict the world. God does not send disasters such as natural calamities, but Nature, ‘which is the *material expression* of the mind of God’, will not for too long tolerate human iniquity but destroys what is putrescent and ‘covers it up with fresh earth on which healthier things may find place to grow’ (LE 17).

Corelli claims that she tried to convey a hint of these spiritual truths in her first book, *A Romance of Two Worlds* (1886). Although some of her readers ‘gave heed’, many were, however, unable properly to understand the novel because of their ‘astounding hypocrisy, [and] also the good opinion they entertained of their own worthiness, their own capabilities, and their own great intellectuality’ (LE 17-8). She explains that she had intended to write for them ‘another book at once, also in the guise of a romance, to serve as a little lamp of love’ whereby her readers might discover the real obstacles preventing their ‘intelligent Soul-advancement’ (LE 18). This project, according to Corelli, was vetoed by her publisher:

But the publisher I had at the time (the late Mr. George Bentley) assured me that if I wrote another ‘spiritualistic’ book, I should lose the public hearing I had just gained. I do not know why he had formed this opinion, but as he was a kindly personal friend, and took a keen interest in my career, never handing any manuscript of mine over to his ‘reader,’ but always reading it himself, I felt it incumbent upon me, as a young beginner, to accept the advice which I knew could only be given with the very best intentions towards me. To please him, therefore, and to please the particular public to which he had introduced me, I wrote something entirely different, – a melodramatic tale entitled: ‘Vendetta: The Story of One Forgotten’. (LE 18-9)

It is true that Corelli was a beginner in the business of novel writing, but at thirty she was hardly young. Bentley did give her first manuscript to his readers and it was Hall Caine’s hostile response that aroused the publisher’s interest and Corelli’s enduring enmity. Thereafter, however, Bentley read her manuscripts himself because she was so difficult to handle.

On the other hand, it is completely untrue that Bentley dissuaded Corelli from writing what she wished. *Vendetta!*, a revenge melodrama, was completed within weeks of the publication of *A Romance of Two Worlds*, leaving no time for

Corelli to have composed ‘a little lamp of love’ in response to readers’ reaction to her first (as yet unpublished) novel. Moreover, it was only with considerable difficulty that Bentley was able to persuade her to rectify her obvious blunders and to remove the most libellous attacks.<sup>133</sup> When he strongly disapproved of the content of the satirical *The Silver Domino*, Corelli simply took the book to Lamley & Co., after including new material which reflected her increasing dissatisfaction with Bentley.

Corelli claims that she wrote her next novel, *Thelma* (1887), about an innocent Norwegian girl in corrupt London society, because Bentley had begged her for a love story. Following publication of that novel – which, she remarks by the way, was very successful – she then considered herself free ‘to move once more upon the lines which my study of psychic forces had convinced me were of pre-eminent importance’ (*LE* 19). It seems that Corelli was ashamed of having written novels dealing with other than psychic themes and, in the ‘Author’s Prologue’ to *The Life Everlasting*, is attempting to blame Bentley for compelling her to do so. This, together with a generally patronising attitude, was a shabby way to treat her late publisher and friend, although insignificant when compared with the way she lampooned him in *The Silver Domino* whilst he was alive. Yet Corelli’s reference to her ‘public hearing’, her claim to have written *Vendetta!* ‘to please the particular public to which he had introduced me’ and her allusion to the success of *Thelma*, reveal that, in the early stages of her career at least, her astute business sense recognised Bentley’s invaluable experience as a publisher.

The fourth novel, *Ardath: The Story of a Dead Self* (1889), about a poet who meets himself in a former incarnation, was not as popular, although it was quite clearly one of Corelli’s favourites. She is eager to point out that this novel won her the praise of Tennyson and Gladstone, but yet, from the ‘Author’s Prologue’, it is impossible not to feel a sense of Corelli’s disappointment, a sense of her having intended *Ardath* to be something greater than it was. She writes: ‘Whatever may now be the consensus of opinion on its merits or demerits, I know and feel it to be one of my most worthy attempts, even though it is not favoured by the million’ (*LE* 20-1).

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<sup>133</sup> See, for example, the account of negotiations between Corelli and Bentley regarding publication of *Thelma* given by Masters in *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, pp. 73-4.

Corelli claims that the response to *Ardath*, whilst not overwhelming, was sufficient to encourage her to venture next upon *The Soul of Lilith* (1892), ‘a third link in the chain I sought to weave between the perishable materialism of our ordinary conceptions of life, and the undying spiritual quality of life as it truly is’ (LE 22). *The Soul of Lilith* relates a scientific experiment conducted upon a young girl brought back to life so that her spirit might be used by the occult scientist to explore other spiritual worlds. The purpose of this novel, Corelli writes, was to demonstrate that prejudice and intellectual pride will only cause failure in the study of the ‘Further World’ and that undue attachment to the body will have the same result (LE 22).

Although this novel was less popular than *Ardath*, Corelli claims that it was ‘welcomed by a distinctly cultured minority of persons famous in art, science and literature, whose good opinion is well worth having’ (LE 22). Who comprised this intellectual elite that Corelli celebrates, and why they would welcome a novel written expressly to criticise them, she does not explain. However, the good opinion of the famous was not, apparently, good enough for Bentley, who impatiently requested her to write ‘something that would “sell” better’. As a result, Corelli tells her readers, she wrote *Wormwood: A Drama of Paris* (LE 22-3).

Again Corelli is being evasive. 1889, the year in which *Ardath* was published, also saw publication of the novella, *My Wonderful Wife: A Study in Smoke*, which sets out to satirise radical feminism but succeeds in creating the only Corelli heroine who, despite being a blunt caricature, is decidedly likeable. Moreover, contrary to Corelli’s assertion, the publication of *Wormwood* in 1890 preceded *The Soul of Lilith* by two years, although it is curious that, in listing Corelli’s works to date in the third edition of *The Life Everlasting*, Methuen also places *The Soul of Lilith* before *Wormwood*.

*Wormwood* is the novel which Annette Federico suggests is ‘an excellent example of middle-class curiosity about and appropriations of decadence’. Federico acknowledges that the motivation behind, and consequently the form of, *Wormwood* is ambivalent: ‘The antidecadent novel is packaged as the very flower of decadence’.<sup>134</sup> Twenty-one years later, Corelli is still rather off-hand in her

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<sup>134</sup> Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 72.

description of the book, clearly not considering it to be one of her significant works:

To relieve [Bentley's] impatience, therefore, I wrote a more or less 'sensational' novel dealing with the absinthe drinkers of Paris, entitled 'Wormwood,' which did a certain amount of good in its way, by helping to call public attention to the devastation wrought by the use of the pernicious drug among the French and other Continental peoples. (LE 23)

Totally ignoring the failed anonymous satire, *The Silver Domino: Or, Side Whispers, Social and Literary*, Corelli claims that her next novel was *Barabbas: A Dream of the World's Tragedy*. The author describes the production of this work in the following terms:

receiving a strong and almost imperative impetus towards that particular goal whither my mind was set, I went to work again with renewed vigour on my own favourite and long studied line of argument, indifferent alike to publisher or public. Filled with the fervour of a passionate and proved faith, I wrote 'Barabbas: A Dream of the World's Tragedy'. (LE 23)

Published in 1893, *Barabbas* was successful but highly controversial. Although praised by Canon Wilberforce and the popular evangelistic monk, Father Ignatius, it was banned by the custodians of Ealing Public Library on the grounds that it was cheap and sensational and that its influence was potentially pernicious.<sup>135</sup>

Corelli's 'Author's Prologue' to *The Life Everlasting* describes her change of publishers from Bentley to Methuen. Using selected extracts from Bentley's correspondence to justify her actions, she explains that *Barabbas*

was the signal of separation from my excellent old friend, George Bentley, who had not the courage to publish a poetic romance which introduced, albeit with a tenderness and reverence unspeakable, so far as my own intention was concerned, the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ . . . He was bound to admit that there was something to be said for the introduction of Divine personages in the epic romances of Milton and Dante [but] what could be written in poetic verse did not, however, seem to him suitable for poetic prose, and I did not waste words in argument, as I knew the time had come for the parting of the ways. (LE 23-4)

This passage reveals that Corelli was quite oblivious to her place in literature. To suggest that *Barabbas* might be 'poetic prose' akin to the 'poetic verse' of Milton and Dante displays ignorance more than arrogance, although it also indicates just how seriously Corelli took herself as a writer. It was not a lack of courage that

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<sup>135</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, pp. 129-33.

prevented George Bentley from publishing *Barabbas*, but good taste, for not only is *Barabbas* far from being an epic, it is bad literature. Nevertheless, even Corelli does not seem fully to realise the extent of the novel's triumph. 'It met with an almost unprecedented success', she writes, 'not only in this country but all over the world'. The truth is that it broke all existing publication records and its success was entirely without precedent.

The timing of Corelli's move to Methuen was impeccable; Bentley's distaste for *Barabbas* had merely offered the pretext she needed. This account of a vital transition in her career reveals Corelli's abilities as a business woman. Following the success of *A Romance of Two Worlds*, *Vendetta!*, *Thelma* and *Wormwood*, Corelli's reputation as a popular novelist was established and she knew that she could negotiate with Methuen from a position of strength to win highly favourable publication arrangements. Corelli implies that the responsibility for recognising business opportunities rested with Methuen, but this thinly disguises the fact that she wanted to manage her own business affairs and believed she could better do so by striking new arrangements with a new publisher. It was a situation in which writer and publisher both stood to gain: Corelli bargained with her 'certain reputation' and Methuen bought the first best seller, *Barabbas*, 'without parley'. An underlying, perhaps unconscious, reason for Corelli's change of publishers at this time may have been that the growing fame of the Corelli persona made the author uncomfortable with Bentley's intimate, although unsolicited, knowledge of her origins.

It was pecuniary need that drove Corelli in her early years of writing and economic independence formed a significant element of her vision for herself and for her ideal female characters.<sup>136</sup> Only in *A Romance of Two Worlds* does a Corelli heroine express financial concerns, as the narrator relates that 'American friends of mine, Colonel Everard and his charming wife, decided to accompany me, sharing with me the expenses of the journey and hotel accommodation'.<sup>137</sup> Thereafter, as Richard Kowalczyk notes, 'the Corelli hero and heroine were rich and successful enough not to be affected by materialistic goals'.<sup>138</sup> The heroine of

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<sup>136</sup> See, for example, Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 68, and Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, pp. 39-40.

<sup>137</sup> Corelli, *A Romance of Two Worlds*, p. 9.

<sup>138</sup> Kowalczyk, 'In Vanished Summertime', p. 858.

*The Murder of Delicia*, for example, is a popular author whose success has brought her enormous wealth, over which, despite her marriage, she retains control. Delicia is the ideal Corelli female, with ‘masses of brown-gold’ hair and invariably dressed in ‘soft white stuffs that that clung in close, artistic folds round her light and lissom figure’. She also ‘managed everything, from the advantageous disposal of her own manuscripts’ to the details of her husband’s dinners.<sup>139</sup>

The success of *Barabbas* and her next novel, *The Sorrows of Satan*, confirmed Corelli’s reputation as an extraordinarily popular novelist and guaranteed her ongoing financial independence. For the next two decades her position was virtually unassailable. Irrespective of the opinions of the critics, until the outbreak of the Great War almost every Corelli novel was a best seller. For any woman of the time, let alone a single, middle class woman of uncertain parentage, to become financially independent through her own efforts was a truly remarkable achievement. Wealth brought Corelli the freedom to pursue the interests which were close to her heart, such as the rejuvenation of Stratford-upon-Avon and patronage of the arts. Although many of her charitable works were marred by controversy, Corelli’s farsightedness and generosity cannot be denied. Like the heroine of *The Murder of Delicia*, Corelli ‘felt the deep truth of the saying, “Unto whom much is given, even from him shall much be required,” and gave her largesse with liberal tenderness and zeal’.<sup>140</sup>

The heroine of Corelli’s novel *Innocent: Her Fancy and His Fact* (1914) displays characteristics similar to Delicia Vaughan, Irene Vassilius in *The Soul of Lilith* and Mavis Clare in *The Sorrows of Satan*. Innocent is illegitimate and, after a lonely childhood, goes to London and publishes her first novel at the age of twenty. The novel is an immediate success and Innocent becomes the rage. She is introduced to society and, like Corelli herself, falls in love with an artist who fails to reciprocate her devotion. Parallels between the Marie Corelli persona and Innocent Armitage abound and include the capacity of each to handle her own literary affairs. Innocent ‘was independent – she could earn sufficient, and more than sufficient to keep herself in positive luxury if she chose, – but for this she

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<sup>139</sup> Corelli, *The Murder of Delicia*, pp. 5, 6 and 3.

<sup>140</sup> Corelli, *The Murder of Delicia*, p. 10.

had no taste . . . She had managed her “literary” business so far well and carefully’.<sup>141</sup>

Amassing riches is not unethical according to Corelli. Many of her characters are wealthy, including Jane in the novel that carries her name, Maryllia in *God’s Good Man*, Morgana, heroine of *The Secret Power*, and, of the heroes, Heliobas (*A Romance of Two Worlds*, *Ardath* and *The Life Everlasting*) and Santoris in *The Life Everlasting*. In *The Sorrows of Satan* almost everyone is obscenely rich, including Satan in the person of Prince Rimânez, whilst Mavis Clare, although perhaps not as wealthy as Delicia and Innocent, does well enough as a writer to enable her to maintain a comfortable independence; the only character with any money problems is Geoffrey Tempest who, initially, has insufficient, and later too much. Mary Deane in *The Treasure of Heaven* and Diana of *The Young Diana* gain wealth as part of their transformation. Corelli was a product of the emergent Victorian middle classes for whom the Protestant work ethic held its own reward for writers as well as for industrialists and financiers, as Innocent explains to her dilettante lover:

Walter Scott was popular and made money – Charles Dickens was popular and made money – Thackeray was popular and made money – Shakespeare himself seemed to have had the one principal aim of making sufficient money to live comfortably in his native town, and he was ‘popular’ in his day.<sup>142</sup>

Corelli’s defence of authors who make money does not cease with the examples of Scott, Dickens, Thackeray and Shakespeare. Indeed, she uses the words of Rimânez in *The Sorrows of Satan* to attack what she perceives to be the attitude of the literary establishment toward wealthy writers: ‘You are too rich. That of itself is not legitimate in Literature, which great art generally elects to wear poverty in its button-hole as a flower of grace’.<sup>143</sup>

In *New Grub Street*, George Gissing contrasts writers of true literary works with popular novelists and laments the fact that ‘Art must be practised as a trade, at all events in our time. This is the age of trade. Of course if one refuses to be of one’s time, and yet hasn’t the means to live independently, what can result

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<sup>141</sup> Marie Corelli, *Innocent: Her Fancy and His Fact*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1914, p. 250.

<sup>142</sup> Corelli, *Innocent*, p. 353.

<sup>143</sup> Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 65.



but breakdown and wretchedness?'.<sup>144</sup> Gissing illustrates his argument through the characters of Jasper Milvain and Edwin Reardon. Corelli attempts to make a similar distinction between popular and good literature in *The Sorrows of Satan*, but the fact that the 'literary' works of Mavis Clare are also extremely popular suggests that her argument is fuelled by the need to establish respectability for her own *œuvre*.<sup>145</sup>

One of the most controversial claims made in the 'Author's Prologue' to *The Life Everlasting* is that the success of *Barabbas* freed Corelli from the need for critical approval. She writes:

Its notable triumph was achieved despite a hailstorm of abuse rattled down upon me by the press, – a hailstorm which I, personally, found welcome and refreshing, inasmuch as it cleared the air and cleaned the road for my better wayfaring. It released me once and for all from the trammels of such obligation as is incurred by praise, and set me firmly on my feet in that complete independence which to me . . . is a paramount necessity . . . I took my freedom gratefully, and ever since that time of unjust and ill-considered attack . . . have been happily indifferent to all so-called 'criticism' and immune from all attempts to interrupt my progress or turn me back upon my chosen way. (*LE* 24-5)

This extract highlights some of the faults in Corelli's writing style which so offended the critics: the inapt and confused metaphors like the 'refreshing hailstorm that cleaned the road' and released her from trammels; the clichés such as 'my chosen way'; the subordinate phrases that she strings together as she moves from one subject to the next in a single sentence. More importantly, this text reveals Corelli's complete lack of understanding of the role of the literary critic. She never could understand why critical acclaim eluded her novels. Her protests of delight at being released from 'such obligation as is incurred by praise' and in becoming independent of critical opinion are too loud and too frequent to be credible. Throughout her career, Corelli seized every available opportunity to abuse the press and, on the rare occasions that a critic praised any aspect of her work, she quickly brought the event to her readers' attention. Regarding *Ardath*, for example, she writes, 'Such authorities as the "Athenæum" and "Spectator" praised the whole conception and style of the work, the latter journal going so far

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<sup>144</sup> George Gissing, *The New Grub Street*, 1891; rpt: Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1968, p. 81.

<sup>145</sup> See, for example, Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, pp. 65, 170-1 and 210, *The Murder of Delicia*, pp. 2-4 and 53-4, and *Innocent*, p. 269.

as to say that I had beaten Beckford's famous "Vathek" on its own ground' (*LE* 20). It is questionable whether the comparison with *Vathek* is complimentary, but Corelli was content to read it that way. What is certain is that she remained puzzled and hurt throughout her career because the literary establishment did not praise her work. She interpreted their collective attitude toward her as one of personal dislike and, to a certain extent, she was right.

Delicia reflects Corelli's acute awareness of the advantages of literary success:

She relished the keen competition of the literary arena, where her rivals, burning with jealousy, endeavoured vainly to emulate her position; and she valued her fame as the means of bringing her into contact with all the leading men and women of her day.<sup>146</sup>

The last part of this comment reveals just how deeply Corelli longed to be part of the establishment, despite her protests to the contrary. The same longing is also apparent in an undated letter to Bertha Vyver: 'Contessa Fenzi says she wishes I would go [to Rome]. I should have such a splendid time there and soon know all the best people in the place'.<sup>147</sup>

Corelli's next novel was *The Sorrows of Satan*, which was even more successful than *Barabbas*. Often considered her best work because it provides good coverage of her concerns and contains some well-written passages, *The Sorrows of Satan* also starkly reveals Corelli's lack of discrimination and objectivity. Religious exhortation jostles with the condemnation of modern literature and nineteenth-century marriage arrangements. She berates contemporary church practices as vehemently as she alleges the corruption of literary criticism, and she derides the secularity of the education system as heartily as she scorns rich American women who marry to gain a title (and impecunious British aristocrats who marry rich American women for their money). She laments equally the dress sense of virtuous women and prime ministers and the spread of atheism. Oblivious to the complex implications of her unprecedented popularity, of *The Sorrows of Satan* and *Barabbas* Corelli merely writes: 'The two books carried their message far and wide with astonishing success and swiftness' (*LE* 25).

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<sup>146</sup> Corelli, *The Murder of Delicia*, p. 7.

<sup>147</sup> Vyver, *Memoirs of Marie Corelli*, p. 114.

The ‘Author’s Prologue’ to *The Life Everlasting* also reveals aspects of Corelli’s own character, exposing her as disingenuous regarding her dealings with Bentley when she implies that he impeded her progress as a writer. Her assertion that no-one could henceforth hinder or oppose her and that she has, subject only to God, complete control over her own destiny, betrays a characteristic hubris. She is duplicitous and self-serving in her interpretation of events. That these traits should contravene the very teachings she espouses – to eschew egotism, ambition and fame – raises yet again the question of how far Corelli believed her own version of events, of how much of what she wrote was for consumption by her readers and a contribution to the living Corelli legend. Nevertheless, sympathetic contemporaries like J. Cuming Walters view the ‘Author’s Prologue’ as evidence that Corelli was a woman with a fine nature, great ideas and a bold mission, arguing that in it she

reveals and expounds herself. She relates what she alone knew . . . of her designs, of the motives by which she was animated, and of the principles she wished to enunciate. It is not only her completest self-revelation, but her self-vindication, made in no apologetic spirit, but with the artless candour of one who wishes to speak the truth and to let that truth suffice for all purposes of explanation, or, if necessary, defence.<sup>148</sup>

Curiously, in the ‘Author’s Prologue’ to *The Life Everlasting*, Corelli refers to all her publications between *The Sorrows of Satan* in 1895 and *The Master-Christian* in 1900 as ‘playing with her pen’. Certainly *The Song of Miriam and Other Stories* (1898) is a repackaging of most of the short stories contained in the earlier *Cameos* (1896), and *Jane* (1897) and *Boy* (1900) are short novels which were only moderately successful, but *The Murder of Delicia*, *The Mighty Atom* and *Ziska* were also published in 1896. *The Murder of Delicia*, concerned with the perennial Corelli themes of the successful female novelist in a hostile literary world and the evils of marriage, is obviously not part of her psychic creed, but *The Mighty Atom* deals with the contemporary dialogue between science and religion and *Ziska: The Problem of a Wicked Soul* exemplifies Corelli’s theories of reincarnation and pre-ordained twin souls.

Also unmentioned in the ‘Author’s Prologue’ to *The Life Everlasting* are *Temporal Power: A Study in Supremacy* (1902), *God’s Good Man: A Simple Love*

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<sup>148</sup> J. Cuming Walters, ‘A Personal Tribute by way of Epilogue’ to Vyver’s *Memoirs of Marie Corelli*, p. 260.

*Story* (1904), *The Treasure of Heaven: A Romance of Riches* (1906), *Holy Orders: The Tragedy of a Quiet Life* (1908) and *The Devil's Motor: A Fantasy* (1911). *Temporal Power* was written after the death of Queen Victoria and is about the role of a well-intentioned monarch under the influence of the corrupt government of the day, the chief ministers of which resemble Joseph Chamberlain and the Marquis of Salisbury. The critic, W. T. Stead, labelled this novel 'a tract for the guidance of the King'.<sup>149</sup> Perhaps its most interesting aspects are, firstly, its strident anti-Semitism and, secondly, the fact that one of the foremost female characters, Lotys, is the leader of a band of revolutionaries and an orator, unusually public roles for a Corelli heroine.

*God's Good Man* constitutes Corelli's revenge upon her enemies in Stratford-upon-Avon for the Henley Street controversy. Sir Morton Pippit represents Archibald Flower, the brewer who later became Mayor of Stratford-upon-Avon, and the Reverend (Putty) Leveson portrays the Rev. Harvey Bloom, whose daughter unwittingly accused Corelli of being divorced. The town is Riversford. In this novel, Corelli remarks that 'it is a pity some law is not in progress to prevent the purchase of historic houses by vulgar and illiterate persons of no family'.<sup>150</sup> The heroine, Maryllia, is notable mainly for her passion to preserve the Five Sisters, a stand of beautiful beech trees two or three hundred years old. Corelli echoes her own heroine when she provides for the preservation of an ilex tree, reputedly the oldest tree in Stratford-upon-Avon, in her will.<sup>151</sup>

*The Treasure of Heaven* is more important for its frontispiece – the first authorised photograph of Marie Corelli – than for its tale of a millionaire who becomes a vagrant before settling into a Cornish village as a basket-weaver, living simply in the home of the woman who befriends him and ultimately inherits his fortune. *Holy Orders* is a temperance novel which also bears the scars of Corelli's altercation with the Stratford-upon-Avon ex-mayor, inasmuch as the evil in this novel emanates from the local brewery, which is eventually, and deservedly, burned down.

All of these books sold well, but not so her next, *The Devil's Motor*, which was illustrated by Arthur Severn. *The Devil's Motor* is best described by Teresa

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<sup>149</sup> Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, p. 69.

<sup>150</sup> Marie Corelli, *God's Good Man*, Methuen, London, 1904, p. 51.

<sup>151</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 284.

Ransom: 'It purports to be an allegory; the text is declamatory and the illustrations nightmarish'.<sup>152</sup> As in *The Treasure of Heaven* and *Holy Orders*, the motor car is depicted as a vehicle of evil and destruction. In 1911, the year of publication of *The Devil's Motor*, Corelli was to buy a Daimler nevertheless.

*The Young Diana: An Experiment of the Future*, was published in 1918. About a spinster who recovers her lost youth by means of a dangerous experiment conducted upon her by a male occult scientist, the novel was criticised for its triviality during a time of war. Corelli's response to the editor of the *Observer*, in which the most offensive criticism had appeared, was rejected, so she included her vindication in a collection of essays entitled *My 'Little Bit'* which she published in 1919 to record her contribution to the war effort. *The Young Diana* is a singularly bitter novel; Ransom attributes this to the aftermath of the Severn affair, 'For there is no destructive power more active and intense than love transformed to hate through falsehood and jealousy'.<sup>153</sup> Kowalczyk, on the other hand, considers that *The Young Diana* (and *The Secret Power*) reflect a shift in Corelli's attitude. The atrocities of the Great War, he argues, convinced Corelli of the impossibility of reviving the Old World virtues.<sup>154</sup>

Corelli's article defending *The Young Diana* is entitled 'Why Did I - ?'. She refutes the criticism that her novel is trivial, claiming that it deals with the safety, the prosperity, the very physical survival of humanity, because all of these are 'vested in fair Woman, upon whom the physical existence as well as "survival" of man depends' and that her book is 'a practical and passionate effort to save *Woman* alive! – beautiful and exquisite *Woman*! – the Mother of all *Man*!'. The article, as short as it is sarcastic, closes with the words: 'I seek to re-energize, re-form and re-establish the world! Amen!'.<sup>155</sup>

In *The Young Diana*, Sophy Lansing, suffragette and author of clever satire, is nothing like the women activists usually represented by Corelli as 'tomboy tennis players', 'giantesses', or 'unnatural and strutting embryos of a new sex'.<sup>156</sup> Sophy possesses a pleasant flat in Mayfair and is charming, witty and

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<sup>152</sup> Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, p. 179.

<sup>153</sup> Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, p. 199.

<sup>154</sup> Kowalczyk, 'In Vanished Summertime', p. 860.

<sup>155</sup> Marie Corelli, 'Why Did I - ?' in *My 'Little Bit'*, Collins, London, 1919, pp. 299-301.

<sup>156</sup> Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 66.

‘one of the best-dressed women in London’.<sup>157</sup> She is, however, deeply cynical about men, love and marriage and she articulates Corelli’s horror of the traditional female role:

A few months of delightful courtship, – then marriage – then incessant routine of housekeeping, illness and child-bearing – and afterwards, when the children grow up, the long dull days of resigned monotony; toothlessness, which is only partially remedied by modern dentistry, and an end of everything vital or pleasurable.<sup>158</sup>

Although only a minor character in the novel, Sophy serves as the novel’s record of the impact of the Great War, reflecting Corelli’s softened attitude toward female suffrage as a result of the movement of women out of the home and into the workforce. She is not a figure of satire; on the contrary, Corelli anticipates Virginia Woolf by giving Sophy her own flat and an income of two thousand pounds per year.

Corelli’s popularity waned after the war and her last works were *The Love of Long Ago and Other Stories*, published in 1920, *The Secret Power* in 1921 and, finally, *Love and the Philosopher: A Study in Sentiment*, published in 1923, a year before her death. Of these, *The Secret Power* is significant for the way in which it demonstrates Corelli’s combination of science and feminism. Richard Kowalczyk also uses this novel to demonstrate his argument that ‘when Corelli’s fictional methods changed, her simplistic opposition of crass materialism to a noble, romantic idealism became more ambiguous and her writing came closer to acceptable art’.<sup>159</sup>

*The Secret Power* deals with war and its aftermath and it appears to foreshadow the atom bomb, nuclear power and germ warfare. In *Memoirs of Marie Corelli*, Bertha Vyver publishes correspondence between Corelli and the scientists W. R. Gregory and Lord Haldane regarding this novel. The letters are of interest for the light they shed upon Corelli’s methods of researching the material for her writing. Clearly, although she corresponded with eminent scientists, little of their advice found its way into her novels. In one letter to the author, for

<sup>157</sup> Marie Corelli, *The Young Diana: An Experiment of the Future*, Hutchinson, London, 1918, p. 80.

<sup>158</sup> Corelli, *The Young Diana*, p. 69.

<sup>159</sup> Kowalczyk, ‘In Vanished Summertime’, p. 861.

example, Gregory explains the nature of sound waves, natural electricity and light waves, but it seems that Corelli paid little attention for, after having read the novel, he writes again:

I understand now why you asked me about the conversion of light-waves into sound, and though the physics of this transformation is not as you have imagined it, yet I should be the last to suggest that your use of the idea was not legitimate in a romance . . . Putting aside your departure from the canons of conventional physics . . . I find in your book the deepest sympathy with the scientific spirit and much intimate knowledge of new scientific ideas. You evidently follow with interest some of the great developments of our times, and you express them in words which carry conviction. There is a possibility that tremendous forces may be released when more is known about the whirling particles which make up the atom, and these may be used for good purposes, as Morgana used them, or for destruction, as with Roger Seaton.<sup>160</sup>

Lord Haldane also read *The Secret Power* and he informed Corelli that it gave him great pleasure as the style was brilliant, the range of imagination very great and the conception a novel one. He does express concern, however, with the way in which scientific progress is portrayed, pointing out that ‘Such a development as you represent is convincing only if it is shown to be what it always must be, the outcome of long and sustained concentration’. Haldane further remarks that no-one living the life of the heroine could design such an airship as did Morgana and that no scientist could have worked out an invention for mass destruction such as Roger Seaton’s without ‘his preliminary work being known’. Despite this criticism, Haldane concludes: ‘Still, you are warning the public against what war may some day come to mean’.<sup>161</sup> Corelli’s notion of scientific research was idealised. Morgana, for example, employs a method described as ‘thinking for results’, a

form of introspection which she knew, from experience, sometimes let in unexpected light on the creative cells of the brain and impelled them to the evolving of hitherto untried suggestions.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Letter dated 16 February, 1923 and reproduced in Vyver, *Memoirs of Marie Corelli*, pp. 252-3.

<sup>161</sup> Letter dated 6 November, 1921 and reproduced in Vyver, *Memoirs of Marie Corelli*, pp. 247-8.

<sup>162</sup> Marie Corelli, *The Secret Power*, Methuen, London, 1921, p. 247.

In his ‘Epilogue’ to Vyver’s book, J. Cuming Walters points out that ‘In the realm of speculative science Miss Corelli followed Lytton and preceded Wells’ and that she felt justified when (unspecified) events foretold in *The Secret Power* were proved to be reality. Of her novels he writes:

Miss Corelli’s romances, then, were not only vivid stories; they were her means of imparting knowledge and doctrine. Not one of them but has ‘purpose,’ and it is of no slight interest to notice the animating cause in each work. We discover by this means the subjects nearest to her heart, and the problems she was eager to solve. It was doubtless because she had a lesson to enforce, a truth to expound, or some fine daring speculation to enunciate, that she threw herself with such ardour into her work.<sup>163</sup>

## CHAPTER FOUR: A CRITICAL VIEW

### I: A MATTER OF GENRE

Corelli’s unpublished autobiographical manuscripts, which Bertha Vyver inserts in her *Memoirs of Marie Corelli* in order to describe her friend’s childhood, and perhaps in an attempt to explain how the author’s adult personality was formed, contain the following youthful pledges: ‘I’ve made up my mind to be “somebody!” – yes . . . I *must* make progress if I am ever to do anything in the world – and I *will* do something! – I *will!* – and I’ll be as unlike anybody else as I can!’.<sup>164</sup> Much later, Corelli wrote to George Bentley: ‘I wish to prove that I am capable of more than one style of novel . . . I have resolved that no two books of mine shall be in the least alike, so that neither the critics nor the public shall know what to expect of me’.<sup>165</sup>

Corelli’s novels are, without exception, didactic. In the ‘Author’s Prologue’ to *The Life Everlasting*, she complains that people ‘will not listen to any spiritual truth unless it is conveyed to them, as though they were children, in the form of a “story” ’ (LE 31). Corelli believed in what she wrote: she took her novels as seriously as she took herself, and, as she lacked a sense of humour, this was very seriously indeed. This absence of a sense of humour, together with her inability to discriminate, meant that Corelli had difficulty in creating characters which, in turn, restricted the ways in which she could convey her messages to her

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<sup>163</sup> Walters, ‘Epilogue’ to Vyver, *Memoirs of Marie Corelli*, p. 267.

<sup>164</sup> Vyver, *Memoirs of Marie Corelli*, p. 34.



readers. Frequently, therefore, instead of making her point through appropriate dialogue, Corelli resorts to authorial and narratorial interventions and these are often lengthy. Moreover, Corelli was virtually self-educated and her reading undisciplined, so her long addresses to her readers lack intellectual rigour. The background material for her novels, such as scientific details, show no signs of comprehensive or scrupulous research, although they are obviously drawn from an eclectic general knowledge. On the other hand, her imagination was boundless and her energy and courage great.

The result is that Corelli writes about philosophy, science, religion, education, the woman question, ethics, society – in fact, about every contemporary issue – in a colourful and passionate but disorderly fashion. Yet she is a more perceptive writer than her nearest rival, Hall Caine, and the gravity with which she approaches her work removes her from what David Murray terms ‘the mob of writing ladies’.<sup>166</sup>

Twentieth-century critics are divided regarding the genre of Corelli’s novels. Richard Kowalczyk classifies them as romances, noting that they contain Gothic themes and shocking lines of action with salacious overtones. He also argues that her ‘scientific novels’ – which ones he does not specify – ‘are attempts to revive older fictional structures and with them traditional attitudes’.<sup>167</sup> Sally Ledger describes Corelli simply as one of the ‘popular writers of feminine romance’.<sup>168</sup> Gerd Bjørhovde classes her as a writer of ‘largely romantic novels’.<sup>169</sup> In his ‘Introduction’ to the 1998 edition of *The Sorrows of Satan*, Peter Keating confines his comments regarding genre to the remark that, like Stevenson in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and Bram Stoker in *Dracula* (1897), ‘Corelli drew for dramatic effect on older traditions of sensation and horror fiction’, and he observes that various scenes in the novel

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<sup>165</sup> Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 17.

<sup>166</sup> David Christie Murray, *My Contemporaries in Fiction*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1897, p. 152.

<sup>167</sup> Kowalczyk, ‘In Vanished Summertime’, pp. 850, 851 and 853.

<sup>168</sup> Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and feminism at the ‘fin de siècle’*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1997, p. 178.

<sup>169</sup> Gerd Bjørhovde, *Rebellious Structures: Women Writers and the Crisis of the Novel 1880-1900*, Norwegian University Press, Oslo, 1987, p. 7.

‘have far closer connections with *fin de siècle* decadence than Corelli would, presumably, have liked to acknowledge’.<sup>170</sup>

Discussing the revival of romance in the 1880s, Michael Wheeler notes that the writers of romance at this time (amongst whom he includes G. A. Henty, Haggard, Conan Doyle, Stevenson and Corelli) ‘revelled in being set at liberty from the idea that mundane contemporary “reality” was the proper subject of fiction’. He also observes that the religious quest was popular with writers of romance in the late nineteenth century. Of Corelli in particular Wheeler states:

A writer whose enormous popularity and high self-esteem are today difficult to comprehend, Marie Corelli is significant mainly in what her bizarre works tell us of the late Victorian taste for escapist sensationalism and the occult.<sup>171</sup>

A different approach is taken by Darko Suvin who has compiled a comprehensive bibliography of Victorian science fiction according to the following definition:

all such fictional works in which an imaginary, nonexistent but not impossible, novelty or novum is narratively dominant or hegemonic, whether it be of a sociopolitical nature (as in utopian fiction), or of a natural-science-cum-technological nature, or indeed a fairly abstract – for example, mathematical or philosophical – parable on the possibilities of novel relationships of psychozoa (intelligent beings) to each other and the universe.<sup>172</sup>

The bibliography is accompanied by an annotated list of a further two hundred books included in earlier science fiction bibliographies but rejected by Suvin as they do not conform to his definition. Three of the rejected Corelli novels, *A Romance of Two Worlds*, *The Soul of Lilith* and *Ziska*, are not science fiction, Suvin claims, but occult supernatural fantasy.<sup>173</sup> This argument receives independent support from the fact that, with the exception of *The Sorrows of Satan*, recent reproductions of Corelli’s works are mainly by publishers like Health Research (dealing with the occult), Kessenger (rare philosophy and freemasonry) and Violet Books (antiquarian supernatural literature and

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<sup>170</sup> Keating, ‘Introduction’ to *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. xiii.

<sup>171</sup> Michael Wheeler, *English Fiction of the Victorian Period 1830-1890*, Longman, New York, 1985, pp. 161-9.

<sup>172</sup> Suvin, *Victorian Science Fiction in the UK*, p. 4.

<sup>173</sup> Suvin, *Victorian Science Fiction in the UK*, pp. 104-5. The remaining rejected novels, *Vendetta!* and *The Sorrows of Satan*, are considered to be neither science fiction nor fantasy.

fantasy).<sup>174</sup> Significantly, Corelli objected to the word ‘occult’ on the grounds that it was a new and inadequate expression for the term ‘Spiritual science’.<sup>175</sup>

Norman Feltes describes *A Romance of Two Worlds* as ‘a strange science-fiction fantasy’.<sup>176</sup> Brian Stableford differentiates between the ‘supernatural fiction of fantasy’ and ‘scientific romance’, noting that the latter includes ‘plausible impossibilities’ supported by an apologetic jargon borrowed from science. Stableford claims that ‘the distinguishing characteristic is not that scientific romances *are* scientific, but that they pretend to be, and that they pretend to be in order to serve some rhetorical purpose’. He continues:

The most successful writer of the period which saw the emergence of scientific romance, Marie Corelli, also wrote stories of this sort, beginning with *A Romance of Two Worlds*, whose charismatic hero reveals to the narratrix the secrets of the Electric Creed.<sup>177</sup>

Yet not all of Corelli’s novels deal with escapist themes, the occult or explicitly with science. *Jane and Boy*, for example, treat social and family circumstances and *The Mighty Atom*, which questions the place of science in education, is the antithesis of escapist and does not include the occult. *Wormwood* is escapist only to the extent that the narrator is an incurable alcoholic and *The Master-Christian*, although depicting a fanciful reincarnation of Christ, pursues the perceived evils of established Catholicism.

R. B. Kershner hails Corelli as ‘the undisputed queen of popular romance’ and places her within the same silver fork tradition as Ouida. Because of the mingling of eroticism and spirituality in their works, Kershner also sees similarities between, surprisingly, Corelli and Gerard Manly Hopkins, as well as, more predictably, between Corelli and Caine, Hichens and Lew Wallace, all writers of highly erotic popular Christian romance, and between Corelli and

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<sup>174</sup> *The Sorrows of Satan* was republished by Oxford World’s Classics in 1998. Several Corelli novels are also republished by Borden Publishing but I have been unable to discover any information about this firm.

<sup>175</sup> Corelli, *The Life Everlasting*, p. 131.

<sup>176</sup> Feltes, *Literary Capital and the Late Victorian Novel*, p. 119.

<sup>177</sup> Brian Stableford, *Scientific Romance In Britain 1890-1950*, Fourth Estate, London, 1985, pp. 8 and 40-1.

decadent writers like Wilde and Swinburne, John Gray and Lionel Johnson. Kershner describes Corelli's style as 'lurid melodrama'.<sup>178</sup>

Annette Federico also considers the question of the genre of Corelli's fiction, noting that there is 'a utopian spirit in her romances, but Corelli's books do not belong to the category of utopian feminist fiction'.<sup>179</sup> Federico gives a qualified categorisation of *The Master-Christian*, *Temporal Power*, *Wormwood* and *Holy Orders* as social-problem novels which attack the big vices of the time but which 'still must be classified as romances'.<sup>180</sup> She describes *A Romance of Two Worlds* as a supernatural romance, *Vendetta!* as a lurid revenge melodrama, *Thelma* as a sentimental story, *Ardath* as an esoteric tale and *Wormwood* as a sermon. *The Soul of Lilith* is a science-fiction story, *Barabbas* a retelling of the Crucifixion and *The Mighty Atom* a critique of modern atheistic education.<sup>181</sup>

Corelli's novels spurn the fashion for literary realism, in Rita Felski's opinion, and offer:

fantasies of escape and transfiguration, depicting glamorous and mysterious imaginary worlds far removed from the everyday lives of her readers. This skilful blending of romance, religiosity, and exoticism spoke to the needs and desires of a vast contemporary public that spanned class boundaries.<sup>182</sup>

Within the context of a consideration of the relationship between gender, mass culture and modernity, Felski argues that women's popular fiction of the time is centrally concerned with the invocation of elsewhere, 'with the imaginative and often hyperbolic representation of a "higher" world', and that Corelli's work is typical of this kind of writing, which she terms the 'popular sublime', as it exhibits a confluence of the ineffable and its popular modes of representation.<sup>183</sup>

Felski's description of novels like Corelli's as the 'popular sublime' is apt because of the elements of transfiguration and transcendence evident in, for example, *A Romance of Two Worlds*, *Ardath*, *The Soul of Lilith*, *Barabbas*, *The*

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<sup>178</sup> R. B. Kershner, 'Modernism's Mirror: The Sorrows of Marie Corelli' in *Transforming Genres: New Approaches to British Fiction*, edited by Nikki Lee Manos and Meri-Jane Rochelson, St Martin's Press, New York, 1994, pp. 67, 74 and 79.

<sup>179</sup> Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 96.

<sup>180</sup> Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 109.

<sup>181</sup> Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 16.

<sup>182</sup> Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, p. 115.

<sup>183</sup> Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, pp. 115-121.

*Sorrows of Satan, Ziska, Temporal Power, The Life Everlasting, Innocent, The Young Diana and The Secret Power*. Yet, despite her observation that the ‘critical terminologies of both realistic and modernist aesthetics are patently inadequate in coming to grips with the distinctive features of Corelli’s fiction’, Felski does not appear confident that the ‘popular sublime’ qualifies as a genre for she is constrained to add that Corelli’s novels ‘are best described as moral fables’.<sup>184</sup> The term ‘moral fable’, however, implies a brevity and succinctness that Corelli’s novels lack, although many of them certainly contain fabulous plots and settings, and all of them are self-consciously and sometimes stridently moral. No doubt, however, Corelli would have seen herself more in the tradition of Homer than of Æsop.

Nevertheless, Felski is right in recognising that Corelli organises ‘textual meaning and events in order to demonstrate triumphantly the overarching presence of a guiding spiritual principle’ and so perhaps a description of her novels might include the term allegory, although this risks overrating their thematic coherence to the same extent as the term ‘fable’ tends to underrate their range and attention to detail.<sup>185</sup> Kowalczyk recognises the metaphoric nature of Corelli’s novels, pointing out that the ‘composition of Corelli’s allegories depends upon a tableau of actions involving two types’ and that the ‘ingenious allegorical system in her fiction uses as its point of reference contemporary data and scientific theories found in English magazines and journals’. He also argues that ‘love provided the basis of Corelli’s carefully constructed allegories which highlighted universal moral truths and feelings’, although he suggests that instead of ‘appealing to an ordered body of ideas to make her allegories work successfully, Corelli referred to the vague and amorphous feelings surrounding Christian myths as an area of consensus between author and reader’.<sup>186</sup> Irrespective of whether she mastered the *modus operandi*, ‘allegorical’ is nevertheless an inadequate classification for Corelli’s novels as it is merely ‘a strategy which may be employed in any literary form or genre’.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, pp. 121-2.

<sup>185</sup> Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, p. 122.

<sup>186</sup> Kowalczyk, ‘In Vanished Summertime’, pp. 858 and 855. See also references to the allegorical nature of Corelli’s work at pp. 850 and 851.

<sup>187</sup> M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 1957; fifth ed., Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Fort Worth, 1988, p. 5.

Corelli's favourite authors were Dickens and Scott and she detested writers like Ibsen. As Felski points out, Corelli 'explicitly defined her own work in opposition to writers such as Zola and the naturalist school, whose work she regarded as both cause and symptom of a wide-ranging moral malaise afflicting contemporary society'.<sup>188</sup> Her antipathy extended to English realists and, in particular, she scorned and despised radical feminist writers.<sup>189</sup> Corelli considered that Dickens and Scott offer ideal versions of femininity as examples to their readers, whereas authors like Gissing, Hardy and George Egerton portray their heroines as flawed characters. Corelli refused to permit literary realism to attenuate her transcendental vision for a moral society. She considered *A Romance of Two Worlds* and *The Life Everlasting: A Reality of Romance* as two of her most serious and important novels and it is obvious from their titles that she considered them to be romances. Similarly, *The Sorrows of Satan, or The Strange Experience of One Geoffrey Tempest, Millionaire*, and *The Young Diana: An Experiment of the Future* also carry the words *A Romance* on their title pages and *The Treasure of Heaven* is subtitled *A Romance of Riches*. Kowalczyk echoes Felski when he remarks:

Marie Corelli's theory of romance is a refraction of the Romantic vision . . . Though not systematized, Corelli's theory of fiction contains a certain boldness for insisting upon Romantic values long after the wave of this movement had reached its crest . . . her romantic theory of fiction centers in the belief that the artist's consciousness is unique. His imaginative perception of reality and his sense of love and beauty coerce the writer's poetic instincts for prophecy. The primary obligation of art, as well as the basis by which it is to be judged, questions how successfully the artist stimulates his readers into experiencing his perception of higher truths.<sup>190</sup>

A satisfactory generic description of the novels of Marie Corelli might therefore be 'allegorical romances', particularly if 'romance' is used in the mediaeval context of an individual quest, where progress is achieved through a series of successful encounters with representations of evil which are only to be defeated by steadfastness, often with the aid of magic. Most of Corelli's novels involve a quest motif and the evils which confront her heroines and heroes are a

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<sup>188</sup> Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, p. 121.

<sup>189</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 210.

<sup>190</sup> Kowalczyk, 'In Vanished Summertime', p. 854.

motley mixture of great wealth, illness, atheism, a corrupt literary establishment, marriages made on a mercenary basis, egotism, age, selfishness, fame, alcohol abuse, greed, the Catholic church, infidelity, a degenerate society and ambition. Most involve the transfiguration or transcendence of the heroine or hero achieved with the aid of occultism, science or religion, or a combination of any of these. Part II of this thesis explores the way in which Corelli develops a singular theology based upon spiritualism and her understanding of contemporary scientific concepts and discoveries.

## II: CORELLI AND THE CRITICS

Contemporary literary critics were generally dismissive of Marie Corelli's novels.<sup>191</sup> Scott notes that some editors refused even to acknowledge her existence, recounting an anecdote wherein Canon Wilberforce offered to write a review of *Barabbas* for the *Nineteenth Century*, only to be told that 'never at any time, or under any circumstances, would any work by Marie Corelli be so much as mentioned in that magazine'.<sup>192</sup> David Murray, in *My Contemporaries in Fiction* published in 1897, comments that Corelli's zeal runs away with her judgement and that her emotion and intellect are not commensurate, a situation which, he remarks, is disastrous for the critical mind but unnoticed by the ordinary reader. He attributes Corelli's success to her belief in herself: 'Her inward conviction of the authority of her own message and her own power to deliver it is the one qualification which makes her different from the mob of writing ladies'.<sup>193</sup>

The review in the *World* of Corelli's first novel, *A Romance of Two Worlds*, concludes: 'taken as a pure romance – a romance of electricity we may call it – the book is a tolerable thing enough. If the writer intends us to take it

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<sup>191</sup> Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 20.

<sup>192</sup> Scott, *The Story of a Friendship*, p. 170. See also Corelli's portrayal of editors' refusal to acknowledge the popularity of her self-reflexive heroine, Mavis Clare, in *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 139.

<sup>193</sup> Murray, *My Contemporaries in Fiction*, pp. 144-52.

seriously – as her preface seems half to suggest – it is pure bosh’.<sup>194</sup> Reviewing *Vendetta!*, the critic George Sala wrote in the *Illustrated London News*:

I am reading *Vendetta* with a wet cloth around my head . . . and my feet in a basin of iced and camphorated water; but ere I reach the end of the Signora or Signorina Corelli’s appalling romance, dreadful consequences will, I fear, accrue. Possibly human gore . . . I shudder; but I continue to read *Vendetta* just as, when I was a child, I used to shudder over the *Mysteries of Udolpho*.<sup>195</sup>

The *World* called *Vendetta!* ‘pure and unadulterated melodrama’.<sup>196</sup> The *Pall Mall Gazette* commented in its review of *The Soul of Lilith*:

It would be impossible in columns of extracts, to convey any adequate idea of the platitude-in-extravagance which pervades this book from end to end. If it were amusing one could forgive it; but there is something so frigid and mechanical in the whole thing that it does not even raise a smile. This is the one really remarkable feature of Miss Corelli’s achievement – that amid all her absurdity she could contrive to be so dull.<sup>197</sup>

Scott and Masters both reproduce lengthy extracts from a twelve-page and, for its time, unusually impartial review of *The Sorrows of Satan*, written by W. T. Stead in the *Review of Reviews*. Stead remarks that the novel is ‘the supreme example of a popular style’ and recommends that, once Corelli has achieved her success, sold her scores of thousands and avenged herself upon her critics, if she would

take the book, tone it down, omit her superlatives, and cut out of it every solitary word that relates to reviews, reviewers, and other women novelists, she will have produced a book which will live long after much of the ephemeral literature of the day is forgotten.<sup>198</sup>

Nevertheless, Stead continues:

Marie Corelli either writes from her own experience and observation, or she draws upon her imagination. If she draws

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<sup>194</sup> Bigland, *Marie Corelli: The Woman and the Legend*, p. 78.

<sup>195</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 67. Catherine Kunce remarks ‘It seems strange that Sala calls Corelli’s novel “an appalling romance,” but admits he cannot put the book down’ – see ‘A Transparent Veil: The Forgotten Works of Marie Corelli’, unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Denver, 1989, p. 7. Surely the point of Sala’s review is that Corelli’s novels, despite their literary defects, make compulsive reading for the mass audience.

<sup>196</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 66.

<sup>197</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 114.

<sup>198</sup> Scott, *The Story of A Friendship*, pp. 171-2.



upon her imagination, it is a very unpleasant imagination; but if her notions are based upon her experience, she must have a very unpleasant set of friends.<sup>199</sup>

Scott attributes to George Bernard Shaw the comment that Corelli's novels represent 'the victory of a powerful imagination over an inadequate array of facts'.<sup>200</sup>

With the exception of Bertha Vyver and Laura Conway, each of the author's biographers reports on the adverse critical reception of her novels. Several cite an unsourced review of *A Romance of Two Worlds*: 'Miss Corelli would have been better advised had she embodied her ridiculous ideas in a sixpenny pamphlet'.<sup>201</sup> A fairly typical comment, attributed to an unidentified edition of the *Spectator*, is also offered by Scott: 'Marie Corelli was a woman of deplorable talent who imagined that she was a genius, and was accepted as a genius by a public to whose commonplace sentimentalities and prejudices she gave a glamorous setting and an impressive scale'.<sup>202</sup>

None of Corelli's biographers includes any reviews of her work by academics. Sir James Donaldson, Principal of St. Andrews University, was the author's good friend and called her 'My Sweet Marie' and 'beloved little lassie'. However, there is nothing to indicate what he thought of her writing, although the fact that he did invite a number of 'clever, brilliant people, well-balanced [and] intellectual' to meet her adds weight to the claim that Corelli was a good conversationalist.<sup>203</sup>

Not all the critics were contemptuous. J. Cuming Walters, editor of the *Birmingham Daily Post*, writes in what Masters describes as 'the eulogistic appendix' to Vyver's biography:

the imagination and the experience were hers, and they produced that remarkable series of human dramas and radiant romances of which

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<sup>199</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, pp. 141-2.

<sup>200</sup> Scott, *The Story of a Friendship*, p. 122.

<sup>201</sup> See, for example, Coates and Bell, *Marie Corelli: The Writer and the Woman*, p. 41, Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 58, and Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, p. 36. Corelli herself claims that the review appeared in the *Morning Post* - see *My First Book: The Experiences of Walter Besant and Others*, 1894; new ed., Chatto & Windus, London, 1897, p. 208.

<sup>202</sup> Scott, *Marie Corelli: The Story of a Friendship*, p. 263.

<sup>203</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 8. In respect to Corelli's ability as a conversationalist, see, for example, Masters p. 78-9, and Vyver, *Memoirs of Marie Corelli*, p. 88.

even Mr. Stead said – speaking of one he disliked most – ‘the conception is magnificent.’ That there is exuberance, that there is passion, that there are faults of style, that there are angry outbursts which should have been restrained, the best friends of Miss Corelli admit . . . I am among those who regret the extremes in *The Sorrows of Satan*, but I almost forget them amid the overwhelming mass of compensations. Moreover, the extremist views expressed are, as will be found in every instance, directed against indisputable wrongs and vices – unchastity, sordidness, slander, corruption.<sup>204</sup>

Masters also notes that the magazine *Shafts* offered ‘rare unequivocal praise’ of *Barabbas*, describing the novel as a ‘masterpiece’ and one of ‘the most powerful literary productions of the nineteenth century’.<sup>205</sup> Teresa Ransom cites an article by A. St John Adcock in the May 1909 issue of the *Bookman* which remarks that

no living author has been more persistently maligned and sneered at by certain sections of the Press – by the presumptuous and strutting academic section of it particularly – than has Miss Corelli; and none has won (by sheer force of her own merits, for the press has never helped her) a wider, more persistently increasing fame and affection among all classes of that intelligent public which reads and judges books, but does not write about them.<sup>206</sup>

It is in this article that Adcock describes Corelli as the ‘idol of Suburbia’.<sup>207</sup>

Writing in 1928, Rebecca West damns Corelli’s writing but is compelled to admire her energy:

the best-sellers, have, like the toad, a jewel in the head: this jewel of demoniac vitality. Marie Corelli had a mind like any milliner’s apprentice; but she was something much more than a milliner’s apprentice. When one turns over her pages one comes on delicious sentences – such as the description of the bad man who made a reputation as a wit by dint of stealing a few salacious witticisms from Moliere and Baudelaire . . . Her incurably commonplace mind was incapable of inaccurately surveying life, but some wild lust for beauty in her made her take a wild inventory of the world’s contents and try to do what it could with them. What a gallant try this Moliere-Baudelaire sentence is to do something with some hearsay story of vice wearing at times an iridescence, and of French authors writing wicked books! She rode the Tosh-horse at full gallop.<sup>208</sup>

<sup>204</sup> Walters, ‘Epilogue’ to Vyver, *Memoirs of Marie Corelli*, p. 259. The phrase cited by Walters is from the review of *The Sorrows of Satan* by W. T. Stead in the *Review of Reviews*. Masters’s comment appears in *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 129.

<sup>205</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 129.

<sup>206</sup> Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, p. 166.

<sup>207</sup> Feltes, *Literary Capital and the Late Victorian Novel*, p. 124.

<sup>208</sup> Rebecca West, ‘The Tosh Horse’ in *The Strange Necessity: Essays and Reviews*, 1928; rpt: Virago, London, 1987, pp. 320-1.

However, not long after, Q. D. Leavis writes:

The high-level reader of Marie Corelli . . . is impelled to laugh, so ridiculously inadequate to the issues raised is the equipment of the mind that resolutely tackles them, and . . . so absurdly out of proportion is the energy expended to the objects that aroused it.

Nevertheless, Leavis also feels compelled to remark upon Corelli's 'magnificent vitality'.<sup>209</sup>

Virginia Woolf's essay 'The Dream' is a review of George Bullock's biography of Corelli, which, Woolf writes, 'makes us feel . . . that we have been watching a stout white dog performing tricks in front of an audience which eggs it on, but at the same time jeers'. Woolf's title relates to Corelli's 'dream hole' in the garden of her childhood home near Box Hill and to the name of her imported Venetian gondola. 'The Dream' is also the name Corelli gives to Santoris's amazing yacht in *The Life Everlasting*. Woolf sees Corelli as the centre of her own dreams:

And that self, sometimes called Thelma, sometimes Mavis Clare, draped in white satin, hung with pure lilies, and exhibited twice a year in stout volumes for which the public paid her ten thousand pounds apiece, is [a] damning . . . indictment of Victorian taste.

Nevertheless, although Corelli dreamed so hard and so efficiently that she was able to realise all except two of her ambitions, Woolf concludes 'it was the dream that killed her':

For inside that ever-thickening carapace of solid dream the commonplace vigorous little woman gradually ceased to live. She became harder, duller, more prudish, more conventional; and at the same time more envious and more uneasy. The only remedy that revived her was publicity. And like other drug-takers she could only live by increasing the dose. Her tricks became more and more extravagant.

Although critical, Woolf is sympathetic toward Corelli. She reserves her harshest condemnation for the audience which applauded and jeered at Corelli's exhibitions of herself – not the 'million', Corelli's readers for whom her novels at least provided some relief in a dreary working existence – but for people like

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<sup>209</sup> Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, 1932; rpt: Peregrine, Harmondsworth, 1979, pp. 64 and 62.

Wilde, the cruel Arthur Severn and the aristocratic ladies who called the author common but invited her to all their lunch and dinner parties.<sup>210</sup>

Modern critics are also generally dismissive of Corelli. In her text, *The Singular Anomaly: Women Novelists of the Nineteenth Century*, Vineta Colby writes of Corelli (and Ouida): ‘Such novelists have no place in this study, not because their work is mainly vulgar sensationalism, but because they were not primarily intellectuals’.<sup>211</sup> Keating observes: ‘Her own characteristic style of writing was high-pitched, florid, emotionally charged; powerful always, and perfectly suited to her fictional task, though with little variation, subtlety, or literary interest’.<sup>212</sup> On the other hand, Keating does point out that

Because literary critics have tended to ignore Corelli or simply to treat her as a joke, it is generally assumed that she did not know what she was saying, but she most certainly did . . . It was, for example, as clear to her as to many of the contemporary writers whose decadence she eagerly condemns, that she was living through an age of cultural crisis . . . She welcomed the modern mass audience and praised popular taste as fundamentally decent, a safeguard against the degeneracy of Aestheticism.<sup>213</sup>

R. B. Kershner mockingly observes parallels between James Joyce and Marie Corelli in that ‘If *Dedalus* is a triumph of ambiguous self-portrayal, *Mavis Clare* is a horrible warning against the novelist’s autobiographical impulse’. Kershner develops this argument by pointing out that Joyce and Corelli were both convinced of their own genius and that both were busy writing and acting out the myth of themselves. Each was bitter against the publishing establishment and sought literary revenge for slights; each was obsessed by betrayal; each was fascinated by the Byronic pose. Both were irresistibly drawn to self-portrayal, were convinced of the ultimate, religious importance of art and the crucial significance of its cheapening for a mass readership: ‘All that finally separated

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<sup>210</sup> Virginia Woolf, ‘The Dream’ in *Collected Essays*, Vol. IV, 1925; rpt: Harcourt, Brace & World, New York, 1967; Major Authors on CD-ROM, Primary Source Media, 1997, pp. 97-100. The only two dreams which Corelli could not will into existence, according to Woolf, were those relating to public recognition for the work of the author’s father and brother.

<sup>211</sup> Vineta Colby, *The Singular Anomaly: Women Novelists of the Nineteenth Century*, New York University Press, New York, 1970, p. 11.

<sup>212</sup> Keating, ‘Introduction’ to *The Sorrows of Satan*, pp. xi-xii.

<sup>213</sup> Keating, ‘Introduction’ to *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. xii.

them was art itself'.<sup>214</sup> Kershner's linking of Corelli with Modernism is echoed in the comments of other critics such as Rita Felski.

Since the 1970s, feminist literary criticism has shown renewed interest in Marie Corelli, particularly in relation to her position as the most popular novelist of the time *vis à vis* 'the woman question' of the 1890s and the female suffrage movement of the early 1900s. Janet Galligani Casey, for example, suggests that Corelli's numerous statements on the status of women have not been adequately considered, probably because they are so highly contradictory. The contradictory nature of Corelli's ideas about the status of women is discussed at some length in Part III of this thesis, together with her conviction that the field of science was one in which women were undoubtedly the equals of men. As Casey points out in respect of Corelli and 'the woman question',

it is precisely her inconsistency regarding this issue, coupled with her immense popularity, that makes her unique and worthy of further study: clearly she reflects the confusion of an entire generation of women, a generation confronted at once with the suffragette movement and the decline of the feminine ideal as perceived in the Victorian age . . . Her conflicting views of womanhood make her a notable transitional figure among the 'literary feminists' – a curious link between George Eliot and Virginia Woolf.<sup>215</sup>

Corelli's is indeed a curious name to link with those of Eliot and Woolf but Casey is not alone in making surprising associations. J. Cuming Walters sees parallels between Eliot's Dorothea Brooke, Esther Lyon, Dinah Morris and Maggie Tulliver and Corelli's Mavis Clare, Innocent and the heroine of *The Life Everlasting*. He suggests that, although neither belonged to the 'shrieking sisterhood', Eliot and Corelli were at one in their protests against the assumed superiority of 'a section of mankind' and in their representation of women who are 'the equal of the best types of men'.<sup>216</sup> More unexpected is Henry Miller's description of Corelli as 'extraordinary' and 'ahead of her time', and his claim that the feminist movement has produced none so captivating as Marie Corelli (with the possible exception of Germaine Greer). Miller attributes to Corelli a gift

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<sup>214</sup> R. B. Kershner Jr., 'Joyce and Popular Literature: The Case of Corelli' in *James Joyce and his Contemporaries*, edited by Diana A. Ben-Merre and Maureen Murphy, Greenwood, Westport, Ct, 1989, p. 57.

<sup>215</sup> Janet Galligani Casey, 'Marie Corelli and Fin de Siècle Feminism' in *English Literature in Transition 1880-1920*, 35 (2): (1992) 163-78 (p. 164).

<sup>216</sup> Walters, 'Epilogue' to Vyver, *Memoirs of Marie Corelli*, pp. 272-3.

for portraiture, scenic descriptions and wonderful characterisations, claims that she has the ability to hold the reader in perpetual suspense, and asserts that she is ‘extremely capable in argument and discussion, giving each side its due’. ‘Her books are packed not only with brilliant dialogue but with action as dramatic as that of the Greek dramatists’, Miller writes, seemingly without irony.<sup>217</sup>

Rita Felski notes that Corelli is a ‘self-identified conservative’ whose texts ‘reveal their inevitable enmeshment within the ideologies and world-views of their time, so that their voices speak to us across a chasm of historical difference’.<sup>218</sup> Nevertheless, through popular culture, Felski like Kershner links Corelli with modern fiction:

Corelli’s fiction offers a significant departure from the prevailing tradition of domestic melodrama that is often seen as the quintessential nineteenth-century feminine genre, foreshadowing the centrality of glamorous locales and conspicuous consumption to much of twentieth-century popular culture. Whereas the domestic novel typically focused on the minutiae of everyday life in the private sphere, preaching the values of feminine modesty and restraint, Corelli sets many of her novels in exotic and sumptuous locations.<sup>219</sup>

Corelli’s novels are also modern, according to Felski, because of their characteristic antimodernism: her use of spiritualism and orientalism to create dream-worlds free of the constraints of historical contingency reflects the modern tendency to locate redemption outside the restless and dissatisfied consciousness.<sup>220</sup>

Norman Feltes, whose interest in nineteenth-century literature lies with publishing history and practice rather than literary criticism or feminism, presents an unusually impartial assessment of Marie Corelli and her works. He details her extraordinary publishing success, her relationship with her publishers and her business acumen. In the context of her business capacity, Feltes examines the author’s self-perception:

the tension itself, between what Marie Corelli denies (‘a strong-minded woman’) and what she claims (‘a literary woman’), is

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<sup>217</sup> Henry Miller, ‘Marie Corelli’ in *Gliding into the Everglades and Other Essays*, Lost Pleiade Press, Oregon, 1977, pp. 65-8.

<sup>218</sup> Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, p. 33.

<sup>219</sup> Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, p. 123.

<sup>220</sup> Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, p. 131.

ideologically the most significant point, representing not only the ambiguity of her self-dramatization but a crucial element of textual ideology in [*The Sorrows of Satan*].<sup>221</sup>

Feltes offers a précis of *The Sorrows of Satan* and its phenomenal success before pointing out that, in a process which has become familiar in the late twentieth century, ‘a “Marie Corelli” was created which was a determinate element of the “text” of her best-seller, a constituent feature of a new, direct distribution of text, unmediated by reviewers and lending libraries’. The extraordinary success of the novel, argues Feltes, was due to the combined entrepreneurial efforts of Marie Corelli and Methuen, within the new patriarchal/capitalist literary mode of production. Significantly, he remarks of Corelli, ‘Her biographers emphasise her complex, neurotic personality and her unusual personal life, but the brutality of reviewers toward her, and her position as a woman writer overdetermined whatever psychological tensions she endured’.<sup>222</sup>

The most recent and extensive critical engagement with Corelli’s works is that undertaken by Annette Federico in her feminist study, *Idol of Suburbia: Marie Corelli and Late-Victorian Literary Culture*, published in 2000. Federico explores the arguments of Casey, Kershner, Felski and Feltes, noting that each of these critics ‘conscientiously avoids simplifying the context for reading Corelli, and each recognizes this writer’s immense popularity and vigorous self-promotion’.<sup>223</sup> Federico looks at Corelli’s work from five perspectives: her struggle to control her image at a time of expanding consumerism, the development of mass media and changing interpretations of the author; the creative, combative and contradictory way in which she participated in the literary trends of the 1880s and 1890s, aestheticism in particular; her efforts to negotiate a feminine aesthetic against the radically politicized debates about gender and literary merit at the turn of the century; in terms of the tension between Modernism and female subjectivity; and, finally, from the perspective of cultural readings of Corelli after the Victorian age up until about 1955. Federico acknowledges that her book ‘seeks to honor Corelli’s protean ambitions’.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> Feltes, *Literary Capital and the Late Victorian Novel*, p. 121.

<sup>222</sup> Feltes, *Literary Capital and the Late Victorian Novel*, pp. 120-8.

<sup>223</sup> Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 11.

<sup>224</sup> Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 11.

Federico's discussion of the way in which Corelli portrays herself is provocative. She examines the author's creation of a public persona and her reluctance to be photographed or to give interviews, rightly suggesting that, in an age of increasing commercialisation, Corelli was determined to control her public image and refused to permit its appropriation by the photographic press.<sup>225</sup> Federico also considers the possibility that Corelli wanted her image to be created through her texts, not implied by her appearance, nor dictated by the male literary elite.

Yet Corelli yearned to be accepted by the literary establishment, which was overwhelmingly male. She wrote to Bentley prior to the publication of *A Romance of Two Worlds*: 'I hope the clever men on the Press will be kind to me, as it is a first book, because if they are I shall be able to do so much better another time'.<sup>226</sup> Thereafter, as each new novel was either ignored or damned by the critics, Corelli's conviction that she was a persecuted woman writer deepened and her reaction became more and more hostile. Perhaps she refused to allow the male literary elite to dictate her image, but Corelli's response to the press remained paradoxical throughout her life: she was aggressive when criticised but childishly grateful to those like Cuming Walters and Edmund Yates of the *World*, who turned from critics into admirers upon meeting her.<sup>227</sup> When Henry Labouchère, Liberal M.P. and founding editor of the newspaper *Truth*, befriended Corelli, she wrote:

I liked him *immensely* . . . He appears to think I have the best and most promising position of any woman writer now to the fore, and says that no criticism of any sort can affect me now in any way. We parted with reluctance on both sides, for we got on capitally together.<sup>228</sup>

Federico's suggestion that the author wanted her image to be created through her texts instead of implied by her appearance also invites close consideration. Federico cites Corelli's own words in the 'Author's Note' to *The Treasure of Heaven*: 'an author's real being is more disclosed in his or her work

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<sup>225</sup> Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, pp. 23-52.

<sup>226</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 16.

<sup>227</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, pp. 145-6.

<sup>228</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 121.



than in any portrayed presentment of mere physiognomy'.<sup>229</sup> Federico acknowledges, however, that a distinction cannot be drawn between the image of Corelli as created in her texts and that implied by her appearance. Corelli was extraordinarily sensitive about the way she looked. Fluffy hair, exotic hats, long trains, flowers, music, pets, poetry and impressive books were all part of her personal choreography, even for private meetings with friends. She constantly merged this image with that of the heroines of her novels; through these characters, she validates her own physical characteristics. In *The Soul of Lilith*, for example, Irene Vassilius, the 'authoress of high repute' who succeeds in everything she touches, ironically offers a remarkable view of the relationship between women's bodies and their minds:

I am small in stature, slight in build, and have curly hair – all proofs positive, according to the majority, of latent foolishness. Colossal women, however, are always astonishingly stupid, and fat women lethargic – but a mountain of flesh is always more attractive to man than any amount of intellectual perception.<sup>230</sup>

Moreover, the Victorian 'womanly' appearance Corelli cultivated in herself and in her heroines is calculated to appeal to men. Corelli despised equally the stereotypical blue-stocking authoress and the feminists who advocated rational dress.<sup>231</sup> Irene Vassilius attracts the occult scientist, El-Râmi, his brother, the poet Féraz, the sensual artist Roy Ainsworth and the 'chivalrous and honourable' Duke of Strathlea. Corelli also seems to have had no shortage of suitors. Masters notes that 'Marie had to endure embarrassing letters from admirers willing to devote their lives to her' and reports that, in 1906, she wrote to A. P. Watt, her literary agent: 'if I wanted to marry I could do so tomorrow'.<sup>232</sup>

Federico highlights Corelli's falsification of her portraits, publishing two sets of original and retouched photographs and pointing out, in respect of the frontispiece to *The Treasure of Heaven*, that 'this official portrait was touched up

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<sup>229</sup> Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, pp. 31 and 40-4, and the 'Author's Note' to Marie Corelli's *The Treasure of Heaven*, p.vii.

<sup>230</sup> Marie Corelli, *The Soul of Lilith*, 1892; twenty-third and popular ed., Methuen, London, 1926, pp. 193-5.

<sup>231</sup> See, for example, *The Soul of Lilith*, p. 412 and *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 194 concerning blue-stockings and dowdy writing women, and *My Wonderful Wife* (F. V. White & Co., London, 1889) for the character of Honoria, who wears men's clothing.

<sup>232</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, pp. 217 and 216.

to make Corelli look young and serene'.<sup>233</sup> In *The Young Diana*, Dr. Dimitrius articulates Corelli's own view when he tells his subject: 'You should never admit to more years than your appearance gives you'.<sup>234</sup> Federico is close to the truth when she suggests:

Corelli's physical – and textual – appearance as a sweetly feminine lady novelist was not an affectation. For a woman with a moral mission, looking the part was essential to gaining converts (and readers), especially given the mass circulation of mechanically produced images in modern culture. The woman who wrote books aimed at exposing the myth of masculine superiority, the degradation of society marriages, political corruption, religious hypocrisy, and rotten reviewers had to look sweet and solemn, charming yet wise, feminine but self-assured.<sup>235</sup>

The words 'textual appearance' refer to the frequency with which Corelli depicts herself in her novels. Readers and critics alike believed that the heroine of *The Sorrows of Satan*, Mavis Clare – inspired popular writer; enemy of the literary critics; financially independent; small, golden-haired and dressed in white; wearing flowers – represented the author. Corelli was forced to deny the connection but throughout her life she played the role she had written for herself and for the heroines of most of her novels. *The Sorrows of Satan* was followed by *The Murder of Delicia*, whose beautiful and commercially astute heroine is an author of uplifting morality tales which attract a huge popular readership but fail to win critical acclaim. Delicia earns £8,000 for a book, a sum, David Murray remarks, approached by only one living lady-writer.<sup>236</sup> 'Her personality is impressed in her writings', suggests J. Cuming Walters, 'Although she always disclaimed being autobiographical, and was probably unconscious that she was so, the *ego* was too dominant for others to overlook it'.<sup>237</sup> It is not unusual for an author to be present in his or her novel; as Barbara Harman points out, 'novelists, after all, are both participants in, and fabricators of, their worlds'.<sup>238</sup> However, it

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<sup>233</sup> Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, pp. 38-42, 46 and 47.

<sup>234</sup> Corelli, *The Young Diana*, p. 89.

<sup>235</sup> Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 35. See also Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>236</sup> Murray, *My Contemporaries in Fiction*, pp. 142-3.

<sup>237</sup> Walters, 'Epilogue' to Vyver, *Memoirs of Marie Corelli*, pp. 258-9.

<sup>238</sup> Barbara Leah Harman, *The Feminine Political Novel in Victorian England*, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, 1998, p. 8.

is impossible to determine the extent to which self-delusion, professionalism, vanity and self-promotion contributed to the image Corelli created of herself and placed so often at the centre of her narratives.

One of the purposes underlying Corelli's mingling of author, narrator and heroine is to invest her texts with a seemingly incontrovertible authority, supported by her success as a popular novelist. For example, her 'Introduction to the New Edition' of *A Romance of Two Worlds* (1887) opens with an expression of surprise at, and a description of, the novel's initial success. Corelli's increasing confidence in herself is evident from her defence of the novel which follows and she is far more assertive than in the original 'Prologue' of 1886. Similarly, the third person narrator who is the figure of authority in *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895) is replaced by a highly personal preface and a first person narrator in the case of *The Life Everlasting*, published in 1911. As Richard Kowalczyk points out, Corelli offered 'the writer's eyewitness reports on the spiritual world . . . [she] hoped her public would accept the voice in her novels to be the direct result of personal experiences revealing the Truth behind the veil of phenomena'.<sup>239</sup>

Corelli did not only hold her readers in thrall by creating a complex authorial and textual persona, she also fabricated an aura of mystery about herself which was not restricted to the details of her birth and age. An insight into her strategy for dealing with the public emerges from the words of a minor character in *The Life Everlasting*. Captain Derrick remarks to the novel's narrator:

Anything that cannot be at once explained is always interesting and delightful to a woman! That is why spiritualistic 'mediums' make money. They do clever tricks which cannot be explained, hence their success with the credulous.<sup>240</sup>

These words are intended to reinforce Corelli's hostility toward spiritualism, a position already familiar to her readers by 1911, but the suggestion that women are attracted by anything connected with mystery is revealing. As well as displaying anti-feminism (to be discussed in Part III of this thesis), this comment implies that Corelli was fully aware that her reclusiveness added greatly to her appeal. Not only are Scott and Masters unkind to claim that Corelli's fear of exposure as 'an ugly old woman' was the reason she refused to be seen in public,

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<sup>239</sup> Kowalczyk, 'In Vanished Summertime', p. 853.

<sup>240</sup> Marie Corelli, *The Life Everlasting*, p. 84.

but they are wrong.<sup>241</sup> Corelli's reasons are no doubt complex. She did venture into society following the success of her first novels and she did enjoy mixing with 'the best people', yet she was also aware that there were many who mocked her lack of refinement, as Virginia Woolf points out. Most important to Corelli was her vast middle class audience and it was very early in her career that Oscar Wilde told her: 'Such a lot of talking-about-you does more good than an infinite number of reviews'.<sup>242</sup> Corelli's intuitive flair for self-promotion made her decide that to be frequently heard but rarely seen was the way to engender an aura that made her 'interesting and delightful'. Like the mediums she despised, Corelli learned to make money by indulging her public in its hankering for mystery.

Corelli's influence increased as her popularity grew and, in keeping with her ideals, she used her considerable power to promote the ethics and causes to which she was committed. Overwhelmingly favourable public response to her work naturally reinforced her belief in her ideals, and in herself as the best means of imparting them. It is little wonder that she became confident in her own authority, whether expressed through non-fiction or fiction, embodied in author or heroine. Although it is accepted in the twenty-first century that famous people comment publicly upon matters in which they have no expertise, Marie Corelli was the first celebrity whose opinions on all aspects of ethical and social behaviour were avidly sought by journalists and their readers. Corelli remained untroubled by any lack of detailed knowledge of the subjects she wrote about, so certain had she become of her moral superiority. It is probable that her unshakeable confidence in herself as moralist, lecturer, author, narrator and heroine provoked much of her critics' animosity.

An unintended consequence of the strategy of conflating author, narrator and heroine, however, is the exposure of Corelli's overly idealised projections of herself. The dangers inherent in such an approach became apparent when she was subjected to critical ridicule for portraying herself in the figures of Mavis Clare in *The Sorrows of Satan* and of Delicia in *The Murder of Delicia*. Similarly, the heroine of *Innocent*, an abandoned illegitimate baby who grew up to become a popular author, considerably fuelled speculation about Corelli's own origins. The

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<sup>241</sup> Scott, *Marie Corelli: The Story of a Friendship*, p. 75, and Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 4.

<sup>242</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 74.

publication of *Innocent* suggests that, although one reason for Corelli's creation of her own public identity was to obscure the details of her birth, this alone cannot explain the characterisation of her heroines. Moreover, although vanity, self-promotion, disguise, control over her image, authorial authority and self-delusion all provide justification for Corelli's creation of a public persona, they do not explain why she repeatedly used this persona in her novels, risking critical censure and misunderstanding time after time. In this context, perhaps even Federico underrates Corelli by describing her as a woman with a moral mission: she was, in fact, a woman with an entirely new theology to demonstrate, a theology which included a system of ethics that equated goodness with youth and beauty. Like Zara in *A Romance of Two Worlds* and the other perfect heroines of her novels, Marie Corelli was determined that her own appearance would constitute proof of her spiritual achievements and thus validate her system of beliefs.

Masters points out that Corelli told one of her governesses that she 'would not be merely pretty, she would be clever, so she had better look clever'.<sup>243</sup> For Corelli, reality and image were merged. Her claims on behalf of her personal religion, the Electric Creed as explained in *A Romance of Two Worlds* and refined in *The Life Everlasting*, would be proven false if she herself did not continue to embody the notion that youth and beauty equated with goodness of heart. Corelli's religion, as well as her belief in herself, demanded that she look young and beautiful. Her readers demanded it, too, as the basis of their faith in her. As Corelli over the years became convinced that she and her textual image were one and the same, the fact that the persona she had created for herself was an idealised heroine, and not a fallible and ageing woman, may well account for the many contradictions that characterised her life and her work as she strove to meet the conflicting demands imposed by the impossible combination of idealism and reality.

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<sup>243</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 42.

## **PART II: CORELLI, SCIENCE AND RELIGION**

Religion and science, viewed broadly, do not clash so much as they combine. To the devout and deeply studious mind, the marvels of science are the truths of religion made manifest.

Marie Corelli, 'Society and Sunday' in *Free Opinions Freely Expressed on Certain Phases of Modern Social Life and Conduct*, Constable, London, 1905, p. 236.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: SCIENCE AND RELIGION: SPIRITUALISM**

## I: CORELLI AND SPIRITUALISM

One of the ways in which the differences between science and religion were reconciled in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was through spiritualism. The growth of an avid mass reading public ensured that popular as well as serious literature reflected the concerns felt at all levels of British society and the work of Marie Corelli provides an excellent example of how science and religion were skilfully blended by a popular author whose novels offered convincing solutions to the spiritual anxieties experienced by millions of readers.

In her book entitled *The Other World: Spiritualism and psychical research in England, 1850-1914*, Janet Oppenheim offers an excellent explanation of how discoveries in geology and astronomy, and new theories in physics and biology, robbed the Victorians of their mechanistic conception of a universe overseen by a clockmaker-like deity who had literally created everything four thousand years before. Faced with what is generally termed a ‘crisis of faith’, many Victorians were searching for a way to ‘synthesize modern scientific knowledge and time-honoured religious traditions concerning man, God, and the universe’.<sup>1</sup> Oppenheim demonstrates how a humanitarian view of the cosmos disposed the Victorians to reject the notion of a predetermining and judgmental deity who denied free will and yet condemned transgressors to a literal hell in perpetuity. The capitalist middle classes had discovered that there were rewards for entrepreneurial individuals and they therefore expected personal rewards from their god as well, declining to believe in a universal salvation offered through traditional Christianity. The rise of democracy and increased emphasis on the individual meant that the Victorians were no longer prepared to rely on institutional intermediaries for access to the deity. Oppenheim concludes that people were searching for a new religion that was rational and yet capable of allaying the most fundamental fears of death and loss.<sup>2</sup>

Initially, it seemed that science would satisfy these needs. Positivism suggested that scientific methodology could yoke the material and the spiritual within a logical and consistent framework and that evolution held the promise of human perfection. However, by the second decade of the twentieth century,

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<sup>1</sup> Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and psychical research in England, 1850-1914*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985, p. 59.

science was found to be, like the deity, inconsistent and arbitrary. The atom was no longer the smallest known particle, laws of thermodynamics and the theory of relativity had undermined classical physics and Darwin's theory of natural selection, followed by the carnage of the Great War, demolished the hope of progressive evolution.<sup>3</sup> Thus the Edwardians and their successors found themselves in a state of spiritual anxiety similar to that of their Victorian antecedents. This undermining of faith is succinctly conveyed by Arthur Conan Doyle in terms of a duel between the material and spiritual views of the universe:

It is a fight in which the Churches championed the anti-material view, but they have done it so unintelligently, and have been continually placed in such false positions, that they have always been losing. Since the days of Hume and Voltaire and Gibbon the fight has slowly but steadily rolled in favour of the attack. Then came Darwin, showing with apparent truth, that man has never fallen but always risen. This cut deep into the philosophy of orthodoxy, and it is folly to deny it. Then again came the so-called 'Higher Criticism,' showing alleged flaws and cracks in the very foundations. All this time the churches were yielding ground, and every retreat gave a fresh jumping-off place for a new assault. It has gone so far that at the present moment a very large section of the people of this country, rich and poor, are out of all sympathy not only with the churches but with the whole Spiritual view.<sup>4</sup>

Conan Doyle, perhaps, exaggerates. Although atheism was not uncommon in the decades either side of the turn of the century, reaction against the concept of a materialist world was more widespread and, indeed, materialism was perceived by many as the archvillain of the age.<sup>5</sup> Reprieve from this spiritual anxiety was sought in the formation of new Christian sects, in unprecedented interest in Eastern religions and the occult, through increasing attention to emerging disciplines concerned with the workings of the mind, such as psychology and

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<sup>2</sup> Oppenheim, *The Other World*, pp. 92-5, 99 and 109-10.

<sup>3</sup> Robin Gilmour, *The Victorian Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1830-1890*, Longman, London, 1993, pp. 129-39, and Oppenheim, *The Other World*, p. 60.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Vital Message*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1919, pp. 68-9. 'Higher criticism' was also known as 'Biblical criticism' which, although undertaken by Christian scholars attempting to harmonise religion and science, shocked its critics as it undermined a literal interpretation of the Bible. Tess Cosslett provides a thoughtful discussion of Biblical criticism in her 'Introductory Essay' to *Science and Religion in the Nineteenth Century*, edited by Tess Cosslett, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984, pp. 13-20.

<sup>5</sup> Oppenheim, *The Other World*, pp. 60-1.



psychiatry, and in Christian revivals like that led by American evangelists, Moody and Sankey.<sup>6</sup>

Another response to materialism towards the end of the nineteenth century and in the years immediately following the Great War was an escalating belief in spiritualism. Oppenheim argues that the popularity of spiritualism was a direct response to the particular needs of the time:

British spiritualists . . . were not simply embracing *any* source of reassurance about the human condition, nor giving their allegiance to *any* faith in their eagerness to believe something other than the ubiquity of matter. They were turning to the one set of beliefs which, they trusted, could meet the specific demands of their day by satisfying a religious need in language, and through procedures, acceptable to science.<sup>7</sup>

Patrick Brantlinger agrees with Oppenheim's argument that the attraction of spiritualism had much to do with reaction against the dominant role assumed by science in the late nineteenth century, adding that 'emphasis on the occult aspects of experience was often reconciled with "science" and even with Darwinism'. Brantlinger points, by way of example, to Andrew Lang, the writer and critic whose interests lay with both anthropology and physics research.<sup>8</sup>

There was, however, no one, definitive form of spiritualism. Some people were attracted to the Society for Psychical Research, whilst others joined Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society, the anthroposophical movement of Rudolf Steiner, or Mary Baker Eddy's Christian Science. Nevertheless, the popularity of the most common form of spiritualism, the seance, in which mediums were believed to produce manifestations from the 'other world', is unarguable. Members of the social and political elite hosted seances in their homes and patronised mediums, the majority of whom were drawn from the middle classes where faith in spiritualism was most prevalent. Belief in spiritualism was also to

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<sup>6</sup> See Gilmour, *The Victorian Period*, pp. 63-5, 68 and 74-5; Oppenheim, *The Other World*, pp. 159-60; 206-7 and 236-7; and 114-5; and William Stuart Scott, *Marie Corelli: The Story of a Friendship*, Hutchinson, London, 1955, p. 43.

<sup>7</sup> Oppenheim, *The Other World*, pp. 61-2. Belief in spiritualism was not, however, confined to the British. See, for perhaps the best known example, in *Anna Karenin* the characters of the Countess Ivanovna and Count Bezubov, who was also known as the spiritualist, Landau, and the effect of these two upon the decision of Karenin not to divorce Anna – Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenin* (1873-7), trans. Rosemary Edmonds, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1978, p. 771.

<sup>8</sup> Patrick Brantlinger, 'Imperial Gothic: Atavism and the Occult in the British Adventure Novel, 1880-1914' in *Reading 'Fin de Siècle' Fictions*, edited by Lyn Pykett, Longman, London, 1996, p. 185.

be found among the educated working classes, where it was frequently connected with socio-political movements like Owenism.<sup>9</sup> Over two hundred spiritualist organisations existed in Victorian and Edwardian Britain, including the British National Association of Spiritualists, formed in 1873 under the sponsorship of the Liverpool Psychological Society.<sup>10</sup>

The events purported to have occurred at seances varied widely according to the inclinations of the mediums involved and included spirit-rapping, the movement of furniture or table-turning, materialisations of ‘ectoplasms’, automatic or direct writing and appearances of the spirits of the dead. The procedures followed in seances were likewise variable, although they were almost always held in darkness or semi-darkness and usually involved some sort of physical contact, such as the participants holding each other’s hands. Many seances included preliminary hymn-singing and/or prayers. Participants were required to conform to the rules laid down by the medium; for example, touching of materialised ectoplasms or spirits was prohibited. Although a few mediums like D. D. Home encouraged scrutiny, most regarded the presence of sceptics as inimical to their psychic powers.<sup>11</sup>

Interest in spiritualism not only spread across the classes, it invaded the scientific community as well. The Society for Psychical Research, formed in 1882, exemplifies the disparate attitudes of scientists toward spiritualism. Oppenheim offers a detailed description of the role of the Society and its activities. She also discusses the motivation of its most illustrious members, including Oliver Lodge, William Crookes, F. W. H. Myers, Henry and Eleanor Sidgwick, William Barrett and William James. Their aims varied from a strong desire to expose spiritualism as a fraudulent practice, to an equally strong wish to find within it empirical evidence of the immortality of the soul. Between these extremes, the Society’s membership reflected every shade of scepticism, agnosticism and ‘the will to believe’.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Oppenheim, *The Other World*, pp. 40-1 and 91.

<sup>10</sup> Oppenheim, *The Other World*, p. 53.

<sup>11</sup> Oppenheim, *The Other World*, p. 14.

<sup>12</sup> Oppenheim, *The Other World*, Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 8. William James popularised the term ‘the will to believe’ in an essay published in 1896. See *The Will to Believe and other essays in Popular Philosophy and Human Mortality*; new ed., Dover, New York, 1956, pp. 1-31.

Frank Podmore is a good example. Although not a scientist, Podmore was associated with the Society from its inception until his death and was – and remains – highly respected for his writings on contemporary spiritualism. He was a sceptical and thorough investigator and his *Studies in Psychological Research* (1897) reveals many of the fraudulent strategies used by mediums. Podmore was never persuaded to believe in spirit communication, but his research did convince him of the existence of mental telepathy between the living. The case of Andrew Lang is also interesting. President of the Society for a time, he nevertheless remained dubious about psychic phenomena. As Brantlinger notes, Lang favoured ‘explanations in terms of extraordinary, hitherto unidentified mental powers, including the power of “unconscious cerebration” to create illusions of ghosts or spirits and to perform telepathic feats’. Brantlinger points out that a major question of late nineteenth-century British psychology was how the subconscious works, or ‘how to explain its mechanisms of projection, hallucination, dreams and forgetting’.<sup>13</sup>

Of the political elite, the Earl of Balfour was president of the Society for Psychological Research for a time and W. E. Gladstone was an honorary member for many years. The upper echelon of the clergy was represented by Bishop Boyd Carpenter and Archdeacon Colley.<sup>14</sup> There were followers of spiritualism within the literary community, too. Conan Doyle and the critic W. T. Stead were firm believers, as was Elizabeth Barrett-Browning. Alfred Tennyson was a member of the Society for Psychological Research and W. B. Yeats for a time belonged to the Esoteric Section of the Blavatsky Lodge. Annie Besant was a pupil of Mme Blavatsky and an active member of the Lodge. John Ruskin dabbled.<sup>15</sup> Charles Dickens derided after-dinner seances where materialisations were produced for a

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<sup>13</sup> Brantlinger, ‘Imperial Gothic’, p. 195.

<sup>14</sup> J. Arthur Findlay, *On the Edge of the Etheric: or Survival After Death Scientifically Explained*, 1931; Australian ed., Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1932, pp. 18-9.

<sup>15</sup> Oppenheim, *The Other World*, pp. 28-57, 123-58, 160-2 and 182.

fee but was deeply interested in phenomena like animal magnetism and spontaneous combustion.<sup>16</sup>

It is not difficult to see why communication with the dead through a medium at a seance was so appealing at the time. It was sufficiently flexible to accommodate Christianity, theosophy and anti-Christian progressivism and it transcended class barriers. Many followers found comfort in the apparent connection with the dead, hence its resurgence following the Great War. Hand-holding around the seance table allowed the physical contact prohibited in broader society and, in the case of young female mediums, sometimes paved the way for sexual encounters.<sup>17</sup> For repressed and housebound women, the seance provided opportunities to escape drudgery and even offered the possibility of fame.

Nor is it hard to understand why there was a degree of acceptance of spiritualism as a legitimate science. The nineteenth century witnessed the rise of pseudo-sciences like phrenology, mesmerism and phrenomagnetism and the legitimisation of social sciences like anthropology, sociology, psychology, psychiatry and sexology. Although phrenology and mesmerism were largely discredited by mid-century, it did not require a feat of imagination to progress from the idea of separate levels of awareness, as suggested by hypnotism, to notions of the conscious and unconscious, suggested by Edmund Gurney, Frederick Myers and William James.<sup>18</sup> Opinions about psychology ranged from the claim that it was but one aspect of the physiology of the nervous system to the argument that it was the science of individual experience. Thus the old issue of dualism versus monism was reintroduced in a nineteenth-century way that confused philosophy, psychology and ‘psychic’ experiences and muddled ontological issues with ‘scientific’ evidence of the immortality of the soul.<sup>19</sup> So many new discoveries were being made in all the fields of science, overturning previously unquestioned assumptions, and so many new technologies were being

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<sup>16</sup> Oppenheim, *The Other World*, p. 48 and, for example, Charles Dickens in *Bleak House*, 1853; rpt: Wordsworth Classics, Ware, 1993, p. 293. Catherine Kunce links Corelli with the Society for Psychical Research, although she notes that such a suggestion was not ‘acknowledged or repudiated’ by Corelli – see ‘A Transparent Veil: The Forgotten Works of Marie Corelli’, unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Denver, 1989, pp. 28-32.

<sup>17</sup> Ruth Brandon, *The Spiritualists: The Passion for the Occult in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1983, pp. 149-62.

<sup>18</sup> Oppenheim, *The Other World*, pp. 249-66.

invented, changing the implausible to the commonplace, that it was not far-fetched to conjecture the existence of a psychic force, similar to electricity, waiting to be discovered and put to use. Indeed, William Barrett, a spiritualist as well as a physicist and Fellow of the Royal Society, was unknowingly prescient when he suggested that nerve energy operated ‘in ways analogous to electricity’.<sup>20</sup> In such a hot-house atmosphere of discovery and change, it is not surprising that belief in spiritualism seemed rational and was therefore widespread and semi-respectable.

The secular spiritualist, Epes Sargent, for example, opens his 1880 ‘Preface’ to *The Scientific Basis of Spiritualism* with the following assertion:

The claim that there is a scientific basis for Spiritualism will be an offence to many . . . But constantly recurring facts, which have stood the test of more than thirty-three years of ridicule, denunciation, and antagonism, must be admitted as having within them some stubborn elements of vitality, if not of scientific verification. What is science but a collection of truths, suggestive of an inference?<sup>21</sup>

Sargent goes on to offer nearly four hundred pages of argument, refuting one by one the criticisms of acknowledged opponents, and, by adding his own observations to those of others (sometimes backed by affidavit), builds what he considers to be a conclusive empirical case in favour of spiritualism as a science. He reasons that spiritualism is a safeguard against superstition as it demonstrates that the ‘unseen world’ is simply another part of universal nature and argues that

The progress of modern Spiritualism has been something marvellous. In less than forty years it has gained at least twenty millions of adherents in all parts of the world. Adapting itself, through its eclectic affinity with all forms of truth, to all nationalities and classes, and repeating its peculiar manifestations everywhere among persons ignorant of its forms and its antecedents, it presents the features of a universal truth, the development of a grand, transcendent science, confirming all the traditions and intuitions of the soul’s immortality, and heralding a dawn before whose light every other science, relating to the nature and destiny of man, must seek to orient itself hereafter.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Oppenheim, *The Other World*, pp. 196 and 236-40.

<sup>20</sup> Oppenheim, *The Other World*, p. 395.

<sup>21</sup> Epes Sargent, *The Scientific Basis of Spiritualism*, 1880; second ed., Colby and Rich, Boston, 1881, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Sargent, *The Scientific Basis of Spiritualism*, pp. 7-8.

Marie Corelli, on the other hand, was fiercely opposed to seances and to theosophy. In her July 1887 ‘Introduction to the new edition’ of *A Romance of Two Worlds*, she pleads: ‘I most earnestly desire those who read the “Romance” to understand quite clearly that the “spiritualism” treated of in its pages is an entirely different thing to what is generally understood by the word’.<sup>23</sup> Inundated with questions from readers of her first novel, Corelli emphatically distinguishes her beliefs from those of others:

The ‘Romance’ has since its appearance been made the subject of much discussion . . . I have been brought into contact with many peculiar phases of thought and feeling relating to occultism and clairvoyance, and people of all shades of opinion seek my acquaintance in the expectation of being initiated into something very strange and mysterious – let me say, something vulgarly melodramatic – concerning the spiritual world . . . Were I to initiate them – or rather pretend to initiate them – into some new or old form of Buddhism – could I show them some poor trickery such as the vanishing of a box in the air, the turning of a red flower to white, or white to red, or any of the optical illusions practised with such skill by native conjurors, I might easily be surrounded by disciples of ‘Occultism’ – persons who are generally ready, nay, even eager to be deceived. (*Romance* xi-xii)

Later in the ‘Introduction’, Corelli vehemently distances herself from ‘table-turning, magnetic slate-writing, and other illusive phenomena’, derides the current ‘craze’ for spiritualism whereby victims fall easy dupes to charlatanism and argues that ‘trumpery tricks of magnetic attraction and sleight of hand’ are very different indeed from the miracles of Christ (*Romance* xiv-xviii). Within the text of the novel, Corelli again draws a clear distinction between spiritualism and her own beliefs:

Your reason will at once tell you that disembodied spirits never become so undignified as to upset furniture or rap on tables. Neither do they write letters in pen and ink and put them under doors. Spiritual beings are purely spiritual; they cannot touch anything human, much less deal in such vulgar display as the throwing about of chairs, and the opening of locked sideboards. (*Romance* 184)

Corelli’s use of the words ‘vulgarly melodramatic’ and ‘vulgar’ in her attacks on spiritualism is significant. In the final chapter of *The Other World*, Oppenheim discusses how some of the greatest scientists of the day, including

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<sup>23</sup> Marie Corelli, ‘Introduction to the new edition’ of *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 1886; new ed., Bentley, London, 1887, p. xvii. Ensuing references to the ‘Introduction’, the ‘Prologue’ and abbreviated references to the novel will be given in parentheses in the text.

Oliver Lodge and William Crookes, felt at times as though they had lost caste in their colleagues' eyes because of their association with spiritualism through psychical research.<sup>24</sup> Inferior by birth and education to Lodge and Crookes, and always anxious to claim the high moral ground, Marie Corelli was well aware that she could not afford to lose caste through association with the kind of spiritualism that she denounced as 'vulgarly melodramatic', sensational and vulnerable to charlatanism. To its opponents, the seance was at best an entertaining conjuring trick and, at worst, the doings of Satan, and Corelli was, even at this early stage in her career, too careful of the reputation she was establishing to risk its being tarnished by so much as a perception that her beliefs might share common ground with anything considered cheap or dubious.

Nevertheless, Corelli emphatically rejected a materialistic view of the universe and, like so many of her contemporaries, was anxious to reconcile old religion and new science. She therefore concocted a theology which was derived from a re-interpretation of selected parts of the Bible, equated electricity (and later radio-activity) with the life force, incorporated some notions from Eastern religions and advocated moral precepts designed to produce ethical, and therefore redemptive, behaviour. Despite her loud denunciations of seances and theosophy, however, examination of contemporary spiritualist texts reveals that Marie Corelli's theories are, in fact, strikingly similar to those of spiritualism.

## II: CORELLI'S CREED

Robin Gilmour explains that 'creed' was a potent word in the second half of the nineteenth century, pointing out that the rejection of orthodox Christianity did not mean that the search for a credible religion was abandoned. Gilmour, like Oppenheim and Brantlinger, highlights the Victorian crisis of faith and ensuing struggle to find a new religious belief. He emphasises the widespread interest in Auguste Comte's Religion of Humanity, positivism and other secular religions, as well as to various forms of theism, as part of this search.<sup>25</sup>

Olive Schreiner examines this hunger for a new creed through the character of Waldo in *The Story of an African Farm* (1883). Toward the end of the novel, she explores contemporary views of immortality, contrasting the

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<sup>24</sup> Oppenheim, *The Other World*, pp. 392-7.

<sup>25</sup> Gilmour, *The Victorian Period*, p. 88.

nineteenth-century Christian with the ‘true Bible Christian’ and the ‘Transcendentalist’:

‘You shall see her again,’ says the nineteenth-century Christian, deep into whose soul modern unbelief and thought have crept, though he knows it not. He it is who uses his Bible as the pearl-fishers use their shells, sorting out gems from refuse; he sets his pearls after his own fashion, and he sets them well. ‘Do not fear,’ he says; ‘hell and judgement are not. God is love. I know that beyond this blue sky above us is a love as widespread over all’.<sup>26</sup>

Marie Corelli also recognised this Victorian craving for a creed that synthesised the old and the new. In 1893, she defends her interest in what she terms the ‘supernatural’, whilst distinguishing herself from spiritualism and theosophy:

I feel the existence of the supernatural, and feeling it, I must speak of it . . . But I distinctly wish it to be understood that I am neither a ‘Spiritualist’ nor a ‘Theosophist.’ I am not a ‘strong-minded’ woman, with egotistical ideas of a ‘mission’. I have no other supernatural belief than that which is taught by the Founder of our Faith, and this can never be shaken from me or ‘sneered down’.<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, by 1911, writing in the ‘Author’s Prologue’ to *The Life Everlasting*, Corelli offers seven of her texts as a definition of the creed she had been developing over the preceding twenty-five years. The seven books, she claims, are linked by the one ‘psychological’ theory. Corelli’s use of the term ‘psychological’ illustrates a problem identified by Janet Oppenheim: the ‘widespread use of the terms “psychology” and “psychological” by spiritualist groups in the second half of the nineteenth century left scars on the psychological profession for many years to come’.<sup>28</sup> Like the spiritualists, Corelli confused ‘psychological’ and ‘psychical’.

Corelli’s ‘psychological’ novels are *A Romance of Two Worlds*, *Ardath*, *The Soul of Lilith*, *Barabbas*, *The Sorrows of Satan*, *The Master-Christian* and *The Life Everlasting*. J. Cuming Walters, in his ‘A Personal Tribute by way of Epilogue’ to Bertha Vyver’s *Memoirs of Marie Corelli*, insists that ‘Her creed,

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<sup>26</sup> Olive Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm*, 1883; rpt: Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1995, p. 288.

<sup>27</sup> *My First Book: The Experiences of Walter Besant and Others*, 1894; new ed., Chatto & Windus, London, 1897, p. 214.

<sup>28</sup> Oppenheim, *The Other World*, pp. 238-9.



her message, her experience, her hope, all that was dear to her and rich within her, are in these works'. He continues:

they are the real Corelli, the woman with a mission . . . She discusses the lapse from Christian faith and deploras it; she appeals for sincerity and its fruits; she sets forth her own simple creed, the creed drawn from Nature; and she presents the esoteric idea of a world intended for training and development in order that the spirit may reach out to its heaven . . . In her 'Electric Theory of the Universe,' however crude her scientific knowledge, she tells us of what she anticipates, and then proceeds to the study of psychic forces, and to her greatest theme, the Hereafter and the Spirit Realm. 'Life and love are of little worth if they must end in dark nothingness' was her conclusion, and she was not brought to it by spirit-communication (which she deemed 'out of natural law'), but by logical reasoning.<sup>29</sup>

One of the keys to Corelli's success as a novelist is this syncretic religion, which, to use Oppenheim's words, fulfilled people's 'religious need in language, and through procedures, acceptable to science'.<sup>30</sup> Based on opportunistic interpretations of selected teachings of Christ, Corelli's creed sweeps away traditional religious authority and observance, and the notion of a jealous and punitive God, and substitutes instead the New Testament concept that 'God is Love' and a system of personal spirituality wherein love and sincerity are rewarded and where every individual has unlimited opportunities to win these rewards. The historical and scientific underpinnings for this religion are constructed by means of a subjective interpretation of theories of progressive evolution and an explanation of Biblical miracles through arcane uses of electricity, cemented by the authority of a general and unspecified wisdom attributed to ancient civilisations.

Although Corelli nominates seven novels as the embodiment of her Electric Creed, only *A Romance of Two Worlds* and *The Life Everlasting* expound in detail the 'Electric Theory of Christianity' and therefore are directly relevant to a close study of her blend of science and religion. Of the other novels, *Barabbas* is a melodramatic, sometimes erotic, retelling of the story of the crucifixion, intended as an illustration of Christ's humanity, but made ludicrous by the

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<sup>29</sup> J. Cuming Walters, 'A Personal Tribute by way of Epilogue' in Bertha Vyver, *Memoirs of Marie Corelli*, Alston Rivers, London, 1930, pp. 261-3.

<sup>30</sup> Oppenheim, *The Other World*, pp. 61-2.

author's turgid language and historical inaccuracies. *The Sorrows of Satan* is crammed with every issue that engrossed Marie Corelli but contributes to her Electric Creed only insofar as it is concerned with ethical behaviour in a corrupt society and how such behaviour contributes to a system of reincarnation and eventual redemption.

*The Master-Christian* is an implausible tale about the reincarnation of Christ as a working class boy named Manuel. This novel contributes to Corelli's creed as, like Conan Doyle's *The Vital Message*, it indicts the established churches as the source of a general increase in atheism and attempts to justify the need for a new spirituality by demonstrating the failings of contemporary religion.<sup>31</sup> It does not, however, offer reasoned criticism of existing religious beliefs or practices, comprising instead a shrill denunciation of the Roman Catholic and High Anglican churches and of sectarianism.

*Ardath* and *The Soul of Lilith* are included in Corelli's list of novels comprising her creed because they exemplify in detail her notions of reincarnation. In *Ardath*, the hero-poet dreams of a former life and realises that the inadequacy of his present existence is the direct result of mistakes made previously. *The Soul of Lilith* is more complex, as the protagonist is split into two conflicting personalities, one of which maintains a resuscitated body in order to utilise its soul in the exploration of life after death. These novels rely heavily on Gothic convention, on allusions to occultism and on vague references to unnamed Eastern religions. As in many Corelli novels, *Ardath* and *The Soul of Lilith* carry erotic overtones; in the case of *Ardath*, the high priestess Lysia invokes H. Rider Haggard's *She*, published two years previously.

In *A Romance of Two Worlds* and *The Life Everlasting* Marie Corelli deliberately constructs and consolidates her populist theology. She identifies the maladies of her age and she works hard to develop and explain her remedies, striving to impose a rational framework upon her intuitive religious and moral beliefs and upon her undisciplined imagination. Her popularity demonstrates that her theories, together with her apparent sincerity, struck a responsive chord with people trying to fulfil a religious need in language and through procedures acceptable to science. 'Certainly, if ever there was a time for a new apostle of

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<sup>31</sup> Conan Doyle, *The Vital Message*, pp. 68-9.

Christ to arise and preach His grandly simple message anew', she writes in the 'Introduction to the new edition' of *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 'that time is now':

Such an one should belong to no Church, for in the multitude of churches and their differing and, unhappily, quarrelsome sects, Christ is crucified over and over again . . . The old forms of preaching do not move the minds of the present generation. There needs fresh fire, more touching eloquence, more earnestness of purpose. And the light of Science must be brought to bear on the New Testament, in which its glorious pages will grow bright with hitherto unguessed mystical meanings if humbly and prayerfully studied . . . The world is growing surely tired of monotonous sermons on the old Jewish doctrine of original sin and necessary sacrifice. (*Romance* xix-xx)

Corelli is careful to create a reassuring Biblical framework for her ideas. One of Schreiner's nineteenth-century Christians, she selects familiar events from the Old Testament, intended to fulfil people's need for stability and continuity in religious tradition, and combines these with allusions to ancient Chaldean, Egyptian, Babylonian and Greek societies, designed to satisfy contemporary interest in the Orient as the cradle of philosophy, mysticism and the occult. These concepts are then united, not only with selections from the New Testament but also with the present, by forces ascribed to light and heat, electricity and radioactivity. The resultant theology is used to explain the creation of the universe, Old Testament phenomena, the miracles of Christ and nineteenth-century scientific discoveries.

The New Testament scriptures that Corelli appropriates for her theology are those which concentrate on the teachings of Christ concerning love and which emphasise Christ's humanity as an incarnation of God's love. In Corelli's theology, Mary, the mother of Christ, plays an important role as the female incarnation of love and the ultimate expression of perfect femininity. Consistent with nineteenth-century thinking, salvation is made to depend on the perfection of one's soul, which, following the example of Christ's resurrection and some populist Buddhism, may be achieved in this world, but is more likely in the next, or in any of the ones thereafter. Simultaneous with the search for perfection is the search, overseen by Love, for the perfect partner, an idea adapted from that espoused by Plato in Aristophanes' speech in the *Symposium*, that each person has a predetermined twin soul.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Robin Waterfield, World's Classics, Oxford, 1994, 189c-193e.

The scientific justification for Corelli's theology rests on a strange equation of love with heat, light and electricity and on a notion of the soul as a kind of electric spark imparted by God to every human being, to be nurtured and developed during the individual's progress through successive lives until perfection is attained and the soul returns to God. Proper development of this electric spark empowers the individual, heightens perception and enables the exercise of personal electric forces in self-defence or for the benefit of others. Thus the immortality of the soul as well as the eternity of the universe is explained, in an adaption of contemporary thermodynamic theory, as spirit and matter ever recycled electrically and there is no such thing as death, merely the passing from one world to another.

Corelli expounds her Electric Creed in *A Romance of Two Worlds* and refines it in her 'Introduction to the new edition', published a year later in 1887. She does not resile from its principles in 1911 in the 'Author's Prologue' to *The Life Everlasting* – that 'Author's Prologue' which Walters considered to be the ultimate expression of Corelli's beliefs – but she does engage in some revision, substituting radium for electricity as the life force and claiming as justification for her change that, according to recent scientific discoveries, electricity spontaneously produces radium. Material nature is a reflection of psychic form and is generated, no longer by an electric spark, but from a divine and eternal psychic substance called 'radia' which emanates from God's own being. In all other major respects, the theories expounded in *The Life Everlasting* do not differ significantly from those put forward in *A Romance of Two Worlds*.

### III: CORELLI AND SCIENCE

Corelli does not distinguish between scientific theory, scientific discovery or science as applied through technological invention. No detailed knowledge of physics prevents her from placing atomic theory, sound and light waves, electricity and the notion of entropy together with mysticism, orientalism and spiritualism in her syncretic religion, which also includes dreams, occult manifestations, incredible flashing and revolving discs and strangely efficacious baths and potions. Her imperfect grasp of the theory of evolution meant that, like so many of her contemporaries, she missed many of the subtleties implied by Darwin's contention that natural selection is entirely random and so her novels,

like others of the time, envisage an ever-progressively evolving humanity. Moreover, Corelli's approach to technology is subjective. The car is an instrument of death, not because of its capacity to kill, but because of the motivation of its owner. The wicked Jacynth of *Holy Orders* and her evil Jewish millionaire husband, Isra Nordstein, for example, exhort their chauffeur to 'drive like the devil' after killing a pedestrian on a country lane, and so 'with devilish speed the car flew – straight ahead like a missile from a giant cannon, with a boom and a whirr and a grind – its fierce eyes of fire probing their way through the darkness'.<sup>33</sup> Morgana's airship, on the contrary, although capable of destruction, is a creative invention designed to benefit humanity simply because Morgana intends it to be so.<sup>34</sup>

Science is explicitly discussed in all except seven of Corelli's novels, novellas and satires: it is crucial to the plot of eight. Only *Barabbas* is free of any reference or allusion to science or to modern technology. Of the remainder, *Vendetta!*, *Thelma*, *The Silver Domino* and *Innocent*, unsurprisingly, refer at least once to the everyday uses of technology, such as electricity and the motor car. Moreover, whereas *The Devil's Motor* might be seen to represent the evil associated with the misuse of technology, in *Jane* the heroine marvels at the wonders of the modern inventions, including aeroplanes, to be found in London. Like everyone at the time, Corelli was fascinated with developments in contemporary science.

Religion and science are integral to the plots and messages of *A Romance of Two Worlds* and *The Life Everlasting*, the two novels featured in Part II of this thesis. Science provides the focus for a discussion of the contrasting uses of power by a good woman and an evil man in *The Secret Power*, discussed in Part III. The Arnold/Huxley argument about the role of science as the basis of education is pivotal to the anti-atheistic novel, *The Mighty Atom*. In *The Soul of Lilith*, Corelli contrasts occult science, which as practised by the hubristic El-Râmi leads to a mindless, extended old age, with the honest scientific endeavour of Kremlin who achieves transcendence. Technological inventions, such as the motor car and the hot air balloon, symbolise the destructive capability of

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<sup>33</sup> Marie Corelli, *Holy Orders: The Tragedy of a Quiet Life*, 1908; fifth and popular ed., Methuen, London, 1924, p. 276.

<sup>34</sup> Marie Corelli, *The Secret Power*, Doubleday, New York, 1921, p. 67.

misapplied science in *Holy Orders*. *The Young Diana* is a novel about the transcendental power of science and a woman's victory over a patriarchal society. Science transforms Diana, not only from a mature and plain woman into a young and beautiful one, but also from mortal clay to ethereal matter, that reward that Corelli allows or promises the successful heroines of her novels and the one which she anticipates for herself.<sup>35</sup>

Corelli's novels also reflect the ways in which she understood and interpreted contemporary scientific theory. Of all her novels, only *Vendetta!*, *The Silver Domino*, *Barabbas*, *The Murder of Delicia*, *Jane*, *Holy Orders*, *Innocent* and *The Treasure of Heaven* lack explicit reference to evolution and/or to Darwinism. Contrary to Peter Keating's assertions, a populist interpretation of the theory of evolution underpins Corelli's belief in individual spiritual progress achieved through a series of incarnations, expressed in *A Romance of Two Worlds*, *Ardath*, *The Soul of Lilith*, *Ziska*, *The Life Everlasting* and *The Secret Power*.<sup>36</sup> As Kowalczyk notes, 'Corelli was a long time populariser of evolutionary theories and believed that without proper leadership, men tended to return to the stage of a savage'. Although Kowalczyk specifically refers to *Wormwood*, *Holy Orders* and *The Treasure of Heaven* in his discussion of Corelli's scheme of spiritual evolution, his observations regarding the standard Corelli heroes and heroines are informative:

Like the operation of higher organisms in evolution, the hero's actions necessarily destroyed corrupt social values in order to prepare the way for something higher and nobler. The outcome of the conflict between hero and society was readily predictable and when the fiber of Corelli's plots stretched too much, she resorted to an emphasis on character portrayals which borrowed from evolutionary theories . . . She thus implied the range of potential development in man by giving the reader illustrations from her stratified scale of moral conduct, from its lowest forms to the highest forms found in the hero . . . The romanticist could reaffirm her own values by creating an imaginative world where one

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<sup>35</sup> Marie Corelli, *The Young Diana*, Hutchinson, London, 1918, pp. 258, 260-5, 275 and 319-20. Critics generally focus on the negative aspects of Diana's transformation; see, for example, Robert L. Kowalczyk, 'In Vanished Summertime: Marie Corelli and Popular Culture', *Journal of Popular Culture* Vol. VII: 4 (1974) 850-63, (p. 860): 'Diana is a being warped by both convention and psychic studies alike'.

<sup>36</sup> Keating asserts: '[evolutionary theory] was one of the factors that caused Marie Corelli to rage against the decadence of modern life' and 'The objections of Marie Corelli seem crazily out of place in a world so swiftly adapting itself to Darwinian terminology' – see Peter Keating, *The Haunted Study: A Social History of the English Novel 1875-1914*, Secker & Warburg, London, 1989, p. 111.

viewed an evolutionary system of ethics in which were placed Christian hybrids as well as nature's immoral freaks.<sup>37</sup>

Arguments drawn from Darwinism determine the characterisation of the two couples in *My Wonderful Wife*, Honoria Maggs and William Hatwell-Tribkin and Georgie Maggs and the Earl of Richmoor. Corelli's attitude toward Darwin is also evident from *The Master-Christian*, wherein her criticism of Catholicism is contrasted with praise of Darwin, offered through the words of the Princesse D'Agramont, a writer whose witty novels had startled Paris:

All brave thinkers of every time have been excommunicated, and many of our greatest and most valuable scientific works are on the Index Expurgatorius. It is my ambition to get into that Index, – I shall never rest till I win the honour of being beside Darwin's 'Origin of Species'.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Kowalczyk, 'In Vanished Summertime', pp. 854; 856-7; and 859-60.

<sup>38</sup> Marie Corelli, *The Master Christian*, Methuen, London, 1900, pp. 211 and 214.

## CHAPTER SIX: *A ROMANCE OF TWO WORLDS*

### I: PLOT, CHARACTERISATION, STRUCTURE, GENRE

There is little to the plot of *A Romance of Two Worlds*. The first person narrator is a young woman who is cured of a nervous illness by Heliobas, a Chaldean healer learned in the secrets of divine, human, animal and vegetable electric forces. She travels from London to the Riviera and thence to Heliobas's magnificent private hotel in Paris for her treatment, which consists of electric baths, strange medicinal draughts, much prayer and reading and an allegorical journey through space. Her – the narrator is never named – cure is effected simultaneously with the death of the physician's beautiful sister, Zara, with whom she is a little in love. She leaves the hotel not only physically healed but also, having gained some knowledge of the origin and nature of electric forces, confirmed in her belief in God and the hereafter and, consequently, spiritually stronger.

The narrator is the first in the long line of idealised Corelli heroines with characteristics similar to each other and to the public persona of the author: 'a small slender girl, clad in white, with a mass of gold hair twisted loosely up from her neck' (*Romance* 60). She is a professional piano *improvatrice*, as was Corelli at the time of writing her first novel. She has an interest in, and some knowledge of, art, literature and science and is financially independent. Her only flaw is insufficient faith in God which has caused her creativity to stagnate. Corelli is unable to infuse her stereotypical characters with individuality so that the reader reaching the end of the novel, whilst aware of the narrator's fantastic experiences, is not conscious of any significant personality development, other than a rediscovered ability to compose beautiful music.

The first seven chapters of the novel are used to establish the authority and reputation of the healer and sage, Heliobas, who reappears in several later Corelli novels. Although Corelli seems to be attempting to introduce Heliobas as a type of seer and philosopher, perhaps in the style of Shakespeare's Prospero in *The Tempest* or Samuel Johnson's Imlac in *Rasselas*, her lack of skill at characterisation means that Heliobas is constructed from two stereotypes: he is



partly a mystical healer and partly the exotic other who has settled in an exotic Paris, with all the trappings of enormous wealth obtained from unidentified sources. A sense of increasing mystery is produced in the first half of the novel by electric doorbells and music, automatic doors, dangerous volatile fluids and the unexplained presence of a Prince Ivan. A Gothic chapel, psychic dog and hints at incest and a lesbian love affair provide as much sensationalism as any late Victorian could desire.

Aware of the interests of her readers, Corelli also uses the early part of the novel to set an exciting context for the narrator's allegorical astral journey. The astral journey, in turn, is designed to engage readers and make them receptive to the theories embodied in the Electric Creed. After the astral journey, which marks the transition to the second part of the novel, and an explanation of the 'secrets of the sun and moon', Corelli rests her readers' minds with a brief glimpse of Paris society in a chapter entitled 'Sociable Converse' before reproducing the Electric Creed. Once the creed is explained, the novel rushes to its climax and conclusion. The structure of *A Romance of Two Worlds* is unwieldy as it is only by understanding the Electric Creed that the reader becomes able to comprehend fully the ways in which the astral journey and the death of Zara signify its teachings and demonstrate Corelli's unique blend of science and religion. The novel alternates between narrative and didacticism.

Although her first, *A Romance of Two Worlds* establishes the pattern of the typical Corelli novel, incorporating a search for physical, mental and spiritual health. This allegorical romance contains all the elements of the quest motif, from the narrator's travels in search of the right treatment, her earthly progression through a series of trials and her metaphorical visit to the planets to observe higher forms of life, until finally, like most of Corelli's standard heroines, she experiences a transformation which confers upon her goodness, health and beauty.

*A Romance of Two Worlds* satisfies the requirements of science fantasy, supernatural romance, science-fiction fantasy, scientific romance and occult supernatural fantasy and it also meets Rita Felski's definition of the popular sublime. Visits to other planets suggest an attempt at utopian fantasy. The novel also exhibits elements of the silver fork tradition and the sensation novel as Heliobas and Zara live in opulence and their friends are aristocratic, rich and famous. Heliobas, proud of his achievements, throws a magnificent dinner party in order to display his cured patient to her friends who are, naturally, amazed at

her newly acquired health and beauty. The atmosphere is oppressive and the dinner table sumptuous. Its centrepiece is a crystal lake upon which floats an electrically decorated gondola, filled with flowers covered in ‘electric sparkles, like drops of dew’ and propelled by a similarly electrically lit gondolier (*Romance* 347). Again, Corelli writes her own dreams, in this case a dream which was to be realised fifteen years later when she imported an Italian gondola and gondolier to carry her about on the Avon River.

The dinner party takes place against a Gothic background of mounting tension. It has been a long sultry day, Heliobas is out of sorts, the narrator and Zara are full of love and premonitions, the psychic dog is behaving unpredictably and a fierce thunderstorm breaks at the conclusion of the meal. Following the protracted build-up, Zara is killed by lightning. After just a momentary breakdown, the narrator becomes a tower of strength, is visited by Zara’s departed spirit, prevents Heliobas from killing Prince Ivan and then reconciles the brother and the rejected lover. The latter’s purpose in the novel now becomes clear: he is proof of the impossibility of true love occurring other than when the parties concerned are predestined twin souls.

## II: NARRATIVE VOICE AND AUTHORITY

Marie Corelli’s creed is her response to the same issues which perplexed the members of the Society for Psychological Research, founded only four years prior to the publication of *A Romance of Two Worlds*. In the rather tentative ‘Prologue’ to the first edition of the novel, Corelli identifies her concerns, referring to the ‘marvels of learning and science’, the ‘wall of scepticism and cynicism . . . being built up by intellectual thinkers of every nation’, the assaults upon and indifference toward ‘the great empire of the Christian Religion’, ‘the actual existence of the Supernatural around us’ and the ‘absolute certainty of a future state of being’ (*Romance* 1-3). A year later, in the ‘Introduction to the new edition’ of *A Romance of Two Worlds*, she writes more confidently:

Materialism does not and can never still the hunger of the Immortal Spirit in man for those things divine, which are, by right, its heritage. Nothing on earth can soothe or console it . . . while one spark of God’s own essence remains alit within us it is impossible that here, on this limited plane of thought and action, we should ever be satisfied. (*Romance* x-xi)

On a different plane from physicists like Oliver Lodge, philosophers like Henry Sidgwick and psychologists like William James, Corelli nevertheless was grappling with the same issues that perplexed the intellectual elite.

Aware that she lacked the academic and social standing of a Lodge or a James, Corelli is most anxious to establish authority for her creed. In addition to creating Heliobas as a famed philosopher and mystic, the other device she employs is the introduction of a variety of narrative voices within *A Romance of Two Worlds*. The most obvious is that of the unnamed narrator. This voice, however, cannot perform its functions. Corelli's intention is to invest it with authority and authenticity by conflating the roles of author and narrator and blurring the distinction between autobiography and romance. At the same time, Corelli is trying to follow the convention of establishing her narrator as a mediator between author and text. The narrator cannot perform both roles and frequent authorial intervention undermines her independence and authority. It is, therefore, often impossible to distinguish between the views of author and narrator, particularly in the many addresses made directly to the reader.

This blending of authorial and narratorial address begins in the 'Prologue' to *A Romance of Two Worlds* with a combination of Corelli's didactic style and a narrator's apparently candid appeal to the reader's trust. 'I am aware that my narration of the events I have recently experienced will be read with incredulity' (*Romance 2*), the narrator/author writes, before continuing:

In the present narration, which I have purposely called a 'romance,' I do not expect to be believed, as I can only relate what I myself have experienced. I know that men and women of to-day must have proofs, or what they are willing to accept as proofs, before they will credit anything that purports to be of a spiritual tendency. (*Romance 3*)

The narrator's comments about whether an expensive dress designed by Worth fulfils its purpose and whether or not stone amulets are vulgar provide other examples of how the author's voice stridently and indiscriminately overrides that of her narrator (*Romance 344, 414-5*). Corelli seems powerless to resist the temptation to insert her personal opinion directly into her novels. As she so frequently confused herself with the public persona she cultivated, so Corelli has difficulty in separating herself, as author, from the figure of the narrator whom she introduces in *A Romance of Two Worlds*. It is a problem which surfaces repeatedly in her novels.

The narrator again attempts to claim legitimacy at the conclusion of the events described in the novel, as she affirms the reality of her experience and appropriates the authority of science to substantiate her assertion:

As for the Electric Origin of the Universe, a time is coming when scientific men will acknowledge it to be the only theory of Creation worthy of acceptance. All the wonders of Nature are the result of *light and heat alone – i.e.*, are the work of the Electric Ring . . . which *must* go on producing, absorbing, and reproducing worlds, suns, and systems for ever and ever. The Ring, in its turn, is merely the outcome of God's own personality . . . a World created by Love and for Love alone. I cannot force this theory on public attention, which is at present claimed by various learned professors, who give ingenious explanations of 'atoms' and 'molecules;' yet, even regarding these same 'atoms,' the mild question may be put: Where did the *first* 'atom' come from? Some may answer: 'We call the first atom *God*.' Surely it is as well to call Him a Spirit of pure Light as an Atom? (*Romance* 434-5)

The notion of God as the First Atom is explored in Corelli's later novel, *The Mighty Atom*.

Corelli always implied that the 'psychic' experiences narrated in the 'psychological' novel, *A Romance of Two Worlds*, were her own. In 'My First Book', an article originally written for *The Idler* in 1893 and re-published a year later in a collection of similar articles by contemporary writers, she asserts: 'It was the simply worded narration of a singular psychical experience, and included certain theories on religion which I, personally speaking, accept and believe'.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, in the 'Author's Prologue' to *The Life Everlasting*, Corelli maintains that her first novel was an attempt to 'explain and express something of what I myself had studied', although she was 'not permitted to disclose more than a glimmering of the light I was beginning to perceive'.<sup>40</sup>

It is therefore curious that Corelli's 'Prologue' to *A Romance of Two Worlds* should betray a lack of confidence in her Electric Creed. Such uncharacteristic diffidence becomes evident on the occasions when the author self-consciously distances herself from the opinions of her narrator:

I wish it to be plainly understood that in this book I personally advocate no new theory of either religion or philosophy; nor do I hold myself answerable for the opinions expressed by any of my characters. (*Romance* 5)

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<sup>39</sup> *My First Book*, p. 207.

<sup>40</sup> Marie Corelli, *The Life Everlasting: A Reality of Romance*, Methuen, London, 1911, p. 13.

Corelli also displays ambivalence towards the Electric Creed in the second part of the novel, this time through the words of the narrator which introduce the chapter containing ‘The Electric Principle of Christianity’:

My readers must not be rash enough to jump to the conclusion that I set it forward as an explanation or confession of my own faith: my creed has nothing to do with anyone save myself. I simply copy the manuscript I possess, as the theory of a deeply read and widely intelligent man. (*Romance* 305)

Reluctance to be associated with the creed resurfaces at the end of the novel. In the closing lines of the ‘Conclusion’, the narrator once more qualifies her commitment to the theories she has articulated:

I have related my ‘experience’ exactly as it happened at the time, and my readers can accept or deny the theories of Heliobas as they please. Neither denial, acceptance, criticism, nor incredulity can affect *me* personally, inasmuch as I am not Heliobas, but simply the narrator of an episode connected with him; and as such, my task is finished. (*Romance* 435)

These examples of affected diffidence demonstrate the difficulties inherent in the strategy of combining authorial and narratorial perspectives. Although eager to promote her creed, Corelli is also experiencing the nervous pre-publication jitters of the first-time novelist. The attribution of the Electric Creed to the character Heliobas is designed to protect the authority of the creed whilst at the same time putting a distance between the author and any criticism that might be forthcoming.

Whereas Corelli intends to invest the narrator of *A Romance of Two Worlds* with the authenticity of the author’s own experience, the voice of the character Heliobas carries the authority of learning and science. ‘The Electric Principle of Christianity’ is presented as one of his scholarly manuscripts and thus invested with added *gravitas*. The narrator firstly dreams of the sage in a series of three visions; she then learns of his existence and singular powers of healing through the story of the artist Cellini, cured of a nervous ailment, scepticism and an inability to mix colours. In the mind of the narrator, the mystical Heliobas is also associated with the achievements of contemporary science, as she explains:

I knew that there were many cases of serious illnesses being cured by means of electricity – that electric baths and electric appliances of all descriptions were in ordinary use; and I saw no reason to be surprised at the fact of a man being in existence who had cultivated electric force within himself to such an

extent that he was able to use it as a healing power. (*Romance* 96-7)

When she meets the famous Heliobas, therefore, the narrator is surprised to find that he addresses her ‘as any physician might do who inquired after a patient’s health’ (*Romance* 107). Nevertheless, he soon demonstrates by an electric hand clasp and the prescription of immediately beneficial baths and draughts that he is indeed the possessor of an unusual power, modestly described as ‘a purely scientific fact’ (*Romance* 119). The doctor’s credentials include an extensive and varied use of electrical appliances, an education in Greek philosophy, early psychic experiments upon his dog and his theories of universal and personal electricity. After the first few encounters, the narrator is convinced that Heliobas does not indulge in ‘vulgar spirit-rapping and mesmerism’ but, again, in ‘established scientific fact’ (*Romance* 160). The accuracy of Heliobas’s prediction of the death of General Gordon in Khartoum in the ‘Conclusion’ to the novel, as reported by the narrator, settles definitively the question of his authority and so the Electric Creed must, by every indication, be taken seriously.

Other narrative voices in the novel include not only the artist Cellini, who represents independent corroboration when he recounts how his own physical and spiritual reinvigoration was achieved with the help of Heliobas, but also a spirit named Azùl who acts as the narrator’s guide on her astral journey. As well as articulating Corelli’s beliefs regarding immortality through his explanation of life on other planets, Azùl serves as a means of blurring fantasy and what is claimed to be reality in the novel. His admonition, recalled by the narrator in time to prevent Heliobas from killing Prince Ivan, is intended as proof that spirits exist and are able to influence life in the real world. The novel also contains a dreamparable, mediated by yet another narrative voice, that of the narrator’s own guardian angel, Aeon, whose name signifies timelessness and who performs a similar function to Azùl by embodying communication between the spiritual and material worlds.

The overwhelmingly favourable response to *A Romance of Two Worlds* showed Corelli that, as far as her readers were concerned, her narrative strategies had succeeded. Six months after the novel’s initial publication, she wrote to George Bentley: ‘Letters are *pouring* in every day about the “Romance”. I cannot

understand it at all'.<sup>41</sup> In *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*, Garrett Stewart uses the metaphor of a compass to describe how the bearings of the addresses writers make to their readers 'measure the orientation of the audiences they magnetise'.<sup>42</sup> Stewart categorises Corelli, Haggard, Kipling and Stevenson as 'lodestones of popular sensibility' and offers Corelli as an 'especially illuminating case' of what he terms hypertrophic publication, as her 'narratives are saturated by the invocation of her audience, on whom she fastens with often garrulous abandon, even as she anathematizes the sort of "reader" she makes no effort to reach'. He argues that the 'New Edition' of *A Romance of Two Worlds*

brings to an unprecedented completion the dialogic gesture of Corelli's prefatory and valedictory engagements with the Victorian audience by printing selected commendatory responses of her readers as an 'Appendix' of 'genuine epistles' – after ten of which inserted documents her own voice strikes up again in peroration.<sup>43</sup>

Stewart suggests that the tendency of the Victorian best seller 'to arrive (or at least end up, in subsequent editions) enveloped in prefatory or other (often retroactive) framing materials, whether fictionalised or not' was an indication of 'the decline of the whole popular Victorian literary ethos . . . the collapse of the nineteenth-century "Easy Book" into the modernist Text'.<sup>44</sup>

The 'Appendix' to which Stewart refers does indeed include ten letters which Corelli claims are typical of those she received from appreciative readers of the first edition of *A Romance of Two Worlds*. The letters are selected and introduced by the author and most are followed by a commentary in which Corelli explains her response and expounds upon the issues raised. A good indication of the tone of the letters is offered by the following:

I so much want to believe in the Great Spirit that 'makes for righteousness,' and I cannot! Your book puts it all so clearly that if I can only know it to be a true experience of your own, it will go a long way in dispersing the fog that modern writings surround one with. (*Romance* 443)

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<sup>41</sup> Brian Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter: The Extraordinary Life of Marie Corelli*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1978, p. 59.

<sup>42</sup> Garrett Stewart, *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1996, p. 149.

<sup>43</sup> Stewart, *Dear Reader*, p. 149.

<sup>44</sup> Stewart, *Dear Reader*, pp. 169-71.

Another reader advised: 'I felt a better woman for the reading of it twice; and I know others, too, who are higher and better women for such noble thoughts and teaching' (*Romance* 440-1). Thus was Corelli persuaded to abandon her ambivalence toward the Electric Creed, and when the second edition of the novel was published in 1887, the tone and words of the 'Introduction to the new edition' and the 'Introduction' to the 'Appendix' display a confidence which quite overrides the tentativeness of the 'Prologue' to the first edition. As Brian Masters recounts:

Thousands of discontented people, worried sick by the new scepticism born of modern scientific advance, were reassured by this unknown lady who spoke to them with missionary zeal. Of course she made them feel better; she demanded no great mental effort, and promised easy assuagement of their ills.<sup>45</sup>

The 'Introduction' to the 'Appendix' concludes with a statement that the author refuses requests for interviews as she does not wish to set herself 'forward in any way as an exponent of high doctrine in which I am as yet but a beginner and a student' (*Romance* 436). There can be no doubt that Corelli takes the Electric Creed extremely seriously and is keen for her readers to accept it as an alternative to traditional Christianity. She is not, however, prepared to expose her ideas to independent questioning. Corelli's dialogue with her readers is not as open as Stewart suggests; her enthusiasm more like that of the evangelist who is eager to preach but unwilling to submit to impartial scrutiny. Like many of the popular mediums of her time, she wants the rules of encounter to remain hers.

### III: THE ELECTRIC CREED

According to the Electric Creed in *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 'Art, Science and Poesy' throughout the ages have prophesied the secrets of electricity. Consequently, the classical painters depicted an 'electric halo' around their virgins and saints; astronomers discovered that the sun was a world in a state of conflagration; the compilers of the *Arabian Nights* recognised that some human beings were forced to take the form of animals; and all this was due to their dim awareness of the power of electricity, only now explained by the Electric Creed. 'All art, all prophecy, all poesy', Heliobas writes, 'should therefore be accepted eagerly and studied earnestly, for in them we find *electric inspiration*, out of

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<sup>45</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, pp. 59-60.



which we are able to draw lessons for our guidance hereafter' (*Romance* 325). By including art, literature and science within the same scheme as religion, Corelli's Electric Creed imitates the attempt by the positivists to create a humanist framework encompassing ethics, science and the arts. The irony is that Corelli was stridently anti-positivist, an attitude demonstrated time and again in her writing and most unequivocally in *The Mighty Atom*.

Marie Corelli claims that the Electric Creed, or 'The Electric Principle of Christianity', as Heliobas's manuscript is called, is 'completely borne out by the New Testament', upon which the 'light of Science' has been brought to bear so that 'its glorious pages . . . grow bright with hitherto unguessed mystical meanings if humbly and prayerfully studied' (*Romance* xiii-xix). The opening words of the Electric Creed assert God to be the '*Supreme Spirit of Light*' (*Romance* 307).

Corelli's creed is a jumble of Biblical quotation and allusion, pseudo-science and sensationalism. Though a curious concoction, it is plausible enough when read in a contemporary context. God is a 'Shape of pure Electric Radiance' whose appearances, as chronicled in the Scriptures, were all electric in character, and he formed his dwelling, a Vast Central Sphere, by a single thought. According to Heliobas,

being pure Light, [God] is also pure Love; the power or capacity of Love implies the necessity of Loving; the necessity of loving points to the existence of things to be loved – hence the secret of creation. (*Romance* 307-8)

Corelli's theology thus far is not inconsistent with the Biblical teaching that God is love and his son, Christ, is the light of the world. It is also consistent with Olive Schreiner's assessment of the nineteenth-century Christian as one who believes that 'beyond this blue sky above us is a love as widespreading over all'.<sup>46</sup>

Corelli's theology is also remarkably consistent with the teachings of spiritualism. Examination of contemporary spiritualist texts reveals recurring parallels between Corelli's writing and that of popular spiritualists. Five years prior to the publication of *A Romance of Two Worlds*, for example, the spiritualist Samuel Watson had proposed similar ideas in *The Religion of Spiritualism. Its Phenomena and Philosophy*. Watson is described on the fly-leaf of his book as 'thirty-six years a Methodist minister' and, although he withdrew from the church

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<sup>46</sup> Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm*, p. 288.

in 1872, his approach to spiritualism remained a deeply religious one. Watson relies heavily upon messages from a Bishop Otey, deceased Episcopal Bishop of Tennessee, for detailed information about the spirit world. Thus Watson's Bishop Otey anticipates Corelli's Heliobas when he explains creation:

I saw that all *divine light* was but the light of *His love*, and as that *love* increased the nearer drew that form to the Spirit of the Infinite; and as the *light* increased, so increased His Spirit there, until through the form that once upon the earth had dwelt, creation worked outward, and new thoughts were born to build new worlds, and bring new species of life to work in turn their life up to God.<sup>47</sup>

Another popular writer on spiritualism was the medium William Stainton Moses, whose *Spirit Teachings*, written in 1883 under the awkward pseudonym of 'M. A. (Oxon)', purports to be messages from several familiar spirits passed to him over a number of years by means of automatic writing. Moses also equates the deity with light and creation, describing God as a 'Fountain of Uncreated Light'.<sup>48</sup>

According to Corelli's Electric Creed, God's first creation was the Electric Circle of the Universe, also referred to as the Great Circle or the Electric Ring. The Ring is synonymous with Eternity, a notion that Corelli develops further in the 'Introduction to the new edition' of *A Romance of Two Worlds*, where she demonstrates her conception of thermodynamics, perpetual motion and entropy by describing the Ring as perpetually creative and perpetually absorbent; it can throw out new planets or draw them into itself and its electric force is infinite (*Romance* xxiii). She explains that this secret of the eternity of the Electric Ring is as simple to the enlightened as the secret of the mainspring of a watch is to a mechanician (*Romance* xxiv). By using a metaphor from the mechanistic eighteenth century, however, rather than one from the evolutionary nineteenth, Corelli reveals the limitations of her understanding of contemporary science. Nevertheless, she was not unique and, half a century later, C. P. Snow uses literary intellectuals' inability to describe the Second Law of Thermodynamics to demonstrate his

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<sup>47</sup> Samuel Watson, *The Religion of Spiritualism. Its Phenomena and Philosophy*, 1880; second ed., Edward O. Jenkins, New York, 1881, p. 217.

<sup>48</sup> M. A. (Oxon) [William Stainton Moses], *Spirit Teachings*, The Psychological Press Association, London, 1883, p. 155.

contention that an unbridgeable gap had opened between the scientific and literary cultures.<sup>49</sup>

Following Genesis, but conscious of evolutionary theory, the Electric Creed next addresses the creation of the earth. Earth, Heliobas explains, was made by a simple manifestation of electricity

consisting in a *heating passage of rays* from the Central Circle to the planet newly propelled forth from it, which caused that planet to produce and multiply the wonders of the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms which we call Nature. (*Romance* 308)

God's next creations were the Children of Light, radiant and immortal beings of beauty and purity, which explains, according to Heliobas, why the scriptures report God's use of the plural in 'let us make man in our image'. Humans, although composed of the same material as animals, vegetables and minerals, contain the likeness of God and these Children of Light within them 'in the form of an *electric flame* or *germ* of spiritual existence combined with its companion working-force of *Will-power*' (*Romance* 309). The Children of Light are the angels of the creation narratives of the Bible and *Paradise Lost*, an analogy which is supported by *The Sorrows of Satan* wherein Prince Rimânez is revealed as 'Lucifer, Prince of Light' and 'Lucifer, Son of the morning'.<sup>50</sup>

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Western civilisation feared that the end of the world was imminent. Not only was the *fin de siècle* approaching, but advances in physics, astronomy and geology had demonstrated that the earth and the sun were much older than hitherto had been believed. Lord Kelvin's Second Law of Thermodynamics presaged the cooling of the sun and the consequent death of life on earth. Foreboding was exacerbated by uncertainty as scientists were unable to agree on the timescales involved: Charles Darwin, for instance, referred to Kelvin as an 'odious spectre' when it appeared that Kelvin's theories regarding the age of the sun played havoc with his own conclusions regarding the time involved in the evolutionary process.<sup>51</sup> Contemporary feelings

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<sup>49</sup> C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures: And A Second Look: An Expanded Version of The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution*, Mentor, New York, 1964, p. 20.

<sup>50</sup> Marie Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, 1895; rpt: Oxford World's Classics, Oxford, 1998, pp. 368 and 380.

<sup>51</sup> J. A. V. Chapple, *Science and Literature in the Nineteenth Century*, Macmillan, Houndmills, 1986, p. 7.

of fear and confusion are reflected in the works of writers like Dickens, Hardy, Wells and Butler as well as in the popular novels of Marie Corelli.

Unlike less bold writers, however, Marie Corelli offers through the *Electric Creed*, as well as immortality for humankind, a solution to the problem of a cooling earth. Although the trope of the soul as a germ (in the sense of a seed) or a spark is a traditional one, Corelli reinvents it as an ‘electric flame or germ’ within each human being. Arguing that it is the smallest planet and the furthest from the Electric Circle, Heliobas claims that Earth receives the least amount of light and spiritual benefit from that source. ‘Were men wise enough to accept this fact’, he writes,

they would foster to the utmost the germs of electric sympathy within themselves, in order to form a direct communication, or system of attraction, between this planet and the ever-widening Ring, so that some spiritual benefit might accrue to them thereby. (*Romance* 310)

Thus human beings have not only the opportunity to effect their own salvation, but, by increasing the cumulative effect of the electric sparks within themselves, restore heat to Earth and rescue their planet at the same time. This theory fits with the notion – expressed in more detail in *The Life Everlasting* – that humans may so develop control over their own internal atomic (or electric) forces that they are also able to influence the atomic (or electric) forces present in their environment.

This notion of the soul as a kind of mysterious Divine spark had existed long before it was adopted by scientists as a metaphor for the theories of galvanisation and electricity. Corelli was only one in a long line of writers who suggested links, real or allegorical, between divinity, a germ or spark and the soul. The spiritualists also used this metaphor. A fine example is provided by Samuel Watson, this time relaying the words of a spirit called ‘Mystery’:

This little germ of God’s own nature, that lives in and expands every human soul, must be restored to Him when the mortal shall have put on immortality. He will by His own immutable and never-ending laws, bring it nearer to His own perfection.<sup>52</sup>

Stainton Moses believed in the same kind of spark. Of a suicide he writes: ‘He destroyed . . . the temple in which dwelt the Divine spark’.<sup>53</sup> Corelli repackaged ideas from science and spiritualism, as well as pearls from the Bible, in order to

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<sup>52</sup> Watson, *The Religion of Spiritualism*, p. 239.

<sup>53</sup> M. A. (Oxon), *Spirit Teachings*, p. 271.

construct her creed. Backed by familiarity and the semblance of authority, the vagueness of these notions was not obvious to those of her readers who, bemused by the apparent contradictions of science and religion, found comfort and reassurance in her syncretic creed.

Having explained the existence of God, the universe and humankind, Corelli's creed next deals with the relationship between them. Science and conventional deterministic theology are adapted to explain how, knowing that the earth's destruction is inevitable because there will always be too few people of sufficient purity to garner the necessary heat from the Electric Ring, God, ever compassionate, forgiving and patient, devised a way to save his creations. Heliobas gives salvation of the few righteous souls a nineteenth-century scientific twist:

this Earth and God's World were like America and Europe before the Atlantic Cable was laid. Now the messages of goodwill flash under the waves, heedless of the storms. So also God's Cable is laid between us and His Heaven in the person of Christ. (*Romance* 312)

According to Heliobas, all religions are types of Christianity, including unspecified beliefs held by Armenians, Chaldeans and Buddhists, because all religions recognise 'the truth of Christ's visitation'. Corelli's theological offerings muddle the beliefs of Christianity with other religions, but a triumphant contradiction emerges that obviously satisfied her humanistic and scientifically inclined Victorian readers:

And here may be noted the main difference between the Electric Theory of Christianity and other theories. *Christ did not die because God needed a sacrifice*. The idea of sacrifice is a relic of heathen barbarism; God is too infinitely loving to desire the sacrifice of the smallest flower . . . Christ's death was not a sacrifice; it was simply a means of confidence and communion with the Creator . . . Finally, by His re-ascension into Heaven He established that much-needed electric communication between us and the Central Sphere. (*Romance* 314-5)

Writing in 1912 in an article for *The World Today* entitled 'Swagger Religionists', Corelli again argues that sacrifice belongs to barbaric times 'when Man, gradually evolving himself out of his many-century prototypes, was half afraid of his own existence'. However, she continues, 'science has opened the door of Infinity', revealing the world of nature with all its wonders, 'and we cannot pretend that the Creator of such perfect work is a capricious or an implacable God of cruelty,

vengeance, and bloodthirstiness'.<sup>54</sup> Thus Corelli uses the language of science to replace the vengeful God of the Old Testament, who requires appeasement, by a nineteenth-century one who is rational and scientific.

Once more Corelli echoes the spiritualists in her rejection of the Old Testament. Conan Doyle wrote several books and undertook lecture tours, including one to Australia, New Zealand and Sri Lanka in 1921, to promote spiritualism. Using an evolutionary metaphor, he writes:

if the Old Testament should remain, like some obsolete appendix in the animal frame, to mark a lower stage through which development has passed, it will more and more be recognised as a document which has lost all validity and which should no longer be allowed to influence human conduct, save by way of pointing out much which we may avoid.<sup>55</sup>

Corelli had difficulty incorporating Judaism into her theology and she was stridently anti-Semitic. This attitude is particularly evident in the novel *Temporal Power* and again in 'Swagger Religionists', where she refers to the 'Jewish Jehovah' as 'a little less barbarous than any Mumbo-Jumbo of a savage tribe'.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, Corelli's dislike of the Jewish nation and its religion only reflected popular opinion. Similarly, her inclusion of Buddhism in the Electric Creed was a response to contemporary interest in Eastern religions, as was, for example, Madame Blavatsky's theosophy.<sup>57</sup> Corelli always shrewdly anticipated her readers' attitudes.

In the same way as Epes Sargent and Samuel Watson offer 'scientific' evidence for spiritualism, Heliobas offers eight instances of 'scientific' proof that Christ was an 'Embodied Electric Spirit'. The first is the star and the vision of angels which appeared at the time of his birth. The star was electric flame from space and easily recognised by the wise Chaldeans for whom 'electricity was an advanced science' and who came prepared to worship the 'radiant Guest, the offspring of pure Light'. The chorus of angels appearing to the shepherds was 'simply a joyous band of the Singing Children of the Electric Ring' who were drawn earthwards by the Radiance of the 'Babe of Bethlehem' (*Romance* 316).

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<sup>54</sup> Marie Corelli, 'Swagger Religionists' in *The World Today*, Vol. XXI (February 1912), p. 1770.

<sup>55</sup> Conan Doyle, *The Vital Message*, p. 36.

<sup>56</sup> Corelli, 'Swagger Religionists', p. 1772.

The second and third proofs, Christ's baptism and the calling of his disciples, are somewhat obscure, but the logic underpinning the fourth proof is easier to follow. Christ's body was so charged with electricity that he was able to heal the sick by a touch or a look; for example, he felt the power go out from himself when a woman in a crowd merely touched his garment and was healed. This, argues Heliobas, 'is the exact feeling that a physical electrician experiences at this day after employing his powers on a subject' (*Romance* 317). Christ's other miracles are attributed to the same electric power.

The fifth 'scientific' proof that Christ was an embodied electric spirit reflects Corelli's awareness of changes in atomic theory during the nineteenth century and contextualises her belief that humans should nurture the electric spark within them. Heliobas is quite explicit in this matter:

The walking on the sea was a purely electric effort, *and can be accomplished now by anyone* who has cultivated sufficient inner force. The sea being full of electric particles will support anybody sufficiently and similarly charged – the two currents combining to procure the necessary equilibrium. Peter, who was able to walk a little way, lost his power directly his will became vanquished by fear – because the sentiment of fear disperses electricity, and being a purely *human* emotion, does away with spiritual strength for the time. (*Romance* 317)

The darkness that covered Jerusalem, the tearing of the temple veil and the earthquake which accompanied the death of Christ were 'electric manifestations' constituting the sixth 'scientific' proof of his electric nature. The seventh proof is the resurrection event itself, a 'powerful display of electric force', evidenced by the 'countenance like lightning' of the angel remaining beside the empty tomb. Mary Magdalene was forbidden to touch the newly-arisen Christ because his strength was being replenished by 'in-rushing currents of electricity' which would have caused her instant death by lightning had she made contact with them (*Romance* 317-8). The final evidence is the electric nature of the Holy Ghost, described by Heliobas as the 'ever-flowing current of the inspired working Intelligence of the Creator'. It is manifested by the rushing wind that accompanied the descent of the Ghost in the form of cloven tongues of flame that appeared upon the heads of the apostles. Heliobas explains, 'It may here be noted that the natural electric flame is *dual* or 'cloven' in shape' (*Romance* 318).

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<sup>57</sup> Curiously, Catherine Kuncze claims that Corelli and Blavatsky were united in their objection to 'table-tappers' - see *A Transparent Veil*, p. 24.

Heliobas next interprets the Anglican creed in accordance with the Electric Creed, and then, following a digression on the proper role of women as exemplified by Mary, the mother of Christ, concludes his exposition of Christianity in the light of science:

*For those who have once become aware of the existence of the Central Sphere and of the Electric Ring surrounding it, and who are able to realise to the full the gigantic as well as minute work performed by the electric waves around us and within us, there can no longer be any doubt as to all the facts of Christianity, as none of them, viewed by the electric theory, are otherwise than in accordance with the Creator's love and sympathy with even the smallest portion of His creation.*  
(*Romance* 321)

Corelli's ignorance of scientific detail is obvious, but it was only equal to that of the readers by whom she was so admired. Readers of popular novels such as *A Romance of Two Worlds* might have been ignorant of the nature of electricity, but they marvelled at its application through inventions such as the telegraph and electric lighting. Physicists belonging to the Society for Psychical Research may have understood the generation and behaviour of electricity, but this did not prevent some of them from trying to determine a scientific basis for immortality through the application of empirical science to phenomena occurring during seances. Conan Doyle, a qualified doctor of medicine, published the first of his famous detective stories the year after publication of *A Romance of Two Worlds* and sincerely believed that he applied the same forensic science and objectivity to spiritualism as Sherlock Holmes brought to the mysterious crimes he was asked to solve.<sup>58</sup> Marie Curie belonged for a time to the Society for Psychical Research. Alfred Russell Wallace, Darwin's co-propounder of the theory of natural selection, became a spiritualist.<sup>59</sup> Epes Sargent asserts in *The Scientific Basis of Spiritualism* that it is 'the glory of Spiritualism that its appeal is to the reason through science; that it gives us the elements of a religion, old as the world, and at once rational, scientific, and emotional'.<sup>60</sup> Corelli was merely combining popular science with Christianity, or rationality with spirituality, in a middle class way

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<sup>58</sup> See, for example, Conan Doyle's contention that, in seances, 'the fact that darkness rather than light, and dryness rather than moisture, are helpful to good results has been abundantly manifested, and points to the physical laws which underlie the phenomena', *The Vital Message*, p. 49.

<sup>59</sup> Tess Coslett, 'Introductory Essay' to *Science and Religion in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 23.

<sup>60</sup> Sargent, *The Scientific Basis of Spiritualism*, p. 164.



that she herself, and therefore her readers, could comprehend and accept. As Peter Keating rightly points out: ‘The best-seller asserted the existence of absolute values. At its most defiant it presented itself as a coherent philosophy that was both older and newer than advanced modern thought’.<sup>61</sup>

#### IV: PROGRESSIVE SPIRITUAL EVOLUTION

Corelli also developed her theories of progressive spiritual evolution in conformity with Victorian expectations of the afterlife. Aware that the concept of a punitive God was no longer acceptable, she combined quasi-Buddhist and theosophist beliefs in reincarnation with the notion of purgatory to constitute a process of progressive spiritual evolution and refinement, incorporating immediate and tangible rewards in this life as well as in the next. The Electric Creed explains that many of the souls who leave the earth are detained in a ‘Purgatory of Air’ where they must work, by helping and warning others, throughout the ages, gradually raising themselves through higher and higher planes until they finally achieve happiness when they reach the Central Sphere, the abode of God (*Romance* 322). Moreover, it is not only the inhabitants of earth who must redeem themselves through this ‘unselfish labour’, but ‘released souls’ from all worlds; in fact, that part of the population of the Central Sphere which originates from earth, known in the Electric Creed as the ‘Sorrowful Star’ because of the scepticism of its inhabitants, will only be a small proportion of the total number (*Romance* 322). Corelli’s theology thus incorporates popular perceptions of contemporary scientific theories about progressive evolution, the age of the earth, the possibility of life on other planets and the infinite nature of the universe.

The concept of achieving salvation through good works is articulated again, albeit in a curiously inverted fashion, in *The Sorrows of Satan*, where Satan, banished from the presence of God, can only find redemption if mankind resists his temptations.<sup>62</sup> In the same way that Satan moves a little closer to God each time his blandishments are rejected, so a spirit in the Purgatory of Air moves a little closer to the Central Sphere with each successful intervention that prevents

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<sup>61</sup> Keating, *The Haunted Study*, p. 442.

<sup>62</sup> See, for example, *The Sorrows of Satan*, pp. 352-3.

a human on earth from erring (*Romance* 322). Corelli's Christians traverse strange worlds by peculiar methods to reach the Central Sphere and the presence of God.

Once more, however, the novelist shared her belief with the spiritualists. Conan Doyle writes of the fiends and evil spirits that sometimes appear at seances:

These creatures are in truth our own backward brothers, bound for the same ultimate destination as ourselves, but retarded by causes for which our earth conditions may have been partly responsible. Our pity and sympathy should go out to them, and if they do indeed manifest at a séance, the proper Christian attitude is . . . that we should reason with them and pray for them in order to help them upon their difficult way.<sup>63</sup>

Samuel Watson also believed in spiritual evolution. 'Eternal progression', he explains,

is the law that governs in spirit-life . . . Instruction, sympathy, and prayer, for those who are in outer darkness, will be the employment of the pure and good, and this Christ-like work will be the most effectual way to develop themselves to a higher plane.<sup>64</sup>

Always offering a line of thought that conforms with Victorian expectations, Corelli is emphatic that there is no hell or place of perpetual punishment in her cosmos, asserting through the Electric Creed that 'Eternal Punishment is merely a form of speech for what is really Eternal Retrogression' (*Romance* 322). Actively evil people may retard their spiritual progress so that they weaken the electric germ of their souls to the extent that it lacks even the power to escape and seek some other chance of development. In such cases, the soul sinks into the form of a quadruped, bird or other creature dominated by purely physical needs. It is not clear whether these have any access to redemption, but they do remain tormented by memory. Again, Law of Retrogression is explained through Heliobas's manuscript:

So that if a man, by choice, forces his soul *downward* to inhabit hereafter the bodies of dogs, horses, and other like animals, he should know that he does so at the cost of everything except Remembrance. Eternal Retrogression means that the hopelessly tainted electric germ recoils further and further from the Pure Centre whence it sprang, *always bearing within itself* the knowledge of *what it was once* and *what it might have been*. (*Romance* 323)

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<sup>63</sup> Conan Doyle, *The Vital Message*, pp. 118-9.

<sup>64</sup> Watson, *The Religion of Spiritualism*, p. 183.

According to Heliobas, this accounts for the pathetic look in the eyes of a dog or a seal and the melancholy patient gaze of oxen toiling at the plough. The punishment is remembrance, for, like Plato, Corelli believes that memory is immortal.<sup>65</sup>

Without going so far as to suggest a new life in animal form, spiritualist writers nevertheless believed in reincarnation as a means of spiritual progression and regression. Samuel Watson, for example, rejects the notion of a literal, perpetual hell, arguing that the concept of a lake of fire derives from Dante, Milton and Pollok and is the negation of a loving God incapable of tormenting his creations. Spirits, upon leaving the body, take the position that their lives have prepared them for, and some are disappointed to find that this position is lower than they expected, because they had relied on faith and the sufferings of Christ – the teachings of traditional Christianity – instead of creating their own destiny by doing God's will.<sup>66</sup>

Watson also believed that memory is everlasting, because 'Memory forges links which cannot be severed; they are eternal'.<sup>67</sup> He presents a clear Law of Recompense to describe the way in which the spirits of the dead achieve certain levels in the spirit world according to the way in which they lived their earthly lives.<sup>68</sup> Epes Sargent argues, in a similar vein but from a secular viewpoint, that spiritualism holds out the 'loftiest inducements to a noble, beneficent life' because it 'proves that as we sow we reap, and that man is preparing his future condition while here, by his ruling thoughts, desires, and acts, and is thus his own punisher, his own rewarder'.<sup>69</sup>

Stainton Moses held similar beliefs, writing of seven spheres of probation, of which earth is the highest, and a further seven spheres of active work, followed by yet another seven higher spheres of Divine contemplation. Progression from the lowest spheres is linked to the work of 'missionary spirits' who endeavour to

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<sup>65</sup> Plato's 'Theory of Recollection', most thoroughly discussed in the *Phaedo*. See, for example, *Greek Philosophy: Thales to Aristotle*, edited by Reginald E. Allen; second ed., Free Press, New York, 1985, pp. 171-6.

<sup>66</sup> Watson, *The Religion of Spiritualism*, pp. 187 and 230.

<sup>67</sup> Watson, *The Religion of Spiritualism*, p. 214.

<sup>68</sup> Watson, *The Religion of Spiritualism*, pp. 214 and 225-32.

<sup>69</sup> Sargent, *The Scientific Basis of Spiritualism*, p. 167.

renew the desire for progress in degraded spirits. Moses writes that ‘Immutable laws govern the results of deeds’, acknowledges a role for memory and explains that

We know of no hell save that within the soul: a hell which is fed by the flame of unpurified and untamed lust and passion . . . from which the only escape lies in retracing the steps, and in cultivating the qualities which shall bear fruit in love and knowledge of God.<sup>70</sup>

More eccentric is *Beyond the Veil* (1878), written by Frances H. McDougall and Luna Hutchinson eight years before *A Romance of Two Worlds* and purporting to be the words of the spiritualist Paschal Beverly Randolph – aided by Emanuel Swedenborg, amongst others – received by the two writers through clairaudience and later edited by them. The book presents a detailed portrayal of life after death, including not only the beautiful universes and gardens that feature in most spiritualist accounts, but also descriptions of family relations, charity work, manufacture, houses and other buildings, what food is eaten and how waste is excreted. Totally rejecting notions of a separate heaven and hell, these ladies propose:

As the Good and Evil are indiscriminately received into this Sphere, the question arises, will not the presence of the latter disturb the essential harmonies, or corrupt the moral atmosphere? I answer, by no means; but the two great classes act and react healthfully and happily on each other; for the Bad are not only made better by the presence and influence of the Good but the Good are actually made better by the presence and necessities of the Bad; and for this reason, that affections are generated, and ministries called forth, which, having their source and motive in a divine love, exalt and refine the highest and the purest; nor could they enter the higher life without precisely this kind of work, from which every one must draw an essential experience.<sup>71</sup>

It is apparent that Corelli was drawing heavily upon established spiritualist principles when she enunciated her vision, or version, of immortality. One curious aspect of her engagement with spiritualism, however, is that whilst she elected to oppose publicly the approaches taken by respected people like Lodge, Sidgwick

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<sup>70</sup> M. A. (Oxon), *Spirit Teachings*, pp. 28 and 77.

<sup>71</sup> Frances H. McDougall and Luna Hutchinson, *Beyond the Veil: the posthumous works of Paschal Beverly Randolph, aided by Emanuel Swedenborg and others*, D. M. Bennett, New York, 1878, p. 44. In this vision of the afterlife, women, in pleasant open air factories, continue to be responsible for the dressmaking needs of society and a princess teaches less fortunate young ladies the art of lace mending.

and James, examination of her work reveals that her beliefs were often closely aligned to those of more popular but often less significant writers. That Corelli never relinquished her belief in progressive spiritual evolution is apparent from novels like *Ardath*, *The Soul of Lilith*, *The Sorrows of Satan*, *Ziska* and *The Life Everlasting*. The theme also emerges in her journal articles and short stories. ‘The World in Tears’, written during the Great War and re-published in 1919 in *My ‘Little Bit’*, seeks to comfort those whose loved ones died in the war by reassuring readers that their beloved has just gone ‘into the next room of existence, whither you yourself will soon go . . . and you will wonder why you shed so many tears when all the while he is alive’. To the ensuing rhetorical request for proof of this spiritual existence, Corelli answers:

‘Sound-waves,’ ‘light-rays,’ ‘radium,’ ‘electric force,’ – all these existed from the very beginning of creation – *why were we not told?* Simply because, by universal law, all advancement is, and *must* be the result of gradual evolvement, suited to the slowly expanding capacity of the human brain and its attendant mental spirituality, and because it is decreed that we shall ‘work out our own salvation’.<sup>72</sup>

Corelli’s ideal heroine of ‘The Stepping Star’, a short story published in *The Love of Long Ago and Other Stories* in 1920, is dainty, feminine, unmarried, rich and, importantly, a scientist and a believer in spiritual evolution. She privileges scientific research over bringing up a family, which she terms merely a ‘race-habit’.<sup>73</sup> To a rejected suitor’s emissary she explains:

It is all a matter of progress and transformation . . . There is no stop in our ‘going on and never to die’ destiny. First, the germ – then the tiny spark of life – then the insect, the reptile, the bird, the animal, the man – all, all evolving to the Angel! It is only our obstinate and unbelieving selves that put a drag on the wheel.<sup>74</sup>

Corelli’s second last novel, *The Secret Power*, is the only one in which her belief in progressive spiritual evolution appears to waver, although she does not abandon it entirely.

## V: ELECTRICITY, ‘THE SPIRIT WORLD’ AND CHRISTIANITY

<sup>72</sup> Marie Corelli, ‘The World in Tears’ in *My ‘Little Bit’*, Collins, London, 1919, pp. 182-3.

<sup>73</sup> Marie Corelli, ‘The Stepping Star’ in *The Love of Long Ago and Other Stories*, Methuen, London, 1920, p. 170.

<sup>74</sup> Corelli, ‘The Stepping Star’ p. 164.

The spiritualists also believed that the human spirit was related to electricity. Samuel Watson, for example, suggests that electricity ‘is the best natural agent to convey a correct idea of the spiritual body, which, like its type, can pass unobstructed through matter, and though not omnipresent, can pass like it through space with almost inconceivable velocity’. Watson also links electricity with the notions of the love of God, light and eternal progression. He offers the following explanation of a lower spirit world:

here spirits from the higher spheres come to talk to them of God’s love, and make them feel they are bound to Him by that electric chain which holds every atom of God’s creation together . . . spirits who are not developed above the transgressions and errors committed while in the body, could never feel the influence of this electric brightness were they not directed and instructed by those who, with feelings God-like, come to them, making their abode brighter by telling them of their union with God and holy angels by this electric chain of love.<sup>75</sup>

Corelli adopts these notions without reservation. The newly-dead Zara, for example, is still in the lowest spirit world when she appears to the narrator of *A Romance of Two Worlds* to warn of a serious danger that is threatening Heliobas (*Romance* 376). Azül and Aeon, too, are within planes where assistance to mortals contributes to their own spiritual progression.

According to Heliobas, the established churches have no place within the Electric Creed as they contain but few true lovers of God and followers of Christ. They are infiltrated by hypocrites and corroded by self-interest when they ought to be united by an ‘*electric* [bond] of love and faith’. Sectarianism contains no Christianity whatsoever and ‘the only Church [is that] which has the Principles of Electricity within it, and is therefore destined to live, because electricity is life’ (*Romance* 325-6). Despite initially protesting that she had no intention of introducing a new religion, no doubt Corelli was gratified to discover in January 1890 that a new church had been founded in America based on the doctrines of *A Romance of Two Worlds*.<sup>76</sup>

Again, Corelli’s criticism of the established churches reflects the attitudes articulated by acknowledged spiritualists. Although previously a Methodist minister and despite many encounters with the spirit of John Wesley, Samuel

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<sup>75</sup> Watson, *The Religion of Spiritualism*, pp. 209-10.

<sup>76</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 94.

Watson was also critical of sectarianism after his withdrawal from the church. In his explanation of the relationship between Christianity, spiritualism and science, he asserts:

Sectarianism, that bane of the churches, should find no place in the spirit circle. Being human, we are necessarily imperfect, and liable to err; and from this fact we should learn to look leniently on the errors of others. None of us can be infallible; no, not even His Holiness of the Vatican, despite his pretensions and dogmatism.<sup>77</sup>

He further explains that Christ ‘established NO CREED, NO CODE, NO CHURCH ORGANISATION, no clerical investments, no fossil forms of worship’, and quotes Bishop Otey as advising from the spirit world that ‘I have no text, I know no sect, nor conform to any creed’.<sup>78</sup> Stainton Moses claims that his spirit communicators were of the same view:

Nor do we teach that there is a special and potent efficacy in any one belief to the exclusion of others. We do not believe that truth is the perquisite of any creed . . . We care not for sectarianism, save that we know it to be a mischievous provoker of rancour, and spite, and malice, and ill-will.<sup>79</sup>

Conan Doyle laments the fact that the major churches strongly oppose spiritualism when they should be uniting with the spiritualists to combat the common foe: materialism.<sup>80</sup>

## **VI: AN ASTRAL JOURNEY AS QUEST ALLEGORY**

The narrator’s astral journey, although preceding the delivery of the Electric Creed in *A Romance of Two Worlds*, is easier to understand when read as a series of illustrations of the Creed. Corelli is ambivalent about the status of this journey; she would have her readers believe that the spirit of the narrator did indeed leave the earth, just as spiritualist writers would persuade their readers of the veracity of their reports of the physical conditions of the afterlife. Significantly, there is a correlation between the beginning of the astral journey in *A Romance of Two Worlds* and preparations for a spirit manifestation during a seance. It was the custom of a medium to repair to a cabinet or closet prior to the

<sup>77</sup> Watson, *The Religion of Spiritualism*, p. 107.

<sup>78</sup> Watson, *The Religion of Spiritualism*, pp. 145 and 215.

<sup>79</sup> M. A. (Oxon), *Spirit Teachings*, p. 55.

appearance of the spirit of a dead person. In most instances the spirit would then allegedly present in the seance room in the body of and speaking through the medium. Some mediums, however, actually pretended to be the spirit of the departed and changed their dress accordingly. Inspection of the cabinet in these cases (if permitted by the medium and inevitably in darkness or semi-darkness) often disclosed a small pile of discarded clothing, sometimes bolstered by bundles or cloths, which seemed to be the medium's own inert body. It is therefore a scene from a seance when, at the beginning of the astral journey, the narrator looks back and sees a

strange imperfect shape, which I seemed faintly to recognise. It looked like a small cast in clay, very badly executed, of the shape I at present wore; but it was incomplete, as though the sculptor had given it up as a failure and gone away, leaving it unfinished. (*Romance* 236-7)

It is strange that Corelli, with her averred distaste for anything associated with seances, should blatantly resort to this metaphor from spiritualism in order to indicate an out-of-body experience for the narrator of *A Romance of Two Worlds*. On the other hand, it may have been Corelli's intention to use the 'small cast in clay' to represent the realist fiction that she so detested because she saw it as ugly and banal, particularly when compared with the expansiveness of the genre of romance. More likely she meant to invoke a Biblical passage and reinforce her own creed by contrasting the old body of the material life with the beautiful new body she believed to be the reward of those who progressed spiritually. Another, possibly unconscious, influence of spiritualism is evident in this novel from the fact that the narrator is the medium of communication between Azùl and Heliobas and between the author and her readers.

In order to obscure the allegorical status of the astral journey, Corelli attempts to authenticate events which took place on the astral journey by mingling them with events occurring elsewhere in the narrative. The narrator's spirit guide amongst the planets is Azùl, the twin soul of Heliobas, who, by caring for her earthly lover, is earning her own salvation and progressing toward admittance to the Vast Central Sphere. Through the narrator, she sends Heliobas a message which prevents him from committing a serious crime towards the end of the novel. Another instance of the author's merger of the spiritual and the material

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<sup>80</sup> Conan Doyle, *The Vital Message*, pp. 68-71.



occurs when the narrator catches a glimpse of Aeon, her own guardian angel, on a sunbeam in Nôtre Dame cathedral.

Nevertheless, it is apparent that the astral journey is also intended to be a journey or quest of the mind, induced by Heliobas. Brian Stableford's definition of a scientific romance – a novel that pretends to be scientific in order to serve some rhetorical purpose – seems particularly apt when applied to the narrator's account of her astral journey. The interpretation of the travels in space as an allegorical journey of the mind and the narrator's 'psychological', or 'psychical', experience is reinforced by the novel's title and by a reading of *A Romance of Two Worlds* in conjunction with *The Life Everlasting*. The second part of the later novel deals almost entirely with the heroine's psychological experiences, purportedly brought about through the influence of others on her mind, including Aselzion, successor to Heliobas as seer and instructor. The interchangeability with which Corelli uses the terms 'psychological' and 'psychical' is always confusing, although it remains in conformity with spiritualist terminology.<sup>81</sup>

The interaction between Heliobas and Azùl and the warning brought from Azùl to Heliobas by the narrator also constitute a practical demonstration of how the theological and ethical systems of the Electric Creed interrelate. As well as invoking the traditional literary notion of a guide through the Underworld, Corelli's ideas reflect those of Samuel Watson who claims that Bishop Otey became his special guide and mentor, sending messages from 'the other world' in order to advise him on appropriate action. Watson quotes the bishop and acknowledges his assistance: ' "As soon as you can, go on with your work, and I will be your guide and counsellor." I have many reasons for believing that he has faithfully fulfilled this voluntary pledge given many years since'.<sup>82</sup>

After meeting the spirits in the Purgatory of the Air, the narrator of *A Romance of Two Worlds* is permitted to visit other planets as part of her journey. The inhabitants of each planet practise an aspect of the Electric Creed and the narrator contrasts the joy of their lives with conditions on earth. Referring to the narrator's own material form, Azùl points out that of all the worlds, earth is the most backward as it is the only place where

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<sup>81</sup> See, again, Oppenheim, *The Other World*, pp. 238-9.

<sup>82</sup> Watson, *The Religion of Spiritualism*, p. 183.

dwell the dwarfs of clay – the men and women who pretend to love while they secretly hate and despise one another. There, wealth is a god, and the greed of gain a virtue. There, genius starves, and heroism dies unrewarded. There, faith is martyred, and unbelief elected sovereign monarch of the people. There, the sublime, unreachable mysteries of the Universe are haggled over by poor finite minds who cannot call their lives their own. (*Romance* 244)

Although the journey to the planets carries utopian overtones, it transpires that none of the inhabitants of the planets has yet achieved perfection: ‘All the inhabitants of each star longed for something they had not – something better, greater, and higher – and therefore all had discontent’ (*Romance* 243). Moreover, Corelli is incapable of the delicacy of expression needed to create the similarities and contrasts between earth and the other planets that are the prerequisites of utopian fantasy. Instead of subtle irony, she uses heavy sarcasm and so her points are frequently blunted.

On Saturn there are no rulers, as each individual is self-governing; there is no marriage, for the law of attraction draws together only those of the opposite sex who are meant for each other (that is, they must be twin souls); and no-one has ever, or will ever, doubt the existence of the Creator. In reward, the beautiful inhabitants of this planet know no sickness or old age, but merely slip off to sleep after an existence of about two hundred years, because the electric belt around their world, visible to earth as the rings of Saturn, is an electric barrier against pestilence and disease, and it scatters health as it scatters light (*Romance* 240-1). Again, Corelli is using pseudo-science to authenticate ethical aspects of the Electric Creed.

Corelli returns to the notion of protective barriers in *The Secret Power*. This novel was written after the Great War and in it Corelli acknowledges that the sea no longer affords Britain protection from hostile invaders and she proposes the creation of an ‘etheric’ barrier, capable of repelling all attackers, around a city or a nation.<sup>83</sup> One of Corelli’s greatest assets was her imagination and, as well as depicting unfamiliar lands like Norway and Egypt, she was capable of envisioning futuristic innovations like space flight and a Star-Wars type of national protection.

Neoplatonic notions of connections between health and beauty and youth and goodness, like those existing on Saturn, are integral to the Electric Creed and

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<sup>83</sup> Corelli, *The Secret Power*, pp. 225 and 246-7.

to Corelli's own life. There are similarities between Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, published the same year as *A Romance of Two Worlds*, and a premonition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in Corelli's contention that the good are beautiful and healthy and always look young. Zara, Heliobas's sister, is not only beautiful, but she is an accomplished sculptress and privy to many electric secrets, her morals are impeccable, and at thirty-eight she looks seventeen years old (*Romance* 153). Thelma, Irene, Mavis, Delicia, Innocent, Morgana – all the author's self-reflexive heroines – are young-looking, beautiful and morally immaculate. Conversely, in *Wormwood*, the degradation wrought by absinthe addiction is reflected in the deteriorating features of Gaston Beauvais.<sup>84</sup> In her theology and in her own mind, Corelli was unable to resist equating beauty and goodness.

Further dimensions of the Electric Creed are illustrated when the narrator of *A Romance of Two Worlds* and her guide visit Venus, where the perfection of the planet and the beauty of its occupants testify that the source of civilisation is the love of 'Art' and 'Nature' united. In this instance, Corelli is making a conscious and determined stand against the contemporary aesthetic movement in literature and art; against the notion of *l'art pour l'art* associated in England with Walter Pater and Algernon Swinburne, and later with the decadent movement, including writers like Oscar Wilde and the artist Aubrey Beardsley. Unlike the aesthetes, who argued that art eschews all morality and believed that artifice improved upon nature, Corelli passionately believed that Nature – the working mind of God – and morality were the very cornerstones of art. In a lecture to the Philosophical Society of Edinburgh entitled 'The Vanishing Gift', she claims: 'Everywhere there is a lack of high ideals, – and all the arts suffer severely in consequence'.<sup>85</sup> Her essay, 'The Power of the Pen', is also concerned with the morality underlying literature: 'And when a writer – any writer – employs his or her power to promote the spirit of Atheism and Materialism, the pen is turned into a merely murderous tool of the utmost iniquity'.<sup>86</sup> It is no coincidence that many of Corelli's morally impeccable heroines – Delicia, Mavis, Irene, Angela,

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<sup>84</sup> Marie Corelli, *Wormwood: A Drama of Paris*, Bentley, London, 1890, p. 392.

<sup>85</sup> Marie Corelli, 'The Vanishing Gift' in *Free Opinions Freely Expressed*, Constable, London, 1905, p. 281.

<sup>86</sup> Marie Corelli, 'The Power of the Pen' in *Free Opinions Freely Expressed*, p. 307.

Innocent and the narrators of *A Romance of Two Worlds* and *The Life Everlasting*, for example – are writers, artists or musicians.

In *Idol of Suburbia*, Annette Federico explores the notion of Corelli as the popular writer who took aestheticism to the suburbs, offering a reading of *Wormwood* and *The Sorrows of Satan* as decadent novels. She admits her proposal is problematic, noting that Corelli's novels 'both embody and resist the search for a particularly feminine aesthetic in the decades before the twentieth century'. Perhaps the difficulty lies in what Federico acknowledges as her 'very inclusive interpretation' of aestheticism, which embraces 'decadence, New Woman novels, and the new fiction (including naturalism)'.<sup>87</sup> Such a wide definition of aestheticism necessarily gathers many disparate novels into its fold and so blunts its usefulness as a descriptive tool. In another sense, too, the suggestion that Corelli was an aesthete is problematical: it might be argued that aestheticism by its very nature becomes non-aestheticism the moment it is appropriated by the bourgeoisie, becoming no longer *l'art pour l'art* but *art à la mode*, a different thing altogether.

Nevertheless, Corelli definitely is trying to carve out a new position for art in her *Electric Creed*. She describes the monarch of Venus as the 'loftiest genius' among many, a 'Poet, ready to sacrifice his throne with joy as soon as his people should discover a greater than he. For they all loved not the artist but the Art' (*Romance* 242). Although this sounds awkward, Corelli is in fact asserting the supremacy of art over artist, in the sense that the gift is more important than its possessor, who merely acts as a steward. As Federico points out, 'Corelli negotiated images of the artist that both reflect and refute the social and literary assumptions of aestheticism'.<sup>88</sup> The Victorian reaction against industrialisation, atheism, commercialisation and other forms of materialism was expressed in a variety of ways. For the artistic elite, aestheticism was an answer; for the middle classes, Corelli offered an elevated view of art and science, where high achievement was possible independent of the social or intellectual standing of the

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<sup>87</sup> Annette Federico, *Idol of Suburbia: Marie Corelli and Late-Victorian Literary Culture*, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, 2000, pp. 53-93.

<sup>88</sup> Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 70.

aspirant.<sup>89</sup> Given the circumstances of her birth, the critical reception of her own work and the size and composition of her ‘Unknown Public’ (to use Wilkie Collins’s term), Corelli had nothing to lose in attempting to redefine the position of art in contemporary society.

The next aspect of the Electric Creed is demonstrated on Jupiter where electricity is the motivating power. Corelli’s narrator observes how people far apart converse through an electric medium, how ships are driven by electricity, and how printing is achieved by electric means. In fact, ‘everything in the way of science, art, and invention known to us was also known in Jupiter, only to greater perfection, because tempered and strengthened by an electric force which never failed’ (*Romance* 243). Corelli again demonstrates an uncanny imagination that envisages possible future technologies. She was to repeat this success later in *The Life Everlasting* and in *The Secret Power* when she foreshadowed the possibility of germ warfare and the motive and destructive power of radioactivity.

The narrator of *A Romance of Two Worlds* and *Azùl* visit many worlds, each ‘fair and splendid’ (Corelli’s choice of adjectives), but each flawed (like Corelli’s adjectives), as their inhabitants are still striving to reach perfection and so are doomed to work and to die (*Romance* 243). The use of the word ‘die’ here is inconsistent with Corelli’s contention that there is no such thing as death, merely a transition from one existence to the next. Presumably she means that all the spirits thus far encountered are destined to further reincarnations until finally they achieve perfection and are transported to the Central Sphere.

Spiritualists like Samuel Watson also envisage life on other planets; or, at least, the spirit of Bishop Otey advises that this is so and that these forms of life are unchanging, as it is only ‘man who moves the countless changes over earth’s broad belt’. Otey explains:

Each planet is inhabited by a separate race, yet all derive their life from the one great Life, and are illumed by His Spirit. Nothing has changed amid the countless orbs of heaven since first they sang their awakening song . . . [Man] lifts or debases the framework of beautiful life. He closes the portals of his inner being and hides the image of God. The world grows in wondrous arts, and increased science crowns man as victor; but the beautiful garden of the soul is left uncultivated.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> See, for example, Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public*, Scolar, Aldershot, 1987, p. 3: the aestheticism of the 1890s was ‘an engaged protest against Victorian utility, rationality, scientific factuality and technological progress’.

<sup>90</sup> Watson, *The Religion of Spiritualism*, pp. 217-8.

Otey's – or Watson's – view is not as harsh as Corelli's, but both see humankind as the most wayward of God's creatures. Significantly, both Corelli and Watson consider that the sins of greed, selfishness and ambition have engendered this situation.<sup>91</sup>

In response to her question about the apparent conflict between the notion of the earth as doomed and the Christian belief in the redemption of Christ, the narrator is presented with a parable in the form of what she terms a 'heaven-uplifted dream' (*Romance* 247). The piling of allusion upon metaphor which is the result of inserting a parable into an allegory complicates the author's message. Godlike, and using the same parallels of Biblical creation adopted by Heliobas in the Electric Creed, the narrator creates a new world. In time this new world and its inhabitants become corrupt and estranged from their creator, who is ordered to destroy both. Christlike, she offers her life instead. At this stage, the narrator's guardian angel appears, rolls up the little world like a scroll and explains that God's love and sacrifice, through the birth of Christ on earth, is greater than that of the narrator. It is a strange parable, not only because it conflicts with Corelli's assertion that the death of Christ was not a sacrifice, but also because it borders upon the blasphemous by equating her narrator with both God and Christ. In *Barabbas*, Corelli was again to court the accusation of blasphemy for humanising Christ, but, although the Ealing public library banned the novel, Bishop Wilberforce wrote to her after its publication: 'God bless and teach you and use you'.<sup>92</sup> *The Master-Christian* also involves a humanisation of Christ, yet it was an immediate best seller. *A Romance of Two Worlds* set the pattern for Corelli novels that, whilst vulnerable to the charge of blasphemy, were more usually praised than criticised by the clergy.<sup>93</sup>

At the end of the astral journey the narrator and Aeon come within sight of the Electric Ring and the Central Sphere where they are rejoined by Azùl, who

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<sup>91</sup> See, for example, *A Romance of Two Worlds*, pp. 232, 242, 244 and 353-4 and 423 and Watson, *The Religion of Spiritualism* pp. 32, 149 and 218.

<sup>92</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, pp. 129-30. Wilberforce was seen as a leading opponent of evolution. His opposition to Darwin's theories, however, was on scientific grounds and he, like Corelli, believed that science and religion were necessarily in harmony. For a discussion of Wilberforce's role in contemporary debates see Tess Cosslett's 'Introductory Essay' to *Science and Religion in the Nineteenth Century*, pp. 1 and 3.

<sup>93</sup> See, for example, Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, pp. 129-32 and 165-6.

describes eternal life within the Sphere as a life that can only be gained through love. The narrator portrays at length the ‘sublime scene’, so ‘unlike Heaven such as we in our ignorance have tried to depict’, as

a Circle, so huge that no mortal measurements could compass it – a wide Ring composed of seven colours, rainbow-like, but flashing with perpetual motion and brilliancy, as though a thousand million suns were for ever being woven into it to feed its transcendent lustre. From every part of this Ring darted long broad shafts of light . . . sometimes a bubbling shower of lightening sparks would be flung out on the pure ether, and this would instantly form into circles, small or great, and whirl round and round . . . with the most inconceivable rapidity. But wonderful as the Ring was, it encompassed a Sphere yet more marvellous and dazzling; a great Globe of opal-tinted light, revolving as it were upon its own axis, and ever surrounded by that scintillating, jewel-like wreath of electricity, whose only motion was to shine and burn within itself for ever. I could not bear to look upon the brightness of that magnificent central World . . . and ever the Rainbow Ring around it glittered and cast forth those other rings which I knew now were living solar systems cast forth from that electric band as a volcano casts forth fire and lava. (*Romance* 260-61)

This jarring description is vague, repetitive, packed with clichés and so typical of Corelli’s prose, which inevitably falls short of her imagination. Yet surely the very mediocrity of her vocabulary contributed to the popularity of her novels as her readers were familiar with her language and understood it easily. Like later science fiction writers, Corelli is wise enough to add authenticity to her imaginative description by including imprecise references to up-to-date scientific theories. *A Romance of Two Worlds* appealed to the public because it was not intellectual, nor were its solutions difficult to comprehend. It is a little titillating but never threatening. Corelli offers her readers something apparently new, but does not require them to exercise judgement or intellect, although she flatters them by appealing to both.

## VII: VALIDATION OF THE ELECTRIC CREED

The narrator is granted a brief encounter with Christ, ‘upon whose broad brows rested a faint semblance of a Crown of Thorns’, who asserts both his humanity and his godhead and promises the narrator immortality in return for her love (*Romance* 265). A swift return to earth is next and the narrator awakes as if from a trance to find Heliobas worried about the length of her absence, which has been greater than that of any of his previous patients. The astral traveller is given

instructions to be followed for the remainder of her earthly life, including a copy of the Electric Creed, a private communication and a prescription for a ‘volatile fluid’ which, Heliobas instructs,

if taken in a small quantity every day, will keep you in health, strength, and intellectual vigour, while it will preserve your youth and enjoyment of life to a very much longer extent than that usually experienced by the majority. Understand me well – this liquid of itself cannot put you into an uplifted state of existence; you need *human* electric force applied strongly to your system to compass this. (*Romance* 271)

Cultivation of her will to the ‘height of electric command’ will enable the narrator to see the spirits who inhabit the air, including the ‘parted spirits of dead persons’. She will be able quickly to discern the motives of her fellow mortals, develop a keener appreciation of good and beautiful things, have ‘a delightful sense of humour and invariable cheerfulness’ (*Romance* 272). Again Corelli’s writing is at once self-referential and yet self-deceived. She never could understand her enemies’ motives, never had a sense of humour and although ‘invariable cheerfulness’ is one of the characteristics of the Corelli persona, it was an attribute that evaded the author in her own dealings with the critics and with all who opposed her views.

Heliobas next explores the Victorian fear of the death of the sun, advising his patient that

The Sun is nothing now but a burning world, burning rapidly, and surely, away; or rather, *it is being absorbed back into the Electric Circle from which it originally sprang, to be thrown out again in some new and grander form.* And so with all worlds, suns and systems, for ever and ever. Hundreds of thousands of those brief time-breathings called years may pass before this consummation of the Sun; but its destruction is going on now. (*Romance* 276-7)

The moon is an ‘electric photograph’ of a former world, now absorbed back into the electric ring. The tides are formed because the sea is impregnated with electricity and it is repelled or attracted by this ‘electric picture of the Moon in Heaven’ (*Romance* 277). Likewise, the electrograph of the moon is compelled to orbit the earth because of the earth’s electric power. Mountains and valleys on the moon, visible through a telescope, are merely clearer perceptions of the electric portrait of the moon, because telescopes, stethoscopes and other ‘mechanical appliances’ assist in the deception of the senses (*Romance* 278). Thus Corelli’s creed is capable of accommodating the scientific notion of the death of the sun



and moon, but the idea is massaged in order to reassure her readers that they and their conceivable descendants will not be adversely affected. Corelli also acknowledges the importance of scientific instruments, but subordinates this to what she perceives as more important spiritual realities.

Corelli uses temporal events, such as the conflict between Heliobas and Prince Ivan narrated in the last part of her novel, to substantiate the spiritual theories articulated earlier. The brief appearance of the spirit of Zara immediately following her death confirms the promise made by Heliobas to the now-enlightened narrator that she will henceforth be able to see

the parted spirits of dead persons, so long as they linger within Earth's radius, which they seldom do, being always anxious to escape from it as soon as possible. Love may sometimes detain them. (*Romance* 272)

The same idea is expressed by one of Samuel Watson's familiar spirits: 'The spirit-world . . . is the abode of undeveloped spirits – those who have not long left the body, and those who, by the laws of spirit-life, have not arisen to higher spheres by progression'.<sup>94</sup> How Corelli reconciles the appearance of Zara with her dislike of materialisations and other phenomena of the seance is not explained. The assumption by many of Corelli's readers that *A Romance of Two Worlds* deals with spiritualism or theosophy is perfectly understandable.

The practical application of the idea of the 'twin souls' is explained by Heliobas during the afternoon preceding Zara's funeral:

In Zara's case, her soul became dominated by a Spirit whose destiny was fulfilled and perfect, and who never could descend to imprisonment in earthly clay. Now, you will not be dominated – you will be simply *equalised*; that is, you will find the exact counterpart of your own soul dwelling also in human form, and you will have to impart your own force to that other soul, which will, in its turn, impart to yours a corresponding electric impetus. (*Romance* 410)

Heliobas's prediction is realised through the persons of the narrator and Santoris in *The Life Everlasting*, where Corelli develops the twin soul notion to a greater extent. She applied the idea of twin souls to the sterile and disappointing relationship between herself and Arthur Severn, as the first paragraph of *Open Confession: To a Man from a Woman* addresses the man as 'you, my one love in

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<sup>94</sup> Watson, *The Religion of Spiritualism*, p. 209.

this world and the next'.<sup>95</sup> No doubt this unsought predestination helped to justify the moralising author's love for a man already married.

The closing pages of *A Romance of Two Worlds* contain a mixture of affected diffidence and passionate preaching wherein the authorial and narrative voices are again intermingled. The author/narrator makes an ambivalent, but at the same time provocative claim to truthfulness, the apparent reticence of which is designed to elicit a favourable reaction from the reader:

My narrative is simply an 'experience;' but I have no wish to persuade others of the central truth contained in it – namely, *the existence of powerful electric organs in every human being, which with proper cultivation are capable of marvellous spiritual force.* The time is not yet ripe for this fact to be accepted. (*Romance* 430)

The author's final words are addressed directly to her readers, exhorting them to abandon materialism and believe in God. This is the very stuff of evangelism, threatening an unrewarding afterlife in return for the denial of spiritual matters during temporal life.

Marie Corelli originally called her first novel *Lifted Up*, but was persuaded by George Bentley to change the title.<sup>96</sup> The term 'lifted up' and variations of it are used throughout the description of the narrator's astral journey and Heliobas later refers to 'an uplifted state of existence' (*Romance* 235, 236, 247, 264, 271). Significantly, a chapter entitled 'Spirit-World' in Samuel Watson's *The Religion of Spiritualism* contains several descriptions of life after death, supposedly given by the spirits of Bishop Otey and others, in which 'lifted up' and variations of the term occur frequently.<sup>97</sup> It is fruitless to speculate on whether or not Corelli read Watson, Sargent, Conan Doyle or any of the other, now obscure, popular writers on spiritualism. What is apparent is that she was well informed about spiritualism and familiar with its terminology. Despite the strong aversion she professed to table-turning, seances and materialisations, and despite her strident derision of spiritualism and theosophy, the similarities between *A Romance of Two Worlds* and contemporary spiritualist writings are too extensive to be coincidental. Furthermore, Corelli continues to betray her knowledge of spiritualist beliefs in

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<sup>95</sup> Marie Corelli, *Open Confession: To A Man From A Woman*, Hutchinson, London, 1925, p. 1.

<sup>96</sup> Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, pp. 55-6.

<sup>97</sup> See, for example, Watson, *The Religion of Spiritualism*, pp. 213, 216 and 220.

the 'Author's Prologue' to *The Life Everlasting*, when she confronts Sir Oliver Lodge of the Society for Psychical Research.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN: SCIENCE AND RELIGION: PROGRESSIVE EVOLUTION**

### **I: INTERPRETATIONS OF 'DARWINISM'**

The theory of evolution provided a site for the interaction of science and religion during the second half of the nineteenth century and in the early decades of the twentieth. For some Christians, evolution confirmed the complex creative powers of God and for these believers in natural theology science and religion did not conflict. They considered that the social and technological developments of the nineteenth century constituted evidence of the steady evolutionary advance of

white, Christian races.<sup>98</sup> Others, aware of the theory of degeneration and the argument that many species had already disappeared, adopted a catastrophist view of evolution and believed that progress took place much more irregularly, marked by a series of divine interventions in a process designed to culminate in the creation and perfection of mankind.<sup>99</sup> Yet others, influenced by Eastern religions like Buddhism and Hinduism, believed that the notion of reincarnation fitted neatly with the concept of individuals continually striving to attain perfection, or at least equilibrium, through an evolutionary series of lifetimes.<sup>100</sup>

However, as Darwinian theory became more widely accepted, it became both better and less well understood, and interpretations of *The Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man* began to vary widely, leading to a fragmentation of ‘Darwinian’ theory and to the emergence of fresh anxieties. Again, these anxieties were discussed in the writing of the period, in non-fiction and fiction, in serious literature and in popular novels, and again the work of Marie Corelli accurately reflects the contradictions underlying the public’s confused attitudes towards Darwinism.

The title of Gertrude Himmelfarb’s book *Darwin and the Darwinian Revolution* emphasises the difference between Darwin’s own writing and its myriad interpretations. Himmelfarb notes that the initial impact of *The Origin of Species* was the result of ‘an antecedent condition of religious and philosophical turmoil’.<sup>101</sup> She also points out that Herbert Spencer had set down the basic principles of an evolutionary ethics long before the publication of *The Origin of Species*:

It was Spencer’s belief that by basing morality on evolution, he had created not merely a philosophy of ethics but a science of ethics. Moral conduct was defined as that which contributed to man’s better adaption and to his higher evolution. Since personal happiness was also the result of a satisfactory adaption, morality and happiness were essentially one. Thus utilitarianism was amalgamated with evolutionism, the individual was

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<sup>98</sup> Cosslett, ‘Introductory Essay’ to *Science and Religion in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 2.

<sup>99</sup> Cosslett, ‘Introductory Essay’ to *Science and Religion in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 4.

<sup>100</sup> Oppenheim, *The Other World*, p. 160.

<sup>101</sup> Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Darwin and the Darwinian Revolution*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1959, p. 330.

reconciled with society, and hedonism became altruism under a different guise.<sup>102</sup>

Notably, George Eliot, in *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss*, and Thomas Hardy in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, also explore the implications of evolution for contemporary ethics. H. G. Wells provides some of the earliest examples of the emerging genre of science fiction in novels like *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds*, wherein he examines both the possibilities of new technologies and extrapolations of the theory of evolution. H. Rider Haggard postulates a kind of reverse to evolution in *She*. A similar view to that of Spencer was later articulated by Leslie Stephen in the *Science of Ethics*.<sup>103</sup>

According to Himmelfarb, two main lines of thought developed from *The Origin of Species*. One of these was the positivist system of ethics based on science, nature and evolution. The alternative interpretation of Darwin's writing envisaged nature as immoral because the only means whereby man could have achieved his superior position in the struggle for existence was through the cunning, ruthlessness and ferocity with which he fought against his competitors. Thus, almost from the beginning, there were two opposing forms of 'Darwinism'. According to the first, nature was the source of all morality and the evolutionary process would ensure an ever more ethical society, especially as retribution was to occur immediately on earth and not in heaven. According to the second, 'cruelty was not only a fact of nature; it was the governing force of nature, the motivating power of life'.<sup>104</sup>

Marie Corelli adhered to the first view, although she remained troubled by its apparent inconsistencies which were difficult to rationalise and to accommodate within her creed. She was not alone. According to J. A. V. Chapple, the literature of the time was fascinated with

origins, growth and transformation; the changing awareness of our relation to animals and plants; the new stress placed upon the struggle for existence, progress and extinction; the growing determination to alter circumstances, especially human ones, by discovering how to predict and then change them; and throughout the century the constant desire to find a basic unity

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<sup>102</sup> Himmelfarb, *Darwin and the Darwinian Revolution*, p. 330.

<sup>103</sup> Leslie Stephen, *The Science of Ethics*, Smith, Elder & Co., London, 1882.

<sup>104</sup> Himmelfarb, *Darwin and the Darwinian Revolution*, p. 332.

of forces and dynamic laws that reconcile or transcend opposites.<sup>105</sup>

These are the issues which Corelli explores in *The Life Everlasting*, although her desire to predict and change human circumstances is more strongly spiritual than biological. This novel, like its predecessor *A Romance of Two Worlds*, is a deliberate attempt to blend science and religion into a basic unity of forces and dynamic laws that both reconcile and transcend opposites.

Corelli's serious engagement with Darwinism in *The Life Everlasting* determines not only the content of the novel, but its form as well, as it is structured to represent the author's conception of evolution. The first part deals with characters who, with the exception of the hero Santoris, are on an undeveloped level of existence and preoccupied with matters such as health and wealth. The narrator is unwillingly caught up in this life and, although she does occasionally have some extraordinary spiritual insights, her desire is for greater spiritual awareness. The action of the second part of the novel is located in a monastery, the inhabitants of which have moved onto a higher spiritual plane and are undergoing intense psychological and moral development. Aselzion – the successor to Heliobas – is the most advanced of these characters, whereas the narrator and the other residents are in various lower stages of progression. The events in the later part of the novel signify the success of the narrator in overcoming the psychological obstacles which were inhibiting her continuing spiritual and moral evolution. The action of the first part of the novel takes place on lowlands or on the water, other than when Santoris and the narrator climb a mountain to watch a sunset. The events of the second part of the novel all occur in a tower or on a mountain-top.

Physical and spiritual evolution are integral to what Corelli terms 'Natural Law' or 'Nature', always written with a capital 'N' as it is synonymous with the mind of God. The 'Author's Prologue' to *The Life Everlasting* abounds with references to the Law of Nature and the ways in which it is made manifest.<sup>106</sup> Corelli summarises her belief in this Law of Nature:

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<sup>105</sup> Chapple, *Science and Literature in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 4.

<sup>106</sup> See the 'Author's Prologue' to *The Life Everlasting* pp. 7, 8, 13, 17 and 33. Ensuing references to the 'Prologue' and references to the novel will be abbreviated and given in parentheses in the text.

Some of our most respected social institutions are nothing but so many self-opinionated and unconscious oppositions to the Law of Nature which is the Law of God, – and thus it often happens that when obstinate humanity persists in considering its own ideas of Right and Wrong superior to the Eternal Decrees which have been visibly presented through Nature since the earliest dawn of creation, a faulty civilisation sets in and is presently swept back upon its advancing wheels, and forced to begin again with primal letters of learning. In the same way a faulty Soul, an imperfect individual Spirit, is likewise compelled to return to school and resume the study of the lessons it has failed to put into practice. (*LE* 32)

The Law of Nature, as the explicit mind of God, shows humans how to behave and failure to carry out these instructions results in the decline of civilisations and this explains, according to Corelli, the lost scientific knowledge of the Armenians, Egyptians and Chaldeans and the need for new societies to arise and begin again and again the process of acquiring wisdom from first principles. Corelli is also conscious of theories of the degeneration of the sun, the earth, the individual and society, theories which also surface clearly in Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*, in Haggard's *She* and in Wells's *The Time Machine*. The knowledge that species had perished during the long course of evolution was disquieting, but for writers like Corelli the disappearance of past civilisations provided both evidence of the operation of the Law of Nature and a warning against ignoring its lessons. Corelli believed that the Law of Nature – the mind of God – and evolution were synonymous.

The 'Author's Prologue' to *The Life Everlasting* touches on other aspects of the post-Darwinian debate, revealing Corelli's awareness of some of the more subtle implications of evolutionary discourse. Sarcastically, she notes the arrogance of the anthropocentrism inherent in the assumption of human supremacy in the struggle for existence:

Man exists – in his own opinion – merely to perpetuate Man. All the wonders of the earth, air, fire and water, – all the sustenance drawn from the teeming bosom of Nature, – all the progress of countless civilisations in ever recurring and repeated processional order, – all the sciences old and new, – are solely to nourish, support, instruct, entertain and furnish food and employment for the tiny two-legged imp of Chance, spawned (as he himself asserts) out of gas and atoms. (*LE* 29)

In the paragraph immediately following, however, she considers the opposite notion of the insignificance of humanity:

Yet, – as he personally declares, through the mouth of his modern science, – he is not of real importance withal. The little planet on which he dwells would, to all seeming, move on in its orbit in the same way as it does now, without him. In itself it is a pigmy world compared with the rest of the solar system of which it is a part . . . Trees would grow, flowers would bloom, birds would sing, fish would glide through the rivers and the seas, – the insect and animal tribes of field and forest would enjoy their existence unmolested, and the great sun would shine on ever the same . . . with unbroken exactitude and regularity if Man no longer lived. Why have the monstrous forces of Evolution thundered their way through cycles of creation to produce so infinitesimal a prodigy? (*LE* 29-31)

Corelli realised that there were contradictory interpretations of Darwinism, but she was less concerned about anthropocentrism than with the moral and social implications of the view of humanity as insignificant. This is evident from *The Mighty Atom*, written fifteen years before *The Life Everlasting* to demonstrate that evolutionary theory untempered by Christian faith leads inevitably to atheism and nihilism.

## II: CORELLI'S REVISIONISM

New discoveries in science persuaded Marie Corelli to revise and consolidate the Electric Creed as propounded in *A Romance of Two Worlds*. *The Life Everlasting* was published twenty-four years after she wrote the 'Introduction to the new edition' of her first novel. Like the 'Introduction' to the second edition of *A Romance of Two Worlds*, Corelli's 'Author's Prologue' to *The Life Everlasting* is as significant for the information the author deliberately reveals about herself as it is for the contradictions it inadvertently exposes in her writing and in her character. It is addressed directly to her readers, partly in conversational and partly in dictatorial tones, again somewhat along the lines of an evangelical tract. Clearly, Corelli intends the 'Author's Prologue' to *The Life Everlasting* to carry more authority – the authority of the best selling popular novelist – than the mere 'Prologue' to *A Romance of Two Worlds*.

The overt intentions of the 'Author's Prologue' to *The Life Everlasting* are to provide an updated version of the Electric Creed, to offer a revisionist explanation of the author's writing career, to tighten the alliance between author and readers and to authorise the story she is about to relate. Corelli again offers her blend of pseudo-science, spiritualism and promises of rewards in this life and the next which, reverting to the words of Janet Oppenheim, 'fulfilled people's



religious need in language, and through procedures, acceptable to science'.<sup>107</sup> A coating of romance ensures that the Corelli remedy is easily swallowed by the mass reading public.

Corelli is still concerned with establishing authority but, with two decades as a successful popular novelist behind her, she is no longer hesitant. The 'Author's Prologue' opens with a reference to the Gospels and to Christ as 'the only Divine Friend this world has ever had or ever will have' and then moves quickly to John the Baptist, the 'Voice in the Wilderness' who was ignored, just as thousands of such Voices have 'sounded forth their warnings or entreaties in vain' throughout the world's history (*LE 1*). Aligning herself with the prophet and friend of Christ, Corelli continues:

Why, then, do I add an undesired note to the chorus of rejected appeal? How dare I lift up *my* voice in the Wilderness, when other voices, far stronger and sweeter, are drowned in the laughter of fools and the mockery of the profane? Truly, I do not know. But I am sure that I am not moved by egotism or arrogance. It is simply out of love and pity for suffering human kind that I venture to become another Voice discarded – a voice which, if heard at all, may only serve to awaken the cheap scorn and derision of the clowns of the piece. (*LE 1*)<sup>108</sup>

Corelli is once more being disingenuous. She knows that her voice is still being heard, and heard loudly, in the second decade of the twentieth century. Her books, both new novels and new editions of the old, were still outselling those of her closest rivals. She was the 'Life-Boat of Journalism', for her articles in the press inevitably provoked controversy and her activities in Stratford-upon-Avon regularly aroused interest in London.<sup>109</sup> Moreover, she knew that her voice would be familiar and reassuring to her readers. Her greatest appeal was to the middle classes who, although financially stable, were still culturally, spiritually and psychologically insecure. In her rush of mixed metaphors and inappropriate

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<sup>107</sup> See, again, Oppenheim, *The Other World*, pp. 61-2.

<sup>108</sup> Corelli likes the convention of portraying herself as a prophet, or voice in the wilderness – see also, for example, 'A Question of Faith' in *Free Opinions Freely Expressed*, p. 39. Michael Oval Kent, however, considers that best sellers like Corelli and Hall Caine were 'not completely committed to the newly-arising image of the 'literary' novelist as an isolated prophet' – see 'Popular Late-Victorian Fiction', unpublished PhD thesis, University of California, Riverside, 1993, p. 255.

<sup>109</sup> Bertha Vyver recounts an anecdote wherein the journalist Charles Jerningham advises an unnamed colleague concerned about his paper's circulation: 'An occasional letter from [Marie Corelli] would increase your circulation in three months to nearly double – Miss Corelli is the Life-Boat of Journalism', Vyver, *Memoirs of Marie Corelli*, p. 194.

language, Corelli states that only ‘the clowns of the piece’ will scorn and deride her, thus uniting her followers with herself as an outsider, snubbed by the religious, scientific and cultural elite.

The next part of the ‘Author’s Prologue’ is the writing which, according to J. Cuming Walters, demonstrates the essentials of Marie Corelli’s faith. Walters is no doubt right, but he neglects to mention that the ‘Author’s Prologue’ also demonstrates Corelli’s own belief in her self – or rather, in her created persona. Corelli refines this public persona throughout her career and now uses its authority to validate the stories she is about to tell; hence her adoption of the explicit term ‘Author’s Prologue’. The first of these stories is her own. She begins with a re-interpretation of how *A Romance of Two Worlds* was written:

I began to write when I was too young to know anything of the world’s worldly ways . . . it was solely on account of a strange psychical experience which chanced to myself when I stood upon the threshold of what is called ‘life’ that I found myself producing my first book, ‘A Romance of Two Worlds.’ It was a rash experiment, but it was the direct result of an initiation into some few of the truths behind the veil of the Seeming Real. I did not then know why I was selected for such an ‘initiation’ – and I do not know even now. It arose quite naturally out of a series of ordinary events which might happen to anyone. I was not compelled or persuaded into it, for, being alone in the world and more or less friendless, I had no opportunity to seek advice or assistance from any person as to the course of life or learning I should pursue. And I learned what I did learn because of my own unwavering intention and WILL to be instructed. (LE 12)

This paragraph contains much that is not strictly true. As Corelli’s biographers make clear, the author was not on the threshold of life when she wrote her first novel at the age of thirty, despite her young appearance which fooled even George Bentley.<sup>110</sup> Unmarried at that age, she was virtually an old maid in contemporary terms.<sup>111</sup> Nor was she ‘alone in the world and more or less friendless’. Her father was alive and her half-brother Eric was also in London. Bertha Vyver had been part of the Mackay household since Corelli’s mother’s death and, as well as being Marie’s companion, had assumed housekeeping responsibilities for the family. Corelli had patrons for her moderately successful career as an *improvatrice*. Charles Mackay was instrumental in the selection of

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<sup>110</sup> Corelli claimed to be seventeen when *A Romance of Two Worlds* was published in 1886 – see Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, p. 5. In *The Murder of Delicia*, published in 1896, Delicia is twenty-seven, having published her first book ten years earlier at the age of seventeen – see *The Murder of Delicia*, pp. 16-7.

the title *A Romance of Two Worlds* when Bentley questioned the choice of *Lifted Up*. Furthermore, although the author claims that her first novel was the result of unique psychic experiences, her use of spiritualist jargon such as ‘behind the veil’ and ‘Seeming Real’ indicates that she was conversant with the texts of spiritualism.

Corelli next asserts that, through her studies of the subjects dealt with in *A Romance of Two Worlds*, she obtained the revelation that ‘Nature is . . . the reflection of the working-mind of the Creator’ and that the solution to the problems of humanity is that ‘if Man went *with* [Nature] instead of *against* her, there would be no more misunderstanding of the laws of the Universe, and that where there is now nothing but discord, all would be divinest harmony’ (LE 13). Because her mind was ‘uninformed and immature’ when writing *A Romance of Two Worlds*, however, Corelli reports that she was not permitted ‘to disclose more than a glimmering of the light’ she was ‘beginning to perceive’. She was on probation, she explains, and forbidden to reveal all that she knew (‘LE 13).

She claims that it was forbidden her to write of radium at that time, although it was known to her tutors ‘who possessed all the means of extracting it from substances as yet undreamed of by latter-day scientists’ (LE 14). Radium was discovered by Marie and Pierre Curie in 1898 so it was impossible for Corelli to have known of it when writing *A Romance of Two Worlds*. Corelli is also unable entirely to relinquish the idea of electricity as the prime force in nature, despite the discovery of radium, so she continues:

I was only permitted to hint at [radium] under the guise of the word ‘Electricity’ – which, after all, was not so much of a misnomer, seeing that electric force displays itself in countless millions of forms. (LE 14)

Corelli appropriates the work of an unnamed scientist which, she asserts, appeared in the *Hibbert Journal* of January 1905, to assist in the re-interpretation of her first novel and to justify her continuing belief in the spiritual powers of electricity. ‘*Electricity* is all things, and all things are *electric*’, she quotes, and then argues:

*This was precisely my teaching in the first book I ever wrote. I was ridiculed for it, of course, – and I was told that there was no ‘spiritual’ force in electricity. I differ from this view; but ‘radio-activity’ is perhaps the better, because the truer term to employ in seeking to describe the Germ or Embryo of the Soul, for – as scientists have proved – ‘Radium is capable of absorbing from*

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<sup>111</sup> Scott, *Marie Corelli: The Story of a Friendship*, p. 19.

surrounding bodies *some unknown form of energy* which it can render evident as heat and light'. (LE 14-5)<sup>112</sup>

Like a fraudulent medium, with unsubtle sleight of hand, Corelli is adjusting the text of *A Romance of Two Worlds* to make it appear to conform with more recent scientific discoveries as she and her readers understood them. It is significant that Corelli's writing has more in common with popular spiritualists than with the acknowledged experts in psychical research and that she prefers to quote unnamed scientists and scientists in general, rather than to explore the relevance to her ideas of the contemporary work of Roentgen, Einstein or Rutherford. Corelli selects sources that resist close scrutiny by hostile critics.

She next quotes from 'one of our prominent scientists' to bolster her own arguments for the equation of radio-activity with the soul, the resurrection of the dead and reincarnation (LE 15-6). Like Schreiner's pearl-fishers, it is obvious that Corelli not only selects her 'facts' to suit her own ends, but assembles them according to her own fashion. Never loath to adapt scientific ideas for her own purposes, a clue to Corelli's real attitude toward disciplined scientific research may be found in the anti-academic novel, *The Mighty Atom*, in her references to academics as 'Professors Dry-as-Dust' and in her frequent satire of conventional education in other novels and articles.<sup>113</sup> Corelli's belief in science is populist, not intellectual.

To the critical reader, Corelli's arguments are inadequately justified. Many of the sources which she cites are unverifiable. The way in which she selects 'facts' and 'truths' is arbitrary and the conclusions she draws from them are undermined by the lack of a governing formal reasoning. Her arguments are rhetorical, not logical. She attempts to use empirical scientific methodology, unaware exactly of what it is and impatient of the discipline it demands, and her

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<sup>112</sup> I have been unable to find Corelli's source despite a close search of the *Hibbert Journal: A Quarterly Review of Religion, Theology, and Philosophy*, Vol. III, October 1904-July 1905, edited by L. P. Jacks and G. Dawes Hicks, Williams and Norgate, London, 1905.

<sup>113</sup> See, for example, *Boy* (Hutchinson, London, 1900) which, like *The Mighty Atom* (Hutchinson, London, 1896), deals primarily with the topic of education; the characters of Professor Von Glauen in *Temporal Power* (Methuen, London, 1902) and Professor Chauvet in *The Young Diana*; descriptions of an Oxford education in *Thelma* (Bentley, London, 1887) pp. 51 and 81 and in *The Life Everlasting*, pp. 62-3, 130-1 and 237; *The Strange Visitation of Josiah McNason*, (*The Strand Magazine*, 1904), pp. 33-34; and the character of the Philosopher in *Love and the Philosopher* (Methuen, London, 1923).

writing purports to follow the conventions of both fiction and non-fiction. Corelli could not question her own work: always opinionated, she was unable to accept views other than her own. Criticism never provoked self-analysis, it only wounded the author whose response was to defend herself by attacking the critic – which is why those who question or disagree with her ideas are labelled ‘the clowns of the piece’.

Nevertheless, Corelli was astute as these tactics served both to deflect criticism and to secure the allegiance of her contemporary middle class readers by isolating all opposition. That Corelli attempted to undertake some second-hand research is demonstrated by the letters to her from the scientists R. A. Gregory and Lord Haldane which are reproduced as part of Bertha Vyver’s biography. It is unfortunate that Corelli’s scientific mentors were tolerant of her technical inaccuracies, as more stringent reviews of her material may have enabled the author to produce work of a quality sufficient to gain her the respect she so ardently craved. At the very least, she might have avoided some of the ridicule which was directed at her worst errors. The parting from George Bentley had removed the only check on her literary extravagance. Corelli’s genius, as Kent Carr comments, was ‘very far removed from the infinite capacity for taking pains’.<sup>114</sup> Nonetheless, her faith in herself, bolstered by her popularity, became unassailable.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT: *THE LIFE EVERLASTING:* *A REALITY OF ROMANCE***

### **I: PLOT, CHARACTERISATION, STRUCTURE, GENRE**

*The Life Everlasting* has little more to its plot than *A Romance of Two Worlds*. The purpose of the novel is to bring Corelli’s theories more into line with recent scientific developments and to invest her Electric Creed with greater credibility by expanding it into psychological dimensions. The heroine is again an unnamed narrator, nervous and in need of a holiday. She resembles the ideal Corelli persona/heroine: small, fair and usually wearing white and flowers. She accepts an invitation to go cruising in the Hebrides in a state-of-the-art steam yacht, named *Diana*, with an atheistic millionaire literary dilettante, his neurotic invalid

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<sup>114</sup> Carr, Kent. *Miss Marie Corelli*. Drane, London, 1901

daughter, their sycophantic doctor and an unremarkable private secretary. During the cruise they encounter an amazing, mysteriously-powered yacht which turns out to be owned by an old Oxford friend of the millionaire. Rafel Santoris is the hero of the story. He is enormously rich, extremely clever and, in late middle age, looks no older than he did in his university days. According to the Corelli formula, his apparent youth should alert the reader to his goodness. Santoris is also the twin soul of the narrator and it transpires that these two have met in several previous incarnations but always made incorrect decisions about the direction of their lives, with the result that their relationship never developed and both were forced to try again and again to unite during a succession of avatars. The millionaire's daughter and her doctor also existed, as evil figures, in one of these previous lives.

Santoris sees the risk involved in another separation and wants the narrator to join him immediately, but she realises that her spiritual development is inferior to his and resolves to undergo further training before again allowing their lives to be united. They go their separate ways. After leaving the pleasure boat, the narrator travels to a monastery and is admitted where no female has been before. She undergoes various 'psychological' trials, the last of which involves walking through what appears to be a fire. The fire resolves into something like the Electric Ring, at the other side of which is Santoris and the lovers are reunited, seemingly for ever this time.

In the first part of the novel, Rafel Santoris and the narrator of *The Life Everlasting* represent the forces of good struggling against the forces of evil portrayed through Catherine Harland and the spiritually blind Doctor Brayle. The name Santoris suggests otherworldliness or saintliness, but the character is the usual Corelli stereotype of the unblemished male: exotic, rich, handsome, youthful and able to utilise the powers of science because he has progressed to a high spiritual plane and therefore possesses great knowledge and wisdom. The forces of good endeavour to nourish the evolutionary potential within themselves through 'the entire absence of self-indulgence', whereas the others allow their degenerate tendencies to flourish through 'neglect, thoughtlessness, carelessness, or selfishness' which cause them mental and physical injury (*LE* 133). Thus the invalid's illness stems from mental and physical conditions initiated by her own actions.

Catherine Harland is diseased physically, mentally and spiritually and is destined to marry her spiritually crippled doctor. The novel implies that if anything at all is to result from such a union, it must, by the laws of heredity, likewise be blighted by physical, mental and spiritual deformity. On the other hand, if the forces of good – the twin souls, Santoris and narrator – overcome their challenges they may evolve to a new sphere where

everything is possible . . . Beauty, perfection, wisdom, progress, creativeness, and a world – even worlds – of splendid thought and splendid ideals, bound to lead to still more splendid realisation! It is not difficult to imagine two brains, two minds moving so absolutely in unison that like a grand chord of music they strike harmony through hitherto dumb life-episodes – but think of two immortal souls full of a love as deathless as themselves, conjoined in highest effort and superb attainment. (LE 244)

No wonder that J. Cuming Walters remarked that Corelli's 'marriages were ideal, but in a workaday world would be difficult, if not for the majority impossible'.<sup>115</sup>

Aselzion, whose name suggests the exotic other, elevation and a glorious future, is the figure of authority presented in the second part of the novel, which he dominates through a role similar to that of Heliobas in *A Romance of Two Worlds*. He is the narrator's instructor and mentor, in other words, and he authenticates Corelli's psychological theories and theology. Less worldly than Heliobas, Aselzion is the head of an esoteric religious order whose monastery is the Château d'Aselzion, also known as the House of Aselzion. He has supernatural abilities, as the narrator suggests at their first meeting:

His cowl was thrown back, fully displaying his fine intellectual head – his eyes, deep blue and full of light, studied my face with a keen scrutiny which I could *feel* as though it were a searching ray burning into every nook and cranny of my heart and soul. The blood rushed to my cheeks in a warm wave. (LE 308)

Corelli invariably introduces eroticism when describing the encounters between the romanticised seers of her novels and their young female neophytes. This is not only the case with Heliobas and Aselzion and the respective narrators of *A Romance of Two Worlds* and *The Life Everlasting*, but also occurs in novels

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<sup>115</sup> J. Cuming Walters, 'A Personal Tribute by way of Epilogue' to Vyver's *Memoirs of Marie Corelli*, p. 278.

like *The Soul of Lilith* and *The Young Diana*.<sup>116</sup> The roles are reversed in *Ardath*, where the priestess Lysia, who might ‘have been taken for a bacchante, a dancer, or any other unsexed example of womanhood, inasmuch as with her golden mantle she had thrown off all disguise of modesty’, intoxicates the young poet, Theos. Corelli’s vocabulary, however, is inadequate to her task and the intended effect is not achieved as the penetration of Aselzion’s gaze into every ‘nook and cranny’ of the narrator’s heart and soul – like the awkward ‘inasmuch as with’ of Lysia’s undressing – ensures that the erotic is undermined by banal language.

Corelli draws heavily on Romantic convention in *The Life Everlasting*. The allegorical struggle between the forces of good and evil, although given a Darwinian twist, is expressed through a series of physical, psychological and spiritual quests, each replete with threatening obstacles, dangerous temptations, personal feats, miraculous rescues and delightful respites, all designed to invoke Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*. The quest motifs of *The Life Everlasting* also parallel those of *A Romance of Two Worlds* in that, firstly, there is an earthly journey, or journeys, and secondly, an out-of-body psychical or psychological journey which signifies spiritual progression. The structure of *The Life Everlasting* clearly separates into two sections dealing with the earthly and the spiritual journeys; that is, evolutionary progression through material and spiritual planes.

The physical journeys which take place in *The Life Everlasting* are more complex than those of *A Romance of Two Worlds* in that more allusions are crammed into them. In *The Life Everlasting*, the narrator travels with a female friend from London to Glasgow and then on alone to Rothesay and the steamer *Diana*. On the *Diana*, with the Harlands and their retinue, she cruises the northern oceans, taking a crucial walk into the mountains with Santoris. Finally, she travels alone from Scotland to the Biscayan coast to find the Château d’Aselzion. The length of these travels varies according to their purpose; the leg from London to Glasgow is relatively short as it only serves to introduce the narrator, whereas the cruise occupies nearly two hundred and fifty pages because it must accommodate the events which introduce and explain Santoris, present aspects of Corelli’s creed and prepare the narrator – and the reader – for the psychological odyssey. The trip from Scotland to France takes a week but occupies only eight lines of text,

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<sup>116</sup> See also *The Soul of Lilith*, Bentley, London, 1892, pp. 135 and 228 and *The Young Diana*, pp.



although the short ascent from the Biscayan coast to Aselzion's castle requires nearly five more pages of description and explanation. The narrator successfully negotiates the obstacles and temptations encountered during the cruise and the ascent to the castle and is therefore prepared for the trials which she is to undergo at the hands of Aselzion.

*The Life Everlasting* also describes a psychological quest and, not content with Spenser, Corelli also intends these events to reflect the epic journeys of Odysseus and Aeneas, with one of the trials involving a journey to the underworld. Significantly, the narrator is the only woman ever to have been accepted as a disciple by Aselzion, although she is enjoined to silence and solitude and is obliged to be heavily veiled whenever she leaves the confines of her tower and the enclosed garden below, impositions which question Corelli's attitude toward the role of aspiring women. The significance of the narrator's experiences are interpreted by Aselzion, either by means of tediously long sermons addressed to the brotherhood or through explanations to the narrator personally as he assesses her progress and decides whether her instruction is to continue to the next phase. More of Corelli's theorising is to be found in a magic book which mysteriously appears in the narrator's room in the castle. 'The Secret of Life' – intended as an imitation of *The Secret of Long Life* by Paracelsus (*LE* 368) – serves the same purpose as Heliobas's manuscript containing the Electric Creed: it conveys an authoritative written account of the author's theories. The narrator is transfigured after absorbing all these teachings of Aselzion and overcoming all the psychological challenges with which she is confronted.

Such a transfiguration recalls Rita Felski's suggestion that Corelli's novels belong to the genre of the 'popular sublime', as *The Life Everlasting* certainly offers 'fantasies of escape and transfiguration' and depicts 'glamorous and mysterious imaginary worlds far removed from the everyday lives of her readers'.<sup>117</sup> Whilst the introduction of the electrically-powered yacht suggests science fiction, the inclusion of fantasy and the occult and the psychological dimensions of this novel ensure that it does not meet Darko Suvin's strict definition of that genre. The novel might be described, in Brian Stableford's terms, as a scientific romance as it does pretend to be scientific in order to provide

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112-6, 199 and 211-214.

<sup>117</sup> Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Ma., 1995, p. 115.

a basis for the rhetoric of the ‘psychic creed’, although the events which take place in the castle of Aselzion indicate that *The Life Everlasting* is also intended to be multi-dimensional and thus more complex than mere scientific romance. Annette Federico accurately describes this novel as a spiritual-quest story wherein ‘the narrator’s quest is ultimately for self-knowledge’.<sup>118</sup> *The Life Everlasting* is therefore another allegorical romance, incorporating both psychological and spiritual dimensions in its quest theme.

Corelli introduces Gothic symbolism into *The Life Everlasting*, particularly in the part of the novel which deals with the narrator’s psychological journeys. The inhabitants of the House of Aselzion – a tower hemmed in by a great ocean and tall crags – wear monk-like habits and there is a stifling atmosphere of solitude and silence as the female narrator is completely removed from human contact, other than on the occasions of her meetings with Aselzion and his messenger. As in *A Romance of Two Worlds*, there is a Gothic chapel and the recurring symbolism of the star and the cross. Santoris’s love for the narrator appears the form of a red rose which clammers up the tower wall to offer her solace and bolster her courage. Doors and gates open and close inexplicably, there are unseen whispering voices, long corridors and mysterious music.

Corelli’s own comments on her novel are revealing. Toward the end of the ‘Author’s Prologue’ to *The Life Everlasting* she writes:

I should perhaps have preferred, had it been possible, to set forth the incidents narrated in the ensuing ‘romance’ in the form of separate essays on the nature of the mystic tuition and experience through which some of us in this workaday world have the courage to pass successfully, but I know that the masses of the people who drift restlessly to and fro upon the surface of this planet, ever seeking for comfort in various forms of religion and too often finding none, will not listen to any spiritual truth unless it is conveyed to them, as though they were children, in the form of a ‘story’. (LE 31)

Corelli hated realist and naturalist novels, preferring a genre which she considered allowed her more freedom to explore and to convey her ideas. Nevertheless, at the same time she wanted this novel to be accepted as a serious philosophical work. Unable to forego the essays which to her mind raise the intellectual level of *The Life Everlasting*, she publishes them within the novel as eight extracts from ‘The

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<sup>118</sup> Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 134.

Secret of Life'. The result is a novel forced to stretch generically to accommodate the author's often-conflicting ambitions.

## II: NARRATIVE VOICE AND AUTHORITY

Although *A Romance of Two Worlds* shows how greatly Corelli was influenced by spiritualism, in *The Life Everlasting* she continues strenuously to reject any association with the popular forms of occultism, declaring that she does not wish to be taken for a spiritualist or a theosophist as both of these terms 'have been brought into contempt by tricksters' (*LE* 25). Nonetheless, her mock-Miltonic comments about Sir Oliver Lodge in the 'Author's Prologue' to *The Life Everlasting* betray her resentment of scientists like Lodge and Sir William Barrett who could believe in spiritualism and yet remain, for the most part, respected by the scientific community:

You have at present living among you a great professing scientist, Dr. Oliver Lodge, who, wandering among mazy infinities, conceives it even possible to communicate with departed spirits, – while I, who have no such weight of worldly authority and learning behind me, tell you that such a thing is out of all natural law and therefore *can never be*. Nature can and will unveil to us many mysteries that seem *super-natural*, when they are only manifestations of the deepest centre of the purest natural – but nothing can alter Divine Law, or change the system which has governed the Universe from the beginning. (*LE* 26-7)

Corelli continues her attack on Lodge and other members of the Society for Psychical Research in the text of *The Life Everlasting*. Questioned about spiritualism, the narrator of the story defines a spiritualist as 'a credulous person who believes in mediumistic trickery, automatic writing and the like', all of which is nonsense and self-deception. Of the 'experienced scientists [who] give these matters considerable attention', she comments: 'Science, like everything else, has its borderland . . . from which the brain can easily slip off into chaos. The most approved scientific professors are liable to this dire end of their speculation' (*LE* 63-4).

Whilst Corelli's emphasis in *A Romance of Two Worlds* is on various aspects of electricity, in *The Life Everlasting* it is on her 'twin souls' theory and on those facets of the Electric Creed which view reincarnation as the progressive evolution of an individual undergoing psychological and spiritual training

throughout a series of lives.<sup>119</sup> It is apparent that whilst *A Romance of Two Worlds* and *The Life Everlasting* remain closely related in their function of expounding the author's creed, the later novel is a more sophisticated attempt to incorporate the psychological – or psychical – dimension with the physical and spiritual aspects already explained in *A Romance of Two Worlds*. As Corelli writes in the 'Author's Prologue' to *The Life Everlasting*,

'A Romance of Two Worlds,' 'Ardath: The Story of a Dead Self,' 'The Soul of Lilith,' 'Barabbas,' 'The Sorrows of Satan' and 'The Master Christian' are the result of a deliberately conceived plan and intention, and are all linked together by the one theory. They have not been written solely as pieces of fiction for which I, the author, am paid by the publisher, or you, the reader, are content to be temporarily entertained, – they are the outcome of what I myself have learned, practised and proved in the daily experiences, both small and great, of daily life. (LE 26)

Corelli wants to connect *A Romance of Two Worlds* and *The Life Everlasting* because they are integral to her creed, but she also needs to distance the later novel, a work of more consideration and maturity, from her first effort. Although Corelli's desire to remove the blemish of naiveté no doubt contributes to her need to re-interpret her first novel in the 'Author's Prologue' to *The Life Everlasting*, an equally compelling reason for making some distinction between the two novels is that the older Corelli is more confident in her creed. The message of *The Life Everlasting* is firmly supported by her strongly-held convictions regarding the theory of evolution, the application of technology and the new science of psychology.

The dilemma created by Corelli's anxiety both to connect and to distance *A Romance of Two Worlds* and *The Life Everlasting* is reflected in the ambiguity of the identity of the narrators of the complementary romances. In the concluding paragraphs of the 'Author's Prologue' to *The Life Everlasting*, Corelli asserts:

I now leave the following pages to the reader's attentive or indifferent consideration. To me, as I have already stated, outside opinion is of no moment . . . I am not the heroine of the tale – though I have narrated it (more or less as told to me) in the first person singular, because it seemed to me simpler and more direct. (LE 31)

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<sup>119</sup> See, for example, *The Life Everlasting*, pp. 167-98, 260-4, 270-5, 408-10, 421, 424 and 430-1 concerning the 'twin souls' theory, and pp. 49, 76-7, 170-94, 197, 238, 247, 252, 327-9, 391-3 and 432 regarding reincarnation.

Corelli's claim that her narrator is a real person is reinforced by the assertion which follows: 'She to whom the perfect comprehension of happiness has come with an equally perfect possession of love, is one out of a few who are seeking what she has found' (*LE* 31). The link deliberately established between narrator and author through the intimation that they possess the same keys to the 'perfect comprehension of happiness' and 'an equally perfect possession of love' is reinforced when Corelli, in the 'Author's Prologue', tells her readers:

if there are one or two out of a million who feel as I do, that life and love are of little worth if they must end in dark nothingness, these may perhaps have the patience to come with me through the pages of a narrative which is neither 'incidental' nor 'sensational' nor anything which should pertain to the modern 'romance' or 'novel,' and which has been written because the writing of it enforced itself upon me with an insistence that would take no denial. (*LE* 27-8)

No carefully constructed perspective emerges from the tale recounted by the narrator because Corelli again fails to establish her as an independent character. Her very existence is continually undermined as she is forced to articulate Corelli's own ideas. A single example will demonstrate the awkwardness of her position:

And then I began to consider that in climbing to some unknown, unseen height in deep darkness I was, after all, doing a wiser thing than living in the world with the ways of the world, – ways that are for the most part purely hypocritical, and are practised merely to overreach and out-do one's fellow men and women – ways of fashion, ways of society, ways of government which are merely temporary, while Nature, the invincible and eternal, moves on her appointed course with the same inborn intention, namely, to destroy that which is evil and preserve only that which is good. (*LE* 397)

The identity of the narrator of *The Life Everlasting* is also destabilised by her admission to Santoris that she has been studying psychic forces for several years and had met Heliobas 'some years back', implying that she is, in fact, the same character as the narrator of *A Romance of Two Worlds* (*LE* 237-8). Corelli, too, admits to having for some time studied psychic forces and claims that *A Romance of Two Worlds* was written partly as a record of these studies (*LE* 17-8, 22, 26, 27, 28, 31).<sup>120</sup> Under the weight of so much authorial intervention, it is useless for the narrator of *The Life Everlasting* to attempt to assert her

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<sup>120</sup> See also, again, *My First Book*, p. 207.

independence. Even the claim that her account of her experiences is factual reads more like the words of the author than the narrator:

And so I will fulfil the task allotted to me, and will enter at once upon my 'story' – in which form I shall endeavour to convey to my readers certain facts which are as far from fiction as the sayings of the prophets of old, – sayings that we know have been realised by the science of to-day. (*LE* 38)

There are also strong similarities between Corelli's 'Introduction to the new edition' of *A Romance of Two Worlds*, her 'Author's Prologue' to *The Life Everlasting* and the narrator's opening paragraphs in *The Life Everlasting*. All dismiss unbelievers from those whom they wish to reach, for example, and all contain some criticism of the established churches (*Romance* x-xi, xiii-xiv; *LE* 2-3, 5-6,10; and *LE* 36-8). The writer of each lays claim to real psychic experiences (*Romance* xii-xiii, xvii; *LE* 13-4, 17, 26, 31; and *LE* 37-8). All seek to differentiate themselves from spiritualism (*Romance* xi-xii, xiv-v, xvi-xviii and xxii; *LE* 25; and *LE* 37). All refer to belief in a unique creed (*Romance* xiii; *LE* 11-14, 26; and *LE* 37).

The unsatisfactory nature of the merger of the two narrators with each other and with the author again exposes the difficulties associated with Corelli's attempts to create a narrative voice which carries the authority of her own fame while at the same time distancing herself as author from a fanciful allegory designed to explain her strongly held beliefs. That Corelli intends *The Life Everlasting* to be both a romance and a record of her struggles to attain psychological and spiritual development is also reflected in the ambiguous subtitle of the novel: *A Romance of Reality*. The Corelli persona continues to refuse to be suppressed.

In further parallels with *A Romance of Two Worlds*, *The Life Everlasting* contains a seer as a male figure of authority, ostensibly independent testimony from one who has benefited from the aid of the seer, and a special manuscript or book. Just as Cellini was the means of introducing the narrator of *A Romance of Two Worlds* to Heliobas, Santoris, whilst indisputably a more important character than Cellini, serves as the link between Aselzion and the narrator of *The Life Everlasting*. Santoris has achieved heightened spiritual awareness because of his development under the guidance of both Heliobas and Aselzion, just as Cellini was cured by Heliobas of a nervous ailment, scepticism and an inability to mix

colours. In both novels, the narrators meet these living proofs prior to their own encounters with the seers and their powers.

Although their roles are similar, Aselzion is a less significant character in *The Life Everlasting* than the Heliobas of *A Romance of Two Worlds*. Heliobas enters the narrative about one quarter of the way through that novel and remains until the end, whereas Aselzion is only present in the last quarter of *The Life Everlasting*. This is partly because Santoris, as the narrator's predestined twin soul, is integral to the action of the novel and partly because, as a former student of Heliobas, he serves to recapitulate and expand the teachings of his mentor for the reader as well as for the narrator. Santoris thus shares the role of Heliobas with Aselzion. All are male figures of authority who perform the role of instructor of the narrator – or narrators – although, significantly, neither Heliobas nor Aselzion is actually present on the astral or the psychological journeys they engender.

Whereas in the case of *A Romance of Two Worlds* the authority of the Electric Creed comes from Heliobas and his manuscript 'The Electric Principle of Christianity', the authority of Corelli's message in *The Life Everlasting* derives from Heliobas by way of Santoris, Aselzion and the magic book 'The Secret of Life'. This book seemingly has no author, but it inevitably falls open at the passages which complement the most recent teachings of Aselzion. In yet another insight into Corelli's attitude toward the discipline required by genuine science, her narrator describes *The Secret of Long Life* by Paracelsus as 'sufficiently abstruse and complex to scare away all but the most diligent and persevering of students', although to her surprise 'The Secret of Life' contains instructions which are 'simple and in accordance with many of the facts discovered by modern science' (LE 368). The extracts from Aselzion's 'The Secret of Life' are separated by narrative and total only about one-third of the words of Heliobas's manuscript, the 'Electric Principles of Christianity'. Corelli obviously felt less need in her later novel to attribute her teachings to external written sources.

### III: DARWINISM IN *THE LIFE EVERLASTING*

*The Life Everlasting* is significant for three reasons: firstly, it reflects a common interpretation of progressive evolution; secondly, it deals with technological change; thirdly, it is Marie Corelli's most serious attempt at writing

a novel incorporating the new science of psychology. The text therefore demonstrates the extent to which, by the early decades of the twentieth century, scientific discourse had thoroughly permeated literary discourse. Canonical writers like George Eliot and Thomas Hardy explored the philosophical dimensions of the theory of evolution and Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell grappled with the social effects of the technological change resulting from industrialisation. Conan Doyle popularised developments in forensic science and scientific methodology and H. G. Wells and Samuel Butler extrapolated the theory of evolution through science fiction. Samuel Butler and William Morris used utopian fiction to envisage a post-mechanical age. Popular novels also reflected middle class perceptions, accurate and otherwise, of all these issues.

*The Life Everlasting* is based on a notion of progressive evolution which endorses the principle of the survival of the fittest without acknowledging the extent to which the struggle to survive is amoral and relentless. Santoris and the narrator are depicted as having undergone an evolutionary process of spiritual development throughout a series of lives to reach their current positions where, provided the narrator overcomes certain obstacles and reaches the same plane as Santoris, unity is the next step. To have attained this degree of progress, they have had to overcome the forces of evil. In the words of the narrator's friend Francesca, Corelli ironically portrays the forces of good and evil as engaged in a Darwinian struggle:

Everything in the Universe is engaged in some sort of a fight, so it seems to me. The tiniest insects are for ever combating each other. In the very channels of our own blood the poisonous and non-poisonous germs are constantly striving for the mastery, and how can we escape the general ordainment? Life itself is a continual battle between good and evil, and if it were not so we should have no object in living. The whole business is evidently intended to be a close conflict to the end. (*LE* 50-1)

Catherine Harland, the millionaire's neurotic daughter, has within her 'an army of malarious germs . . . eating away at her moral fibre' (*LE* 155). She presents a more sarcastic and materialistic view of the struggle to survive:

it's all a question of what they call bacteriology nowadays. Medicine is no use unless it can kill the microbes that are eating us up inside and out. And there's scarcely any drug that can do that . . . It's a dreadful scheme of creation, don't you think, to make human beings no better than happy hunting grounds for invisible creatures to feed upon . . . The whole thing is a mere business of eating to be eaten! (*LE* 89)



Santoris expresses Corelli's view that, nevertheless, the struggle to survive is necessary because without 'strife of some sort the world would become like a stagnant pool breeding nothing but weeds and the slimy creatures pertaining to foulness' (*LE* 232-3).

Corelli thus explores the contemporary notion of bacteriology and applies it as a metaphor on two levels: scientifically in terms of the struggle for survival, and spiritually as a description of the battle between good and evil. The result is Corelli's usual blurring of the literal and the metaphoric. During a discussion of the ill and evil Catherine Harland, for example, Corelli uses Santoris to give the following explanation:

There are germs which disintegrate effete forms of matter merely to allow the forces of life to rebuild them again – and these may propagate in the human system if it so happens that the human system is prepared to receive them. Their devastating process is called disease, but they never begin their work til the being they attack has either wasted a vital opportunity or neglected a vital necessity. Far more numerous are the beneficial germs of revivifying and creative power – and if these find place, they are bound to conquer those whose agency is destructive . . . Evil thoughts make evil blood, and in evil blood disease germinates and flourishes. Pure thoughts make pure blood and rebuild the cells of health and vitality . . . To be ill is to acknowledge neglect of existing laws and incapacity of resistance to evil. (*LE* 134-5)

Corelli's equation of virtue and health is an extension of her theory that goodness equals beauty, first suggested in *A Romance of Two Worlds*. The idea is further modified and more fully developed in the second part of *The Life Everlasting* through the words of the seer, Aselzion, who describes human physical, mental and spiritual growth in terms of attaining mastery of the atoms and atomic forces which are within and surrounding every individual – in terms, that is, of empowering the spirit to control matter (*LE* 349). The rewards will be mastery of the secrets of life, youth and love.

Those who fail to master their atomic forces are doomed to degeneration, or retrogression to the state of an animal. Corelli introduces this notion, based on the theories of Max Nordau and adapted by many spiritualists, in *A Romance of Two Worlds* and it resurfaces in *The Life Everlasting*, initially through a conversation between the narrator and Francesca on a train.<sup>121</sup> The two women

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<sup>121</sup> See Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, Heinemann, London, 1895.

are watching a group of men travelling to Scotland for the hunting season and Francesca comments:

I am sure . . . that in the beginning of creation we were all beasts and birds of prey, eating each other up and tearing each other to pieces. The love of prey is in us still . . . look at a few of these men! One has just passed our window who has the exact physiognomy of a hawk, – cruel eyes and a sharp nose like a voracious beak. Another I noticed a minute ago with a perfectly pig-like face, – he does not look rightly placed on two legs, – his natural attitude is on four legs, grunting with his snout in the gutter . . . you . . . believe that persons who lead evil lives and encourage evil thoughts, descend the scale from which they have risen and go back to the lowest forms of life . . . I tell you there are people in this world whom I see *in the very act of descending*. (LE 48-9)

The narrator confirms her friend's view in an address to her readers which emphasises that each individual exercises free will in choosing whether to 'go backward and downward rather than forward and upward' and 'no power, human or divine, can alter the course they elect to adopt. As well expect that God would revert His law of gravitation to save the silly suicide who leaps to destruction from tower or steeple' (LE 49). These arguments resurface several times in *The Life Everlasting*, for example in the discussions between the Harlands, Dr Brayle, Santoris and the narrator aboard the *Diana* and through the teachings of Aselzion in the second part of the novel. The exercise of the will is pivotal in Corelli's theories of psychology.

Corelli's understanding of the theory of evolution includes the traditional Gothic theme of defective antecedents as well as vague notions of heredity stemming from a superficial understanding of Darwin's theories, Malthus' ideas of population and the contemporary science of eugenics. Catherine Harland, for example, blames her parents, grandparents and great grandparents for her illness and her father acknowledges the responsibility of forefathers for afflicting their offspring with 'poisoned blood' (LE 89 and 133). Even Santoris admits the possibility of a person's being born with 'some inherited trouble', inviting the suggestion that Corelli was sufficiently prescient to envisage the science of genetics (LE 135). Corelli's notions of evolutionary theory and heredity also encompass the 'twin souls' theory. Santoris remarks:

But if the pairs that are joined in marriage have no spiritual bond between them and nothing beyond the attraction of the mere body – they people the world with more or less incapable, unthinking and foolish creatures like themselves. And

supposing these to be born in tens of millions, like ants or flies, they will not carry on the real purpose of man's existence to anything more than that stoppage and recoil which is called Death. (LE 241)

The element critical to Corelli's version of progressive evolution is memory. This is a concept which Corelli shared with the spiritualists and its origins lie with Plato and in the idea of an *animus mundi*, although its nineteenth-century application was more often in the form of the notion of a Lamarckian inherited collective memory which enabled some species to adapt to their environment better than others. For Corelli, memory provides the motivation for individuals to progress as they 'are never permitted to entirely forget' the experiences of previous lives (LE 165). It is also integral to the author's concept of psychology. Santoris explains to the narrator of *The Life Everlasting* that a series of visions or dreams that she has recently experienced are examples of her subconscious memory. They are

your own psychic impressions and memories. You think you have seen strange episodes – these are nothing but pictures stored far away back in the cells of your spiritual brain, which (through the medium of your present material brain) project on your vision not only presentments and reflections of past scenes and events, but which also reproduce the very words and sounds attending those scenes and events. (LE 196)

Yet again, Corelli articulates a view she shared with the spiritualists and demonstrates the confusion which generally surrounded the psychological and psychical. Annie Besant, who lectured and wrote extensively on psychology and was a leading member of the Theosophical Society, held a similarly vague view of the sub-conscious and expresses it, like Corelli, in a jumble of metaphors:

it contains a great mass of different things that need to be sorted out and arranged. It has well been called a 'vast lumber-room,' and in it we find all kinds of relics of the past – all sorts of rags and tatters of yesterday, which are still attached to the vehicles in which we are working; and we need to sort out the lumber in order to recognise, when anything comes to the surface, its place in our consciousness, its root in our past evolution.<sup>122</sup>

Both Besant and Corelli also practise a type of writing aptly described by George Levine as 'Darwinian', in that the 'Darwinian' aspects of their arguments do not accurately reflect Darwin's own thought, but the authors' understanding

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<sup>122</sup> Annie Besant, *Theosophy and the New Psychology: A Course of Six Lectures*, 1904; rpt: Theosophical Publishing Society, London, 1909, p. 60.

and interpretation of it.<sup>123</sup> Corelli cannot bring herself to acknowledge the notion of natural selection, as its randomness would undermine her whole concept of progressive evolution and the existence of predetermined twin souls. Toward the end of *The Life Everlasting*, Corelli sneers at the idea that God is not in total control of the processes of evolution: ‘If he has made an “error of selection” as the scientists would say . . . I can wait, even for another thousand years’ (*LE* 413). Like many Victorians, Corelli had a ‘deeply uncomfortable sense that science fails to keep touch with the full richness and particularity of human experience’.<sup>124</sup> As George Levine points out, Darwin was forced to accept progress without teleology, but others like Corelli remained committed to their belief in natural theology whereby the laws of nature – that is, insofar as Corelli was concerned, the working mind of God – provide a rational prescription for all human behaviour.<sup>125</sup> Corelli insists that the attraction between twin souls is a system of etheric vibrations which, like wireless telegraphy, unite the couple with such a force that they cannot turn away from each other. Her confusing argument insists that this attraction is neither romance nor reality, but simply a law (*LE* 168). Her premise is that all human endeavour is subject to nature’s laws, whereas Darwin discovered that such laws do not exist. Corelli was typical of her time in that, although her novels participate in the discourse of science, they betray a sense of unease concerning the implications of some scientific theories and discoveries.

#### **IV: TECHNOLOGY IN *THE LIFE EVERLASTING***

As well as linking spiritual and biological theories of progressive evolution, *The Life Everlasting* also deals with technological progress, which Corelli uses as a metaphor for scientific progress in general. Annette Federico discusses Corelli’s involvement with science and technology, citing the author’s positive response to the telephone and radio and her early purchase of a car. Federico also refers to William Stuart Scott’s claims that some of Corelli’s novels foretold future

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<sup>123</sup> George Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Ma., 1988, p. 10.

<sup>124</sup> George Levine in the ‘Introduction’ to *One Culture: Essays in Science and Literature*, edited by George Levine, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1987, p. 11.

<sup>125</sup> George Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists*, p. 15.

scientific discoveries, such as light rays, biological warfare, the hydrogen bomb and the use of atomic power for transport. Federico remarks:

She seems to have had faith in scientific progress: sound waves, light rays, microbes, electricity, radium – all are treated in her novels, not only after the war but from the very beginning of her career, without apparently jeopardising her religious beliefs. She readily moved on from the Victorian age of steam to the modern age of electricity; if you take seriously her creed of electric religion, she was even ahead of her time. Far from being the enemy of religious faith, science provided Corelli with more metaphors for divinity.<sup>126</sup>

The populist view of science and technology – excepting, perhaps, that offered by the emerging genre of science fiction – resisted many of the newer, culturally-unpalatable scientific theories, with the result that authors like Corelli frequently present their readers with a contradictory view of science. *The Life Everlasting* thus offers and reflects equivocal contemporary attitudes toward science: the novel is written on a ‘Darwinian’ model and it acknowledges the benefits of new sciences and technology, but at the same time it recognises some of the drawbacks of the increased use of technology and vehemently criticises the rise of atheism and materialism, which it attributes directly to the inability of science to accommodate the spiritual dimensions of life.

Corelli clearly relishes new modes of transport and communication, she is aware of developments in bacteriology and drug therapy and she discusses atomic theory, cathode rays and the evolutionary nature of the universe (*LE* 107). Santoris’s yacht the *Dream*, a mixture of science fiction and fantasy, is powered by electricity generated by water and it supports more electrically-driven modern appliances than Heliobas had in his sophisticated Paris apartment. Through the words of Santoris, Corelli tracks the progress of the harnessing of wind, steam, and then electricity in applied science, wonders at the emerging power of hydrogen and speculates on the possibility that ‘a thimbleful of concentrated fuel . . . might take the largest ship across the widest ocean’ (*LE* 149-50).

Yet Corelli is not convinced that all technological progress is good. Steam and smoke blacken and tarnish the furniture and fittings of Harland’s luxurious yacht and electricity, although in vogue, is useless as a cure for mental illness (*LE* 145, and 88-9, 98-9). Likewise, the author is not sure that science always operates to human advantage. The theory of evolution involves a great deal of waste and, if

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<sup>126</sup> Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 160.

all that ‘science teaches us [is] that we are the mere spawn of the planet on which we live’ and that humanity has no higher aims than those of an ant or a mouse, then ‘we should be bound in common duty and charity to stop the population of the world altogether – for the whole business is useless’ (*LE* 112 and 245). Corelli thus repeats the theme of *The Mighty Atom* and presages one of the arguments of *The Secret Power* when she insists that science must never be allowed to destroy an individual’s religious faith. The words of Santoris to the narrator of *The Life Everlasting* provide the key to Corelli’s attitude toward science and religion: ‘You have worked hard at problems which puzzle the strongest man’s brain, and you have succeeded in many things because you have kept what most men manage to lose when grappling with Science, – Faith’ (*LE* 169).

#### **V: PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF THE NOVEL**

In the second part of the novel, Aselzion’s assumption of Santoris’s role as the narrator’s instructor indicates that Corelli has moved *The Life Everlasting* into psychological dimensions. The narrator is in the House of Aselzion, an austere, fortress-like monastery remote from the nearest village and greatly feared by the villagers. Its governance is autocratic and patriarchal and the narrator is confined in a sparsely furnished room at the top of a tower which overhangs a sheer precipice above an ocean. The tower contains narrow winding steps leading down to a small enclosed garden. Unfortunately, the symbolism of the tower, the ocean and the garden is somewhat muted because in this Gothic world of the technological age the narrator’s quarters have ‘a well-fitted bathroom’, a dumb waiter to deliver her meals and the room is cleaned and her bed made by unseen servants.

Aselzion tests the narrator’s resolve in an initial interview. He informs her that the knowledge she is seeking is the secret of life, the secret of youth and the secret of love. Although likening her quest to that of Faust, Aselzion informs the narrator that there is no devil, only a Divine Intelligence, and that her success or failure is entirely dependent upon the strength of her own willpower (*LE* 314-6).<sup>127</sup> ‘If you are true to yourself’, he explains, ‘no power can resist the insistence

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<sup>127</sup> Corelli makes further references to Faust – see p. 335 of *The Life Everlasting*, for example, wherein Aselzion asserts ‘the dream of Faust is no fallacy! – only that the renewal of youth is not the work of magic evil, but of natural good’. She also seems unaware that denial of the existence

of a strong Will brought steadily to bear on any intention. If the effort fails, it is only because the Will has hesitated' (*LE* 343). He continues in a scientific metaphor, using a crystal globe 'full of some strange volatile fluid, clear in itself but intersected with endless floating brilliant dots and lines' to illustrate his words:

You, like this crystal globe, are full of imprisoned atoms – atoms of Spirit and Matter which work together to make you what you are – but you have also the governing Will which is meant to control them and move them either to support, sustain and revivify you, or else to weaken, break down and finally disperse and disintegrate you, preparatory to your assumption of another form and phase of existence. (*LE* 347-8)

Aselzion repeats Corelli's theory that the secrets of life, youth and love lie in the proper exercise of the individual will and the trials the narrator is to undergo are designed to temper and strengthen her power over her own mind. The terms of the narrator's residence in the tower are solitude and silence: a woman can never be accepted into the fraternity of the monastery (*LE* 316-7).

The first test takes place in the monastery's Gothic chapel where the hidden narrator is permitted to hear a sermon delivered to the brotherhood by Aselzion. The patriarch firstly discourses on the eternal law of compensation, which is the secret of life and in fact a restatement of Samuel Watson's Law of Recompense. As befits a novel endeavouring to explore psychological matters, Aselzion next adds many words concerning the role of the mind in controlling the 'conglomeration of atoms' which comprises man. The secret of love is revealed as the Natural Law, the divine and perfect scheme of the universe, the working mind of the Creator. In a reference to the teachings of Heliobas in *A Romance of Two Worlds* and to Biblical and Darwinian suggestions of the profligacy of reproduction, Aselzion explains that of all the creatures, only man rebels against or denies this natural law, with the result that he scatters his force and fails in his highest effort. On the other hand, preaches Aselzion, a person with a strong mind is capable of harnessing its force in compliance with the natural law and so is able to 'renew his own youth – his own vitality' and this is the secret of youth (*LE* 327-331). Clearly it is also the secret to successful reproduction and to reincarnation on a higher plane. The novel is firmly in the realm of natural

theology and ‘Darwinism’ but a long way from the theory of evolution through natural selection.

The emblem of Aselzion’s order is a combined cross and seven-pointed star which, reverting to the symbolism of *A Romance of Two Worlds*, signifies Christ and light as the elements of love. The narrator is terrified as Aselzion walks into this flaming symbol and becomes transfigured in the Biblical sense. Nevertheless, her fear does not prevent her from attempting to do the same when she is left alone in the chapel following the conclusion of Aselzion’s sermon. The result, however, is not transfiguration but a swoon.

Aselzion interprets this episode as a positive sign of the narrator’s determination to become one with love and resolves to assist her to develop the power of her will. He explains again that ‘there is no moment in which you do not, consciously or subconsciously, “will” something’ and that strengthening the will is a matter of maintaining the right attitude. The will’s control over an individual’s inner atomic forces is to be encouraged through concentration of the thoughts on ‘health, vitality, youth, joy, love and creativeness’. This, in turn, aids the ‘revivifying elements of your system to build up new nerve tissue and fresh brain cells, as well as to make new blood’ (*LE* 348-9). Corelli’s understanding of psychology includes the notion that it is important to develop a strong subconscious willpower which will automatically step in and deter the conscious mind from wrong thinking which will lead to wrong doing and to illness.

Teresa Ransom describes the narrator’s psychological experiences as encounters with various tempters including the phantoms of wealth, fame, pride and fear.<sup>128</sup> Corelli’s allegory is, however, a little more complex than Ransom suggests. The first test consists of a confrontation with the black ‘Phantom’ or ‘Shadow’ of death. The narrator interrogates her ‘inner consciousness’ and reasons that death is in fact no more than a ‘Living Change’, so she accosts the phantom which grows lighter until with a flash it becomes ‘a dazzling Shape of winged radiance . . . [an] inhabitant of higher and more heavenly spheres than ours’ (*LE* 357). This shape commends the narrator’s courage and the reader is reminded of the belief that Corelli shares with the spiritualists: there is no death but merely a change from one form into another.

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<sup>128</sup> Teresa Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli: Queen of Victorian Bestsellers*, Sutton, Thrupp, 1999, p. 178.



The next test involves doubt as the narrator, evoking scenes from *The Faerie Queene*, awakes from the refreshing sleep which followed her first ordeal to hear voices conversing about Aselzion and Santoris and describing them respectively as an impostor and a lure for women. Her defence is to read the love-letter given to her by Santoris wherein the words ‘wiser than to doubt’ suddenly alert her to the fact that it is again within her own consciousness that the trial is taking place. She resolves to fortify her mind by reading excerpts from the book ‘The Secret of Life’ given to her by Aselzion and reproduced by the author/narrator for the benefit of her readers and in order to expound her theories in further detail.

The narrator’s next encounter is with jealousy as she has a vision of Santoris with another woman. Initially ‘stunned and bewildered with the confusion of thought in my brain’, she begins to exercise her reason until she reaches the conclusion that her own love for Santoris should be such as not to begrudge him happiness, even if it is with another woman (*LE* 377-8). Resigned to this view, she remains saddened and therefore in a weakened mental state when accosted by a strange couple. It is difficult to decode this part of the text but it is probably intended to demonstrate the unreliability of the senses. The strange couple appear respectable and kindly and they try to persuade the narrator that she is being detained in the tower against her will and that she is the dupe of Aselzion and Santoris. The narrator successfully rebuts these charges with the words ‘I am pained and perplexed and tortured by what I hear and see – but my hearing and sight are capable of being deceived – why should I think of evil things which are not proved?’ (*LE* 381). She exercises willpower over her senses by calling out the name of Santoris, demonstrating Corelli’s belief in the reality and power of passionate love.

The narrator’s next visitor is the phantom of sorrow who reminds the reader of Corelli’s words in the ‘Author’s Prologue’ to *The Life Everlasting*:

The Reality of Life is Happiness; – the Delusion of Life, which we ourselves create by improper balance and imperfect comprehension of our own powers, must needs cause Sorrow, because in such self-deception we only dimly see the truth . . . But for the Soul that has found Itself, there are no more misleading lights or shadows between its own everlastingness and the everlastingness of God. (*LE* 4)

The purpose of this phantom is to show the narrator a vision of Santoris’s yacht, the *Dream*, which is sinking. It now becomes apparent that Corelli’s naming of

Santoris's wonderful yacht is also problematical, for it suggests that both the boat and its owner are not real but visionary, thus undermining the teachings of Santoris which are integral to Corelli's creed and also casting doubt on the attainability of the happiness for which it is a metaphor. On the other hand, as Virginia Woolf realised, Corelli was accustomed to willing most of her dreams into existence, so perhaps the narrator of *The Life Everlasting* is undergoing a test of her faith as she envisions her notion of happiness disappearing – be it dream, symbol or allegory – and it is her reaction to this which will determine the extent to which she is in control of her will, or mental powers.

Corelli wrote *The Life Everlasting* upon her return from a yachting trip with Arthur Severn and his wife in the early days of their acquaintance, so perhaps the author had in mind a dream of love.<sup>129</sup> Earlier in this novel the narrator recalls one of her former lives wherein she and Santoris were separated because a religious law forbade them to marry. Her words on that occasion may well articulate Corelli's own regrets regarding Severn's status:

Was it right . . . that the two perfect lines of a mutual love should be swept asunder? – or if it was, as some might conceive it, right according to certain temporary and conventional views of 'rightness,' was it *possible* to so sever them? (*LE* 178)

Once again, Corelli's tendency to merge the identities of author and narrator destabilise the text and blur the messages she is trying to convey.

The narrator next enters a small boat which glides into a gloomy world where she begins to 'hear strange sounds of wailing, and shuddering cries of appeal, and our darkness was lightened by the drifting to and fro of pale forms that were luminous and human in shape though scarcely of human resemblance' (*LE* 385). This episode is reminiscent of Odysseus or Aeneas in the underworld as it is here that the narrator encounters the phantoms of wealth, fame and pride. The text also demonstrates the extent to which Corelli, consciously or unconsciously, was influenced by the Romantic poets, recalling as it does the spiritual geography of the quests described in Shelley's *Alastor* and Keats' *Endymion*. The narrator of *The Life Everlasting* disperses her phantoms by calling loudly that love is not a

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<sup>129</sup> Masters and Ransom both attribute much of the inspiration underlying *The Life Everlasting* to Corelli's yachting holiday off Scotland with Arthur and Joan Severn and to the author's love for the former – see Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter*, pp. 243-4 and 271 and Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, pp. 174-5 and 182. This opinion underrates the importance of the novel as a sequel to *A Romance of Two Worlds* and a refinement of its theories.

dream, reinforcing Corelli's argument that love is reality and all else mere psychological delusion.

The narrator's next trial is patterned on the temptation of Christ, as she is accosted by another black form which leads her to climb 'some unknown, unseen height in deep darkness' (*LE* 397). Teresa Ransom suggests that the apparition is the phantom of fear.<sup>130</sup> This accords with the scientific proofs of Christ's electric nature offered in *A Romance of Two Worlds*, in which the apostle Peter, who was able to walk upon water, 'lost his power directly his will became vanquished by fear – because the sentiment of fear disperses electricity, and being a purely *human* emotion, does away with spiritual strength for the time' (*Romance* 317). Ransom's view is supported by the words of Corelli's contemporary Annie Besant who, writing about what she terms 'sub-consciousness' and 'super-consciousness', also places a great importance on the strength of willpower over fear:

if your nervous and muscular systems are out of order, you will often be troubled by certain fears of the senses, which give rise to what are roughly called hallucinations – visions which are often the dim catching sight of beings existing in the astral world. To get rid of those, increase the health, and, by understanding whence they come, oppose your knowledge to the influence on the brain . . . The moment you fear, you are losing grip of your brain, and are falling under the control of your sympathetic nervous system; so that fear is the most deadly enemy of the man who would bring the super-conscious into connection with his normal waking-consciousness.<sup>131</sup>

The narrator is led up an extremely steep incline, interrogated about her beliefs in 'Love, the generator of Life and the moving Cause and Mind of all created things' and, like Christ, challenged to prove her faith by casting herself off the pinnacle into the darkness below. She avows the immortality of her soul, throws herself off, is followed by a brilliant flash of light and swirls into darkness and silence. When she recovers consciousness she is in no longer in the tower but in a delightful room and attended by Aselzion who informs her that she has passed all the tests so far.

Like Heliobas after the astral journey, Aselzion interprets the preceding events for his acolyte, informing her that 'nothing whatever has happened to you, save in your own mind' (*LE* 406). He explains:

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<sup>130</sup> Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, p. 178.

your adventures have been purely mental – and were the result of several brains working on yours and compelling you to see and to hear what they chose . . . Human beings really live surrounded by the waves of thought flung off by their own brains and the brains of those around them . . . if they are not strong enough to find a centre-poise, they are influenced by ways and moods of thought which would never be their own by choice and free-will. If a mind . . . can stand alone, clear of obstacle, in the light of the Divine Image, then it has gained a mastership over all things. (*LE* 406-7)

This might appear to be logical psychology for the time until the seer next explains that ‘men and women with great aims in life are swept away from their intentions by the indifference or discouragement of their friends’ (*LE* 407). Perhaps this interpretation of the philosophical and psychological directly in terms of the mundane served to bring Corelli’s theories within the intellectual reach of her readers and so accounts for much of her mass appeal, but the same lack of discrimination no doubt explains why the literary critics were often so disparaging of her writing.

The narrator is informed that she has learned the most powerful lesson in life: ‘the resistance and conquest of the influences of others’ (*LE* 403). Using the words of Aselzion, Corelli justifies her own contentious career, including her inability to accept criticism and actions such as her rejection of George Bentley’s kind and wise advice. Possibly she is also attempting to legitimise her love for the married Arthur Severn:

You will go back from this place to the world of conventions, – and you will meet a million influences to turn you from your chosen way. Opinion, criticism, ridicule, calumny and downright misunderstanding – these will come out against you like armed foes, bristling at every point with weapons of offence. If you tell them of your quest of life and youth and love, and of your experience here, they will cover you with their mockery and derision – if you were to breathe a word of the love between you and Rafel Santoris, a thousand efforts would be instantly made to separate you. (*LE* 411-2)

The narrator’s final test echoes her first. Robed in white, she goes for the first time publicly to the chapel. All the monks are present and, at the behest of Aselzion, she walks into the inferno that is the emblematic cross and star. Corelli is playing with two allusions here. One is the notion of transfiguration, replicating the experience of Christ, followed by transcendence into another plane of existence. Once more, Corelli has selected pearls from the Bible. The other, more

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<sup>131</sup> Besant, *Theosophy and the New Psychology*, p. 67.

volatile allusion has its basis in the situation of the narrator as the only woman in the House of Aselzion and is open to interpretation as both liberating and erotic. After experiencing complete isolation and seclusion, the narrator undertakes her final trial under the eyes of all the other inhabitants of the monastery. Such a public test signifies that she has achieved equality with, or even supremacy over, the other acolytes, but it simultaneously evokes the eroticism of the unsatisfied wife in George Egerton's 'A Cross Line' who fantasises about dancing almost naked in front of a large male audience.<sup>132</sup> Corelli emphasises the erotic nature of the experience through her suggestion that the narrator, heart beating, nerves thrilling, feels like a sacrificial virgin exposed to the multitude of (male) eyes:

on every side wherever I looked there were men in white robes with cowls thrown back on their shoulders, all standing in silent rows, watching me as I came. My heart beat quickly, – my nerves thrilled – I trembled as I walked, thankful for the veil that partially protected me from that multitude of eyes . . . I felt . . . a strangely solitary creature, draped in white like a victim for sacrifice. (*LE* 427)

Nevertheless, there is no contact between the narrator and the monks in the chapel and Santoris is on the other side of her ordeal to receive her. The novel closes with a postscript written by the narrator from the *Dream* where she now lives with Santoris. This postscript summarises the teachings of the novel – already presented three times, by Santoris, by Aselzion and in the essays from 'The Secret of Life' – and describes the narrator's life, as well as what happens to the Harlands and Dr Brayle. It is her life with Santoris that is of most interest, with its allusions to the Bible and Wordsworth and its suggestion of some hitherto unexpected powers of science:

We – my Beloved and I – can only prove the truth of the Soul's absolute command over all spiritual, material and elemental forces by our One life and the way we live it – we, to whom everything that is necessary and desirable for our progress, comes on demand, – we, whom Science serves as an Aladdin's lamp, realising every imaginable delight – we, with whom Love . . . is the very Principle of Life, the very essence of the waves of the air through which we move and have our being. (*LE* 435)

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<sup>132</sup> George Egerton [Mary Chavelita Dunne], 'A Cross Line' in *Keynotes*, 1893; rpt: *Keynotes & Discords*, Virago, London, 1983, pp. 19-20.

### **PART III: CORELLI, SCIENCE AND FEMINISM**

I took you to be many years older than you are, with a ripe scientific experience. I find you young, beautiful, and pathetic in the pure womanliness of your nature, which must be perpetually contending with an indomitable power of intellectuality and of spirituality.

Marie Corelli, *The Secret Power*, Doubleday, New York, 1921, p. 309.

### **CHAPTER NINE : THE WOMAN QUESTION**

## I: CONTEMPORARY FEMALE ACTIVISM

There was no consensus among late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century female activists regarding priorities for gaining economic, legal or political rights for women. Although a core of campaigners, like Barbara Leigh Bodichon, Josephine Butler, Millicent Garret Fawcett and Frances Power Cobbe, supported most activities designed to improve the lot of contemporary women, the opinions of progressive women were diverse and they formed a range of organisations which pursued specific, sometimes contradictory, objectives. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the militancy of some suffragists divided women activists and their supporters even more deeply.

Any assessment of the feminist credentials of contemporary writers, including one so controversial as Marie Corelli, is therefore bound to be flawed if late twentieth-century ideologies are retrospectively superimposed upon the diverse attitudes of the women of one hundred years earlier. The work of Grant Allen, another controversial nineteenth-century writer, provides an excellent example of the discrepancies which become apparent when ideology influences retrospective analysis. Critics like Carolyn Nelson group Allen with the feminist writers of the 1890s, Jeffrey Weeks sees him as a radical and a reformer, and Sally Ledger and David Rubenstein regard him as strongly anti-feminist.<sup>1</sup> Ann Ardis interprets his novel, *The Woman Who Did* (1895), as both challenging the dominant Victorian sexual and domestic ideologies and reinforcing them, whilst Jane Miller sees it as ‘an anti-feminist novel disguised as a New Woman novel’.<sup>2</sup>

Evaluation of the progress achieved by late nineteenth and early twentieth-century female activists in terms of discrete events also tends to mislead, as change was sporadic and often involved only minor matters or partial solutions to existing problems, so that its effects were cumulative and often clear only in hindsight. To argue that nineteenth-century feminism began in the 1850s, for

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<sup>1</sup> Carolyn Nelson, *British Women Fiction Writers of the 1890s*, Twayne, New York, 1996, p. 8; Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: the regulation of sexuality since 1800*, 1981; second ed., Longman, London, 1989, pp. 19, 33, 92 and 165; Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and feminism at the 'fin de siècle'*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1997, p. 15; and David Rubenstein, *Before the Suffragettes: Women's Emancipation in the 1890s*, Harvester, Brighton, 1986, pp. 33 and 34 (n.).

<sup>2</sup> Ann L Ardis, *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1990, pp. 14 and 23, and Jane Eldridge Miller, *Rebel Women: Feminism, Modernism and the Edwardian Novel*, Virago, London, 1994, p. 25.

example, is arbitrarily to ignore women like Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Martineau and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who had earlier battled for women's rights. Similarly, although a series of legislative reforms in the last half of the century meant that by the 1890s the position of women was vastly improved from what it had been in the 1860s, the changes to women's place in society cannot be attributed to legislative reform alone.

Furthermore, nineteenth-century feminism does not end with the year 1900 as many of the attitudes prevalent in the 1880s and 1890s were still present in British society after the turn of the century. Paradoxically, the outbreak of war in 1914 effectively marked the end of the suffrage movement, yet the first, albeit limited, vote for women was granted immediately the war ended. Only rarely did events occur which either caused or marked a definite and noticeable alteration in public sentiment; one exception was the Oscar Wilde trials of 1895 which led to and represented a strong public reaction against decadence and radical feminism.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, it is possible to create a context within which to explore Marie Corelli's attitude toward feminism, bearing in mind that the term 'feminism' is a twentieth-century construct and that neither 'the woman question', as it was called at the time, nor Corelli's attitude toward it were static during the novelist's career. Corelli was, and still is, usually viewed as an anti-feminist writer, probably because most of her ideas are expressed through the idealised womanly figures of her heroines and also because of the attitudes she champions in the pamphlet *Woman, or— Suffragette: A Question of National Choice*. However, as always, Corelli was contradictory. She focused upon issues such as recognition of women's intellectual, scientific and creative abilities which were ignored by female activists more preoccupied with the absence of their economic, political or legal rights. As Annette Federico implies, twentieth-century feminism has a tendency to ignore women writers who do not locate sexual equality in

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Teresa Mangum, 'Style Wars of the 1890s: The New Woman and the Decadent' in *Transforming Genres: New Approaches to British Fiction*, edited by Nikki Lee Manos and Meri-Jane Rochelson, St Martin's Press, New York, 1994, p. 51; Ann L. Ardis, '“Shakespeare” and Mrs Grundy: Redefining Literary Value in the 1890s' in *Transforming Genres*, pp. 2 and 10; Sally Ledger, *The New Woman*, p. 94; Rubinstein, *Before the Suffragettes* p. 25; Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*, Viking, New York, 1990, p. 171; and Michael Foldy, *The Trials of Oscar Wilde: Deviance, Morality, and Late-Victorian Society*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1997, pp. 129-50.



politics and praxis.<sup>4</sup> Writing in relation to the way in which feminist critics argue for the subversive power of mass culture, Anne Cvetkovich cautions against the tendency to confuse ‘the critically interesting with the subversive’.<sup>5</sup>

Developments in science impacted directly upon the position of women in the second half of the nineteenth century through the effects of social change brought about by technological revolution and as a result of the new world view introduced by the theory of evolution. These developments were, naturally, reflected in the literature of the time. Bourgeois individualism and the emphasis placed upon personal conscience and social duty by humanism and positivism replaced a traditional religious acceptance of the status quo, with the result that a new type of fiction, the ‘social problem’ or ‘condition of England’ novel, became prominent. Most notably, Disraeli, Kingsley and Dickens focused public attention on the plight of the poor under the prevailing industrial system. In the same vein, Elizabeth Gaskell, whose responsibilities as a clergyman’s wife in Manchester kindled her sympathy toward the particularly degrading position of women in the lower classes, also wrote movingly about the problems facing the working classes in large industrial cities under the existing system of ‘political economy’. Writers like Herbert Spencer, George Lewes and George Eliot examined the ideological implications of new scientific theories in the context of changes taking place in society; Eliot, for example, interrogated theories of organicism and evolution through characters like Dinah, Hetty and Adam in *Adam Bede* (1859) and Tom and Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860).

Female activism became publicly noticeable at a political level when, in the 1850s, a group of women including Barbara Leigh Bodichon and Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy formed the Langham Place circle.<sup>6</sup> This group organised various campaign committees, published the first ‘feminist’ periodical of the century and opened a library and reading room for women in the West End of London. The Langham Place circle also established committees to promote the further education and employment of women. When J. S. Mill was elected to Parliament in 1866, the petition for female suffrage which he presented shortly

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<sup>4</sup> Annette R. Federico, *Idol of Suburbia: Marie Corelli and Late-Victorian Literary Culture*, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, 2000, p. 96.

<sup>5</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *Mixed Feelings: Feminism, Mass Culture, and Victorian Sensationalism*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1992, p. 38.

<sup>6</sup> Philippa Levine, *Victorian Feminism 1850-1900*, Hutchinson, London, 1987, p. 15.

thereafter was organised by the Langham Place women. In 1867 Mill unsuccessfully moved an amendment to the Reform Bill substituting 'person' for 'man' in an attempt to apply the proposed extension of the franchise to women; in the same year he published *On the Subjection of Women*. Regional female suffrage committees were established in London, Birmingham, Bristol, Edinburgh and Manchester in 1867 and 1868 and these combined to become the National Society for Women's Suffrage in 1868.<sup>7</sup>

The notions of individuality and ownership of property which supported the ideology of the Victorian middle classes raised questions concerning women's position in society and, ironically, the position of married women in particular, as a woman lost her legal status and became, along with everything she owned, the property of her husband upon marriage. It soon became apparent that women were losing both individuality and property and in 1856 the first Parliamentary Bill aimed at giving married women the right to own their own property was introduced.<sup>8</sup> The 'woman question' – the question of the status of women – was out in the open.

In the 1860s and 1870s the most contentious topics were divorce reform, women's access to higher education, the double standard applied to relations between the sexes, custody of the children of separated parents, the right of women to work outside the home, female suffrage and the right of married women to own property. By the 1880s and 1890s women had won limited access to higher education, married women were entitled to own property and some reform had been made to the divorce laws. By this time, however, the woman question had expanded to include female sexuality and the inequitable Contagious Diseases Acts and more emphasis was being placed on the matter of female suffrage. The populist debate focused upon women who played sports, rode bicycles, smoked cigarettes or wore rational dress, activities which provoked the most heated arguments – and the most ridicule – as they symbolised a total loss of 'womanliness', that quintessential quality of the Victorian 'angel in the house'

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<sup>7</sup> Philippa Levine, *Victorian Feminism*, pp. 15 and 57-65 is the source of the information in this paragraph.

<sup>8</sup> Philippa Levine, *Victorian Feminism*, pp. 135-6.

who, for the protection of her moral purity and because of her physical and intellectual weakness, was denied access to any significant public role.<sup>9</sup>

One factor contributing to the increased attention given to the position of women was the expansion of the Victorian urban middle classes within which the female occupations of pre-industrial society were no longer available. Another was the introduction of universal elementary education from 1870 which produced more women seeking access to higher education. An indirect but significant contribution to the changing position of women was the worsening population imbalance in Britain: the ratio of females to males ranged from 102.9 to 100 in some districts to 149.8 to 100 in others (the middle class districts were in the highest categories), so that by 1901 females outnumbered males by over one million.<sup>10</sup> Marriage, hitherto the only respectable occupation for middle class women, was becoming both harder to attain and less satisfactory when achieved.

One way of looking at how the position of middle class women changed during the second half of the nineteenth century is through the perspective of the public versus the private spheres. According to the Victorian ideal, the rough and tumble of *laissez faire* capitalism was to be left to the man of the family operating in the public sphere, whilst the woman remained at home creating and maintaining a sphere of peace for the benefit of her husband and children. She was the angel in the house who exerted moral influence: intellectually inferior to her husband, she was kept from the dangers and temptations of the outside world in order to preserve her innocence and womanliness. Many women supported this separation of the sexes on the grounds that a woman's sphere should be kept well apart from a man's in order to prevent social and moral contamination.

Confinement of women to the home was reinforced by legal as well as ideological means. Aware that ownership of property conferred a degree of independence, the all-male British Parliament resisted the Married Woman's Property Act until 1882.<sup>11</sup> Until the passing of the Matrimonial Causes Act in 1884, a husband could legally confine his wife to the home against her will and

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<sup>9</sup> The term 'angel in the house' derives from the popular series of poems written by Coventry Patmore in praise of Victorian ideals of love and marriage. Entitled *The Angel in the House*, the poems were published between 1854-1863.

<sup>10</sup> Kathleen Blake, *Love and the Woman Question in Victorian Literature: The Art of Self-Postponement*, Harvester, Sussex, 1983, p. 81.

<sup>11</sup> Philippa Levine, *Victorian Feminism*, p. 139.

had access by ‘conjugal right’ to her body without consent, and until 1891 a court could seize and imprison a woman who refused to live with her husband.<sup>12</sup> Such legal limitations frequently led to further confinement and the increased restrictions of constant child bearing and rearing.

The medical profession used biological arguments to reinforce notions of the differences between the sexes, arguing that a woman’s role was first and foremost a reproductive one and that increased use of her intellect would proportionally decrease her power to conceive and give birth to healthy offspring. Women were thus overtly discouraged from undertaking higher education or intellectual employment.<sup>13</sup> The emergence of psychology and sexology late in the nineteenth century served to entrench the connection between the female reproductive system and mental health through the classification of specific female disorders like hysteria and neurasthenia. The short story, ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ (1892) by the American activist Charlotte Gilman Perkins vividly describes the painful situation of an intelligent woman writer driven insane because her post-natal depression is diagnosed by her physician husband as neurasthenia and treated by the imposition of S. Weir Mitchell’s ‘rest cure’, a treatment which banned exercise, imposed isolation and proscribed all intellectual activity. Later, Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) would explore the continuing interaction between notions of sexuality and mental health in London after the Great War.

The middle class – which included a growing number of lawyers and doctors – reinforced its own ideology and thus women came to be classified under two categories only: the ‘angel in the house’ or the ‘fallen woman’, the former having no sexuality at all and the latter consisting of nothing but depraved sensuality. Despite attempts by writers like Gaskell, George Moore and even Corelli’s nearest rival, the popular novelist Hall Caine, to arouse sympathy for the ‘fallen woman’ on the grounds that society was at least partly responsible for her condition, middle class opinion remained so fixed that any appearance in the public sphere by a woman was considered indecorous.<sup>14</sup> As George Meredith

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<sup>12</sup> Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies*, p. 31. Also see Philippa Levine, *Victorian Feminism*, pp. 137 and 143, for details of the ‘Clitheroe Case’ which brought to public attention a man’s right to have his estranged wife imprisoned.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Philippa Levine, *Victorian Feminism*, p. 129.

<sup>14</sup> See Elizabeth Gaskell, *Ruth*, 1853; republished in *Ruth and other Tales*, Smith, Elder, & Co., London, 1890; George Moore, *Esther Waters*, 1894; rpt: J. M. Dent, London, 1936; and Hall

reflects in *Diana of the Crossways* through the words of Emma Dunstane: ‘The English notion of women seems to be that we are born white sheep or black: circumstances have nothing to do with our colour’.<sup>15</sup>

However, toward the end of the century, greater access to education and lessening opportunities to marry, or to make suitable marriages, increasingly drove women into the public arena in search of paid or voluntary employment. David Rubinstein describes the movement of educated middle class women into commercial and financial occupations (with typewriting and shorthand), the civil service (as inspectors and commissioners), elementary and secondary teaching, nursing, journalism and libraries.<sup>16</sup> The municipal franchise was granted to single women in 1869 and extended to married women in 1894. The Elementary Education Act of 1870 entitled women to vote for and stand in elections for the new School Boards.<sup>17</sup> Women also became Poor Law Guardians and parish councillors.<sup>18</sup> Female students and workers had no option but to travel by public transport or bicycle which led to the opening of tea-shops where they could stop for refreshment.

Barbara Harman, in *The Feminine Political Novel in Victorian England*, investigates the way in which several Victorian novels reflect this steady movement of women into the public sphere. She finds that Gaskell’s Margaret Hale in *North and South* (1855) ‘celebrates, rather than resists, the connection between private and public life, suggesting that the link is powerful and transformative’, although she acknowledges that Gaskell’s portrayal of Margaret’s

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Caine, *The Woman Thou Gavest Me: Being the Story of Mary O’Neill Written by Hall Caine*, Heinemann, London, 1913.

<sup>15</sup> George Meredith, *Diana of the Crossways*, 1885; rpt: Virago, London, 1980, p. 133.

<sup>16</sup> Rubinstein, *Before the Suffragettes*, pp. 71-2.

<sup>17</sup> Chester Clarence Huff, Jr., suggests that Corelli wrote *The Mighty Atom* in protest against ‘the battle raging over the 1894 election to the London school board of a large number of progressives’ – see ‘The Novels of Marie Corelli: Their Themes and Their Popularity as an Index to Popular Taste’, unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Colorado, 1970, p. 87.

<sup>18</sup> Philippa Levine, *Victorian Feminism*, pp. 71-2.

entry the into public domain is 'risky and potentially compromising'.<sup>19</sup> Harman also argues that, whilst George Meredith in *Diana of the Crossways* displays an astonishing fluidity of private and public spheres, he severs the connection between publicity and sexuality by maintaining the complete chastity of his heroine. Nancy Lord in George Gissing's *In the Year of the Jubilee* (1894) is more complex because, although she is completely unrestrained, her experience in the world is one of bad publicity and she finds the freedoms of her secret marriage less satisfying than she expected.<sup>20</sup>

Harman's text demonstrates the diversity of novelists' reactions to women's infiltration of the public sphere. Firstly, there are big differences in the contemporary authors' own attitudes and, secondly, there are internal inconsistencies in the way that they deal with the characters in their narratives; Gissing, for example, does not always seem to be in control of the aggressive masculinity of Lionel Tarrant in a novel that is generally sympathetic toward women. This authorial diversity, however, is to be expected in the treatment of a topic such as the woman question which by its very nature was bound to be contentious and to provoke disparate views even among supporters of women's emancipation.

Not included in Harman's survey, probably because it is not clearly a public activity, is the movement of women into journalism. As the middle class population became literate, wealthier and more mobile, the demand for reading material also increased. This led to a proliferation of journals and many of their contributors, editors and even some proprietors were women. Among the most influential were Eliza Lynn Linton, Margaret Oliphant, Harriet Martineau, Christian Isobel Johnstone, Maria Jane and Geraldine Jewsbury, Charlotte Yonge, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, Elizabeth Rigby, Anne Mozley, Anna Jameson, Frances Power Cobbe, Josephine Butler, Emily Faithfull, Barbara Bodichon, Lydia Becker, Bessie Parkes, Dinah Mulock and Caroline Norton, the model for

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<sup>19</sup> Barbara Leah Harman, *The Feminine Political Novel in Victorian England*, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville, 1998, pp. 11 and 75. However, Patricia Ingham argues that Margaret Hale transgresses the boundaries of both gender and class: 'By becoming an agent in the public sphere and the centre of all eyes she has turned herself into a public woman, an *actress* not an angel, potentially a fallen woman' – see *The Language of Gender and Class: Transformation in the Victorian Novel*, Routledge, London, 1996, p. 67.

<sup>20</sup> Harman, *The Feminine Political Novel in Victorian England*, p. 179-181.

*Diana of the Crossways*.<sup>21</sup> Significantly, this list includes feminist and anti-feminist women. Bertha Vyver remarks that Charles Jerningham called Marie Corelli the ‘Life-Boat of Journalism’ because of her controversial contributions to the periodicals and the responses they generated.<sup>22</sup> Writing for journals was certainly an activity which women undertook in the home but its ramifications were entirely public as women’s opinions on the woman question and other contemporary topics became more widely disseminated through the popular press.<sup>23</sup>

Opponents of female emancipation – and many of them were women – utilised social Darwinism to bolster their arguments against improvements in the social, economic and political position of women. Many gave credence to the Darwinian proposition that women, like ‘savages’, belonged to inferior races which had not evolved to the elevated state of white men and therefore were not qualified to exert influence on public affairs. Furthermore, as Rita Kranidis points out, social Darwinism was used to harness the support of ‘nature’ in deciding the acceptability of certain social characteristics and roles and rejecting others, thus imposing a harmful fatalistic destiny upon women.<sup>24</sup> David Rubinstein corroborates this history of the use of the terms ‘natural’ and ‘unnatural’ as a means of social control, describing how women were considered ‘by nature’ inferior as they were governed by emotion, not by reason; their influence was moral, originating in their purity, freedom from sensuality and unselfishness. Doctors provided medical ‘evidence’ for the inferiority of women’s brains.<sup>25</sup> It was ‘natural’ for women to be mothers and arguments were drawn from eugenics to reinforce their role as the procreators and nurturers of the race. Fear of

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, 1977; expanded ed., Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1999, p. 155.

<sup>22</sup> Bertha Vyver, *Memoirs of Marie Corelli*, Alston Rivers, London, 1930, p. 194.

<sup>23</sup> Novel-writing was, of course, the area where women most frequently put their ideas into the public sphere. Twentieth-century critics argue strenuously about whether women novelists played a dominant role in the nineteenth-century novel market, or whether they were, on the whole, considered inferior to their male counterparts. From opposing points of view, this topic is discussed by Gaye Tuchman and Nina E. Fortin, *Edging Women Out: Victorian Novelists, Publishers, and Social Change*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1989 and Michael Oval Kent, ‘Popular late-Victorian fiction’, unpublished PhD thesis, University of California, Riverside, 1993, pp. 129-34.

<sup>24</sup> Rita S. Kranidis, *Subversive Discourse: The Cultural Production of Late Victorian Feminist Novels*, Macmillan, Houndmills, 1995, pp. 96-7.

degeneration made this proposition even more emotive and powerful as the British empire began to decline in the closing years of the century.

Tension surrounded the woman question, with strong views held by both men and women on all aspects of the debate. An indication of the intensity of public interest is given by the reaction to the question posed by the *Daily Telegraph* 'Is Marriage a Failure?': 27,000 responses were received between 15 August and 2 September 1898.<sup>26</sup> Although the position of women had gradually improved throughout the second half of the century, in the 1880s and 1890s there was an outbreak of radical feminism which came to be personified in the term the 'New Woman'. Social conservatives allied the New Woman with decadence and national degeneration; interpretations of Darwinism were used to argue that men were becoming effeminate, women masculine and the empire was threatened from degeneracy within and enemies without. The forces of social conservatism received a fillip when the scandals of the trials of Oscar Wilde shocked the public, quashed the decadents and also dampened public sympathy for feminist campaigns.

Nevertheless, agitation for women's legal and political inequality was not stamped out. In 1897 the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies was formed under the leadership of Millicent Garrett Fawcett and in 1903 Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst established the more radical Women's Social and Political Union. Later the Women's Freedom League was formed by a dissident group of Pankhurst followers. Although these organisations frequently campaigned together, the suffrage movement had effectively split as the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies was a conservative body, committed to obtaining its aims by legal means, whereas the Women's Social and Political Union had, by 1905, become a militant organisation which drew criticism equally from anti-feminists and conservative feminists.<sup>27</sup>

Women writers, too, were engaged in the struggle for political rights. The Women Writers' Suffrage League was formed by Cicely Hamilton and Bessie Hatton in 1908 with the aim of gaining the Parliamentary franchise on an equal

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<sup>25</sup> Rubinstein, *Before the Suffragettes*, pp. 3-9.

<sup>26</sup> Ledger, *The New Woman*, p. 22.

<sup>27</sup> Miller, *Rebel Women*, pp. 126-8.



basis to men through ‘the methods proper to writers – the use of the pen’.<sup>28</sup> Membership of this organisation included Sarah Grand [Frances McFall], Violet Hunt, Olive Schreiner, Elizabeth Robins, May Sinclair and Evelyn Sharp. Other writers who supported the suffrage movement included H. G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, Rebecca West, Amber Reeves, John Galsworthy, John Masefield and Ford Maddox Ford. On the other side, writers such as Margaret Oliphant and Eliza Lynn Linton publicly opposed female suffrage.

One particularly controversial aspect of the woman question explored by some ‘feminist’ writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was sexual equality. Whilst writers like George Egerton [Mary Chavelita Dunne] believed that sexual inequality lay at the root of women’s repression, most suffragists saw the battle for sexual liberty as an unwelcome and unsavoury distraction from the fight for political rights. Socialist women like Beatrice Webb maintained that sexual freedom for women would follow general economic and political liberty.<sup>29</sup> It is, perhaps, difficult in retrospect to understand how some women activists could have separated the notions of sexual and political emancipation. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, sexuality had become politicised by theories of social Darwinism and eugenics and through the operation of the Contagious Diseases Acts.

Within the framework of the ideology of the angel in the house versus the fallen women of the lower classes, Victorian men were at liberty to satisfy their ‘natural’ craving for sex before and outside of marriage with prostitutes drawn from the ‘naturally’ depraved lower classes of women. The greatest rake could be reformed through marriage to a good, innocent, young woman. Condemnation of the double standard by female activists was based on their awareness that poverty was the underlying cause of prostitution amongst working class women and that promiscuous middle class men were the beneficiaries of inequitable social conditions.

Allied to the problem of prostitution was the spread of venereal diseases. Ostensibly in order to limit infection, Contagious Diseases Acts were passed in

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<sup>28</sup> Miller, *Rebel Women*, p. 128. Miller’s history of feminism in the early twentieth century provides the basis of this summary.

<sup>29</sup> Sally Ledger, ‘The New Woman and the Crisis of Victorianism’ in *Cultural Politics at the fin de siècle*, edited by Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, p. 40.

1864, 1866 and 1869 allowing for the detention and medical examination of any woman in nominated garrison towns and ports suspected of being a ‘common prostitute’. Grounds for detention included being informed against by soldiers and sailors. Women found to be carrying a disease were forcibly detained in hospital in order to effect a cure: no action was taken against their clients.

Many female activists opposed this legislation and in 1869 the Ladies’ National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts was founded. Josephine Butler, active in this as in so many other feminist causes, pointed out to a Royal Commission hearing that the acts served to entrench a double moral standard as they penalised women but offered protection and immunity to male ‘sinners’, whilst making no effort to reform their behaviour. Butler, as a respectable married woman, was on safe ground as it was a known, albeit unspoken, fact that many middle class women had contracted venereal diseases from their promiscuous husbands and had given birth to unhealthy children.<sup>30</sup>

Disgust with the double standard applying to relations between the sexes, particularly through the operation of the Contagious Diseases Acts, also led to the formation of organisations like the Social Purity League and the Moral Reform Union. The novelist Sarah Grand was active in the social purity movement and her novels, *The Heavenly Twins* (1893) and *The Beth Book* (1897), explore the effects of male promiscuity upon wives and children. Grand advocates sexual purity for men on the same basis as that expected of women. In *The Story of A Modern Woman* (1894), Ella Hepworth Dixon also explores the double standard applying to relations between the sexes and chronicles the damage inflicted by promiscuous, diseased middle class males upon working and middle class women. Sheila Jeffreys takes pains to defend members of the social purity movement against accusations of Victorian prudishness, pointing out that the radical feminist Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, in *Phases of Love* (1897), advocates an equality in the relationship between men and women which enables passion to transcend the physical and become far more mutually-satisfactory ‘psychic love’.<sup>31</sup> Marie Corelli, labelled anti-feminist, was obviously in agreement with this aspect of

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<sup>30</sup> Philippa Levine provides one of many feminist accounts of the agitation against the Contagious Diseases Acts – see *Victorian Feminism*, pp. 145-51.

<sup>31</sup> Jeffreys, *The Spinster and her Enemies*, p. 32.

radical feminism as her notions of psychic love expressed in, for example, *A Romance of Two Worlds* and *The Life Everlasting*, echo Wolstenholme Elmy's argument that physical self-determination for women leads to improved relations between the sexes.

Sexual restraint for both men and women was not the only approach to sexuality taken by activist women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. George Egerton's short story 'A Cross Line', published in 1893, shocked many readers with its description of a married woman's attraction to another man, her sexual overtures toward her husband and her fantasy of dancing, scantily clad, in front of an audience of aroused men. Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis argued that women's sexuality had been repressed under Victorian social ideology; Ellis, in particular, believed that healthy unions between male and female were those where the sexual desires of both were equally indulged, although he maintained the conservative view that man was the pursuer and the woman most satisfied when she had accepted the male to whom she felt she could most joyfully submit.

Dissatisfaction with the institution of marriage and recognition of the issue of female sexuality also gave rise to the notion of 'free love', defined not as promiscuity but as the deliberate co-habitation of couples without the sanction of marriage. Despite the examples of George Sand and George Eliot, however, and the formation of the Legitimation League in 1897 which worked for the recognition of children born out of wedlock and for the reform of marriage and divorce laws, couples' rejection of marriage led to enormous practical difficulties, as Thomas Hardy shows in *Jude the Obscure* (1896) and George Gissing intimates in *The Odd Women* (1893).<sup>32</sup> The status of Grant Allen's novel, *The Woman Who Did*, remains contentious because, although Herminia Barton's principled stand against marriage is explored through the account of her life as a single mother, she is later rejected by a more conservative lover whom she refuses to marry and she ultimately succumbs to the impositions of society by committing suicide after being deserted by her only daughter. George Moore's *Esther Waters* valorises the single, (in this unusual case) working class mother and questions why, in later life, she felt the need for the presence of a husband. Olive Schreiner has both mother and child die after Lyndall runs away with, and then from, her

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<sup>32</sup> See Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, p. 180, for a description of the Legitimation League.

lover in *The Story of an African Farm*. The married Kate Ede, who in George Moore's *A Mummer's Wife* (1885) elopes with an actor, becomes an incurable alcoholic. The writing of sexologists like Havelock Ellis and the work of Sigmund Freud helped to reinforce the connection between female sexuality and mental health so that women's sexual nature remained a conundrum for society well into the twentieth century, as reflected in the works of novelists like D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and E. M. Forster.

The pervasiveness of the women question in Britain during the 1880s and the first half of the 1890s was partly the result of the education reforms of the 1870s, which produced a newly-literate and newly-mobile female population demanding more newspapers and periodicals. This popular press attracted advertising income by generating controversy. Whilst serious writers of fiction and non-fiction continued to debate the woman question within their own forums, extremism was fostered by journals like *Punch*, which was notorious for its anti-feminist articles and cartoons.<sup>33</sup> The result was that leading writers of all political persuasions were drawn into the public conflict in order to defend their positions. Marie Corelli entered this debate about what became termed the 'New Woman' with the publication of her 1889 novella *My Wonderful Wife*.

The New Woman was a radical but fictional expression of certain aspects of the woman question, although many opponents of feminism and conservative feminists attempted to prove that she existed in reality. The ambiguity of her status is reflected in the words of Sally Ledger: the New Woman was 'a feminist activist, a social reformer, a popular novelist, a suffragette playwright, a woman poet; she was also often a fictional construct, a discursive response to the activities of the late nineteenth-century women's movement'.<sup>34</sup> Others see the New Woman as 'well-educated, critical of marriage, anxious for sexual and economic freedom, but also neurotic and self-destructive'.<sup>35</sup> An excellent contextual description of the New Woman is provided by Gail Cunningham in

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<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Gerd Bjørhovde, *Rebellious Structures: Women Writers and the Crisis of the Novel 1880-1900*, Norwegian University Press, Oslo, 1987, p. 9.

<sup>34</sup> Ledger, *The New Woman*, p. 1.

<sup>35</sup> Sanders, *Eve's Renegades*, pp. 56-7.

*The New Woman and the Victorian Novel*.<sup>36</sup> Fiction exploring the social, political and sexual implications of the figure of the New Woman became known as ‘New Woman literature’, although the most vehement arguments about the New Woman continued to be aired in the popular newspapers and periodicals.

The term ‘New Woman’ was coined by Ouida [Marie Louise de la Ramée] in an article entitled ‘The New Woman’ published in May 1894 in the *North American Review*. Ouida’s article was a rebuttal of ‘The New Aspect of the Woman Question’ by Sarah Grand, published in the same journal in March that year. It is ironic that Ouida’s term stuck because she was, like Marie Corelli, an eccentric writer of romances and considered to be anti-feminist, whereas Grand was an active member of the social purity movement and belonged to the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies and the Women Writers’ Suffrage League and it was Grand who campaigned hard for women’s marital, educational and legal rights and who became known as the ‘foremother’ of New Woman literature.<sup>37</sup>

Critics do not agree about which authors should, in retrospect, be classified as New Woman writers. Elaine Showalter initially chooses Olive Schreiner, Sarah Grand, John Oliver Hobbes [Mrs Craigie], Beatrice Harraden, Ethel Voynich, Mary Coleridge, Mémie Muriel Dowie and George Egerton in the first edition of *A Literature of Their Own*, but enlarges this list significantly in the expanded 1999 edition of her book. Most other critics add to this list Iota [Kathleen Mannington Caffyn], Mona Caird, Emma Francis Brooke, Ella Hepworth Dixon and Mary Cholmondeley, although few agree with Showalter’s inclusion of Hobbes, Harraden, Voynich or Coleridge and Penny Boumelha regards Iota as ‘an avowed anti-feminist’.<sup>38</sup> David Rubenstein includes Isabella O. Ford, Netta Syrett, Graham Travers [Dr. Margaret Todd], Caroline Fothergill, Edith Nesbitt, Evelyn Sharp, Edith Ellis and Gertrude Dix, but remarks that the feminists of the 1890s ‘contributed much more to emancipation than to fiction’.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Gail Cunningham, *The New Woman and the Victorian Novel*, Macmillan, London, 1978, pp. 1-19.

<sup>37</sup> Mangum, ‘Style Wars of the 1890s’, p. 47.

<sup>38</sup> Penny Boumelha, *Thomas Hardy and Women: Sexual Ideology and Narrative Form*, Harvester, Brighton, 1982, p. 86.

<sup>39</sup> Rubenstein, *Before the Suffragettes*, pp. 27-31 and 33-4.

Ann Ardis lists one hundred texts she considers to be New Woman literature.<sup>40</sup> Among male writers, George Moore, George Gissing and Thomas Hardy are frequently considered to be New Woman novelists; some critics include H. G. Wells and George Meredith, although, surprisingly, not the latter's *The Egoist* (1879), but only *Diana of the Crossways*.<sup>41</sup> Again, there is no consensus on the status of Grant Allen's work.

The New Woman was portrayed by her adversaries as many, sometimes contradictory, things: as a neurotic, a man-hating prude, an enemy of motherhood, a promiscuous proponent of free love, an enemy of marriage, or as a masculine, rollicking, short-haired, trousers-wearing, bicycle-riding, sports-playing, cigarette-smoking Amazon. The critic Hugh Stutfield, in an essay entitled 'Tommyrotics' published in *Blackwood's* in June 1895, categorised new women as 'erotomaniacs' who wrote 'morbid and nasty books'. Sally Ledger includes Bram Stoker, Marie Corelli and Eliza Lynn Linton with Stutfield as writers of the 1890s who were convinced that the New Woman was associated with Wildean decadence.<sup>42</sup>

Critics of the New Woman used science to justify their arguments by appropriating a version of social Darwinism which argued that the masculinity of the New Woman and the effete-ness of the decadent male proved that Britain was producing increasingly degenerate offspring and that the continuance of the nation required a return to mid-Victorian values, accompanied by an emphasis on women's role as the breeders of strong, manly and adventurous men. The decline of the British empire, especially when compared with the vigour of America, was used to corroborate this view.

On the other hand, proponents of greater freedom for women also used arguments drawn from the work of Darwin to substantiate their claims. They defended a less restricted, physically active style of living for women on the grounds that strong, healthy women were more likely to give birth to fitter babies. As Sally Ledger points out, a 'good deal of feminist argument, in common with

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<sup>40</sup> Ardis, *New Women, New Novels*, pp. 205-8.

<sup>41</sup> It is surprising that *Diana of the Crossways* is included in New Woman writing by some critics when *The Egoist* is not, as the latter severely criticises both male and female acceptance of traditional marriage arrangements and its main female character, Clara Middleton, displays some distinctly New Woman traits. Both novels pre-date the term 'New Woman'.

<sup>42</sup> Ledger, *The New Woman*, p. 106.

imperial discourse, was preoccupied with race preservation, racial purity and racial motherhood'.<sup>43</sup> Writers like Olive Schreiner confront Darwin on his own terms, arguing that if women were behind in the evolutionary process, it was because their development must have been recently arrested and that this would dangerously hinder the development of the whole human race.<sup>44</sup> Thomas Hardy uses a Darwinian argument in *Jude the Obscure* to demonstrate that neither society nor humans individually had progressed to a stage where independently-minded people could survive: Sue Bridehead immolates herself and Jude and his children die, whilst the only survivor is the pig-like Arabella who thrives by thoroughly exploiting her existing environment.

Twentieth-century feminist criticism also remains divided about the status of New Woman literature. Elaine Showalter initially claimed that the new women only had one story to tell and exhausted themselves in the telling of it, although she revises this opinion in *Daughters of Decadence* and in the expanded 1999 edition of *A Literature of Their Own*.<sup>45</sup> Patricia Stubbs argues that New Woman writers put too much emphasis on personal and sexual entanglements and that they were unaware of the limitations of the vote and oblivious to the part played by the family and its ideology in perpetuating women's oppression.<sup>46</sup> Ann Ardis labels the comments of Showalter and Stubbs as condescending and dismissive, although she defends them on the grounds that the marginality of feminism in the 1970s, together with the dominance of the Modernist aesthetic, forced feminists to endorse traditional standards of literary value in order to persuade academe to take women's literature seriously, with the result that they devalued the impact of New Woman writers.<sup>47</sup> In response, Showalter accuses Ardis of abandoning rigorous tests of aesthetic judgement and literary quality in respect of women's

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<sup>43</sup> Ledger, *The New Woman*, p. 64.

<sup>44</sup> Ledger, *The New Woman*, p. 24.

<sup>45</sup> Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p. 215, her 'Introduction' to the expanded edition of *A Literature of Their Own*, pp. xxvii-xxxii and the 'Introduction' to her collection of feminist short stories entitled *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the Fin de Siècle*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1993, pp. vii-xi.

<sup>46</sup> Patricia Stubbs, *Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel 1880-1890*, Harvester, Sussex, 1979, pp. xiii and 128.

<sup>47</sup> Ardis, *New Women, New Novels*, pp. 6-8.

writing.<sup>48</sup> Rita Kranidis takes a stronger line and criticises Showalter for classifying late nineteenth-century feminists as somehow pre-self-discovery and for complicity in an aesthetic tradition which privileges non-partisan and apolitical literature.<sup>49</sup> Gerd Bjørhovde also attacks Showalter for sidelining women writers of the 1890s through generalisation, by taking an ahistorical approach and through her dismissive attitude to non-realist texts.<sup>50</sup> Sally Ledger maintains simply that the naming of a 'New Woman' discourse was a triumph as it distinguished a voice against the dominant discourse.<sup>51</sup>

A common criticism of the new women is that they did not combine to form a movement in the modern sense of the term. One of the reasons for this is that they did not all share the same concerns. Sarah Grand, for example, believed in the sanctity of motherhood and sexual purity on the part of woman and condemned the double standard of society which did not insist on the same purity for men. In *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894), Mona Caird makes a strong attack on motherhood, blaming mothers for the oppression of their own daughters. George Egerton emphasises female sexuality. Olive Schreiner describes a society that undervalues female intelligence and, like Hardy, demonstrates the futility of efforts to achieve change in the short term. Mary Cholmondeley portrays the repression of an intelligent woman surrounded by her intellectual inferiors in *Red Pottage* (1899). Gallia, in M<sup>é</sup>nie Muriel Dowie's novel of the same name, chooses her husband on the basis of his physical suitability as a prospective father, despite knowing that he had been in love with another woman whilst simultaneously keeping a mistress and despite her own love for another man.

What the New Woman writers had in common was a strong scepticism toward the institution of marriage. Schreiner's Lyndall in *The Story of an African Farm* refuses to marry her lover as does Herminia Barton in Allen's *The Woman Who Did*. Celia in George Moore's *A Drama in Muslin* (1886) prefers the convent to marriage. Marriages in Grand's *The Heavenly Twins* and *The Beth Book* are generally unhappy or unsatisfying, as they are in Gissing's *In the Year of the*

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<sup>48</sup> Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p. xxvi-xxvii.

<sup>49</sup> Kranidis, *Subversive Discourse*, p. 59.

<sup>50</sup> Bjørhovde, *Rebellious Structures*, p. 10.

<sup>51</sup> Ledger, *The New Woman*, p. 10.



*Jubilee* and *The Odd Women* and in the cases of Hadria in *The Daughters of Danaus*, Diana and Emma in *Diana of the Crossways* and Sue Bridehead in *Jude the Obscure*. Marriage is immaterial to George Egerton's depictions of female sexuality in *Keynotes* (1893), whilst several of the short stories in her *Discords* (1894) reveal extreme unhappiness in marriage.

Jane Miller argues that the new fiction of the 1880s and 1890s broke with novelistic tradition, previously concerned primarily with courtship, and attempted to demonstrate the problems of the institution of marriage through a married heroine's experiences. Acknowledging that it was only partially successful in challenging narrative conventions concerning marriage and narrative closure, Miller nevertheless concludes that 'the new fiction of the 1890s marked an important shift in the relationship of the idea and ideal of marriage to the form of the novel'.<sup>52</sup>

Although New Woman discourse virtually disappeared from the popular newspapers and journals after the Oscar Wilde scandal, the figure of the New Woman remained present through the turn of the century in novels like Sarah Grand's *The Beth Book* and May Sinclair's *The Creators*. A similar figure is discernible in some of the characters of E. M. Forster, Helen in *Howards End*, for example, and in several of the women in D. H. Lawrence's early works, such as Clara in *Sons and Lovers*. Sometimes the New Woman became a suffragist or suffragette, as in the cases of H. G. Wells's *Ann Veronica* and Vida Levering in Elizabeth Robins' *The Convert*. In 1911 two novels were published which had the suffrage movement as their focus: these were *No Surrender* by Constance Maud and *Suffragette Sally* by Gertrude Colmore.<sup>53</sup>

## II: CORELLI AND THE NEW WOMAN

Marie Corelli's participation in the New Woman debate was inevitable given the appeal to popular sentiment upon which her writing is based. That she was outwardly hostile toward the New Woman is evident from *The Sorrows of Satan*, published in 1895, the year of the Oscar Wilde trials and at the peak of the New Woman debate. As Peter Keating points out, 'the challenge to sexual morality posed by the "new woman" novel – is . . . virulently attacked by Corelli

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<sup>52</sup> Miller, *Rebel Women*, p. 45.

<sup>53</sup> Miller, *Rebel Women*, p. 144.

in *The Sorrows of Satan*'.<sup>54</sup> In this novel, Corelli merges her aversions to the New Woman, to decadence and to the marriage market in the figure of Sibyl, the beautiful and aristocratic woman who marries Geoffrey Tempest, the millionaire narrator of the tale, for his money. Sibyl admits: 'I cannot feel. I am one of your modern women – I can only think – and analyse'.<sup>55</sup> Corelli uses her character to exaggerate and deride New Woman fiction:

Books that go into the details of the lives of outcasts? – that explain and analyse the secret vices of men? – that advocate almost as a sacred duty 'free love' and universal polygamy? – that see no shame in introducing into the circles of good wives and pure-minded girls, a heroine who boldly seeks out a man, *any* man, in order that she may have a child by him, without the 'degradation' of marrying him? I have read all those books – and what can you expect of me? Not innocence, surely. (SS 162)

In the same conversation, Sibyl refers to 'these "new women" days' where an education for the role of wife is to be found in 'newspapers, magazines, and "decadent" novels' and she attributes her opinion to the 'bit of Ibsenism, or whatever other ism affects me' (SS 164-5). Like the conservatives and anti-feminists, Corelli held European writers, particularly Ibsen and Zola, to be responsible for the trend of 'new realism' in British literature which dealt with hitherto unspeakable topics like unhappy marriages and venereal diseases. Significantly, George Egerton was greatly influenced by the Norwegian naturalists, including Knut Hamsun, and several of her short stories are set in Norway where she lived for a time. It is perhaps equally significant, in a perverse kind of way, that Corelli's *Thelma* is about an innocent Norwegian girl married to a sophisticated English aristocrat who takes her to London and allows her to be surrounded by so much sexual innuendo and appearances of infidelity that she leaves him to return to the purity of her remote homeland.

In *The Sorrows of Satan*, Corelli deliberately juxtaposes New Woman writers and her own public persona, embodied in the popular author Mavis Clare. As Tempest and Rimânez – the figure of Satan in the novel – prepare to visit

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<sup>54</sup> Peter Keating in the introduction to Marie Corelli's *The Sorrows of Satan*, 1895; rpt: Oxford World's Classics, Oxford, 1998, p. xix.

<sup>55</sup> Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. 161. Ensuing references to this novel will be abbreviated and given in parentheses in the text.

Mavis, their discussion turns upon literary women, described by Tempest as ‘unsexed’. Rimânez makes Corelli’s point bluntly:

You are thinking of the ‘New’ women I suppose – but you flatter them – they never had any sex to lose. The self-degrading creatures who delineate their fictional heroines as wallowing in unchastity, and who write freely on subjects which men would hesitate to name, are unnatural hybrids of no-sex. (SS 178)

Corelli is using the degeneration argument to push her view: masculine women and effeminate men are ‘unnatural’ and threaten the continuance of the human race.

Corelli also ridicules the traditional stereotype of the woman writer and she uses Rimânez to compare satirically the diminutive, white-clad, fair-haired Mavis to ‘the dyspeptic, sour, savage old blue-stocking’ (SS 179). The contrast is made again between Mavis and ‘unsexed females’ and ‘repulsive bluestockings’ during the men’s visit to the writer, and once more shortly after when they discuss how unlike is Mavis to ‘the accepted ideal of the female novelist . . . an elderly, dowdy, spectacled, frowsy fright’ (SS 185,194).

Sally Ledger argues that Corelli conflates the New Woman and the decadent, describing Sibyl Elton in *The Sorrows of Satan* as a ‘vampiric figure’ with an ‘enormous sexual appetite’ who blames New Woman fiction and the poetry of Swinburne for her own moral corruption.<sup>56</sup> However, as with everything else about Marie Corelli, her status as critic of the New Woman is ambivalent. Ledger fails to mention that in the suicide letter which holds Swinburne and ‘a few of the most praised novelists of the day’ responsible for her moral degeneration, Sibyl also blames negligent and mercenary parents, vulgar servants, a morally dysfunctional aristocracy and above all, the marriage market, for not having given her proper guidance in the first place (SS 319-30). Moreover, Sybil expresses her own, as well as Corelli’s, aversion to decadence, when she recollects a French perfume seller: ‘the well-dressed doll of a man who served me, with his little waxed moustache’ (SS 335). Paradoxically, early in her career

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<sup>56</sup> Ledger, *The New Woman*, p. 102.

Corelli was flattered by Swinburne and was pleased to receive compliments from Wilde.<sup>57</sup>

The other aspect of the New Woman – that is, the embodiment, as opposed to the writer, of unnatural things – is also the object of Corelli’s criticism through the words of Rimânez when he refers to modern girls not as women, but as the ‘tomboy tennis-players and giantesses of the era . . . the unnatural and strutting embryos of a new sex which will be neither male nor female’ (SS 66). Corelli was contradictory, however, and her 1889 novella *My Wonderful Wife!: A Study in Smoke*, although intended as a satirical polemic, is a surprisingly understanding depiction of the populist view of the New Woman, notwithstanding the fact that it was written three years before Ouida coined the term and six years prior to *The Sorrows of Satan*.

Although critical of the figure of the New Woman, Marie Corelli in fact shared many of the concerns of the ‘feminist’ writers. Like Sarah Grand, she believed that both men and women should maintain sexual purity. Like Mona Caird, she blamed mothers for the repressive way in which girls were brought up. With Olive Schreiner she believed that intelligent women were the intellectual equals of men and had a valuable contribution to make to social discourse. In common with all New Woman writers, Corelli abhorred the system that brought young women ‘out’ into society to be paraded as future wives in marriages that were negotiated on the basis of financial gain. The ambivalent figure of Honoria in *My Wonderful Wife* embodies Corelli’s own fractured attitude toward feminism in the form of the New Woman.

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<sup>57</sup> Vyver, *Memoirs of Marie Corelli*, p. 52 and Brian Masters, *Now Barabbas was a Rotter: The Extraordinary Life of Marie Corelli*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1978, p. 74. In her early career as an *improvatrice*, Corelli was pleased when Swinburne gave her two of his poems to set to music.

## CHAPTER TEN: *MY WONDERFUL WIFE: A STUDY IN SMOKE*

### I: PLOT, CHARACTERISATION AND NARRATIVE VOICE

Narrated from the husband's point of view, *My Wonderful Wife!: A Study in Smoke* is the tale of an ineffectual middle-aged man who marries an attractive young woman only to discover that she smokes cigars, hunts with male friends, wears men's clothes, dislikes her own child and, finally, enters the most public sphere of the platform speaker, resulting in the irrevocable breakdown of the marriage. The two main characters of *My Wonderful Wife* are the narrator, William Hatwell-Tribkin, and his wife Honoria. Throughout the novella these are contrasted with Honoria's sister, Georgie, and her fiancé, the Earl of Richmoor. Richmoor is rich indeed and a gentleman in all that he should be, but Georgie ironically belies her masculine name and represents the Victorian ideal feminine:

She had beautiful eyes – not so beautiful in colour as in their dreamy expression of tenderness; she had a sweet, soft, kissable face, a charming fairy-like figure, and a very gentle, yet fascinating, manner . . . the very picture of sweet maidenhood and modesty in her pretty white cotton gown, with a 'fetching' little bunch of pansies and mignonette carelessly slipped into her waistband . . . a refreshing glimpse of womanhood.<sup>58</sup>

Georgie is the angel in the house and Richmoor the perfect husband – wealthy, well-connected, considerate and loving. Hatwell-Tribkin is intended to represent the reasonable male and Honoria the ugly, masculine side of the New Woman in all her modernity.

Corelli does not achieve the stark contrast she aims for in her portrayal of the two couples. Hatwell-Tribkin is weak and easily-influenced, inclined but unable to play the tyrant, hysterical and old-fashioned and, although initially despising Georgie as 'a timid little morsel of a woman', he soon comes to feel more comfortable in the company of his sister-in-law than he does with his wife (*WW* 12). Speaking of her sister's engagement, Honoria informs her husband that

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<sup>58</sup> Marie Corelli, *My Wonderful Wife! A Study In Smoke*, 1889; rpt: with *Vendetta! The Story of One Forgotten*, International Book Company, New York, n. d., pp. 28, 49 and 51. Ensuing references will be abbreviated and given in parentheses in the text.

Richmoor ‘might have had *me*’ had he cared to ask, raising the question of why the level-headed Honoria decided in the first place to marry the unsuitable Hatwell-Tribkin and whether she is any less unhappy than her husband with their marriage (*WW* 28). Moreover, Hatwell-Tribkin overhears Richmoor admitting that he had initially been half inclined to fall in love with Honoria (*WW* 35). There is, therefore, an underlying suggestion that Honoria and Richmoor, and Georgie and Hatwell-Tribkin, might have been better suited to each other and this serves to undermine the author’s criticism of Honoria. Corelli also seems to be questioning the validity of the notion of ‘falling in love’, although the issue is not pursued in the novella.

Hatwell-Tribkin is as his name implies; a ‘small, mild, rather nervous man’, a sycophant, a ‘spooney’ fellow, ‘a soft-hearted booby’ and ‘a timid man and a patient one’ (*WW* 3, 9, 11, 64, 65). He ascribes his attraction to Honoria to the work of spiritualists, astral influences or hypnotism (*WW* 5). He tends to whine, for example when he describes his own wedding:

It was a pretty wedding, people said. It may have been. I know nobody looked at or thought of *me*. I was the least part of the ceremony – the bride was everything; the bride always *is* everything. And yet the bridegroom is an absolute necessity; he is wanted, is he not? The affair would not go on well without him? Then *why* is he, as a rule, so obstinately ignored and despised by his friends and relatives at his own wedding? (*WW* 6)

He is an idealist and a romantic but unable to control the pitch of his voice, cannot govern his temper, laughs and almost cries hysterically, and thus is inadequate as a figure of masculinity and lacking in authority as a narrator. He quails before Honoria and never wins an argument with her nor in the slightest degree prevails upon her to accede to his wishes. She is good-naturedly oblivious to his pleas that she behave in a womanly fashion and his attempts to impress his authority upon her are risible: Honoria honestly laughs at her husband’s efforts to impose his ideals of domestic bliss upon her and Hatwell-Tribkin usually retires in fits of hysterics from arguments with his wife. Even Honoria’s mother, a weak and sickly woman, proves to be stronger than her son-in-law (*WW* 43-51).

Honoria is Corelli’s version of the New Woman. Like her friend, Mrs Stirling, she

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dresses as nearly like a man as is compatible with the present *convenances*; cuts her hair quite short, wears shirtfronts and men's ties, shoots, bags her game, goes after salmon . . . rides a tricycle, has a perfect mania for fox-hunting (always in at the death), and *smokes*. (*WW* 36)

Honorina is matter-of-fact, straight-forward and unsentimental. She discovers that she and her baby son are unsuited to each other, she has no interest in domestic affairs and she finds quiet evenings and seaside holidays insufferably dull. Her companions are a bunch of sporting 'boys' with whom she goes hunting and to the theatre; she has no sexuality whatsoever. Being married to Honorina, in the approving words of the wife in George Egerton's shocking New Woman short story 'A Cross Line', is 'like chumming with a chap'.<sup>59</sup> On their wedding evening, Honorina asks her husband 'let's be chummy': a suggestion which Corelli clearly intends to be offensive (*WW* 10). Honorina emerges victorious from every disagreement with Hatwell-Tribkin because of her masculine affability, reasonableness and refusal to become angry; she attributes his remonstrances against her behaviour to his suffering from toothache or indigestion or inebriation and it is she who decides to trial a separation. The marriage breaks down irremediably when she undertakes a successful lecture tour speaking 'On the Advisability of Men's Apparel for Women', dressed 'precisely like a man' (*WW* 66). Nonetheless, Honorina remains honourable and wonderful.

Although highly critical of Honorina and the New Woman, Corelli misplaces her hostility toward her characters. The supine husband is as unattractive to the author as he is to a woman like Honorina. Moreover, despite her faults, Honorina is admirable. Richmoor describes her as 'a handsome creature, wonderfully clever and spirited . . . a *good* woman . . . Never plays a double game – couldn't be false if she tried' (*WW* 35). The narrator also concedes that his wife has a sense of humour, is 'a bright woman, a clever woman, handsome, good-tempered, and cheerful as the day, never ill, never dull, never cross', she is clever, she is brilliant, she is daring, she is 'as honest and true as steel' and, above all, she is wonderful (*WW* 13-14, 17, 76, 34; 3, 42, 47; 76-7). Corelli's own belief in the intellectual power of women precludes her from creating Honorina as a lesser creature than her husband.

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<sup>59</sup> George Egerton, 'A Cross Line' in *Keynotes*, 1893; rpt: *Keynotes & Discords*, Virago, London, 1983, p. 17.

Honorina is, nevertheless, a flawed character. She is boisterous and unromantic, has no maternal feelings and is totally insensitive to the causes of her husband's unhappiness – yet these flaws are merely the products of Corelli's imprecise creation of her as a stereotypical New Woman. More importantly, it seems that Corelli unconsciously invests Honorina with many of the personality traits which the author herself lacks and, although these are presented as faults, in fact they combine to give Honorina a depth of characterisation absent from any other Corelli heroine. Thus Honorina suffers from no self-delusion or conceit, has no pretensions and is not envious, is truly concerned for her husband's welfare and has the ability to laugh wholeheartedly at herself and at her literary and platform ambitions. She is sincerely baffled by Hatwell-Tribkin's hysterical outbursts and hilarious when she attempts to locate their origins in toothache, headache, indigestion or drunkenness (*WW* 21). In contrast, Corelli's other heroines – Mavis Clare, for example – are as wooden as their author in their attempts at humour. The spectacle of Mavis's pet doves, named after the magazines which criticised her, is as ponderous as their owner's conversation is pretentious.<sup>60</sup> The idealised Morgana of *The Secret Power* is awkward in her humour and heavy-handed in her satire.<sup>61</sup>

Despite her own ideals, Corelli admires Honorina and this engenders in the reader of *My Wonderful Wife* a corresponding respect for the character. Corelli aims to be severely satirical in this work, but her ambivalence toward her characters and her inability to write with subtlety or irony combine against her to produce a narrative which presents Honorina, although grotesquely exaggerated, as credible and likeable. Moreover, Corelli invests Honorina with loyalty, sincerity and courage: three of Corelli's own greatest attributes.

On the other hand, Corelli's insistence on frequent authorial intrusion fragments the voice of her narrator. Hatwell-Tribkin is intended to be a figure of satire, yet at times, such as when he discusses the role of the woman writer, his opinions are clearly Corelli's. The resultant blurring of the distinction between author and satirised narrator undermines Corelli's attempts at caricature and casts doubt on her own views. *My Wonderful Wife* is therefore unnecessarily complex

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<sup>60</sup> See, for example, *The Sorrows of Satan*, pp. 181-93.

<sup>61</sup> See, for example, the exchange between Roger Seaton and Morgana in the desert in Corelli's *The Secret Power*, Methuen, London, 1921, pp. 14-25.



and in all respects ambiguous, continually raising the question of whether Corelli is in control of the implications of her own work.

## II: GENRE

New Woman writers like George Egerton and Olive Schreiner experimented with different forms of fiction. Corelli, too, abandons her preferred form, the novel, when she writes about the New Woman. Egerton's work is characterised by its use of vignettes, ellipses and fantasy sequences and it is significant that Corelli likewise constructs this New Woman novella as a series of inconclusive scenes, depicting the narrator's encounters with his wife or with others who reflect her behaviour.

Jane Miller discusses the place of marriage in New Woman and Edwardian fiction, pointing out that the new women writers were the first to challenge the novelistic convention of the courtship narrative when they put marriage at the beginning instead of at the end of the novel. Miller argues this not only prevents satisfactory closure of the narrative, but highlights the institution of marriage itself as the problem, rather than the defects of individual characters.<sup>62</sup> Corelli follows this New Woman trend in *My Wonderful Wife*, which abbreviates the traditional courtship narrative and effectively commences after the marriage has taken place. The New Woman nature of the novella is further emphasised by the presence of marriage at the centre of most of the conversations between husband and wife and between Hatwell-Tribkin and other characters, such as Honoria's mother and the Earl of Richmoor. The novella's focus is encapsulated in its reference to the *Daily Telegraph* discussion 'Is Marriage a Failure?', which, in the narrator's view, was 'attended by masses of correspondence from strong-minded ladies and woeful-spirited men' (*WW* 29).<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Miller, *Rebel Women*, pp. 44-5.

<sup>63</sup> It was Mona Caird, the radical New Woman writer, who contributed the provocative 'Is Marriage a Failure?' series to the *Daily Telegraph* – see Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, p. 39. Corelli would have been aware of Caird's reputation as a female activist and, in this context, her aversion to 'strong-minded women' is relevant – see N. N. Feltes, *Literary Capital and the Late Victorian Novel*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1993, p. 121, regarding Corelli's distinction between a 'literary woman' and a 'strong-minded woman'.

Corelli certainly examines the institution of marriage in *My Wonderful Wife*, but she is unable to produce the clever dialogue needed for her characters to explore why they married each other. Furthermore, the characterisation of Honoria as masculine and of Hatwell-Tribkin as feminine is insufficiently flexible to demonstrate the causes of the couple's mutual dissatisfaction. Corelli is incapable of creating subtle circumstances which permit discussion of marriage as an institution; the situations she describes are grotesque and the dialogue between the characters over-written and melodramatic.

Corelli's inability to sustain the satire of *My Wonderful Wife* is only partly due to her lack of a sense of humour. More importantly, she is caught on the horns of a dilemma: she believes that the way in which society arranges marriage is wrong and she knows that the idealised Victorian marriage, if such exists, is no longer satisfying for many women, but she is unable to abandon her commitment to the romanticised gender roles which she tries to exemplify in Georgie and Richmoor. Her indecision is evident through the initial attraction between Honoria and Richmoor, the weakness of the characters of Georgie and Hatwell-Tribkin and the ultimate triumph of Honoria. Corelli's awareness of the unsatisfactory nature of contemporary marriage becomes fully evident later in *The Sorrows of Satan*, where, through the words of Sibyl, she comments: 'you have only to read the 'new' fiction . . . to be assured that your ideas of domestic virtue are quite out of date' (SS 297). Corelli and the New Woman writers had a shared understanding of the inadequacy of marriage for many women and, consequently, they also shared the difficulties of finding a satisfactory solution for the problems encountered by the feminist characters of their narratives.

Corelli overcomes this difficulty. At the end of *My Wonderful Wife*, Honoria enjoys celebrity status whilst her husband, no longer able to enjoy even a cigar, is forced to acknowledge that, wonderful though his wife is, he cannot live with her. Corelli intends to portray Honoria's failure *as a woman*, yet the reader concludes that the character is in fact a most successful new type of woman. Throughout the novella, Corelli tries to offer Georgie as the ideal wife in contrast to the defective Honoria, but the narrative closes with an unconvincing contrast between the 'womanly woman who knows how to make her husband perfectly happy' and Honoria, famous in several continents and still considered wonderful. The closure of *My Wonderful Wife* defies the convention of New Woman writing:

unlike her fictional type, Honoria finds a rewarding place in society as a career woman.

As the title indicates, Corelli intends *My Wonderful Wife: A Study in Smoke* to be a satire, attacking modern fiction, society life, newspapers and periodicals, the institution of marriage and, of course, the New Woman and smoking. Possibly she is also criticising decadence, in the person of her narrator, Hatwell-Tribkin, although he does not conform to the decadent stereotype nor to the Swinburne-type figure with which Corelli inevitably associates decadence. Corelli's volubility and inability to discriminate disrupt her intentions. One glaring instance of this occurs when the narrator interrupts his own monologue regarding the womanly woman to complain at some length, inconsequentially, about society's alleged tendency to grin: 'We might as well be death's-heads at once and have done with it. We shall be some day; but I fancy we are rather anticipating the pleasure!', he cries (*WW* 39). The reader is similarly disconcerted when Honoria's mother comments on tea 'which isn't half so good now it gets advertised on the walls so much' in the middle of a scene designed to contrast Georgie's motherliness with Honoria's lack of maternal instinct (*WW* 47-51). Corelli is incapable of allowing her narrator to stand alone; she must use him to air her own prejudices. This dilutes the strength and individuality of her character and blurs the distinction between the objects of her satire: Hatwell-Tribkin becomes more ridiculous than his wife.

Corelli's lack of subtlety and wit are apparent in over-written scenes and through repetition. A typical instance is that in which Hatwell-Tribkin, on the way to his office following an altercation with Honoria, encounters one of his wife's young male friends and discovers that she plans to go for the seasonal grouse-shooting with her regular sporting companions. It had been his intention to take her and the baby to the seaside for a quiet family holiday. After the narrator and the 'boy' separate, Hatwell-Tribkin complains:

I watched him dash over a crossing under the very nose of a plunging cab-horse and disappear on the opposite side. He was a fish, I declared to myself – a fish, not a man! Scrape his gills and cook him for dinner, I muttered, deliriously, as I went along – scrape his gills and cook him for dinner! (*WW* 27)

The characterisation of the narrator is so overdrawn that it fails as an ironic critique of Honoria. This is particularly evident on the occasion when, finding himself incapable of influencing his wife, Hatwell-Tribkin turns to his

mother-in-law for help. The narrator's own ineptitude, selfishness and wounded pride emerge more clearly than the alleged failures of the woman of whom he is complaining:

‘As a wife she’s out of her element; as a mother she’s still further out of her element. A smoking, betting, crack shot is scarcely the person to undertake the commonplace care of an infant; a notable female deer-stalker is not precisely suited to the *degradation*’ (and I emphasised the word bitterly) ‘of marriage. In fact, it is because I feel the position of affairs as so extremely serious – serious even to the degree of possible mutual separation – that I have come to *you*, Mrs. Maggs, to ask you to speak to Honoria quietly, to reason with her, and point out how little her behaviour conduces to my happiness’. (*WW* 46)

Mrs Maggs only cries and informs her son-in-law that she could never control Honoria and yet she emerges from the encounter victorious in her defence of her daughter as clever, always laughing and simply the most wonderful woman.

Corelli's heavy-handed style also undermines her intention to satirise Honoria. Her deliberate overuse of the adjective ‘wonderful’ provides the perfect example. Applied constantly to describe Hatwell-Tribkin's wife, clearly Corelli means this as a sarcastic epithet, but, despite its tedious repetition, the word continues to have a positive resonance. Honoria *is* honourable, and she is a good sportswoman, an accomplished figure in society, an intelligent and humorous partner, a successful writer and a sufficiently good platform speaker to earn her living. Beside these achievements, her failure to be a good wife and mother seems insignificant, particularly as she freely admits that she finds nothing in Victorian domestic life to present her with intellectual or physical challenges (*WW* 56). Honoria is a character who cannot be demonised, no matter how crude her caricature. This highlights the ambivalence of Corelli's attitude toward female activists, as it seems that her intention to castigate the New Woman figure is subverted by her own sympathy for women and she is forced instead into reluctant admiration of her heroine. As the narrator is unable to stand up to either his wife or his author, Honoria emerges as the most powerful figure of *My Wonderful Wife*: more powerful even than her creator.

The most persuasive rhetoric is given to Honoria and several pages toward the end of *My Wonderful Wife* are dedicated to a summary of and excerpts from her address ‘On the Advisability of Men's Apparel for Woman’ (*WW* 67-73). Honoria's lecture is reasonable and her delivery, for the most part, calm and

dignified despite considerable heckling and the reader is convinced that she has a promising and worthwhile career in front of her, although all that Hatwell-Tribkin is able to comprehend are some ill-mannered jests which provoke him to an indulgence in self-pity. It is clear that he will not be able to bring up his child but will spend the rest of his life dependent upon his mother-in-law and sister-in-law. Although Corelli despised rational dress for women, she cannot bring herself to make Honoria appear foolish. Indeed, Honoria sounds not dissimilar to Corelli herself in the 'Author's Prologue' to *The Life Everlasting* when she claims:

I am very glad, ladies and gentlemen, that I have provoked you to laughter – very glad, as this behaviour on your part convinces me more than ever of the value of my theory! All great ideas have been first laughed at ever since the world began. The notion of steam as a motive power was laughed at; the Atlantic cable-wire was laughed at; and naturally the proposition of men's clothing for women must, like all other reforming propositions, be at the outset laughed to scorn also. But nevertheless it will take root – it *is* taking root – and it will win its way in spite of all opposition. (*WW* 70-1)

### III: THE WOMAN QUESTION IN *MY WONDERFUL WIFE*

On the woman question, Corelli also gives the most convincing lines to Honoria:

we are no longer the drudges, housekeepers, general servants, and nurses that adorned that by-gone age of darkness! We are the equals of man. What he can do, we can do as well, and often better; we are his companions now, not his slaves . . . Fancy! I should have been shut up nearly all day in the house, with a huge apron on, sorting jams and pickles, and counting over the sheets and pillow-cases like a silly old noodle. (*WW* 13)

Corelli herself left sorting jams and counting linen to her companion, Bertha Vyver. The narrator's response to his wife, through which Corelli defends the traditional Victorian woman's role, has none of Honoria's enthusiasm and rings hollow as a criticism of assertive women, although it does give weight to the argument that Corelli believed that women were best suited to the role of power behind the throne:

It is surely no disgrace to a woman to be womanly; her weakness is stronger than all strength; her mildness checks anger and engenders peace. In her right position, she is the saving-grace of men; her virtues make them ashamed of their vices, her simplicity disarms their cunning, her faith and truth inspire them with the highest, noblest good. (*WW* 30)

Like Olive Schreiner, Honoria does not accept the Darwinistic argument from nature but turns it on its head, presciently describing herself as ‘a fair specimen of the woman of the future’ (*WW* 31). In response, the narrator displays Corelli’s own lack of subtlety as he questions whether such women of the future expect to fight battles and naval engagements, lay railways, build bridges, construct canals, break stones for roadworks, drive cabs and omnibuses, dig wells and put up telegraph wires, or to become stokers and porters. He settles the matter to his own satisfaction – and presumably to Corelli’s – by stating that woman is both man’s inferior and his superior, a complex and beautiful problem which the best men prefer to keep ‘mysterious and forever sanctified, and shut out from the vulgar gaze of the curious crowd’ (*WW* 32-3). The narrator’s preference for his wife to remain in the private sphere recalls Corelli’s tactics for preserving her own enigmatic identity from the vulgar gaze of inopportune photographers.

The reader of *My Wonderful Wife* is constantly confronted with Corelli’s ambivalence toward feminism. Echoing the sentiments of the social purity movements, Honoria completely rejects her husband’s view of the relations between the sexes, expressing ideas like those of Sarah Grand in *Ideala* (1888), *The Heavenly Twins* and *The Beth Book* and of Olive Schreiner in *The Story of an African Farm*:

Don’t talk of your sex, my dear boy, as though they were all romantic knights-errant of the olden times, because they’re not! They’re nasty fellows, most of them, and if women are nasty too, why then they help to make them so! Look at them! Talk of smoke, why, they’re always smoking – dirty pipes, too, full of beastly tobacco – cheap tobacco; and as for their admiration of all those womanly qualities you describe, they don’t care a bit for them! They’ll run after a ballet-dancer much more readily than they’ll say a civil word to a lady, and they’ll crowd round a woman whose name has been bandied about in a horrid divorce case, and neglect the good girl who has never made herself notorious. (*WW* 33)

Corelli also cannot help but give Honoria the lines in which the author expresses her own view of the intellectual power of women:

You want me – *me* – to be a docile, thank-you-for-nothing-humble-servant-yours-faithfully sort of woman, dragging about the house with a child pulling at her skirts and worrying her all day long; you want to play the male tyrant and oppressor, don’t you? but you *won’t!* not with *me*, at any rate! You’ve got a free woman in me, *I* tell you, not a sixteenth-century slave! My constitution is as good as yours; my brain is several degrees better; I’m capable of making a brilliant career for myself in

any profession I choose to follow, and you are and always will be a mere useful nonentity (*WW* 56-7).

Honorio's words are exaggerated and clumsy, but there is no doubting her sincerity. As Corelli was to argue strongly in later novels and essays for the intellectual equality of men and women, it is impossible for the reader to interpret Honorio as criticism of the power of women's minds.

Corelli and the New Woman writers not only agreed about the immorality of the double standard applying to relations between the sexes, they were also united in believing that married women should have a degree of independence. They were in complete unison in their opposition to the way young women were brought up in ignorance and placed on the 'marriage market'. The difference between Corelli and the New Woman writers was that, whilst many of the latter would have abandoned marriage altogether, Corelli believed that the institution should be raised to a higher plane where spiritual affinity replaced economic compatibility or animal passion as the basis of the union. Paradoxically, however, Sarah Grand, arguably the most notorious of the New Woman authors, and the radical feminist Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy also believed that marriage should be based on the spiritual and intellectual affinity of the partners.

Honorio, like many of the heroines of New Woman fiction, believes 'The institution of marriage is itself a mistake . . . it ties a man to a woman, and a woman to a man, for the rest of their mortal lives, regardless of future consequences. And it doesn't work' (*WW* 29). Corelli believed that marriage was a divine sacrament and that men and women had their predestined partners throughout a series of reincarnations, but she was unable to fulfil her intention of severely criticising the New Woman's attitude, inherently recognising that, in many cases, marriage in Victorian society offered women only humiliation and repression. Corelli is forced to accept that there is much more to the New Woman than smoking and wearing men's clothes, and *My Wonderful Wife* demonstrates that although the author cannot approve the outward appearances and behaviour of radical feminists, she finds it impossible to disagree with many of their arguments.

#### **IV: GENDER INVERSION IN *MY WONDERFUL WIFE***

As Elaine Showalter points out, the *fin de siècle* marked a crisis of identity for both men and women. Questions were asked about what constituted

‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’.<sup>64</sup> In their exploration of the question of sexuality, many New Woman writers invert gender, as does Corelli in *My Wonderful Wife*, in order to investigate whether gender differences actually exist or whether they are social constructions. In *The Heavenly Twins*, Sarah Grand makes Angelica the stronger and more intelligent of the twins, although Diavolo is naturally given the education and career to which his sister is more suited. The married Angelica dresses as a choirboy and has a curious relationship with a character known only as ‘the Tenor’ – a relationship which raises the issue of homosexuality and questions the basis of heterosexuality. Mérie Muriel Dowie in her novel *Gallia* (1895) also questions assumptions of gender difference by making her heroine much stronger than the man she loves and the one whom she marries.

Olive Schreiner also examines the definitions of gender in *The Story of an African Farm*, not only through the protests of Lyndall about the limited opportunities available for intelligent women, but more subtly through the naming of the cross-dressing Geoffrey Rose who disguises himself as a nurse in order to care for the dying Lyndall. Rose is a quiet man and smooth-skinned and he displays more womanly – in the Victorian sense – traits than any of the other female characters in the novel, with the possible exception of Em. Other characters in this novel are also ambiguous: Waldo and his father are powerless, although they are male, but Tant’ Sannie, gross as she is, uses the predatory tactics of a hunting animal to assure herself of a life of ease.

George Egerton uses gender inversion to explore the nature of female sexuality. The wife depicted in ‘A Cross Line’ in *Keynotes* loves the outdoors and angling, she smokes, has a horror of procreation, is not interested in her husband’s past sexual affairs and is shown to initiate the sexual encounter which leads to her pregnancy. Her husband is portrayed as constantly around the home, growing and nurturing gardens and animals, preparing food and, whilst generally caring for his wife, exhibiting a total lack of comprehension of her psychological needs. The conflict within the New Woman between the pressures of tradition and her own desire for freedom is often characterised or caricatured as neurosis. Sue Bridehead in *Jude the Obscure* is the most frequently cited example. The less well-known neurotic woman in Egerton’s ‘The Regeneration of Two’, published in *Discords*,

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<sup>64</sup> Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, pp. 8-10.



overcomes her disorder through self-assertion and productive activity and is eventually able to form a relationship of equality with the man she loves.

Gender inversion assists Corelli to demolish her own criticism of the New Woman in *My Wonderful Wife*. Honoria is given all the characteristics of a good fellow: honesty, fidelity, reason, intelligence, self-confidence, an equable disposition, respect for sportsmanship and fair play and a good sense of humour. Hatwell-Tribkin, on the contrary, blusters, rebels and resorts to womanly behaviour when his wants are not fulfilled. He is susceptible to that Victorian female malady, hysteria; his voice, he narrates, ‘took on a plaintive, almost tearful wail’ and he is afraid lest he ‘should give way to convulsions of wild laughter – laughter which really would not have been far off the verge of tears, I was so thoroughly shaken from my usual self-control’ (*WW* 22). At the end of one confrontation with Honoria he confesses: ‘I had no words wherewith to answer her, but I released my pent-up wrath by banging the street door as I went out with a violence that I freely admit was femininely pettish and unworthy of a man’ (*WW* 26). Other unpleasant encounters with his wife are described by the narrator in terms similar to the following, which clearly depicts role reversal:

we had once or twice what I should freely describe as a devil of a row. *I* got red in the face, and *she* never changed colour – *I* swore, and *she* dropped me a mocking courtesy – *I* held on to a chair to save myself from getting lifted bodily off the ground by the honest wrath of my indignation, and *she* lounged on a sofa, smoked, and grinned at me. Yes! I say *grinned!* (*WW* 42-3)

Rather than explore the social construction of gender roles, Corelli uses gender inversion in *My Wonderful Wife* to lampoon both masculinity in women and effeminacy in men. She is unsuccessful, however, and one reason is that whilst Honoria cuts quite a good masculine figure, Hatwell-Tribkin makes a most unappealing female, even in Victorian terms. Furthermore, no matter how earnestly Corelli tries to contrast the idealised Georgie and Richmoor with the caricatured Honoria and Hatwell-Tribkin, she fails, probably because, being aware of the opinions and prejudices of the middle classes, Corelli knew that no matter how much the public laughed at the smoking habits, rational dress and short hair of the New Woman, women in 1889 could not be returned to the seclusion of the private sphere. Characters like Georgie and Richmoor belong to

the idealised past of Walter Scott (*WW* 4).<sup>65</sup> Neither the woman nor the woman question could be put back in the box.

#### V: THE 'FEMINIST' AS WRITER

As well as being a sportswoman and a reluctant mother, Honoria is a novelist, although her husband labels her a fraud because, despite the fact that her friends praise her literary genius and her publisher pays well, she is 'a mere scribbler of sporting platitudes', having no interest in Byron, Shelley, Scott, Dickens or Thackeray, nor any understanding of Elizabeth Barrett and George Sand, and she sleeps through the best presentations of Shakespeare's plays (*WW* 18-19; 23-4). This attempt to contrast unfavourably the work of Honoria, a popular writer, with the writing of her own literary favourites appears to discount Corelli's own significant achievements as a successful popular novelist. In fact, Corelli is attempting to make a distinction between the 'trashy' popular novelist of the railway bookstalls and one like herself whom she perceives to be as seriously critical of contemporary society as Dickens or Thackeray.

Like Corelli, New Women writers frequently represent female independence by a writing career, for example, Diana in Meredith's *Diana of the Crossways*, Marian Yule in Gissing's *The New Grub Street* (1891), Hester in Mary Cholmondeley's *Red Pottage*, Beth in Grand's *The Beth Book*, the woman encountered by the narrator of 'The Spell of the White Elf' in Egerton's *Keynotes* and Miss du Prel in Mona Caird's *The Daughters of Danaus*. Miss du Prel is of particular interest because she, like Miss Corelli, is an independent woman living comfortably off the proceeds of her novel-writing, although Rita Kranidis claims that both are reactionary characters who write romance novels in which their heroines' struggles are rewarded by socially lucrative marriages.<sup>66</sup> Other New Women heroines are musicians, like Hadria in *The Daughters of Danaus* and Angelica in *The Beth Book*; the narrator of *A Romance of Two Worlds* is likewise

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<sup>65</sup> Tamee Bowers Livingston underrates Corelli in claiming that she 'acted as a reactionary force as she tried to restore the virtues and mores of an earlier age' – see 'Ordering Chaos: Marie Corelli and the Value of Popular Culture', unpublished M.A. thesis, Georgia Southern University, 1997, p. 9.

<sup>66</sup> Kranidis, *Subversive Discourse*, p. 87.

a musician, although elsewhere Corelli expresses doubt that women have the power to be great musicians, their purpose being to inspire rather than create.<sup>67</sup>

Whilst Corelli may not have intended to display Honoria as an example of the successful woman novelist, she did intend to use the character as a peg upon which to hang her views of women writers. In the first place, the narrator of *My Wonderful Wife* voices Corelli's opinion about the capacity of women to write and what makes their writing different from that of men:

I think that, given a woman with a keen instinct, close observation, and large sympathies, she ought to be able to produce greater masterpieces of literature than a man. But there is no necessity for her to part with her womanly gentleness because she writes. No, for it is just that subtle charm of her finer sex that should give the superiority to her work – not the stripping herself of all those delicate and sensitive qualities bestowed on her by Nature. (*WW* 19)

Sublimely unaware of her own lack of delicate and sensitive qualities, through the words of her narrator Corelli next refutes the notion that women who write books are by definition unwomanly, stating emphatically 'Never was there a greater mistake' and inserting some characteristic self-publicising: 'one of the sweetest and most womanly women I ever met is rapidly coming to the front as a most gifted and brilliant writer' (*WW* 19). It is pertinent that *My Wonderful Wife* was published in 1889 following the remarkable success of *A Romance of Two Worlds*, *Vendetta!* and *Thelma*. Popularity and genius in a writer are not mutually exclusive, according to Corelli.

Corelli also uses Hatwell-Tribkin to describe what she sees as the failings of the New Woman writers and to explain her view of the proper relationship between women and literature:

To my idea the 'mannish' woman should be altogether debarred from entering into the profession of literature, inasmuch as she can do no good whatever in it. She takes a wrong view of life; her theories are all at sixes and sevens; she mixes up her rights and privileges with those of the coarser sex till she does not know which is which; she has wilfully blunted all her finer susceptibilities, and is therefore practically useless as a thinker-out of high problems, or a consoler to her fellow-creatures. Literature of itself does not unsex a woman; its proper influence is a softening, dignifying, and ennobling one; therefore if, in that calling, a woman proves herself unwomanly in her speech, manners, and customs, you may be sure the unsexing process

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<sup>67</sup> See Marie Corelli, *Woman, or—Suffragette? A Question of National Choice*, C. Arthur Pearson, London, 1907, pp. 6-7.

was pretty well completed before she ever took up the pen.  
(*WW* 20)

Corelli's own language is hardly soft and dignified as she aims her barbs at feminist writers who suggest that there are places in the public sphere for women and when she criticises those who consider all women writers to be 'unsexed' or bluestockings. Annette Federico is sympathetic to Corelli's inconsistent view of female writers:

The Victorian publishing world was insensitive to Corelli's professed love of her fellow authors and her idealistic view of literature. The cultural stakes were high, and Corelli was forced into an attitude of unwomanly aggression . . . Corelli's scrappy temperament served her well when it came to her masculine enemies, but the competition inherent in a patriarchal and highly stratified literary market can thwart the impulse for female solidarity.<sup>68</sup>

Federico, rightfully, is suggesting that Corelli is ambivalent about what she wants for women. Certainly the author believes that women have an important role to play, other than as the inspiration for male creativity, because the strongest characters in her novels are independent women. Delicia, Innocent and Mavis are self-supporting writers, Lotys in *Temporal Power* is a leader in a revolutionary movement and a public speaker, Maryllia runs a large estate and Morgana flies an airship alone. Honoria may be satirised as a popular writer and a successful platform speaker, but Corelli herself lectured on various occasions to crowds of up to three thousand at meetings hosted by bodies like the Scottish Society of Literature and Art, the Edinburgh Philosophical Society, the Literary and Philosophical Society of Manchester and the Royal National Lifeboat Institution of Leeds.

On the other hand, Corelli did not go on lecture tours and did not charge when she spoke at meetings, although she accepted lavish gifts. She declined most opportunities to appear in public and went to great lengths to avoid the press, especially photographers. It seems that she had specific criteria by which she judged the worthiness of a public appearance: the prestige of the organisation involved; whether she could choose her topic; the sympathies of the audience – all circumstances which confirmed the image of an ultra-feminine though intellectual writer which Corelli worked so hard to create and maintain for herself. Clearly she was not opposed to the presence of women in the public sphere *per se*,

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<sup>68</sup> Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 114.

although her own public appearances were limited. Perhaps she was afraid of losing control over her own image, either because of the risk of adverse or excessive publicity or perhaps she feared that she might be ridiculed in ways which she could not defend. Honoria, the New Woman, is able stoutly to resist ridicule and refute her attackers, but Corelli cannot avail herself of the same weapons because she has placed them beyond her own reach. Her ambivalence about women in the public sphere may simply be because her lack of a self-critical faculty meant she could not see herself in the same terms in which she saw other women. On the other hand, as R. B. Kershner suggests, she may simply have possessed ‘a half-conscious genius for self-publicising’.<sup>69</sup>

Federico observes that although ‘Corelli’s views appear closer to those of the old-fashioned husband, Honoria’s feminist speeches carry surprising conviction’.<sup>70</sup> She claims:

*My Wonderful Wife* is a provocative text to study against Corelli’s notions of feminine writing, for it is written almost on the pattern of New Woman fiction, with a male narrator, lengthy dialogues on social questions, a feminist protagonist, and a failed marriage.<sup>71</sup>

Federico also offers an explanation of Corelli’s ambivalence in *My Wonderful Wife* and identifies a possible motive for the author’s inconsistent approach to the issues Honoria represents when she argues that Corelli

self-consciously tried to articulate a specifically feminine aesthetic in opposition to both patriarchal literary values *and* the New Woman novel and that this was tied to her belief in the sanctity of literature and the moral influence of woman.<sup>72</sup>

The proposition that Corelli attempted to create a feminine aesthetic deserves exploration. Emphasising that Corelli’s pronouncements on the progress of the women’s movement were contradictory, Federico nevertheless agrees with the links made by Janet Galligani Casey between Eliot, Corelli and Woolf and considers that

Corelli made a serious effort to mediate the ambivalence inherent in constructions of the feminine . . . to work out the

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<sup>69</sup> R. B. Kershner, ‘Modernism’s Mirror: The Sorrows of Marie Corelli’ in *Transforming Genres: New Approaches to British Fiction*, edited by Nikki Lee Manos and Meri-Jane Rochelson, St Martin’s Press, New York, 1994, p. 68.

<sup>70</sup> Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 112.

<sup>71</sup> Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 113.

<sup>72</sup> Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 114.

connections among literature, feminine nature and emerging feminist politics, and the broader realm of social practice.

Federico also suggests that Corelli's feminine aesthetic is not concerned with such matters as form, diction and style, but with women's roles as providers of inspiration and moral influence in literature and art, and she points to the female writers and artists in *A Romance of Two Worlds*, *The Soul of Lilith*, *The Sorrows of Satan*, *The Murder of Delicia*, *The Master-Christian* and *Innocent* as examples of how Corelli expresses female creativity. It is a feminine aesthetic which embraces sexual equality, including intellectual and financial independence, but which does not erase sexual difference, for, according to Corelli, women have special gifts which they endanger by venturing into the dominant sphere of the masculine.<sup>73</sup>

The notion that Corelli was seeking to articulate a feminine aesthetic is plausible, although it implies an intellectual rigour not evident in the author's essays and certainly absent from her fiction. Federico's attempt to 'honor Corelli's protean ambitions' salutes the author's instinctive need to find her place in an increasingly commercial and competitive marketplace at a time when traditional female roles were evidently inadequate but when the alternatives also seemed unattractive and frightening. Nevertheless, Corelli's powers of analysis and articulation fall far short of those of Eliot and Woolf.

#### **VI: DARWINISM IN *MY WONDERFUL WIFE***

The two opposing interpretations of social Darwinism – progressive evolution and degeneration – evident in mainstream British society by the 1880s are also apparent in *My Wonderful Wife*. Honoria tells Hatwell-Tribkin that she is 'a fair specimen of the woman of the future, and you, old boy, *you* want a women of the past' (*WW* 31). Belief in progressive evolution underpinned the emerging science of eugenics. Eugenics was a hereditarian theory of population, population statistics and population genetics combined to develop a theory of population regulation based on a notion of national efficiency derived from Francis Galton. As Jeffery Weeks notes, the theoretical origins of eugenics lie in Darwinism insofar as man is a product of natural selection and therefore in an age of science should be able to participate consciously in the evolutionary process. Weeks

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<sup>73</sup> Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, pp. 98-104.

points out that some nineteenth-century eugenicists advocated social reform as part of the evolutionary process, whereas others were indifferent to reform but wanted to purify the stream of life at its source, not so much to eradicate the social causes of evil as to eliminate core biological defects. As a science, eugenics did not so much influence detailed policies as provide a context for policy-making. It attracted elements of both the far right and the socialist left and included patriotic and imperialist themes and an element of racism.<sup>74</sup>

Such an extrapolation of social Darwinism recognised that women were crucial to plans for breeding an increasingly superior race and even gave rise to a situation where some experts like Havelock Ellis called for an open and healthy female sexuality. In this context, women were encouraged to cast off many restrictions and to develop themselves physically and mentally. Choosing a marriage partner became a matter of scientific breeding, rather than one of love or economics. Like the feminist social purity movement, the notion of healthy sexuality subverted conventional relations between the sexes because it undermined the double standard, although the motivation behind healthy sexuality was quite at odds with the driving forces of the social purity movement. As Penny Boumelha notes, the introduction of eugenics shifted the ground from the moral to the scientific.<sup>75</sup> Mènie Muriel Dowie's *Gallia* does not choose her husband on the basis of wanting to be married – 'I am not allured by the prospect of being anybody's wife' – but because

I admire you; you fill out my idea of what a man should be, not only in looks, but in qualities . . . I have only yearned to be a mother – I can't explain and say more about it than that, even to you; I have wanted the father of my child to be a fine, strong, manly man, full of health and strength.<sup>76</sup>

Coupled with the idea of healthy sexuality was the argument that women should be more educated, partly in order to be more fit companions for their husbands, but also for the progress of the race.

Of course, these innovative ideas did not go unchallenged and conservatives continued to argue that physical, public and intellectual activities

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<sup>74</sup> Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society*, pp. 130-4.

<sup>75</sup> Boumelha, *Thomas Hardy and Women*, p. 21.

<sup>76</sup> Mènie Muriel Dowie, *Gallia*, 1895; rpt: Dent, London, 1995, pp. 191-2.

threatened women's capacity for child-bearing and rearing, and a reactionary cult of motherhood developed which threatened to force women back into the home. Traditionalists deplored the movement of women from side-saddles and riding habits to bicycles and split skirts and predicted dire results. Their opponents argued that more exercise and the consequent easing of clothing restrictions produced better mothers in the long term. In this way, the arguments for and against rational dress for women clothed opposing interpretations of social Darwinism.

Corelli took part in the polemic, and she was, as always, strident and contradictory. She derides Honoria for her love of sport and exercise and for wearing masculine clothing because it is more comfortable. She mocks Honoria's plea to women to 'Resist [men] with your utmost might! You will find the task easier when you have thrown aside all useless frippery and adornment, and adopted their garments, and with their garments, their liberty!' (*WW* 73). Yet she creates Honoria as

a glorious girl . . . with plump shoulders, round arms, ample bosom, full cheeks, good teeth, and quantities of hair – a girl with 'go,' and 'pluck,' and plenty of 'style.' . . . how amazingly she talked – she laughed, till the superabundant excess of her immense vitality made me positively envious! She danced with the vigour and swing of a stalwart Amazon . . . *she* never tired, never felt faint, never got giddy – not she! She was in sound health, mark you; sound and splendid physical condition, and had appetite enough for two ordinary men of middle size. (*WW* 3)

In Corelli's cumbersome, repetitive style, Honoria is ironically described by the narrator in ensuing paragraphs: 'Health radiated from her; her very aspect was invigorating . . . she was a thoroughly . . . healthy female . . . she was tremendously healthy: there was no sickly mawkishness or die-away languor about her' (*WW* 3-4). Obviously, Honoria is the ideal woman to mother strong, manly British boys and she lives up to the expectations of science and her husband when she bears a 'remarkably fine' son who is 'really and truly a good specimen' (*WW* 24-5).

Honoria links the evolution of physical strength with the contemporary dress code, arguing in her lecture:

How long, I should like to know, would [men's] physical strength endure if they were weighted down with the heavy skirts worn by women? Could they walk twenty-five miles a day in women's boots? Could they play cricket or football in



women's corsets? *No!* Thus it is plainly evident that they enjoy superior physical strength *only* because they are properly clothed; they have the free use of their limbs; they are not hampered in any movement; they can go out in all weathers and not suffer in consequence. There is no reason either in law or nature why they *should* possess this advantage. Women, by adopting their style of dress, will secure to a great extent much of their muscular and powerful physique. (*WW* 69)

Corelli understands the principles at stake in the case for rational dress and gives Honoria plausible arguments based on the science of the day. Yet she continues to try to contrast Honoria with Georgie and with 'the women in Walter Scott's novels . . . the women our great-grandfathers used to admire – those gentle, dignified, retiring, blushing personages, who always wanted men to fight for them and protect them' (*WW* 76; 4). Although she creates Honoria as a progressive woman of the future, Corelli also yearns for the romance of the past. The idealised heroines of her novels reflect the image of herself that she created and her continued preference for the genre of romance, in spite of the move by serious contemporary writers into naturalism and realism, echo the middle class public's ambivalent attitude toward the benefits of progress and its nostalgia for the past. Nevertheless, Corelli's failure to abandon her neo-Romantic ideas and move forward with her readers contributed to the decline in her popularity after the Great War.

Social Darwinism also gave rise to a notion completely opposite to progressive evolution, that of degeneration, which encompassed the scientific prediction of the death of the sun, the waning of the British empire, aestheticism in art and literature, the effeminacy of men and the demise of the womanly woman, decadence in society, the deplorable health of the working classes and generalised *fin-de-siècle* anxieties. Degeneration theory, most famously articulated by Max Nordau, privileged biology and contributed to the medicalisation of social theory whereby society was dissected 'as though it were precisely analogous with a human body'. Degeneration theory contributed to the move of sexuality from the area of moral discourse to that of scientific discourse.<sup>77</sup> Society was seen as sick and in need of radical treatment.

Writing in 1915, Corelli claims that the world is 'infected with the sickly symptoms of decay' and opines that the Great War is

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<sup>77</sup> Boumelha, *Thomas Hardy and Women*, p. 139. See also Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, Heinemann, London, 1895.

Destiny in labour; and the pangs and throes of her child-birth will give us a New World! For the Old World is fast crumbling and crushing down upon us like an ancient ruin struck by lightening-flash and thunderbolt; the old vices, lusts, and littlenesses are being torn away from us as a storm-wind tears away the parasite ivies from mouldering walls . . . This thing of terror and confusion Was To Be; it Had To Be! It has been coming upon us slowly, but steadily, for years . . . we have felt its approach instinctively in a general sense of insecurity – in a feverish impulse of haste to live lest we should suddenly die.<sup>78</sup>

However, even before turn of the century, social conservatives like Bram Stoker, Hugh Stutfield, Eliza Lynn Linton and Corelli had been convinced that male decadence and the sexuality of the New Woman constituted a particularly British form of degeneration.

Even earlier, however, in *My Wonderful Wife*, Corelli was using her narrator to describe Honoria in terms of degeneration theory: ‘instead of having a woman by my side I had a sort of hybrid human growth which was neither man nor woman’ (*WW* 18). She also links sexuality and the decline of empire through the words of Hatwell-Tribkin:

Honoria, dear Honoria! I know there are many woman nowadays who act as you do . . . but, believe me, no good can come of this throwing down of the barriers between the sexes; no advantage can possibly accrue to a great nation like ours from allowing the women to deliberately sacrifice their delicacy and reserve, and the men to resign their ancient code of chivalry and reverence. (*WW* 30)

Later he adds: ‘this mania for striving to make women the equals of men, is as wicked as it is unnatural, and can engender nothing but misery to the nation as well as to the individual’ (*WW* 32). Corelli’s views on the causes of individual and national degeneration are presented in Hatwell-Tribkin’s summary of his discussion with Richmoor and Herbert Vaughan:

When woman voluntarily resigns her position as the silent monitor and model 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. (*WW* 38-9)

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<sup>78</sup> Marie Corelli, ‘This Amazing War: A Woman’s Point of View’ printed in the *Sunday Pictorial*, March 28, 1915 and reprinted in *My ‘Little Bit’*, Collins, London, 1919, pp. 48-9.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN: A QUESTION OF FEMINISM

### I: 'ANTI-FEMINIST' FEMALE WRITERS

The New Woman was only one expression of late nineteenth-century 'feminism' just as activism was only one of the many ways through which women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries negotiated their position in society. The spectrum of women's attitudes is fractured even further when the opinions of those women who would have considered themselves to have been socially conservative or even anti-feminist are taken into account. Although consciousness of the woman question was greatest in the middle classes, within these classes women spoke, acted and wrote in many different and often contradictory ways. Marie Corelli was not alone in her ambivalence toward the changing role of women in society.

Eliza Lynn Linton, for example, is almost universally described as anti-feminist. Yet she persuaded a domineering father to allow her to live alone in London and earn her living as a writer and when her short marriage failed, she left her husband to return to her profession. Best known for the strident criticism of modern women expressed through her series of journal articles, 'The Girl of the Period' and 'The Wild Women', Linton nevertheless lived an emancipated and independent life, writing eight novels and an autobiography as well as contributing regularly to *Household Words*, *Temple Bar*, *Saturday Review*, *Macmillan's*, *Cornhill Magazine*, *Fortnightly Review*, *Nineteenth Century* and many other periodicals. As Valerie Sanders points out in *Eve's Renegades: Victorian Anti-Feminist Women Novelists*, Linton

reveals herself as split between womanly self-effacement, even fear of her own voice, and a desire to destroy the status quo: a split that was never healed, and which inclines her towards self-punishment in her novels and articles. Whereas in the former, her sympathy for active and independent girls is close to the surface and easily detectable, in her articles it is repeatedly driven underground or twisted into a backlash against the very freedoms she herself valued and practised.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Sanders, *Eve's Renegades*, pp. 136-7.

Sanders's examination of female writers considered to be anti-feminist includes Charlotte Yonge, who did not move from the village where she was born, did not marry, never questioned her religious beliefs and remained all her life under the influence of the Rev. John Keble, yet produced 160 books for children and adults and for forty years edited the girls' magazine, *The Monthly Packet*. In her novel *The Clever Woman of the Family*, Yonge reveals her understanding of the frustration felt by young, unmarried women forced into a life of idleness. Rachel Curtis attempts to break with tradition by establishing a school for exploited young lace-makers but her enterprise ends in death and financial disaster. Yonge's comment on her character's ensuing humiliation encapsulates the author's opinion of women who refuse to remain within their traditional roles: 'it was just chastisement for headstrong folly and conceit'.<sup>80</sup> Yonge has nothing to offer her disillusioned heroine other than a conventional marriage to a good man prepared to guide his wife in her efforts to be of some use to the world. This was advice that Yonge herself was unable to follow.

Sanders also scrutinises the work of Margaret Oliphant. Oliphant was widowed after only seven years of marriage and thereafter supported her own family, and later her brother's, through her writing. Her output was prodigious and included over one hundred novels in addition to biographies and historical works. Sanders points out that although Oliphant is less overtly anti-feminist than the other writers examined in *Eve's Renegades*, 'her favourite tone is ironic and ambiguous, making her real opinions somewhat elusive'.<sup>81</sup> The characters of Catherine and Hester Vernon in her novel, *Hester* (1883), support this comment as although both are strong women, neither is able to avoid the consequences of a characteristically female lapse in judgement.

The last of Sanders's anti-feminist writers is Mary Augusta Arnold, granddaughter of Thomas and niece of Matthew, but better known as Mrs Humphry Ward. Of her, Sanders writes: 'Ward's novels offer the fullest analysis of the middle-class woman's position in a rapidly changing society, and yet still return an answer that is confused and ambiguous'.<sup>82</sup> The heroine of Ward's novel, *Delia*

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<sup>80</sup> Yonge, *The Clever Woman of the Family*, p. 268.

<sup>81</sup> Sanders, *Eve's Renegades*, p. 208.

<sup>82</sup> Sanders, *Eve's Renegades*, p. 80.

*Blanchflower* (1915), rebels and becomes a suffragist before finally settling down to marry her older guardian. Like Yonge's Rachel, Delia discovers that activity in the public sphere compromises young unmarried women. Yet the aristocratic Lady Tonbridge admits that she is a kind of suffragist:

Yes, indeed I am . . . Here am I, with a house and a daughter, a house-parlourmaid, a boot-boy, and rates to pay. Why shouldn't I vote as well as you? But the difference between me and the Fury is that she wants the vote this year – this month – *this minute* – and I don't care whether it comes in my time – or Nora's time – or my grandchildren's time. I say we ought to have it – that it is our right – and you men are dolts not to give it us. But I sit and wait peaceably till you do – till the apple is ripe and drops. And meanwhile these wild women prevent its ripening at all. So long as they rage, there it hangs – out of our reach. So that I'm not only ashamed of them as a woman – but out of all patience with them as a Suffragist!<sup>83</sup>

As Lady Tonbridge is a model figure in *Delia Blanchflower*, a wise and progressive woman and not by any means a radical, it is reasonable to assume that she reflects Ward's own expectations that women deserve and will eventually attain the vote. Nevertheless, Linda Dowling and David Rubinstein see Ward as opposed to suffrage, although both acknowledge that her *Marcella* shows that she was influenced by the New Women writers.<sup>84</sup>

From a different perspective to that of Sanders, Rita Felski in *The Gender of Modernity* cautions against the 'well-rehearsed problems within feminist theory, whereby an identity politics which identifies female gender as a guarantor of resistance insists on finding evidence of buried feminism within every text written by a woman'. Applying this warning specifically to a critical reading of the work of Marie Corelli, Felski explains that her interest in the popular author is partly a result of the fact that Corelli 'was treated with often appalling misogyny by a male-dominated literary establishment' before continuing:

Yet this interest cannot be extended to a reading of her texts as the literary expression of an oppositional feminine culture, a move which reinscribes the more dubious tenets of subculture theory in its appeal to a unified collectivity of resistive subjects. On the contrary, a contemporary perspective that is even slightly conscious of hierarchies of class and race as well as gender cannot help finding many aspects of nineteenth-century

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<sup>83</sup> Mrs Humphry Ward, *Delia Blanchflower: A Novel*, Ward, Lock & Co., London, 1915, pp. 111-2.

<sup>84</sup> Linda Dowling in 'The Decadent and the New Woman in the 1890s' in *Reading Fin de Siècle Fictions*, edited by Lyn Pykett, pp. 52-3 and Rubinstein, *Before the Suffragettes*, p. 32.

women's popular writing deeply problematic . . . popular fiction can more usefully be read as comprising a variety of ideological strands that cohere to or contradict each other in diverse ways.<sup>85</sup>

Felski's warning is well-founded and timely. Certainly the writing of Linton, Yonge, Oliphant and Ward – like that of Corelli – exhibits contradiction and this may well explain why Sanders finds her so-called anti-feminist writers ambiguous: they resist retrospective ideological labelling because they reflect the often-anomalous position of late nineteenth-century/early twentieth-century middle class women in a changing society.

Nevertheless, many feminist critics are quick to dismiss Corelli as a social conservative. Commenting on the central position of the woman question in literary debate during the last decade of the nineteenth century in *Rebellious Structures: Women Writers and the Crisis of the Novel 1880-1900*, Gerd Bjørhovde notes in respect of Corelli (and Mrs Humphry Ward) that

both of them must be considered conservative writers, and although not detracting from their value or possible interest to the literary scholar, this brought them outside the scope of the present study, which above all is concerned with *rebellion*.<sup>86</sup>

Jane Miller points out that it was not only male writers who promoted stereotypes and criticised the suffrage movement and uses Corelli's pamphlet, *Woman, or—Suffragette: A Question of National Choice*, to exemplify anti-suffrage writing by women.<sup>87</sup> Sally Ledger sees Corelli as anti-feminist, reading Sybil Elton of *The Sorrows of Satan* as the 'sexually decadent, vampiric . . . New Woman of the piece' and classing Corelli with figures as radically anti-feminist as the journalist Hugh Stutfield, who conducted a vicious crusade against all forms of female emancipation.<sup>88</sup>

Patricia Stubbs uses Corelli's *Temporal Power* as an example in her discussion of the assumption, expressed in a number of nineteenth-century novels, 'that women are the "power behind the throne" and that they are satisfied with this invisible, shadowy role'. Stubbs considers that *Temporal Power* 'takes this

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<sup>85</sup> Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Ma., 1995, p. 142.

<sup>86</sup> Bjørhovde, *Rebellious Structures*, p. 17.

<sup>87</sup> Miller, *Rebel Women*, p. 156.

<sup>88</sup> Ledger, *The New Woman*, pp. 102 and 106.

belief to ludicrous and laughable extremes' but argues that the ideas expressed in the novel cannot be dismissed, if only because of Corelli's success and popularity. Stubbs argues that Corelli's

crude simplifications of contemporary ideology very largely account for this success, and a reading of her work, though it requires stamina, does reveal dominant social and political assumptions in a particularly clear way . . . The plot is absurd, but indicates clearly enough in its exaggerated way, the lengths to which the idea of woman as inspiration could be stretched.<sup>89</sup>

Rita Kranidis takes yet a different position, arguing that whilst Corelli's novels 'embraced and reinforced patriarchal idealizations of women . . . [her] essays, published mainly in journals, challenged patriarchal ideology through bold feminist proclamations'. According to Kranidis, Corelli states her own brand of feminism in her journal articles, which were written for a market significantly different from the readers of her novels, but conformed to mainstream expectations of fiction in order to succeed as a novelist.<sup>90</sup> This opinion recalls Sanders's argument that Charlotte Yonge's novels promote sympathy for the independently-minded woman although her journal articles contradict this stance.

Elaine Showalter discusses whether Corelli should be considered a feminist or an anti-feminist, writing along lines similar to Stubbs of the way in which the novelist 'saw in grace and beauty, and wiles and seduction, a truer and more lasting source of power than the vote' and referring to Corelli's unfortunate metaphor of woman as a spider holding scores of men prisoners by silken threads.<sup>91</sup> Showalter, however, recognises Corelli's ambiguity when she remarks that 'in fact, Marie Corelli had a profound New Womanish faith in female dominance, and saw the proper relation of the sexes as that of goddess and worshipper'.<sup>92</sup>

Rita Felski questions the argument put forward by Stubbs and Showalter, although she acknowledges that Corelli is often classified with Mrs Humphry Ward and Eliza Lynn Linton as part of the late nineteenth-century backlash against feminism. Felski points out that in spite of her public persona as a

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<sup>89</sup> Stubbs, *Women and Fiction*, p. 45.

<sup>90</sup> Kranidis, *Subversive Discourse*, pp. 67-8.

<sup>91</sup> Corelli, *Woman, or—Suffragette?*, p. 31.

<sup>92</sup> Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, p. 226.

'womanly' woman and her opposition to the female suffrage movement, Corelli's representation of gender relations is ambivalent. She continues:

Not only does her own fiction reveal a conspicuous lack of interest in depicting the idylls of home life, but her female characters frequently engage in passionate tirades against male power and the tyranny of marriage . . . Corelli's novels . . . contain numerous instances of forceful, angry, and frustrated women railing against men's egoism and failure to recognize women's abilities and achievements. Her novels reveal a profound emotional ambivalence in their representation of gender relations, oscillating between recurring expressions of anger, frustration, and resentment toward the male sex and a yearning for oceanic dissolution of the self in an ecstatic merging of souls.

Felski reinforces this argument with the observation that Corelli's 'heroines are only rarely integrated into the sphere of domesticity . . . they remain aberrant, marginal, awkwardly positioned in relation to the social structures within which they find themselves'.<sup>93</sup>

As Felski points out, Corelli's angel-heroine stereotypes provide an indication of the author's attitude toward women. Unlike the Victorian ideal, they are rarely in the house but are usually professional musicians (the narrators of *A Romance of Two Worlds* and *The Life Everlasting*), writers (Honorina in *My Wonderful Wife*, Irene in *The Soul of Lilith*, Mavis in *The Sorrows of Satan*, Delicia in *The Murder of Delicia* and Innocent in the novel of that name), scientists or connected with science (again the narrators of *A Romance of Two Worlds* and *The Life Everlasting*, Diana in *The Young Diana* and Morgana in *The Secret Power*), demagogues (Honorina again and Lotys in *Temporal Power*) or splendid businesswomen (Mavis, Delicia, Innocent and Maryllia, the heroine of *God's Good Man*; Claudia, heroine of 'Claudia's Business', a short story published in *The Love of Long Ago and other Stories*, is a successful stockbroker). Almost all are economically independent and inveterate travellers. Many of them remain single – Mavis, Miss Letty (*Boy*), Jane (*Jane*) and Morgana – and Violet (*Boy*) goes as a nurse to the Boer War. Thelma (*Thelma*), Honorina and Delicia leave their husbands, although Thelma is reunited with hers and Delicia subsequently dies. In these ways, even Corelli's idealised characters have much in common with the independent women of 'feminist' novels. Furthermore, many 'feminist' novelists were afraid that their heroines' convictions might be too

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<sup>93</sup> Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, pp. 129-31.



shocking for the reading public and so created rebellious characters, such as Hester Gresley in Mary Cholmondeley's *Red Pottage*, who conformed outwardly to the strictures of proper Victorian social behaviour.

More confusingly, the plots of so-called feminist and anti-feminist novels of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often follow similar lines. Writers like Yonge, Iota and Ward, usually categorised as anti-feminist, allow their heroines a period of rebellion in order to explore the dangers of female independence, after which the rebel of the family either accepts a conventional marriage or dies if her transgression is irredeemable. Similarly unsatisfactory endings are also the lot of independent characters of feminist fiction, like Hadria in Mona Caird's *Daughters of Danaus*, H. G. Wells's Ann Veronica in the novel of the same name and Olive Schreiner's Lyndall in *The Story of an African Farm*. The effort to live an unconventional life is too much for them, society is ultimately overpowering and they capitulate or die.<sup>94</sup> Their feminist creators seem less able than Marie Corelli to envisage a society in which free and independent women lead socially fulfilling lives and find personal satisfaction. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Corelli persisted in using the romance genre long after it had been replaced by new realism, a genre which rarely admits of a happy ending.

## II: 'THE MODERN MARRIAGE MARKET'

An excellent insight into the divergence of contemporary women's views on aspects of the woman question is offered by a series of articles published in *The Lady's Realm* in 1897 and collected in a single volume published by Hutchinson the following year. The book takes its name from the first article, Marie Corelli's 'The Modern Marriage Market'.<sup>95</sup> Saturated with novels and journal articles on the subject of marriage, Corelli's readers would have been familiar with the attitude implied by her title, as few of her novels fail to criticise the rituals which marked the coming of age of a young woman in late nineteenth-century society and the subsequent arrangements for marriage. The views expressed in these articles are not only those of women in the middle class as the other contributors are Lady Jeune, Flora Annie Steel and Susan, Countess of

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<sup>94</sup> George Moore's *Esther Waters* is one of the rare triumphant single mothers of the fiction of this period.

<sup>95</sup> Marie Corelli et al., *The Modern Marriage Market*, Hutchinson, London, 1898. Ensuing references will be abbreviated and given in parentheses in the text.

Malmesbury. The fact that the opinions of these women are rarely examined in twentieth-century feminist literary criticism serves to confirm Felski's warning against an identity politics.<sup>96</sup>

Corelli's discussion opens with a tirade against contemporary society followed by the now-familiar argument, expressed with greatest vehemence in *The Sorrows of Satan*, that young women of marriageable age are brought out and paraded in society with the aim of attracting wealthy or aristocratic men. Corelli sees this as a purely economic transaction whereby girls are sold by their mothers to the highest bidder in order that they may thereafter lead materially comfortable lives. Through such arrangements, rich men gain socially desirable wives whilst impecunious nobles trade their name for the dowries of wealthy but lesser-born girls. The evil in this system of marriage, according to Corelli, is that it ignores the 'natural law' – that is, the 'passion of love' – whereby

the man and woman concerned have discovered in each other his and her true mate, – that they feel life is alone valuable and worth living in each other's company, – that they are prepared to endure trouble, poverty, pain, sickness, death itself, provided they may only be together, – and that all the world is a mere grain of dust in worth as compared to the exalted passion which fills their souls and moves them to become one in flesh as well as one in spirit. (*MMM* 21)

The second article in *The Modern Marriage Market* is that by Lady Jeune, widow of the Hon. J. C. Stanley and subsequently wife of the eminent judge, Francis Henry Jeune, Baron St. Hellier. As might be expected, she defends the status quo. She criticises Corelli's idealism and rejects entirely the author's view that contemporary society is singularly corrupt, pointing out that throughout history human nature has been 'stronger than all the forces and influences opposed to it, and it does not alter materially, though conditions of life, and changes, modify it' (*MMM* 59). She refutes the Darwinistic degeneration argument – frequently levelled at the British aristocracy – by stating that never was there a time when 'self-reliance and individuality were so pre-eminently the characteristics of a people' and it is precisely these characteristics that are the strength of the British empire.

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<sup>96</sup> An exception is David Rubinstein – see *Before the Suffragettes*, pp. 14 and 40.

More importantly, whilst Lady Jeune acknowledges that ‘there are, and always have been, women who are sufficiently worldly to allow and even to persuade their daughters to marry for the material advantages which a rich husband can provide’, she argues that such women are not representative of the majority (*MMM* 75-6). She points out that girls enjoy society for its fun, gaiety, change and excitement and that any young, wholesome-minded girl would be horrified at the suggestion that she was millionaire-hunting (*MMM* 78). Turning Corelli’s own words against her, Lady Jeune insists that modern thought and education make mothers realise ‘the dear and holy responsibilities of life’ with regard to their children ‘and so refrain from using any influence except what tends to their happiness; and the same influences also make girls understand the profanation and wickedness of a loveless marriage’ (*MMM* 83-4).

The third contributor, Flora Annie Steel, author of short stories and novels about India where she lived from 1867 to 1889, takes quite a different approach, beginning her article with an analysis of the words ‘modern’, ‘marriage’ and ‘market’ in the context of their use by the preceding writers. She argues that

We must either say that marriage is honourable in all if we get an equivalent which satisfies our personal ideals, or we must say that neither for love nor for money have men and women the right to enter into a contract which only concerns themselves for a few short years, but which may influence the world for generations. (*MMM* 103-4)

According to Steel, sensual pleasures may be bought by love or by money: ‘Self lies at the bottom of both decisions’ (*MMM* 116). Steel admits to grounding her argument upon her experiences in India and argues that marriage should not be based upon individual needs but, for the good of the race, should return for its meaning to ‘the same bracing and wholesome gospel’ that ‘our Eastern sisters have never left; to the sanction of home and motherhood’ (*MMM* 129-30). Her argument combines social Darwinism, eugenics and social conservatism. Every woman, she argues, wishes to marry, to have a home and children and to share in the glory and toil, because she unconsciously echoes a far higher ideal of life (*MMM* 110-1). This ideal, or ‘great truth’ as Steel calls it, is irreconcilable with Western individualism:

man and woman stand related, not to each other, but to the immortality of their race – that immortality which comes to the world through the generations on generations of men and women who are born into it. There, even nowadays, when error

has obscured so much, marriage is not a purely personal matter, as it is with us; it is a duty to the race. (*MMM* 118-9)

The final contributor is Susan, Countess of Malmesbury, who summarises the three previous writers as ‘the Romantic, as presented by Miss Marie Corelli; the Social, as understood by Lady Jeune; and the Practical, of which Mrs. Steel is the prophet’ (*MMM* 139). The first of these, she remarks acutely, ‘writes with a skilful pen, a warm heart, but an undisciplined mind’ (*MMM* 139). The Countess argues that the choice of marriage partners should be based upon ‘a certain capital of youth and health, and, in addition, qualities, moral and mental, such as are necessary to advance them in their condition of life’ (*MMM* 164). The moral and mental qualities that determine a couple’s compatibility include (primarily) class, race, parity of financial circumstances and lack of hereditary diseases and (secondarily) physical beauty, evenness of temper and the ‘greater moral and intellectual gifts which go to widen and heighten the horizon of our life, and which bring unfailing consolation in time of privation or sorrow’ (*MMM* 165-73).

Clearly, all these women were aware of contemporary issues like evolution, heredity, decadence and degeneration. Not one of them could be described as a ‘feminist’, yet three of them argue that young women have the right to select their own marriage partners and that direct parental intervention is justified only where a girl is in danger of making a foolish or dangerous (the words are interchangeable) choice.<sup>97</sup> Remarkably, they make few references to the role of fathers, although the Countess of Malmesbury recounts a joke based on eugenics wherein a prize bull responds to his aristocratic owner’s compliment with the remark ‘Well, my lord, if as much trouble had been taken to select your father and mother as you took with mine, you would be a magnificent fellow too’ (*MMM* 153). Flora Steel suggests that ‘Men have already almost lost their fatherhood, from the very extent of their personal freedom in regard to it’ (*MMM* 130).

As their views on marriage differ, so the opinions of these four writers concerning the advances made by women vary greatly. It seems surprising that Lady Jeune, apparently the social conservative, is most fulsome in her praise of the modern woman, but perhaps this is because privileged young women of her

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<sup>97</sup> The exception is Flora Steel who attacks the underlying reasons for marriage – money and Love – but avoids discussing who has ultimate responsibility for choosing a girl’s husband.

class had the option to follow a career, whereas many middle class and all working class girls were forced to go to work.

Susan, Duchess of Malmesbury, takes an almost opposite view. Although acknowledging that ‘girls are now highly educated . . . [and] allowed freedom undreamt of twenty years ago’, she argues that this education does them a disservice because ‘the superficial knowledge of life they thus acquire is one of the most dangerous elements in their present condition’ (*MMM* 161). The Duchess believes that half an education, an ‘attitude of independence, an indisposition to listen to advice combined with total ignorance of the real situation’ lead young women to make foolish decisions about marriage in the mistaken belief that they have found invisible but possible perfection. ‘It is this search for the ideal, and the fond belief that it has at last been found, which wrecks so many lives and makes the searchers do wrong in secret’, she warns (*MMM* 161-3).

Flora Steel is not interested in discussing the advance of women and does not see it as particularly relevant to the points she is making. She mentions that the ‘changing conditions of woman’s life in this nineteenth century of ours make it imperative that some more certain guide should be chosen’ other than ‘Love with a big L’ as the basis of marriage (*MMM* 116). She also observes that in ‘the good old days, when women had little else to do, and still less to choose, this dream of personal happiness was not so dangerous as it is now, when we have begun to ask questions and to insist upon answers’ (*MMM* 127-8). She makes a controversial but insightful point with her remark that, in a time when not all women are able to marry, it is dangerous ‘to din the claims of personal pleasure and pure passion’ into the ears of young women ‘who may have to listen to it without the mysterious sanction of marriage’ (*MMM* 129).

In ‘The Modern Marriage Market’ Corelli takes the advance of women for granted, but she questions the ways in which women are using their freedom. Early in this essay, addressed to the female readers of *The Lady’s Realm*, she criticises

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 . . . we alone are to blame if we shatter [men’s] ideals and sit down by choice in the mud when they would have placed us on thrones. (*MMM* 16)

Shortly after she states: 'Women are free to assert their modesty, their sense of right, their desire for truth and purity, if they only will' (*MMM* 38). Corelli shares the concerns articulated by the Duchess of Malmesbury for she, too, considers that hidden dangers lie in the freedom available to contemporary women. Whereas the Duchess does not credit young women with the ability to withstand the seduction of passion, Corelli, on the contrary, believes that guided by a passionate love they are able to avoid both the pitfalls of modern life and the temptations of the marriage market. She argues that a woman should be

certain – absolutely, sacredly, solemnly certain – that out of all the world that one man is indeed her pre-elected lover, her chosen mate, – that never could she care for any other hand than his to caress her beauty, – never for any other kiss than his to rest upon her lips, – and that without him life is but a half-circle, waiting completion. (*MMM* 44-5)

Corelli's idealisation of women is not restricted to scientists, musicians, writers and businesswomen, but also extends to a kind of primitive woman who follows what she terms as the 'natural law' of passionate love. This type of woman is first hinted at through Thelma in *Thelma*, perhaps through Lotys in *Temporal Power*, through Mary Deane in *The Treasure of Heaven* and most clearly in the character of Manella in *The Secret Power*. Such a woman is able to experience

love, – the real passion, that elevates you above all sordid and mean considerations of self – that exalts you to noble thoughts and nobler deeds, – that keeps you faithful to the one vow, and moves you to take a glorious pride in preserving that vow's immaculate purity. (*MMM* 52)

She is a woman who acts intuitively and is prepared, like Thelma, Mary and Manella, to sacrifice herself for the man she loves. She is proud of her womanhood but prepared to surrender it to her lover. Although elsewhere Corelli argues for the independent woman, in 'The Modern Marriage Market' she exhorts women, albeit through an unfortunate use of the plural, to 'give yourselves ungrudgingly, fearlessly, without a price or any condition whatsoever, to the men you truly love' (*MMM* 52).

### **III: FREE OPINIONS FREELY EXPRESSED**

Corelli's creation of contradictory heroines who are at once passively feminine and independent is the fictional expression of her own beliefs. In 1905

she selected a number of what she termed ‘social papers’, some of which had already appeared in various journals, and republished them with some new material as *Free Opinions Freely Expressed on Certain Phases of Modern Social Life and Conduct*. Still enjoying enormous popularity, Corelli is confident in her authority and she commends her ‘opinions’ to the public solely on the grounds that they ‘are honest, and that they are honestly expressed, without fear or favour’.<sup>98</sup> One of these social papers is entitled ‘The Advance of Woman’.<sup>99</sup>

This article commences with a brief overview of what Corelli sees as the changes which have taken place in intellectual life over the past sixty years and then moves on to a commentary on the achievements of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot in times when ‘men were still chivalrous’ and a woman ‘so rarely had the chance of asserting the brilliant qualities that are her natural endowment’. Next Corelli predicts the

onward march of the white-robed Amazons into the Battle of Life. Braced with the golden shield of Courage, helmeted with Patience, and armed with the sword of Faith, the women-warriors are taking the field, and are to be seen now in massed ranks, daily marshalling themselves in more compact order, firm-footed and fearless, prepared to fight for intellectual freedom, and die rather than yield. They, too, will earn the right to live; they, too, will be something greater than the mere vessels of man’s desire. (*FOFE* 170)

Corelli describes the ‘didactic male’ whose greatest attributes are that he kicks a football as well as he kicks his wife, eats and drinks more than she does, smokes more and is able to ‘indulge freely in unbridled licentiousness’ without being banned from good society. Against this she contrasts the historical representation of ‘Fortune, Fame, Justice, the Arts and Sciences’, the ‘divine spirit of Nature itself’, Faith, Hope and Charity, the Three Graces, the Muses and the Fates as ‘wearing woman’s form and possessing women’s attributes’ (*FOFE* 173). In so doing, Corelli exhibits one of her most common stylistic faults: she is unaware that her comparison of men and women is blunted because of the way in which she juxtaposes the trivial and the ideal. Moreover, she does not realise that the idealisation of the female is merely another means of removing women from the

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<sup>98</sup> Marie Corelli, ‘Author’s note’ introducing *Free Opinions Freely Expressed on Certain Phases of Modern Social Life and Conduct*, Constable, London, 1905, p. ix.

<sup>99</sup> ‘The Advance of Woman’ in *Free Opinions Freely Expressed*, pp. 169-184. Ensuing references to *Free Opinions Freely Expressed* will be abbreviated and given in parentheses in the text.

reality of daily life. Nevertheless, in this part of the text Corelli is expressing ‘an oppositional feminine culture’.

She is also on firm feminist ground as she describes the lack of opportunities available for women to excel in poetry and music and when she remarks:

There is one thing that women, generally, in the struggle for intellectual free life, should always remember . . . namely, that the Laws, as they at present exist, are made *by men, for men*. There are no really stringent laws for the protection of women’s interests except the Married Woman’s Property Act, which is a great and needful boon. (*FOFE* 176)

Corelli follows this claim with a call for more ‘women-lawyers – Portias, with quick brains’. Her complaint against laws made ‘*by men, for men*’ is shared by most radical female activists. Mary Erle, for example, the heroine of Ella Hepworth Dixon’s *The Story of a Modern Woman*, contemplates suicide because she is ‘a living, suffering entity . . . in a world of artificial laws; of laws made for man’s convenience and pleasure’.<sup>100</sup>

Corelli notes that women have made a ‘decided mark of triumph’ in the field of medicine and have done much excellent work as inspectors of schools. Her next point, however, demonstrates the contradictions recognised by Felski. Corelli categorically states that she detests the notion of women in Parliament because she would not like to see ‘the sex, pre-eminent for grace and beauty, degraded by having to witness or to take part in such “scenes” of heated and undignified disputation as have frequently lowered the prestige of the House of Commons’ (*FOFE* 181). She adds, in another of her trivialising juxtapositions, that neither does she like to see women playing hockey or indulging in other ‘tom-boy’ sports and pastimes.

A digression concerning the need for women to be good cooks and housekeepers for their own comfort rather than for the comfort of men precedes Corelli’s description of her ideal contemporary woman:

In claiming and securing intellectual equality with Man, [Woman] should ever bear in mind that such a position is only to be held by always maintaining and preserving as great an Unlikeness to him as possible in her life and surroundings. Let her imitate him in nothing but independence and individuality. Let her eschew his fashion in dress, his talk and his manners. A

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<sup>100</sup> Ella Hepworth Dixon, *The Story of a Modern Woman*, 1894; rpt: Merlin, London, 1990, p. 264.



woman who wears ‘mannish’ clothes, smokes cigars, rattles out slang, gambles at cards, and drinks brandy and soda on the slightest provocation, is lost altogether, both as woman and man, and becomes sexless. But the woman whose dress is always becoming and graceful, whose voice is equable and tender, who enhances whatever beauty she possesses by exquisite manner, unblemished reputation, and intellectual capacity combined, raises herself not only to an equality with man, but goes so far above him that she straightway becomes the Goddess and he the Worshipper. This is as it should be. Men adore what they cannot imitate. (*FOFE* 182-3)

This passage reveals much about Corelli’s attitude regarding the position of women. It is clear that she considers women to be the intellectual equals of men, although society has in the past denied them opportunities for achievement. Nevertheless, she believes that the freedom which women have gained should not be squandered through acceptance of mere social equality. This is the basis of her hostility toward new women like Honoria: they waste their hard-won independence by emulating men’s behaviour. Furthermore, Corelli is too conservative to relinquish the Victorian notion of the womanly woman and so she creates an ideal female comprised of femininity, independence, intellectual equality with her male counterparts and female moral superiority. She totally undermines her ideal creation, however, by insisting that men will naturally worship such a being: unlike her good cooks and housekeepers, Corelli’s ideal woman cannot exist for her own satisfaction but must strive for male approval.

Similar attitudes are evident in the article ‘Accursèd Eve’, also published in *Free Opinions Freely Expressed*.<sup>101</sup> In this essay Corelli indulges in some rather strident anti-Semitism by way of introduction, blaming the Jewish religion for initiating

a calendar of appalling, almost superhuman crime [against woman]. Man has taken the full licence allowed him by the old Genesis story (which, by the way, was evidently invented by man himself for his own convenience). ‘Thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee.’ And among all tribes, and in all nations he *has* ruled with a rod of iron! (*FOFE* 153-4)

Corelli uses Eve as a metaphor to argue that from the beginning of time women have been more sinned against than sinning and have always been treated as chattels. She remarks that this attitude reached a turning point only in the ‘pagan days’, when the Greeks and Romans ‘had a latent glimmering of what Woman in all her glory should be’ and so represented Truth, Beauty, Justice, Fortune, Fame,

Wisdom, Mercy, Chance and Victory ‘in the female form divine’. This period foreshadowed women’s

higher future and better possibilities, when the days of her long and cruel probation should be accomplished, and her ‘curse’ in part be lifted. There are signs and tokens that this happy end is in sight. Accursēd Eve is beginning to have a good time. (*FOFE* 154-5)

To this point, Corelli is expressing an oppositional feminine culture. ‘Having a good time’, however, opens up the possibility that women might abuse their well-deserved liberty and ‘run headlong into licence’. Accursēd Eve, Corelli writes, ‘having broken several of her old-time fetters, and beginning to feel her feet as well as her wings, just now wants a word in politics’. Why this should be so is beyond Corelli’s understanding, as she confesses ‘I wonder that she should wish to put herself to so much unnecessary trouble, seeing that she has the whole game in her hands’:

I do not know any man who is not absolutely under the thumb of at least one woman. And I will not believe that there is any woman so feeble, so stupid, so lost to the power and charm of her own individuality, as not to be able to influence quite half a dozen men. This being the case, what does Accursēd Eve want with a vote? . . . I say that she has much better, wider work to do than take part in tow-rows with the rather undignified personages who often make somewhat of a bear-garden of the British House of Commons. That she would prove a good M. P. were she a man, I am quite sure; but as a woman I know she ‘goes one better,’ in becoming the wife of an M. P. (*FOFE* 155-6)

Confused semantics notwithstanding, Corelli’s meaning thus far is clear: women now have all the power they want and are better off continuing to exercise it indirectly through men. She is no longer promoting an oppositional feminine culture but, as Patricia Stubbs asserts, arguing the case for women as the power behind the throne.<sup>102</sup>

The closing paragraphs of ‘Accursēd Eve’, however, again display the underlying discords that Felski notices in nineteenth-century women’s writing. Corelli amends her metaphor to equate Eve’s curse, not with oppression, but with an excess of loving which leads women into credulity, weakness, failings, vanities and sins. ‘Her first impulse in earliest youth is a desire to please Adam’, a desire which leads her to offer the forbidden fruit, the best of herself. When her offering

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<sup>101</sup> Marie Corelli, ‘Accursēd Eve’ in *Free Opinions Freely Expressed*, pp. 152-61.

<sup>102</sup> Stubbs, *Women and Fiction*, p. 45.

is accepted, 'she is invariably happy and virtuous' (*FOFE* 159). Corelli has shifted responsibility for women's behaviour onto men. This is even more the case in respect of 'bad women' who 'were not bad in the first instance' but are only considered so because, if their

instinctive efforts have been met with cruelty, oppression, neglect, desertion and sometimes the most heartless and cowardly betrayal, they can scarcely be blamed if they play the same tricks on the unloving, disloyal churls for whom they have perhaps sacrificed the best part of their lives. (*FOFE* 160)

Corelli has no remedy to offer these betrayed women because 'innocent faith and trusting love *are* the best part of every woman's life' (*FOFE* 160). Independence no longer exists and female intellectual equality counts for nothing when the womanly woman is rejected. Corelli is able to offer nothing but a curse in the form of an inversion of her original metaphor:

Beautiful, frail, trusting, loving, Accurs'd Eve! She bends beneath the curse, – but the clouds are lifting! – there is light in the sky of her future dawn! And it may be that a worse malediction than the one pronounced in Eden, will fall on those who make her burden of life heavier to bear! (*FOFE* 160-1)

#### **IV: 'WOMAN, OR– SUFFRAGETTE?'**

Corelli's ambivalence toward female emancipation was long-standing. Bertha Vyver reports that, addressing members of the Whitefriars Club on the occasion of their 'ladies' dinner' in 1901, Corelli 'spoke for fifteen minutes, unprepared, in eloquent defence of our sex', after which Winston Churchill in the chair congratulated her and opined that the excellence of her speech had 'almost disarmed his opposition to Women's Suffrage'.<sup>103</sup>

Yet in 1907 Corelli directly challenged the suffragettes with her lengthy pamphlet *Woman, or– Suffragette: A Question of National Choice*. In it she repeats the arguments familiar from *Free Opinions Freely Expressed*: women are the equals of men in the arts, science and literature, they already hold all the power they need through their influence over men and the suffragettes imperil this power – and thereby the well-being of the nation – through unwomanly behaviour which exposes them to ridicule and retaliatory aggression. She also introduces a new argument along the lines that music and, to a lesser degree, mathematics are

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<sup>103</sup> Vyver, *Memoirs of Marie Corelli*, p. 161.

equivalent to politics insofar as these are fields of endeavour wherein women are better employed as the inspiration for action, not as activists. She explores more deeply the relations between the sexes, again using the metaphor of Adam and Eve, although this time construing it differently. She resiles from her former idea that men, through acceptance or rejection of offered love, influence the way women behave and develops instead the reverse theory that women are the creators and educators of men and thus the authors of their own destinies.

It is this last development in Corelli's thinking that is of most interest. She now argues that women are responsible for the behaviour of men:

It cannot, of course, be denied that women have suffered, and still are destined to suffer, great injustice at the hands of men. But again, that is the result of the way in which mothers have reared their sons and still continue to rear them. Till they alter their rule of treatment, – which is one continuous system of spoiling, molly-coddling and baby-worship carried on into manhood, – so long must they reap what they have sown, – namely, that familiarity 'which breeds contempt'.<sup>104</sup>

Corelli returns to this argument several times, stating that 'a man is seldom anything more than a woman's representative' and that 'Man is what woman makes him. She bears him and rears him. She is his sovereign and supreme ruler. From the first breath he draws, She, and She alone possesses him' (*Suffragette?* 15). Corelli uses her revised Adam and Eve metaphor to explain that if a woman gives her son the best of her life and the best of her love – that is, 'the juiciest side of the apple' – and indulges and spoils him, he will naturally come to imagine that he is her 'lord and master, [and] then she has only herself to blame if he continues to "lord and master" it over her always'. She continues:

I do insist very strongly upon the fact that whatever may be the folly and tyranny of man in regard to woman, woman alone is in fault for his war against her. It is she who has taught him to fight for everything he wants. It is she who has always urged him to kick out hard at any obstacle that threatens to interfere with his getting his own way. (*Suffragette?* 16)

No longer does Corelli believe that women's love makes them vulnerable; she invests women with total control over the way men behave. Relations between the sexes cannot be on an equal footing for Corelli, one or the other must prevail.

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<sup>104</sup> Corelli, *Woman, or – Suffragette: A Question of National Choice*, p. 5. Ensuing references will be abbreviated and given in parentheses in the text.

Longer than most of her other essays, *Woman, or— Suffragette* contains more contradictions. Despite her claims on behalf of women, Corelli is quite disparaging about their capabilities and unlike Olive Schreiner sees no hope for the progressive evolution of the majority. She laments that

despite Madame Curie . . . despite the many increasing and well-merited honours won by women students in the various Universities, – despite a few notable women artists, musicians and writers, the sad but incontestable fact remains that brilliant and intellectual women are distinctly in the minority, and are likely always to remain so . . . No power, human or divine, can alter the inborn spirit of the purely frivolous feminine . . . [who] does not express much more intelligence than that of the uneducated squaw, decking herself out with beads and feathers, – and . . . does not appear to indicate the slightest promise of a change towards any higher development. (*Suffragette?* 24-5)

Using such broad generalisations, Corelli criticises many things about women: their sentiment ('in nine cases out of ten the sentiment of the average woman is more on the surface than in the soul'); their lack of self-control ('she always lacks the grand self-control which is the inward power of the great musician'); their inability to engender respect ('a large majority of women, recklessly casting aside everything that makes womanhood sacred, neither seek nor deserve . . . respect'); their selfishness ('They are too self-centred, and often too spiteful to one another to convince men of their possible greatness or sincerity of character. They are also much too individually egoistic'). Women are also impulsive ('women act so quickly on impulse, – sometimes a feline or tigress-like impulse'); and they lack ambition:

if we take a merely superficial view of women all over the world, their main objects of existence would seem to be marrying and breeding, and they show themselves so universally at one on this point that it is no wonder men refuse to think they can be moved by any higher aims than those which they share equally with the rabbit and the moth. (*Suffragette?* 7-33)

According to Corelli, women are also to blame for the erroneous impressions men have of them. In statements that betray both her opinion of herself and her vulnerability to criticism, she explains that this is not only because

they show the most cruel and acrimonious spite and jealousy when one of their sex becomes distinguished in art or letters, but because they are the first to start unkind reports about her and against her, – against her looks, her dress, her manner, and even her reputation. There is no length to which women's tongues will not run when 'downing' other women more brilliant than themselves. (*Suffragette?* 33-4)

Women indulge in tea-table scandal and bilious envy. Their interests, as portrayed in the women's sections of the popular press by other women or by incredibly stupid men, include fashion, recipes and care of their hair and hands. As 'Fool Rampant', they are the dupes of 'downgrading advertisements, which instruct them as to what a painted, powdered, padded, dyed, frizzled, shameless creature a woman *may* be, and often is'. All this is by way of proving that 'the majority of the fair sex are not as yet in any way fitted for the franchise, and, after all, it is the majority that counts' (*Suffragette?* 36). This is the same majority which buys Corelli's novels and it is sometimes a wonder that they do, given the author's patronising inclination to see herself as one apart from them, a voice in the wilderness and one of the few to whom the secrets of life – including what is best for women – have been divulged.

In this vein, she flatly states: 'I suppose, taking all the circumstances of my life and surroundings into consideration, that I have as good a right to claim a "vote" as anyone' and proceeds to describe in detail how she has 'had to work hard and continuously' for herself, without assistance from any man – no mention here of her father or of George Bentley – and how, on the contrary, many men are indebted to her for 'a helping hand out of difficulty'. 'I earn every pound I possess', she justifiably asserts in words not unlike those of Lady Tonbridge: 'I am a householder, paying rates and taxes, and I employ men who depend upon me for their wages, these men having a "right" to vote, while I have none' (*Suffragette?* 14). Nevertheless, she claims

no more rights than are already mine to the full, – and as for wanting a vote, why should I? As matters stand at present, I can win for any candidate in whom I may happen to be interested, at least forty or fifty votes, – perhaps more. Suppose . . . I did secure my own *one* vote, should I be better off than I am now, with the certainty of forty or fifty male voters at my beck and call, ready to do precisely as I bid them? (*Suffragette?* 13)<sup>105</sup>

Reinforcing her own public persona, Corelli suggests that a group of beautiful, exquisitely-dressed women pleading 'with tuneful eloquence and

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<sup>105</sup> E. M. Forster highlights the ambiguous position of women who seek, or are forced to seek, to exert their influence through men: 'Mrs Plynlimon, when condemning suffragettes, had said: "The woman who can't influence her husband to vote the way she wants ought to be ashamed of herself." Margaret had winced, but she was influencing Henry now, and though pleased at her little victory, she knew that she had won it by the methods of the harem' – E. M. Forster, *Howards End*, 1910; rpt: Edward Arnold, London, 1947, p. 243.

reasonable dignity' might so bedazzle members of the House of Commons that they would be granted 'anything and everything on the spot', but then almost as an afterthought she notes: 'But, – and here is the sorrowful part of it, – one never sees any pretty women among those who clamour for their "rights" . . . because every pretty woman knows she has every "right" she can ever want' (*Suffragette?* 38). The following unfortunate metaphor describing women's power over men exemplifies Corelli's lack of discipline over her prose:

The clever woman sits at home, – and like a meadow spider spreads a pretty web of rose and gold, spangled with diamond dew. Flies – or men – tumble in by scores, – and she holds them all prisoners at her pleasure with a silken strand as fine as a hair. Nature gave her at her birth the 'right' to do this, and if she does it well, she will always have her web full.  
(*Suffragette?* 31)

The wonder is that Corelli maintained her popularity as a writer, for in this single article she consciously and unconsciously insults both female and male readers. The most likely explanation is that most of her readers were as idealistically inclined as the author herself and so failed to recognise the full implications of her words.

**V: MY 'LITTLE BIT'**

In 1919 Collins published *My 'Little Bit'*, a collection of Corelli's articles and speeches written, with two exceptions, during the Great War. The exceptions are 'The Great Unrest' (1912) and 'Savage Glory: An Appeal Against War' (1913). The principle governing the presentation of the articles comprising *My 'Little Bit'* is obscure: it is not chronological, does not separate articles from speeches and is not based upon any obvious topical grouping. Such a seemingly-haphazard arrangement is unfortunate because it emphasises Corelli's contradictory assertions and arguments: had the articles been arranged chronologically, for example, they might have presented the author's understandably varied reflection of and reaction to life in England throughout the war. As it is, *My 'Little Bit'* resists orderly critical analysis.

The majority of the essays contain a large amount of jingoistic propaganda, representing Corelli's 'little bit' or her contribution to the war effort. Some, like 'The Splendid Service of the Sea' and 'Recruiting Speech', are what the latter implies – a call to men to join the armed forces and for women to teach

‘their own boys, and other women’s boys too, the inestimable value of service’.<sup>106</sup> Others, such as ‘Wanted – More Women!’, ‘“The Time of Our Lives”: Our Women in War’, ‘The Triumph of Womanhood’ and ‘Shells; and Other Shells’ deal with the activities of women in wartime and are significant because they reflect the way in which some of Corelli’s views on the woman question changed radically during the war.

In the pre-war essay ‘Savage Glory’, Corelli instinctively links male predominance in scientific endeavour with modern weaponry. She describes the ‘new long-range quick-firing gun’ as ‘dastardly’ and its operation is as ‘cowardly as to stab a man in the back unawares’. The submarine as ‘a truly devilish invention’ (*Little Bit* 13). Corelli’s attitude toward weapons of warfare, later expressed more forcefully in *The Secret Power* through the figure of Roger Seaton and his deadly invention, is evident from her consideration of the submarine:

No one ever seems to pause and consider what an amount of fiendish cunning in the mind of man has evolved the construction of this deadly engine of warfare – still less does the question ever appear to suggest itself as to whether such a perfidious way compassing slaughter is humane . . . or truly ‘civilised’ . . . modern science has sharpened our wits to a more merciless edge – we are cunning enough to hide ourselves and our instruments of death from our intended victims after the fashion of assassins lurking in ambush. (*Little Bit* 13)

These words reflect the Darwinistic notion that the supremacy of mankind is due to his ruthless ability to conquer all opposition. No doubt comments like these contribute to Annette Federico’s opinion that ‘Corelli’s repulsion of “masculine forms” on the political front was . . . partly based on her suspicion that masculine culture – including the results of science, technology and industrial capitalism – trampled on distinctly feminine features’.<sup>107</sup> Nevertheless, Corelli’s attitude changed during the war and, in ‘Wanted – More Women’, using a mixture of Biblical and evolutionary metaphor, she calls upon women to join the ‘struggle for the Right against Might, because it is their own cause – the very essence of their existence’ (*Little Bit* 61). She threatens: ‘we shall have our revenge . . . but not now’ and encourages women to make the most of the opportunity ‘to show our ability, our powers of organisation, our reasonableness, our courage, our

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<sup>106</sup> ‘The Splendid Service of the Sea’ in *My ‘Little Bit’*, p. 112. Ensuing references to *My ‘Little Bit’* will be abbreviated and given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>107</sup> Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 103.



industry and our patience' (*Little Bit* 63). Then, she writes (paraphrasing Asquith) 'We will have taken our place, and we shall continue to take it, and to keep it!' (*Little Bit* 65). This essay does not exclude female aggression from Corelli's plans for the advance of women.

Of the 'feminist' essays, 'Wanted – More Women! An Appeal' berates men for their historical mistreatment of the opposite sex. Corelli calls for more women to work in the munitions factories, notwithstanding the fact that

in peace times man has denied you the very possession of ordinary common sense; he has thrust you out of intellectual and academic honours; he has grudged you any place in art, literature, or science, and he has made you the butt of every cynic, comedian, and caricaturist ever since he arrogated to himself the 'everything' of life. You have been and are the grist to the mill of the comic press; your fathers have often been glad to sell you in the marriage market to the highest bidders; your lovers have played with you and deserted you . . . your husbands have often been faithless and perjured; and in certain of man's legal forms, you have been classed with 'children, criminals, and lunatics'. (*Little Bit* 60)

Corelli lays the blame for savage warmongering squarely upon men, arguing that the stupid, blind, criminal and selfish impulses which lead to war have also caused men to degrade women and obstruct their intellectual aspirations (*Little Bit* 61). She reiterates the argument that, had men from the beginning made women their mental and spiritual equals, by this time there would be no wars. Woman's 'love would have constrained and educated them, her instincts guided them, her inborn maternity shielded them from the wrongs their ambitions and jealousies persuade them to wreak upon each other' (*Little Bit* 61).

The most significant change in Corelli's attitude toward women is her volte-face concerning female suffrage. Writing in 'Is All Well With England?', she admits that 'Some years ago I was one of the many who were strongly opposed to the "Votes for Women" movement, judging it to be wholly unnecessary' (*Little Bit* 170-1). Alluding to a notion hinted at as early as in *My Wonderful Wife*, she explains that she had believed in Walter Scott's 'exalted specimens of the race' until it was forced upon her that these were figments of the novelist's 'delightful imagination', and that men more often derided than worshipped women. Again she mentions the legal classification of women with 'children, criminals and lunatics', indicating, through repetition, just how offensive she felt such a position

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to be. These factors combined with her observation of women during the war ‘going forth in the places of men, going in thousands, without demur or hesitation, and taking their full share of the hardest and most menial labour’, to arouse in Corelli a belief that

it was no longer possible to deny [women] equal rights with men in every relation of life and every phase of work. By every law of justice they deserved the vote – and I who, as a woman, was once against it, am bound to support the cause. (*Little Bit* 171-2)

‘All the same’, unable entirely to relinquish her former view, she adds: ‘I shall be sorry to see them in Parliament; deeply sorry to find them straying so far out of their higher and far more influential sphere’ (*Little Bit* 172). In ‘The Women’s Vote: Nature versus Politics’, an essay which closes with the fervent hope that no woman will ever be returned to Parliament, Corelli asserts that women want to have their own way up to a certain point but prefer, ultimately, to defer to men (*Little Bit* 296).

‘Shells; and Other Shells’ primarily praises the work of women in the munitions factories and in the shipyards and roundly asserts that ‘WITHOUT WOMEN’S WORK THE WAR COULD NOT BE WON!’ (*Little Bit* 212). ‘The Triumph of Womanhood’, which was written for the Scottish Women’s Hospital, takes a more comprehensive, albeit idealised, view of women’s role during and after the war. It commences with a vision of ‘angelic woman’ who, having shaken off the trammels that for many centuries man had fastened about her, radiates through the ‘gloom and blood and slaughter of this world war’. Corelli portrays woman as cheerfully moving beside man ‘through the poisonous smoke of battle and the thunder of the guns’ and as being ‘swift to rescue him, and first to soothe’ when he is wounded and fallen. The Eve allegories have disappeared and woman, now madonna-like, is indifferent to all but suffering. Corelli asserts:

To Woman, in her mother-love and mercy, friend and foe are alike indifferent; all that her pitying eyes see are the gaping wounds, the flowing blood, the torn and disfigured limbs – her province is to save, heal, and comfort if she can. She knows that with God there are no nations, but that all men are human beings, subject to the same sufferings, the same deaths . . . she may sometimes think wistfully that had they sought her counsel they might have found some better way out of their quarrel than the killing of their brothers. (*Little Bit* 192-3)

Corelli’s tone in this essay is uncharacteristically subdued, although, as always, the views she expresses are idealised. She is now only slightly critical of

men, reasoning that ‘most men, especially our heroic fighters, are touchingly grateful for women’s kindness and devoted nursing, while fairly astonished at their endurance, cheerfulness, patience, and devotion’ (*‘Little Bit’* 194-5). Even more surprisingly, in this essay she is generous toward women. Whilst admitting that there are some ‘worthless women – fool-women, toy-women, – fit for nothing but posturing in various attitudes and sets of clothing’, in an evolutionary metaphor Corelli predicts that these, as well as other natural aberrations such as the ‘ape-like’ Bernard Shaw alluded to in ‘The Whirlwind’, ‘will find their level and grow fewer as time goes on’ (*‘Little Bit’* 195).

In a complete reversal of the stand taken in *Woman, or – Suffragette?*, Corelli acknowledges in ‘The Triumph of Womanhood’ that women have mastered their ‘early Victorian nerves’, learned ‘the great secret of self-control’ and acquired ‘wonderful vigour and courage’ (*‘Little Bit’* 194). She sees them as having attained her ideal of independent womanliness:

This great war has somewhat altered the lines of the masculine perspective, for men have been forced to admit that women can do all their work as well as themselves, and sometimes better. They can even build ships and aeroplanes, and all this without losing the spirit of womanliness. Strange as it may seem, the woman who might lately have been seen hammering at the keel of a ‘Dreadnought’ can prove herself soft-handed in tending the wounded, and most reverently loving in her last cares for the dying and the dead. (*‘Little Bit’* 193-4)

She argues that ‘the supposed “incapacities” of woman’ never existed other than in ‘the hopelessly unintelligent of her sex which have their counterpart in man’, and points out that woman has ‘supported her share of the burden of life under a stupid system of repression and tyranny which has frequently resulted in discouragement, weariness, and indifference’ (*‘Little Bit’* 194-5). For the future, Corelli envisages a new role for woman:

give her the chance to be her true, free self, and she will be the most powerful factor in the world for the betterment of humanity . . . [and] now at last Woman has her chance! And those who see her day dawning, must and will pray earnestly that she will use her powers always for the highest and the best. (*‘Little Bit’* 195)

Rita Felski’s warning against an identity politics which associates female gender with a guarantee of resistance is again relevant because, despite Corelli’s claims on behalf of women, she does not seek to overthrow male dominance. She concludes this essay with the explanation that the use of woman’s powers ‘for the

highest and the best' means their use 'to the end that Man may find in her not a "drag on the wheel," but a great lifting strength to bear him upward and onward to that completeness of noble living which from the beginning God has ordained' (*Little Bit* 195). Once again, Corelli has returned to the argument that women's freedom is not an end in itself. Only when cooking is a woman free to consider her own needs, in all else her satisfactory existence depends upon her maintaining a subordinate role in a partnership with a man.

Eventually, Corelli consolidates and reconciles many of the contradictory notions expressed in her essays. She develops her vision of an ideal feminine but independent woman, a scientist who is the equal of any man and one who looks on her inventions as progeny designed to contribute to the betterment of humankind. Unconcerned with mere politics, Morgana, heroine of *The Secret Power*, is preoccupied with the future of the human race.

## CHAPTER TWELVE: *THE SECRET POWER*

### I: PLOT, CHARACTERISATION, NARRATIVE VOICE

The plot of *The Secret Power* relies upon the tension Corelli creates through the opposition of the three main characters of the novel. There is no character development as each is a Corelli stereotype, although the scientist Roger Seaton is not entirely a villain but, like El Râmi in *The Soul of Lilith*, a Faustus figure who has opportunities to choose between good and evil. Tension exists between the pale, ethereal but nonetheless queenly and creative scientist Morgana Royal, and the ‘black bear’ Roger Seaton, a destructive scientist, and is played out through the love affair they do not quite have. There is also tension between Seaton and Manella Soriso, a young servant who loves him passionately. The last area of tension is that between the white, elfin Morgana, scientist and sophisticate, and the darkly beautiful Manella, passionate and primitive.

Some time prior to the commencement of the main events of the novel, Morgana had introduced the brilliant but unworldly Seaton into New York society with aim of working with him on altruistic scientific projects connected with radioactivity.<sup>108</sup> The misogynistic Seaton believed that Morgana wanted to steal his work, but he could not avoid falling in love with her so he abandoned his dilemma and secluded himself in an isolated ‘consumption hut’ attached to a remote sanatorium located in a desert in California in order to pursue his scientific inquiries in solitude.

The novel opens with an introductory exchange between the cynical scientist and Manella who brings his food and loves him unrestrainedly. Shortly thereafter, Morgana also quits New York to return to her home, *en route* paying a final visit to Seaton with the intention of persuading him to change his mind. Of course, she meets Manella and the women are attracted to each other despite their differences, but the meeting of the two scientists is unrewarding.

Morgana travels to Sicily to oversee the renovation of her sumptuous villa and to take her first flight in a secret airship of her own design, and also to indulge in philosophical conversation with her neighbour, Don Aloysius, her staff, her chaperone and various stray guests, scenes which afford Corelli plenty of opportunities to discourse upon her favourite topics. The airship’s inaugural flight is successful, as is Morgana’s subsequent aerial search for a mysterious Brazen City. Although refused permission to land, she communicates on a sound ray with a resident of the city and learns her destiny. Returning to Sicily, she discovers the

true identity of Don Aloysius and that the Brazen City is in fact made of gold and represents a kind of New Jerusalem where advanced beings await the second coming of Christ (*SP* 255, 257). Soon after hearing an Angelus bell from Don Aloysius' monastery, Morgana receives a message on a sound ray from the city instructing her to journey to California to rescue Seaton from an unspecified danger.

Meanwhile, Seaton has discovered the power to annihilate nations. Corelli is not explicit about this discovery but hints at a germ-laden radioactive bomb (*SP* 135, 156). Certainly it is some kind of radioactive substance as Seaton keeps it in a container similar to those in which Morgana stores the fuel for her airship. Seaton summons a senator to his hut and offers to sell his discovery to the United States government on the condition that it is used as a deterrent in the event that any nation threatens to go to war against another. This occasions a long discussion during which Corelli puts forward her views on war – she has once more become pacifist and blames the press and money-hungry governments for causing wars (*SP* 138-41) – and on the degeneration of the human race, but the outcome is that Sam Gwent is unable to give Seaton the required undertakings on behalf of his government. The scientist thereafter proclaims himself the sole instrument of the Supreme Intelligence and the master of the world.

This part of *The Secret Power* is reminiscent of Corelli's essay, 'Savage Glory', an anti-war statement in which Corelli, using a Darwinian metaphor of the savage as undeveloped mankind, argues that 'WAR is unquestionably the thrust and blow of untamed Savagery in the face of Civilisation' – 'Civilisation' meaning humankind in an advanced evolutionary state. Related Darwinian references include mention of the idea that 'various tribes of animals and insects do make war on each other', although Corelli reasons that such wars 'occur much more frequently among the low-grades of nature-life than the high'.<sup>109</sup> She states more conventionally: 'That every animal should fight or work individually for food is the natural law - the spirit of prey is one from which Man himself is never exempt', and follows this claim with an explanation:

During the far-off periods of his evolution from embryonic animalism towards the higher potentialities of his being, he was

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<sup>108</sup> Corelli, *The Secret Power*, p. 20. Ensuing references to this novel will be abbreviated and given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>109</sup> Corelli, 'Savage Glory' in *My Little Bit*, p. 4.

doubtless forced to fight his way against such opposing obstacles as threatened to stay or overwhelm him in his progress, but now - now when he stands, or thinks he stands, on a height of intellectual power and attainment which enables him to discard old barbarisms, surely it would be possible for him to control the lurking remains of his original savagery.<sup>110</sup>

In the light of these comments, Roger Seaton stands condemned as a low form of life and not, as he thinks, the master of the universe.

By the time Morgana in her airship reaches the megalomaniac Seaton, the Californian desert has imploded as a result of an earthquake. Seaton and Manella are seriously injured and the container of radioactive material has disappeared. Morgana flies the wounded couple back to her villa where under expert treatment Manella recovers. Seaton also survives but despite all care is doomed to remain mentally and physically the shell of a man because 'he has been playing recklessly with a great natural force, which he has not entirely understood, for some destructive purpose, and . . . it has recoiled on himself' (*SP* 310). Morgana installs Seaton in her villa with Manella, whose 'natural' womanly love has not diminished, and flies off to the Golden City. Corelli's *L'envoi* to the novel explains that recently some travellers found the wreckage of an airship in the Great Desert in Africa and their tales of a nearby Brazen City found their way into the sensational press. Morgana, however, like the ever-young Diana, lives

and can make her voice heard when she will along the 'Sound Ray' – that wonderful 'wireless' which is soon to be declared to the world. For there is no distance that is not bridged by light, – and no separation of sounds that cannot be again brought into unison and harmony. 'There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy,' – and the 'Golden City' is one of those things! 'Masters of the world' are poor creatures at best, – but the secret Makers of the New Race are the gods of the Future! (*SP* 341-2)

In *The Secret Power*, Corelli creates her ideal woman in the figure of Morgana. She is tiny and pale and repeatedly described as fairy, elfin, ethereal, elemental, other-worldly and fey, and as resembling a butterfly.<sup>111</sup> There is some doubt surrounding the status of Morgana's otherworldliness, as it is not clear at first whether this is a temporal character deficiency or a spiritual character

<sup>110</sup> Corelli, 'Savage Glory' in *My Little Bit*, p. 9.

<sup>111</sup> See, for example, *The Secret Power*, pp. 14, 33, 35, 42, 44, 49, 93, 102, 117, 168, 174, 197, 295 and 298 regarding Morgana's ethereal nature and pp. 29, 39 and 197 for analogies of her appearance to that of a butterfly.

attribute (*SP* 20, 190, 231). Nevertheless, she is a brilliant scientist: her marvellous airship is powered silently by radioactivity and all its scientific paraphernalia is charmingly disguised. With a steering cabin and staff quarters as well as ‘daintily fitted sleeping rooms’ and ‘two exquisitely furnished saloons’, it is reminiscent of Santoris’s yacht in *The Life Everlasting*, although not symbolic of a dream but figured through analogies with great birds and named the ‘White Eagle’ (*SP* 88-95). Morgana is not only a scientist, she is a philanthropist and philosopher, ‘the richest woman in America’ and an excellent businesswoman. Her only failing is an inability to love ordinary men (*SP* 32, 49, 82; 78, 79). This failing and the ambiguity surrounding her otherworldliness are explained late in the novel when it transpires that she is destined to become a member of another, more advanced race which resides in the Golden City – a race similar to those portrayed as inhabiting the planets in *A Romance of Two Worlds* (*SP* 75-9, 224-32).

The figure of Manella Soriso portrays an alternative ideal woman. In an obvious reference to the archetype of the noble savage, Corelli presents Manella as the primitive feminine empowered by nature and love. Seaton represents fallible ‘Man’ in Corelli’s view: clever but emotionally retarded and bent on using science to harness the forces of nature for destructive purposes. Like Catherine Harland’s, his disease is moral as much as it is physical.

The only other character of significance in this novel is Don Aloysius, who is a cross between a Jesuit priest and Heliobas (*SP* 82). Don Aloysius is revealed as indigenous to the Golden City but temporarily sent to earth to accomplish an unidentified but Christ-like task. His presence is signified by bells, though Corelli does not make an ecclesiastical or (like Virginia Woolf in *Mrs Dalloway*) a temporal connection through this symbol. The bells are associated with the Golden City and represent a ‘Sound Ray’, the ‘light which carries music on its wings and creates form as it goes’ and which is the means of communication between the Golden City and earth. As Don Aloysius explains: ‘the “Sanctus” bell suggests wireless telegraphy or telepathy, that is to say, communication between ourselves and the divine Unseen’ (*SP* 257;181). Although Don Aloysius resembles the other powerful Heliobas figures in



Corelli's novels, Morgana is unique for a Corelli heroine in that she is his spiritual equal and intellectual superior.<sup>112</sup>

The action of the novel takes place mainly in Sicily and the Californian desert, although there are some scenes in New York society. Morgana is Celtic, not Scotch like whisky as she is at pains to point out, but Highland-born of Phoenician-Egyptian ancestry (*SP* 171-2).<sup>113</sup> Seaton is American, Manella of Spanish parentage, and Don Aloysius was educated in England and Scotland and lives in Sicily. Most of Morgana's staff are Sicilian, although her tame chaperone is English. The government and society ostensibly under scrutiny are American, but the author's criticisms are generalisations designed to appeal to domestic and overseas readers. Corelli displays none of the nice differentiation between Americans and Europeans observed and described in such detail by her contemporary Henry James.

The events of *The Secret Power* are described by a third person narrator who explores the thoughts of the characters and comments upon their actions. Frequently Corelli's characters are her direct mouthpieces, most obviously Mavis, Delicia and Innocent. In other novels she uses a first person narrator to convey both the story and her beliefs, as in *A Romance of Two Worlds* and *The Life Everlasting*, or to comment on the good and evil characters of the novel, as in *The Sorrows of Satan*. In *The Secret Power*, the narrator contributes an additional view of the issues discussed in the novel. Roger Seaton's attitude toward Morgana, for example, is mediated by this narratorial voice:

Then admiration yielded to the usual under-sense of masculine resentment against feminine intellectuality, and a kind of smouldering wrath and opposition took the place of his former chivalry and the almost tender pleasure he had previously felt in her exceptional genius and ability. (*SP* 116)

The sarcasm thus exhibited betrays Corelli's habitual inability to separate herself from her narrator and the novel contains many more characteristic narratorial interjections which serve solely to articulate the author's own views. The narrator's affected mockery of Morgana, for example, reveals Corelli's own bitterness:

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<sup>112</sup> Such as, for example, Heliobas in *A Romance of Two Worlds* and *Ardat*, the unnamed Supreme Head of the Brethren of the Cross in *The Soul of Lilith* and Aselzion in *The Life Everlasting*.

<sup>113</sup> The Heliobas figures also share this Phoenician-Egyptian ancestry.

A woman! Man's pretty toy! – man's patient slave! How should a woman master any secret! Engineers and mechanics laughed scornfully and shrugged their shoulders – yet – yet – the great airship stared them in the face as a thing created, – a thing of such power and possibility as seemed wholly incredible. And now the creator, – the woman – had arrived, – the woman whose rough designs on paper had been carefully followed and elaborated into actual shape; – and there was a tense state of expectation among all the workers. (SP 84)

Such a comparison of 'toy' women with women of intellectual substance is one of the author's favourite tropes. Corelli also repeatedly attacks male dismissal of female scientific achievement, not only through the character of Morgana but also in frequent references to the work of Marie Curie (SP 19, 195-6).<sup>114</sup>

## II: GENRE

*The Secret Power* varies the pattern of Corelli's allegorical romances in that it contains the parallel quests of Morgana and Seaton, the first of which leads to eternal life and the second to devastation. Otherwise the novel follows Corelli's preferred form, incorporating science fantasy, social commentary, her religious creed, excoriation of the press and a love story. As in *A Romance of Two Worlds*, *Ardath*, *The Life Everlasting*, *The Young Diana* and so many of Corelli's other novels, there are mystical apparitions and voices, strange volatile fluids, twin souls, religious explanations for scientific phenomena, pseudo-scientific rationales for fantastic occurrences and detailed explanations of the role of heat and light in the processes of creation and maintenance of life (SP 89-95, 261; 136, 295; 73, 181-2; 129, 289; 229-30, 260-1; 98, 110, 257).

Still present is her habit of juxtaposing the significant and the trivial, such as the repeated insertion of invective against newspapers into the otherwise serious dialogue between the scientist and the senator about the nature of war, the responsibilities of government and the future of mankind. Corelli also displays her typically unfortunate choice of metaphor, describing Manella's eyes as 'great head-lamps flaring out of that motor-brain' (SP 39). The awkwardness of this comparison is exacerbated by the fact that it relates to a character whose existence

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<sup>114</sup> See also, for example, 'The Triumph of Womanhood' in *My 'Little Bit'*, p. 195; *Woman, or – Suffragette?*, p. 24; and 'Coward Adam' in *Free Opinions Freely Expressed*, p. 149-50.

in the novel is totally reliant on her primitive state and who confesses herself to be ignorant and slow to learn and is seen by others as such (*SP* 7, 46, 55).

Corelli attacks her standard targets in *The Secret Power*: the press (camera-men in particular); governments; the marriage market; the clergy.<sup>115</sup> Her usual denunciations, however, are somewhat muted in this novel. More importantly, she re-examines her own interpretation of evolutionary theory and social Darwinism in a post-war context, exploring the idea of a return to nature in reaction to the unprecedented devastation caused by a war fought with powerful new technology based on scientific discoveries. *The Secret Power* is also unusual because Corelli seems to be less certain of her own position. While on the one hand she appears to be advocating a return to a primitive, feminine, creative nature, on the other she denigrates women's reproductive role and suggests that primitive nature is barbaric (*SP* 99, 167). She pursues the notion of female supremacy in scientific endeavour at the same time as she questions the value of scientific achievements capable of the wholesale destruction of human life.

Post-war British literature reflects a loss of innocence and the end of hope for ever-progressive evolution and these losses are evident in the work of writers as disparate as Virginia Woolf and Marie Corelli. Both novelists are clearly concerned about the effect of the war on the mental health of individuals and the nation.<sup>116</sup> Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* paints a sympathetic and frightening picture of the effects of shell-shock on Septimus Smith and satirises mental health professionals through the characters of Dr. Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw. Though less able to articulate her concerns, Corelli, too, is conscious of profound changes in the nation's psyche. Sam Gwent, representative of the United States government in *The Secret Power*, experiences 'a touch of what is called "nerves"' when he hears of Seaton's invention or thinks of its implications, and speaking of the suicide of his nephew remarks 'My sister loved her boy, – Jack. His death has driven her silly for the time – doctors say she will recover – that it's only "shock." "Shock" is answerable for a good many tragedies since the European war' (*SP* 136, 156; 131). Later in the novel, at a society wedding devised to allow the author to vent her criticism of the marriage market, Gwent thinks of the

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<sup>115</sup> See, for example, *The Secret Power*, pp. 19, 20, 47, 130, 138 and 278; 133, 141 and 278; 28-30, 38 and 166-9; and 87 and 277.

<sup>116</sup> *The Secret Power* pre-dates *Mrs Dalloway* by four years.

discoveries and megalomania of Roger Seaton and muses: ‘he’s not quite sane . . . He has been obsessed by the horrible carnage of the Great War, and disgusted by the utter inefficiency of Governments since the armistice’ (*SP* 278).

The solutions Corelli attempts to offer in *The Secret Power* are essentially the same as those of her creed as elaborated in *A Romance of Two Worlds* and *The Life Everlasting*: individuals who progress through this world according to the true teachings of Christ will emerge in their next life as higher beings and each has her or his predestined twin soul. Although Roger Seaton fails in his quest, Morgana succeeds and moves to a plane of heightened awareness in the Golden City (*SP* 326-7).

There is, however, less emphasis in *The Secret Power* on Corelli’s creed and more questioning of whether it is possible to return to a primitive, natural society or whether the human race as a whole has progressed too far in the wrong direction and should be obliterated to make way for a different species. Morgana refers to an expected ‘Change when all things shall be made new’ and claims: ‘Human nature is craving for a change – for a newer world – a newer race, – and those who see that Nature is *not* “brainless” but full of intelligent conception, are sure that the change will come’ (*SP* 243). In this Corelli reflects a catastrophist view of evolution, based on an interpretation of Biblical events like the Great Flood and the demise of Sodom and Gomorra in terms of her vision of ‘Nature’ as the mind of God doing away with what is rotten on the earth in order to allow new, untainted species to flourish. These sentiments are first articulated in essays like ‘The Whirlwind’ and recur in all Corelli’s subsequent work up to her last novel, *Love and the Philosopher*, published in 1923, wherein she suggests through the character of Jack Durham that London, Berlin and the other big cities are ‘full of filth’, ‘muck-heaps’ that badly want clearing. *Love and the Philosopher* is set during the period of the Great War and Corelli argues that the human wickedness which caused the war will have to be wiped out through the effects of war. ‘The Supreme Being is tired of looking at the muck-heaps. He wants a clean world. And we’ve all got to help Him clean it! – with our blood and our lives’, exclaims Jack.<sup>117</sup>

Despite her suggestion that world salvation may lie in the creation of a new race within a more natural order in the protective hands of women, Corelli in

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<sup>117</sup> Corelli, *Love and the Philosopher*, p. 66.

*The Secret Power* also questions the role of women in such a revitalised world. Notwithstanding her idealisation of Manella as a noble, primitive woman and her argument that women are the creators and men the destroyers, the author cannot consign women solely to the role of mother and some of the harshest words in the novel are reserved for the world as ‘a breeding place and a dying place’ (*SP* 67; 18). Corelli’s interpretation of evolutionary theory cannot accommodate what she, now almost seventy years old, sees as the corrupt state of the world, yet she has no real alternative to offer and only seems able to suggest a half-hearted and inadequate fantasy solution in the existence of the Golden City (*SP* 129). The splitting of the quest theme in this novel signifies its departure from the certainty of Corelli’s earlier work.

### III: EXPERTS AND EVOLUTION IN *THE SECRET POWER*

*The Secret Power* is singular in that Corelli relies on expert scientific, as opposed to occult, opinion to establish the fact that her main characters, Morgana Royal and Roger Seaton, are intellectual equals and respected scientists. At their first meeting, Seaton is surprised to hear the ‘little fair creature with beseeching blue eyes and gold hair’ introduced by a distinguished scientist as ‘one of our most brilliant theorists on the future development of radio activity’ (*SP* 115). The professor engaged to treat Seaton and Manella after the earthquake is also amazed when he first meets Morgana, despite having corresponded with her for some time ‘on current questions of scientific importance’:

From the extremely learned and incisive tone of her letters he had judged her to be an elderly woman of profound scholarship who had spent the greater part of her life in study, and his astonishment at the sight of the small, dainty creature who received him in the library of the Palazzo d’Oro was beyond all verbal expression. (*SP* 297-8)

No doubt Corelli has in mind her own persona and her correspondence with W. R. Gregory and Lord Haldane.

The same professor is again surprised to discover that his male patient is ‘one of the most brilliant of our younger scientists . . . Roger Seaton, whose experiments in the condensation of radio-activity startled America some four or five years ago’ (*SP* 310-1). Corelli’s use of expert opinion – a distinguished scientist and a professor – to establish the authority of her characters exemplifies the extent to which the authority of science had replaced that of religion. As part

of the scientific world view, a new hierarchy was developing within which distinctions were being made between the knowledge of the specialist elite and the generalised assumptions of public opinion. Corelli makes quite clear in earlier novels like *The Mighty Atom* that she disapproves of the secularisation of authority, but in *The Secret Power* she recognises the need to follow the new, scientific conventions.

That the scientific world view was becoming predominant is evident from the way in which evolutionary and biological metaphor had become part of the vernacular. Corelli uses evolutionary metaphor to describe spiritual progression in *A Romance of Two Worlds*, and evolution in *My Wonderful Wife* signifies the positive and negative aspects of the struggle to survive. *The Life Everlasting* describes the battle between the forces of good and evil, spiritual and psychological progress, and life itself extensively in biological and evolutionary terms, as well as in spiritual terms. Corelli relies even more heavily on evolutionary and biological metaphor in *The Secret Power*, using these devices to question the very existence of humanity. The spiritual dimension of this 1921 novel is no longer as big as the universe travelled by the narrator of *A Romance of Two Worlds*, but has shrunk to the size of the terrestrial Golden City, its representative Don Aloysius and Morgana. Although a believer in spiritualism, Corelli is a product of the time when scientific motifs infiltrated every aspect of contemporary life and language.

Like many of her post-war contemporaries, Corelli now has a more pessimistic view of evolution. She regards as wasteful the disappearance of earlier, advanced civilisations and repeatedly through the words of her characters asks whether the purpose of creation is solely to live, eat, breed and die (*SP* 56, 180, 186, 244-5; 109, 221, 266).<sup>118</sup> Her revised view of evolution is heard most stridently through the words of Roger Seaton who derides ‘the magnetism of the male for the female, the female for the male, – the magnetism that pulls the opposite sexes together in order to keep this planet supplied with an ever new crop of fools’ (*SP* 6). Seaton argues for a dramatic pause in the reproduction of human life:

The world is over-ripe and over-rotten, – and it is over-crowded with a festering humanity that is *inhuman*, and worse than bestial in its furious grappling for self and greed. One remedy

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<sup>118</sup> See also *The Life Everlasting*, p. 89 which refers to creatures living merely to eat and be eaten.

for the evil would be that no children should be born in it for the next thirty or forty years – the relief would be incalculable, – a monstrous burden would be lifted, and there would be some chance of betterment. (*SP* 129-30)

When she expresses similar doubts concerning the future of the race in the words of Morgana, however, Corelli must be taken more seriously. Seaton, after all, is a destructive character whereas Morgana is creative. Yet even Morgana asserts: ‘I shall not aid in the continuation of the race . . . [It] is too stupid and too miserable to merit continuance. Everything has been done for it that can be done, over and over again, from the beginning’ (*SP* 24-5). Alluding to the disappearance of species, Morgana later wonders: ‘why the race should be continued at all . . . The time is ripe for a new creation’ (*SP* 70). Reflecting post-war anxiety she states: ‘I have not worked for peace or happiness . . . because to my mind neither peace nor happiness exist . . . All Nature is at strife with itself, incessantly labouring for such attainment as can hardly be won’ (*SP* 97-8). As a result, she reasons,

Human nature is tired . . . of the same old round of working, mating, breeding and dying – for no results really worth having! Civilisation after civilisation has arisen – always with strife and difficulty, only to pass away, leaving, in many cases, scarce a memory. Human nature begins to weary of the continuous ‘grind’ – it demands the ‘why’ of its ceaseless labour . . . Human nature is craving for a change – for a newer world – a newer race. (*SP* 244-5)

Although these words echo Catherine Harland’s description of life as a ‘frightful scheme’ in *The Life Everlasting*, Catherine is a defeated representative of the forces of evil in that novel, which has a totally optimistic conclusion.<sup>119</sup> In *The Secret Power*, however, even the oracular Don Aloysius seems to question the possibility of a progressive evolution toward happiness:

It is a dubious question . . . When we view the majesty and loveliness of nature – we cannot but believe we were intended to enjoy the splendid treasures of beauty freely spread out before us, – then again, if we look back thousands of years and consider the great civilisations of the past that have withered into dust and are now forgotten, we cannot help wondering why there should be such a waste of life for apparently no purpose. (*SP* 180)

Corelli makes no effort to refute Darwin’s theory of evolution in *The Secret Power*, but blames it for what she perceives as the universal spread of

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<sup>119</sup> See *The Life Everlasting*, p. 89, for example.

unhappiness. Through the words of Morgana, she argues that people were more content when in ignorance of their origins:

People used to be happy because they were ignorant – they had no sort of idea why they were born, or what they came into the world for. Now they've learned the horrid truth that they are only here just as the trees and flowers are here – to breed other trees and flowers and then go out of it – for no purpose, apparently . . . They used to believe in another life after this – but that hope has been knocked out of them. Besides it's quite open to question whether any of us would care to live again. (SP 16)

Corelli accuses the Darwinian struggle to survive of being the cause of war. Once more using Sam Gwent as her mouthpiece, she argues that 'all nature is at war with itself, it's a perpetual struggle to live, and it's evident that the struggle was intended and ordained as universal law'. (SP 143)

Through the words of Seaton, Corelli questions the creation of things she considers to be ugly, like a red-haired youth who is regarded with contemptuous amusement and of whom Seaton remarks 'Ugly little devil . . . And yet Nature made him, as she makes many hideous things – in a hurry, I presume, without any time for details or artistic finish' (SP 114). Although still not acknowledging the role of natural selection, Corelli now questions the processes of Nature – hitherto seen as the working mind of God – and seems uncertain whether the creative process is as orderly and as progressive as she had once been convinced. Corelli saw the post-war world as overwhelmed by destruction, waste and ugliness.

#### **IV: WOMEN AND SCIENCE**

In *The Secret Power*, microbes form the basis of several scientific analogies which link the novel's underlying themes. Microbes and degeneration theory are combined to signify the notion of the regression of humanity due to spiritual, moral and social disease. Corelli also uses the idea of humans as diseased microbes, infecting each other. The metaphor is based on the work of Ronald Ross who, in 1902, was awarded a Nobel prize for discovering the life cycle of the malarial parasite carried by mosquitoes.<sup>120</sup> Corelli's post-war concern about the vulnerability of nations to disaster from the air fits neatly into the

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<sup>120</sup> J. A. V. Chapple, *Science and Literature in the Nineteenth Century*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1986, p. 180.



metaphor, which also lends itself, in the context of this novel, to the notion of germ warfare. The microbe metaphor of *The Secret Power* is capable of encompassing the relationship between all living things.

Morgana equates people with microbes as she looks over Naples from her airship: ‘Poor little microbes! How sad it is to see them crawling about and festering down there! What *is* the use of them!’ (SP 187). When Rivardi remonstrates that human beings love, work, think and create, Morgana replies, ‘Microbes do the same – only we don’t take the trouble to think about them! But if we knew their lives and intentions, I dare say we should find they are quite as clever in their own line as we are in ours!’ (SP 187). Corelli is thus on the one hand linking Morgana with God and on the other criticising an anthropocentric view of the universe.

By linking Morgana with God, Corelli is signalling that *The Secret Power* is concerned with the notion of women as a creative force. Corelli had always argued without reservation that women’s capacities were equal to those of men in the fields of art, science and literature. Her essays frequently refer to Marie Curie as an example of the way in which the scientific establishment neglected its leading women. More than any of her other novels, *The Secret Power* fully vents Corelli’s ideas on this topic. Her arguments cluster around two main themes: the first is women’s creative abilities as scientists and the second is their power as the producers and custodians of the race.

Although in *The Secret Power* Morgana Royal and Roger Seaton are of equal standing as scientists, Corelli emphasises the fact that Morgana is rarely accorded her rightful place in the scientific hierarchy. To expressions of doubt that a woman could invent such a marvellous airship, Morgana responds with an abrupt

Stop there! . . . Do not repeat the old gander-cackle of barbaric man, who, while owing his every comfort as well as the continuance of his race, to woman, denied her every intellectual initiative . . . We have changed that beggarly attitude!’ (SP 62)

It is Morgana who cries ‘No man is ever “interested” in woman’s work’, and who nevertheless suggests in a familiar metaphor that men steal women’s ideas:

you imply the same old Garden of Eden story of man giving away woman as a wholly incomprehensible bad job! Adam flung her back as a reproach to her Creator – ‘the woman thou gavest me;’ – oh, that woman and that apple! But he had to confess ‘I did eat.’ He always eats, – he eats everything woman

can give him – he will even eat *her* if he gets the chance! (*SP* 86)

Don Aloysius, an expert in the supernatural, remarks that the majority of men grow impatient with clever women as they prefer stupid ones (*SP* 187). Roger Seaton tells Morgana: ‘women have no business with science’ and she retorts: ‘No, of course not! . . . Not in men’s opinion. That’s why they never mention Madame Curie without the poor Monsieur! *She* found radium and he didn’t, – but “he” is always first mentioned’ (*SP* 19).

The most lengthy discussion regarding the relative scientific abilities of men and women takes place between Morgana, Don Aloysius and Rivardi. Here Corelli again makes two points: first, that men’s scientific discoveries and inventions are inferior to women’s; and second, that women’s work is not recognised by ‘the great scientific institutions of London and Paris’ (*SP* 194-6).<sup>121</sup> Corelli’s repeated complaints about the scientific establishment’s neglect of Marie Curie and her own reception by the literary establishment are tellingly combined in this conversation:

Marja Sklodowska Curie, for example, has pulled many scientists out of the mud, but they are not grateful enough to acknowledge it. One of the greatest women of the age, she is allowed to remain in comparative obscurity, – even Anatole France, though he called her a ‘genius,’ had not the generosity or largeness of mind to praise her as she deserves. Though, of course, like all really great souls she is indifferent to praise or blame – the notice of the decadent press, noisy and vulgar like the beating of the cheap-jack’s drum at a country fair, has no attraction for her. Nothing is known of her private life, – not a photograph of her is obtainable – she has the lovely dignity of complete reserve. She is one of my heroines in this life – she does not offer herself to the cheap journalist like a milliner’s mannequin or a film face. She will not give herself away – neither will I! (*SP* 195-6)<sup>122</sup>

Corelli does not even try to disguise her own voice in this overwritten paragraph and her words are familiarly irrational: as a genius, she has never been appreciated; the press is to blame; no real genius needs the press in any case; journalists, especially photo-journalists, are dishonest. Thus does Corelli the author attribute to Curie the scientist a desire for the same enigmatic persona that

<sup>121</sup> Corelli also makes the first point earlier in the novel – see *The Secret Power*, p. 64.

<sup>122</sup> This simile reminds the reader, perhaps unfortunately, of the words of Rebecca West: ‘Marie Corelli had a mind like any milliner’s apprentice’. See Rebecca West, ‘The Tosh Horse’ in *The Strange Necessity: Essays and Reviews*, 1928; rpt: Virago, London, 1987, p. 321.

the novelist worked all her own life to fashion. Curie was as successful in her own way as Corelli, but was sufficiently reticent to avoid controversy. Corelli invited criticism because of her repeated and undisciplined intrusions into her texts and because she waged war with her perceived enemies frequently and stridently by the very public means she so vehemently claimed to loathe: the press. Corelli's own failings, however, did not diminish her admiration for Curie as a representative of the ideal feminine.

In *The Secret Power*, Corelli contends that women fulfil their creative role when they become involved in scientific enterprises. Morgana's airship is designed to contribute to the good of humankind, whilst Seaton's invention is a destructive force. Corelli means the contrast to be sharp, for although Morgana tells Seaton 'I believe I've discovered something with which I could annihilate you', she explains that her scientific endeavour is 'bent on seeking ways and means for the safety and protection of nations', in the same way as Seaton was bent on creating 'a force for their destruction' (*SP* 19; 247). Morgana's creativity and goodness form a personal protective covering about her, reminding the reader of Mavis Clare, of whom Peter Keating remarks in his 'Introduction' to *The Sorrows of Satan*: 'Her genius is dedicated to serving others and is therefore immune to the corrupting power of money, as it is also to false and malicious criticism'.<sup>123</sup>

Morgana's protective force forms part of a vision of national immunity that anticipates American presidents Ronald Regan and George W. Bush: a defence system which would exclude malaria-carrying mosquitoes, disease-infested microbes and hostile aircraft and their radioactive cargoes. Morgana adapts a Shakespearean metaphor to explain further her idea:

Modern science had made the sea useless as a 'wall' or 'moat defensive' against attacks from the air, – but if there existed an atmospheric or 'etheric' force which could be utilised and brought to such pressure as to encircle a city or a country with a protective ring that should resist all effort to break it, how great a security would be assured 'against the envy of less happy lands'. (*SP* 247)

Toward the end of the novel, Morgana again represents Corelli's view that women scientists use their powers for good when she stresses the difference between her

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<sup>123</sup> Keating, 'Introduction' to *The Sorrows of Satan*, p. xvi.

use of science and Seaton's: 'I use it for health and movement, progress and power – not for the destruction of any living soul'. (SP 327)

## VI WOMEN'S ROLE IN THE EVOLUTIONARY PROCESS

Corelli's other suggestion in *The Secret Power* is that hope for the future of the world lies in a return to a more primitive and more natural way of life with women such as Manella mothering the race (SP 247). No doubt this idea has its origins in the contemporary revulsion against war, but it also confirms Corelli's view in *Woman, or – Suffragette?* that women through their role as mothers have the ability to influence the behaviour of men and thus the future of the race. At the same time, however, Corelli implies that a return to primitive nature will result in a regression to barbarism. She appears to contradict herself again by denying the intelligent Morgana the opportunity to advance the race by having clever children on the grounds that the airship constitutes her contribution to humanity. Yet this argument, too, is undermined when the airship crashes.

Manella embodies an optimistic 'Darwinian' or eugenicist notion that healthy women are the mothers of a revitalised race. At the beginning of *The Secret Power*, she is described as 'a big handsome creature, sun-browned and black-haired, with flashing dark eyes', with 'the unspoiled beauty of natural lines in her form', and 'the proud poise of her handsome head on her full throat and splendid shoulders' is striking (SP 2, 5). As well as representing the perfect woman for giving birth to strong, healthy offspring, Manella constitutes a critique of modern women in that she is also capable of devoting herself with a passionate love to her husband and children (SP 78). Corelli again uses Sam Gwent to muse on 'the warm, passionate voice of Manella in frank admission of her love for Seaton':

This was primitive passion, – the passion of primitive woman for her mate whom she admitted to be stronger than herself, to whom she instinctively looked for shelter and protection, and round whose commanding force she sought to rear the lovely fabric of 'Home,' – a state of feeling as far removed from the sentiments of modern women as the constellation of Orion is removed from earth. (SP 277)

For all his wealth and power, Gwent finds himself both envying and despising Seaton who 'was in the prime of strength, and who, with all the glories of Nature about him and the love and beauty of an exquisite womanhood at his hand for

possession, could nevertheless devote his energies to the science of destruction' (SP 278). Corelli condemns modern men and women but she unreservedly believes that it is the male who is carrying the degenerate sickness of the race and that the only hope for racial improvement lies with women.

This argument is sustained by the fact that, at the end of the novel, it is Manella who has the power over the brain-damaged Seaton. As Morgana explains to Don Aloysius, 'she will surround him with the constant influence of a perfectly devoted love. Dare we say there shall be no healing power in such an influence?' (SP 326). Moreover, Seaton's incapacity renders the healthy Manella victorious. She has circumvented his rejection and upheld the right of women to select their own mates on the basis of passion, as Corelli insists they should do in *The Modern Marriage Market*. Seaton resembles several contemporary male characters, such as Sir Clifford in D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and Septimus Smith in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, who are physically, mentally or morally crippled by the Great War and its aftermath. Corelli intimates that men deserve punishment for the wars that women would have avoided by harnessing the power of love.

Yet, through the words of Morgana, Corelli derides Manella's passionate love:

To feel like *that* is to feel like the female beasts of the field who only wait and live to be used by the males, giving 'all they are and all they have,' poor creatures! The bull does not 'love' the cow – he gives her a calf . . . you are a nobler creature than a cow! No wonder men despise women who are always on the cow level! (SP 44-5)

To Seaton, whom she addresses as 'fool bear of a man', Morgana is even more scathing about Manella's primal nature, describing her as an 'untutored female savage' and predicting:

She's just the kind of thing you want – to fetch wood, draw water, cook food, and – bear children! And when the children come they'll run about the hill like savages themselves, and yell and dance and be greedy and dirty – and you'll presently wonder whether you are a civilised man or a species of unthinking baboon! You will be living the baboon life, – and your brain will grow thicker and harder as you grow older, – and your great scientific discovery will be buried in the thickness and hardness and never see the light of day! (SP 47-8)

Corelli does not seem to be able to make up her mind whether Manella exemplifies a futuristic noble savage in whom lies the hope of a better,

matriarchal race, or whether she represents degeneration into a barbaric and frighteningly primitive state. This uncertainty becomes even more apparent through the narrator's assessment of the character, particularly when it is read in the context of Corelli's assertions regarding the capabilities of women in *Free Opinions Freely Expressed*, the various articles in *My 'Little Bit'* and in *Woman, or— Suffragette?* and her ambiguous attitude toward Honoria in *My Wonderful Wife*. Always Corelli's *alter ego*, the narrator of *The Secret Power* cannot decide whether to condemn Manella or to praise her, describing her as having 'the large loveliness of a goddess and the soul of a little child' but remaining unsure of her place in relation to contemporary women:

Manella was a splendid type of primitive womanhood, – healthy, warm-blooded and full of hymeneal passion, – as a wife she would have been devoted, – as a mother superb in her tenderness; but, measured by modern standards of advanced and restless femininity she was a mere drudge, without the ability to think for herself or to analyse subtleties of emotion. (SP 58)

If the figure of Manella remains ambiguous in *The Secret Power*, it is because although she, the primitive, ultimately triumphs over Seaton, the scientist, she achieves a victory as hollow as the human being Seaton himself has become.

The author might be expected to clarify these issues through the character of Morgana, but she does not. Morgana is powerful because of her immense wealth and the respect accorded her as an authoritative scientist. Moreover, notwithstanding the suggestion that she might have loved and married Seaton, she is not in fact the loving or the marrying kind at all. A lengthy dialogue between Morgana and her chaperone, Lady Kingswood, serves to articulate Corelli's arguments against marriage. The first of these is the familiar one concerning the essential nature of passion. Morgana is appalled by Lady Kingswood's statement that she doubts whether any married people adore each other and her assertion that 'If they can be good friends and rub along pleasantly through all the sorrows and joys of life together, they should be satisfied' (SP 166) – an opinion with which Honoria of *My Wonderful Wife* would no doubt agree. Like Corelli in 'The Modern Marriage Market', however, Morgana retorts that love should be 'blood within the veins of time' (SP 166).

The second argument against marriage is peculiar to *The Secret Power*. It is informed by an older Corelli's views of the futility of bringing children into a degenerative world and it includes the ingratitude of children. Lady Kingswood

explains: ‘Having a baby is not at all a romantic business! – quite the reverse! . . . when they get older and have to go to school you soon find out that you have loved *them* far more than they have loved or ever *will* love *you*’ (SP 167). Morgana questions whether the maternal instinct is a natural one, explaining to Don Aloysius, in words which are reminiscent of Honoria, how she hated dolls as a child:

Horrid little stuffed things of wood and wax and saw-dust . . .  
With great beads for eyes – or eyes made to look like beads –  
and red cheeks, – and red lips with a silly smile on them! Of  
course they are given to girl-children to encourage the ‘maternal  
instinct’ as it is called – to make them think of babies, – but *I*  
never had any ‘maternal instinct’! – and real babies have always  
seemed to me as uninteresting as sham ones. (SP 99)

Lady Kingswood voices the traditional Victorian women’s view that ‘Life is certainly full of disappointments, especially in love and marriage – but we must endure our sorrows patiently and believe that God does everything for the best’ (SP 168). Morgana, however, is a much more modern woman and she rejects both Lady Kingswood’s words and her way of life:

I shall not marry . . . There are so many more things in life  
worth winning . . . My airship for instance! – it’s worth all the  
men and all the marriages I’ve ever heard of! My beloved  
‘White Eagle!’ – my own creation – my baby – *such* a baby!  
(SP 168-9)

When describing Rivardi’s opposing belief that ‘wifehood and motherhood were more conducive to a woman’s happiness than all the most amazing triumphs of scientific discovery and attainments’, the narrator of *The Secret Power* comments: ‘He was perfectly right according to simple natural law’ (SP 241). Corelli usually trusts ‘simple natural law’ to solve the problems of humankind, but now, in the form of Manella, it has been found wanting and is possibly even degenerative. Perhaps Corelli is merely expressing her own feelings when Morgana states that ‘it is not everyone who is fitted for matrimony’ (SP 69). The dilemma of Corelli’s own life is revealed in the narrator’s remark that ‘women who are endowed with more than common intellectual ability have to choose one of two alternatives – love . . . and child-bearing, – or fame and lifelong loneliness’ (SP 240). The novelist may also be recalling her own misplaced love for Arthur Severn when, through the words of her narrator, she expresses disillusion: ‘Married or single, woman both physically and mentally is

the greatest sufferer in the world – her time of youth and unthinking joy is brief, her martyrdom long' (*SP* 241).

Although Corelli intends her readers to believe that Morgana finally joins the inhabitants of the Golden City, the remains of the crashed airship in the desert represent the demise of the most advanced scientific achievement that the author is capable of imagining. Moreover, as the airship is Morgana's baby, its crash also signifies that she has in fact created nothing lasting, scientific or human. All hope for humanity, if there is any, lies with the diseased Seaton and his primitive Manella. In *The Secret Power*, Corelli's view of the evolution of the human race is dismal and even her belief in progressive evolution through reincarnation seems no longer certain. Her highly evolved creature, like Sue Bridehead, is incapable of survival in a world inhabited by insensitive intellectual inferiors.



## **CONCLUSION**

Michael Wheeler may well have had Marie Corelli in mind when he wrote:

most of the tens of thousands of novels published during Victoria's reign (an estimate of forty thousand is sometimes quoted) are unquestionably buried . . . They lie in the catacombs of the major libraries . . . These forgotten novels have gone the way of all minor examples of popular literature written to pass the reader's time and keep the writer's pot boiling, or to instruct the reader and get the writer's pet theory into print.<sup>1</sup>

Marie Corelli's novels have not disappeared into the catacombs. They are still popular with readers interested in the occult and read by scholars seeking to identify early expressions of feminism in English literature. Corelli's philosophy has been compared to that of Teilhard de Chardin.<sup>2</sup> That Corelli was the first of the British best sellers means that any consideration of the history of popular culture is incomplete without reference to her works.

Corelli's novels reflect the changing times in which she lived. Her *Electric Creed* expounds, in terms of contemporary scientific theory, her notions of the existence and composition of God, Christ and human souls, the creation of the universe and the purpose of the planets. Her theory of human progressive spiritual evolution through reincarnation represents her attempts to grapple with a changing world view in which science was replacing religion as the source of authority.

Tess Cosslett blames the scientists – T. H. Huxley and John Tyndall in particular – for igniting the conflict between 'the old, religious, natural-theological science, and the new, irreligious, purely naturalistic science'. She suggests that Huxley and Tyndall, both self-made men who had not been educated through the traditional English establishment, were seeking to take over the cultural leadership of the country by constructing a complete scientific world-view to supplant the world-view of Christianity. Other leading exponents of variants of this 'creed' – Cosslett's choice of word here is crucial – are Herbert Spencer, George Eliot, W. K. Clifford, Leslie Stephen and John Morley.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Wheeler, *English Fiction of the Victorian Period 1830-1890*, Longman, London, 1985, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Cecil Westh, *Marie Corelli's Christian Philosophy: juxtaposed with Teilhard de Chardin's Christian philosophy as seen in The Phenomenon of Man*, Westh, Vordingborg, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> Cosslett, 'Introductory Essay' to *Science and Religion in the Nineteenth Century*, edited by Tess Cosslett, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984, pp. 8-10. Robin Gilmour also describes the late-Victorian religious angst as a search for a new creed – see *The Victorian Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature, 1830-1890*, Longman, London, 1993, p. 88.

Corelli, a self-made woman whose origins lay well outside of the English establishment, constructed a creed far more extensive than that of Huxley, Tyndall or Stephen. Her Electric Creed not only accounts for the origins of the universe and the miracles of the Bible, but it provides a scheme for personal salvation, explains life after death and lays down principles for ethical behaviour. Rules for proper social conduct are prescribed in novels like *Thelma*, *Wormwood*, *The Sorrows of Satan*, *Jane*, the novella *My Wonderful Wife* and the satires, *The Silver Domino* and *The Devil's Motor*. Corelli establishes role models for sovereigns in *Temporal Power*, for the clergy in *The Master Christian*, *God's Good Man* and *Holy Orders*, for scientists in *A Romance of Two Worlds*, *The Soul of Lilith* and *The Secret Power* and for millionaires in *The Sorrows of Satan*, *The Treasure of Heaven* and in the short story 'The Strange Visitation of Josiah McNason'. *The Mighty Atom* and *Boy* spell out the requisites for a sound education system. Mavis Clare, Delicia Vaughan and Innocent Armitage embody the responsibilities entrusted to writers, and Angela Sovrani and the narrators of *A Romance of Two Worlds* and *The Life Everlasting* exemplify the ideal artist and musician.

As society altered, the role of women also changed. Whilst all but the most reactionary realised that this was inevitable, public opinion was generally hostile toward the violence of the aggressive suffragists and even progressive and feminist writers were ambivalent about radical activism. It is hardly to be expected that Marie Corelli, best seller, would be out of sympathy with mainstream contemporary thought. Described as 'commonplace' and the 'idol of suburbia', Corelli nevertheless knew that changes to women's place in society were not only unavoidable but necessary.<sup>4</sup> Her own uncertainty regarding these changes, apparent from the contradictory views put forward in her essays and through the characters of her novels, reflected the misgivings of her readers, most of whom realised that the age of the Victorian feminine ideal had passed – if, indeed, it had ever existed.<sup>5</sup> Therefore Corelli sought to create a new figure of the

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<sup>4</sup> Rebecca West, 'The Tosh Horse' in *The Strange Necessity: Essays and Reviews*, 1928; rpt: Virago, London, 1987, p. 320 and N. N. Feltes, *Literary Capital and the Late Victorian Novel*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1993, p. 124.

<sup>5</sup> For a fine discussion of the role of the family in the period 1875 to 1914, see Peter Keating, *The Haunted Study: A Social History of the English Novel 1875-1914*, Secker & Warburg, London, 1989, pp. 152-238. For example: 'For the mid-Victorian novelist, marriage, a family and home, were ideals to strive for . . . For the late Victorian novelist, marriage, family and home, were more commonly symbols of repression, to be treated warily at best and if necessary to be avoided entirely by desperate flight', p. 161.

ideal woman who was the equal of any man and yet retained the qualities considered to be essentially feminine.

It took some time for Corelli to develop and refine this figure. Characters like Thelma, for instance, and Mary Deane, are too docile, whilst Honoria, in every way her husband's superior, and Diana, the *femme fatale* who seeks eternal revenge against men, are too aggressive. Delicia and Innocent are undone by love for an undeserving man and Lotys dies because the man she loves is unavailable. Jane and Miss Letty are too old to be ideal women and Maryllia insufficiently independent. As she aged, and following her miscarried love for Arthur Severn, Corelli became more inclined to see her ideal woman as single.<sup>6</sup> The narrator – or narrators, perhaps – of *A Romance of Two Worlds* and *The Life Everlasting* is reunited with her twin soul, so that only Mavis Clare and Morgana Royal remain as viable, independent, single heroines. Corelli probably considered Mavis as the perfect late-Victorian woman, but the opprobrium attached to her as the Corelli persona precluded her re-presentation in later novels.

The Edwardian Morgana thus becomes the ideal woman whom Corelli offers as a role model for her readers. A renowned scientist, wealthy, a staunch defender of the abilities – as distinct from the rights – of women, politically astute, able to command and clear-headed, she nonetheless remains beautiful, elfin, fey, spiritual, kind, unselfish, sentimental and possessed of impeccable taste and manners. Morgana is single by choice, but lavishes her 'natural' and 'womanly' nurturing instincts upon her airship because of its potential to ensure the protection and safety of nations.<sup>7</sup> Corelli saw the ideal feminine as equal to, but as different as possible from, her male counterpart.

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<sup>6</sup> For example, of the fifteen tales in Corelli's *The Love of Long Ago and Other Stories*, Methuen, London, 1920, six deal with single women, women who are relieved to have been widowed early and one woman who chooses her own husband when she is ready to marry. Of the remaining stories, seven have male protagonists.

<sup>7</sup> Marie Corelli, *The Secret Power*, Methuen, London, 1921, 247.

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Listed below are all works consulted in the course of preparation of this thesis. For convenience, the bibliography has been divided into two main sections, primary material and secondary material. Within the section listing primary material, the works of Marie Corelli have been separated and arranged into four groups, within which they appear in chronological order.

### PRIMARY MATERIAL

#### Works of Marie Corelli

##### I: Novels, satires and novellas

*A Romance of Two Worlds*, 1886. New edition, Bentley, London, 1887

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