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Marie Corelli (1855-1924)

By Sharon Crozier-De Rosa

During her lifetime, Marie Corelli (pseudonym for Mary Mackay) managed to attain what would today be referred to as superstar status. According to one of her biographers, Brian Masters, Corelli reigned as the bestselling writer in the world for almost thirty years, during which time at least thirty of the novels she published were 'world best-sellers.' 1 Her romances, blending sensationalism with transcendentalism, outsold those of all her contemporary literary rivals, 2 and she broke all previous publishing records by selling an average of 100,000 copies of her books per year. 3 It was not unusual to hear of thousands fighting to touch her gown when she made scheduled public appearances. She was a celebrity in a new age of mass media. However, public opinion was not entirely even. Contemporary reviews of her writing, for example, ranged from being 'savage and merciless', according to Methuen publishing house founder, Sir Algernon Methuen, to public endorsements by leading figures including William Gladstone and Queen Victoria. 4

Since the heady height of her fame, Corelli and her writings have spent a considerable period of time in exile. However, they have now been returned 'to conversations about the late-Victorian and Edwardian literary world', thanks in most part to writers and biographers such as Janet Galligani Casey, Annette Federico, N Feltes, Richard Kowalczyk, Brian Masters, and Teresa Ransom. 5 In the 1990s, Oxford University Press released a 'World Classics' edition of her 1895 phenomenal bestseller, *The Sorrows of Satan*, with an 'Introduction' by Peter Keating. The motivating factor behind many recent accounts of Corelli's life and critiques of her writing seem to lie with a curiosity, in Federico's words, about a woman whose fame at the beginning of the twentieth century was 'unsurpassed', and yet by the end of that century had become 'a name vaguely, and pejoratively, connected with Victorian popular fiction'. 6 A substantial proportion of these recent studies of Corelli and her work centre on the role that gender played in Corelli's writing and in the literary world at the end of the Victorian era.

Corelli's complex, often contradictory views on turn-of-the-century femininity and feminism are renowned. She was notoriously vociferous in her criticism of the 1890s New Woman, New Woman writers and New Woman fiction in general. Yet her life and her expansive collection of writing (novels, articles and pamphlets included) reveal an ambiguous, often paradoxical, attitude towards all that the New Woman and contemporary feminism represented. On the one hand, Corelli was an unmarried female writer who outsold all her rivals, both male and female, defied the conventions of the male-dominated literary world

and loudly proclaimed women to be worthy of intellectual and financial independence; on the other, she was a writer and public figure who attacked the open militancy of radical feminism and the explicit sexuality of the New Woman, who campaigned against women receiving the vote and who romanticised feminine frailty. She was a writer who deplored what she saw as the contemporary trend towards atheism, debauchery and the disappearance of sexual difference and yet who sold thousands of novels indulging in those same vices. ⁷ It is clear that, given her astounding global popularity, Corelli's life and her written works provided a superb stage for the simultaneous declaration of solid feminist and wildly anti-feminist sentiments.

Corelli the Woman

Born in London in 1855, Corelli achieved fame with the publication of her first novel, *A Romance of Two Worlds*, in 1886. From then onwards, she wrote and published at least thirty popular or bestselling novels, as well as a large volume of short stories, poems, journalism and polemical essays. She later moved to Stratford-upon-Avon, where she was renowned for numerous eccentricities including that of importing an 'authentic' Italian gondola and gondolier. She lived there with her life-long friend and companion, Bertha Vyver, until her death in 1924.

Corelli manufactured an air of mystery to surround the details of her life. She perpetuated this sense of personal intrigue and worked hard to protect her invented public persona throughout her career – no mean feat, considering the degree to which her life was the subject of public scrutiny. Even after her death, for example, the various competing stories about her birth and her parentage continued to 'bewilder' and confuse the public of which she had been literary 'Queen'. By dressing in willowy white or pastel shades, and decorated with flowers, or draped in romantic costume (clothing that concealed her 'dumpiness' according to one of her earlier biographers, Eileen Bigland), Corelli's stylised image accorded well with the romanticised notions of femininity that abound in her fiction. Controlling this stylised image meant controlling the dissemination of photographs and portraits of herself. This was made all the more difficult by the fact that Corelli's invented self also entailed 'lopping' at least ten years of her real age. Controlling the public release of personal images became even more pertinent in order to support this fiction. ⁸ Yet, these portraits of the soft, innocent lady-author distributed by Corelli and her publishers belied the canny businesswoman beneath.

Corelli fought persistently against unwanted intrusions into her private life. In her 2000 study, *The Idol of Suburbia*, Annette Federico argues that it is this constant, often successful attempt to control the public dissemination of unauthorised images that marks Corelli as a remarkably astute member of the literary marketplace – revealing much about her ambition and her 'canniness as a woman in a male-dominated industry'. ⁹ And this fact was recognised during Corelli's era. The standard of her literature may have been ridiculed but, as a 1906 edition of the *Westminster Review* remarked, she was, with the possible exception of her literary rival Hall Caine, 'the greatest genius of self-advertisement produced by our century'. ¹⁰ This is all the more remarkable because this was the era that ushered in the culture of

celebrity, including author iconography, fuelled by the advent of mass media, particularly photojournalism. As her books broke publishing records and her fame rocketed, the number of public appearances that she made, ranging from attending theatrical performances to presenting to the Edinburgh Philosophical Society and the Royal Society of Literature, also grew. ¹¹ (Incidentally, she was the first woman to lecture before the Royal Society of Literature.) Maintaining control over her celebrity became more difficult. Nevertheless, Corelli was relentless. Twenty years after her writing career began, for example, *The London Chronicle* and the *New York Times* reported that Corelli had filed suit against photographers in her home town of Stratford-upon-Avon. While obviously revelling in the detail that the photographs in question were unflattering, and that Corelli's representatives had alleged that 'a gross libel had been perpetrated on her features', the *New York Times* wrote that she had filed for an injunction to restrain the photographers from 'publishing or otherwise disposing of picture postcards purporting to depict scenes in the private life of Miss Corelli'. ¹² Whether issues of privacy, vanity or marketing were at the forefront of this suit cannot be known. Doubtless, it was a mixture of all three. However, what is of consequence is that this female author continued to take a stand against the imposition of increasingly common practices in an industry renowned for being dominated by men.

Corelli the Writer

These were not the only conventions that Corelli was to fight against. In relation to her writing, she reacted to unfavourable reviews of her novels by refusing to send out free copies of her books for reviewers. Reviewers, like all other readers, she declared, were to purchase a copy. ¹³ Few other authors of the time had the confidence, or the arrogance, to do the same.

So how did this remarkably successful, astute, unmarried writer and business woman treat feminism and the New Woman in her writing? Corelli's attitudes towards femininity and feminism rarely differ between her fictional and non-fictional writing. Each form of literature mirrors an ambiguous, sometimes contradictory, approach towards pivotal women's concerns of her day. Each is revealing of the negotiations and compromises Corelli reached in her explorations of prominent feminist concerns. Publications such as 'The Advance of Woman' (included in the 1905 collection entitled *Free Opinions Freely Expressed on Certain Phases of Modern Social Life and Conduct*) and *Woman – or Suffrage? A Question of National Choice* (published in 1907) attacked the 'loose conduct and coarse speech' of campaigning Suffragists while championing 'simple womanliness' over 'a political mess of pottage'. ¹⁴ 'Real Woman', *Woman – or Suffrage?* continued, 'if she has the natural heritage of her sex, which is the mystic power to persuade, enthrall and subjugate man, she has no need to come down from her throne and mingle in any of his political frays'. ¹⁵ 'The Advance of Woman' concludes: 'Men adore what they cannot imitate.' ¹⁶ Taking to the streets to agitate for the vote only serves to deplete the distinction between femininity and masculinity. Those women who are seen, as she states in *The Sorrows of Satan*, 'clamouring like unnatural hens in a barn-yard about their 'rights' and 'wrongs'' rob the rest of their sex of its dignity. ¹⁷

Corelli's fictional writing continued this assault on the New Woman. Her bestselling novels

made frequent derogatory references to the stereotype of the New Woman, to the coldly intellectual, Girton educated, 'Christ-scorning,' sexually knowledgeable, ugly, short-haired and bespectacled bicycle-riding and tennis-playing female – one 'eminently fitted to become the mother of a brood of atheists'. 18 (She conveniently ignored the fact that the majority of the period's moderate feminists based much of their philosophy in Christianity.) One of her most damnable and sensational indictments of the New Woman and New Woman fiction comes in the form of *The Sorrows of Satan's* (1895) Lady Sibyl. Lady Sibyl's story leaves the late Victorian reading public in no doubt as to the dangerous effects of a modern society permeated with the New Woman's 'clamouring' and the decadence of New Woman fiction.

Lady Sibyl is both a New Woman and a victim of the New Woman in that she gains all her unwomanly knowledge from New Woman novels – sexual knowledge that leads her to her death after she sensationally throws herself naked at the Devil (in the form of the charming Prince Lucio). As she explains to her husband, Geoffrey Tempest: 'Oh yes, indeed we know quite well what we are doing now when we marry, thanks to the 'new' fiction!'. 19 Moreover, she conveniently leaves a suicide note explaining that her downfall stemmed from reading a New Women novel over and over again until she began to understand all of its insinuations and until she also began to enjoy them. 20 The writers of New Women novels, frequently female, come under bitter attack as authors who write in order to 'degrade and shame their sex,' authors who are 'destitute of grammar as well as decency'. 21 These authors, these 'self degrading creatures who delineate their heroines as wallowing in unchastity, and who write freely on subjects which men would hesitate to name,' are described in *The Sorrows of Satan* as the 'unnatural hybrids of no-sex'. 22 (What is interesting here is that Corelli, like other anti-New Woman writers, insisted on portraying her New Woman as possessing a 'voracious sexual' appetite, and this is despite the 'silence surrounding female sexuality within the mainstream feminist movement' of the time.23)

Corelli always opposed the stereotypical image of the New Woman because, as 'unnatural hybrids of no-sex', they threatened the naturalness of sexual difference. However, interestingly, she did write an unusual 'lighter' story, *My Wonderful Wife* (1889), that presented the New Woman less as dangerous and more as misguided and ridiculous – a novella that Federico describes as 'a humorous send-up of New Women and the marriage question'. 24 Honoria Maggs, the 'heroine' of the story is unequivocally a New Woman. She is a physically robust, non-sentimental Amazonian figure who likes to hunt, spend time in the company of 'the boys', eats like a man, has a loud voice that frightens her husband as they are taking their wedding vows, and who, her husband informs us, he would have kissed 'but that vile cigar stuck out of her mouth and prevented' him.25 Still, and as interesting as Honoria is, especially in contrast with her insipid husband, her continued insistence on acting like a man, even after marriage and motherhood, of aping man's habits (including writing 'a sporting novel, full of slap-dash vigour and stable slang'), and her rejection of her child and therefore woman's sacred duty to 'save' the human race, constitutes a series of moral transgressions for which she must be condemned (though not the same sensational damnation that is imposed on Lady Sibyl).26

However, this condemnation of feminism and the New Woman was made by a woman writer who simultaneously and fervently campaigned for the well-deserved recognition of the female mind and of the substantial, even remarkable, intellectual capabilities of women in the often hostile environment of the male-dominated intellectual world. Corelli's bestselling novels may have derided the notorious figure of the New Woman, but she also centred most of her novels on female protagonists who exuded a sense of feminine genius and intellectual independence. 27

Corelli often allowed the thoughts and actions of her heroines to extend past the limitations normally set in place by Victorian idealism, particularly as these related to their intellectual capabilities and their career goals, provided that she deemed these capabilities and goals to be appropriate according to her notion of femininity. She allowed their thoughts and attitudes to sometimes creep dangerously close to boundaries challenged by the New Woman, only then to completely withdraw back into a world of nostalgic romance, one safely directed by a solidly mid-Victorian sense of morality. In Janet Galligani Casey's words, Corelli provided readers with 'the illusion of a feminist spirit couched in a fundamentally conventional Victorian ideology' (Casey 166).

Corelli's heroines, like herself, challenged many late Victorian conservative idealistic notions about women's lives. Like their creator, most of her heroines (such as *The Master-Christian's* successful, spiritual artist Angela Sovrani, *The Sorrows of Satan's* indisputably feminine novelist of some genius Mavis Clare, and the mystical and philosophical narrator of *The Life Everlasting*) were seeped in suitably feminine though independent occupations. They did not live the life of the typical wife and mother – immersed in what Arnold Bennett called the 'business of domesticity'. 28 And, Corelli's fiction leaves readers in absolutely no doubt, the lives of these women are far to be preferred and admired than those of the multitude of women who spent their lives fulfilling the typical roles of wife and mother – women who were rarely presented with the opportunity of exercising their intellectual capabilities.

Therefore, although she opposed what she saw as the coarse exhibitionism of the New Woman, her writing, and her life, did present continual challenges to conservative opinions about the proper role of women. In *The Master-Christian*, she issued a challenge:

For why should a woman think? Why should a woman dare to be a genius? It seemed very strange! How much more natural for her to marry some decent man of established position and be content with babies and plain needlework! 29

In *The Sorrows of Satan*, she reiterated this challenge, asking if women 'should be kept in their places as men's drudges or toys - as wives, mothers, nurses, cooks, menders of socks and shirts, and housekeepers generally'? 30 Corelli's answer, in her life and her writing, was a resounding 'No'.

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NOTES

1. Brian Masters, *Now Barabbas Was a Rotter. The Extraordinary Life of Marie Corelli*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1978, pp.3, 6.

2. Even Corelli's closest competing novelists, although they sold extremely well, did not touch her success. Hall Caine, who, at the height of his career, sold 45,000 copies per year, was Corelli's closest rival. He was followed by the third most popular author of the time, Mrs. Humphrey Ward, who, in her best years, averaged about 35,000 copies, and then by H. G. Wells, who at the peak of his career sold approximately 15,000 novels annually (Margaret B McDowell, 'Marie Corelli', in *Dictionary of Literary Biography. Vol. 34. British Novelists, 1890-1929: Traditionalists*, Thomas F. Staley (ed.), Gale Research Company, Detroit, 1985, pp. 82-89, p84.) Indeed, McAleer points out that Corelli remained the highest selling female writer on the publishing firm Methuen's books until her death in 1924 (Joseph McAleer, *Passion's Fortune. The Story of Mills & Boon*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, p14).

3. Annette Federico, *The Idol of Suburbia. Marie Corelli and Late-Victorian Literary Culture*, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville and London, 2000, p.2 and Masters, p.6.

4. Maureen Duffy, *A Thousand Capricious Chances. A History of the Methuen List 1889-*

1989, Methuen, London, 1989, p.8 and Masters, p.107.

5. Janet Galligani Casey, 'Marie Corelli and Fin de Siècle Feminism', *English Literature in Transition*, vol. 35, no. 2, 1992, pp. 163-178; Annette Federico, *The Idol of Suburbia. Marie Corelli and Late-Victorian Literary Culture*, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville and London, 2000; N. N. Feltes, *Literary Capital and the Late Victorian Novel*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1993; Richard L. Kowalczyk, 'In Vanished Summertime: Marie Corelli and Popular Culture', *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 7, no. 4, 1974, pp. 850-863; Brian Masters, *Now Barabbas Was a Rotter. The Extraordinary Life of Marie Corelli*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1978; and, Teresa Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli: Queen of Victorian Bestsellers*, Sutton Publishing, Phoenix Mill and New York, 1999.

6. Federico, p.2.

7. Even though Corelli railed against the morally dubious and controversial New Woman figure, she 'nevertheless raised the emotional temperature to a lurid pitch of unsatisfied and therefore constantly itching desire which is simply that lust she so often condemns' (Duffy, p.10).

8. Eileen Bigland, *Corelli: The Woman and the Legend*, Jarrolds, London, 1953, p.63 and p.127.

9. Federico, p.15.

10. Quoted in Federico, p.14.

Leavis, Q. D., *Fiction and the Reading Public*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1979 [1932], p.137.

11. 'Marie Corelli Brings Suit. Famous Novelist Objects to Private Life on Postal Cards', *New York Times*, 13 May 1906.

12. Peter Keating, 'Introduction' in Marie Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1996, p. xii.

13. Marie Corelli, *Woman, — or Suffragette? A Question of National Choice*, Pearson, London, 1907, p.3.

14. Marie Corelli, *Woman, — or Suffragette?*, p.3.

15. Marie Corelli, 'The Advance of Woman', in *Free Opinions Freely Expressed on Certain Phases of Modern Social Life and Conduct*, Dodd, Mead & Company, New York, 1905, pp.188-205, p.204.

16. Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p.386.

17. See Corelli, *The Mighty Atom*, pp.17, 104;

18. Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, pp.81, 371-372, 405.

19. Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p.306.

20. Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p.405.

21. Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, pp.305-306.

22. Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, pp.221, 305-306. For more anti-New Woman sentiment see, for example, Corelli, *The Mighty Atom*, p.104. Corelli's derision of New Women writers does not end with the novelists. She also singles out female journalists of the era. These women do not fulfil any of the criteria of Corelli's ideal women. Nor do their occupations. 'Ill-educated lady-paragraphists' who scrounge up gossip for a small sum of money lack feminine dignity – like Corelli's Old Lady Maravale who, 'rather reduced in circumstances, writes a guinea's worth of scandal a week for one of the papers' (Corelli, *The*

Sorrows of Satan, p.260). Moreover, just to ensure that none of Lady Maravale's lack of feminine dignity escapes the audience, Corelli later portrays her 'gorging' herself on chicken salad and truffles (Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p.271). David Rubinstein writes that the number of female journalists during this era rose as the publication of women's magazines increased and as typically female topics, such as fashion and society news, gained more attention in the press. For more information on this area of employment, see Rubinstein, David, *Before the Suffragettes. Women's Emancipation in the 1890s*, Harvester Press, Brighton, Sussex, 1986, pp.73-86.

23. Sally Ledger, 'The new woman and the crisis of Victorianism', in Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken (Ed.s), *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siecle*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, pp.22-44, p.30. Ledger also cites the example of Bram Stoker's 1897 novel, *Dracula*. When one of the 'good' or innocent girls in the novel is transformed into 'an oversexed vampire' she has to 'be massacred in the most appalling way by the brave young English men of the piece in order to be removed as a threat to the British 'race'' (Ledger, 1995, p30).

24. Federico, 2000, pp.110-111.

25. Marie Corelli, 'My Wonderful Wife' (1895), in *Cameos*, Books for Libraries, New York, 1970 [1895], pp.180, 182, 186, 195 and 199.

26. Corelli, *Cameos*, p.181.

27. See, for example, Federico, *The Idol of Suburbia* and Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, *The Middle Class Novels of Arnold Bennett and Marie Corelli: Realising the Ideals and Emotions of Late Victorian Women*, The Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston, New York, 2009.

28. See Arnold Bennett, *Hilda Lessways*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1976 [1911].

29. Corelli, *The Master-Christian*, p.587.

30. Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p.173