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The Middle Class Novels of Arnold Bennett and Marie Corelli: Realising the Ideals and Emotions of Late Victorian Women

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**THE MIDDLE CLASS NOVELS
OF ARNOLD BENNETT AND MARIE CORELLI**
Realising the Ideals and Emotions
of Late Victorian Women

Sharon Crozier-De Rosa

With a Foreword by
Pat Jalland

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To Justin, Oisín and Lorcán

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FOREWORD

The Middle Class Novels of Arnold Bennett and Marie Corelli: Realising the Ideals and Emotions of Late Victorian Women is an excellent book which makes a significant original contribution to historical knowledge. It displays a high degree of competence in independent research, a thorough understanding of the relevant literature and uses appropriate methodology.

Sharon Crozier-De Rosa uses the novels of Arnold Bennett and Marie Corelli very skilfully to illuminate the 'interior lives' — the thoughts, feelings and values — of single middle class women in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain. In the first section she provides a splendid justification of the use of literature as an alternative source for the history of emotions and *mentalités*, and also of her choice of these particular novelists. She displays a thorough knowledge of the literature in the field as she notes the difficulties in recapturing the elusive emotional dimension of women's past lives from sources such as diaries and letters and the value of fiction in helping to compensate for the silences in the historical record. She uses the novels not just for illustrations but as a valuable central source for the 'depiction of human interiority and in the pathway they provide into past mindsets into the values and the attitudes of their readership'.

Crozier-De Rosa offers an effective argument for the particular use of the novels of Bennett and Corelli, especially for their depiction of the 'new woman' figure

which brought vital issues concerning women's position in society to the attention of a wider audience. While both were successful popular novelists, Bennett was a good middlebrow author whose influence was more lasting, while Corelli had remarkable bestselling success with her escapist novels in exotic surroundings. The work argues that the two novelists provide quite different kinds of insight, both very valuable: Corelli reveals more about the broader interests and attitudes of her huge reading public, with didactic style and one-dimensional characterization; Bennett, by contrast 'expresses more lasting truths' and penetrates more deeply into individual lives, feelings and experiences.

This book devotes three major sections to an analysis of the two novelists' treatment of 'What "to do"' (education, domesticity and employment); 'The Spiritual Side of Life'; and 'Romantic Relationships'. Each section commences with a skilful analysis of the broader historical debate on that theme and a review of the literature; the evidence drawn from the novels is then firmly placed in its historical context. The work confirms the belief that the idle middle class woman was indeed a myth, yet demonstrates that traditional views of the importance for women of 'the business of domesticity' remained influential. The boundaries of the separate spheres still 'remained largely in place'.

The two sections on spirituality and romantic relationships are especially revealing because of the obvious limitations of the existing sources. By the late nineteenth century there was a growing reticence regarding religious beliefs which became increasingly nebulous. Despite their differences, Bennett and Corelli argue that individual notions of Christian morality were still pervasive, though institutionalized denominational religious practice was in decline. The chapter on 'Sexual Desire' is fascinating, with an excellent section on the substantial historical literature complemented by a thoughtful analysis of its treatment by the

two novelists. Both agree that it had become acceptable in the late Victorian period for middle-class women to express sexual desire and pleasure within engagement as well as marriage, but this was accompanied by a greater insistence on individual restraint.

Professor Pat Jalland
Australian National University

SECTION A INTRODUCTION

The novelist is 'a historian, the preserver, the keeper, the expounder, of human experience'.¹

'The secrets of the heart are not to be found in the archives. The things we really want to know about people are never put down on paper for the benefit of their biographers. Outside the sphere of music and literature, the deepest emotions are inarticulate.'²

This book uses fiction to add to historians' understanding of unmarried middle-class women's perceptions and emotional concerns during the years 1880-1914. There is a strong argument that the attitudes and the values expressed in some forms of fiction correspond with and affirm those held by many of their readers. Consequently, the more popular a novel is, the more likely that it corresponds with and affirms the values and attitudes of a proportionately higher number of readers. It is for this reason that I have chosen to examine a number of the novels of two of the era's more commercially successful writers; one a largely respected middlebrow author, Arnold Bennett (1867-1931) who achieved consistently high levels of popularity during the period, and the other a phenomenally bestselling author, Marie Corelli (1855-1924) who broke all contemporary sales records.

Such a task involves analysing characterisation, plot lines and outcomes, central themes, recurring issues, and even implicit allusions (noticeable absences or gaps

¹ Joseph Conrad writing in reference to Henry James in 1905, quoted in J. A. V. Chapple, *Documentary and Imaginative Literature 1880-1920*, Blandford Press, London, 1970, p. 13.

² John Brooke, *George III*, McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1972, p. 55.

rather than explicit statements), while maintaining a knowledge of the context in which these literary works were produced, circulated and read. I aim to reconstruct some of the thoughts and feelings, as well as some of the experiences, with which single women in particular would have been familiar. The areas or aspects of life on which I focus include education, employment and domesticity, spiritual feeling, and romantic love and sexual desire. No doubt I have overlooked other issues concerning the lives of these unmarried women. However, my guiding principle for selecting the aspects that I have chosen to examine has been to take notice of recurring issues or themes that have suggested themselves to be significant and worthy of analysis during a reading of the fictional texts under scrutiny.

I have specified the years 1880-1914, but, as with any attempt at periodisation, these dates are necessarily flexible.³ Moreover, although the exact years in which these two authors gained literary prominence differ a little, the years in which they published most of their writing overlap enough to present historians with a combined view of an almost 30 year period of remarkable historical transformation.

I chose to analyse the works of Arnold Bennett in part due to the notoriety of Virginia Woolf's criticism in 1924 of Bennett's 'shopkeeper's' view of literature. This criticism did much to recommend him to a study of the lives of 'ordinary'

³ In the 'General Editor's Preface' to *The Oxford English Literary History*, Jonathon Bate claims that it would be 'possible to argue endlessly about periodization'. Moreover, in reference to the task undertaken by this Oxford series, he adds that using specific dates to begin and end a period falls in with 'the false assumption that literature moves strictly in tandem with events'. Still, periodisation is often essential. Each volume of the series in question certainly argues in favour of the specific period on which it has chosen to concentrate its efforts. However, it is similarly stressed that those dates remain flexible – to be treated as a guide rather than as a rule. See Jonathon Bate, 'General Editor's Preface', in Philip Davis (ed.), *The Oxford English Literary History. Volume 8: 1830-1880. The Victorians*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2002, pp. vii-ix.

middle-class women at the turn of the twentieth century.⁴ Therefore, it is exactly this 'shopkeeper's' view of literature that I want to access.

However, in wanting to introduce a comparative dimension to this work I was led to the phenomenon of bestselling fiction. As a consequence of a vastly changed literary scene, unprecedentedly high sales figures were recorded for novels at the end of the Victorian period. Marie Corelli was one of the chief beneficiaries of this – as one of the first 'modern bestsellers'. So, it seemed entirely fitting to compare her literary works with those of Bennett. What results is a broad view of turn-of-the-century attitudes towards unmarried middle-class women – one that draws on Bennett's more individual and detailed observations of female thought and behaviour as well as Corelli's more idealised concepts of femininity. This combined study of the novels of a bestseller and a middlebrow author contributes towards filling in some of the 'gaps' existing in a history of late Victorian and Edwardian women's interior lives – an area of historical investigation in which there is still much work to be done.

The overall structure of this book reflects some of the difficulties that I encountered when attempting to divide this work into chapters along thematic lines. Often a discussion of the primary and secondary material concerning one particular theme spilled over into the discussion of another, necessitating a substantial degree of cross-referencing. For example, the chapter on 'The Business of Domesticity' sometimes refers to that on 'Employment and Careers'; 'Romantic Love' often shares information with 'Sexual Desire'; and the themes explored in 'Religion and Spirituality' touch on all chapters, just as they coloured most aspects of late Victorian and Edwardian life. Consequently, I have grouped certain chapters together and included them under different section headings.

⁴ Virginia Woolf, 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown', in *Collected essays I*, Hogarth Press, London, 1966, pp. 319-337.

Within each chapter, Bennett's and Corelli's texts are treated separately. My initial intention had been to intertwine their insights much more closely. But, the realisation that their respective contributions to a history of middle-class women were often so diverse recommended segregation. This approach also benefited clarity. Still, the overall aim of this study is comparative and so the insights gleaned from the works of both of these popular writers are compared and contrasted at various points within each chapter, as well as within the book as a whole. Moreover, as I feel that there is more to be mined from Bennett's middlebrow fiction regarding some of the popular attitudes of the English reading public towards the 'ordinary' experiences of 'ordinary' middle-class women, than from Corelli's more highly idealised fictional narratives, I have chosen to examine the works of Bennett first in most of the following chapters.

Furthermore, although unmarried women are the primary focus of this book, there are limited occasions when discussions touch on the experiences and feelings of married women. In the case of Bennett's novels, these instances are mostly confined to the 'Romantic Relationships' section. Here, examples from early periods of marriage are used to help illustrate the effects on young middle-class women of ideal notions of love and actual experiences of love and sex. References to married women from Corelli's novels, however, are interspersed throughout the book. This is because Corelli is much more concerned with idealised notions of femininity than with portraits of individual women. Consequently, there is not always any apparent difference between her treatment of married and unmarried women – especially in regard to ideal notions of femininity which had direct implications for both groups. Ideals are of the utmost importance in her fiction. Therefore, all middle-class women are subject to them – whatever their marital status. Corelli's comments on married women, then, are often pertinent to a discussion of single women.

My final caveat addresses the overall aim of this study which is to add to historical understandings of women's lives. I am interested in the English reading public at a time when the country was witnessing major historical shifts. As such I do not analyse in extensive detail either the personal lives of the writers concerned or changing constructions and understandings of the novel as a literary form. This latter task I leave to those who have much more expertise than I in the vast and complex area of literary theory. It suffices for the primary purpose of this book to use the following two chapters to touch necessarily briefly on a number of relevant areas of thought or study that warrant addressing, namely: *mentalité* or emotions; Bennett and Corelli's qualifications as commentators on their age; the makeup of the reading public; notions of reader reception; and, the nature of the forms of novels that were popular at this time.

The following chapters, 'A History of Women's Emotions Using the Novels of Bennett and Corelli' and 'Using Novels as a Historical Source', form the introductory section of this book in that they discuss the scholarly foundations on which this entire study is based.

Chapter 1 addresses where this study fits in the wider historical debate. It discusses recent publications in the area of women's history; the turn-of-the-century concern with the New Woman; the study of *mentalité*; Arnold Bennett and Marie Corelli's qualifications as commentators on the subject of late Victorian and Edwardian middle-class women; and, very briefly, the nature of the turn-of-the-century literary scene and the advent of the bestselling novel. Problems encountered when trying to marry these various and diverse aspects together have necessitated dividing this chapter into 3 separate sections: women's history; *mentalité*; and the authors and the literary scene. Doubtless this chapter appears somewhat eclectic, but this is necessary in order to give an idea of the broad scholarly debate in which this book is situated.

Chapter 2, on the other hand, concentrates on outlining debates more specifically related to the principal source on which this book is based – popular novels. It addresses the nature of popular novels, drawing on the relationship between the text and the reader, and on the methods used to extract material of historical importance from them.

CHAPTER 1

A History of Women's Emotions Using the Novels of Bennett and Corelli

Introduction

There are many 'gaps' or 'silences' in what has been deemed a history of 'interior life'⁵ – absences that are due, in most part, to a relative shortage of historical records. This scarcity of relevant evidence is only compounded in the exploration of late Victorian and Edwardian middle-class women's emotions – few women from this social stratum having left personal documents from which historians can reconstruct their private lives. Popular novels, however, provide one pathway into this realm. By their very nature, these novels deal with themes and issues central to the interests of a wide audience. The values they reflect and debate and those they ultimately endorse enter into public discourse. Popular novels, such as those by Arnold Bennett and Marie Corelli, then, offer rare and valuable insights into the gaps that are left concerning the picture that we have been able to construct of the personal realities of these women.

An enormous body of literature concerning the lives of women during the Victorian and Edwardian eras has been published over the past three or four decades. Much of this work has been dedicated to analysing the overall social, moral and economic context in which late Victorian and Edwardian women lived. A substantially smaller section of this writing has concentrated on probing

⁵ For reference to the term 'interior life', see Bernard Bailyn, 'The Challenge of Modern Historiography', *American Historical Review*, vol. 87, no. 1, 1982, pp. 18-19.