

Historical Women's Writing

MARIE CORELLI: MODERNISM, MORALITY, AND METAPHYSICS

Edited by Carol Margaret Davison and Elaine M. Hartnell



Marie Corelli: Modernism, Morality, and Metaphysics

This collection reappraises and retheorizes Marie Corelli's diverse fictional writings and locates them in their contemporary literary and social context.

Marie Corelli (1855–1924) was a fabulously popular novelist in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Yet, in her day, critics railed against her taste for sentimentality, melodrama, supernatural worlds, and overt didacticism. Many critics are still ambivalent about her writing. However, in their reappraisal, the contributors to this volume largely circumvent the earlier critics and engage afresh with Corelli's writing strategies, genre choices, representations of social issues, and her ideas about science, metaphysics, and morality. Moving beyond the now outdated project of "recovery", the volume also discusses Corelli's literary market place, analyzing both her publishing successes and her decline in popularity. An important theme throughout is Corelli's troubled relationship with an emerging literary Modernism and an ever-widening gulf between high and popular culture. The contributors interrogate the critical templates, assumptions, and biases of a literary establishment (past and present) centred on Modernist tropes and structures. As a result, the Corelli they unearth is not a defective Modernist but an innovative and original writer who eschewed the dictates of a movement with which she had no empathy.

This book was originally published as a special issue of *Women's Writing*.

Carol Margaret Davison is Professor of English Literature at the University of Windsor in Ontario, Canada. She is the author of *History of the Gothic: Gothic Literature, 1764–1824* (2009) and *Anti-Semitism and British Gothic Literature* (2004). She has edited several books and dozens of articles and book chapters on Gothic literature.

Elaine M. Hartnell currently teaches English at the University of Tabuk, Saudi Arabia. She is the author of *Gender, Religion and Domesticity in the Novels of Rosa Nouchette Carey* (2000) and of numerous articles and chapters on Victorian literature, the Gothic, and domestic fiction.

Historical Women's Writing

Series editor: *Marie Mulvey-Roberts, Professor of English Literature at the University of the West of England, Bristol, UK*

This series explores a wide range of women's writing from across the world, spanning several centuries up to the First World War. Each volume consists of a collection of essays focusing on a specific theme, period of time, genre, or author, ranging from the canonical to lesser-known and neglected writers. These books will be a valuable resource for scholars and students of literature and history, as well as for more general readers with an interest in historical women writers and their work.

Recent titles in the series include:

Suffrage and Women's Writing

Edited by June Hannam and Katherine Holden

Women's Writing from Wales before 1914

Edited by Jane Aaron

Children's Literature in the Long 19th Century

Edited by Catherine Butler and Ann Alston

Bicentennial Essays on Jane Austen's Afterlives

Edited by Annika Bautz and Sarah Wootton

Locating Ann Radcliffe

Edited by Andrew Smith and Mark Bennett

Marie Corelli: Modernism, Morality, and Metaphysics

Edited by Carol Margaret Davison and Elaine M. Hartnell

For a full list of titles please visit

<https://www.routledge.com/Historical-Womens-Writing/book-series/HWW>

Marie Corelli: Modernism, Morality, and Metaphysics

Edited by
**Carol Margaret Davison and
Elaine M. Hartnell**

First published 2020
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2020 Taylor & Francis

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN13: 978-0-367-40526-7

Typeset in Perpetua
by Newgen Publishing UK

Publisher's Note

The publisher accepts responsibility for any inconsistencies that may have arisen during the conversion of this book from journal articles to book chapters, namely the inclusion of journal terminology.

Disclaimer

Every effort has been made to contact copyright holders for their permission to reprint material in this book. The publishers would be grateful to hear from any copyright holder who is not here acknowledged and will undertake to rectify any errors or omissions in future editions of this book.

Contents

	<i>Citation Information</i>	vi
	<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	viii
1	Introduction – Marie Corelli: A Critical Reappraisal <i>Carol Margaret Davison and Elaine M. Hartnell</i>	1
2	Moral Uncertainty and the Afterlife: Explaining the Popularity of Marie Corelli’s Early Novels <i>Nickianne Moody</i>	8
3	The Corellian Romance <i>contra</i> Modernity: <i>The Treasure of Heaven</i> and <i>Innocent</i> <i>Martin Hipsky</i>	26
4	“Je t’aime . . . moi non plus”: Deconstructing Love in <i>Open</i> <i>Confession to a Man from a Woman</i> <i>Julia Kuehn</i>	45
5	The Genius in <i>Ardath: The Story of a Dead Self</i> <i>Alisha Siebers</i>	66
6	Marie Corelli’s Best-selling Electric Creed <i>Robyn Hallim</i>	87
7	Morals and Metaphysics: Marie Corelli, Religion and the Gothic <i>Elaine M. Hartnell</i>	104
8	Marie Corelli’s <i>Barabbas</i> , <i>The Sorrows of Satan</i> and Generic Transition <i>Benjamin F. Fisher</i>	124
	<i>Index</i>	141

Citation Information

The chapters in this book were originally published in *Women's Writing*, volume 13, issue 2 (July 2006). When citing this material, please use the original page numbering for each article, as follows:

Chapter 1

Marie Corelli: A Critical Reappraisal

Carol Margaret Davison and Elaine M. Hartnell

Women's Writing, volume 13, issue 2 (July 2006) pp. 181–187

Chapter 2

Moral Uncertainty and the Afterlife: Explaining the Popularity of Marie Corelli's Early Novels

Nickianne Moody

Women's Writing, volume 13, issue 2 (July 2006) pp. 188–205

Chapter 3

The Corellian Romance contra Modernity: The Treasure of Heaven and Innocent

Martin Hipsky

Women's Writing, volume 13, issue 2 (July 2006) pp. 206–224

Chapter 4

“Je t’aime . . . moi non plus”: *Deconstructing Love in Open Confession to a Man from a Woman*

Julia Kuehn

Women's Writing, volume 13, issue 2 (July 2006) pp. 225–245

Chapter 5

The Genius in Ardath: The Story of a Dead Self

Alisha Siebers

Women's Writing, volume 13, issue 2 (July 2006) pp. 246–266

Chapter 6

Marie Corelli's Best-selling Electric Creed

Robyn Hallim

Women's Writing, volume 13, issue 2 (July 2006) pp. 267–283

Chapter 7

Morals and Metaphysics: Marie Corelli, Religion and the Gothic

Elaine M. Hartnell

Women's Writing, volume 13, issue 2 (July 2006) pp. 284–303

Chapter 8

Marie Corelli's Barabbas, The Sorrows of Satan and Generic Transition

Benjamin F. Fisher

Women's Writing, volume 13, issue 2 (July 2006) pp. 304–320

For any permission-related enquiries please visit:
www.tandfonline.com/page/help/permissions

Notes on Contributors

Carol Margaret Davison is Professor of English Literature at the University of Windsor in Ontario, Canada. She has edited and authored several books and dozens of articles and book chapters on Gothic literature.

Benjamin F. Fisher is Professor of English at the University of Mississippi, USA. He has published widely on American, Victorian, and Gothic topics, notably Poe, Freeman, Wharton, Murfree, Frederick Irving Anderson, George Meredith, Ella D'Arcy, Mrs. J. H. Riddell, Dickens, Hardy, and Housman.

Robyn Hallim is Assistant Director of the New South Wales Office of State Revenue, Australia. Her academic interest is in the interaction between science and English literature in the nineteenth century.

Elaine M. Hartnell currently teaches English at the University of Tabuk, Saudi Arabia. She is the author of a book on the novels of Rosa Nouchette Carey, and of numerous articles and chapters on Victorian literature, the Gothic, and domestic fiction.

Martin Hipsky is Professor of English at Ohio Wesleyan University, USA. He specializes in the literature and culture of British and Irish modernism. He also teaches and publishes in the areas of film studies and critical theory.

Julia Kuehn is Professor of English at the University of Hong Kong. Her research interests lie in Victorian literature and culture, travel writing (related to China), and critical theory. She is a Director of the Hong Kong International Literary Festival.

Nickianne Moody sadly passed away in 2019. She led the Media and Cultural Studies provision at Liverpool John Moores University, UK. She published on most popular genres, nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction, popular culture, and more specifically cultures of reading.

Alisha Siebers is Director of the Annual Campaign at the United Way of the Battle Creek and Kalamazoo Region (nonprofit organisation management), USA.

1 Introduction – Marie Corelli

A Critical Reappraisal¹

Carol Margaret Davison and Elaine M. Hartnell

In the introduction to his edition of Marie Corelli's *The Sorrows of Satan* for the Oxford Popular Fiction series a decade ago, Peter Keating rightly noted that: "There is virtually no worthwhile criticism of [Marie] Corelli's work, and even the biographies tend to focus on her eccentricities which were notable."² Although Keating fails to mention it, the problem of sexist bias plagued the majority of those biographies. Take the following outrageous comment from Brian Masters in 1978 when attempting to explain the Corelli phenomenon:

Women without men usually have overweening ambition, coupled with a ruthless determination to satisfy it. Deprived of the primitive function which is their right, they spend their lives trying to show the world that they too can achieve something. The phenomenon of Marie Corelli is less a case for the literary critic than for the psychiatrist.³

As the various journalistic obituaries detailing her career especially attest, numerous pseudo-psychiatrists posing as literary critics have weighed in on the "Corelli conundrum"—the apparent puzzle surrounding her tremendous success. Foremost among her "analysts" was J.M. Stuart-Young, who, writing under the pseudonym "Peril" in a 1906 article in the *Westminster Review* entitled "A Note upon Marie Corelli by Another Writer of Less Repute", attempted to account for what he called the "Corelli cult".⁴ His explanation is contradictory at best, suggesting as it does that her works both reflected *and* cultivated national degeneration. Stuart-Young leaves no doubt, however, as to his predominant claim—namely, that Corelli is an insidious contributing force to the degenerative state of the nation. Central to her power, he maintains, is the fact that she is "the most emotional writer among us to-day".⁵ Although he notes that the late Queen Victoria had a standing order for all of Marie Corelli's publications⁶, he erroneously theorizes that Corelli's readership was otherwise comprised of the "unthinking classes"⁷—"the members of her own sex, in middle-class society, and from the working-classes — shop-girls and young men of the larger towns"⁸—and he suggests that her popularity signals the nation's mediocrity, stupidity, and lack of perception.⁹ In his sustained and vitriolic anti-Corelli campaign, Stuart-Young notably confesses that Corelli

“helped to derange [his] adolescence”.¹⁰ In what he implies is his saner and more sober adulthood, he denounces her as a “false god”¹¹ whose work is not even original. Corelli plagiarized such ideas as those of the Rosy Cross and the Electric Creed, he claims, from the work of an unnamed French Decadent writer.¹² Like many before and after him, Stuart-Young predictably assumes the role of psychiatrist, labelling Corelli “an erotic degenerate of the subtlest type”¹³ and a “man-woman” who combines the worst aspects of both sexes.¹⁴ As her novels help to nurture a nation of criminals and weaklings¹⁵, the only solution to such a menace—this “national evil [. . .] [and] peril to the social state”¹⁶—is to ban them. Whatever solution is selected, Stuart-Young prophesies that Corelli will be forgotten, like Ann Radcliffe, 50 years hence.¹⁷

As regards literary criticism, Corelli did not fare much better in the remainder of the twentieth century. John Lucas’s assessment of Corelli, dating from 1979, for example, essentially echoes Stuart-Young’s. According to Lucas:

[. . .] she isn’t a great novelist, she isn’t even a good one. But her books are of interest because they clearly reflect opinions, wishes, likes and dislikes that were widely current during the last years of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth. If you want to know what the man on the Clapham omnibus thought of life during those years, Marie Corelli’s books will help to tell you.¹⁸

If Corelli may be said to have a single redeeming feature, according to Lucas, it is that her work functions as a gauge of the contemporary common man’s world view. Thus is the concept of Corelli’s works as simple (read *effortless*, *unskilful*), unmediated productions again promoted.

If a “Corelli conundrum” may actually be said to exist, it involves the pronounced ambivalence that has characterized Corelli criticism since the time of her earliest publications. She seems to elicit extreme responses, the Stuart-Youngs of the world lining up only on one side of the divide. While some critical commentators deem Corelli’s works flawed in their biblical knowledge and even sacrilegious, for example, others—in some instances prominent clergymen—praise her as a “Puritan of the Pen” who fulfils a “quasi-religious function”.¹⁹ Father Ignatius, a prominent monk at Llanthony Abbey, repeatedly praised Corelli’s most popular best-seller, *The Sorrows of Satan*, and went on record with the following statement:

Marie Corelli is doing more for the faith than Archbishops and Bishops and convocations put together; there are thousands upon thousands throughout English speaking Christendom who will bless the pages that Marie Corelli has penned. Where did the courage come from that made this woman so bold that the Personality of God, the Divinity of Christ,

the sanctity of marriage, and the necessity of a religious education should spring from her pen?²⁰

Ambivalent responses to Corelli's work are in keeping with the various ideological ambivalences that several recent critics have maintained inhere in her works. In *The Gender of Modernity*, for example, Rita Felski takes up the long-standing issue of Corelli's vexed relationship to feminism. She identifies an oscillation in Corelli's works "between recurring expressions of anger, frustration, and resentment toward the male sex" alongside a yearning "for oceanic dissolution of the self in an ecstatic merging of souls".²¹ Similarly, Annette Federico, author of the only monograph that, fairly successfully, assesses Corelli's writing against the backdrop of the fin-de-siècle and Edwardian eras²², notes Corelli's complex relationship to the Decadence movement. Federico claims that Corelli's 1890 anti-Decadent, anti-absinthe novel, *Wormwood: A Drama of Paris*, is "completely dependent on decadent tropes".²³ In her words, this "antidecadent novel is packaged as the very flower of decadence, even down to the colour green, which Wilde popularized as 'the sign of a subtle artistic temperament'".²⁴

If for no other reason, the ideological and aesthetic complexities repeatedly identified in Corelli's works justify their reappraisal. While each essay in this special issue undertakes this long-overdue enterprise to varying degrees, they do so for other significant reasons, among them the reconsideration of Corelli's noteworthy generic innovations and eclecticism, and her compelling treatment of a broad spectrum of contentious issues varying from gender roles and marriage to science and spirituality. The fin de siècle witnessed a proliferation of new novel types—among them the boy's adventure novel, the spiritual romance, and science fiction—and the experimental Corelli was certainly of her age with her unique blend of sensationalism, mysticism, romance, and the Gothic (to name but a few styles she employed). Much can be better understood in retrospect in relation to the gender and literary politics that dogged this ardent defender of the romance mode. Gender-aware developments in cultural studies since the 1970s relating to such things as the theorization of popular fiction and the best-seller have helped to explain Corelli's canonical status. In the light of these phenomena, Corelli may be described as a serious and unfortunate casualty in a battle over aesthetic values at a particularly significant moment in literary critical history—namely, the emergence of literary Modernism, which involved the establishment of an ever-widening chasm between "high" and "popular"/"low" literature. Corelli's enemies, however, extended beyond supporters of the burgeoning Modernist movement to include promoters of the New Woman movement and realists/naturalists of all stripes. While present-day feminists have been unwilling to reclaim her due to her often strident

anti-New Woman stance, Corelli was actually a self-reflexive writer whose views on women's issues changed over the course of her lifetime.

In contradistinction, the authors of the seven essays appearing in this special issue do not disown Corelli. Whether discussing deathbed scenes, science, Modernism, genre, or authorial persona, they present a fresh approach to her writing that will hopefully encourage a new generation of scholars to (re)appraise Corelli for themselves.

Nickianne Moody's opening essay, "Moral Uncertainty and the Afterlife: Explaining the Popularity of Marie Corelli's Early Novels", offers up a theoretically grounded vindication of Corelli that analyses some of the reasons behind her popular appeal. Provocatively comparing Corelli to a spiritualist because her work is uplifting, religious, didactic, and popular, Moody considers Corelli's strategies as an author of best-sellers, "polysemic texts that can be read from many and contrasting subject positions". By way of an analysis of the death sequences in five of Corelli's early novels—which varied in their treatment from the realistic to the fantastic—Moody examines Corelli's ability to raise moral questions relating to taboo subjects without fully closing down interpretive possibilities.

Martin Hipsky's essay, "The Corellian Romance contra Modernity: *The Treasure of Heaven* and *Innocent*", sheds further light on Corelli's work within the context of literary history, more specifically the tradition of the romance novel and the emergence of Modernism. Hipsky takes Fredric Jameson's interpretation of the role of the popular romance in the wake of nineteenth century high realism and naturalism as his springboard. By way of two of Corelli's romances from the Edwardian era—*The Treasure of Heaven: A Romance of Riches* (1906) and *Innocent: Her Fancy and His Fact* (1914)—Hipsky shows how Corelli figures spirituality in a paradoxical manner. While being traditionally Christian and promoting the romance mode, Corelli also prefigures certain of High Modernism's emergent attitudes toward cultural modernity.

Exploring the themes of romance and modernity from a different perspective, Julia Kuehn's essay, "'Je t'aime . . . moi non plus': Deconstructing Love in *Open Confession to a Man from a Woman*", situates Corelli's posthumous novel in the context of the widening chasm between "high" and "popular" literature, but also notes changes in romantic fiction, including an increased sexual explicitness. It suggests that Corelli locates and employs a set of rhetorical and narratological strategies to show that romantic fiction is a calculated masquerade aimed at expressing an unattainable ideal of love. Identifying a number of key moments in the (de)construction of love, and analysing mirror scenes in the novel, Kuehn employs Julia Kristeva's concept of women's cyclical time as opposed to man's linear time, and Roland Barthes's idea of the non-linear and non-rational organization of the lover's

discourse to reveal Corelli's highly structured dissection of romantic love in this her last novel.

By comparison, Alisha Siebers's "The Genius in *Ardath: The Story of a Dead Self*" focuses on how Corelli shapes her emerging authorial persona. In a close reading of Corelli's second novel, Siebers examines Corelli's desire to define authentic creativity and to emphasize ascetic selflessness, and observes how this leads Corelli to redefine the standard Romantic notion of inspired genius. Arguing that, in *Ardath*, Corelli experiments with the idea that inspiration is a memory of poetry composed in the author's past life, Siebers concludes that this definition of self-inspired genius, which enables an author to be both original and transcendent, participates in late nineteenth century debates about the link between genius and insanity, and is influenced by established fin-de-siècle concerns about the role of women writers in the marketplace.

In its discussion of the fin-de-siècle "science versus religion" debate, Robyn Hallim's essay, "Marie Corelli's Best-selling Electric Creed", takes yet another direction. Beginning by examining how the theory of evolution undermined traditional religious beliefs but also prompted a search for a new creed able to defy materialism and reconcile science and religion, Hallim moves on to a summary of Corelli's conflicting attitudes toward science and technology. She concludes with critical readings of *A Romance of Two Worlds* and *The Life Everlasting*, which feature the nucleus of Corelli's personal theology known as the "Electric Creed", and explores Corelli's ambivalent attitude towards science as expressed in one of the later novels, *The Secret Power*.

Elaine Hartnell continues the focus upon the religious aspects of Corelli's novels in her essay "Morals and Metaphysics: Marie Corelli, Religion and the Gothic". Positing that many of Corelli's novels are Gothic in character, she uses, as the focus for her discussion, two of Angela Carter's axioms about the Gothic: that Gothic literature "retains a singular moral function — that of provoking unease" and that the Gothic "deals entirely with the profane". However, she disagrees with the latter on the grounds that Corelli's work has almost a superfluity of discussion about the sacred. After an exploration of Corelli's religious ontology—a kind of Christianity though entailing reincarnation—Hartnell then considers the relationship between this syncretic religion and the Gothic. She concludes that Corelli's extensive, and at times lurid, dramatization of both the metaphysical and the ethical is at the root of all the Gothic elements to be found in her work.

Finally, Benjamin Fisher also considers the role of the Gothic in his essay, "Marie Corelli's *Barabbas*, *The Sorrows of Satan* and Generic Transition". However, his primary focus is on aspects of Marie Corelli's experimentation in these two novels. He argues that Corelli takes poetic licence with elements from the Bible and folklore, which combine well with the Gothic tradition as it had filtered down into the 1890s. He then explores and illustrates how Corelli

deftly brings this formula to bear on contemporary cultural and social issues. Fisher astutely notes that the fragmented sensibility in characters such as Barabbas, Judas, and Judith (from *Barabbas*), and Tempest and Sibyl (from *The Sorrows of Satan*) also anticipates similar character instability in both Modernist narrative and romance fiction. He argues that such artistic strategies in Corelli's works invite various overdue aesthetic revaluations.

To continue to ignore or belittle Marie Corelli's cultural contributions on the basis of her beliefs or aesthetic philosophy is not only to do a huge disservice to her, but also to fin-de-siècle literary history as a whole and the tradition of the ever-adaptable romance mode that mesmerized an ever-increasing mass readership. Intriguingly, the reassessment of Corelli's oeuvre necessarily involves the reassessment of the critical templates, assumptions, and biases that have been brought to bear upon it, and the exposure of some very firmly entrenched cultural anxieties relating to such issues as mass literacy. Each of the seven critical essays and two review articles in this special issue is attuned to the aforementioned literary and/or gender politics, and makes a strong case for bringing Corelli's works into both the classroom and the study.

Notes

- 1 The editors would like to acknowledge the tremendous patience and cooperation of the contributors. Thanks are also due to Adam Langton for his assistance in ensuring consistent notation throughout and Dr Marie Mulvey-Roberts for her encouragement and helpfulness towards this issue's completion. Finally, we are grateful to Cathy Millwood and the Records Office at the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Stratford-upon-Avon, for supplying us with our cover illustration.
- 2 Peter Keating, introduction, *The Sorrows of Satan, or, The Strange Experience of One Geoffrey Tempest, Millionaire: A Romance*, by Marie Corelli (1895; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996) xxi.
- 3 Brian Masters, *Now Barabbas Was a Rotter: The Extraordinary Life of Marie Corelli* (London: Hamish, 1978) 238–40.
- 4 Peril [J.M. Stuart-Young], "A Note upon Marie Corelli by Another Writer of Less Repute," *Westminster Review* 167 (1906): 680.
- 5 Peril 683.

- 6 Peril 680.
- 7 Peril 683. While no “consistent demographic profile” of Corelli’s reading audience may be discovered, as Annette Federico has rightly claimed, a reviewer in 1909 asserted that “many” of Corelli’s “most enthusiastic admirers are men of the professional classes — doctors, barristers, lawyers, writers, men of education and intelligence”. Annette R. Federico, *Idol of Suburbia: Marie Corelli and Late-Victorian Literary Culture* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2000) 65.
- 8 Peril 680.
- 9 Peril 685.
- 10 Peril 689.
- 11 Peril 689.
- 12 Peril 687.
- 13 Peril 691.
- 14 Peril 691.
- 15 Peril 691–92.
- 16 Peril 689.
- 17 Peril 687–88.
- 18 John Lucas, “Corelli, Marie,” *Novelists and Prose Writers*, ed. James Vinton (London: Macmillan, 1979) 283.
- 19 Federico 165.
- 20 Teresa Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli: Queen of Victorian Bestsellers* (Stroud: Sutton, 1999) 85.
- 21 Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995) 130.
- 22 See Carol Margaret Davison’s review of Federico’s study in *Women’s Writing* 9 (2002): 468–73. The main defect of Federico’s study is the heavy-handedness of her feminist post-structuralist agenda that results in her historical moment often overshadowing Corelli’s.
- 23 Federico 73.
- 24 Federico 72.