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“THE EPITOME AND PORTRAIT OF MODERN SOCIETY”: OUIDA AS SOCIAL  
BAROMETER OF THE VICTORIAN ERA

A dissertation  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the Department of English  
The University of Mississippi

by

LORRAINE DUBUISSON

May 2013

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## ABSTRACT

The Victorian Era was one of great social flux; tremendous advances in science and technology called into question deeply held religious beliefs while the changing legal status of women threatened to undermine traditional views of gender roles. Industrialization and the driving economic force of capitalism led to rapid urbanization as well as contributing to shifting class boundaries. In addition, the purpose and responsibilities of the Artist/Poet and, indeed, of art itself were closely scrutinized and hotly contested. Most frequently, historians and scholars of literature have looked to authors such as Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Oscar Wilde, and Alfred, Lord Tennyson when charting the progression of the various social anxieties that informed the Victorian age. These, along with other authors considered part of the canon, offer valuable insight into nineteenth-century values, and their voices are those most frequently cited as representative of Victorian attitudes and concerns. However, another, and less familiar, writer offers equally important commentary on the period. Ouida was a British author well known for her best-selling sensation novels of the 1860s and her novels of society written in the following decades. She published prolifically, sometimes releasing more than one novel in a single year. Ouida was widely read in her time, and though her work is not currently studied by a significant portion of the academy, her voice was an important component of the chorus of Victorian authors writing about gender, class, scientific development and the relevance of art and the artist. As a result, Ouida offers a vital perspective on Victorian life that deserves the attention and scholarship afforded to canonized writers of this period.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## 1. INTRODUCTION: “THE TEMPER OF THE AGE”<sup>1</sup>: VICTORIAN SOCIAL ANXIETIES

The Victorian Era was one of great social flux; tremendous advances in science and technology called into question deeply held religious beliefs while the changing legal status of women threatened to undermine traditional views of gender roles. Industrialization and the driving economic force of capitalism led to rapid urbanization that “bred a sense of captivity, of helplessness, of claustrophobia” (Altick 77) as well as contributing to shifting class boundaries. In addition, the purpose and responsibilities of the Artist/Poet—he to whom Thomas Carlyle ascribes access to “the sacred mystery of the Universe” (*On Heroes* 114)—and, indeed, of art itself were closely scrutinized and hotly contested. Not surprisingly, this social flux generated a curious amalgamation of fear and optimism that is broadly manifested in the literature of the period. As Richard D. Altick remarks in *Victorian People and Ideas*, “Victorian literature is, among other things, the record of a society seeking ways to adjust itself to conditions as revolutionary as any we face today. The Victorians found themselves living in a world whose novel demands they were wholly unprepared to meet. It was a crucial moment in modern history” (73).

In the seventeenth century, James Ussher hypothesized from biblical evidence that the Earth was created by God in 4004 B.C.E. (Altick 99), a view widely held by the European intelligentsia. Advances in geological and biological sciences during the Victorian era soon cast doubt, however, on Ussher’s timeline for creation.

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<sup>1</sup> Ouida. “The Sins of Society.” *Views and Opinions*. London: Methuen and Company, 1896: 5.

The progress of geological and paleontological studies in the first half of the nineteenth century, climaxed by Alfred Wallace's and Charles Darwin's simultaneous announcement of the theory of biological evolution . . . made it evident that the "past" had to be measured not in centuries or millennia but by geological ages stretching back hundreds of thousands of years. (Altick 99)

*In Memoriam*, written by Alfred, Lord Tennyson and perhaps the most famous poem from the nineteenth century, contains a passage in which the poet wrestles with the impact of evolution on his faith. Tennyson writes, "Are God and nature then at strife, / That nature lends such evil dreams?" (*In Memoriam* 55.5-6). Tennyson's ultimate conclusion is to reject neither science nor faith but rather to "[reaffirm] the possibility of keeping that faith . . . without denial or evasion of such knowledge as might seem to encourage a purely agnostic approach to the unknowable" (Buckley 85). Despite Tennyson's reconciliation of science and faith, other Victorians remained profoundly uncomfortable with the growing tension between religion and scientific discovery in this period.

As well as grappling with the compatibility of faith and science, Victorians endeavored to find universal physical laws to govern every aspect of the natural world, including all facets of human life (Houghton 33). Many of them had "faith in the existence of ultimate truths in religion and ethics, in politics, economics, and aesthetics (as well as natural sciences)" (Houghton 14) while others struggled with the disconcerting concept of relativity that emerged in an age of "competing philosophies which called all in doubt" (Houghton 12). In *Sartor Resartus*, for example, Carlyle avers that science cannot uncover the laws of nature because nature is unfathomable; he distrusts that those universal laws even exist to be discovered (107). Skepticism rooted in the scientific process drew many of his contemporaries to the same



conclusion for different reasons: “the scientific view that all things, material and human, were in constant flux, changing under the inevitable influences of many and complex factors, could make all truths seem relative only to a particular moment” (Houghton 15). This new relativity was both liberating and deeply distressing to the Victorians. Coming down firmly on the relativist side of the argument, John Stuart Mill says in *On Liberty*, “To refuse a hearing to an opinion, because they are sure it is false, is to assume that *their* certainty is the same thing as *absolute* certainty” (253).

Inextricably bound up with the Victorians’ sometimes uneasy preoccupation with scientific advancement is the notion of progress, a general belief in the “natural and organic development” (Houghton 29) of society towards some better state. Although the industrialization of this period ushered in many helpful innovations such as the steam engine, that same industrialization was also responsible for increased urbanization, environmental devastation, and appalling labor conditions that threatened to undermine the notion of progress in any positive sense. In John Ruskin’s hands, the black smoke that billowed from steam engines becomes a metaphor for what Altick calls “the whole state of modern man, poisoned, choked, and blackened as he was, body and soul, by the industrial system” (39). In response to the plethora of social ills surrounding the growth of industry, many Victorian novelists chose to focus on the plight of a labor force for whom working conditions deteriorated as industrialization advanced. Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South*, Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times*, and Benjamin Disraeli’s *Sybil* are but a few of the novels that tackle this theme.

Capitalism, the driving force behind industrialization, contributed to the ascendance of a new social class and a variety of attendant anxieties. Class lines in England had always been strictly drawn with the aristocracy positioned at the top of the hierarchy followed by the gentry,

the middle classes (composed of merchants, retailers and other kinds of professional men) (Altick 27), and then everyone else. In the nineteenth century, the middle class gained power rapidly (Altick 27), and the very real possibility of social mobility on a wide scale emerged. As a result, the Victorian middle class longed to cross class lines into the gentry, “often to their subsequent secret discomfort as well as that of their new ‘equals’” (Altick 28) when they succeeded.

Not surprisingly, the breakdown in social stratification was a source of great anxiety to many Victorians who were afraid of the power and influence attained by the middle class as well as the clamor for social and political reform from the working class while growing increasingly frustrated with an aristocracy which seemed to have abandoned its role of governance for a life of dilettantism. Carlyle describes the period as being divided between “a virtual Industrial Aristocracy as yet only half-alive, spell-bound amid money-bags and ledgers; and an actual Idle Aristocracy seemingly near dead in somnolent delusions” (*Past and Present* 164). The fundamental difference in the outlooks on life espoused by (or believed to be espoused by) these two groups, naturally generated a great deal of antagonism between them. In *The Stones of Venice*, John Ruskin writes:

It is not that men are pained by the scorn of the upper classes, but they cannot endure their own; for they feel that the kind of labour to which they are condemned, is verily a degrading one and makes them less than men. Never had the upper classes so much sympathy with the lower, or charity for them, as they have at this day, and yet never were they so much hated by them: for, of old, the separation between the noble and the poor was merely a wall built by law; now it is a veritable difference in level of standing, a precipice between upper and lower

grounds in the field of humanity, and there is a pestilential air at the bottom of it.  
(370)

The great prose writers of the day vehemently debated the shifting boundaries of social class. Carlyle and Ruskin would preserve the old class demarcations at all costs. They both speak out against democracy and increases in political power for the middle and lower classes, championing instead a return to a paternalistic, feudal model in which the aristocracy once again takes up its rightful mantle of governance, leading the masses by example. Carlyle suggests that the push for democracy is evidence that the aristocracy had abdicated its vital role in society (*Past and Present* 158) and become instead “a Governing Class who do not govern” (*Past and Present* 139). Carlyle’s notion that the lower classes need to be ruled by an aristocracy which inspires their loyalty and love through a paternalistic feudalism (*Past and Present* 165) is echoed in Ruskin’s nostalgia for the “noble reverence” (*Stones of Venice* 371) of the serf for his social superiors. In contrast, Matthew Arnold would usher in a kind of utopia in which class demarcations have been dissolved. In *Culture and Anarchy*, he writes:

[Culture] does not try to teach down to the level of inferior classes; it does not try to win them for this or that sect of its own, with ready-made judgments and watchwords. It seeks to do away with classes; to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere; to make all men live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light. (Arnold 475)

The debate was also carried out in the fiction of the nineteenth-century. From the divide between the landed gentry and the manufacturing class explored in Gaskell’s *North and South* to the experiences of characters living in an industrial mill town in *Hard Times* by Dickens to Heathcliff’s rise to gentleman status in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, a significant portion

of the body of Victorian literature focuses on the implications, positive and negative, of the changing nature of social class. Many of these novels explore how social class was experienced by women. For example, governesses and their ambiguous social position feature prominently in such novels as *Lady Audley's Secret* by Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, and *No Name* by Wilkie Collins. In other novels, like George Eliot's *Adam Bede* and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, lower class women are taken advantage of sexually by upper class men who lead to their downfall. This exploration of social class and women is not surprising given that beyond the acquisition of wealth, the only other route to upward social mobility in nineteenth-century England was marriage.

This period marked a growing “tendency to see contemporary marriage as itself a form of prostitution” (Pykett 65), a kind of marriage market in which women sold themselves to the highest bidders. Marie Corelli writes in “The Modern Marriage Market,” an article published in *The Lady's Realm* in 1897,

Marriages are seldom the result of affection nowadays,—they are merely the carrying out of a settled scheme of business. Mothers teach their daughters to marry for a “suitable establishment”: fathers, rendered desperate as to what they are to do with their sons in the increasing struggle for life and the incessant demand for luxuries which are not by any means actually necessary to that life, say, “Look out for a woman with money.” Heirs to a great name and title sell their birthrights for a mess of American dollar-pottage . . . . (598)

Lampooned quite amusingly in Jane Austen's novels published in the early part of the nineteenth-century, such as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*, this marriage market posed quite a serious quandary for Victorians. If marriage was supposed to be the embodiment

of a sacred union endorsed by God in which man and woman “become one flesh” (Gen. 2.24) united in holy love, then marriages of convenience for capital gain could be seen as a serious affront to the conventional moral and ethical standards of the day.

Also threatening to erode traditional values of the time period, the concept of marriage underwent an extensive legal transformation in the Victorian age. Before 1839, separated women could not retain custody of their children regardless of the circumstances of their separation; in that year, women gained the right to retain custody of children under seven years of age, and in 1873 they were allowed custody of children under sixteen. Before 1857, divorce was only allowable by an act of Parliament. The 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act decreed that “a husband could divorce his wife on the simple grounds of adultery, but a wife had to prove not only her husband’s adultery but an additional offense such as desertion, cruelty, rape, or incest” (Altick 58). In other words, the law was grossly unfair to women and required a greater burden of proof against men in a divorce case. Regardless of the positive social progress that a law legalizing divorce might have ushered in, the inequity of the Matrimonial Causes Act did little to restore faith in the institution of marriage.

At the same time that these legal changes were being enacted, attitudes toward women were also profoundly altering. The century began with a very fixed notion of the role of women: the ideal Victorian woman was known as the “angel in the house,” a designation taken from the title of a Coventry Patmore poem. Patmore’s poem offers the example of a “gentle wife . . . / Whose wishes wait upon her lord, / Who finds her own in his delight” (2.5.16-19). Patmore’s poem suggests that male action and success are somehow dangerous and create anxiety for men. Thus, the passive and ennobling angel in the house provides men an escape from external pressures (Christ 149) as a kind of “priestess dedicated to preserving the home as a refuge from

the abrasive outside world” (Altick 53). As summarized by Walter E. Houghton, the angel in the house is “the submissive wife whose whole excuse for being was to love, honor, obey—and amuse—her lord and master, and to manage his household and bring up his children” (348).

And yet, not all Victorian women were content to live within this very circumscribed sphere of influence. A great many of them were advocates for social and legal changes that would allow women to have “equal rights with men: the same education, the same suffrage, the same opportunity for professional and political careers” (Houghton 348). This was the New Woman, a term coined by Ouida in her response to Sarah Grand’s 1894 article, “The New Aspect of the Woman Question.” The New Woman rejected the angel in the house, that essentialist and patriarchal view of women rooted in medieval concepts of chivalry. Nowhere is that rejection as apparent as in the novels written by women in the nineteenth century. “Even the most apparently conservative and decorous women writers obsessively create fiercely independent characters who seek to destroy all the patriarchal structures which both their authors and their authors’ submissive heroines seem to accept as inevitable” (Gilbert and Gubar 77-78). From the passionate and assertive independence of the female protagonist of *Jane Eyre* to the female characters in George Eliot’s novels, among them Maggie Tulliver and Dorothea Brooke, who long for intellectual lives, a significant portion of the body of literature written by women in this time period in some way comments on, and often critiques, the ideals that were supposed to shape Victorian womanhood.

Amidst social, political, and technological upheaval, the Victorians were also embroiled in an aesthetic debate. Jerome Hamilton Buckley argues in *The Victorian Temper* that the Victorians could not agree upon a common body of principles governing art (132). As a result, a variety of schools of thought theorized the function of art and the role and responsibilities of the

artist in society. From those who were reacting against Romanticism, to the Spasmodics, who continued to espouse the Romantic tradition to the Aesthetes, Victorian discourse was rife with opinions about art's purpose and the effects of social and technological changes on art.

Many Victorians believed that art should primarily serve a didactic purpose. In "The Study of Poetry," Arnold asserts that although England subscribes to the religion of facts, poetry is about ideas; poetry is what elevates life (502). "The best poetry," Arnold writes, "will be found to have a power of forming, sustaining, and delighting us, as nothing else can" ("The Study of Poetry" 503). Similarly, Carlyle suggests in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* that inside all Great Men is a Poet (114) whose function is to reveal sacred mystery, to expose the public to what is beautiful (115). Carlyle implies that poetic language must by necessity convey what is morally good (*On Heroes* 119) in another iteration of that Victorian idea that beauty, or the lack thereof, is indicative of moral worth. Because of its moral function, art was touted by many, among them Mill, as a tool for education and a buffer against the anti-intellectualism that ran rampant through industrialized England (Houghton 270).

In contrast, other critics denied that art must serve a didactic purpose. Walter Pater writes in the "Preface" to *The Renaissance*—"To define beauty, not in the most abstract but the most concrete terms possible, to find not its universal formula, but the formula which expresses most adequately this or that special manifestation of it, is the aim of the true student of aesthetics" (545). According to Pater, the critic should ask himself what effect the art has on him and whether that effect is pleasurable or not and then attempt to discover what elements of the artistic production engender that response (546). Although Pater's conception of art was the fuel that kindled the movement, he was not entirely in sympathy with the Aesthetes (Buckley 180). He suppressed the "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance* for fifteen years after its first appearance for

fear it would be misread (Buckley 180) and because he could not consider art as completely divorced from its social environment as the Aesthetes did (Buckley 181).

This tension between art for art's sake and art as an edifying instrument is perhaps best demonstrated in the conflict between James Abbott McNeill Whistler and Ruskin. Whistler and the other Aesthetes espoused "a scorn of nature, a contempt for meaningful subject matter and 'painted ideas,' an assertion of the artist's independence from the claims of society, and a denial of his responsibility for vital communication" (Buckley 157). Ruskin, firmly positioned in the didactic camp, publically censured Whistler's work. Whistler then sued Ruskin for libel and was awarded one farthing in a lengthy lawsuit that bankrupted them both (Buckley 158).

If the nature of art was in contention for the Victorians, then the role of the artist remained unclear as a matter of course. The Spasmodic school developed the "concept of the poet as a divinely inspired creature with an inalienable right to eccentricity, a right to despise the conventions that bound other men and to indulge a brooding genius in studied self-absorption" (Buckley 42). Arnold also uses the word genius to describe the Poet, writing in "The Literary Influence of Academics," that "genius is mainly an affair of energy, and poetry is mainly an affair of genius" (442). Tennyson suggests in "The Poet," that writers of genius can effect great social change. The Poet sends forth arrows composed of his thoughts (line 11) that infect his listeners (lines 21-22) and create a freedom that melts old rites and forms (lines 37-40). While opinions about art differed, sometimes significantly, most Victorians seemed to agree that the artist is set apart from the rest of society in intellect and purpose. This space between the artist and society led to feelings of alienation for artists, not only from the world around them, but from each other. Houghton and Stange explain in their introduction to *Victorian Poetry and*



*Poetics*: “The intense preoccupation of the major Victorian poets with the problem of isolation is . . . a natural result of the insecurity of their cultural status” (xvii).

The Victorians’ preoccupation with science also complicated their views on art. “Not content with illustrating the range of applied science” (Buckley 127), innovators presenting work at the Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851 showcased machines as works of art in which ornament concealed function (Buckley 127). Suddenly scientific and technological progress bore a complex relationship with what had been traditionally recognized as art in both the manner of art’s production and the aesthetic principles that governed that production. Indeed, Arnold links genius in science and in art, asserting that they originate from the same wellspring (“The Literary Influence” 442). Viewing art through the lens of science, however, deeply concerned Ruskin in *The Stones of Venice*. He posits that men should not make art with the perfection of machines (369); indeed true art cannot be perfect according to Ruskin (375), for perfection is stagnation (376). He writes:

Men were not intended to work with the accuracy of tools, to be precise and perfect in all their actions. If you will have that precision out of them, and make their fingers measure degrees like cog-wheels, and their arms strike curves like compasses, you must unhumanise them. All the energy of their spirits must be given to make cogs and compasses of themselves. (369)

Like the other social anxieties plaguing the Victorians, the debate over artistic principles was depicted in the literature of the time. For example, Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* explores the relationship of art to morality and what becomes of a life lived as art, a life lived in pursuit of sensations. Like *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a portrait features prominently in *Lady Audley’s Secret* by Braddon; Lady Audley’s portrait is painted in the pre-Raphaelite style

with all the requisite fetishization of her hair. Braddon writes, “Yes; the painter must have been a pre-Raphaelite. No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have painted, hair by hair, those feathery masses of ringlets with every glimmer of gold, and every shadow of pale brown” (72). Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* centers around Jude Fawley and Sue Bridehead and contains the pair’s commentary on Gothic architecture, commentary that responds to attitudes raised by Ruskin in *Stones of Venice* in particular, as well as commentary on the poetry of Swinburne among other artistic concerns.

Most frequently, historians and scholars of literature have looked to the aforementioned poets, prose authors, and novelists—Tennyson, Dickens, Eliot, Wilde, Carlyle, Ruskin, Gaskell, Disraeli, Mill, the Brontë sisters, Braddon, Collins, Hardy, Pater—when charting the progression of the various social anxieties that informed the Victorian age. These, along with other authors considered part of the canon, offer valuable insight into nineteenth-century values, and their voices are those most frequently cited as representative of Victorian attitudes and concerns. However, another, and less familiar, writer offers equally important commentary on the period.

Ouida (Marie Louise Ramé, later Marie Louise de la Ramée) was a highly successful British author widely known for the high society novels she began publishing in the 1860s.

During a career spanning almost forty years, Ouida wrote twenty-four novels, two volumes of essays, as well as short stories and numerous articles on animal rights, politics, and the arts. Her best-selling novels testify to her versatility and were read by a remarkably diverse audience: males and females, youths and adults, working girls and elevator boys, canonical novelists and European statesmen. (Schroeder and Holt 9)

She published prolifically, sometimes releasing more than one novel in a single year. Over the course of her long career, the style of Ouida's work shifted from the more sensational themes that characterize her early publications to a concentration on strident social commentary and urge for reform.

Although scholars frequently apply the label to her early novels, categorizing Ouida as a sensational writer proves somewhat problematic. Of the two classes of sensational fiction, "newspaper sensationalism" and "domestic sensationalism," the latter was written primarily for and by women (Poster 296-97). Sally Mitchell asserts in "Sentiment and Suffering: Women's Recreational Reading in the 1860s" that domestic sensation novels chronicled the adventures or misadventures of a heroine; the hero of the novel is usual crippled in some way (37), and the heroine's love for the hero generates from his moments of weakness (36). "The crippled or feminized hero, then, serves a dual function: he is both a manageable object for the heroine's affections and an alternate persona, who provides the daydreamer with a gender role in which more interesting adventures are possible" (38). Mitchell also suggests that domestic sensation novels depicted a space in which female characters possess moral superiority and male characters require assistance and support from the female characters (45).

Ouida's novels, however, do not fit neatly into Mitchell's model. Of foremost importance, Ouida did not initially write for a female audience. *Under Two Flags* "originally appeared in a military periodical, and was therefore designed for masculine consumption" (Ffrench 47). One of Ouida's most famous declarations underscores this point: "*Je n'écris pas pour les femmes. J'écris pour les militaires*" (qtd. in Sutherland xviii).<sup>2</sup> In addition, most of Ouida's early novels lack heroines. Although she often feminizes her male characters, they

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<sup>2</sup> I do not write for women. I write for military men.

appear in no way crippled and do not serve as castrated men with whom female readers could identify (Mitchell 40).

Carol Poster recognizes that Ouida's novels do not belong in the domestic sensationalism category. She suggests that Ouida "wrote scandalous, violent, risqué sensation novels" (298) that were the polar opposites of domestic sensation novels, though even this categorization seems limited. Similarly, Pamela Gilbert indicates that Ouida's contemporaries unfairly grouped her with the other sensation novelists; as a result, the designation has simply remained unexamined for quite some time (8). Ouida's early writing drew from several genres to offer a broader and more complex series of novels than many scholars credit her with achieving. Until recently, for lack of a better critical term, most scholars used the term sensation novel to describe Ouida's fiction of the 1860s. In *Ouida the Phenomenon: Evolving Social, Political, and Gender Concerns in Her Fiction*, Natalie Schroeder and Shari Hodges Holt suggest that "most of Ouida's novels focus mainly on romance and the foibles of fashionable society rather than mystery and intrigue" (16) and should therefore be labeled novels of high society instead.

Ouida's handful of biographers, most writing in the first half of the twentieth century, tend to dismiss her work with personal attacks on her character, effectively ignoring the scope of her readership and, therefore, her influence. For example, in *Ouida: the Passionate Victorian*, Eileen Bigland paints a portrait of Ouida as a lonely, love-starved megalomaniac, a woman living with one foot in reality and the other in a dream world (60). Bigland describes Ouida as desperate to be loved (42) but desperately unlovable; she says that Ouida is snobbish and rude with delusions of grandeur and pretensions to a place of power she doesn't hold. According to Bigland, Ouida even surrounds herself with her intellectual inferiors so that she can appear to the greatest effect (84). Bigland's Ouida is a pitiable figure. Similarly, Malcolm Elwin (while

admitting that he has only read three or four of Ouida's novels in their entirety and only one of them with "careful study, annotation, and enjoyment in re-reading" (20)) calls Ouida "[a novelist] who successfully capitalized the degenerate taste of the uncultured public" (20) and presumes that "the popularity of Ouida's novels illustrates the degenerate taste of the new reading public of the commercial middle class" (282). In *The Fine and the Wicked: the Life and Times of Ouida*, Monica Stirling suggests that Ouida adopted an "overweening manner" as a means to "defy misery" (123), presumably the misfortune surrounding her later days. Even Elizabeth Lee, who is perhaps kinder than others in her depictions of Ouida, has this to say about the poverty-stricken end of the writer's life:

In judging Ouida, despite even the sadness of her last days, I scarcely think we should pity her overmuch, or conclude that because her life seems unhappy to the onlooker it was necessarily unhappy to herself. Inordinately vain personas are seldom unhappy; they suffice unto themselves . . . . She came to regard herself rather as a heroine of one of her own books than as an ordinary woman living in an ordinary world. (231)

These later critics were perhaps influenced by Ouida's treatment by her contemporary critics. From the beginning of her career, charges of misogyny were leveled at Ouida. For example, in 1877 in *The Victoria Magazine*, Ella writes of Ouida: "she is not an enthusiastic admirer of her own sex" (369-70). Alongside her treatment of women, the underlying moral (or lack thereof) contained in Ouida's novels was constantly suspect. Indeed, her ability to write realistically at all often came under attack. In a review of *Chandos* in the *Athenaeum*, Geraldine Jewsbury writes: "The black and the white, the brightness and darkness of life that is represented, bear no resemblance to any state of things that would be possible in a world subject

to the laws of gravitation” (797). In the same review, Jewsbury goes on to say, “There may be some occult necessity for an author to write books like ‘Chandos’; but we cannot believe in any fixed fate which should compel a rational being to read them; and they make a very bad use of their freedom of selection if such books are their choice” (798).

Despite the academy’s overwhelmingly negative reaction, Ouida’s novels sold rapidly. In fact, Max Beerbohm suggests that critics often disregarded Ouida merely because of her popularity (105), and the tinge of snobbery that often accompanies the academy’s reaction to popular, mainstream publications certainly colors much of the commentary on Ouida’s work. As a consequence, Jewsbury’s remarks on *Chandos*, published in 1866, can be read as a statement on class; a variety of factors in collusion “made the printed word both cheaper and more readily accessible than it had ever been before” (Altick 64) in the mid-nineteenth century, resulting in a reading public that crossed class lines—a reading public whose tastes and desires were drawn from the middle and lower classes as well as the aristocracy. This diverse and extensive readership makes study of Ouida’s work extremely relevant. Even though the characters of many of her novels are drawn almost exclusively from the aristocracy, something in her writing spoke meaningfully to and for the great masses of Victorian people, something that encapsulates the emotional tenor of the Victorian age. As Harriet Waters Preston writes of Ouida in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1886, “It is no light thing to be a popular writer; and when one has been a popular writer for twenty-five years, more or less, and, under whatever variety and severity of protest, is quite as much read as ever at the end of that time, the phenomenon is undoubtedly worth of attention” (47).

The academy is just beginning to recognize Ouida’s contributions to the corpus of Victorian literature. In the last thirty years, a group of feminist critics have focused on “the

social implications” (Hannaford 308) of Ouida’s depictions of women and their relationships to men. For example, Sally Mitchell investigates Victorian women’s recreational reading and the ways in which female authors, including Ouida, generate power within that genre. In “Ouida: the Enigma of a Literary Identity,” Jane Jordan examines the “intense curiosity about homosexuality” (92-93). Natalie Schroeder explores the kind of “resistance to conventionally prescribed social roles” (87) she finds vitally important to understanding Ouida’s novels of society as a rebellion against the establishment. Most recently, Ouida has been the subject of literary criticism by Schroeder and Holt, who have published the first (and only modern) book-length treatment of Ouida that is more concerned with her writing than her biographical details. Although these scholars have reintroduced Ouida to the academy, her work is still largely untouched in many avenues of research.

In *Views and Opinions*, Ouida writes that “the faults of an age are begotten and borne out of itself; it suffers from what it creates” (“Vulgarity” 341). In a time that generated such beneficial social, political, scientific and technological progress, that progress itself was recognized by the Victorians as responsible for what Arnold describes in “The Scholar-Gipsy” as “sick fatigue” (line 164) and “this strong disease of modern life” (line 203): the fear of failure, the mental breakdowns, and the ever-increasingly hurried pace of life that plagued them (Houghton 61). Quality of life was improving in many ways—medical advances and the newfound, relative ease of communication and travel, for example—but those improvements often came at the expense of traditional values and long-held beliefs. Perhaps more than people in any other period of time before them, the Victorians were conscious of living in “an era of change *from the past to the future*” (Houghton 1), a future they faced optimistically but also not

without fear of what that future might hold in store for mankind. Ouida's novels encapsulate both the fear and the confidence characteristic of the Victorian age and comprise

a comparatively unexamined record of Victorian cultural paradoxes . . . . Ouida's works are therefore worthy of study not only for their literary merit but for their value as cultural artifacts, manifestations of late-Victorian ideas regarding sexuality, masculinity, femininity, commodification, marriage, and family (Schroeder and Holt 10)

as well as progress, scientific innovation, class, and the role of the artist in society.



## 2. “A CURIOUS POSSIBILITY OF FIENDISH EVIL”<sup>3</sup>: THE CHANGING ROLE OF WOMEN

In *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar define a Western, female literary tradition through its motifs of enclosure and escape, insanity, doubling, fire and ice, and diseases such as anorexia, agoraphobia, and claustrophobia. They examine women’s social positions and reading habits and discuss the “redefinitions of self, art, and society” (xii) that dominate the canon of the authors of this literary tradition. In addition, Gilbert and Gubar are concerned with the ways in which women “act out male metaphors in their own texts” (xii), specifically through the figure of the madwoman. The madwoman, they assert, is frequently used by nineteenth-century female writers to embody the writer’s desires; rather than identifying (or rather than solely identifying) with the docile and subservient heroines of their stories, these writers treat the madwoman as a vehicle for investigating the ramifications, positive and negative, of acting outside social norms. The madwomen are ultimately punished by the narrative, legitimizing and rendering covert that investigation:

Even the most apparently conservative and decorous women writers obsessively create fiercely independent characters who seek to destroy all the patriarchal structures which both their authors and their authors’ submissive heroines seem to accept as inevitable. Of course, by projecting their rebellious impulses not into their heroines but into mad or monstrous women (who are suitably punished in

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<sup>3</sup> Ouida. “Female Suffrage.” *Views and Opinions*. London: Methuen and Company, 1896: 324.

the course of the novel or poem), female authors dramatize their own self-division, their desire both to accept the strictures of patriarchal society and to reject them. (Gilbert and Gubar 77-78)

The juxtaposition of these two female character types—the angel who upholds all the virtues Victorian society holds dear and the fiend who exists only to undermine and subvert those virtues—provides women writers with the opportunity to safely discuss socially unacceptable behaviors without appearing to endorse them or denying that other less radical ways of living also hold their own rewards.

Gilbert and Gubar provide a very compelling framework through which a female Victorian novelist's negative portrayal of women can be seen as an unlikely by-product of feminist thinking, even when that author's body of work appears on first read to contain numerous misogynistic elements. Though they do not discuss her specifically, Gilbert and Gubar give us a nuanced and complicated way to conceive of misogyny in Victorian novels by women such as Ouida as an exploration of the roles available to women in a society in which the rules that governed power, opportunity, and gender identity were rapidly changing.

In much of her work, Ouida portrays most women as evil and manipulative social climbers. The few women she depicts in a positive light tend to be abstracted ideals of purity and goodness who possess childlike minds and malleable dispositions that yearn for male guidance. Even when Ouida's narrators generate sympathy for female characters, that sympathy is usually mitigated by naming other women as the source of the female character's predicament. Geraldine Jewsbury, a reviewer writing for the *Athenaeum*, repeatedly emphasizes the atmosphere of misogyny that pervades Ouida's writing. For example, as Jewsbury points out in

her 1865 review of *Strathmore*, Ouida's male characters are often despisers of women (142) who continually wax poetic on the failings of the fairer sex.

Beyond the words and actions Ouida pens for her fictional characters (which are open to a much greater degree of interpretation), Ouida frequently makes remarks in her non-fiction essays that are difficult to understand as anything other than misogynistic. According to her essay "Female Suffrage," Ouida believes that "the ideal woman is, we know, the type of heroism, fortitude, wisdom, sweetness, and light; but even the ideal woman is not always distinguished by breadth of thought" (319). And in perhaps her most blatant condemnation of women, Ouida states,

The New Woman declares that man cannot do without woman. It is a doubtful postulate. In the finest intellectual and artistic era of the world women were not necessary to either the pleasures or passions of men. It is possible that if women make themselves as unlovely and offensive as they appear likely to become, the preferences of the Platonic Age may become acknowledged and dominant . . . .  
("The New Woman" 209)

Ouida is a complicated individual, and that her words are misogynistic in many ways cannot be denied. But other impulses are at play in Ouida's novels, impulses that have been categorized as feminist by the handful of scholars who have written about her since the late 1980s. For example, in *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes*, Talia Schaffer lauds Ouida as creating "a remarkable epigrammatic language that lets [her female characters] work against their own objectification" (122). In fact, Schaffer points out that Ouida lived the life of a New Woman even while criticizing that lifestyle on paper (15). As part of her examination of Victorian women's reader response to sensation novels, Pamela Gilbert proposes that Ouida's female

characters possess “remarkable power and energy in manipulating and controlling their environment, and a capacity for doing damage that may have been a potent attractant for female readers who felt that their own control of their lives was at best tenuous” (144). According to the most recent scholarship on Ouida, conducted by Schroeder and Holt, “Ouida’s extensive body of work remains a comparatively unexamined record of Victorian cultural responses to the growing consumerism, commodity fetishism, and spectacle produced by nineteenth-century capitalism, as well as those complex mechanisms by which both men and women negotiated conflicting desires to accommodate and subvert patriarchal constructions of gender” (10). Like others who have published on Ouida, Schroeder and Holt believe that, despite their veneer of misogyny, Ouida’s novels point out the insipid roles available to women in her time period and the corruption of a society that forces women into these roles and uses other women to do so.

Ouida published her first full length novel in 1864, and in many ways *Held in Bondage; or, Granville de Vigne. A tale of the day* is the best example of Ouida’s penchant for couching social critique in the language of an oppressive patriarchy. Its heroines, Alma Tressillian and Violet Molyneux, aren’t as one dimensional as those of her other novels of the 1860s, such as *Strathmore* and *Chandos*, or as passive as the heroines of later novels such as *Moths*. As Schroeder and Holt posit, “In [Ouida’s] early fiction, stereotypical adventuresses and domestic angels alike exhibit an admirable independence that undercuts the misogynistic connotations of their character types” (21). Interestingly, though, the villainesses of *Held in Bondage* are rather **more** one dimensional than later ones like Jeanne de Sonnaz of *Moths*, allowing the reader to make clear, and perhaps surprising, connections between them and the heroines.

Six years later in *Puck: His Vicissitudes, Adventures, Observations, Conclusions, Friendships, and Philosophies Related by Himself and Edited by “Ouida,”* Avice Dare, who

styles herself as the beautiful actress Laura Pearl and then again as the exotic and alluring Cléopâtre, moves from humble beginnings in the countryside to the life of a “courtesan of the nineteenth century” (P 532). Though Avice is never represented as anything other than an avaricious gold digger with no regard for the lives of the men and women who surround her (or even for the well-being of the child she’s conceived out of wedlock (P 235)), at the end of the novel, she occupies a position of power and wealth in society. Avice is rewarded for her ruthlessness, while the heroines—women who cling to an antiquated sense of justice and honor—are dead by the novel’s close.

By the time Ouida publishes *Princess Napraxine* and its sequel *Othmar* in 1884 and 1885, respectively, her message has become even more radical. Princess Napraxine, ostensibly the heroine of both novels, is described as “cold, merciless, and capricious in her nature” (PN 2:10). She is incapable of feeling emotion, addicted to the power she has over others, and decidedly not possessed of maternal instincts in the least. She is contrasted with Yseulte de Valogne and Damaris Béarde, both of whom subscribe to traditional views of class and gender and who exemplify the paragon of Victorian womanhood. Despite Yseulte’s inherent goodness and self-subsuming love for Othmar, Princess Napraxine has the following to say about their relationship: “I am quite sure that he has imagined in this poor child an angel and a goddess; a kind of Greek nymph and Christian virgin blent in one. When he finds that she is only a child, who has had the narrowest of all educations, and is not even a woman in her comprehension or her sympathies, he will be intolerably wearied” (PN 2:178-79). Princess Napraxine’s subversive conclusion, that the modern man of class and breeding cannot truly love the angel in the house, proves true. And just like their counterparts in *Puck*, the idealized Yseulte and Damaris die by the end of the series.

Over the roughly twenty years between the publication of *Held in Bondage* and *Othmar*, Ouida's portrayal of women betrays a deep dissatisfaction and discomfort with the traditionally accepted female paradigm, culminating in an argument that the angel in the house is no longer a viable option for Victorian women but rather a ghost of the distant past so venerated by Carlyle and other great thinkers of the day. The most that Victorians can expect from women in society is the nobility that arises from good breeding, "those gifts mental and moral which, under suitable circumstance, make the noblest of temperaments" (PN 2:283). In other words, while angels might still populate the homes of the lower classes—the proud peasantry, the rude but essentially moral manual laborers who accept social stratification as a given and a must—she is not to be found in the mansions of high society, and soon she will be absent from all English homes entirely.

During her long writing career, Ouida tells stories that censure women but that also admire the very behavior being censured. Very much in keeping with Gilbert and Gubar's analysis of the Victorian woman writer, Ouida focuses heavily on the problematic nature of the power and agency that is usually only given to women who transgress in fiction—the villainess, the monster, the madwoman—and in doing so, creates heroines that are shockingly akin to the fiendish women who populate her work.

“WE ARE NONE OF US ANGELS WITHOUT WINGS”<sup>4</sup>

From the very beginning of *Held in Bondage*<sup>5</sup>, women are described in less than flattering terms. They are conquests (HIB 1:56) and commodities (HIB 1:87), game to be hunted and then possessed by men (HIB 1:85). They are hypocritical, and they lie (HIB 1:44), and they certainly don't age well (HIB 1:194 and 2:161). In the bitter words of one of the primary male

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<sup>4</sup> Ouida. *Held in Bondage*. London: J.B. Lippincott, 1864: 1:367.

<sup>5</sup> See *Ouida the Phenomenon* by Schroeder and Holt pages 35-48 for a further discussion of *Held in Bondage*.

characters, Granville de Vigne, ““Women are either actresses or fools”” (HIB 1:367). Even those women who can be described as virtuous because they remain faithful to their husbands and enjoy the role of mother are hardly good companions for their spouses; these women just don’t excite the male intellect (HIB 1:222 and 2:451). To compound an already ugly portrait of the female gender, here mothers arrange their children’s marriages in order to gain the largest social capital or to relieve the household of the expense of caring for their daughters (HIB 2:230) so that they may spend more money on their own frivolous purchases. Traditional society marriages in *Held in Bondage* are as Ouida describes them in the article “The New Woman”: “a worse prostitution than that of the streets” (216), a comparison she reiterates in *Moths*.

Given that *Held in Bondage* depicts women in general as false, heartless and cold, Alma and Violet immediately stand out from their peers. De Vigne first meets Alma when she is a blonde, blue-eyed, precocious three-year old (HIB 1:19), and immediately, if a bit disconcertingly to the modern reader, she falls in love with him at that tender age (HIB 1:20). That Alma loves de Vigne even as a child is significant; her love is therefore pure and innocent and predicated on none of the artifice that dictates the affections of mature women. By the age of ten, Alma is dressing herself in white and floating through the pages of the novel like something ethereal and otherworldly (HIB 1:117). As she grows, Alma’s beauty is not perfectly conventional (as in contrived) but is “fairyesque” (HIB 1:260) and a reflection of her strong intellectual life. The narrator, Chevasney, says:

Alma Tressillian was pretty enough not to have been viewed altogether with indifference by most men. I am not sure, though, that pretty is the word for her. It is so dealt out to every girl who resembles those lovely waxen dolls sold in diminutive baby-clothes or ball-dresses in the Pantheon, or who chances to have a

pink color and a stereotyped smile, that I hate using it to a woman *worth* admiring. (HIB 1:260)

Accompanying Alma's unconventional beauty is an innocent, and therefore appropriate, passionate temper that proves irresistible to every man who meets her (HIB 1:261). Chevasney repeatedly reminds us that Alma is different, that she operates according to an alternate set of principles than most of the women he encounters. Although the novel doesn't directly attribute Alma's idealized nature to her grandfather, it certainly implies that being reared solely by a male parental figure outside the machinations of society has allowed Alma to cultivate only the best parts of the temperament she was born with.

Alma and de Vigne are separated for a time, and when they cross paths again, Alma is eighteen years old and supporting herself by selling watercolors in the aftermath of her grandfather's death. She is an excellent artist who uses her brush to "escape away into an ideal world, and shut out the real and the actual, with all its harshness, trials, and privations" (HIB 1:281). In fact, the extremely well read Alma uses literature for much the same purposes, with the sum total of her knowledge of the world coming from books rather than life experience (HIB 1:305, 308, 355). Unlike many other heroines in sensation novels, however, Alma doesn't get her information from best-selling romances; in fact, de Vigne tells her, "As your taste, like your notions of honor, are a man's and not a woman's, and somehow resemble mine, perhaps my library can suit you better than the circulating ones" (HIB 1:291).

Alma's sense of honor and loyalty is her defining characteristic throughout both volumes of *Held in Bondage*. She stands steadfastly by de Vigne in the "self-oblivion of her love" (HIB 2:242) even knowing that he has deliberately kept her in the dark about his previous marriage, even knowing that he does not return the trust she places in him. As Alma describes it, her



loyalty to de Vigne supersedes any other obligation, social or moral, that she can possibly incur and any affront that her beloved might deliver. She says,

“What do I call fidelity? I think it is to keep faithful through good report and evil report, through suffering, and, if need be, through shame; it is to credit no evil of the one loved from other lips, and if told that such evil is true by his own, to blot it out as though it never had been; to keep true to him through all appearances, however against him, through silence and absence and trial; never to forsake him even by one thought, and to brave all the world to serve him; that is what seems fidelity to me,—nothing less—nothing less!” (HIB 2:240)

Reading the novel as Alma subsumes herself in a man who has deceived her, who has unjustly accused her of immorality, who watches her flounder economically and does nothing to help, is often a difficult task, especially when the narrator insists on referring to Alma as a spaniel and de Vigne as her master, in what Vincent E. H. Murray calls “Ouida’s favorite simile for a pure woman’s love” (933). Alma’s tendency to excuse the worst behavior in men while simultaneously decrying her own sex is uncomfortable for the modern reader to accept. “Ouida’s misogyny is undercut, however, by her disturbing awareness of the social restrictions that motivate women’s materialism and ambition. Because gender politics are so complex, her attitudes toward women are ultimately nebulous; women are inconstant, vain, proud, cruel, and heartless, but they are also constrained by the options open to them” (Schroeder and Holt 85). That Ouida writes about Alma and other female characters in this manner in order to illuminate what she believes are social injustices makes the misogyny hardly more palatable; nevertheless, Alma does embody the tensions and contradictions of a society whose gender roles and expectations were in what many Victorians believed to be a frightening state of flux.

Alma is the counterpoint to the other female characters in the novel. She possesses the masculine trait of intellectual curiosity because women are urged by society to be intellectually bereft. Alma is otherworldly because women live too much in an unnatural and contrived world. She's no angel, however; she actively denies being an angel in the house (HIB 1:367) in a move that rejects the paragon of female virtue of her society. Alma is real and vital and genuine because society and the marriage market teach her peers to be manipulative and hypocritical and cold. Perhaps most troublingly, she reminds de Vigne that, unlike Alma herself, even those women who would discard the dictates of society often cannot. In Alma's own words:

“You know, Sir Folko, it always seems to me that women, fenced in as they are in educated circles by boundaries which they cannot overstep, except to their own hinderance, screened from all temptations, deprived of all opportunity to wander, if they wished, out of the beaten track, should be all the gentler to your sex, whose whole life is one long temptation, and to whose lips is almost forced that Circean ‘cup of life’ whose flowers round its brim hide the poisons at its dregs. Women have, if they acknowledge them, passions, ambitions, impatience at their own monotonous rôle, longings for the living life denied to them; but everything tends to crush these down in them, has thus tended through so many generations, that now it has come to be an accepted thing that they must be calm, fair, pulseless, passionless statues, and when here and there a woman dares to acknowledge that her heart beats, and that nature is not wholly dead within her, the world stares at her, and rails at her, for there is no *bête noire* so terrible to the world as Truth!”  
(HIB 1:335)

In fact, women cannot be natural because society forces them to behave insincerely in order to trap husbands. Women are tricksters; they marry for material goods and position but convince the men they ensnare that they are marrying for love. As de Vigne explains, “‘I call it intensely BAD to see girls of eighteen and twenty such artful actresses; to know that they are bred up in such rank artificiality that every gesture is studied, every word weighed, every action that looks natural, or frank, or fresh, has been prearranged beforehand, to trap the unwary’” (HIB 1:221). Women are caught in an endless cycle which they have no hope of breaking and which threatens the very moral fabric of the English nation. De Vigne continues:

“They cry out that the nineteenth century men have lost all the strong stuff that made ‘Pro patria’ the rallying cry of the Greeks and Romans, that made Socrates choose death rather than the dishonour of flight, and the Gracchi stand till now synonyms of perfect manhood. I don’t think we have; but if we had it would scarcely be a matter of wonder, when women like these, fed on artifice, cramped with conventionality, and taught politic lies from their cradles, are the English wives, and mothers and sisters whom it is British custom to hold up as profitable standards and wholesome reproofs to the rest of European ladies!” (HIB 1:221)

In sharp contrast to Alma, Violet is very much a participant in the glittering world of aristocratic society. Chevasney tells us that Violet’s figure is “slight, but perfect in symmetry; on her delicate features the stamp of quick intelligence, benighted by the greatest culture; and in her whole air and manner the grace of good ton and fashionable dress” (HIB 1:183). She is, by all outward appearances, the same kind of woman that Chevasney and his compatriots spend a preponderance of the pages of *Held in Bondage* damning. After all, Violet has been reared by a society mother, and she is the belle of the ball at every engagement she attends. Curiously,

however, Violet has somehow escaped the deleterious effects of society. “Though she was one of the admitted belles, and was run after (and enjoyed the pursuit, too) by scores of men, she was free, natural, and unartificial as the little flower after which she had been named” (HIB 1:184). Violet manages to revel in what pleasures society has to offer without engaging in any of the immoralities it encourages and without resorting to falsehood. She says, “The artifices and the frivolity of the society that we are constantly in worry me. I want to say always what I think, and nobody seems to do it in the world” (HIB 1:231).

Eventually, Violet finds herself in the same situation as Alma; she falls in love with a man, Sabretasche, who is still married to the wife he’s kept secret since his youth. Although Sabretasche attempts to guard his heart from Violet, he falls in love as well, and they can finally rejoice when he receives word that his first wife has died. Before they marry, Sabretasche tells Violet the whole sordid story of his first marriage. Violet responds by assuring Sabretasche that she understands perfectly any rash behavior or immoral actions in his youth; after all, men are tempted to misbehave from the cradle and can scarcely be held accountable for their misdeeds, particularly if they regret them. What Violet is most concerned with is her duty now that Sabretasche has confessed. She asserts: “A woman’s office is to console, not censure, and if a man has trust enough in her to reveal any of his past sins or sorrows to her, her pleasure should be to teach him to forsake them and forget them in a fresher, fairer, happier existence” (HIB 1:389). Like Alma with her hero, Violet believes that Sabretasche can do no wrong—or rather, that if he does, that wrong should be immediately forgiven.

On the eve of his marriage to Violet, Sabretasche discovers that his first wife still lives. Naturally, the two cannot marry now and must bury their feelings for each other as best as they can. Violet’s mother, Lady Molyneux, tries to marry her off to several eligible bachelors. The

way her daughter pines after Sabretasche has become an embarrassment, not to mention that Lady Molyneux could outfit herself much more handsomely if she weren't spending so much on Violet's clothes. Violet refuses and counters, "'Would you not put me up to auction, knock me down to the highest bidder? Marriage is the mart, mothers the auctioneers, and he who bids the highest wins. Women are like racers, brought up only to run for cups, and win handicaps for their owners'" (HIB 2:233).

Like Alma's fidelity, Violet's refusal to marry for convenience or social position or wealth or anything other than love is her essential trait. "Thus, Violet derives her angelic purity from her resistance to the conventional domestic role rather than her acceptance of it . . . . Therefore, for Ouida's angel, woman's highest mission is obviously not marriage, but maintaining self respect" (Schroeder and Holt 37). Lady Molyneux asserts that marriage is a "social compact" (HIB 2:233), an arrangement that need not be predicated on love in order to be successful. Ouida suggests in many of her novels and several articles that marriages for purposes of wealth and social advancement are morally repugnant and damaging to both men and women, and Violet vehemently agrees:

"I consider a marriage de convenance the most gross of all social falsehood. You prostitute the most sacred vows and outrage the closest ties; you carry a lie to your husband's heart and home. You marry him for his money or his rank, and simulate an attachment for him that you know to be hypocrisy. You stand before God's altar with an untruth upon your lips, and either share an unhallowed barter, or deceive and trick an affection that loves and honors you." (HIB 2:234)

Violet refuses to capitulate to familial pressure to conform to social norms, a refusal that would be interpreted by Victorian readers as transgressive on multiple levels.

Chevasney concludes *Held in Bondage* with an extended treatise on marriage that appears on the surface to center around a paraphrase of Parolles's line from Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*: "A young man married is a man that's marred" (HIB 2:447). Indeed, Chevasney waxes poetic about the dangers for men in matrimony<sup>6</sup>, the most important of which is that when men marry early, they condemn themselves to lives with women who won't interest them as adults. "God help, then, the man who has taken to his heart and into his life a wife who, fair in his eyes in all the glamour of love, all the 'purpureal light of youth,' is as insufficient to him in his maturer years as are the weaker thoughts, the cruder studies, the unformed judgment, the boyish revelries of his youth" (HIB 2:448). This quotation is an example of Ouida's misogyny in all its brutal glory.

Underneath Chevasney's warnings about the tendency of women to age much faster than men, however, his caution that marriage degrades the husband, and his admonition that even women who remain virtuous eventually become tedious burdens to their husbands, is a much more unexpected criticism of marriage and one that is very feminist in nature. Chevasney suggests that traditional courtship in no way prepares a couple for marriage and actually actively sabotages the long term success of the relationship. If a man and woman dance a few times at a soiree and participate in small talk under the careful supervision of chaperones, what can they really learn about one another (HIB 2:450-51)? How can they be certain that they are suited for each other if they are never allowed to interact outside the stylized norms of a small number of social settings? Ouida couches her call to social action in language that privileges men—how can a man know what he's getting into if he hasn't examined the goods, so to speak?—but the reverse is true for women as well.

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<sup>6</sup> See *Ouida the Phenomenon* by Schroeder and Holt pages 39-42 for a further discussion of marriage and divorce in *Held in Bondage*.

The villainesses of *Held in Bondage* occupy an interesting space in the novel. The women de Vigne and Sabretasche so rashly marry in their youth—Lucy Davis, later known as Constance Trefusis, and Sylvia da Castrone, respectively—are on the surface unequivocally evil. They are both of lower stations than their husbands, and their social standing manifests itself in several ways, most notably their tempers. Lucy possesses “one of the nastiest tempers possible, which she did not always spare even to him, and which, when the first glamour had a little cooled, made de Vigne rather glad than otherwise that his departure from Frestonhills was drawing near” (HIB 1:23). Sylvia’s temper is “that of a devil, her passions such as would have disgraced the vilest woman in a street-brawl” (HIB 1:394). Sylvia goes so far as to attempt to murder Sabretasche when he catches her in a compromising situation with another man (HIB 1:399). Ouida often links these women’s worst sins with their social class. De Vigne and Sabretasche are aristocrats and the greatest affront is not that they have been tricked into marrying women who don’t love them but that they have been tricked into marrying women beneath their stations.

After de Vigne throws over the young Lucy, she devotes her life to revenge. Once many years have passed, she appears again under an alias and seduces de Vigne. Throughout *Held in Bondage*, Chevasney describes Lucy as exerting a terrible power over the men around her. Her beauty is a tool of tyranny (HIB 1:85). She is like a drug (HIB 1:101), an irresistible intoxication that cannot be escaped so that when asked, de Vigne cannot even say why he loves her, only that he does (HIB 1:145). Sylvia exerts a similar power over Sabretasche. She convinces him to fall in love with her while knowing nothing of her background and personality (HIB 1:392), somehow concealing the violence and vice that she will return to once they are wed. Lucy and

Sylvia each manage to hide during courtship the crazed passion, the madness, that rears its ugly head the moment matrimony is complete.

In what is surely a critique of the male role in courtship, Ouida makes her two heroes so indiscriminating beyond physical beauty that they can't even discern basic personality traits of their beloveds, an inability that will punish them for most of their adult lives. Sabretasche explains:

“Now you are young and easily swayed, you fall in love—as you phrase it—with some fine figure or pretty face. Down you go headlong . . . . You marry her; the honeymoon is barely out before the bandage is off your eyes. We will suppose you see your wife in her true colors—coarse, perhaps low-bred, with not a fiber of her moral nature attuned to yours . . . . She revolts all your better tastes, she checks all your warmer feelings, she debases all your higher instincts; union with her humbles you in your own eyes . . . . Your home is one ceaseless scene of pitiful jangle or of coarser violence. She makes your house a hell; she peoples your hearth with fiends; she and her children—hideous likenesses of herself—bear your own name and make you loathe it.” (HIB 1:198)

The lives of the two heroes are utterly ruined; contact with their lower class wives has turned the heroes' naturally warm and passionate natures into “a solid, impenetrable, immovable block of ice” (HIB 1:70). Even worse, neither man can marry again when he meets a woman more suitable for him because his first marriage is still valid.

Ouida elevates Lucy and Sylvia from mere villainess in three ways. First, they are the most powerful characters in *Held in Bondage*. Their machinations drive the plot and characterization for nearly a thousand pages of prose. They are responsible for determining the



happiness, or lack thereof, of almost every character the reader encounters. Only the vagaries of circumstance—death and the revelation that Lucy is a bigamist—reduce their power. No actions the heroes perform even begin to counter the stranglehold these women have on their lives. In fact, the only power either hero is ever given over his first wife is merely physical: near the end of the second volume, de Vigne almost kills Lucy in a fit of rage. She feels his power then, but that power is fleeting and ultimately impotent as he leaves her living (HIB 2:383).

Secondly, as narrator, Chevasney generates a surprising amount of sympathy for the female characters in the novel, even the villainous ones. Though he is hardly exempt from making sexist statements, Chevasney most often provides the voice of reason, the counterpoint to de Vigne and Sabretasche's over-the-top and irrational attitudes toward women. For example, at one point Chevasney and Sabretasche debate English divorce laws. While Sabretasche is only concerned with the inadequacy and injustice of the legal system as it applies to men, Chevasney fears that making divorce easier to obtain could cause all sort of social problems (HIB 1:196-7), not the least of which is men divorcing their wives to legitimize new romances (HIB 1:199).

In another example of his even-handedness, Chevasney's strangely compassionate treatment of Lucy provides the reader with an alternative view of the character. Lucy clearly believes that she is the wronged party in her relationship with de Vigne. She asserts that during their youthful flirtation, de Vigne proposed to her (HIB 1:50) and then retracted the proposal when Lucy accepted it as genuine. According to de Vigne's recollection, when he threw her over, Lucy taunted him that she wanted him only for his money and his rank anyway (HIB 1:51). All this information is filtered through Chevasney, who often recounts for the reader scenes to which he has not been privy and must therefore necessarily be interpreting them according to his

own understanding of events. As Chevasney states, “Each man sees things through his own lorgnon” (HIB 2:116).

As a result, the reader cannot help but wonder if Lucy’s version of their relationship is correct. Did de Vigne wrong her? He is described ad nauseam as a lady’s man who thinks very little of dallying romantically with any woman he pleases. Lucy insinuates that she is not the only woman of lower class with whom de Vigne has satisfied his primal urges. ““In by-gone days, all you used to care for were, if I recollect rightly, a carnation bloom and a fine figure,”” she says to de Vigne, ““and if the external pleased your senses, I never knew you [to] care particularly for the over-cleanliness of mind and character”” (HIB 2:375). A scenario in which de Vigne makes false promises to the milliner’s assistant in order to gain her affections is hardly implausible as she would have no social or legal recourse if he chooses not to keep them. The narrative suggests that Lucy’s brand of revenge is truly the only sort of justice she could have hoped for in her circumstances.

And what if Lucy does pursue de Vigne only for his wealth and social standing? Chevasney wonders toward the end of the second volume what other options a woman such as Lucy has at her disposal. “She could not make herself a gentlewoman—she could not make herself a woman of talent or of ton” (HIB 2:433). Lucy’s ability to rise above her station is nonexistent except through marriage; how does that reflect on a society that only gives women the opportunity to improve their circumstances by matrimony? This view of Lucy’s character as one who is attempting to navigate through an almost impossible set of social conditions, albeit immorally, is endorsed when the novel’s conclusion does not find her completely diminished (HIB 2:446). Lucy is certainly punished; her marriage to de Vigne is exposed as a sham, and the social circle in which she moves shuns her. At the close of *Held in Bondage*, though, Lucy still

has lovers to provide for her and a group of companions with whom to associate. Although she is dependent on the generosity of her paramours, she is not defeated in the least.

Finally, Ouida complicates Lucy and Sylvia through the connections between these villainesses and their foil, Alma. Alma functions as a mirror image, as a doppelganger, of Lucy and Sylvia. In a very real sense (including the biological in Sylvia's case), Alma is the daughter of these rogue women, for the conduct of the virtuous is not so far from the exploits of the wicked in *Held in Bondage*. For example, Alma occupies a tenuous social position. She was reared in an aristocratic household and believes herself to be of noble birth, but she now lives in reduced circumstances, forced to earn her living by the labor of her hands. She is taken in by the Molyneux family as a companion for Violet where she is treated with contempt by Lady Molyneux and as a sexual object by Violet's brother. She is suspect, like Lucy and Sylvia, because she is a liminal figure, belonging wholly to no specific social position. To make matters worse, Alma is often not chaperoned; a young girl of eighteen entertaining men alone in her cottage is a recipe for social disaster in the Victorian period, and soon Alma is the subject of gossip (HIB 1:317).

Even more fascinating is Sabretasche's question of whether Alma has inherited her mother, Sylvia's, bad nature. "Despite her education, her frankness, and her apparent sweetness and delicacy, had she, indeed, hid unseen within her the leaven of her mother's nature? Had heartlessness and sensuality and treachery of character been the sole inheritance his wife had bequeathed her child?" (HIB 2:340). This question is a legitimate one. Even though she does not deliberately seek to ensnare de Vigne, Alma bewitches him as surely as Lucy did. "Her witchery of womanhood" (HIB 2:74), no matter how unconscious, intoxicates de Vigne until he's forced to cover Alma's face with "lava kisses" (HIB 2:74). Most importantly, Alma is even

willing to defy social and moral conventions and live with de Vigne as his mistress when the secret of his marriage to Lucy is revealed (HIB 2:394). Alma is one step away from being labeled the same sort of woman as Lucy and Sylvia, but the narrator instead lauds her courage and her willingness to give up the respect of society because of her love for de Vigne.

The connection between Lucy and Alma is made even more explicit when Ouida tells us that both these women are living solely for de Vigne; in a grotesque inversion of Alma's love for him, Lucy is "that life which only existed to do him such hideous wrong" (HIB 2:384). Both women are obsessed with de Vigne to the point of self-oblivion, and Lucy serves as an object lesson for the reader; the sort of love that erases self can easily morph from Alma's idealized fidelity into something more sinister.

The third villainess of *Held in Bondage*, Lady Fantyre, is arguably the most intriguing of all the characters in the novel and is, remarkably, the subject of virtually no scholarly attention. Lady Fantyre is the "widow of an Irish peer, a little, shriveled, witty, nasty-thinking, and amusing-talking old lady, with a thin, sharp face, a hooked nose, very keen, bright, cunning, quizzical eyes, a very candid wig, and unmistakable rouge" (HIB 1:45). She is elderly, and therefore unlovely in every way, including the inexplicably dirty state of her clothing (HIB 2:445). In Lady Fantyre, Ouida gives us a character who uses her sexuality to pull herself up into the aristocracy, a lower class woman who marries into the upper echelons and breaks class boundaries. Perhaps more scandalous than her class mobility, Lady Fantyre insinuates that widows such as herself enjoy a greater degree of sexual autonomy than other women (HIB 2:125). Lady Fantyre is the logical progression of a Lucy whose original seduction of de Vigne is successful; the reader can easily imagine a Lucy who is not consumed by revenge becoming much like Lady Fantyre in her old age. Yet despite her long list of negative characteristics,

Chevasney believes Lady Fantyre is also “a wise old woman in her way” (HIB 1:57). She is the one character who is allowed to speak the truth, and Chevasney consistently credits her with special insight and discernment: “The Fantyre might be a nasty old woman, but she spoke greater truths than most good people” (HIB 1:251). Ouida seems to be suggesting that Lady Fantyre’s wisdom can be directly attributed to her nastiness; like the madwoman, Lady Fantyre is given special knowledge precisely because she operates outside of certain social strictures.

Lady Fantyre is also the only character who wholly triumphs in the story. Though de Vigne and Sabretasche eventually escape their first marriages and wed women whom they love, both men spend decades in torment and anguish at the hands of their first wives. Alma and Violet must each live with the knowledge that they are not the first women to attract their beloved’s affections, and Violet must bear the secret knowledge of a step-daughter whose very existence distresses her, knowledge which at first threatens to complicate the friendship between the two young women. Ouida writes: “To find in Alma Tressillian, her favorite, her friend—the daughter of her own lover—that child whom, without knowing or hearing of, she had instinctively hated for her mother’s sake . . . was at the first flush intensely painful to her” (HIB 2:348). Lady Fantyre alone enjoys a fully autonomous existence from start to finish and is never punished for her transgressions. She lives to the ripe old age of ninety-seven. After having lived what Chevasney assures the reader is a very full and exciting life, “she died as she had lived, I hear, sitting at her whist-table, be-wigged and be-rouged, gathering her dirty, costly lace about her, quoting George Selwyn, dealing herself two honors and six trumps, picking up the guineas with a cunning twinkle of her monkeyish eyes” (HIB 2:445).

In *Held in Bondage*, Ouida’s portrayal of women is more closely allied with traditional views than in her later works. The heroines of this novel are consumed by their love for

aristocratic men; that love is described as worship, and Alma and Violet devote themselves wholly to that worship. Here, good women serve to console the men they adore, existing to absolve past wrongs and make the lives of men more comfortable. Ouida also reinforces traditional class views in *Held in Bondage* by suggesting that marrying beneath one's station can lead only to ruin and misery. However, she complicates her treatment of these conventional beliefs in two ways: First, she introduces what will become a crusade that spans the entirety of her writing career—a critique of the marriage market that turns what should be a union based on love into a business transaction that often yokes together people of unequal position in society or people that are otherwise ill-suited for each other. Violet goes against social norms in refusing the marriages her parents attempt to arrange, but she does so because her honor and dignity will not allow her to profane what she considers a sacred institution. In fact, Violet is one of the few upper class women whom Ouida depicts as “good”; her counterparts in subsequent novels will move farther and farther from conventionally accepted notions of goodness, culminating in the morally complex character of Nadine Napraxine. Secondly, from Ouida's first novel on, she argues that good women cannot hold male interest. As de Vigne says,

“The few goodhearted ones make constant wives and patient mothers, but in those few chained to the follies of their drawing-room, or the dull domesticities of their nursery, what man finds a companion? And if he ever look for anything in them to think his thoughts, to sympathize in his graver studies, to help him on his better road; to comprehend, to refine, to exalt his intellect, or his aims, God help him!”

(HIB 1:222)

The ideal woman conceived of by her fellow Victorians may, Ouida concedes, be “good,” but she is no intellectual, and she possesses very little in the way of power and agency. Those

women with power, those women who can seize control of their circumstances and fashion more rewarding lives for themselves, are like Lucy, like Lady Fantyre—social climbers who Ouida describes as morally ambiguous at best.

“THE MOB FEMININE RAISED ON HIGH FROM THE GUTTER”<sup>7</sup>

*Puck* is narrated by a tiny, white Maltese dog<sup>8</sup>. Primarily owned by women, he has “had mistresses in all classes of society” (P 12), giving him a unique authority to comment on the character of Victorian women from a variety of walks of life. Because he is a dog, a creature humans do not expect will understand the conversation around him and from whom humans do not think to keep secrets, Puck has access to the true nature that lies beneath the personas of the women he encounters. Puck is also educated; while living with a widow whose companion frequently reads aloud to her from works of literature, Puck absorbs “a vast and varied human knowledge” (P 89), the breadth of which Puck expects to astonish his readers and which lends an extra dimension of credence to his judgment. Of course, Ouida uses Puck’s credentials to justify her own authority to speak on these matters. Puck’s astoundingly thorough education is actually Ouida’s education. His privileged insight on the nature of women belongs to her as well. Just as Gertrude Stein expresses her observations of expatriate society in Paris by posing as Alice B. Toklas, Ouida conveys her observations of the world around her through Puck. By using Puck as her mouthpiece, Ouida makes first person pronouncements about Victorian culture in the guise of his character.

The story that Puck tells is ostensibly an autobiography, but he is more concerned with critiquing the opportunities given to women in Victorian society than with immortalizing the events of his life. The central thesis of *Puck* is that the role of women in Victorian society is

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<sup>7</sup> Ouida. *Puck*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co, 1870: 134.

<sup>8</sup> See *Ouida the Phenomenon* by Schroeder and Holt pages 89-102 for a further discussion of *Puck*.

changing and not for the better; however, women who are unwilling or unable to play by the newly emerging set of rules invariably find themselves unable to survive this social transformation. Women who pretend to be from the upper class, the gold diggers and social pretenders, are able to successfully navigate the vagaries of mid-nineteenth century life. Armed with sexual power over men “and having fallen upon an Age which has elected to deify the courtesan, and wherein hard avarice, and keen passions for pelf and self do prosper more greatly than any genius or attainment, or quality of the mind or character, [these women are] rewarded for [their] sin” (P 531). Women of honor, women who are moved by impulses nobler than themselves, cannot endure in this new world.

Puck’s life begins in the English countryside with Reuben Dare and his sister Avice. While Ben is a kind and morally upright man, Avice is lazy and dishonest, and, even more troubling, she aspires to rise above her humble station in society. “‘She’s a feckless thing’” Puck’s canine companion Trust tells him. “‘Always running her head on ribbons, and rings, and gay rags, and such like, all out of her station’” (P 19). She steals Ben’s painstakingly saved money to purchase “poor glass trumpery” (P 32) from a roving peddler and ultimately sells Puck to a stranger for half of what he’s worth (P 81). Although Puck doesn’t expect to ever encounter Avice again, their paths continually cross over the course of his memoir.

When Puck next meets Avice Dare, she has disguised herself as Laura Pearl, a beautiful but essentially talentless actress (P 154). The disguise proves so convincing that Puck doesn’t recognize her as one of his original owners for more than one hundred pages of the novel (P 237). Avice’s prosperity depends on her ability to continually remake herself in the image of what society finds most fascinating. She moves from persona to persona with ease, leaving destruction and misery in her wake.



In a word, she was the courtesan of the nineteenth century, who, to all the license and all the cruelty of the wantons that turned their thumbs downward for their brawny paramours to die in Rome, has added all the vulgarities of modern ribaldry and all the chicaneries of modern civilization. Hence, being thus suited to the Age which had begotten her, being thus its creature and its likeness, she had thriven in it as the snake thrives in hot and poisonous waters which for all purer and healthier things breed death. (P 532)

Ouida ascribes to Avice an almost limitless degree of power and agency; she devours and destroys all that comes into contact with her (P 239), particularly the lives and fortunes of men. Her first conquest that Puck is privy to—Vere Essendine, the Viscount Beltran—owns the theater in which Avice performs. Beltran is an aristocrat whose features present to the world a veneer of cold contemptuousness which hides his innate kindness (P 168). He affects to be emotionless and indifferent (P 169) while conducting his numerous good works in secret (P 184). Beltran is not perfect—he has squandered his fortune (P 184) and his dislike for women knows no bounds (P 183)—but he is almost unbelievably brave, heroically saving children from simultaneously burning and drowning in a horrific boating accident on the Thames (P 184). In one of Ouida's most frequently employed character tells, Beltran also treats animals well (P 169), a clear indication of his ultimate moral worth.

Beltran does not love Avice, nor does he want to marry her, but he clearly enjoys keeping her as a mistress. Likewise, Avice feels no love for him, embezzling money from the theater (P 170) and leaving Beltran for good on the opening night of a new play (P 296) at which a riot ensues as a consequence of her absence (P 300). Initially, Beltran seems to have escaped Avice's clutches with relatively little damage considering what will happen to her future

conquests as the narrative progresses. He restores the destroyed theater at a ruinous cost (P 419), but his only losses are money and wounded pride. “His heart indeed had not been pierced by the blow dealt him that night; he had never loved this woman save with the slight, soulless, inconstant passion which a loveliness purely physical invokes” (P 313). Unfortunately, Beltran’s reprieve is all too brief, and by the close of the novel, Avice plays a direct role in robbing him of the only woman he ever truly loves.

Avice runs through the fortune of her next lover, the Prince de Ferras, in one season and then has him killed in a duel by another paramour (P 379). By this time, Avice is posing as Cléopâtre, a cruel beauty “with her full-lidded lustrous eyes, that had such magnetism in them; with her curling lips that so seldom spoke, yet breathed a sorcery over men; and with her chain of tawny topaz, that seemed like a yellow snake about her throat” (P 379). As Cléopâtre, Avice has grown bolder in her desire for material wealth, more overtly sexual in attempting to acquire that wealth, and even more heartless towards the men she ensnares.

After the Prince’s death, Avice moves on to Carlos Merle, an artist whom she commissions to paint the portrait that will immortalize her beauty and power (P 377). Carlos is described as a painter of some genius who lacks the discipline necessary to achieve lasting greatness (P 343). He is engaged to marry Madelon Bris who proves a reluctant fiancée; she intuitively senses the incompatibility between them that so many doomed couples realize too late in Ouida’s works (P 362) and delays their marriage in order to secure his happiness before her own (P 370). Madelon’s intuition proves sadly correct once Carlos becomes interested in Avice as far more than an artistic subject. He cuts off all contact with Madelon and begins living with his muse. When Madelon travels to Paris to seek out the erstwhile Carlos, Avice’s housekeeper describes to her the turmoil that Carlos experienced before succumbing to Avice’s seduction:

He was hard to conquer, look you; he had a horror of her at the first, he shunned her, and fled from her, and that set her harder on this fancy to beat him. She will have no man look on her face and keep sane. So she set him to paint her portrait . . . and before the painting was one-half done the world held only for him that one woman . . . . I think he has shame of it,—bitter shame sometimes, but he is drunk with it, as it were; he has no will but hers. He would fling himself in the river at a sign from her. (P 387-88)

Shortly after Madelon's confrontation with the housekeeper, Puck sees Avice being escorted around Paris by another man and realizes that she has thrown Carlos over for a new source of wealth and prestige (P 395). Puck later discovers that after losing a duel to Avice's new lover, Carlos lingers on the verge of death "for five weeks—five weeks of raging fever, of intolerable torture (P 501).

Despite her legacy of ruined lives, Avice is continually rewarded for her immorality. Before long, she manages to capture the affections of the Marchioness of Isla, a young boy named Malcolm Kenneth. In his youth and inexperience, he is easily ensnared by Avice and marries her (P 529). This marriage makes her more socially acceptable and allows her to don her final persona—the devoutly religious philanthropist (P 598). Never mind that her husband fears her and has embarked on a quest to drink himself to death as a result of their marriage (P 598) or that the maternal instincts so absent for the child she bore out of wedlock (P 235) manifest themselves for her legitimate son in shared pleasure in cruelty to others (P 597). Avice has achieved more than she ever dreamed of accomplishing as an impoverished country girl unable to afford even the poorest imitation of the jewels she now wears so lavishly. According to Puck, "beyond all favors of chance or circumstance, all aids of accident or opportunity, the chief reason

of her fortune was that this woman was so entirely harmonious with her time, so utterly its true daughter in rapacity, in licentiousness, in egotism, in coarse hard lusts of gold, and in dull dead indifference to anything save gain” (P 532).

The other women in *Puck* don't fare nearly so well as Avice. Gertrude D'Eyncourt is a well-bred actress admired by Beltran and his set. She is unhappily married to a swindler (P 200) who considers her his property (P 522). Derringham Denzil falls in love with Gertrude, but she is “a woman so unsexed that she won't accept diamonds” (P 200), refusing all overtures from potential suitors. Gertrude could easily become another version of Avice Dare. She is beautiful and is actually a talented performer where Avice is not; in addition, more men than Denzil offer her the opportunity to escape from her brutish husband as their mistress. She could use her beauty and her genius on the stage not only to ensure her physical safety and personal liberty but to amass a great fortune from the men who admire her. However, Gertrude chooses to shun the world that Avice embraces. She disappears from London on the same night that her husband is found beaten to a pulp (P 200), and no one, including Denzil, knows where she has gone (P 522).

Through a twist of chance, Puck finds himself living with the noble and merciful Madame Reine (P 394), a beautiful woman the reader begins to suspect before long is none other than Gertrude D'Eyncourt. Gertrude is consumptive (P 399) and soon begins wasting away rapidly (P 404). In a fragment of an unsent letter that Gertrude burns before her death, Puck learns that Gertrude has forsaken a life in the public spotlight, forsaken fame and fortune, forsaken even the possibility of happiness with Denzil, because her love for him is so great that she cannot ask him to bear the public censure that a relationship with a married woman would elicit.

“It was not because I doubted you that I dared not become your mistress: it was because I trusted you so utterly,” [Gertrude writes.] “You loved me with such noble and perfect love; you would have surrendered your life to mine as indemnity for what you would have thought my sacrifice; you would have held that the world’s scorn gave me upon you a claim as fast as iron, imperishable, eternal. You would never more have been free; and I—I, oh my love! should have been your jailer, your injurer, your curse.” (P 408-09)

Gertrude is convinced that some “higher, happier, purer love” (P 409) than Denzil’s love for her will eventually consume him, and she has no wish to stand in the way of his potential happiness.

Gertrude continues the trend of heroines in Ouida’s work for whom the happiness of the men they love supersedes their own. Gertrude’s attitude toward marriage also proves typical of Ouida’s female characters: like the Princess Napraxine whom Ouida has yet to write, Gertrude does not consider the bonds of marriage particularly sacred or inviolable. Her unwillingness to become Denzil’s mistress stems not from a moral position; rather, she considers his happiness sacrosanct and hopes to avoid tying him to a relationship that might soon be characterized by unequal affections (P 409). She dies alone and in great physical and emotional pain rather than subject him to hypothetical sorrow. In contrast to Avice, Gertrude’s inability to thrive in the world of the demi-mondaine leads directly to her loneliness and death. Because she refuses to use her sexuality for material gain and because she refuses to view all men as interchangeable coin purses, Ouida doesn’t allow Gertrude to possess any degree of power in the novel.

Madelon Bris, another female character who is contrasted with Avice, operates the Silver Stag hotel with her mother. Ouida contradicts herself when describing the family’s finances.

First, she writes that they earn enough money to live comfortably (P 346), but later she insinuates that the family is poor (P 348). In any event, Madelon and her mother exemplify industrious women who live simple, unornamented, poetic lives (P 348). They are also decent and honorable women who will not allow the artists who patronize their hotel to bring models or companions with them for fear of housing moral turpitude (P 346).

Madelon's goodness is explicitly stated in a lengthy passage in which she is compared to Avice Dare:

This life of hers was prose, even as had been Avice's, but there was a poetry in it. It was not heavy-weighted with tawdry follies; it was not fevered with discontent; it was not disfigured by an everlasting straining after something unpossessed; it was not hideous with that dead, incurable poverty of spirit and abject slavery to the dominion of ignorance that are so appallingly hopeless in the lives of your English poor. Avice had wreathed huge glass beads on her throat—red, and yellow, and blue; Madelon never wore but the ivory necklace that had been her great-great grandmother's. Avice had worn a gown of many colors, and of as many rags; Madelon wore one of dark-blue serge, but whole and deftly shaped. Avice, gathering radishes for the dinner-table, had thrown them all together, wet and soiled with the clods of their native earth; Madelon washed them heedfully, set them in little dainty pyramids of red and white, and garnished the whole with blossoming thyme. Avice at her work had kept her mouth sullenly tight set; Madelon at her work sung like some blithe bird. In Avice poverty had been dire ugliness and sulky wrath; in Madelon poverty was smiling patience and thoughtful content. (P 348)

Like Gertrude, Madelon is another possible incarnation of Avice Dare. She is the version of Avice who is content with her station in life and who is cheerfully constrained by class boundaries. Madelon never wants for more than she has been allotted, and she never sullies the simple pleasures her existence affords by longing for what she might attain only through corrupt means.

Also like Gertrude, Madelon's greatest priority is the well being of the man she loves. She is reluctant to accept Carlos's advances because she believes she will be unfit to be his wife when he has reached greatness as an artist. "I am but one of the people," she says. "I have ever labored with my hands; I am ignorant, even if sympathy teach me some few things. You will be great, my friend; you will have fame, and fame brings fortune; I shall be no meet companion for you in that new life which so surely waits for you" (P 361). Relationships in which partners are unequally yoked, whether that inequality stems from a difference in social status or intelligence or sympathy, prove unfavorable for the characters in Ouida's novels. Marriages that result from such relationships are invariably miserable ones, and in *Puck* Ouida seems to suggest that were they to wed, Carlos and Madelon's marriage would fare no differently.

Of greater significance to their marital bliss than a mismatch in temperament between Carlos and Madelon, Carlos does not truly love Madelon. He believes his love for her is genuine, but it is based entirely on his recognition of her goodness. Puck declares that "pure women are too cold, and passionate women are too vile" (P 385), suggesting that Madelon is too good to hold Carlos's interest for very long. In addition, what Carlos does feel for Madelon is completely devoid of passion, and Puck assures his audience that "though there be absolute passion without love, there is no absolute love without passion" (P 359). Passion is the province

of the vile woman, of Avice Dare and Laura Pearl and Cléopâtre; if Madelon cannot feel passion herself and elicit it in others, if goodness and passion are mutually exclusive, then the angel in the house is a farce. Ouida explicitly states this shockingly subversive notion in the following quotation:

Madelon was a woman pure of soul, high of thought, loving nobly, and with innocence, desiring the greatness of that which she loved, and seeking its honor before her own joy; Cléopâtre bared her limbs to the painter's gaze, and looked into his with her burning cold eyes, and glided forth from her bath to meet him, with the water glistening on her polished skin, and said in her soul that he should love her in such wise, that this love should kill all manhood, all conscience, all godliness, all genius within him, and deliver him over to her prostrate, worthless, a mockery of men. Yet it was Cléopâtre, and not Madelon, that he loved. (P 384-85)

When Madelon discovers Carlos living with Avice, she falls desperately ill in a physical manifestation of her emotional pain. She cannot compete with Avice for his affections; Madelon's moral character forbids her to stoop to Avice's level of infamy, and she can no more become the sensual creature of passion that might woo Carlos away from Avice than Avice can renounce her path of greed and lust. Puck loses track of Madelon after her illness but later overhears that Madelon has become a Sister of Charity who devotes her life to caring for the sick. Her illness has prematurely aged her, turning her hair white and robbing her of beauty (P 596). Madelon's story concludes where perhaps it should have begun—in a religious order surrounded by other virtuous women who battle cholera and save lives “‘as if by a saint's miracle’” (P 596).



*Puck* insinuates that for Victorian women no feasible middle ground exists between the two archetypes of angel in the house and the fiendishly evil villainess. One female character, Nell Browne, might occupy such a position, but even this liminal space proves untenable for her. Nell is born in a poorhouse to a prostitute who dies there like a caged animal (P 260). Beltran employs her as an actress in his theater, “but she was no genius, she was no beauty, she was only a little blue-eyed, sturdy-limbed girl of the populace . . . . She came to a workhouse at her birth; she would go to a workhouse for her grave” (P 506). Nell is undeniably lower class and doesn’t possess the acting skills that might lift her above her station, yet Nell never pretends to be anyone other than who she is. She is not money hungry like Avice though she is given the opportunity to be so. When Beltran offers her the gift of an expensive necklace, Nell flatly turns him down (P 271). Rather than rejecting her humble upbringing as Avice does, as an adult Nell financially aids the woman she was farmed out to by the poorhouse as a child (P 262). Though Nell earns her living in the morally suspect world of the theater and though she would clearly welcome the recognition for her performance that would make life more comfortable and economically secure, she operates according to a set of moral standards that prevent her from making the choices Avice makes. Nell refuses to test the limits of class boundaries. She doesn’t aspire to a higher status, and she adheres to traditional class views. Nell is no angel, but she is honorable and noble in her own way.

Unfortunately, noble compassion is Nell’s downfall. *Puck* follows Nell one day into a claustrophobic room in a squalid apartment building. Here a fellow actress, very young and once very beautiful before the ravages of her illness, lies dying (P 508). Nell pays her rent and sits with the dying girl, risking her own health in the process, not only in terms of contagion but in lack of sleep. The dying girl’s landlady worries that Nell will harm herself sitting up night after

night while still fulfilling her obligations as an actress (P 509). In fact, Puck notices that Nell's beauty has "hardened, and got a curious, worn, coarse, pained look" (P 510). Though Beltran admires Nell's good character and would assist in her philanthropic projects, Nell rebuffs his friendship. Her regard for Gladys Gerant, Beltran's newest hire and the only woman he has ever truly loved, will not allow her to sully the aristocratic actress's reputation with her proximity (P 513). Nell continues sitting up alone with sick actresses until she finally succumbs to fever and dies (P 548).

Gladys Gerant is the one female character who has nothing in common with Avice Dare and who is not presented as an alternate version of her. Gladys comes from noble stock though her family's circumstances have been much reduced through the generations. Puck states, "Race is stronger than circumstance. She had been reared in the severe simplicity of a yeoman's household, and amidst the harsh privations of poverty . . . . And yet Race had conquered Accident, and vindicated her title to it—in every limb and lineament; in every motion and gesture; in the accents of her voice, in the gaze of her eyes" (P 475). Gladys's aristocratic nature is immediately apparent to all who encounter her (P 267) and serves as the basis for the moral code that governs her actions throughout the novel.

After the death of both parents and the loss of the family farm, Gladys comes to London to find her prodigal brother who left the Gerants to seek his fortune as a writer in the Great City (P 258-59). Nell discovers Gladys starving and unconscious in the street (P 249) and takes the problem to Beltran who sends Gladys away to his housekeeper to recuperate from privation and the shock of the news of her brother's death (P 450). During that period of time, Beltran provides an education for Gladys that culminates in her introduction to the stage (P 451). However, Gladys does not know that Beltran owns the theater in which she performs or that he

pays her wages (P 479); her pride would not permit her to accept what she deems charity, even though Beltran's secret patronage allows her to escape the hardships of acting that wreck the bodies and the spirits of the young women with whom she shares the stage (P 478).

As might be expected, Gladys falls deeply in love with Beltran; "love for him had grown into the religion of her existence" (P 544). Gladys carries that religious devotion so far as to assert that she will gladly allow Beltran to kill her if he so desires in gratitude for all that he has done for her. Ouida consistently describes the way that Gladys loves Beltran with adjectives typically reserved for the angel in the house, for example—"sweetest, highest, most innocent" (P 545). Gladys is allowed to possess passion, but that passion is concentrated totally on her devotion to Beltran, on what Ouida calls "her unasked submission to him" (P 545), and never on overtly sexual and physical expressions of love. In fact, when Beltran finally kisses her, Gladys "shrank weeping to him like a tired child" (P 563). Gladys responds to Beltran's commands as she would to a father's, and though her love for him is quite profound, it is not the dangerous, sensual love of a woman like Avice. Gladys is so disturbed by Beltran's passion for her that she worries that "she must be debased in his eyes and her own forevermore" (P 564) as a result of both the fierceness of his kisses and her confused reaction to them. Although she is not presented as sexually frigid, sexual situations frighten Gladys, and she looks to Beltran for guidance and reassurance. In this way, Gladys stays well within the bounds of acceptable behavior for Victorian women though the world around her supposes the worst of her association with Beltran.

Beltran does not instantly return Gladys's love and struggles between behaving as aristocratic society demands and the dictates of his heart. London society assumes that Gladys is Beltran's mistress and that her position at the theater is just one component of their arrangement

(P 477). Beltran foolishly believes that his word will be enough to protect Gladys's reputation and is astonished when his sister and female acquaintances refuse to befriend her. "When he had endeavored to induce women of his own class to take interest in her, he had been baffled by their indifference or their incredulity, and could make no impression either on their coldness or their skepticism" (P 480). These women, Beltran's sister especially, fear the social stigma of associating with an actress and a kept woman. "'The world holds her as your mistress,'" Beltran's sister says. "'I cannot subject my children—'" (P 542). Though many of the women of Beltran's status have committed adultery and even pass off their bastards as legitimate children, they would be scandalized to socially recognize Gladys (P 484). Despite the hypocrisy of such a position, Beltran's female friends are unwilling to damage their own reputations (and the reputations of their children) through contact with Gladys.

As he wrestles with whether or not to marry Gladys, Beltran wonders whether his personal knowledge of her innocence will suffice or if society's assumptions about her purity matter more (P 553). On her deathbed, Nell extracts a promise from Beltran that he won't allow the slander society speaks of Gladys to become truth (P 550); coupled with his growing feelings for Gladys, this promise influences him to marry Gladys in secret. Though their relationship is now legitimate, Beltran knows that society will still shun his wife, and his pride compels him to continue the secrecy.

For, to the man who is proud and of pure lineage, it is not enough that he may know the innocence of his wife to be without soil; it is as the very breath of his life that it should be unassailable by living lie or dead rumor, and unapproachable as the stars on high. And, sooner or later, the woman who learns that she has been suspected by the world will learn that, however deep her husband's love, or

however imperishable his trust, there is one galled wound in his strength by which a passing touch can force his haughtiest pride to wince. (P 570)

Even the recently acquired inheritance which leaves Beltran wealthy beyond measure will ease his wife's transition into society only by increments. Gladys's acceptance by the aristocracy will require long, hard work, and even then she will never be free from the possibility of gossip and slander (P 572).

At this point in the novel, Avice metes out the punishment on Beltran that earlier he appeared to escape. She takes it upon herself to reveal to Gladys the extent to which Beltran has been responsible for both Gladys's financial security and her triumph upon the stage. Avice says, "You were a girl he found in the streets, I've heard?—selling flowers and starving? And you'd a pretty face, and he took a liking to it; and he made a—lady—of you? It's his way; and it pays, too" (P 576). Avice insinuates that Gladys is one in a long succession of mistresses and mischaracterizes her as complicit in what essentially amounts to prostitution. She bluntly speaks to Gladys's face what the rest of society has spoken behind her back, and Gladys cannot bear the shame of Avice's disclosure. Gladys is even more deeply wounded when Avice suggests that marrying Beltran has done him even greater harm than living as his mistress.

"You've killed his pride in him forever and aye," [Avice says]. "Do you know that the women of his rank would no more come nigh you than nigh me? Do you know that his world will say he has married his mistress, and that your sons will be taught, soon or late to blush for their mother? Do you know that, to live with you, he must give up his order: and that, though you may carry its title, you will never pierce into its ranks? But I'm a 'vile woman,' you know; you,—you're an angel of innocence! . . . . When, through you, he is the scorn of friends and the

jest of fools; when for you he gives up his old world, and his own race; when by you he has children who can be taunted by schoolmates with your name; when for you he lives beggared, restless, half obscure, shunning the eyes of the world because of the stain the world thinks that it sees on his scutcheon, *then* he will find little choice, I fancy, between my ‘infamy’ and your ‘innocence’ . . . . He will never tell it to you, because he is a gentleman born; but as sure as he lives, so sure will the day come when in his soul he will curse you for the selfishness you cloaked in purity, for the cruelty that you masked in love. I am a bad woman—yes—but I was never so base to him as you! I only took his gold; I never stole his name!” (P 578-79)

Gladys might suffer slander to her own name but to cause Beltran harm is the one fault she can never forgive in herself (P 580). Immediately after Avice’s revelation, Gladys takes the stage one final time as Githa, the main character of a play set in a bygone heroic age (P 556). She delivers the performance of a lifetime, using the words of the play to deliver heartbreaking commentary on her relationship with Beltran. As Githa, Gladys laments the infamy she’s brought to Beltran’s name, and “in the self-abandonment of a love that was absolute in its idolatry” (P 581), she reacts to such disgrace in the most extreme manner available to her—death.

In *Puck*, Ouida unequivocally states that the angel in the house cannot survive in the new climate of the latter half of the nineteenth century. The patriarchal underpinnings of idealized womanhood place the onus of male honor and dignity on female purity. Merely the appearance of immorality is enough to ruin the reputation of even the most virtuous women, and once introduced, no mechanism to counteract that appearance exists. Surrounded on all sides by

Avice Dare and her ilk, by those who would use feminine wiles to forcibly take the wealth and power to which they possess no social right, society cannot help but view all women through a suspicious lens, and the angel in the house is besmirched despite her innocence. Just as she dies in the pages of *Puck*, the novel suggests that the angel in the house will similarly fade as a Victorian ideal.

As in *Held in Bondage*, misogynistic undertones continue to color Ouida's writing in *Puck*. Here, she even goes so far as to have a female character suggest that "if two-thirds of all the female children that are born were put in the water-butt, where they put two-thirds of our puppies, the world might be comfortable" (P 503). Women are called "spiders" (P 11) and "scorpions" (P 380) and "so much tinder lying ready for the Devil's flint" (P 502). However, regardless of the misogyny that characterizes her work, Ouida uses *Puck* as an opportunity to examine one possible avenue for female power. Though Avice is described as cruel, ruthless, and brazen in her quest to acquire material wealth, she is rewarded for her efforts. She is "the Faustine, the Assassinatress, the Hell-born" (P 395) and is directly responsible for numerous deaths throughout the course of the novel, but she is never punished for her transgressions. Avice functions as a prime example of Gilbert and Gubar's monstrous woman with one notable caveat: Avice not only enjoys great power, but she is allowed to retain it. She is the single primary female character in the novel who occupies an improved position at its close. Avice may be the worst kind of woman, but she proves that "the jeweled wanton may steal the honor of your name unchastised, and wed your young heir to eternal shame, unarraigned" (P 530).

“‘MARRIAGE IS THE GRAVE OF LOVE’”<sup>9</sup>

*Princess Napraxine* and *Othmar*<sup>10</sup> revolve around the romantic relationship between Princess Nadège “Nadine” Napraxine and Otho Othmar. Nadine, a Russian beauty, is unhappily married to Prince Platon Nicholaivitch Napraxine. She constantly surrounds herself with a bevy of admirers, none of whom enjoys a physical relationship with her (PN 1:54-55) and who instead must satisfy themselves with serving as her platonic escorts (PN 1:146). One of these admirers, Othmar, intrigues Nadine in a way that none of her other devotees have achieved thus far (Ouida, PN 1:89). Though she initially declines Othmar’s advances, as the novels progress, his feelings for her force Nadine to scrutinize her own emotional makeup in an effort to come to terms with her complicated stance on love and marriage.

Nadine is one of the most fascinating and outrageous characters ever created by a Victorian author. Over and over again, she shatters the ideal version of Victorian womanhood, operating well outside accepted nineteenth-century social mores with impunity. The archetype of the feminine as defined by the Victorians does not apply to Nadine. She favors the cerebral over the emotional and wields great power based on her intelligence. She eschews her maternal obligations, flouts conventionally held beliefs regarding love and marriage, and delights in the violence that originates from her own cruelty. Yet Ouida presents Nadine as the heroine of the series rather than the villainess this description of her implies.

Ouida depicts Nadine almost solely in terms of her intelligence and corresponding dearth of emotions. Othmar’s uncle, Baron Fritz, believes that Nadine’s “merciless intelligence was as a seismographic pendulum which foretold truly the convulsions of the future” (PN 2:182). She possesses “an intelligence refined by culture to the utmost perfection of taste and hypercriticism

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<sup>9</sup> Ouida. *Othmar*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1902: 12.

<sup>10</sup> See *Ouida the Phenomenon* by Schroeder and Holt pages 209-219 for a further discussion of these novels.



of judgment” (PN 2:284), and “psychological analysis far outweighed with her all personal emotions” (O 370). Indeed, Nadine’s intelligence is of the caliber that she sometimes attends lectures at the Academy (PN 3:100) and can engage in witty repartee with the most prominent scientists of the day (PN 3:97).<sup>11</sup> Ouida presents Nadine as so intelligent that the emotions typically ascribed to women—love, friendship, maternal interest, jealousy—are somehow unworthy of her experience. Detached and disconnected from those around her, she feels none of the emotions that the other characters in the novels assign to her but moves through the action of the series as if she is watching a play unfold (PN 1:94).

Surprisingly, Nadine does not seem to regard her inability to feel emotions as any great loss. Her complete indifference to her fellow man (and woman) grants her both pleasure and power. Because the outcome of any given situation doesn’t matter to Nadine, only her analysis of the motivations and passions of others, she amuses herself by cruelly manipulating the people with whom she comes in contact. She plays God with the lives around her, reveling in her control over her sphere of influence. Nadine sometimes wishes for the novelty of feeling emotions for herself, but this wish is half-hearted, as a child might wish for a new toy that will soon bore her. Ouida writes,

She had always liked to bring about singular scenes, unusual situations, strange emotions, merely for the sake of observing them with the same subtle and intellectual pleasure, as a writer of romance feels in the complications and characters which he creates at will, and at will destroys. She had always brought about a perilous position when she could do so, because to enter upon one was as agreeable to her as it is to a good mountaineer to ascend to perilous heights. She had been often tempted to regret her own physical coldness, which rendered such

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<sup>11</sup> Nadine’s scientific pursuits will be considered at greater length in Chapter Two.

heat of emotion and of danger as d'Aubiac's royal mistress had known impossible to her . . . . Of all things which had bored her throughout her life the love of the male human animal had bored her the most. But a complicated situation, a set of emotions on an ascending scale—a spectacle of troubled consciences and of disturbing elements—these it had always diverted her to watch, calm and untouched by them as any marble statue which looks from a glad window upon a storm at sea. (O 76).

Victorian audiences were probably most shocked by Nadine's reactions to her children. She sees her children with Platon rarely, electing to house them with his mother in the Crimea for most of the year (PN 1:53). Nadine doesn't love her offspring, partly as a result of what she sees as the degradation of the sexual act that conceived them (PN 2:251) and partly because she deems them too much like their despised father. Nadine believes that she can do nothing to educate the children of such a stupid man but doesn't seem to realize the self-fulfilling prophecy she's created (PN 1:54). By denying her culpability in the potential future stupidity of children she's refused to help educate, Nadine rejects the traditional view of maternal obligation. She has no hand in rearing Sachs and Mitz, finding them exceedingly ugly and absurd (PN 1:105). “They are quite wonderfully ugly,” Nadine says. “An ugliness flat, heavy, animal, altogether Tartar. I imagine I could have been fond of a child like any other woman, but then I think with any mother it must be always the child of a man she loves” (PN 2:284-85). Nadine's coldness leads Platon to speculate that she would not care if Sachs and Mitz died (PN 2:226).

Nadine marries Othmar at the end of *Princess Napraxine* after they are both widowed. She and Othmar have two children, Otho and Xenia, of whom Nadine is fond because they belong to Othmar (O 23). Otho and Xenia are depicted as the ideal children whose beauty,

innocence, and unflagging good natures contribute to her attachment to them (O 37). Although Nadine manages some affection for her children with Othmar, even taking part in their education, they do not interest her overmuch. “She was not a woman to whom the babble and play of children could ever be long interesting; her mind was too speculative, too highly cultured, too exacting to give much response to the simplicity, the ignorance, and the imperfect thoughts of childhood. But in her own way she loved them” (O 36). Nadine’s great intellect mars the relationships she should hold most dear; even for a set of perfect children whose father elicits from her a greater emotional response than any other man in her life, Nadine cannot muster more than a vague fondness.

Nadine’s moral code is similarly scandalous. Her moral compass is predicated entirely on her good taste, pride and “profound indifference” (PN 1:63-64). Nadine asserts that “perfect taste” (PN 1:64) can be substituted for traditional ethical standards because vice offends her sensibilities. She decides at the beginning of her marriage to Platon that she will never commit adultery, not from any abhorrence of wrongdoing or any sense that marriage should be an inviolable state, but because adultery seems common and vulgar to her refined sense of taste (PN 1:54-55). At the only point in her life in which she is tempted to commit adultery, the damage to her social position rather than decency compels Nadine to deny Othmar (PN 2:55).

Nadine commits act after act of cruelty with little remorse, leaving a trail of dead would-be lovers behind her. Men dueling over her affections amuses Nadine though she affects otherwise. Despite her amusement, Nadine hates to be implicated in the ensuing scandal that surrounds such duels and insists that she cannot be blamed for the choices made by the men who love her (PN 1:68). However, that insistence is belied numerous times in both novels when Nadine is directly named responsible for instigating conflict among her admirers. For example,

“she loved to see men on the brink of a quarrel: sometimes she restrained them from passing the brink; sometimes she did not; sometimes she helped them over it with a little imperceptible touch, light as the touch of a feather, which yet had all the power of electricity” (PN 1:83). Though she may feel a twinge of regret from time to time over the death of a suitor, Nadine abdicates any responsibility for their wellbeing; her principles do not compel her to prevent violence among her admirers, nor do they check her delight in that violence.

Although Nadine does not encourage Platon to fight for her honor, she is widowed as the result of a duel. Platon challenges a man he overhears gossiping about the relationship between Nadine and Othmar to a sword fight (PN 3:260). Of course, the gossip—that Othmar loves Nadine and that his marriage to another woman was provoked by the futility of that love—is quite true (PN 3:244). Platon admires Othmar (PN 3:249), however, and loves his wife despite her coldness to him (PN 3:252); as a result, he duels just as much to protect Othmar’s honor as Nadine’s. Unfortunately, Platon dies at sword point, clutching a tea rose he had liberated from Nadine’s corsage the night before (PN 3: 266). When told of his death, Nadine acknowledges, if only to herself, that she has treated Platon badly (PN 3:287) and wishes that her final words to him had not been so cruel (PN 3:284); however, her primary response to Platon’s death is to worry that her incorrect assumption that Othmar was his dueling partner will become fodder for the gossip mill (PN 3:291). The only emotion Nadine feels in abundance after Platon dies is relief.

More frequently than dying as the consequence of duels, Nadine’s admirers commit suicide when her lack of interest in them as paramours becomes painfully apparent. Platon’s twenty-two year old cousin, Boris Fedorovich Seliedoff, kills himself (PN 2:218) after Nadine toys most unfairly with him, taking out her ire with Othmar on the unsuspecting young man (PN

2:195). Nadine manages to muster a modicum of remorse over Boris's suicide, even crying when she learns of his death (PN 2:231), but her primary response to the situation is annoyance and a "sense of the wrong done to herself" (PN 2:230) by Boris, who inconsiderately exposes her to gossip with his violent death.

Boris's death leads Nadine to reject Lord Geraldine (PN 2:235), another of her suitors who happens to be the brother of her closest female friend, Lady Evelyn Brancepeth. Evelyn has asked Nadine to release her brother from his fruitless devotion (PN 1:341), and when she does Geraldine emigrates to North America (PN 2:280). While seal-hunting, Geraldine becomes trapped on an ice floe that breaks away, and he freezes to death (PN 3:163). He doesn't commit suicide, but the text presents Nadine as culpable for Geraldine's death by driving him from England and triggering the grief that prompts his engagement in such reckless sport. In a letter breaking off their friendship, Evelyn writes to Nadine:

It would have been so easy for you, when first my brother ventured to show you what he felt, to banish him forever with a decisive word; he would have been man enough to understand and to accept it; but you did not take that trouble, and the love of you grew—not perhaps precisely upon hope—but at least upon the tacit permission to exist. (PN 3:167)

Evelyn believes that her brother's blood is on Nadine's hands (PN 3:168), and while Nadine is willing to concede to at least some of Evelyn's analysis of the situation, she still cannot accept responsibility for the role she plays in Geraldine's death or the death of any of her other devotees. Nadine thinks, "When they irritate me, I really do not care what becomes of them. As long as they know how to please me I am always amiable. It is not my fault that their knowledge comes to an end too soon" (PN 3:170).

The only admirer whose fate ever interests Nadine is Othmar, and his feelings for her oblige her to examine her attitude toward love and marriage. Nadine sees marriage as merely a business transaction that has little to do with the suitability of partners. When mulling over her lack of wedded bliss with Platon, Nadine identifies the transmission of property as the primary function of marriage, including their own.

“The fault is not ours,” she would say, “it is the institution that is so stupid.

People do not know how else to manage about property, and so they invented the marriage state. But it is an altogether illogical idea, binding down two strangers side by side for ever, and it cannot be said to work well. It keeps property together, that is all; so I suppose it is good for the world; but certainly individuals suffer for it more than perhaps property is worth.” (PN 1:52-53)

Nadine completely divorces marriage from love (PN 1:48), and she does not believe that it constitutes a sacred bond between man and wife. Marriage is merely a contract in her eyes. Conventional moral strictures concerning marriage do not trouble Nadine, nor does she believe that the sanctity of marriage is divinely ordained: “No human ordinances can be sacred, and we cannot be sure there are any divine ones, logically, all the probabilities are that there are none; so she certainly would have said had anyone challenged her views on such a subject” (PN 2:46).

Nadine’s approach to marriage with Platon has been to dominate him from the beginning, managing him with fear and constant reminders of his inferiority (PN 3:146). She submits to his sexual advances but only to obtain heirs, and then she denies Platon any further sexual access (PN 1:50). The sexual act disgusts Nadine; “all the caresses and obligations of love were odious to her” (PN 1:51). Her loathing of sexual intimacy leads Nadine to conclude that on her wedding night, “she had been as much violated as any slave bought in the market” (PN 2:251),

underscoring her conception of marriage as a commercial enterprise. According to Nadine's worldview, Platon purchases the right to sleep with her—at least until she produces children to carry on the family name—with his wealth and all the attendant rights marriage to him bestows on her.

Nadine's subsequent relationship with Othmar lacks sexual heat as well. She withdraws from his caresses and would rather they behave as friends than lovers (O 137). In fact, Ouida describes Nadine as utterly bereft of physical passion (O 137). The single sexual encounter described between Nadine and Othmar occurs during a reunion after a separation of three months. Nadine expends a great deal of effort to sexually excite Othmar, but the pleasure she receives from intercourse with him is purely mental. Reestablishing her power over Othmar gratifies her; in addition, her ability to "blind and enslave" (O 229) Othmar helps to keep Nadine's concerns about aging at bay. Because Nadine cannot offer Othmar the love that he longs for, she offers him her body instead. "It might not be the highest form of love, but it was the ablest" (O 229), she muses.

Throughout the series, Ouida depicts Nadine as incapable of experiencing love. "She did not think about love at all; she was not romantic" (PN 1:49). In fact, when Othmar declares his love for her and asks her to run away with him, Nadine responds that she has never loved anyone, including him (PN 1:364). After she rejects him, Othmar marries another woman in an attempt to forget his feelings for Nadine. At this point, Nadine is willing to admit that Othmar inspires in her "something more than the merely intellectual curiosity with which before she had studied the results of her influence upon him" (PN 2:95), but she constantly questions whether what she feels for Othmar is love (PN 3:330).

Once Nadine and Othmar marry, she still cannot commit her heart to him. She cares for him more than she formerly believed possible, but her analysis and continual psychological critique distance her from Othmar. When she is honest with herself, Nadine can only admit that “she loved him, perhaps” (O 29). Nadine seems certain that they would have loved one another more deeply if they had never married, and she expects someone else to eventually supplant her in Othmar’s affections (O 34). Nadine cannot bring herself to admit that love—what should, according to conventional wisdom, serve as the basis of her union with Othmar—even truly exists. To Nadine, love is imaginary, necessitating “leisure for [its] development” (PN 1:100).

Ouida most clearly reveals Nadine’s extreme skepticism regarding love in the opening scene of *Othmar* in which Nadine reigns as Queen over a Court of Love. Nadine charges the Court to define love, an exercise which proves most difficult for the group. The Court alternately describes love as the attempt to acquire wealth (O 3), the presence of sexual desire, and devotion to another—the last of which is dismissed as passé. Nadine prefers to think of love as an illusion, arguing that the lover always loves a false beloved of her own making (O 4). For the princess, love is a social construct: the product of education, and an unnatural state of being. People “love” because they have been led to believe that a certain set of behaviors is the appropriate response to particular stimuli. A Court member explains: “Love as a sentiment was always unknown in a state of nature, and was only created with the first petticoat” (O 12). The Court of Love decrees inconstancy as a defining characteristic of love (O 6) and laments that most partners prove incompatible in some way (O 9). The Court ignores the traditional connection between love and marriage, scarcely mentioning marriage in the discussion at all, except to avow that “marriage is the grave of love” (O 12). Surrounded by attitudes such as



these, Nadine's inability to determine whether or not she loves Othmar, or even wants to love Othmar, is not surprising.

By the end of the series, Nadine recognizes the disadvantages of her coldness and endeavors to change. Her role in the death of an innocent woman at last moves Nadine to strong emotion; repentant and regretful, she becomes aware that she has squandered her influence and her gifts (O 392). She first attempts to make amends with Otho and Xenia and is shocked and saddened when the children admit they fear her (O 339). Otho and Xenia are further disturbed when Nadine shows them the physical affection she has heretofore denied (O 340). Next Nadine apologizes to Othmar, admitting that she has wronged him. When asked if she finally loves him, Nadine answers, "I suppose so—since I doubted you. Love is always blind!" (O 396). Despite this glib response, Ouida implies that Nadine cannot ever truly love Othmar. She can behave more compassionately to him and to her children, but the actual passion of love will continue to elude her. Tragically, Nadine can change her behavior but not her emotional and mental makeup.

Nadine—wholly cerebral, characterized by indifference and cruelty, a poor mother, emotionally distant, morally ambiguous at best—is a strange choice of heroine for Ouida. Ouida's scathing comments on the growing call for women's rights notwithstanding, in Nadine she creates an intriguing incarnation of the New Woman. Unlike her counterparts of the time, Nadine doesn't agitate for the vote or attempt to gain employment in a traditionally male environment; however, Nadine's kinship with the New Woman seems plain. Maternity holds no appeal for her. Power, particularly power over men, interests her, and she wields it with little remorse. A deeply held belief in scientific principles governs Nadine's behavior and choices; her intelligence far surpasses the intelligence of those around her, men and women alike. Nadine

is formidable and dangerous, a threat to male authority. In fact, she bears more than a passing resemblance to those monstrous women whose presence in Victorian literature Gilbert and Gubar find so captivating. But Nadine is also a pitiable figure. Her relentless quest for control drives wedges between her and those who would offer her friendship. She finds little happiness in her children or her marriage. Nadine may exert an extraordinary degree of power for a Victorian woman, but ultimately she finds herself profoundly dissatisfied with its fruits. *Princess Napraxine* and *Othmar* reveal the steep price that awaits the generation of women who will replace the angel in the house. They also reveal a sympathy with the New Woman that Ouida never articulates directly—indeed, that she actively denies in her prose writing—but only implies through the lives of her fictional female characters.

Ouida contrasts Nadine with two young girls who exemplify stereotypes of conventional womanhood. The first of these girls, Yseulte de Valogne, comes from a noble French family that has fallen on reduced circumstances. Yseulte is a distant cousin to the Duchesse de Vannes, who funds her education and maintenance at a convent and who allows Yseulte to take her holidays with the family (1:120). Yseulte's old fashioned and beautiful manners (PN 1:125), coupled with her penchant for elegant simplicity (PN 1:187), immediately mark her as a true lady regardless of her poverty. Steeped in tales of the past and of tradition (PN 1:202), Yseulte subscribes to the social mores of an older and better time. Ouida also repeatedly emphasizes Yseulte's closeness to nature (PN 1:205), evoking the link Patmore constructs between his angel in the house and the natural world (1.4.52-71).

While on holiday with her cousin, Yseulte meets Othmar for whom she develops an innocent and unconscious love (PN 2:71). Although he does not return her love, Othmar decides to marry Yseulte in order to forget Nadine's rejection and to provide what he feels is a more

appropriate situation for Yseulte than a future as a nun (PN 2:78). Immediately, Ouida lets her readers know that Yseulte is nothing like the avaricious Avice Dare. Yseulte's young cousin Blanchette assumes that she accepts Othmar's proposal to gain access to his vast riches (PN 2:99), but Yseulte insists that she would love Othmar even if he were poor (PN 2:154). Othmar believes Yseulte's declaration, but the other characters in the series incorrectly assume that Othmar's money makes him an attractive match for her.

Despite Othmar's disdain for Yseulte's life at the convent, a sincere belief in Christianity colors her outlook. As a result, Yseulte subscribes to the conventional opinion of marriage as a religious institution:

To her, marriage was a mystic, spiritual union; all she knew of it was gathered from the expressions borrowed from it to symbolize the union of Christ and His saints. She went to it with as religious and innocent a faith as she would have taken with her to the cloister had they sent her there. If any human creature can be as pure as snow, a very young girl who has been reared by simple and pious women is so. (PN 2:156)

Yseulte even spends the two weeks before her marriage in retreat at the convent in which she grew up, preparing herself spiritually to become Othmar's wife (PN 2:149). She embodies the model of femininity as envisioned by the Victorians—devoutly Christian, pure of heart and mind, and confident that holy should always describe matrimony.

Also in keeping with a paradigm of womanhood that considers wives to be subordinate helpmeets for their husbands, Yseulte promises never to notice Othmar's shortcomings. "If he have faults," she says, "I shall never see them—you may be sure of that; and if you tell me how to please him, I will never think of myself" (PN 2:181). Yseulte says this to Baron Fritz who

worries that if she idolizes him, Othmar will ultimately disappoint her with his indifference. Ultimately, Yseulte chooses to disregard the Baron's advice. She continues to view Othmar as vastly superior to herself, even going so far as to elevate him to the status of a god (PN 2:256) whose edicts must be obeyed (PN 3:34). Yseulte never questions Othmar, never criticizes Othmar, and never defies him in any way. Whereas Nadine selfishly considers only her own whims when she acts, Yseulte carefully weighs each action she takes to determine its impact on Othmar and only proceeds if that action benefits Othmar. The polar opposite of Nadine, who completely disregards her husband's happiness and well being, Yseulte allows herself to be subsumed by her love for Othmar, typifying the ideal Victorian wife in all her self-abnegation.

Ouida also contrasts Yseulte's experiences of sex with Nadine's. Unlike Nadine, Yseulte responds sexually to her husband; however, she is never comfortable with that response. "To Yseulte, love was at once a revelation and a profanation: she shrank from it even whilst she yielded to it" (PN 2:255). Ouida leads us to believe that Yseulte sexually desires Othmar and longs for his touch, but she complicates Yseulte's enjoyment of sex by suggesting that even between husband and wife physical expressions of love can conflict with the innocence required of the ideal woman. As a result, marriage to Othmar simultaneously exposes Yseulte to both "ardent love" and "brutalising intimacy" (PN 3:37). Yseulte fulfills her marital obligations to Othmar and even takes pleasure from doing so, but the erotic unnerves her. Like Gladys and Beltran in *Puck*, Yseulte remains childlike in her reactions to Othmar—timid, hesitant, always following his lead, and never initiating physical contact herself. In this way, Yseulte escapes the pitfall of Nadine's inhuman coldness while still maintaining her aura of purity.

Despite Yseulte's archetypal goodness, Othmar doesn't love her. In fact, his boredom with his paragon of a wife swiftly grows into something more closely resembling hate (PN

3:310). No matter her worth as a woman, Yseulte cannot excite Othmar's passions as Nadine does, and his indifference to Yseulte only intensifies as her love strengthens. Nadine offers the following explanation for Othmar's lack of interest in his wife:

“She is worth very much more than I am; she is both handsome and lovely; she is as harmless and guileless as a dove, and she adores him, a great deal too much; yet, perhaps one ought to say therefore, he cares nothing on earth for her; he will love me as long as his life lasts; he would do so even if I had the tremendous penalty-weight, as the racing-men say, of being his wife. I really do not know why it is that the noblest sort of women do not excite love. I wonder why it is? I asked my father once; he said, ‘Because the devil dowers his own daughters.’ But that explains nothing; we all know there is no devil; there are women—and women. That is all.” (PN 3:182)

Though she cannot pinpoint exactly why this should be so, Nadine knows what Yseulte will soon learn, that beauty and goodness do not compel love (PN 3:338). She dismisses the notion that certain women owe their success to an alliance with evil; after all, otherwise she must admit to such an alliance herself. Instead, Nadine suggests that all the trappings of the ideal of femininity, particularly an overabundance of self-obliviating love for one's husband, cannot compete with the fascination a woman like Nadine herself engenders. In fact, she believes an overabundance of love actively destroys reciprocal feelings. According to Nadine, Yseulte dooms her relationship with Othmar by upholding the very standards to which Victorian women were supposed to aspire.

The penultimate chapter of the final volume of *Princess Napraxine* portrays Yseulte's death. Even though she believes committing suicide is sinful, Yseulte kills herself because she

loves Othmar so deeply that she wishes for his happiness even if he can only find that happiness with Nadine (PN 3:369). Yseulte's sorrow that Othmar does not return her love and her justified belief that he married her only as a charitable undertaking also play a role in her suicide (PN 3:368). Ouida uses the word "martyr" to describe Yseulte's beautiful and unbroken dead body (PN 3:374), clearly identifying her with the saints of the religion which Yseulte holds so dear. Like those saints, Yseulte finds living in a world that doesn't value her beliefs quite difficult; when challenged by circumstance, Yseulte is willing to die rather than compromise either her pride or the magnitude of her love for Othmar.

Because Yseulte dies at the end of *Princess Napraxine*, Ouida must provide a new foil for Nadine in *Othmar*. That foil takes the shape of Damaris Bérarde, an heiress of sorts who lives on the island of Bonaventure with her anarchist grandfather (O 45). Nadine initially encounters Damaris in a scene reminiscent of her first meeting with Yseulte which Ouida uses to establish a connection between the two doomed characters from the outset (O 43). Against the counsel of both Othmar and Monsieur Melville, her most trusted advisor, Nadine removes Damaris from her sheltered environment on Bonaventure and thrusts her into the glittering world of high society for an evening where she is mocked as an amusing oddity by her social betters (O 89). This incident, no more than a passing fancy on Nadine's part, instigates a terrible set of circumstances that lead Damaris into danger and deprivation.

When Nadine invites Damaris to their home, Othmar accuses her of cruelty. He suggests that Nadine sets up the girl for a lifetime of misery by introducing her to the aristocratic milieu of which she can never truly be a part (O 72). Othmar's fears prove correct. Well before attending Nadine's fete, Damaris asks a visitor to Bonaventure not to describe high society for fear that his tales will make her restless with her simple lot on the island (O 69). Once she experiences that

world for herself, Damaris becomes consumed with feelings of inferiority and shame. Ouida writes, “When she caught sight of her own figure in the mirrors, standing amidst all the glow and delicacy of colour of these marvellous chambers, she seemed to herself barbarous, incongruous, grotesque, a blot upon the scene, a savage set amidst civilization” (O 97). At this point, Damaris develops the desire to prove herself worthy to Nadine, a desire that will characterize her for the remainder of the novel.

At first because he’s piqued by Nadine’s disregard for their young guest and then because Damaris touches his heart, Othmar takes her under his wing. He rows her back to the island himself when he realizes that Nadine has no intention of taking Damaris home at the promised hour (O 102) and advises her not to lie to her grandfather about her whereabouts even though she left Bonaventure without his permission (O 106). After only one encounter, Othmar leaves such an impression on Damaris that she risks her grandfather’s ire in order to do what Othmar would find honorable. Her honesty does not protect her from punishment; Damaris is brutally beaten (O 111), shipped off to a harshly managed convent (O 173), and eventually disowned (O 176). The next time Othmar and Damaris meet, a police officer has mistaken her for a prostitute and is arresting the sick and starving young woman (O 151). Naturally, Othmar rescues her, beginning a clandestine association between the two that culminates in Damaris’s death.

Unlike Yseulte, Damaris is never, and has no chance of becoming, Othmar’s lover. Although Nadine believes otherwise, Damaris is never her rival. And yet, like Yseulte, Damaris loves Othmar with her whole being. Othmar’s presence magnetizes Damaris, induces ecstasy in her (O 300), and after months of Nadine’s coldness, Othmar finds himself moved by Damaris’s warmth. However, Othmar’s reaction to Damaris’s innocent passion embarrasses him (O 288), and he tells Damaris in no uncertain terms that he will never love anyone other than Nadine (O

299). Although Othmar does not return her romantic feelings, Damaris “would have died happy if gathered one moment to his breast” (O 295).

As with Yseulte, the narrative draws a distinction between the true, but unrequited, love that Damaris offers Othmar and the facsimile of affection that Nadine offers her husband. Othmar thinks regretfully: “Never in any hour of her empire over him had the woman to whom he had given up all he possessed, his past, his present, and his future, known one single pulse of such love for him as filled the whole soul and nerve and nature of Damaris Bérarde” (O 295). She idolizes Othmar in a way to which Nadine would never condescend, and her love for Othmar stems from a physical and emotional response to him that Nadine can only manufacture. Ouida underscores the contrast between Damaris and Nadine when Othmar wonders of his wife—“Was it that she had it not in her to give any man more than that mingling of momentary aphrodisiacal indulgence and of eternal immutable derision; and that whilst her power to create a heaven of physical passion was so great, her power of satisfying the exactions of the heart and soul was slight?” (O 236). The woman Othmar loves can offer him so little in comparison to Damaris and Yseulte, yet his obsession with Nadine persists. Like Yseulte, Damaris places her beloved before herself but in vain. Othmar may have a paternalistic interest in Damaris’s welfare that develops from a sense of responsibility for Nadine’s meddling in her life, but next to Nadine, Othmar doesn’t even notice Damaris.

In Damaris Ouida creates another incarnation of the ideal woman. From her humble beginnings on the idyllic Bonaventure to the home in the country Othmar secretly maintains for her, Damaris is most comfortable in natural settings, and the text repeatedly identifies Damaris with the natural world. It also links her with a simpler, better time—a mythical past of heroes hallmarked by honor and nobility. The following description of Damaris working in the fields



evokes those associations in addition to the glorification of motherhood that characterizes the angel in the house:

It was the perfection of full and youthful female strength and health, teeming with all the promise of a perfect organisation, all the vitality which makes strong mothers of strong men . . . womanhood as it was when the earth was young, and when life was simple and straight as a rod of haze; womanhood buoyant, healthful, forceful, fearless; with limbs uncramped by fashion and beauty ignorant of art, living in the wind, in the water, in the grass, in the sun, like the dappled cattle and the strong-winged bird. (O 215)

Ouida portrays Damaris in this passage as a kind of domestic goddess, the epitome of health and womanly perfection who is unafraid of difficult labor. This goddess feels more at ease with domestic occupations such as mowing down the remnants of a summer's harvest than with the paraphernalia of life in high society. Damaris possesses no artifice and has as little need for the contrivances of fashionable society as do the cattle and birds to which Ouida compares her.

At the end of the novel, Damaris commits a form of suicide by nursing a sick child who is dying of diphtheria (O 382). Her death isn't prompted by the grief of unrequited love but rather fear that Othmar will one day come to believe that she takes advantage of his generosity (O 363). He has kept his hand in her financial support a secret even from her, so when a socialite of Nadine's circle informs Damaris that she is widely believed to be Othmar's kept mistress, Damaris cannot bear the shame that erroneous conclusion might bring to Othmar's name (O 359). She first thinks to correct any misunderstandings Nadine might have about her relationship with Othmar, but this "instinct of self-negation and noble [effort]" (O 362) falls on deaf ears. Nadine answers Damaris's honesty with cruel disbelief and a complete disclosure of the degree

to which Damaris owes her modest funds to Othmar. Only then does Damaris fully understand why the world calls her little better than a prostitute. Rather than blame Othmar for his deceit, she deduces that his motives in concealing his monetary aid from her are honorable. “Her mind was too intrinsically noble, her instincts were too pure and untainted by suspicion, for any baser supposition to attach itself to him in her thoughts, even in the moment of her greatest suffering” (O 379). Having thus absolved Othmar of any culpability in Nadine’s misapprehensions, Damaris’s pride—“the stubborn self-will of the peasant united to the finer, more impersonal pride derived from a great race” (O 379)—obliges her to commit a kind of suicide rather than live with the degradation of Nadine’s scorn.

Ouida’s treatment of women in *Princess Napraxine* and *Othmar* provides another example of what many have seen as misogynistic elements in her writing. The unequivocally good women of these novels die, unable to survive in an age that no longer values or even trusts in their goodness, and the woman who should be the villainess is instead touted as the heroine of the series. In addition, Ouida undermines the heroine’s triumph by suggesting that she can never truly find happiness because she cannot overcome the coldness and the ennui which are the legacy of the age in which she lives. Unlike in *Held in Bondage* and *Puck*, no female character in *Princess Napraxine* or *Othmar* enjoys unmitigated happiness or success, and most of them must endure a great deal of suffering before the series ends.

“THE RESTLESSNESS AND FEVERISHNESS WHICH HAVE COME UPON THIS CENTURY”<sup>12</sup>

Ouida’s portrayal of women, complex and at times problematic, vacillates between admiration for the moral strength of the stereotypical angel in the house and impatience with her passivity and self-sacrificing nature; her writing also complicates traditional views of acceptable

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<sup>12</sup> Ouida. “Female Suffrage.” *Views and Opinions*. London: Methuen and Company, 1896: 302.

behavior for women by giving many of her villainesses an extraordinary degree of agency and refusing to punish them for their wrongdoing. According to Schroeder and Holt, “Though as narrator, Ouida may occasionally chastise women for their weaknesses (in comparison to men), ultimately her novels reveal more sympathy, strength, and power for female characters than she openly avows. Her women are victims of their limited social sphere, of their ineffectual education, and of the demands placed on them by their artificial society” (21). A direct reflection of the social turbulence of the time in which she lived, Ouida’s writing explores the confusion and anxiety she and her fellow Victorians felt about the changing role of women in the late nineteenth century.

Ouida primarily writes about the exploits of the upper classes and those few privileged to move upwards through class boundaries; however, though the characters of her novels occupy a world to which the majority of her readers had no access, that largely female readership closely followed the activities of the aristocracy and, to the extent that they could, modeled their own lives after those of their social betters. As Joan Perkin explains in *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*,

The upper classes, representing less than one per cent of the population, dominated social life in Society, and this was almost entirely controlled by women . . . . The English aristocracy was the focal point of envy, admiration and gossip, representing for many people the lifestyle they most wished to imitate. Aristocratic women were to the general public in England then what film stars became in the mid-twentieth century and television and rock stars are today. (312)

Ouida may people her novels with lords and ladies, but the social critique couched within her fiction applies more broadly to the interests and views of other social classes.

*Held in Bondage*, *Puck*, *Princess Napraxine*, and *Othmar* subvert the Victorian ideal of the angel in the house, an archetype best expressed in the Patmore poem of the same name. “The Angel in the House” offers an account of Felix Vaughn’s relationship with his wife, Honoria. Honoria represents perfect femininity and the standards to which Patmore suggests Victorian women should aspire. Felix, the fictional author of the poem, writes “The Angel in the House” with a didactic message in mind. First, he assures readers of the ennobling influence of a good woman. Patmore writes: “On wings of love uplifted free, / And by her gentleness made great, / I’ll teach how noble man should be / To match with such a lovely mate” (1.2.42-44). Such a woman is modest, simple, innocent, and a vehicle through which Christian values are made manifest to the world around her. A typical description of the virtues of this paragon of womanhood occurs in the following passage:

Her disposition is devout,  
Her countenance angelical;  
The best things that the best believe  
Are in her face so kindly writ  
The faithless, seeing her, conceive  
Not only heaven, but hope of it; (Patmore 1.4.12-16)

Once he has established her essential characteristics, Felix next asserts that the angel in the house cheerfully submits to her husband. In fact, “her will’s indomitably bent / On mere submissiveness to him” (Patmore 2.2.96-97). The woman immortalized in “The Angel in the House” provides a template of womanhood for the Victorian female—one who is subordinate, humble, gentle, and a balm for the world-weary soul of man.

One among many writers to expound on this template, John Ruskin further clarifies the obligations of morally upright women in the lectures which make up the enormously popular *Sesame and Lilies*. According to Deborah Epstein Nord, “In Britain, it became a best-seller, a common gift for girls, and a fixture in middle-class homes” (xiv). In these lectures, Ruskin advocates the idea of separate spheres for men and women with women reigning over the sacred refuge of the home; as a consequence, *Sesame and Lilies* emphasizes the importance of the practice of domestic arts (15), the value of motherhood (21), and the protection of woman’s inherent decency. Ruskin writes: “The man, in his rough work in the open world, must encounter all peril and trial . . . . But he guards the woman from all this; within his house, as ruled by her, unless she herself has sought it, need enter no danger, no temptation, no cause of error or offence. This is the true nature of home—it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt and division” (77). For Ruskin, the ideal woman is capable of banishing all external anxieties from the home in order to maintain a sanctuary that she dedicates to the comfort and well-being of her family.

Modern readers of Victorian literature must not make the mistake of conflating the ideal with the actual lives lived by the women of this time period. As Perkin stresses, “At no time during the nineteenth century could it be said that most aristocratic women were stereotypical ‘angels in the house’—vapid, passive, clinging, unintelligent and uninterested in the world outside the home” (*Women and Marriage* 101), and neither were a great deal of their counterparts in the middle and lower classes. However, though many Victorian women did not meet the standards envisioned by Patmore or Ruskin, the angel in the house still loomed large in public consciousness; the popularity of texts like *Sesame and Lilies* indicates that whether they

followed Ruskin's prescription for suitable conduct or not, most Victorian women would likely have internalized that model of femininity to varying degrees.

Over and over again, Ouida assaults the validity of the conception of womanhood that Patmore and Ruskin espouse. In her nonfiction, Ouida often dismisses the capability of the vast majority of women to reach the high bar set by the angel in the house. For example, in "Female Suffrage," she writes: "Very few women are capable of being the sympathetic mistress of a great man, or the ennobling mother of a child of genius. Most women are the drag on the wheel of the higher aspirations, to the nobler impulses, to the more original and unconventional opinions, of the men whom they influence" (319). Ouida views her sex as predominantly unjust ("Female Suffrage" 309), duplicitous ("Female Suffrage" 322), and concealing a latent propensity for evil ("Female Suffrage" 324). And even if a woman should somehow attain the purity and goodness Patmore describes, like Gertrude and Gladys, Damaris and Yseulte, her goodness cannot contend with the mercenary attitude that characterizes the nineteenth century. *Avice Dare* will always prevail. The angel in the house has become obsolete.

Ouida also finds the Victorian approach to marriage obsolete and distasteful. She insists on the impossibility of a happy marriage ("The Sins of Society" 26-27), likening marriage to both a grave ("O Beati Insipientes" 75) and a prison ("O Beati Insipientes" 78). In her most strident critiques of the institution, Ouida maintains that marriage and prostitution share more than a few traits ("The New Woman" 216), a position held by a surprising number of her contemporaries. "Significantly, many woman writers such as Eliza Lynn Linton and Ann Lamb pointed out that mercenary sexuality existed in the respectable marriage market as well as in the *demi-monde*; they suggested that the economic dependency of the prostitute on her male

customers was not so different from the general dependency of middle-class women upon their husbands” (Perkin *Victorian Women* 230).

As a result, Ouida tends to portray marriage quite negatively. Women like Avice Dare and Lucy Davis use marriage as an avenue to wealth and social mobility, chaining men of whom they prove unworthy to a lifetime of marital discord and shame. Ouida contrasts these opportunists with women like Violet Molyneux, who would rather remain unmarried than marry a man she does not love, and Nadine, who while not an opportunist recognizes that marriage in the nineteenth century bears a striking resemblance to a business transaction intended to establish the distribution of property. Perkin argues that the commercial aspects of Victorian marriage in the upper classes actually functioned as a source of power for women. “The supreme paradox of this male-oriented system of property and social structure was that marriage was the fulcrum on which its whole world turned, and women, as the chief instruments and match-makers, held the levers which turned it” (*Women and Marriage* 6). While Ouida’s fiction acknowledges that women can achieve a certain degree of autonomy through marriage, the comparison between marriage and prostitution remains at the forefront in her novels, overpowering any advantages the institution might bestow.

In addition to the angel in the house, Ouida’s writing also criticizes the New Woman. She argues in “Female Suffrage” that the Victorian era is diseased and that the campaign for the expansion of female rights is a symptom of that disease (302). Ouida can see nothing good emerging from granting women the right to vote, and she expends a great deal of energy in this article outlining the dangers that she believes will result from allowing women to assume a voice in politics. Blatantly declaring that “the woman is the enemy of freedom” (“Female Suffrage” 315), Ouida states in no uncertain terms that women do not belong in the public sphere.

In an essay responding to a piece written by Sarah Grand, Ouida objects to the New Woman<sup>13</sup> by name. From the rather petty complaint that the New Woman dresses poorly, “making herself a caricature of man” by adopting his clothing (“New Woman” 210) to the more serious allegation that women become “merciless” (“New Woman” 212) once assigned a modicum of power, Ouida methodically, if not exactly logically, addresses a variety of problems she finds with the changing role of women. The first of these, alluded to in her comments about dress, concerns a belief that women should not attempt to emulate men (“New Woman” 210). She believes that providing women with the same education and employment opportunities as men will make women pitiless and tyrannical (“New Woman” 218). Ouida also wonders how the New Woman can say that she should have the same opportunities as men but still want men to behave chivalrously towards her. Since chivalry implies the existence of a weaker sex, Ouida sees a fundamental incompatibility between the advancements the New Woman calls for and the way she wants to be treated by men (“New Woman” 209).

Of course, “the paradox of Ouida denouncing the New Woman type in her journalism while developing heroines with distinctly New Woman characteristics in her fiction” (Schroeder and Holt 13) reflects the disparity between her own life and what she is publicly willing to advocate. Ouida tries to reconcile that disparity by suggesting that women and men of genius are “a third sex which is above the laws of the multitude” (“New Woman 220); in this way, Ouida works around the contradiction. Clearly, she believes that she is not a woman but a genius of this third sex to whom the usual rules do not apply. And so, Ouida can, with a clear conscience, give her readers female characters like Nadine who casually exercise massive amounts of power and influence and who cow men from all walks of life with their intelligence and charm. Though

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<sup>13</sup> “Although Ouida is given credit for naming the New Woman, the term actually appeared first in the *Westminster Review* in 1865, in an article objecting to sensation fiction” (Schroeder and Holt 65).



these female characters embody the “curious possibility of fiendish evil” (“Female Suffrage” 324) that Ouida so fears from her sex, their cruelty, greed, and unwomanly attributes are offset by their genius. The fictional New Women Ouida writes about can be viewed as her attempt to make sense of the inconsistencies between what Victorian society tells women they should desire and what individual women actually desire. Though Ouida cannot help but call the New Woman evil and monstrous, she also cannot prevent her admiration, however conflicted, from coloring her fiction.

Not surprisingly, Ouida’s contemporaries often accused her of encouraging corruption in her readership. Vincent E. H. Murray describes the popularity of her novels in the following way: “Precisely as certain diseased conditions of the body give rise to a craving after an unnatural food, so do certain morbid conditions of the mind produce an appetite for literary food which sound mental organization would reject” (935). According to Murray’s reading of her work, not only are Ouida’s female characters madwomen, she is one herself! Murray clearly recognizes that, as Gilbert and Gubar point out,

the madwoman in literature by women is not merely, as she might be in male literature, an antagonist or foil to the heroine. Rather, she is usually in some sense the *author’s* double, an image of her own anxiety and rage. Indeed, much of the poetry and fiction written by women conjures up this mad creature so that female authors can come to terms with their own uniquely female feelings of fragmentation, their own keen sense of the discrepancies between what they are and what they are supposed to be. (78)

### 3. “NOUGHT ON THE EXHAUSTED SURFACE OF A DEAD EARTH”<sup>14</sup>: THE EVILS OF PROGRESS

The Victorian Era was one of scientific innovation, of great leaps in knowledge, and of rapid changes in technology. As a result, the era was also one of great anxiety hallmarked by competing and often incompatible ideas about the role of science in society and the nature of progress. On the one hand, many Victorians expressed “faith in the existence of ultimate truths in religion and ethics, in politics, in economics, and aesthetics (as well as the natural sciences), and in the capacity of the human mind to discover them” (Houghton 14). Attempts to codify physical laws that govern “the whole life of man” (Houghton 33) occupied a great deal of the scholarly energy of the time period. However, those who subscribed to Carlyle’s doctrine of hero worship found themselves forced to reject “the scientific conception of history as a vast and interrelated play of cultural forces under the impersonal control of historical laws” (Houghton 313). Otherwise, no man can truly be characterized as Great, only as “the man who was in a position to hasten the development which in any case would have occurred eventually” (Houghton 313).

Scientific discoveries also cast doubt on traditionally held religious beliefs. In 1869, Tennyson and James Knowles founded a Metaphysical Society devoted to the discussion of the reconciliation of Christianity and science (Buckley 185). Twenty years earlier, Tennyson had famously immortalized his own struggle to balance religious convictions with scientific truths in *In Memoriam*, one of the best known literary works that explores the Victorian crisis of faith. In

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<sup>14</sup> Ouida. “Death and Pity.” *Views and Opinions*. London: Methuen and Company, 1896: 252.

this poem, Tennyson explicitly states that matters of faith cannot be scientifically proven and that science can never fully explain the ineffable. In “The Prologue,” he writes,

We have but faith: we cannot know,  
For knowledge is of things we see;  
And yet we trust it comes from thee,  
A beam in darkness: let it grow. (lines 21-24)

However, in an environment in which many insisted that only that which can be empirically observed is real, Tennyson struggled to maintain his religious beliefs. Arnold takes up the same issue in “Empedocles on Etna.” Here the poet calls attention to the Victorian desire for knowledge, the desire to measure and catalogue and quantify the natural world. “Look, the world tempts our eye,” Arnold writes. “And we would know it all!” (lines 317-18). Despite scientific advancement, mystery remains, and Arnold highlights the difficulties of religious faithfulness in an age when vast stores of knowledge are still out of reach. As Empedocles characterizes mankind—“Who knows not what to believe / Since he sees nothing clear” (89-90)—so Arnold characterizes his fellow Victorians who flounder without a complete understanding of the universe to which they belong.

Perhaps most significant to the Victorians, scientific development played an undeniable role in the erosion of the quality of life many of them enjoyed. Eking out an existence in the cities that housed industry was made increasingly difficult by the environmental effects of industrialization and urbanization. As Altick explains about London in 1849:

This purgatory was both fetid and dark . . . . Many such slums lay in low ground along streams swollen by human sewage and industrial waste; sometimes the pollutants were so thick that land birds could ride on the surface. And over all

hung a cloud of sulphurous smoke, the delusive sign of prosperity. When the chimneys billowed and the very rain was dirty, people were “in work” . . . . The effluents from the chimneys laid waste whole tracts of countryside. (45)

Even those lucky enough to escape employment in the dangerous working conditions of the Victorian factory had to contend with the air and water pollution those factories emitted. All citizens from the lowliest miner to the aristocrat were touched in some way by the detrimental environmental effects of industry.

Like many of her contemporaries, Ouida was disturbed by the consequences (actual and potential) of scientific advancement and discovery, industrialization, and urbanization. In 1896, she published a collection of essays that includes “Some Fallacies of Science,” her response to an address given by Lyon Playfair to the British Association (281). “Some Fallacies of Science” critiques the scientific endeavors of the times, elaborating on a set of problems Ouida finds inherent to the Victorian practice of science. While some of her criticism focuses on other issues, Ouida is primarily concerned with two problems in this article —the effects of scientific progress on the natural world and its effects on the psychological makeup of mankind. She worries that both will be irreparably damaged by what she calls “that bigotry of science” (“Some Fallacies of Science” 283).

In “Some Fallacies of Science,” Ouida points to nine scientific fallacies she discovers in the writings, speeches, and practices of Victorian scientists. First, she suggests that scientists form a kind of closed-membership club in which only scientists are fit to judge the work of other scientists and no criticism from outside sources is considered valid (281-282). Later in the essay, she likens scientists to religious fanatics; replacing the yoke of the Church with one of science does not constitute progress to Ouida (301). She highlights the importance of a liberal arts

education, stating that unlike a scientifically oriented education, familiarity with the humanities is quite at odds with the proliferation of imperialism, capitalism, and consumerism (284). In fact, Ouida remains wary of the idea that “all knowledge is valuable” and that all “methods of obtaining it are justified” (299). She believes that studying anatomy and physiology makes people egotistical and ill, writing, “those nervous illnesses which are the peculiar privilege of modern times, are largely due to the exaggerated attention to themselves which science has taught to humankind” (286). Ouida goes on to suggest that the drudgery of factory work is more than equal to the drudgery of crafting items by hand (287) and that scientific pursuit pollutes both water and air (292). In her discussion of the final fallacy, Ouida offers her most damning commentary on the evils of science. She posits that “science offers prizes to the prurient curiosities and the nascent cruelties of youth with which literature can never compete. To study all the mysteries of sex in anatomy, and to indulge the power of a Nero in little when watching the agonies of a scientifically tortured or poisoned dog, are enjoyments appealing to instincts in the frame of the school-boy” (298). For Ouida, the pursuit of science is not only dangerous to the natural world; it also threatens the emotional and mental well being of practitioners, foregrounding their cruelty and self-absorption in ways that are dangerous not only to themselves but to those around them.

Ouida’s concern for the present is underscored by her reverence for the past, a reverence shared by many of her contemporaries. For example, in more than one of his essays, Arnold identifies the ancient Greeks as models for the Victorian world. In *Culture and Anarchy*, he writes that “Greece did not err in having the idea of beauty, harmony, and complete human perfection, so present and paramount” (466). For Arnold, classical Greek ideals are still relevant and should characterize current, English culture. In another example, Carlyle suggests in *Past*

*and Present* that “the Centuries are all too lineal children of one another; and often, in the portrait of early grandfathers, this and the other enigmatic feature of the newest grandson shall disclose itself, to mutual elucidation” (130). Carlyle believes that great truths can be uncovered in the study of the past and the great men who people it; an understanding of what has come before is necessary to understand current times, and great figures of history should serve as exemplars to the modern Victorian. Like Thomas Carlyle and Matthew Arnold, Ouida clings to a vision of an idealized past full of virtuous heroes that contrasts sharply with the callousness and selfishness she believes to be typical of her day.

In “The Passing of Philomel,” Ouida laments “the mania for restoration and innovation” (141) that leads to the loss of historic landmarks and the defacement of those which are allowed to remain standing. In addition to devaluing monuments to antiquity, Ouida’s fellow Victorians also drastically altered the natural landscape in ways she finds appalling. She mentions air, noise, and light pollution as modern problems as well as the practice of clearing forests for tramway lines (142). In fact, Ouida goes so far as to call damage to the natural world the “curse of the town” (142) and to blame it on the “filth of urban cesspools” (142). She believes that “it is very probable that the conditions of human life in the future will be incompatible with the existence of the nightingale at all” (143). Threaded throughout this essay is a longing for a mythical past when Nature had yet to be destroyed by modernity, a past that is very much rooted in the world of classical Greece.

“THE CHANGE IS CALLED PROGRESS”<sup>15</sup>

*The Tower of Taddeo* is emblematic of Ouida’s anger at the demolition of the physical remnants (forests, historic buildings, parks) of the idealized periods of antiquity she venerates as well as the destruction of the natural world in the name of progress. The novel follows the plight

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<sup>15</sup> Ouida. *The Tower of Taddeo*. New York: Lovell, Coryell, & Co., 1892: 313.

of a family who lives in the historic Tower of Taddeo and maintains a library there. The library has been losing money for some time when the head of the family, Ser Checci, finds an extraordinarily valuable manuscript of Dante's *Divine Inferno* at the bottom of a chest where it has lain forgotten for years. He buys the volume on credit and ultimately sends his family to ruin when he cannot pay his creditor. Ser Checci and his daughter, Beldia, subscribe to a code of ethics with origins in antiquity; in many ways, their beliefs conflict with those of contemporary Victorian society. As a result, Ouida's cautionary tale warns of the dangers the modern world can hold for a family whose values are so closely connected with those of the past.

Ouida describes the Tower of Taddeo as a testament to the skill of its ancient architects: "it had been given both grace and poetry by its builders, who had belonged to that age in which men knew so well how to unite the useful and the beautiful, how to harmonise the lovely with the formidable, and how to use the sports of peace to hide the strengths of war" (TOT 5). The tower represents the history of Florence in microcosm; "the whole course of Florentine history has passed through the deep and narrowed street on which its frontage looked" (TOT 17). Indeed, Ouida treats the reader to lengthy, and at times tedious, litanies of the historical events and personages the tower has witnessed over the centuries. It is an archetype of beauty, an example of the great works made by hands who understood beauty in a way that contemporary artists do not (TOT 6), but it is also a physical reminder of the richness of history and the value of historical knowledge to the Victorian people. Alas, the Tower of Taddeo is one of the last of such structures standing. Ouida writes, "There were so many of those towers once in this city; and now they are nearly all levelled and destroyed by people who prefer factory-chimneys with their hellish stench, and the frightful follies of the jerry-builder" (TOT 14-15).

The tower's inhabitants seem drawn from another time altogether, perhaps from the time of the tower's construction. Beldia is named after the nurse of a saint (TOT 11), which immediately identifies her with both the past and with religious purity. She is well-educated although not in the same manner or on the same subject matter as her contemporaries (TOT 22), and "reverence for all great things, and heroic lives" (TOT 15) is her defining characteristic. For instance, Beldia enjoys pretending that she lives during the Renaissance. She escapes to the top of the tower and imagines that her view from that vantage point is of a medieval sky-line rather than the "modern ugliness" (TOT 133) apparent from a street view of the city. Beldia believes the Renaissance to be an era of beauty, one full of romance and mystery (TOT 133), and feels out of place in the modern world as a consequence.

Not surprisingly, Beldia's strong identification with the distant past directly results from living in the Tower of Taddeo, which serves as the source of her fascination with all things medieval. As the narrator explains:

For anyone deeply versed in the traditions of the past, and amorous of their beauty, as she was, the dead arise and live again in such historic and hero-haunted precincts. To the fool, to the vain, to the puffed-up ape of modernity, they are but dark walls, narrow ways, dumb stones, closed portals; but to those who love them with humility and tenderness they are full of eloquent and undying life. Beldia dreamed of these dead people often in her rare enjoyment of unoccupied time, and when she lay in her bed in the narrow chamber under the roof they came about her smiling gladly or weeping wearily, and telling her many things. (TOT 19)

Because she is not a "puffed-up ape of modernity," because she is not a fool or consumed by vanity, Beldia has access to the wisdom of the ages. She can read the tower much in the same



way others read books, and she benefits both intellectually and emotionally from the information writ invisibly on the tower's walls.

Beldia's absorption in the past also stems from exposure to her father's interests and personality. The omniscient narrator of *The Tower of Taddeo* asserts that "in the country which once produced the noblest literature of the world, books are in the present era the least esteemed, are read the least, and are regarded with the most indifference and contempt" (8). Not so for Ser Checci whose passion for books and the knowledge they contain consumes him, causing him to regard books in the same way a mother might regard a child. Ser Checci derives from books the same emotional and intellectual satisfaction that Beldia derives from the tower. "Beside all that old books said to him as a scholar, they awoke his affections and his imaginations . . . he could never see a volume which had weathered centuries, a manuscript which had been written in other ages, without a strong emotion as of tears" (TOT 79).

At times, Ouida portrays Ser Checci's affinity with the past negatively. In one example, he refuses to confide in Beldia and instead relies on her strength without understanding the sacrifices she makes for his comfort because "he held to ancient views concerning parental austerity, and had unconsciously something of the old Greek and Roman contempt for the mind and the opinions of women" (TOT 40). In another example, Ouida links Ser Checci's downfall with "that absence of mind which is so often the accompaniment of intellectual devotion to an ideal or an art" (TOT 203). Because he devotes himself to dusty tomes and ancient knowledge, he cannot successfully navigate the treacheries of a society in which young men plagiarize him for their own gain (TOT 61) and a shop-keeper with whom he's been friendly for years sacrifices him on the altar of capitalistic greed.

However, the narrator's final verdict on Ser Checci is one of pity. Though he bears some blame for his family's ruin, including the loss of the tower, Ouida holds more culpable the society which does not value the past or Ser Checci's role as its caretaker. When the tower is stripped of all material goods, the workmen see only "ugly old books" (TOT 297) barely worth the paper they're printed on rather than the treasure trove of knowledge those volumes contain. Ser Checci remains an honorable and noble figure even in his defeat while his tormenters are characterized by greed, coarseness, and ignorance. He dies just before the family can be evicted from the tower, Ouida's intimation that Ser Checci cannot physically survive in the modern environs outside the Tower of Taddeo more than clear (TOT 304).

Beldia's love interest, Odisio Fontano, possesses a "reverence for the past" and "the spirit of the past" (TOT 118) similar to that of Beldia and her father. Though his ancestors were once wealthy, Odisio no longer enjoys any of that ancestral wealth, only the noble and manly characteristics passed down through his bloodline (TOT 115). As a result of his poverty and his captivation with the past, Odisio "was like one of those errant students of the Middle Ages, who roamed over Europe, with nothing but a staff and a satchel, welcome everywhere to scholars for sake of their facile wit and well-stored brain" (TOT 116). Odisio shares with Beldia a fondness for the Renaissance, with Ser Checci a love of books and ancient knowledge, and with the architect of the Tower of Taddeo "something of the fire and of the emotion . . . which made the men of the Middle Ages call the builder in stone *magister in vive lapide*" (TOT 118). Though he suffers great hardships, as do Beldia and Ser Checci, Odisio remains a heroic figure throughout the novel, a standard of chivalric and ethical behavior who retains Beldia's love where all other suitors would fail.

In direct contrast to the novel's protagonists, *The Tower of Taddeo's* antagonists are prime examples of modernity. The first, Aurelio Vestuccio, is a self-made man, one who has risen above his impoverished childhood at a sea port to become the nouveau riche proprietor of a well maintained, respectable, curio shop in Florence (TOT 71). In addition to dealing in antiquities and knickknacks, Vestuccio extends lines of credit to his fellow Florentines, the mechanism by which he is able to seize Ser Checci's land and other assets. When Vestuccio demands repayment and Ser Checci cannot pay his debt, debt that the shop-keeper has cleverly concealed in other people's names in order to obscure his involvement (TOT 277), Vestuccio cannot understand Beldia's insistence that Vestuccio's behavior is morally wrong. "For to Vestuccio it seemed so natural, so holy, so beautiful a thing to allow interest to rule existence, that he did not see that there was anything but what was most creditable in the avowal that it did so" (TOT 227).

Vestuccio's love of money and of himself causes him to abandon his finer impulses (as from time to time he does feel guilt for his treatment of Ser Checci), but ultimately he adheres to the tenets of capitalism that assure him he's done nothing wrong. He explains to Beldia that her father managed his money poorly, and after years of such financial mismanagement, Vestuccio couldn't extricate Ser Checci from the morass of debt if he tried (TOT 229). Loath to accept his explanation, Beldia replies, "I cannot deny that my father's errors are such as you have said. But you have taken a cruel advantage of them. You have turned to your own profit his trustfulness and absence of guilt. You have filled your strong box with his signatures, and when the time was ripe to most profit by them, you have pulled the cord and let the axe fall. You cannot deny it"" (TOT 230).

The novel's second antagonist and Vestuccio's partner in crime, Pampilio Querci, is a notary who

admired nothing except the smoke of the dirty tramway car in which he went out to Sesto or Campi on feast days, to shoot songbirds in the hedges; and the stuccoed box which he was pleased to call a house, where he slept every night amongst iron rails, pollarded acacias, a brand-new jute factory, and an acre or two of boarding covered with posters and lithographed advertisements of new soaps and cheap furniture. When the young advocate went to sleep amongst those surroundings, he felt indeed that his head was pillowed on progress. (TOT 119)

The quintessential Victorian man of business, Querci embraces the modern ugliness *The Tower of Taddeo's* protagonists eschew. He finds beauty in factories that pollute the air and water and joy in poorly constructed buildings and furniture. No avatars of the past come to speak wisdom to Querci before he falls asleep each night; the squeal of train wheels on rails sings him to sleep instead.

Like Vestuccio, Querci's mercenary impulses separate him from the protagonists of the novel. Ouida reveals that "he had skill enough to send his own little bucket of a mind deep down again and again into the profound wells of [Ser Checci's] knowledge, which he knew how to pour forth again thinly and carefully, as if brought from his own especial springs" (TOT 55). With Ser Checci's borrowed brilliance, Querci begins to build a reputation for himself in the public press as an erudite scholar and political contender (TOT 55). Like others before him, Querci is willing to pass off Ser Checci's brilliant ideas as his own in order to move a rung or two up the ladder of success (TOT 54).

Querci is also willing to use Ser Checci's financial misfortunes to punish Beldia for rejecting his romantic interest in her. At several points in the novel, Ouida emphasizes Querci's power to square Ser Checci's debt with Vestuccio (TOT 148); after all, he works with Vestuccio behind the scenes to manage the vast reach of Vestuccio's credit empire (TOT 205) and has achieved a certain amount of political clout already. But Querci's pride has been so wounded by Beldia's rejection that he revels in the pain Ser Checci's debt causes her and works with Vestuccio behind the scenes to oppose any measures Ser Checci attempts to relieve his debt (TOT 269). In Querci's estimation, "she might have possessed him, and his dapper person, and his checked suit, and his brand new house amidst the tramway lines and the jute factories, and she had preferred a wandering Lombard scholar, with loose chestnut curls and an old velvet jacket, and no house at all anywhere, except in outlines upon his drawing board" (TOT 272). That Beldia refuses Querci's suit in favor of Odisio comes as no surprise to anyone but Querci himself. Querci embodies all the evils of progress and modernity that Beldia despises; his ambition and wealth cannot compete with Odisio's authentic scholarly and artistic nature.

Ouida closes *The Tower of Taddeo* with the tower's destruction. A workman preparing the tower to be razed tells the distraught Beldia that

"at Palazzo Vecchio they want to have everything spick-and-span new; they want to make a quay here, they say, with electric light, and a tramway, and new houses, all whitewashed, just like the quay on the other side where the old Zecca, and the trees, and the Alberti used to be. And like enough, when all's been cleared, they'll choke it up with factories and gas-works, just as the shore is choked up down yonder." (TOT 288)

The tower must come down to make way for modernity. Florence (and by extrapolation, Victorian England) no longer sees value in monuments to the past, viewing them instead as impediments to social and scientific advancement of dubious worth. Ouida leaves the reader with the following tragic image: “On the site of the Tower of Taddeo, there is now standing the chimney of a factory, belching forth its stinking vapours to the sullied waters and the outraged heavens. The change is called Progress” (TOT 313).

“THE CHILL AND ANALYTICAL KNOWLEDGE OF SCIENCE”<sup>16</sup>

In *Princess Napraxine* and *Othmar*, Ouida shifts her focus from the destruction of the natural world to the destruction of the human psyche. In these novels, Princess Nadine Napraxine is described as if she is a scientist or an amateur psychologist. She does not experience emotions but rather analyzes them. She even engineers situations and fashions experiments in order to examine human behavior as a dispassionate observer. Unfortunately, Nadine’s scientific sensibilities get her into trouble. They divorce her from her humanity and prevent her from finding fulfillment in her children or her marriage—the preservation and cultivation of which Victorians considered the natural purview of woman. Nadine’s scientific eye is habitually turned inward, making her unhealthily introspective and incapable of true intimacy. In addition, Nadine and the other characters of the novels frequently weigh in on the scientific practices and theories of the day, passing judgment on their both their validity and their effects on the physical and mental wellbeing of the Victorian people.

An emotionless and detached observer of human behavior, Nadine “had one unending appetite—that of the study of character” (PN 1:66). The only true entertainment Nadine seems to derive from her life stems from psychoanalyzing the people in her social circle. As the narrator explains: “The various degrees of passions in her lovers diverted her; she had no vanity;

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<sup>16</sup> Ouida. *Othmar*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1902: 239.

she could dissect and weigh their emotions with perfect accuracy and philosophise [sic] upon them with a clearness of understanding wholly beyond the reach of vain women” (PN 1:351). She ruthlessly examines the motivations of everyone with whom she comes into contact, relentlessly teasing out the various reactions she can cause with a gesture or a word. She takes an acquaintance’s measure quickly, accurately, and dispassionately—and very rarely allows anything approaching the bonds of friendship or love to color how she uses the information she gathers. In fact, more often than not, Nadine uses that information to engineer the downfall of a lover or friend because “she valued her power of destruction as the only possible means of her amusement” (PN 1:69).

Quite naturally, Nadine’s friends and family find her analysis and subsequent psychological manipulations off-putting in the extreme. Lady Evelyn Brancepeth, the woman with whom Nadine’s relationship most closely resembles actual friendship, describes Nadine’s machinations in the following way: “It is the exercise of a merciless power which is as chill as a vivisector’s attitude before his victim” (PN 1:341-42). Monsieur Melville, Nadine’s acquaintance of many years, tells her, “I fear, Princess, that you are like Virschow or Paul Bert, who are so absorbed in cutting, burning, and electrifying the nerves of dogs that the dog, as a sentient creature, a companion, and a friend, is wholly unknown to them. Humanity, poor Humanity, is your dog” (PN 2:211-12). Over and over again, those who encounter Nadine link her behavior to the very worst behaviors of scientists—those behaviors that devalue life and award to the scientist limitless and terrible power. Nadine is the product of a scientific education; she has internalized the scientific mindset so valued by many in her society, and as a result, her psyche has been damaged.

Ouida warns in her essay “Death and Pity” that the deification of science will lead to a generation of citizens who have been encouraged from their earliest days to hold human and animal life in contempt, a generation whose selfishness knows no limits. She writes:

And when the new scientific lexicons opened to them teach children how to make a white rabbit ‘blush’ by the severance of certain sensitive nerves, and bid them realise that in the pursuit of ‘knowledge,’ or even of fantastic conjecture, it is worthy and wise to inflict the most hellish tortures on the most helpless and harmless of sentient creatures. To sacrifice for experiment, or pleasure, or gain, all the other races of creation, is the doctrine taught by precept and example from the thrones the lecture-desks, the gunrooms, and the laboratory-tables of the world. It is not a doctrine which can make either a generous or a just generation. Youth is callous and selfish of itself, and by its natural instincts; and all the example and tuition given from palace, pulpit and professorial chair are such as to harden its callousness and confirm its selfishness. (244)

Just like the youth Ouida depicts in this essay, Nadine delights in torture and disregards the injury her experiments cause to others. She is a fictional representation of the very real harm that Ouida attributes to scientific pursuits in her non-fiction essays.

In large part, this harm occurs as a consequence of the tendency of science to divorce life from its more metaphysical components. In *Princess Napraxine* and *Othmar*, the prickings of conscience can be reduced to mere byproducts of a scientific process (PN 2:295). Creativity can similarly be defined as “a question of brain tissue and blood-globules” (O 77) rather than a spiritual gift or a connection to the metaphysical. According to Nadine, even the soul is little more than a collection of neurons firing. She tells Othmar that ““there are no such things as



human souls. It is an exploded expression. There are only conglomerates of gases and tissues moved by automatic action, and adhering together for a few years, more or less. That is the new creed” (O 75). Othmar agrees with Nadine’s assessment that the body is a machine, its gears grinding on in many ways irrespective to emotional sensibilities (O 24); however, Othmar does not deny the existence of the soul. He does not privilege the quantifiable machinations of the body over the esoteric workings of the mind. Unlike Nadine, Othmar uses the language of science to explain his theories of body and mind without erasing the soul. In Othmar’s opinion, bodily processes have ““nothing to do with the suffering of the soul”” (O 24). In fact, he believes that ““nothing can be more unjust than to confuse the one with the other”” (O 24).

That Nadine does not exempt herself from the severe scrutiny she turns on others does not surprise, perhaps, when regarded in this light. If the soul can be measured and weighed as dispassionately as blood and bone, surely Nadine’s self-knowledge should rival her understanding of her acquaintances. As a result, she puts herself under the microscope and examines her own motivations with the same intensity she devotes to the behavior of others. At one point in *Princess Napraxine*, Ouida compares Nadine to a scientist who is so eager to make a scientific discovery that he demonstrates no attachment to or sentiment for even his own child. She writes:

There is a well-known physiologist, now head of a famous laboratory, who, when his son died, a boy of twelve, scarcely waited for the child's last breath to plunge his scalpel into the still warm body in hopes of some discovery of the law of life. If she had had any emotions she would have done a similar thing; she would have dissected them even if they had sprung from her own life blood. (PN 3:113-14)

In Ouida's comparison, paradoxically, Nadine is both the scientist and the poor, dead child. She destroys with and is destroyed by her unnatural desire to understand the inner workings of the human mind.

The most poignant examples of the self-injury her analytical nature causes occur between Nadine and her closest family members. Because Nadine holds herself so aloof, so far above the reach of ordinary human emotions, Othmar and their children together do not believe (and perhaps rightly so) that she truly cares for them and have trouble cultivating healthy affection for her in return. Otho and Xenia grow to fear her (O 339) and respond to the physical affection she offers them at the end of the novel with bewilderment (O 340). As for Othmar, his fervent love for Nadine comeslingles unpleasantly with the deep sense of failure and shame her coldness produces in him (O 236). In many ways, Nadine spends the majority of her relationship with Othmar preparing for his love for her to wane; this situation, along with her innate reticence, prevents her from declaring with any certainty whether she loves him or not. Cognizant of her lack of emotional commitment, Othmar wonders, "Was it that she had not in her to give any man more than that mingling of momentary aphrodisiacal indulgence and of eternal immutable derision; and that whilst her power to create a heaven of physical passion was so great, her power of satisfying the exactions of the heart and soul was slight?" (O 236). Nadine doesn't believe in the existence of the soul or love or the possibility of permanent happiness in marriage; years of scientific observation have led her to both these conclusions and the potentially irreparable distance she places between herself and her family.

Nadine constantly questions her feelings (or lack thereof) in an effort to predict what she might feel in the future and also in order to control her actions and the actions of those around her. Ultimately, she proves unable to formulate scientific laws that govern emotions accurately

even though she dedicates significant time and mental energy to applying scientific methods of observation and experimentation to human behavior. Despite Nadine's desire to slot all her experiences neatly into a set of scientific principles, emotions—even her own—do not follow the rules suggested by her theories. Confronted by the definitive test of her life's pursuit, Othmar's alleged infidelity, Nadine's theories fall apart quite dramatically. She believes that she has prepared herself to lose Othmar's affections; after all, the data she has collected over the years suggests the unavoidable nature of such a loss. She believes that she can manage changes to her marriage dispassionately and is quite surprised to find that all her carefully crafted hypotheses bear little relationship to what actually occurs and what she feels as a result:

A sensation of failure, of loss, of humiliation, was always with her . . . for her own consciousness that she herself had been untrue to all the theories and philosophies of her existence, that she had failed to guide their lives into that calm haven of friendship and mutual comprehension which had always seemed to her the only possibly decent grave for a dead passion; and had failed also in this crisis of their fates to preserve that wisdom, patience, and composure, which can alone lend dignity to the woman who sees her power passed away. All her life long she had woven the most ingenious and elaborate theories as to the failure of men and women to secure fidelity and peace; she had reasoned with perfect philosophy on the causes of that failure, and turned to ridicule that childish passion and that fretful inaptitude with which the great majority meet those inevitable changes of the affections and the character which time brings to all. But now, she herself, having been met with such changes, had done no better, and been no wiser than they all. She had suffered like them, she had made reproaches like them, she had

allowed indignation and offence to hasten her into anger which could only gratify her enemies and all the gaping world. (O 386)

Science fails Nadine and fails her spectacularly. She has built her life on a meticulously constructed scientific foundation and must watch in astonishment as all her assumptions unravel.

Nadine's miscalculations unsettle her so deeply precisely because scientific laws undeniably governed so many other aspects of nineteenth-century life. For example, the growing field of medical science could finally explain and cure a variety of ailments that had baffled physicians in the previous centuries. Medicine also offered relief for the more mundane complaints of modern life. For instance, why should any person pine sleeplessly for love when sleeping pills could quickly remedy the problem (PN 1:216)? Scientific rationale successfully described the political and economic workings of the Victorian world (PN 3:39), and even beauty in the arts could be dissected to discover its roots (PN 1:282). And yet, the novels foreshadow Nadine's comeuppance almost from the very beginning because even while she and the other characters continuously deify science, they also constantly undercut its power.

Near the beginning of the first volume of *Princess Napraxine* Nadine says that "the astronomers who are now busy seeing canals in the planet Mars, would see nothing if they had not their glasses" (PN 1:41). Here she implies that the technology that allows scientists to examine the surface of Mars actually obfuscates the truth as the canals themselves are imaginary interpretations of natural phenomena. On more than one occasion, she insinuates that the preponderance of scientific progress has advanced little more than "the art of intellectual hair-splitting" (O 2). In fact, "to the satirical clearness of her highly-trained intelligence the delirium of science was quite as much a malady of the mind as were the rhapsodies of religion" (PN 3:98). Notwithstanding Nadine's faith in science to account for the vagaries of human emotion,

she clearly believes it incapable of evaluating all facets of life, even going so far as to say that she finds comfort in knowing that scientists will never “‘explain away, or regulate, or measure with their pocket-rule’” (PN 3:190) all the mysteries of the natural world.

Nadine also states that “‘the age has invented nothing that does not result in worry’” (PN 1:44). She follows that declaration with a lengthy discussion of the telegraph and its negative impact on the work of diplomats. Technology that allows constant communication and supervision ruins the diplomat’s work; supervisors and politicians hound him constantly, eating away at the time he would otherwise devote to the cultivation of advantageous relationships or the gathering of sensitive information (PN 1:44). Nadine’s beliefs echo what Ouida claims in “Some Fallacies of Science”: “The telegraph, like all the inventions of the modern age, tends to shorten time but to harass it, to make it possible to do much more in an hour, a day, a year, than was done of old, but to make it impossible to do any of this without agitation, brain-pressure and hurry” (291). According to this view, progress leads to mental anxiety and physical exhaustion and produces a generation of people who have access to technology that simultaneously makes their lives easier and more emotionally fraught.

Other characters in the novels foreground the destructive capabilities of science and the alacrity with which those in power have adopted scientifically engineered methods of retaining that power, methods which have trickled down to rebels who would divest leaders of their authority. Lady Brancepeth asserts,

“You underrate, too, the immense fascination of the power to destroy; *on se grise* with that sense of holding the annihilation of a whole community in their hands. What made the Roman emperors mad,—the unlimited power of destruction,—now intoxicates the mechanic or the clerk who has the task of planting a can of

nitro-glycerine. When statesmen, and even philosophers, theorise about human nature and all its disorders, they never give weight enough to the tremendous attraction which pure destruction alone exercises over so many minds.” (PN 1:34)

Like Ouida in *Views and Opinions*, Lady Brancepeth emphasizes the destructive potential of science and the way in which that harmful tendency proliferates through society as science advances. While Nadine wields her destructive potential on a smaller, more personal level than what Lady Brancepeth describes in this passage, the novel plainly connects Nadine’s small-scale scientific endeavors with those occurring in the national and global arenas.

In addition, Baron Fritz provides some of the most detailed and fascinating commentary on the dangers of scientific advancement in the second volume of *Princess Napraxine*.

According to Fritz, science has so muddled the thinking of the modern man that his mind is damaged as a consequence. Using his nephew Othmar as an example, Fritz avers that modern men are caught between traditional ways of thinking and the new approaches that science offers.

“Otho . . . ,” he says, “is a pessimist; he has a mental nevrose, to borrow the jargon of scientists; he has so cultivated his conscience at the expense of his reason, that I sometimes believe he will be satisfied with nothing but the abandonment of all he possesses; and no doubt he would have tried this remedy long since, only he has no belief in any Deity who would reward him for it. The misfortune of all the thoughtful men of Otho's generation is, that they combine with their fretful consciences an entire disbelief in their souls, so that they are a mass of irritable anomalies. The mirthful sceptics of Augustan Borne, of Voltairian France, and of Bolingbroke's England, were all consistent philosophers and voluptuaries; they disbelieved in their souls, but they believed in their bodies,

and were amply content with them. They never talked nonsense about duty, and they passed gaily, gracefully, and consistently through their lives, of which they made the best they could materially, which is only reasonable in those who are convinced that the present is the sole sentient existence they will ever enjoy. But the tender-nerved pessimists of Otho's kind and age are wholly inconsistent. They believe in nothing, and yet they are troubled by a multitude of misgivings; they think the soul is merely a romantic word for the reflex action of the brain, and yet they distress themselves with imagining that the human animal has innumerable duties, and should have innumerable scruples, which is ridiculous on the face of it, for, religion apart and Deity denied, there is no possible reason why man should have any more duties than a snail has, or a hare." (PN 2:333-34)

Fritz suggests that a choice must be made between what has come before and the future opening up to his contemporaries; science and tradition seem mutually exclusive to him, and efforts to reconcile the two lead only to anxiety and other neuroses in his estimation. By Fritz's reckoning, Othmar's inability to fully embrace the modern world produces the kind of distress and doubt that features over and over again in both the fiction and the prose of the Victorian era.

Fritz correctly points out the trouble that Othmar and his circle have with reconciling the past and present. In addition to his uncle, Nadine also accuses Othmar of subscribing to ideas of the last century, specifically antiquated notions of manners and nobility (O 276), and suggests the same sort of problems with holding these notions as Fritz does in the previously quoted passage. Most damningly, the two characters most closely identified with the past—Yseulte and Damaris—do not survive to the novels' end, intimating a much more tragic conclusion for those unable to cope with progress than mere neurosis.

Much as Ouida does in her non-fiction essays, Nadine contrasts the travails of her own century to the integrity of an idyllic past. She and the other characters continually reference different historical periods as times in which people had genuine feelings and possessed virtues no longer accessible to Victorians. Nadine believes that people living in the past must have been quite different from their modern counterparts (O 120), able to feel much more deeply than she and her contemporaries do, for example. While holding court at one of her homes, Nadine declares: “I think that all feelings were stronger, warmer, deeper, more concentrated in the earlier ages of the world” (O 25).

Ouida’s focus on the past in *Princess Napraxine* and *Othmar* highlights the tension many Victorians experienced when confronted with the changing scientific landscape and its impact on their lives. Ouida insinuates that while the past was better (and people better as a consequence), progress remains inevitable. The pursuit of science damages the psyche, and yet how can Victorians avoid that damage? Nadine is a product of her times; she cannot move through the world around her in any other way except along with the tide of advancement. If she attempts to hold on to the past, she risks courting death like Othmar’s first wife, Yseulte, and Damaris, the orphan he takes under his wing.

“THE EMPTY WORD OF ‘PROGRESS’”<sup>17</sup>

Ser Checchi delivers perhaps the best articulation of Ouida’s fears concerning progress in *The Tower of Taddeo*. He tells Beldia,

“They are producing new wheat by artificial fertilisation, but I am not sure that what is so produced will answer so well as the natural plant . . . . Do you not think the most wonderful secret of all in nature is how that germ lies hidden in the grain and sprouts when restored to earth? Those ears of wheat from the Pharaohs’

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<sup>17</sup> Ouida. “Blind Guides.” *Views and Opinions*. London: Methuen and Company, 1896: 180.



sepulchres which germinate after two thousand years, explain it scientifically how you will, the miracle and the mystery of it still remains the same. Man is dumbfounded before it. I once saw an Etruscan tomb opened away yonder by Volterra. There were some small kernels of wheat in a stone cippus. I planted them in a fresh-turned furrow, and they grew and multiplied! That I saw with my own eyes. And in due time I ate bread from the harvest of those grains. They had lain there in the dark, in the bowels of the rock, for hundreds upon hundreds of years; they had been put there in the stone cippus before the birth of Caesar, before the rise of Rome; yet life was still in them, dormant life, which awoke when they once again felt the moist, warm soil open to receive them, felt the dew, and the mould, and the showers. What is impossible in any resurrection after that? How should the human mind follow or grasp the living spirit which was at work within the dry husk?" (TOT 67-68)

According to Ser Checchi, science can never quantify the mysteries of the universe, and it can never improve upon the time-honored methods of the past. He also insinuates in this passage that if ever modern man is once again ready to receive the wisdom of the ages that wisdom will germinate in willing soil just like the ancient Egyptian and Etruscan seeds he mentions to his daughter. While Ser Checchi does not grasp the peril inherent to his belief, Ouida clearly does. Ser Checchi may be right, but he also dies because he cannot bring himself to live in the present, and he is not the only character in her body of work to do so. Ser Checchi's analogues exist in several novels in Ouida's canon<sup>18</sup>. The past may exemplify all that is noble and worthwhile in human nature, but progress marches relentlessly on, destroying much in its path, including those who cannot (or will not) learn to function in the modern world. Ouida's novels imply that

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<sup>18</sup> Some examples include Gladys Gerant in *Puck* and Yseulte in *Princess Napraxine*.

despite the threat scientific advancement poses, it cannot be stopped, and those who cannot adapt will succumb to the law of survival of the fittest. Unfortunately, those who do manage to adapt (like Nadine) will find no guarantees of happiness or health as a result. Ouida does not offer a clear-cut solution to the problem either in her novels or her prose writing, choosing instead to leave the tension unresolved—much as it remained in her life and the lives of her fellow Victorians.

#### 4. “FOES OF VULGARITY”<sup>19</sup>: THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE ARISTOCRACY

At the start of the nineteenth century in England, firmly ensconced ideas concerning social status prevailed even as the middle class grew in power and the wealth of the nouveau riche eclipsed that of the oldest and most respected aristocratic families. According to Altick,

The Victorians had inherited Edmund Burke’s organic view of the political state and of society. Just as the state was an organism with internal principles of growth which were not to be interfered with by artificial instruments and innovations, so society was made up of well-defined social strata, the living result of centuries of tradition, and was endowed, as a result, with a near-mystique. The belief that the hierarchical structure based on hereditary privilege had something sacred about it survived into an age of increasing social fluidity, and not alone in stuffily conservative minds. In Victorian England, the concept of “deference”—willing acknowledgement that the people in the classes above one’s own were justly entitled to their superiority—was so strong that it was proof against all the subversive and disintegrating forces which were brought to bear against it. (18)

Anxiety over shifting class boundaries, the diminishing authority of the aristocracy, and the gaining momentum of democratic principles caused many Victorians to cling tightly to conventional conceptions of class stratification.

And yet, those “subversive and disintegrating forces” continued to criticize the traditional hierarchy, perhaps most effectively for what Carlyle calls in *Past and Present* an “Idle

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<sup>19</sup> Ouida. “The Sins of Society.” *Views and Opinions*. London: Methuen and Company, 1896: 5.

Aristocracy seemingly near dead in somnolent delusions” (164). Although Carlyle supports the preservation of customary class demarcations and advocates for a paternalistic, feudal model of governance in which the aristocracy once again takes up its rightful mantle of leadership, he also does not hesitate to point out that much of the aristocracy had abdicated any sense of responsibility in favor of indulgence. In the fiction and nonfiction of the period, the aristocracy is often characterized as wasteful, lazy, given to gluttony and excessive drinking, and overcome by gambling debts (Altick 21-22)—hardly attributes that demonstrate their superior claim to political power and moral authority.

Complicating the issue, at least for the middle and lower classes, the Victorian insistence on respectability encouraged social climbing; poverty became dishonorable instead of merely unfortunate in the public view (Houghton 184-185), and achieving gentleman status became the main road to respectability (Houghton 185). Consequently, “when duty and respectability combined to make gentility the goal of existence, the phenomenon of snobbery was pervasive” (Houghton 188). This phenomenon serves as one of the central themes in *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens; as Angus Calder writes in his introduction to the text, one social message of the novel is that “class divisions sustained by wealth destroy the bonds of fellowship which should exist between man and man, and can condition even a morally sensitive person such as Pip to act badly” (24). Pretending to be of a higher station—putting on airs—grew common in the Victorian era and contributed to a dichotomy of thinking in which aristocrats deserved scorn because they didn’t work (Houghton 189), but their very idleness was also deeply coveted by their social inferiors (Houghton 190).

Ouida expresses great apprehension over the changing political landscape of her time in her fiction and nonfiction. In “Vulgarity,” she states, “There is hourly growing in the world a

dull and sullen antagonism against all superiority, all pre-eminent excellence, whether of intellect, birth or manner; and this jealousy has the germs in it of that universal war on superiority which will be necessary to bring about the triumph of socialism” (342). As evidenced by this quotation, Ouida is scandalized by the growth of democracy in England and the burgeoning freedoms afforded to citizens of all stripes. Many of her novels glorify a quite feudal system of government (at least on the smaller scale) and privilege the aristocrat (particularly the male aristocrat) above all others. She largely attributes the brittle and declining power of the aristocracy to the effects of capitalism on society—foremost, that anyone with wealth, no matter how that wealth is acquired, is allowed to join its elite ranks.

In asserting that “the average man is not an intellectual or a noble being; neither is the average woman” (“Female Suffrage” 310), Ouida implies that moral and mental worth is a class issue. As a result of its superiority, Ouida posits that the aristocracy must don a mantle of responsibility that includes the promotion of elegance and refinement (“The Sins of Society” 3), the maintenance of high social standards (“The Sins of Society” 4), the arbitration of taste (“The Sins of Society” 4), and the preservation of the purity of aristocratic bloodlines (“The Sins of Society” 30). “This,” she writes, “is high society as it should be—based on blood with interlopers barred; its members so rich that they are not swayed by displays of wealth” (“The Sins of Society” 3).

However, like Carlyle (after whom she models her arguments in large part), Ouida criticizes the aristocracy for excess and overindulgence (“The Sins of Society” 5), including the practice of overspending to entertain lavishly and subsequently selling heirlooms and other property to pay for the debts incurred as a result (“The Sins of Society” 9). Ouida derides the gambling, drinking, cigar-smoking aristocrat that so often peoples the pages of other Victorian

works (“The Sins of Society” 15), but she reserves her most strident criticisms for “the continual alliance of old families with new wealth” (“The Sins of Society” 30), “a wealth of which [they ask] neither the origin nor the solidity, and which is content only to borrow and bask in as pigs in mud” (“The Sins of Society” 5). This latter issue, the lamentable disappearance of what Ouida calls “high breeding” (“The Sins of Society” 30), dominates much of the treatment of class in her fiction.

“A NEW-BORN PLUTOCRACY CREEPING UPWARD ON ITS SWOLLEN BELLY LIKE THE SERPENT OF SCRIPTURE”<sup>20</sup>

*The Massarenes* chronicles the rise of William and Margaret Massarene from their humble beginnings to a meteoric escalation in wealth. Margaret begins life as a dairymaid of Kilrathy, County Down (M 31), and William is born in the workhouse (M 16). After their marriage the couple emigrates from England to America where William works for thirty-five years as a “miner, miller, meat salesman, cattle exporter, railway contractor, [and] owner of gambling saloons, and opium dens for the heathen Chinees” (M 17). After years of hard work unhampered by a scrupulously ethical outlook on business practices, William “had been in many trades and many speculations; he owned railway plant and cattle-ranches and steam-boats and grain-depots, and docks and tramways and manufactories, and men and women and children laboured for him day and night by thousands harder than the Israelites toiled for the Pharaohs” (M 38). Once their fortune is made, the Massarenes sail back for England with the goal of entering into high society, a goal which proves at first elusive and then ambiguous in its success.

Ouida juxtaposes the travails of the Massarenes with the exploits of Lady Kenilworth (also known as Mouse) and her husband Lord Kenilworth (also known as Cocky). The Kenilworths are the dissolute sort of aristocrats who squander their fortunes and mire themselves

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<sup>20</sup> Ouida. *The Massarenes*. London: Sampson Low, Marston & Company, 1898: 119.

in an ever-increasing morass of debt while abdicating any responsibility for their actions, no matter how immoral or reprehensible. The Kenilworths recognize that they can manipulate the Masserenes to their financial advantage, especially because the rest of high society refuses to acknowledge the nouveau riche family in any meaningful way. As the reader learns, William Massarene “was an outsider, and in this period of perplexity, disappointment, and futile aspirations to the ‘smart world,’ Lady Kenilworth, the high priestess of smartness, held out her hand to him” (M 41).

The drama of the novel occurs against a backdrop of strongly held public opinions concerning both the nouveau riche and the aristocracy. The rising class of nouveau riche is largely regarded as a deplorable necessity by the aristocrats whose lavishly appointed households depend on the regular influx of money from people who are willing to purchase social standing. These businessmen may be thought uncouth and ill bred by their social betters, but their money supports the overindulgence of the titled. As the Marquis of Framlingham explains:

“Aristocracy in its true sense exists no longer . . . . What remains? Nothing except trade, and trade cannot oppose wealth, because it lives solely through it. For this reason, money, mere money, with no other qualities or attractions behind it, is omnipotent now as it never was before in the history of the world . . . . Royalty recognising that money is stronger than itself, courts men of money, borrows from them, and puts out in foreign stocks what it borrows as a reserve fund against exile. You see there is no power left which can, or dare, attempt to oppose the undisputed sway of money.” (M 136)

The vulgarity of associating with a class of people who are not noble or genteel and have no hopes of becoming so is rendered obsolete by the enormous power their wealth exercises.

Ouida presents the aristocracy in a much harsher light than she does the socially mobile. To a great degree, *The Massarenes* implies that the nouveau riche are much less culpable for their bad behavior than the aristocracy who enable them to live out their pretensions. In other words, social climbers can't help but take every opportunity to advance in position, and the aristocracy should know better than to pave the way for them. Too many aristocrats borrow money directly from the nouveau riche to support their profligate lifestyles, and even those who don't accept outright loans and gifts indirectly benefit by continually dining and vacationing on the newly wealthy's dime. Despite their breeding and inherent nobility and despite the efforts their families have taken in many cases to cultivate their most noble and intellectual qualities, Ouida describes current aristocrats as "of no more consequence than a snail on a cabbage leaf" (M 111); all they do, even their best acts, they perform in service of their own selfishness and ego.

The lower classes also acknowledge a difference between the aristocrats of their day and the aristocrats of their forefathers' generation. One servant expresses his distaste for working for aristocrats who have squandered or otherwise lost their ancestral wealth and who have resorted to base kleptomania as a result (M 8). Another servant describes the current social and political climate of England as one in which the aristocracy has "gone to seed" (M 162). Almost invariably, the lower classes represented in the novel—the servants, tenants, and other commoners—long for the return of a strong, moral and noble aristocracy (M 204) which will restore England to its former glory.

Ouida offers more specific and cutting commentary on the aristocracy in her treatment of the Kenilworths. Cocky's childhood education, supervised by his father, the Duke of Ormes, strove to inculcate principles of morality, nobility, and intellectualism; however, the duke's best



efforts to rear a son worthy of his name appear to have failed, and he laments that Cocky falls next in the line of succession to his title and property (M 46). In fact, the duke goes so far as to wonder “by what caprice of chance, what irony of fate, had this stalwart and high-principled race produced such a depraved and degenerate being as Cocky?” (M 49). A heavy drinker (M 15), Cocky also suffers from poor physical health, including the loss of one lung (M 43). His own wife describes Cocky and men like him in the following way:

“They drink like ducks and never show it. They eat like pigs and never feel it. They cut their own throats every hour and are all the better for it. They destroy their livers, their lungs, their stomachs and their brains, and live on just as if they had all four in perfection. Nothing ever hurts them though their blood is brandy, their flesh is absinthe, and their minds are a sink emptied into a bladder.” (M 63)

Mouse’s contempt for her husband apparently extends to the bedroom as well: he appears to have fathered none of their four children. In short, Cocky embodies the very worst traits attributed to male aristocrats during this time period.

Mouse proves to be no more honorable than Cocky. Although from time to time Ouida insinuates that Mouse has fine moral qualities that could prevail if she would allow them to, ultimately she cannot resist the lure of gold (M 26). Mouse possesses no conscience, but her breeding provides a kind of moral compass which causes her to attempt to disguise her machinations and to require all those around her to overlook her obviously unscrupulous motives for befriending the Massarenes (M 35). Rather than avoiding behavior that she knows runs counter to the nobility of her birth, Mouse chooses instead to engage in masquerade and subterfuge that fools no one.

The acquisition of material wealth comprises the sole occupation of Mouse's energy. She married Cocky because he was physically ill and likely to die soon (possibly leaving her to benefit financially from his death and certainly leaving her free to marry again) and because he was morally bereft and unlikely to interfere in any of her affairs (M 43). His possession of the roc's egg, a yellow diamond taken as a spoil of war by his ancestors from the turban of an Indian chief slain in the battle of Plassey (M 45), cemented the deal. Mouse's desire for money runs so deep that she secretly pawns the roc's egg and replaces it with a counterfeit jewel so that no one will know what she's done with the original (M 250). As perfect exemplars of the new sort of aristocracy, Mouse and her husband quickly squander any money that comes into their possession, even the dearly won sum that Mouse obtains from the roc's egg. She and Cocky live so far beyond their means that they continually want for money to satisfy their creditors and often rely on the largesse of Mouse's brother Ronnie to pay their debts.

Like Princess Napraxine, one of Mouse's most unattractive attributes is her lack of maternal feeling. She doesn't spare much time for her four children (M 47), and her son Jack describes her as "cruel nasty" (M 11). Once, she even abruptly embarks on a journey without leaving any money or directions for the servants to care for the children; the servants can find no food in the household and must contact the children's uncle Ronnie in order to buy provisions (M 322). Perhaps even more disturbing, once Jack inherits his late father's title, Mouse's attitude toward her son sours. She begins to hate the power and wealth he will wield once he comes into his majority (M 253) and chafes at the injustice of a system of inheritance that doesn't give her ready access to the jewels and other property her son has inherited (M 273). In short, she is jealous of her own child instead of being grateful that he has succeeded to a financially secure future.

Into such company debut the Massarenes. William is better equipped than his wife to deal with his family's laborious entry into proper society. Well aware that the aristocracy will require him to pay for their acceptance, he considers this quid pro quo arrangement acceptable but at first cannot find anyone willing to endure his patronage. Ouida writes:

They had done all that could be done in the way of getting into society; they had neglected no means, shunned no humiliation, spared no expense, refused no subscription, avoided no insult which could possibly, directly or indirectly, have helped them to enter its charmed circle, and yet nothing had succeeded. Nobody came, nobody at least out of that mystic and magic sphere into which they pined and slaved to force or to insinuate themselves; not one of those the dust of whose feet they were ready to kiss would come up the staircase under the smiling gaze of Clodion's young falconer. (M 20-21)

Until the Massarenes encounter the helping hand of the Kenilworths, that is. Once Mouse has taken William's family under her wing, the rest of high society soon follows with a grudging acceptance and additional quid pro quo arrangements to maintain that acceptance. William's indisputably exceptional business acumen eventually proves in his favor as the aristocrats he deals with come slowly to realize that their transactions place them in William's power (M 165). He tolerates Mouse's contempt and the barely veiled insults of her friends, but ultimately their dependence on his wealth leaves them vulnerable to the iron will of a man who lacks compassion, mercy, and sensitivity (M 38-39).

Margaret does not fare so well as her husband in the new role she finds herself occupying. For more than three decades, William had kept their burgeoning wealth and his plans to enter high society in England a secret from Margaret (M 108). She believed that they were

poor, or at least in danger of becoming so without scrimping and saving. As William didn't share the object of their years of hard work with her, Margaret is ill-prepared for an abrupt transition from backbreaking toil to luxury. She cannot bear the spectacle her wealth produces and the scrutiny to which it exposes her (M 20), and she cannot abide the waste associated with her new position in life (M 161).

Margaret's primary difficulty, though, lies in navigating a world largely governed by unwritten rules internalized over a lifetime by its inhabitants (M 31). Very early in the novel, for example, Margaret slights Mrs. Cecil Courcy who seems quite shabby to her but who is actually an extremely influential aristocrat (M 7). Margaret naturally believes that someone who must haggle over small amounts of money as she witnesses Mrs. Courcy doing has no business staying in expensive hotels. She feels safe in assuming that Mrs. Courcy couldn't possibly belong to the upper class and is shocked to find that appearances have deceived her (M 10). The deceptive nature of appearances—the inability to determine from outward clues the social class to which a person belongs—serves as a running theme throughout *The Massarenes* with Margaret often making incorrect assumptions about the people she encounters.

As an interloper, Margaret also has very little idea about how to speak or comport herself socially; she continually makes mistakes in public settings that shame her. Mouse in particular bewilders Margaret. Margaret doesn't speak her language, indeed often cannot decipher Mouse's remarks in the least, and becomes a pitiful creature in her presence (M 24). Margaret even fears her servants. She cannot ignore their background presence as Mouse does and cannot strip her speech of the honorifics that announce her humble beginnings to the help and everyone else within earshot (M 25).

Compounding Margaret's discomfort, William forces her to give up her old friends (M 19) and forbids her to socialize with the other nouveau riche who would probably prove more comfortable company for her (M 18). As a consequence, Margaret spends much of her time alone and miserable in the luxury of Harrenden House (M 17) and wishing for her old life as a dairy maid (M 107). Ouida describes Margaret as an ostensibly good person; she's kindhearted, charitable, and hard-working (M 38). Margaret longs for the past in which those virtues seemed to matter to those around her, a past in which the people she knew meant what they said and followed simple laws of hospitality (M 27), a past in which she reveled in the simplicity and purity of the natural world rather than chafing at the artifice of high society (M 108).

In one of the novel's many ironies, William now hates Margaret for the virtuous qualities that made his acquisition of wealth and power possible (M 106). Never as stupid as William believes, Margaret apprehends his disdain and even tells their daughter that she would kill herself to suit William if she wasn't afraid of spending the afterlife in hell as a result (M 158). Margaret is an early example of what the twenty-first century calls a starter wife, a partner who proves instrumental in helping her husband acquire wealth or fame or a professional goal but who finds herself useless to and discarded by her husband once that goal has been achieved.

At the beginning of their arrangement with the Massarenes, the Kenilworths make the sorts of demands of William that he expects. Mouse wants William to place Cocky on the board of some institution (M 28-29), and William succeeds in naming Cocky as the director of a bank directly after the Massarenes attend a soiree hosted by Cocky's father (M 114). The duke had forbidden the Massarenes entrance to his house (M 95) but concedes the invitation after some eloquent begging on Cocky's part (M 100). Cocky's directorship following so closely on the heels of the Massarenes receiving a coveted invite to a party at the duke's home gives the false

appearance that the duke has permitted the acquaintanceship with the Massarenes in exchange for his son's appointment (M 117). Mouse also convinces William to buy Vale Royal from her cousin Roxall (M 33) and Blair Airon—a largely worthless tract of land—from her lover Harry (M 34-35).

Eventually, however, Mouse makes a request of William that places her squarely within his power. After Cocky dies, all the jewels that belong to his estate, including the roc's egg, must go to Jack; however, since Jack is a minor, those jewels will be appraised and then safeguarded until he reaches his majority. Mouse realizes that the counterfeit roc's egg will not pass an inspection by an appraiser and makes an appointment with the creditor Beaumont who holds the original to retrieve the jewel. Beaumont threatens to take her to court over the money she cannot repay him, and thus Mouse has her first inkling that living in debt subjects her to her lender's authority (M 264). In desperation, Mouse decides to ask William to pay her debt (M 297) without considering what William might ask for in return.

In one of the most disturbing scenes contained in Ouida's body of work, William decides to demand sexual favors from Mouse as compensation for paying her debt. He most certainly rapes Mouse in this scene, possibly violently. According to the novel, William "put his two big knotted yellow hands one on each knee, and looked at her mercilessly. 'Think I'll take my payment now, or else the di'monds,' he said, with a vile chuckle. She felt his odious grasp on her bare arms and his loathsome breath on her cheek. 'Don't cry out, my beauty, or you'll lose your di'monds,' he said, with his lips on her shell-like ear. 'You've got to be fond of Billy now!'" (M 313). Although the text doesn't explicitly say so, Ouida insinuates that William continues to demand sex from her (M 325) and keeps her entirely under his thumb with regard to her time and her movements from the time of the initial rape forward (M 333).

At this point in *The Massarenes*, Ouida reveals that the kind of sadistic power William holds over Mouse was really his endgame all along (M 336). Hints of this sadism appear throughout the novel. For example, William has killed Negroes as if they were game to be hunted (M 133), he bought Robert Airley's mineral rich land years ago in a move that was completely legal but highly unethical (M 347), and he subscribes to the theory of the survival of the fittest to justify crushing the weak beneath his boot heel on his climb to the top (M 349). But in his treatment of Mouse, William's sadism reaches full flower. He schemed for thirty years not only to force his acceptance into high society but also to somehow punish the upper classes for making that struggle so dearly won, and Mouse suffices as a scapegoat for William.

Ironically, William "was what is called an essentially worthy man, and he was an essentially modern product of modern engines" (M 201). Over and over again, William asserts that his great achievements outweigh any unscrupulous measures he may have taken to make them, and most of those around him seem unwilling to argue the issue. William frames his acceptance into proper society as the logical consequence of hard work. In a speech delivered at a political meeting, he says,

"I was a poor working lad, gentlemen, with three pounds in my pocket, and yet here I stand to-day the equal of prince and peer, who by honesty and economy, and incessant toil, has come to put his legs under the same mahogany with the highest of the land . . . . What do you want with republican institutions, my friends, when under a monarchy the doors of wealth and honour open wide to the labouring man who has had sense and self-denial enough to work his way upward?" (M 164)

William would have the constituency to whom he speaks believe that he pulled himself up by his bootstraps to gain enormous riches rather than by trampling up the backs of the poor and the vulnerable. William would also have his listeners believe that the rude circumstances of his birth should not matter in the face of his great wealth. For the most part, the characters in the novel tend to agree with him.

Those characters who disagree, most notably William's daughter and Mouse's brother, serve as examples of both moral rectitude and proper awareness of class distinctions. Kathryn Massarene despises her parents' pretensions to the aristocracy (M 89) and wishes that they would disown her (M 120). She refuses to behave or dress like Mouse and the other upper class women (M 122), and she also refuses to accept marriage proposals from high ranking suitors who promise to promote the interests of her family in exchange for her hand. Kathryn refuses on the grounds that such an alliance would make her little better than a prostitute and also because she does not believe that the lower classes should marry into the aristocracy (M 125-126). Kathryn posits that true nobility can come only from blood and breeding (M 340), and since she lacks both, any marriage between herself and an aristocrat would prove disastrous. Naturally, Kathryn's beliefs disappoint her family just as surely as her family's social climbing embarrasses her (M 121).

Ouida's central thesis in *The Massarenes*, that upward social mobility threatens to destroy the very fabric of English society, is best embodied in the following extended quotation in which Kathryn ruminates on her family's situation:

She knew that the great world would use [her father], rook him, feed on him, but would always laugh at him and never see in him anything except a snob. She knew that every invitation given to him or accepted from him, every house-party



which he was allowed to gather, or allowed to join, every good club which he was put up for, every great man who consented to dine with him, were all paid for by him at enormous cost, indirectly indeed but none the less extravagantly. She knew that he would in all likelihood live to do all he had aspired to do; to get into the Commons, perhaps to get into the Cabinet, to receive royalty, to shake hands with princes of the blood, even perhaps to die a peer. But she knew that all this would be done by purchase, by giving money, by lending money, by spending money largely and asking no questions, by doing for the impoverished great what Madame de Sevigné called manuring the ground. To her taste, success and rank procured in such a manner left you precisely where you were before its purchase. She knew that to a society which you only enter on sufferance you remain always practically outside on the door-mat; and she did not understand that to the soul of the snob even the dust of the door-mat is sweet. She did not understand either that in her father's case the door-mat was but one of the preliminary stages of the triumphant career which he had mapped out in his brain when he had first put one dollar on another in Dakota. (M 134)

No matter how many people allow her parents to grace their halls or to speak to them in public, no matter how much wealth her father continues to accumulate or how many public positions he acquires—underneath all that pretension, William, the poor working lad wed to Margaret, the milkmaid still remains. As Kathryn replies to Margaret's notion that the Queen can make William a lord, "She can make him a lord; she cannot make him either noble or gentle. His nobility will be a lie, as his armorial bearings are already'" (M 340).

Kathryn shares her convictions with Mouse's brother, Ronnie Hurstmanceaux. Ouida describes Ronnie as generous, self-denying, and morally upright. He inherited debt when his father died, but by living modestly, he paid off that debt without selling his ancestral land or family heirlooms. After putting his financial affairs into order, Ronnie continues to live well within his means, counter to the example that most of his social set provides (M 57).

Unsurprisingly, given his economy, Mouse's profligacy disappoints and embarrasses Ronnie (M 59). When she complains that she and Cocky are destitute, Ronnie bluntly responds that they shoulder all the blame for their financial straits as a consequence of living beyond their means (M 53). Much of Ronnie's interaction with his sister is fueled by his desire to help her learn to live more modestly so that her family can gain financial security; Mouse and Cocky, however, always roundly reject Ronnie's proposals as absurd (M 227).

Ronnie despises Mouse's plan to tap into the Massarenes' wealth and refuses to be party to her machinations (M 52). Ouida writes: "His sister had said rightly; he was not a man of his time; he was impetuous in action, warm in feeling, sensitive in honour; he had nothing of the cynical morality, the apathetic indifference, the cool opportunism of modern men of his age. He was no philosopher, and he could not bring himself to smile at an unprincipled action" (M 118). As a true gentleman, Ronnie can no more condone his sister's actions than he can stoop so low as to borrow money from a tradesman himself.

He certainly cannot entertain the notion of marrying Kathryn Massarene for her riches as Mouse suggests (M 55). Once Ronnie meets Kathryn and discovers that she is nothing like her mother and father but rather more aristocratic in bearing and in feeling than some born to the title, he feels both pity for her position and a grudging attraction to her virtuous nature. However, Ronnie shares Kathryn's belief that marriages between members of different social

classes cannot work. As he tells an acquaintance, Kathryn ““must dree her weird. She can no more escape the penalty of being her father’s daughter than a hangman’s daughter can escape hers’” (M 197).

Ronnie slowly comes to change his opinion, however, after William is murdered by Robert Airley, the poor tenant farmer he wronged so many years ago in America (M 368). Recognizing her father’s death as a kind of poetic justice for the sort of life he lived, Kathryn decides as his sole heir to use William’s vast wealth to repay all the people he harmed in his business practices (M 426). Kathryn has long despised her father for spending his money to entertain lords and ladies rather than using his wealth to succor the poor or finance other worthwhile projects (M 135). William’s death leaves Kathryn free to put his fortune to the use she has always favored. She travels to America and gives away two-thirds of her inheritance to the people who suffered at her father’s hand. After setting up a fund for her mother’s maintenance, Kathryn donates the remainder to various charities, leaving none for herself (M 498).

Overwhelmingly, the response to Kathryn’s decision is negative, and even Ouida seems to regard Kathryn’s actions with a certain degree of irony. The novel states,

What a shocking example! Ought big brewers, instead of ascending to the celestial regions of the Upper House, to strip themselves of their capital and build inebriate asylums? Ought big bankers, instead of going to court and marrying dukes' daughters, to live on bread and cheese, and give their millions in pensions and bonuses? Ought big manufacturers, instead of receiving baronetcies, and having princes at their shooting parties, to go in sackcloth and ashes, and spend all their profits in making the deadly trades healthy? Were all the titled railway

directors to pull off their Bath ribbons, and melt down the silver spades with which they had cut the sods of new lines, in order to give all they possess to maimed stokers, or dazed signalmen, or passengers who had lost their legs or their arms in accidents? (M 501)

Giving away her inheritance implies that Kathryn believes that the acquisition of money (or at least its acquisition by the methods her father employed) is a crime (M 499), an implication that discomforts not only the aristocracy who benefit from that wealth but also the sensibilities of her own mother. Already deeply wounded that her late husband only bequeathed to her a relatively meager annual allowance while leaving the largest portion of his fortune to the one person guaranteed not to appreciate the bequest (M 385), Margaret can see only a kind of pig-headed insult in Kathryn's decision to rid herself of her father's money (M 440).

In keeping with his tendency to view the world around him much differently than his social equals, Ronnie admires what Kathryn has done and asks her to marry him (M 511). At first she refuses, insisting, "“You think you would forget my origin, but you could not do so. You would reproach yourself for having brought base blood into your race; you are prouder than you know—justly proud, I think. You would be too kind to show it, but you would regret every hour of your life”" (M 514). By the novel's conclusion, however, Ronnie has managed to convince Kathryn of the possibility of a successful marriage between them, and they marry (M 565), much to Mouse's consternation (M 567).

Along with the joy of the matrimonial union between the two characters who exemplify the tenets of honor and nobility, Ouida weaves into *The Massarenes* an additional glimmer of hope for the aristocracy in the narrative surrounding Mouse's son Jack. Jack consistently displays the innate nobility that his mother and father figure lack. For example, when Margaret

offers him some money at the same time that she gives his sister Boo an ornately decorated golden box, Jack refuses because “something indefinite in his mind shrank from taking a stranger’s gift” (M 14). Ouida describes him as a child characterized by generally good and honorable impulses (M 452), perhaps remarkable given the examples set for him by Mouse and Cocky.

Jack knows that Cocky is not his biological father and that Harry, Lord Brancepeth can claim that honor instead. The novel portrays Harry as a largely helpless victim caught inextricably in Mouse’s web, an otherwise worthy man and a hidden gentleman: “His principles were not very fine, or very strong, but they were the instincts of a gentleman. They were smothered under the unscrupulousness of a woman who had influence over him, as so many of the best feelings and qualities of men often are” (M 36). After Cocky’s death, Harry proposes to Mouse, but she rejects him because she wants to marry someone wealthy (M 279). Harry leaves England, humiliated by her rejection, but not before giving his son some parting words of wisdom. He says to Jack:

“Listen. If you grow up without seeing me try and be a good man. Not such a beast as men are nowadays. Not such a fool as I am; a mere horse-riding, card-playing, dawdling, gaping, well-groomed tomfool. Keep out of the accursed London life. Don't mind what women say. Tell the truth. Keep straight. Live on your land, if any land’s left when you're of age. There are a lot of things I want to say to you, but I don’t know how to say ‘em, and you’re too little, you wouldn't understand. But don’t do as I've done, that’s all; and make yourself as like your uncle Ronnie as you can.” (M 323)

Here Ouida outlines her prescription for all that ails the English aristocracy. If Jack can eschew the mistakes that Harry has made, if he can live within his means and avoid the temptations of women and drink and gambling, if he can be the kind of aristocrat his uncle embodies, then Jack's future will be a much different one than Harry's. In this quotation, Ouida suggests that if other members of the aristocracy deign to adopt this formula for right living, then many of the class issues of fin de siècle England can be resolved.

By the novel's conclusion, Mouse has browbeaten Prince Wolfram of Karstein-Lowenthal into marrying her (M 546) and tricked Adrian Vanderlin, a wealthy banker, into giving her new husband half his fortune in return for reuniting Vanderlin with his estranged wife (M 549). William Massarene's grip on Mouse has gone slack in death, and she continues unabated to use those around her for social and financial gain. However, Ouida ends *The Massarenes*, with a word of warning for Mouse. Another nouveau riche family now lives in Harrenden House and benefits socially from Mouse's friendship (M 574). Although she occupies an undeniably improved financial position, Mouse courts the same danger with her new financial benefactor that she courted with the old. With the specter of her rape at William's hands still haunting the narrative, the Australian wool-stapler who has purchased Harrenden House concludes the novel with the following thought: "why should he not succeed wherever William Massarene had succeeded? Why not indeed?" (M 574).

““NOTHING ON EARTH CAN RECONCILE PROPERTY AND POVERTY””,<sup>21</sup>

Although Ouida wrote *Syrlin* nearly a decade before *The Massarenes*, her portrayal of the political landscape of Victorian England is much more nuanced and complex in this earlier novel. As in *The Massarenes*, Ouida highlights the failures of the aristocracy in *Syrlin*; however, the novels differ in their treatment of the lower classes. In *Syrlin*, she also writes much more

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<sup>21</sup> Ouida. *Syrlin*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1891: 193.

sympathetically about the upwardly socially mobile than she does about characters of corresponding social station in *The Massarenes*, and the lower classes are given more of a voice and greater agency. She focuses to a much greater degree on the platforms adopted by the political parties at play and the frustration that both sides feel in reconciling reality with dearly held political ideals. In *Syrlin*, Ouida offers no clear-cut and easy answers to the political questions that plague the latter half of the nineteenth century in England, offering her readers instead a rather bleak and largely hopeless portrait of the century's end.

The aristocracy in *Syrlin* suffers from many of the same faults treated at length in *The Massarenes*. Lady Wilfreda Avillion, the female protagonist of the novel, is the daughter of "one of those country gentleman of long descent, who are such very great persons that no title could make them greater" (S 22); in addition, her mother is the daughter of an extremely powerful and influential late duke. Yet, Freda despairs of a brother who provides "a source of anxiety which has become chronic in England" (S 24). Fulke is a spendthrift and a gambler, and he has borrowed against his property to keep abreast of the debts he accrues. More than once, Freda laments the gradual ruin of her ancestral home at her brother's hand (S 28). Much like Mouse and Cocky in *The Massarenes*, Fulke resists any offers his sister and her husband Uther make to help him manage his financial affairs more responsibly (S 24).

Freda's young sons, May and Fluff, exemplify the modern aristocrat despite her best efforts to inculcate a sense of duty and nobility in them both (S 100). May predicts that he will eventually sell Brakespeare (S 99), the ancestral property he'll one day inherit, presumably to finance a life of indolence and gambling (S 100). Despite their mother's horror, neither child feels any connection to the history made in the hallowed halls of Brakespeare or to the traditions

of their forebears, preferring instead the frenetic pace of London and the allure of modern life (102). According to Ouida,

They were little Elzevir editions of the habits and thoughts of their period; the one ambition of their souls was to smoke and to shoot, and when they went to a morning performance at any theatre they preserved unmoved and supercilious countenances alike through all the jests and all the pathos. There was no single reflection of [Freda's] own mind and nature ever mirrored in their little souls. There was something shallow, chilly, unreceptive in their tempers which escaped all her efforts to soften it . . . . It was no one's fault, but she felt that these pretty boys were little monsters of selfishness and had narrow little souls that would be for ever shut to the poetry and spirituality of life. (S 98)

These examples, plus others in the novel, present the same unflattering portrayal of the upper classes found elsewhere in Ouida's body of work.

Despite their shortcomings, however, at least some aristocrats in *Syrlin* appear as heavily constrained by their social standing and deeply invested in contributing to the health of the nation. Ralph—whose titles include Duke of Beaufront, Marquis of Saltaire, Viscount Wriotheley, and Baron Deloraine (S 20)—keenly feels the responsibility of his position. Before he inherited such illustrious titles, Ralph was content to lead a “perfectly useless and sensual life” (20); however, becoming the Duke of Beaufront confers on Ralph a sense of duty that his life as an aristocrat of meager means did not inspire. As he explains to Syrlin, the male protagonist of the novel, ““You cannot measure the stifling burden which ‘position’ lays on English people of rank. They are like the knights of the fourteenth century, whose armour grew so heavy they were fairly suffocated to death underneath it”” (S 91). Similarly, Freda also



explains to Syrlin that she undertakes many duties for the greater good that she doesn't necessarily find enjoyable although she doesn't elaborate on what these duties entail (S 134).

Most of the aristocrats in *Syrlin*, Freda included, are politically active and participate in government to varying extents. Schroeder and Holt point out that Freda "supports the Tories and aristocratic rule (like Ouida) and fears the rising power of the Whigs and Socialists" (236). She truly feels that she acts in the best interests of the nation as a whole by supporting the Tory party; as Ralph explains to Syrlin: "She honestly believes, not only that her class has the right to govern . . . but she believes that let alone it could govern, on the whole, much better than any other class, in which I doubt if she be far wrong. Joined to the irritated sense that her order is being robbed of all its just privileges, there is a nobler, finer sense, that it is being deprived of its power to do good to the country'" (S 92-93).

Ouida often contrasts Freda's sincerity with the disinterest and selfishness of her peers. For example, near the beginning of the novel, the Tory party calls its members home from abroad to demonstrate a united political front to the opposing parties; although they dutifully show, many of these aristocrats grouse at the inconvenience of cutting their vacations short rather than sharing Freda's notion that this homecoming provides an opportunity for leadership (S 31). According to Uther, absenteeism from England by the upper classes is often cited as fueling the fires of the Radical agenda (S 334); therefore, the return of those absent aristocrats could prove advantageous to the restoration of power to the aristocracy.

Uther contributes to politics by voting along party lines even when he disagrees with the measures he votes on (S 275), and he struggles against the threat of Communism by donating to projects whose outcomes he doesn't follow and giving money to the party (S 311). He represents the sort of aristocrat who believes strongly in his own right to rule but who also

believes equally strongly that very little is required of him in return for that right. Uther's "race was of the purest nobility and clearly traced to remote centuries and royal ancestries, and no more lofty and chivalrous traditions could be described than were his" (S 23). In terms of wealth and bloodline, no character in *Syrlin* could be called nobler than Uther, and yet his sense of duty and patriotism pale in comparison next to Freda or Ralph.

Politically, Ralph subscribes to the Tory party while expressing deeply critical views of the aristocracy and a surprising degree of empathy for the political aspirations of the lower classes. At one point in the novel, he tells Syrlin, "You cannot understand the attraction of belonging to the governing class, and the intensity of irritation at seeing power slip aside from that class chiefly through their own ineptitude and timidity. I do not myself care about it, because I hate the whole sham structure of social life, and do not care if it be swept away with all its lies to-morrow" (S 92). Ralph believes that the aristocracy is best qualified to lead, but he also believes that aristocrats have become ineffectual leaders as a consequence of the way they choose to live their lives. In other words, Ralph believes that the traditional political system would still work in England if the aristocracy still espoused those old ideas of duty and honor that characterized their governance in centuries past. Since they do not, the aristocracy leaves itself open to criticism by the Socialists and other Radicals. Freda expresses a similar sentiment to Syrlin when she says, "I am a Conservative, not because I can hope that Conservatism will materially alter the direction the world is taking, but because, as Ralph says, I wish to die hard; I think one should be true to one's order, to one's traditions, to one's belief, whatever it is" (S 158).

Ralph's empathy for the lower classes is best illustrated through a conversation he has with John Kitson, "a plain, sensible person of the old sort" (S 144) who makes his living as a

farmer. Kitson doesn't want to abolish the aristocracy (S 146); in fact, he would prefer to have for a landlord someone like Ralph who doesn't set dangerous traps on his land or spend all his time shooting game (S 147). In Ouida's shorthand, cruelty to animals and an obsession with hunting are coded as immoral and unethical behaviors. So once again, Ouida portrays the good and honest peasantry as strongly desiring the morally upright leadership of a strong aristocracy and floundering in its absence. She writes:

“There's something rotten in the State decidedly,” he thought, “when a sturdy Tory and a law-abiding rustic like this excellent Kitson is disposed against his wish to turn Anarchist. The little Rugbys and their pheasant-slaughter and their men-to-load have done it. Rugby don't mean to do any harm; he thinks himself a pillar of the State, and subscribes to the Carlton, and presides at county meetings, and is always present to vote against marriage with a deceased wife's sister; but I do thoroughly understand how the sight of this excellent youth, with his guns and his friends and his keepers, does tend to make a mild Socialist of the worthy British farmer who pays rent to him. I wonder if the order generally will ever see it and reform itself without any fuss . . . .” (S 147)

Another character who exhibits profound empathy for the poor and working classes, Lord Flodden, first visits England at the beginning of *Syrlin* (33). Ouida describes Flodden as tall, monastic, possessing “sound sense” (S 54), and completely out of place in London society as he has spent the fifteen years of his minority abroad (S 33). He is better suited to the past (S 190), like most of Ouida's moral exemplars, and while his title gives him undisputed access to society, he is as ignorant of its workings as Margaret Massarene and in just as dire need of a guide (S 65). Freda takes him in hand because she wishes to secure his allegiance to the Conservative party;

Flodden's family belonged to the Whig party, which already courts his favor (S 35), and he could just as easily be swayed in that direction without intervention.

Flodden says to Freda, "Don't think me a prig, Lady Avillion; but you know I do feel one ought to bring one's conscience into these things; I feel that political life ought to be a matter of real conviction, not a mere mechanical repetition of what one's own family has thought and done. I know it sounds presumptuous and silly to say so, but I have thought about it a good deal, and I do so want to do what is right" (S 59). Flodden takes this urge to do what is right to extremes that baffle his fellow aristocrats. At one point, he causes a scene outside his London abode by ordering his servants to rescue a stray dog and give money to some poor women loitering outside under a streetlamp and then undertaking the task himself when his servants meet his orders with astonishment (S 67-68). On another occasion, Flodden follows an impoverished and starving flower seller back to her home so that he can witness her poverty for himself (S 289). Well aware that he compromises himself socially by being seen in public with her, the flower seller attempts to dissuade Flodden from his task to no avail (S 290). Once at her home, Flodden can see that she and her mother are members of the "respectable poor" (S 291), good and honest people brought low by circumstances of birth. The squalor of the flower seller's living situation overwhelms and humbles Flodden and leaves him even more uncertain about the proper course of political action.

This sympathy for the lower classes also extends in surprising ways to the upwardly socially mobile in *Syrlin*. On the surface, Ouida's disdain for the nouveau riche comes through just as strongly in this novel as it does in others. The refrain—"London society is too easily entered, too easily pleased, too easily captured. It is not exclusive enough to preserve even a semblance of aristocracy" (S 196)—is repeated throughout the text. Freda in particular feels

that aristocratic women are the gatekeepers of society and values her ability to “stand firmly . . . against the invasion of a popularity and plutocracy begotten out of rottenness like a toadstool” (S 320). She has no desire to see women of obscure origins elevated to the same social stature as women who inherit their position by birth.

Freda’s opposition to the nouveau riche is best exemplified in the following quotation: “You cannot help Tag Rag and Bobtail being accepted by the Lord Chamberlain, but you can tell your own Cerberus not to let them pass your door-mat. She was of opinion that a few women of position, if they chose to be firm about it, might still ‘save society’; others of this persuasion did not seem, however, to be anywhere; but if alone, like the beleaguered châtelaine of Vaudemont, she would not cede her castle to the foe” (S 75). Freda laments that she lacks the power wielded by aristocratic ladies in the past to end a social climber’s sojourn into the upper echelons of society, largely because current society finds these women so fascinating and amusing (S 109).

One such woman described in the novel, Esmeralda Euphrosyne Gossett, begins her life in extreme poverty. Her father started his career as a miner and subsequently made his fortune in business, yet only a few refuse Esmeralda’s company despite her humble birth (S 108-109). Although Esmeralda can manufacture the look of an aristocrat, she only manages to create a kind of external chic that doesn’t help her to understand the subtle nuances of the world she now inhabits (S 110). This lack of understanding ultimately leads to a loss of social standing when she accidentally offends Uther on the subject of his title (S 111). Esmeralda’s story reveals an additional reason for allowing the nouveau riche access to high society beyond the monetary one so thoroughly explored in *The Massarenes*. To put the matter bluntly, society finds Esmeralda entertaining. She provides comic relief and satisfies the prurient interest of the aristocracy in the lives of the struggling poor (S 109).

Alongside the commentary on the upwardly socially mobile characteristic of Ouida's work, *Syrlin* also makes a case for approving upward social mobility in certain circumstances. Unlike *The Massarenes*, which focuses on the rise of a mercantile class and social mobility gained through money earned in business, *Syrlin* seems to suggest that social mobility for artists of true worth doesn't damage the aristocracy. One of the main tensions in the novel concerns whether or not artists should be allowed to marry into the aristocracy, specifically whether or not an artist named Auriol should be allowed to marry Uther's niece and ward, Ina; although many of the main characters object to such a union, the arguments in its favor prove difficult to refute.

Uther and Freda's unwillingness to entertain the notion of Ina marrying Auriol surprises Syrlin, who as an artist himself can find no reasonable objection to their marriage. He sees their rejection of Auriol's suit as a kind of inexcusable hypocrisy symptomatic of the moral failings of the aristocracy. Syrlin explains his stance to Freda in the following quotation:

“A man of blameless character, of great gifts, who is received by you and your friends, is considered beneath contempt or consideration if he lifts his eyes to one of your maidens; a man of poor character, of vile habits, of common intelligence, and of senseless prodigality, remains on an equality with her because he possesses a nobility which he disgraces. Where is the sense of that? Where is the justice? Your admiration of the arts is fictitious; all your respect for talent is a mere shibboleth. Your whole estimate of life is conventional and false . . . . Lord Nantwich in the Bankruptcy court is noble; Lord Ouse in the Police Court is noble; Lord Isis, warned off Newmarket Heath and struck off every club in London is noble; Lord Orwell, found in a gambling-hell after midnight and fined before magistrates, is noble; but Auriol is not noble, he is only a Jongleur; you

like him as a singer, but you scorn him as a man; he is loyal, sincere, and gentle, he owes no one a sou, he has a soul attuned to fine issues; but all that is nothing. To suppose that he has any thought of love for a niece of yours is as insulting, as intolerable, to you as if he were one of the footmen in your antechambers.” (S 213-214)

In addition to this well reasoned argument, Syrlin points out that Ina possesses no wealth of her own and that Auriol could provide for her financially (S 212). Freda’s only response to Syrlin is that if he doesn’t understand the impropriety of a marriage between Ina and Auriol, then she finds herself unable to explain it to him. Her assertion that a union between the two flouts tradition and shows ““naked disregard of every rule of existence’” (S 212) appears weak next to Syrlin’s bewilderment that a scandalous and debt-ridden aristocrat should make a more fitting husband for Ina than a morally upstanding and financially solvent artist.

Ouida also makes an exception in *Syrlin* for Consuelo Laurence, a social climber who enjoys a close friendship with Ralph. Consuelo is a mulatto who can pass for white (S 78). Her father was a wealthy plantation owner (S 79) who kept her in luxury until his death; because of Consuelo’s illegitimacy, she cannot inherit from her father and is thrown onto the mercy of the world (S 231). In the company of only a beloved Negress nurse, Consuelo first makes a precarious life for herself in America (S 232) and then marries Horace Laurence, an Englishman. Unfortunately for Consuelo, she discovers that Horace is a gambler and a violent rogue only after they have a child. Ralph meets Consuelo as her child dies in her arms (S 233) and naturally feels a great deal of sympathy for her situation. After Horace dies in a duel (S 234), Ralph attempts to give her money, but Consuelo refuses, preferring to make her way in the world on her own.

After a few years of barely scraping by, Consuelo inherits a fortune from an uncle and then allows Ralph to sponsor her entrance to high society (S 235).

As might be suspected, Freda strongly opposes the friendship between Ralph and Consuelo. Freda disparages the circumstances of her birth despite her ignorance of Consuelo's past, forbidding Consuelo entrance to her home and declining visits to Ralph when Consuelo is in attendance (W 81). Freda also shares the opinion of the Duchess of Kincardine that Ralph and Consuelo are romantically involved and refuses to believe Ralph's protests to the contrary.

Ouida writes:

The Duchess of Kincardine and Oronsay was certainly a woman of incontestable position; her husband had a hereditary right to keep his bonnet on before the Queen, and she herself had been on many a long and intimate visit to Balmoral; but she found life hard; the day is gone by when duchesses were esteemed like the Ark of the Covenant; people did not care to go to her dusky, narrow house, her economical dinners, and her sharp, biting remarks; the cream of the pan of society was skimmed by those who had golden spoons; the success of the day was not with blue blood, but with cleverness, with impudence, with physical beauty, above all, with wealth; this knowledge made the naturally bitter temper of Anne Kincardine much more bitter, and, being a woman with five plain and unprofitable daughters, what could she do but say savage things of Mrs. Laurence, who, it was well known, might marry numbers of the best men next week if she would, and was supposed to keep Ralph Beaufront, as it is vulgarly termed, tied to her apron-strings. (S 85)



Although Freda doesn't share in the Duchess's jealousy of Consuelo's wealth and matrimonial opportunities, her objections to Consuelo stem from the same root, ostensibly that Consuelo is an interloper in upper class society and that she usurps the rights and privileges that should belong solely to aristocratic women.

However, Ouida does not depict Consuelo as an avaricious gold digger like the women she features in *Puck* or *Held in Bondage*. Consuelo refuses Ralph's money when he initially offers it to her, and she refuses him again when he proposes marriage (S 226). Consuelo realizes that although he certainly values her friendship and her company, Ralph doesn't love her (S 225), but her primary argument against wedding Ralph concerns their unequal social stations. In a scene reminiscent of Kathryn Massarene's rejection of Ronnie's proposal, Consuelo explains to Ralph that she doesn't want his warm friendship to sour to regret in marriage because she lacks noble birth (S 237). Consuelo also asserts that society would gossip about them if they were to marry and that Ralph would find such gossip about his wife unbearable (S 303). The antithesis of the kind of woman Freda and the Duchess assume her to be, Consuelo chooses not to marry the man she loves because she values his wellbeing over her own (S 228).

At the end of the novel, Freda comes to Consuelo to ask her pardon for years of snubbing and to ask her to reconsider Ralph's suit. Freda has come to doubt her own powers of perception and to believe that she has unjustly characterized Consuelo's motives. However, Ouida complicates Freda's acceptance of Consuelo as a potential wife for her cousin Ralph by only allowing Freda to recognize Consuelo's worth at the point in the novel in which Freda has realized that her vision for the aristocracy of England is unworkable, that her political activism yields few positive results, that her immersion in high society only wearies her, and that her one opportunity to experience true passion has ended before it ever really began. Freda's acceptance

of Consuelo is both an act of despair and a desperate wish for Ralph to find whatever happiness he may in the desperate times they occupy.

Freda's descent into despair begins when she is caught riding in a carriage during a political demonstration and is nearly killed by the mob. Despite warnings to stay inside her home, Freda chooses to go out into the riot to visit her dying former governess (S 240). On the way back, rather than taking an alternate route, she forces her servants to drive her through the worst of the melee (S 248) and then sits regally through a violent attack that she feels certain will kill her (S 249): "Freda, despite her station and political activism, finds herself powerless for the first time in her life in the face of the lower classes' growing discontent, and her naïve, nearly disastrous reliance on her class for protection effectively summarizes the failure of her conservative politics" (Schroeder and Holt 237). Syrlin saves Freda from the mob (S 205), but he cannot preserve her optimism or her conviction that the aristocracy can regain leadership of the country. Though the mob disperses, Ouida suggests that it will one day rise again, a malevolent force that a compassionate aristocracy can no longer hope to contain (S 265).

After this experience, Ralph confronts Freda. "'You have seen the Tory toy face to face, haven't you?' he said gravely, 'and you realise now, that it is not a clumsy good-humoured pet to be quieted with sugar and cream, but a many-headed ravenous bull-dog that wants blood and reeks of offal. It is not a beast to be led about by primrose-chains, and soothed by the tinkling of ladies' guitars and violins'" (S 328) Ralph contends that the lower classes have legitimate complaints about the behavior of the aristocracy that force them to adopt Socialist politics. Other characters in the novel, such as the writer Lorraine Iona, argue that when peasants starve, they quite naturally hate their social betters who can afford more than enough to eat (S 192).

Flodden perhaps occupies the best position from which to effect positive political change. He grew up outside England and espouses no particular political leanings. He's a blank slate ready to be convinced of the merit of a particular course of action, and Ouida consistently characterizes him as possessing a strong moral and ethical sense in addition to compassion for his fellow man. Flodden quite astutely discerns that none of the political parties acknowledge the realities of what it means to live an impoverished life in nineteenth-century England and instead prey upon the fears of the most vulnerable segment of the population to further their aims. According to Ouida,

He had seen the poor trotted out and dressed up and held forth as pretence and excuse for everything; used by the great lady's ennui, by the politician's party motives, by the newspaper-writer's spleen, by the novelist's need of sensation, by the adventurer's greed and ambition, by the Conservative's desire to appear a benefactor, and the Radical's anxiety to seem a patriot; made by all a toy, a tool, a bone of contention, a stalking-horse, a pretext, a weapon, or a boast, from the Primrose dame who wanted a ballot on earth and a place in heaven, to the Editor who found charity cover a multitude of sins and sell ten thousand copies of a slanderous journal. But it seemed to him, as he walked sadly homeward in the early evening, that all those who thus traded in and toyed with this gigantic woe, this endless horror, knew not what they did, and mocked at and insulted it when they came, with their cheap nostrums and charlatans' panaceas, to cure this hopeless cancer in the body politic. (S 293)

Eventually, Flodden becomes so disgusted at the state of English society that he flees with Iona (S 388), either to live with him in seclusion at Iona's home in Palestine or to live with him in

Bræ-eden where Iona suggests Flodden might reside amongst the common people and perhaps learn in that way how to best serve England in the future (S 387-388). Flodden represents the best hope for improving the political position of the aristocracy, but by the novel's close, even he has succumbed to despair.

““WHAT ARE WE TO DO?””<sup>22</sup>

Ouida leaves unanswered in both *The Massarenes* and *Syrlin* the question of how to successfully address these social problems. She presents the nouveau riche gaining entrance to high society as inevitable given that some aristocrats will always accept handouts in order to maintain extravagant lifestyles. She writes in *Syrlin* that “nothing resists wealth. Nothing is respected except money. These are the two lines from the gospel which Society writes at the head of the copybooks of its pupils” (S 28), and she demonstrates very clearly in *The Massarenes* that Mouse will continue to find nouveau riche sponsors even though she has already suffered dearly for doing so.

As for the political questions raised in the novels, Schroeder and Holt point out that “the conservative ideal Ouida has long espoused of effective government by a benevolent aristocracy is proven no longer tenable in a decaying society” (236). While Ouida clearly believes in the ennobling effects of the aristocracy on the lower classes, she has Iona unequivocally state that ““nothing on earth can reconcile property and poverty”” (S 193). A little earlier in the novel, Syrlin delivers an impassioned speech in which he suggests that no matter how benevolently they may act, aristocrats will always find themselves at the mercy of the mob. He says:

“I have seen in France the Dames du Calvaire forsaking of their own will their boudoirs and their ball-rooms to go and watch by cancerous and scrofulous bodies, and wash putrid wounds, and soothe yelling maniacs, and lay their white

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<sup>22</sup> Ouida. *Syrlin*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1891: 159

hands on lupus-eaten foreheads. There could be no doubt of their disinterestedness, of their nobility, of their holiness, yet I am sure that were the guillotine again at work in a new Terror, the Dames du Calvaire would be the first sent to feed it; excellence of intention avails nothing against class jealousy . . . . They think your finest and tenderest actions are only another form of self-love; they think you want to make their sick-beds help you as a ladder to heaven. They do not believe in heaven, but they know that you do; and that is why the benevolence of the *heureux de la terre* is always a suspected and despised thing in the eyes of these wolves who have been hungry and murrained all their lives.” (S 160)

Even education, often touted as the one viable solution to the political problem, receives its fair share of criticism in *Syrlin*. Freda says, “Education, even if it could be given, which is impossible, would merely make them able to perceive that Socialism is their only useful gospel. Do you suppose that any education can reconcile the hungry man to seeing the dinner tables spread as he looks through the windows of the rich?” (S 339). When education isn’t being treated flippantly by the characters in *Syrlin* (as when Freda suggests that a public education aimed at enculturating the masses should include free music, cheap coffee, and a moratorium on advertisements on posters (S 2-3)), then it is characterized as something difficult to define and impractical to implement (S 265).

In the end, Ouida leaves her readers (and her characters) with the same questions that trouble them to begin with. In the words of Freda:

“What are we to do? . . . . If we do not occupy ourselves with public questions we are looked on as heartless and self-engrossed pleasure-seekers. If we do do our

best, as it seems to us, to lighten the misery and better the lot of those who are around us, we are considered to create a proletariat (that is a bad classicism I know, but it is the word in use). What are we to do? Will you tell me that?" (S 159-160)

## 5. “THEIR HEAVEN OF SMALL THINGS MAKES HIS HELL”<sup>23</sup>: THE THREAT TO GENIUS AND ART

The nature of art and the role of the artist in Victorian society appear quite frequently as themes in Ouida’s fiction and nonfiction, perhaps because as a writer herself she had a vested interest in the outcome of the debate over the purpose and worth of her chosen profession. Many of Ouida’s contemporaries believed that art should serve an ethical purpose, that it could morally educate (Houghton 267) and provide an avenue for the ennobling of the mind (Houghton 263). This view (exemplified by Arnold, Carlyle, Tennyson, and Ruskin, among others) figures the poet as a prophet (Carlyle *On Heroes* 114), a kind of genius who has access to knowledge and creativity beyond the reach of most other men and who is honor bound to share that knowledge with those in ignorance. Other schools of thought, namely the Aesthetic movement, valued art for art’s sake rather than for any didactic powers art might possess.

Ouida devotes a significant degree of creative energy to defining what she calls artistic genius as well as determining the factors necessary to cultivate this genius. Much of her writing explores nineteenth-century attitudes towards the artist’s role and responsibilities, using a variety of artistic professions—including actors, visual artists, singers, and writers—to do so. Throughout Ouida’s treatment of art and artists, she continually foregrounds an artist’s need for privacy even though intense public scrutiny plagues those whose artistic works have achieved any degree of popularity. Ouida clearly believes strongly in the importance of art and in the

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<sup>23</sup> Ouida. “Shelley.” *Views and Opinions*. London: Methuen and Company, 1896: 272.

moral worth of the true artist of genius, but she just as clearly believes that the social and political climate of the Victorian era threatens the welfare of both art and artists.

Ouida often peoples her novels with artists, if not as protagonists, then as background characters who flit in and out of the action to deliver pronouncements on artistic principles or to lament society's attitude toward poets and painters. For example, *Chandos*, published in 1866, follows the downfall of Ernest Chandos, art aficionado and artist himself. Ouida states of Chandos that "a physiognomist would have said, 'Here is a voluptuary, here is a profound thinker, here is a poet'" (C 6). This "collector and connoisseur" (C 6) of art provides patronage to Guido Lulli, a musician so gifted that "music as grand as Beethoven ever dreamed or Pasta ever sang woke from his genius into life" (C 49). Ouida implies that Lulli's genius reaches such heights in large part because Chandos's patronage allows him to live monastically, focusing only on his music and largely eschewing the detrimental effects of society on the artist (C 51). Lulli is continually characterized as out of step with those around him and unselfishly devoted to the pursuit of art (C 101). In fact, Ouida describes the crippled Lulli in relationship to his contemporaries as one who "had a kingdom of his own in which he was supreme, had a power of his own in which he was godlike, and lived as far above the fever and the fret of their own lives as the stars move above them in their courses" (C 388).

Published a little more than a decade later, *Ariadne* focuses on the plight of the female artist in the nineteenth century as embodied by the character of Giojà, a sculptor. Giojà's "status as an outsider and a woman allows Ouida to explore the particular restrictions imposed on female artists . . . . Giojà has true genius; but although she is genuinely gifted, well educated in the classics, and has the soul of an artist, blatant antifeminism at first stands in the way of her realizing her ambitions" (Schroeder and Holt 119). In *Friendship*, published the year following



*Ariadne*, Ouida writes about Etoile, another “victim of the antifeminist attitude to female artists” (Schroeder and Holt 177). Though Etoile produces paintings lauded for “their force, their depth of tone, their anatomical accuracy, and above all their profound melancholy” (F 38), no one believes that a woman can paint such masterpieces until Etoile’s mentor outs her to society as the artist responsible (F 39). Art loses its attraction for Etoile when she falls in love with Prince Ioris, but as Schroeder and Holt note, once Etoile rejects the prince, “the power of her rejection makes it hard to believe that Etoile will not resume her art, take up the privileged masculine tools of the brush and chisel, and carve an independent future for herself” (179).

Artists appear in Ouida’s novels with such regularity that an exhaustive discussion of each appearance proves prohibitive, but two novels in particular—*Puck* and *Syrlin*—provide rich explorations of Ouida’s attitude toward art. Each novel contains discussions of artistic genius and the ways in which it is understood (or misunderstood) by Victorian society as well as the factors that jeopardize its relevance and its cultivation. These novels illustrate through plot and character the judgments Ouida explicitly renders again and again in the essays compiled in *Views and Opinions*. Together these texts present a compelling argument for the precarious social position occupied by men and women of genius in the nineteenth-century.

“SOMETHING OTHER THAN HUMANITY, SOMETHING BEYOND, ABOVE IT”<sup>24</sup>

To begin, how does Ouida define genius? Genius in her works primarily distinguishes those who possess extraordinary skill in artistic endeavors although from time to time Ouida does attribute genius to characters who are not artists. For example, in *Puck*, she describes the rustic laborer Ben as possessing a poet’s temperament and feeling if not a poet’s gift of speech (56); in fact, Ben’s dog Trust believes Ben to be an unlearned poet (21) who derives genius from his closeness to nature (56) and his moral worth. For the most part, however, Ouida connects

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<sup>24</sup> Ouida. “Shelley.” *Views and Opinions*. London: Methuen and Company, 1896: 262.

genius with artistic brilliance—whether that brilliance is demonstrated on the page, the stage, or the canvas—and maintains that genius is innate, a quality present at birth (S 137) and developed over a lifetime. Ouida also stresses the great gulf that lies between genius and mere talent. As she writes in *Syrlin*, “‘My dear Syrlin,’ said Auriol, ‘you can be whatever you like; you are charged with genius to your fingers’ ends as with electricity. Genius is always many-sided; it is talent, its pale imitator, which is limited, which is stationary, which runs only on one line’” (206).

The chief characteristic of geniuses as Ouida portrays them is just how different they are from their contemporaries. This difference is sometimes physically visible; for instance, the genius of a minor artist in *Syrlin* manifests in his eyes which shine with “a light as though they saw other things than this narrow and dingy street could show to him” (244). In a similar quotation from *Puck*, Gladys Gerant’s genius is also visible in her eyes; “the eyes were dreaming, indeed, looking far way, with the imaginative, poetic gaze of ‘one who beholds visions’” (468). Taking the physical evidence of genius to extremes, Ouida insists in “O Beati Insipientes” that men of genius are generally physically attractive, substantiating her claim by extolling the beauty of a long list of geniuses including Tennyson, Milton, Goethe, and Napoleon (74-75). Although she makes no comparable claim regarding the physical appearance of female geniuses in the essay, all the women in Ouida’s fiction to whom she attributes artistic genius possess great physical beauty.

More often, though, Ouida situates the difference between genius and the masses in behavior, with the genius presenting as a kind of liminal figure—otherworldly and out of place amidst the frenetic, everyday lives of the people around him. Indeed, other characters tend to perceive Ouida’s geniuses as tinged with, if not outright madness, then at the very least

eccentricity. Freda Avilion censures geniuses in *Syrlin* for so often appearing odd to their contemporaries. She doesn't understand why anyone would deliberately present himself in such an unconventional and off-putting manner; therefore, "if you were eccentric, she thought, you might be cracked" (S 71) instead of merely exercising a carefully rehearsed affectation (S181).

Geniuses in Ouida's works are also frequently identified with another type of liminal figure, the child. She writes in *Views and Opinions* that "one of the chief characteristics of genius is an extreme youthfulness of feeling and of impulse, often also of expression; the great artist is always in one side of his nature a child" ("O Beati Insipientes" 58). In this way, Ouida connects genius with the innocence and the purity of the very young but also the passion and impetuosity that often characterizes children. In *Syrlin*, Ralph Beaufront declares with some measure of affection that artists are children (298); Freda later entertains a similar notion (minus the affection) that renders the childishness she sees as inherent to genius inseparable from the lunacy that she believes also typifies the true artist (343). The liminal space they occupy gives geniuses in Ouida's works tacit permission to behave in ways considered unacceptable for others, running the gamut from the commission of simple social gaffes to speaking truth to power. After all, like children and the mad, "people of genius are never quite responsible for their actions" (S 175).

Ouida ascribes to the genius a rather long list of personality traits that appear quite unflattering and cause those around him or her varying degrees of discomfort. For example, geniuses aren't necessarily good conversationalists (P 216), and according to Freda, they can be compared to bulls in china shops (S 118). Freda, the Lady Avilion also maintains that artists are "capricious and captious, and they want so much attention" (S 12). In addition, they exhibit great passion (S 206), potentially to the point of loss of self-control (S 284). The portrait Ouida

draws of Syrlin depicts the artist as a difficult personality, a temperament of extremes (S 153) colored by hyperbole of feeling (S 44) and a great arrogance (S 405). In “O Beati Insipientes,” Ouida explains her characterization of Syrlin and other artistic geniuses in the following quotation:

The calm consciousness of power in the great writer, in the great artist, will always appear vanity to the majority, because the majority is incapable of seeing how entirely different to vanity it is, and how, if arrogant in the world, it is always humble in the closet; if it be conscious of its own superiority to its contemporaries, it will be none the less conscious of its inferiority to its own ideals. The intimate union of pride and of humility, which is characteristic of all genius, and pre-eminently sincere in it, can never be understood by the world at large. (56)

In other words, the arrogance of geniuses is warranted, a natural consequence of their superiority to their fellow man. This superiority also excuses all those other negative quirks of personality that Ouida’s geniuses possess.

Percy Bysshe Shelley, a genius so powerful that Ouida devotes an entire essay to his praise, receives from her a sweeping exoneration for all his transgressions as a consequence of that power. Ouida asks, “What can his conduct, within the bonds of marriage or without them, matter to a world which he blessed and enriched? What can his personal sorrows or failings be to people who should only rejoice to hearken to his melodious voice?” (“Shelley” 258). For Ouida, the quality of Shelley’s works far outweighs his personal shortcomings, either real or imagined, (“Shelley” 261), an allowance she extends to all the artists of genius who occupy the pages of her novels.

Unfortunately, this difference between geniuses and the mere men with whom they must associate, alongside the propensity of geniuses to behave in ways that provoke those mere men, engenders a sense of hostility and fear in the genius's contemporaries. Even while conceding the merits of his artistic contributions, the masses often react to the genius with antagonism. Puck explains, "Do you imagine that a corrupt age cannot revere, that an artificial age cannot be stirred by truth, that an abject age cannot rise to comprehension under the compelling force of genius? . . . when its eyes are on them they dare not refuse to obey; even if they obey in fear and in hatred. Stone it in the dark they will, indeed:—because men are often-times lower than the beasts of stall and sty" (P 562). Geniuses make everyone around them uncomfortable because their brand of truth proves unpalatable to society at large, even to those who don't recognize that the genius's criticism applies to their own lives (S 194). Like Tennyson's poet who sends forth arrows of truth to infect his listeners ("The Poet" lines 25-26), Ouida's geniuses communicate an important message of truth with the potential to radically alter society, but that message often distresses and irritates the intended audience. As a result, the genius inhabits an uneasy position in society, one clearly exemplified in the following extended description of Lorraine Iona, a novelist who moves in the same circles as Syrlin:

London has no place for such men. It wants the bustling politician, the breathless financier, the unscrupulous agitator, the astute leader-writer, the scheming inventor, the railway director, the bubble-blower, the promoter of land companies and insurance offices, and giant schemes of working ruby mines in virgin forests and taking traction engines into pathless jungles; these are the men it needs, to these its arms are stretched, its ears are opened, its monster riches are displayed and given, oftentimes as Moses Primrose gave the mare for the green spectacles in

a shagreen case. But for such an one as Lorraine Iona, London has no place. It will look at him with languid curiosity at an Academy soirée. It will listen to him at a dinner table with mingled impatience and amusement. Now and then, in a way, he is as acceptable from his oddity as a monster sturgeon from the Baltic or an unusually large pine-apple from the Regent's Park show. But it has no place in its ranks for a prophet, no patience with a physician of the soul. He would only make it highly uncomfortable if it ever took him seriously. He speaks of Utopia, of the New Jerusalem, of the youth of the earth renewed by sacrifice, by love, by liberty, by nature: London only wants its wine-lists, its share-lists, and its visiting-lists; its stall at its favourite theatre, and its opinions all sorted and packed up for it by its morning papers. It does not believe it is either diseased or in danger; it continues calmly to buy its hothouse fruit and truffled chickens, and if the mob is swarming against its iron-shuttered shops, a mob hideous as hunger, ravenous as wolves, more brutal than any brute not born of woman, it abuses the Home Secretary and opens a fresh bottle of Cos d'Estournel. (S 194)

According to this description, the genius is not only peculiar but also monstrous, a kind of Cassandra whose counsel means little to a society obsessed with progress and the acquisition of money.

Perhaps because their message so frequently falls on deaf ears, Ouida also characterizes the genius as melancholy. After her final and most successful performance on the stage in *Puck*, the exhaustion and sorrow that result from her artistic perfection show visibly on Gladys's face (562). Her great gift for acting burdens Gladys's spirit and wearies her in complete contrast to the entertainment her acting provides the audience. Moreover, Ouida suggests that the artist

frequently suffers for art in ways that consumers of that art cannot understand: “There is no labor so utterly weary and cruel under the sun as the labor which takes the semblance of pastime. For the dullard is free to go to his solitude, and weep his heart out, if he will, for the dead whom he laments; but Verdi must write his opera-bouffe, though the mistress of his youth lies scarce cold in her coffin” (P 335). Geniuses continue to produce artistic greatness even during times of great distress and indeed use that distress as fuel for their creations though doing so denies them the emotional release afforded to others.

And yet, genius is “something other than humanity, something beyond it, above it—never of it; something which stands aloof from it, however it may express itself as kin to it. That the soul of man is divine is a doubtful postulate; but, that whatever there is divine in a human form is to be found in genius, is true for all time” (“Shelley” 262-63). However a genius may trouble his fellow man or however he may chafe under the burden of his gifts, a genius still sits at the apex of the hierarchy of mankind in Ouida’s estimation. For that reason, genius excuses all; as Freda comments, “Of course genius may be as singular as it pleases; it is a sovereign and makes its own laws” (S 134).

“MEDITATION, SOLITUDE, COMMUNION WITH THE MINDS OF THE DEAD”<sup>25</sup>

Ouida proposes that genius thrives under a certain set of conditions. The first, and perhaps most important, of these conditions is solitude. In “The Sins of Society,” Ouida declares that “the great malady of the age is the absolute inability to support solitude, or to endure silence” (8). The feverish and hurried pace of Victorian life has infected the production of art and literature, and the isolation necessary for the cultivation of the artist is culturally feared and despised (“The Sins of Society” 8-9). However, this need for solitude doesn’t stem from misanthropy or “the coldness of his own heart” (“O Beati Insipientes” 77) but rather from the

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<sup>25</sup> Ouida. *Syrlin*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1891: 263.

genius's need to commune with both the beauty of nature and "the wisdom of old" ("O Beati Insipientes" 77) collected in libraries.

According to Ouida in "Gardens," the garden, here a stand-in for all natural settings, serves as the domain of the poet and philosopher (45). This essay portrays a solitary child reading about chivalry amidst an idyllic garden, the effects of nature, poetry, and history comingling to make him virtuous and wise ("Gardens" 53). Beauty, particularly beauty in nature, "is always inspiration" and leads to happiness, productivity, and elevating thinking in Ouida's estimation ("The Sins of Society" 5-6). In painting this garden scene, Ouida also alludes to the Golden Age of Greece, once again foregrounding her longing for and idealization of the past as well as her belief that genius must draw from the wisdom of previous ages.

The necessity of solitude for the artist of genius figures prominently in Ouida's fiction. In *Puck*, Derringham Denzil pronounces the secluded, contemplative life in nature as the only one fit for a poet or painter (207). The novel suggests that another character, Nellie Browne, could not return to the vulgar sort of acting that has comprised her theatrical career if she remained long in contemplative solitude with Gladys near the sea; isolation and forced introspection color her tenure in burlesque as "such pitiful stuff, and so foolish and vile" (P 453). *Puck* also contains a comparison between the urban art studio and the rural one. When Carlos moves to Paris to make his fortune as an artist, Puck has the opportunity to examine his new studio and compare it to the one the artist left behind him in the countryside. "If I had been an artist," Puck says, "I think I should never have painted so well in this small, luxurious, gaudy chamber, with its stuffs, and metals, and skins, as in that broad, low, wooden room, all open to the light, and swept by the free heavens of winds, and scented by the odors of the woods and



fields without” (P 372). Indeed, Carlos rarely paints once he resides in the city; his artistry atrophies without the infusion of inspiration that can only come from natural beauty (P 373).

Syrlin continually craves solitude and sees himself as unsuited to a life of artifice in society. “I am a forest animal chained at a banquet, the meats and drinks of the banquet have no savour to me,” he says. “I want my native solitude” (S 163). When he eventually retreats from society entirely to his newly purchased home at Willowsleigh, Syrlin begins writing a play, the masterpiece of his artistic career; alone but for occasional visits from Auriol, Syrlin’s passion comes to full fruition: “He was unhappy, but his unhappiness was of that kind which at once stimulates and spiritualises the mind of a man of genius, and in the desire for solitude which it creates, elevates and strengthens him” (S 317). Syrlin’s genius flourishes because he shuns the frenetic pace of London society with all its distractions. After all, “he knew that meditation, solitude, communion with the minds of the dead, were the only sponsors of great thought, and that the breathless excitation of modern life only produces forced and crude growths of the brain in all arts and sciences” (S 263).

“THE INTOLERABLE KODAK, THE INTOLERABLE INTERVIEWER, THE ARTIFICES OF THE PRESS”<sup>26</sup>

The Victorian era arguably marks the beginning of celebrity culture in which figures made famous by politics, the entertainment industry, or the charm inherent to their vast fortunes found themselves exposed to an ever-increasing degree of public scrutiny. Ouida strenuously objects to the idea that any artist must sacrifice his right to privacy because his art has achieved a certain measure of popularity. She writes, “That because a man has done something higher, better, more beautiful than his fellows, he is therefore to be subjected without resistance to their curiosity and comment, is a premiss so intolerable that it should not be permitted to be advanced

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<sup>26</sup> Ouida. “O Beati Insipientes.” *Views and Opinions*. London: Methuen and Company, 1896: 66.

in any decent society” (“O Beati Insipientes” 64-65). To the Victorians, nonetheless, the worth of Great Men is such that they deserve universal admiration, creating a paradox in which the interest of the public is justified but simultaneously abhorrent and damaging to the artist. This paradox forces artists to become complicit in their own loss of privacy; they could eschew the public eye but risk courting public irritation by withdrawing from society (“The Penalties of a Well-Known Name” 370).

Ouida particularly abhors the publication of the diaries and letters of men and women of genius as well as recollections of their lives by those acquainted with them. According to her, what begins as private speech should never become public speech (“O Beati Insipientes” 69). Ouida doesn’t understand her society’s obsession with searching through the papers a dead man leaves behind for proof of scandalous behavior (“Shelley” 261). By her reckoning, “the disease of ‘documents’ as they are called in the jargon of the time, is only another name for the insatiable appetite to pry into the private life of those greater than their fellows, in the hope to find something therein wherewith to belittle them” (“Shelley” 262).

Ouida also laments that interest in an artist’s life often supersedes interest in his work (“The Penalties of a Well-Known Name” 376-77). She partially attributes this prurient interest in the details of an author’s life to a desire for realism in the humanities, one that she does not share as she believes those who necessitate realism “as the scaffolding of their creations” demonstrate great “poverty of imagination” (“The Penalties of a Well-Known Name” 379). In short, a deeper understanding of the historical facts of an artist’s life reveals nothing of significance about his artistic contributions. Therefore, Ouida argues that the world may judge the work but not its creator; for her, a consideration of the artist does not belong in a discussion of his artistic endeavors (“The Penalties of a Well-Known Name” 372). Her argument for the

death of the artist hinges on two points: that the merits of a work of art don't depend on the personal virtue of the artist and that even so, discovering salacious aspects of the private life of the artist might spoil the art for the audience anyway ("O Beati Insipientes" 68). Why risk discovering the man behind the curtain when the value of his works alone should suffice?

The use of developing technology to reveal more to the public about the private lives of celebrities especially disturbs Ouida. Though people of genius and power have always fascinated the masses, technological advances of the nineteenth-century made satisfying that curiosity much easier than in generations past. She writes in "O Beati Insipientes" that "modern inquisitiveness is far worse, being armed with all the modern powers to torture. The intolerable Kodak, the intolerable interviewer, the artifices of the press, the typewriter, the telegraph, the telephone, the greedy, indelicate, omnivorous mind of the modern public—all contribute to make of a celebrity a Gehenna" (66). The modern reader might wonder just what exactly Ouida protests so vehemently in this passage. Photographs reveal a kind of truth about a person's physical likeness that is absent from a portrait, no matter how skilled the painter. Journalists ostensibly conduct interviews to reveal character traits of the interviewee or to obtain the interviewee's perspective on matters of public interest. Ouida's comments in "O Beati Insipientes" imply that she thinks the public should only have access to an idealized version of a genius—the romanticized portrait painted by a master, the musings of the genius carefully edited by himself—and not the potentially damaging or humiliating details that paparazzi might uncover using modern technology.

At several points in both *Syrlin* and *Puck*, Ouida makes pointed comments about celebrity culture and the dangers it poses for artists. In *Puck*, Beltran warns Gladys that because she performs publically on the stage, society will feel entitled to information about her private life

(443), potentially exposing her to ridicule. After all, as Puck notes, society loves nothing better than to trace Great Men (and Women) back to their humble origins so that it can feel superior to those geniuses in the only way available (P 13), devoting ample energy to “stoning a man of genius” in the papers whenever possible (P 147). Although he speaks primarily of fellow aristocrats rather than artists, Ralph wonders in *Syrlin* if the minutiae of the lives of celebrities published so regularly in the newspapers is truly newsworthy. Freda suggests that posterity will value these kinds of details, and in any case, even if future generations do not care, she certainly finds them absorbing now (S 155). This exchange between Ralph and his cousin reflects the tension the Victorians felt between the public’s right to know and the celebrity’s right to conceal, marking the beginnings of an argument over privacy that persists into the twenty-first century.

Both novels deal with the false promises of continued relevance that fame offers the artist. Franfreluche informs Puck that society recognizes artists ephemerally when they occupy the limelight and then quickly forgets them. She says, ““We are uncommonly fond of our celebrities,—oh , yes,—we buy their photographs and steal their characters with the greatest ardor imaginable. We are always flinging flowers before them, and throwing stones after them, with the most affectionate energy possible. But it’s only while they’re in the range of our eyesight. If they retire, or pause, or only get sick for a while, we’ve done with them”” (P 190). In fact, *Syrlin* faces this very predicament when a severe illness necessitates his absence from society; in the relatively short amount of time he spends out of circulation, society completely forgets he exists (S 389).

Ouida’s prescription for the artist struggling with issues of privacy and the obligations of fame consists of eschewing society. In “The Penalties of a Well-Known Name,” she cautions burgeoning poets who long for fame that achieving celebrity status ultimately proves detrimental

to the artist (386) though it certainly does afford a variety of privileges that she cannot deny but which ultimately do not outweigh its negative consequence (369). As she explains in *Syrlin*:

The great world polishes wit, dissipates prejudices, teaches wisdom, corrects exaggeration; but in return for these gains from it, the artist pays away much of his own riches, because to all great creations of art an atmosphere of serenity is necessary, and in the world there is no rest. There are stimulus, interest, friction, dramatic movement, but there is no rest; its atmosphere is heated and intoxicating, its pleasures are quickly followed by depression, and its passions become a dram-drinking which steals away time and force and contentment from anyone who becomes famous in it. It saps his energies, it debilitates his imagination, it fritters away his time, it makes a plaything of his power, it coaxes the lion in him to let himself be *frisé* and be-ribboned, and drawn into tricks like the poodle; and then one fine day when he is tired, or unwell, or out of spirits, fashion leaves him, and the great world forgets him, and he may die like Sheridan, and have his bed old from under his body for aught that it will care. (121)

Rather than succumbing to the dangerous allure of public prominence, the genius should hold himself aloof from society and never stoop to concern himself with public opinion. Ouida elaborates using Shelley as the preeminent example of an artist with the correct approach to celebrity: “The world had never dominion enough over him to make him fear it, or sacrifice his higher affections to it. In this, as in his adoration of Nature and his instinctive pantheism, he was the truest poet the modern world has known” (“Shelley” 272).

The geniuses that fill the pages of *Puck* and *Syrlin* struggle to forgo society with varying degrees of success. In *Puck*, Gladys first escapes the harms Ouida associates with fame by

remaining deeply disinterested in the social machinations that surround her. “Happily for [Gladys], she was of a temper to which the meditative and intellectual pleasures of thought and of art were far more suited than the noisier and more frivolous diversions of society” (P 518-19). In this way, Gladys remains blissfully unaware that widespread perceptions of her relationship with Beltran have damaged her reputation for much longer than if she had concerned herself with entering high society. Less happily, once Gladys learns that ugly gossip and false accusations about her sully Beltran’s good name, she dies of shame (P 587). While much of the blame for Gladys’s death clearly falls on Avice Dare who reveals the truth to her, Ouida also implies that a society more interested in gossiping about the private life of a gifted actress than enjoying the genius of her performance also shares a great deal of responsibility for her tragic end.

In contrast to Gladys, Syrlin participates in polite society, but he carefully keeps himself from becoming too enmeshed in the intrigues of the aristocracy. He displays “the contempt which every genius feels for the ways of the world” (S 91) and disdains the publicity he finds so vulgar (S 17-18). According to Syrlin, the only fame a genius requires is proliferation of his ideas (S 164-65). In fact, “To the artist who has both dignity and sensibility the continual note of interrogation with which Society approaches him is an unbearable irritation. The little people like it, because it makes them of importance, and flatters them up into the empyrean of a momentary notoriety, but the great artist loathes it, and would fain flee from it for ever to some Ultima Thule unknown to man” (S 49). One of Syrlin’s closest friends, Auriol, sacrifices his potential to achieve artistic genius as a result of his desire to embrace society. Auriol settles for a lesser kind of success, performing in the drawing rooms of aristocrats and at the parties of the upper class, but he could have attained much loftier heights as an artist if he had rejected the world he now welcomes (S 208-09). For this (among other reasons), Syrlin calls society “the

worst enemy the artist has” (S 121) and insists that artists do themselves a great disservice by accepting its patronage (S 215).

By entering into society, artists run the risk of being seen as mere commodities. For example, Freda views genius as a product the aristocracy has paid for with admission to its inner circles; according to this position, a transaction occurs between artists and their admirers that allows artists access to high society for the price of their skills at entertaining (S 37). Her husband, Uther, represents that patron who admits no equality with the artist (S 138); rather than genuinely appreciating the artist for his skill, Uther condescends to accept the company of artists so long as they remain aware of their inferior social status, express appropriate levels of gratitude for his condescension, and provide the kind of entertainment Uther feels enhances the quality of his gatherings (S 45). The Lord and Lady Avilion “belonged to a world in which genius is caressed, but caressed as a clever monkey or a dog who could play cards would be welcomed by it in a moment of ennui” (S 205). Thus, agreeing to the kind of unwritten contract the aristocracy offers destroys the artistic impulse and diminishes the worth of any contributions to society that genius might make.

““LIGHT, GAIETY, NOISE, PRETTY PICTURES””<sup>27</sup>

Although painters, singers, and writers move through the pages of *Puck* and *Syrlin*, both novels focus on the genius of actors. These works of fiction initially address the question of whether acting can even be considered art. Dudley Moore says in *Puck*,

“Pardon me, but it is not possible to have Art at all on the stage. Art is a pure idealism. You can have it in a statue, a melody, a poem; but you cannot have it on the stage, which is, at its highest, but a graphic realism. The very finest acting is only fine in proportion as it is an exact reproduction of physical life. How,

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<sup>27</sup> Ouida. *Puck*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1870: 472.

then, can it be Art which is only great in proportion as it escapes from the physical life into the spiritual?" (554).

According to Dudley's logic, if acting isn't art, then actors aren't artists (P 555). Syrlin agrees that acting cannot be classified as art. Unlike painters or musicians, actors leave no creation of permanence behind them for future generations (S 163). Syrlin also denies that actors are artists when he suggests that actors merely interpret the artistic works of others, serving as the medium through which texts become meaningful to an audience. "We are of use," he says, "to convey the images and ideas of men greater than ourselves to the common multitudes" (S 49). In an earlier chapter, he definitively declares, "I have not the power of creating art. I can only represent what others describe. It is folly to speak of an actor creating a part; the poet or the dramatist has created it; the actor is the lute over which the hand of the creator passes to call forth the air already composed" (S 49). Syrlin further asserts that acting is not an art because it inspires fictitious emotions in the audience; for example, it causes people to feel sympathy for characters for whom they would have none if they met them in the flesh (S 17). Acting proves equally emotionally disingenuous on the actor's part, requiring the actor to manufacture counterfeit emotions according to the dictates of the play. As a consequence, Syrlin wishes he "had been anything other than a mime, imitating and so degrading the passions and emotions which I never felt" (S 315). Freda goes so far as to insinuate that because actors merely imitate, they are bereft of genius though they are nonetheless accepted as such by a society "mad over actors" (S 70).

Ouida argues that burlesque actors in particular do not qualify as artists because they pander to an uneducated and undiscerning public. Much of the acting in *Puck*, conducted by Avice Dare and other lower-class women of her ilk, owes its success to the coarse and vulgar



speech that characterizes burlesque as well as its focus on female sexuality (150). Burlesque earns money by entertaining the masses and appealing to the lowest common denominator (P 141), usually by creating a spectacle at the center of which resides a recognizable face—the celebrity made memorable by familiarity rather than any sort of talent or genius (P 311). Beltran suggests that burlesque has become so appealing because modern society lacks the imaginative capacity necessary to enjoy theater. He says, “A generation which has found out that the moon is only a dried-up ball, and the ultima Thule only a bit of water, that Wallace never lived, and Joan of Arc never died, may be pardoned for not very easily yielding itself to delusions” (P 473). For Beltran, the nineteenth-century’s concentration on the discovery and proof of facts has rendered the sense of mystery on which great art depends objectionable. Denzil blames the hurry and the bustle of Victorian life for the way in which the popularity of burlesque outstrips the meager appeal of theatrical productions of true artistic merit. He comments, “The mind is always so highly strained at its work in our day, that it refuses to make any additional effort in its mere relaxations. When you have been thinking all day, with little pause or peace, you do not want to think in the evening, when your mental strain is relaxed: you want light, noise, pretty pictures—something that needs no thought whatever” (P 475). Only when Gladys makes her debut on the stage does a discussion of the actor of true artistic genius become prominent in *Puck*, for despite protestations to the contrary, Ouida clearly views actors as artists capable of genius.

Syrlin and Gladys fit all the criteria necessary for genius according to Ouida’s definition, and the novels frequently refer to both characters as geniuses, citing their considerable success on the stage as proof. Significantly, however, both Syrlin and Gladys die immediately following their greatest triumphs in the theater. Gladys dies of shame and heartbreak after a performance

that echoes her situation with Beltran (P 586), and Syrlin commits suicide after performing a play of his own composition that uses his love for Freda and hatred of her husband as its foundation (S 435). In the deaths of these characters, Ouida suggests that the true actor of genius—in contrast to the mere imitator or the conduit for the genius of others—imbues his theatrical performances with the emotional vitality of his own life. In doing so he risks, like Syrlin, public exposure of truths best left private or, like Gladys, burning out the flame of his genius in one spectacular triumphant moment on the stage.

“BLESSED [ARE] THOSE WHO HAVE DONE NOTHING REMARKABLE . . . .  
UNMOLESTED MAY THEY DWELL”<sup>28</sup>

The treatment of artistic genius in Ouida’s body of work serves as a kind of apologia for the difficulties she encountered in her writing career. Many of her pronouncements in *Views and Opinions* read as wishful thinking—for her own eccentricities to be excused as a result of the genius of her writing and for her own desire for privacy to be respected by the public. Unfortunately, neither wish seems to have been granted to Ouida’s satisfaction in her lifetime.

Although Ouida certainly possessed many admirers, her novels met with harsh criticism by the media. A short list of comments from reviews of her fiction in literary magazines of the era paint a relatively accurate picture of the reception of Ouida’s work by her contemporaries. In a review of *Two Little Wooden Shoes* in the August 1, 1874, *Examiner*, the reviewer writes: “To tell a story well, and with some degree of power, is not all that is demanded of a novelist; that were placing the art too low” (827). Of *In a Winter City*, another reviewer in the April 22, 1876, *Examiner* comments: “This book will add nothing to the writer’s reputation in any favourable sense of the word” (462). Ouida fares no better in the *Athenæum*. Criticism of her in that publication runs the gamut from observations such as—“it would be absurd to treat Ouida as a

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<sup>28</sup> Ouida. “O Beati Insipientes.” *Views and Opinions*. London: Methuen and Company, 1896: 55.

serious student of politics, history, or society” (“Review of *Ruffino*” 539) to “in spite of a good many of the absurdities of thought and expression which long experience has taught us to expect from Ouida, we have read worse stories in the past year” (“Review of *Le Selve*” 145). Reviewers of her work in the *Athenæum* express the shame they feel at being asked to take Ouida’s writing seriously (“Review of *Wanda*” 632), declare her novels void of any moral worth (“Review of *Dog of Flanders*” 199), and object to referring to her as a genuine artist (“Review of *Critical Studies*” 377). Even a critic like Max Beerbohm, who dedicates his collection of critical essays to Ouida with love, cannot bring himself to praise her writing unequivocally. “Ouida is not, and never was, an artist,” (106) he states in *More*. Despite her success at selling books, Ouida never achieves widespread acclaim as a genius among her peers, an omission that must have rankled deeply given her prolific writing career.

Ouida’s eccentricities also made their way into the press. According to Jane Jordan in “Ouida: The Enigma of a Literary Identity,” Ouida lived far beyond her means and often entertained the literati and glitterati of the day at gatherings that bordered on the socially unacceptable (78-79). As Schroeder and Holt put it, “She spent money recklessly, behaved outrageously, and hosted elaborate dinner parties and evening receptions, often smoking cigars with the men” (16). She kept numerous dogs as pets, allowing them free reign in her home and pampering them as if they were children (Schroeder and Holt 18). She also conducted more than one ill-advised and embarrassing infatuation in full view of the public eye (Jordan 84). Writing roughly forty years after Ouida’s death, Eileen Bigland characterizes her as a lonely, love-starved megalomaniac, a woman who lived half in reality and half in a dream world of her own making, a writer with delusions of grandeur and pretensions to a level of genius she didn’t deserve. Perhaps not surprisingly, Ouida’s extravagances and eccentricities culminated in abject

poverty, and near the end of her life, she suffered additional insult and exposure to the press by well-meaning charitable attempts to alleviate the squalor of her living conditions (Schroeder and Holt 20).

Ouida counters these criticisms of her writing and of the way she chooses to live her life by insisting that the world simply cannot understand genius nor can it exist alongside genius without succumbing to jealousy. She writes, “It is not only the fierce light which beats upon a throne which genius has to bear, but the lurid glare of the sulphur fires of envy, making livid what is white, making hideous what is fair, making distorted and deformed what is straight and smooth and comely” (“O Beati Insipientes” 56). According to Ouida, the artist has a responsibility to present the truth to the public—truth about politics, about society, about relationships between men and women, and about the dangers inherent to progress and innovation: art most certainly performs a didactic purpose for Ouida. Serving as the mouthpiece of truth should provide the artist with some protection from criticism but instead exposes the genius to public condemnation. Rather than appreciating Ouida for the analysis of the Victorian era contained in her body of work, many of Ouida’s contemporaries make hideous what is fair out of both her writing and her personal life. However, throughout a career characterized by both enormous popular success and pervasive critical disapproval, Ouida holds fast to her own estimation of her literary merit and mission. As she writes in “Shelley,” “above all else the poet should be true to himself—to his own vision, his own powers, his own soul” (279).

## 6. CONCLUSION: “A NINETEENTH-CENTURY LITERARY PHENOMENON”<sup>29</sup>

Outside of a handful of academics, Ouida is no longer widely read in the twenty-first century, but that situation is slowly changing. Malcolm Elwin predicts in 1934 that “life is too short to expect that much besides *Moths* . . . will ever again be read of Ouida” (15), and his prediction held true until the last decade when several of her works—including *A Dog of Flanders* and *Under Two Flags*—were reprinted. Elwin’s assessment of Ouida remains one of the most disturbing and almost violently cruel judgments of her literary merits. He writes in *Victorian Wallflowers*: “The end of Ouida’s career is symbolic of the end of the Victorian era; she died in 1908, a tawdry, bedraggled crap of derelict wreckage, defiantly wearing her tattered and old-fashioned finery in surroundings of accumulating ruin, while raucously vociferating the wisdom of her superficial cynicism and ludicrously confident of her suppositious genius” (20). Elwin discards Ouida’s worth along with the worth of the entire half-century that comprised her writing career, seeing in the pitiable circumstances of the end of her life a parallel to the rise of modernism that supplants Victorian literary principles. According to his metaphor, the negative aspects of Ouida’s writing are endemic of the Victorian era, symptomatic of its artifice, and no less worthy of censure than the time period itself.

Other critics, though less cruel in their assessment than Elwin, also suggest that Ouida’s relevance ends with the turn of the twentieth century. Bonamy Dobrée writes in 1970 in *Milton to Ouida: A Collection of Essays*:

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<sup>29</sup> Schroeder and Holt. *Ouida the Phenomenon*. Newark: U of Delaware P, 2008: 9.

And then there are two aspects [of Ouida's writing] which we can well imagine more attractive to the Victorians than to us: the first is the characters themselves, the second what they imply. We do not today care so much for types . . . and Ouida's persons are types, or rather, they are what used to be called 'humours'; they represent qualities, such as good or evil, heroism or vileness, courage, cruelty, and so on; and, here is the appeal, when she depicts good qualities, physical or moral, they are those which most of us, at some time of our lives, if generally in very early youth, wish to acquire. And, believing in her heroes so thoroughly as she does, we believe in them too, at least while we read her, and it is probably that the Victorians, simpler-minded than we are, believed in them more easily than we can. These then were the people one would give anything to be, and, since one believed in them, one could identify one's self with them for the moment. What more rapturous experience could there be?" (197).

In other words, Ouida's fiction reflects what Dobrée sees as a simpler time, and as a result, her writing can now only appeal to either the very young or the very unsophisticated reader. Ouida's novels might entertain, but they don't fulfill the loftier functions ascribed to literature in modern times.

Buckley agrees with Dobrée that Ouida's writing possesses little literary merit, proposing in *The Victorian Temper*, published in 1951, that "popular novelists like 'Ouida' provided a welcome retreat from the restive intellect by exploiting mere sensation utterly untrammled by moral purpose" (205). Buckley offers Ouida as an example of a turn in the late Victorian period from a focus on reason and science to escapism; though Buckley doesn't necessarily view the

nineteenth century as a simpler time, he does view Ouida's writing as uncomplicated escapism—fiction that provides a distraction from the complexities of the era rather than exploring them.

However, though these twentieth-century critics—along with many of the critics of Ouida's own day—refuse to grant her a place in the canon of nineteenth-century literature, her writing remains relevant into the twenty-first century for a variety of reasons, many of which have already been elaborated on at length in this dissertation. Ouida does comment on the social and political anxieties that plagued her contemporaries, even if she often couches that commentary in the kind of melodrama, sensation, and hyperbolic fantasy that on first glance can obscure the significance of her critique. She advocates social reform, particularly in marriage, and provides fascinating insights on feminist issues that continue to interest modern scholars. As Schroeder and Holt suggest in *Ouida the Phenomenon*,

Throughout her career, Ouida's writings exhibit a powerful longing to conform to conventional societal roles, always balanced by a keen, often painful, insight into the limitations and flaws of approved social identities. And while she dealt with many of the issues that typically dominated the works of nineteenth-century writers, it is in part this contradiction at the heart of her fiction—which so vividly encapsulates the tensions, inconsistencies, and anxieties of her age—that establishes her significance for nineteenth-century literary studies. (247)

Though she never achieved the kind of popularity with the academy attained by writers such as Eliot or Dickens, Ouida's voice nonetheless plays an important role in the chorus of Victorian writers. For this reason, discussions of her work appear in a variety of recent scholarship, including *Disease, Desire, and the Body* and *A Companion to Sensation Fiction*, both by Pamela Gilbert, as well as *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes* by Talia Schaffer.

In addition, Ouida's body of work anticipates modern issues of literary consequence in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries, among them animal rights and environmentalism. Ouida believes that animals think and feel just as people do ("Death and Pity" 230) and speaks out strongly against what she sees as the torture of animals in scientific experimentation ("Death and Pity" 244). In a similar vein, she mourns the loss of the countryside and of monuments to the past in the name of progress. She writes in "Blind Guides," "To demolish noble, ancient and beautiful things, in order to reproduce the modern mushroom-growths of a dreary and dusty 'western township,' can allege neither sense nor shrewdness as its excuse; it is simply extremely silly; even if inspired by greed it is both silly and shortsighted" (181). Before the advent of genetically modified foods and other controversial farming practices, Ouida worries about the long term effects of "scientific husbandry" ("The Passing of Philomel" 141) and "the extreme greed which characterises agriculture and horticulture" ("The Passing of Philomel" 137). Avenues of future scholarship in Ouida's work should certainly include eco-critical studies of her fiction juxtaposed with the public statements she makes concerning the environment in her non-fiction essays.

Additional academic projects worthy of pursuit include re-printing additional volumes of Ouida's works like the recently published Broadview critical edition of *Moths* and the Valancourt Classics editions of *Under Two Flags* and *In Maremma*, all edited by Schroeder. Although most of Ouida's works are available online through the Internet Archive, putting her fiction into more widespread print circulation makes her a much more viable candidate for study at the undergraduate level. Other possibilities consist of post-colonial readings of her fiction, Marxist criticism, and queer studies (particularly homosexual and homosocial relationships between the male characters of her novels).



In *More*, Beerbohm writes that Ouida's novels

contain qualities which have gained for them some measure of Corellian success. Probably that is why, for so many years, no good critic took the trouble to praise them. The good critic, with a fastidiousness which is perhaps a fault, often neglects those who can look after themselves; the very fact of popularity—he is not infallible—often repels him; he prefers to champion the deserving weak. And so, for many years, the critics, unreprieved, were ridiculing a writer who had many qualities obvious to ridicule, many gifts that lifted her beyond their reach. (105-06).

Beerbohm's statement seems particularly germane if applied to Ouida's literary significance in the current century. Though her writing consists of much that deserves negative critique, it also contains a rich, and largely unmined, trove of observations about the Victorian era that foreshadow the modern era to come.

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## VITA

### EDUCATION

M. A. University of Mississippi (Fall 2003)

B. A. University of Southern Mississippi (Spring 2001)

### ADDITIONAL EDUCATION

Graduate of University of Mississippi Writing Project's Summer Institute—

intensive training in writing across the curriculum; affiliated with the National Writing Project and the Mississippi Writing/Thinking Institute (Summer 2004); in 2006 I served served as a member of the UMWP's first Technology Team which is responsible for integrating new technology into the UMWP

Study abroad experiences in both France and Spain

### CONFERENCE PAPERS

“The Myth of the Angel in the House: Women in Ouida's *Princess Napraxine* and *Othmar*”—presented at the 2012 conference of the Georgia Philological Association

“Creating Connected Learners: Building a Composition I Learning Community Course”—presented at the 2012 Teaching Matters: Ten Years After conference as part of a panel I helped design on teaching in Learning Communities

“Female Feelings of Fragmentation: Misogyny in Ouida's *Held in Bondage*”—presented at the 2011 conference of the Georgia Philological Association

“If the Shoe Fits: Using Global Cinderella to Teach Comparison-Contrast Writing”—presented at the 2011 Teaching Matters: Discovering What Works conference as part of a panel I helped designed on teaching writing

“Millennial Teaching: Implementing Learning Communities Courses”—presented as a roundtable discussion I helped design at the 2010 conference of the Georgia Association of Historians

“‘Journeys end in lovers meeting’: Narrative in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*”—presented at the 2009 conference of the Georgia Philological Association as part of a panel that I helped design on *The Haunting of Hill House*

“‘The Preferences of the Platonic Age’: Male Homosocial Desire in Ouida's *Strathmore*”—presented at the 2008 conference of the Mississippi Philological Association as part of a panel that I helped design on social flux in the Victorian period

“Keeping ‘Whiteness’ out of the Muck: the Mad Dog in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*”—presented at both the 2007 conference for the Southern American Studies Association and the 2007 University of Mississippi Isom Student Gender Conference

“A Poetic Legacy: Mary Oliver’s Use of ‘Riprap’”—presented at the 2007 conference of the Mississippi Philological Association as part of a panel that I helped design on ecologically minded readings of poetry

“Racism in the Media: The Original *Star Trek* Series”—presented at the 1998 conference for the National Association of African American Studies and published in their proceedings

#### READINGS

“‘Nought on the Surface of an Exhausted Dead Earth’: Ouida and the Evils of Scientific Progress,” MGC Lyceum (Fall 2012)

Forest and Field Writer’s Workshop, Reidsville, GA; public reading of short story

“Inversion” (Fall 2011)

#### PUBLICATIONS

“From the Literature”—*Campus Safety and Student Development*; 10-3, 10-4, 11-1, 11-2, 11-3, 11-4, 12-1, 12-2, 12-3, 12-4, 13-1, 13-2, 13-3, 13-4 (Spring 2009 to Summer 2012; quarterly literature review column)

“From the Literature: What’s Hot . . . What’s Not”—*Report on Emotional & Behavioral Disorders in Youth*; 8-2, 8-4, 9-1, 9-2, 9-3, 9-4, 10-1, 10-2, 10-3, 10-4, 11-1, 11-2, 11-3, 11-4, 12-1, 12-2, 12-3, 12-4, 13-1 (Spring 2008 to present; quarterly literature review column)

“A Poetic Legacy: Mary Oliver’s Use of ‘Riprap’”—*Publications of the Mississippi Philological Association*; Spring 2008

#### EDITORIAL ASSIGNMENTS

Wrote and edited, along with the Advising Committee, the Faculty Advising Manual (Fall 2012)

Served on the editorial board for the “Symposium” section of *Transformative Works and Cultures* (TCW), a Gold Open Access peer reviewed journal focusing on media and fan studies broadly conceived (Jan 2009 to Jan 2010)

Contributing editor for *Report on Emotional and Behavior Disorders in Youth* (2008 to present)

Contributing editor for *Campus Safety and Student Development* (2009 to present)

Wrote and edited, on a team of four, a Teaching Assistant's Handbook for University of Mississippi graduate teaching assistants/instructors across the curriculum (Summer 2005)

Editor of Winter 2002 edition of *Annotations*, University of Mississippi English Department newsletter

#### WORKSHOPS

Forest & Field Writing Retreat taught by Janisse Ray (2011)

#### GRANTS AND AWARDS

Nominated for Teaching Excellence and Outstanding Advisor Peer Awards at MGC (2010)

Critoph Prize Graduate Student Travel Award (2007)

Kramer Graduate Instructor Award: Award for Outstanding Teaching Assistant in  
Sophomore Literature (2003-2004)  
Honors Fellowship (M. A.) from University of Mississippi

#### EMPLOYMENT: MIDDLE GEORGIA STATE COLLEGE

#### COMMITTEE WORK

MGSC Advising and Transfer Consolidation Committee (co-chair 2012-2013)  
Consolidation Committee for Academic Advising (2012-2013)  
Faculty Evaluation and Development Committee (2011-2012, Fall 2012)  
Search Committee member for Student Success Center advisor position (2010)  
Title III Grant Development Committee (2010-2011)  
Advising Committee (2009-2010; Chair 2010-2011, 2011-2012, Fall 2012)  
Search Committee member for Academic Advisor position (Summer 2009)  
Learning Community QEP Subcommittee Member (2008- 2012)  
Reading Module QEP Subcommittee Member (2008-2012)  
Humanities Division Syllabus Evaluation Committee (2008-2012)  
Intellectual Property Committee Member (2008-2010)

#### SERVICE TO COLLEGE

Coordinated Advising Committee presentations for Fall Kickoff (2012)  
Taught in the inaugural Prep Academy for Learning Support students (2012)  
Member of MGC Book Club (2011 to present)  
Wrote column for *Student Success Newsletter*—"How to Email Your Professor" (2011)  
Presented workshop on Plagiarism with Crystal O'Leary-Davidson for Student Success  
Center (2010)  
Presented workshop on Study Skills for Learning Communities Students (2010)  
Presented workshop on "Avoiding Plagiarism" at Fall Kickoff with Tracie Provost (2010)  
Attended Outreach Lunch with area high school English teachers (2009)  
Participated in the Bleckley County Schools Reading Program (2009-2010)  
Cooked and Served Food at International Day (2008 to present)  
Represented Humanities at First Look (2008)

#### AFFILIATIONS

Modern Language Association  
University of Mississippi Writing Project  
Georgia Philological Association  
Georgia Association of Historians  
Mississippi Philological Association  
Phi Kappa Phi  
Phi Eta Sigma  
Alpha Lambda Delta  
Gamma Beta Phi  
Golden Key  
Omicron Delta Kappa