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Marie Corelli's Handling of Two Victorian Gender Stereotypes and Its Implications

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Abstract

Marie Corelli, in her portrayal of the 'Fallen Woman', creates a new sub-type of 'the Married Fallen Woman' in Nina Romani (Vendetta), Lady Clara Winsleigh (Thelma), and Lady Sibyl Elton (The Sorrows of Satan). Violet Vere, both married and conventionally 'Fallen', is contrasted with the married and not yet officially 'Fallen' Lady Clara. La Marina in The Murder of Delicia is unmarried and 'Fallen', but plans to rise up from her 'Fallen' state through marriage. Corelli is at times unwittingly supportive of or even admiring towards the conventionally 'Fallen'!

The other gender stereotype that Corelli treats – and subverts – is that of the Old Maid in The Young Diana (1918).Faking her own death, the thirty-plus Diana eventually undergoes rejuvenation in Geneva under an occult scientist. Not only does she regain her youthfulness, beauty, and sexual attraction, but transcends all that eventually to reject the very social construct of 'woman'.

The paper attempts to trace the implications behind Corelli's portrayals in a repudiation of the view that her thought-processes remained static from her first novel in 1886 to her death in 1924.

Keywords: *'Married Fallen Woman' – Old Maid - misandry*

Biographical Introduction

Marie Corelli (1855-1924), born Mary Mackay, was a phenomenally popular novelist whose first novel, *A Romance of Two Worlds*, was published in 1886. She is credited with having written the first English bestseller in the form of her 1895 novel *The Sorrows of Satan* which outsold all English novels written before and along with it. Her readership ranged from Queen Victoria herself who apparently placed a standing order for her books, to shop assistants and adolescents. At the time of her death in 1924, *The Sorrows of Satan* 'was in its sixtieth edition and had been translated into almost every European language and adapted both to the stage and to film.'[1] It was the one Corelli novel that Oxford World's Classics chose to reprint in 1998.[2]

Gender Stereotypes of the Victorian Period

[1] Federico, Annette R. *Idol of Suburbia: Marie Corelli and Late-Victorian Literary Culture*. Charlottsville. University Press of Virginia. 2000. 7.

[2] Keating, Peter. Ed., *The Sorrows of Satan, Or, The Strange Experience of One, Geoffrey Tempest, Millionaire*, by Marie Corelli. 1895. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford & New York. Oxford University Press. 1998.

Nina Auerbach identifies three apparently-powerless victim archetypes of Victorian womanhood: the 'Fallen Woman', the 'Angel in the House' and the 'Old Maid'.[3] She has described the Angel in the House as a 'selfless paragon … enveloped in family life and seeking no identity beyond the roles of daughter, wife and mother'.[4] As Corelli's handling of this Victorian icon has been discussed elsewhere,[5] the present discussion will focus on the two remaining icons as they appear in her fiction, considering their activities in both the domestic and the public spheres. Each of them will be defined when each is analysed.

The Domestic Sphere: The Fallen Woman

The attitude that a woman's fall must end with her death, whatever her social status, predates the Victorian period, as evidenced by the apparently-ruined Olivia Primrose singing in Chapter XXIV of Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766):

> When lovely woman stoops to folly,
> And finds too late that men betray,
> …
> The only art her guilt to cover,
> To hide her shame from every eye,
> To give repentance to her lover,
> And wring his bosom--is to die.[6]

Corelli reserves her portrayals of apparent poetic justice for unfaithful wives from the upper classes. One may classify them under the sub-icon: the 'Married Fallen Woman'. The first such character she creates is Nina in *Vendetta* (1886). Regarding adulterous wives, Corelli makes her own position unambiguous in the 'Author's Preface' to the novel:[7]

> We know … that the infidelity of wives is … far too common for the peace and good repute of society. *Not so common is an outraged husband's vengeance; not often dares he take the law into his own hands, – for in England at least, such boldness on his part would doubtless be deemed a worse crime than that, by which he personally is doomed to suffer.* But in Italy …– whether right or wrong, – … strange and awful deeds are perpetrated …
>
> (no page no.; my emphasis)

Narrated by a betrayed husband, the Sicilian Count Fabio Romani, the protagonist is mistaken to be dead and is buried alive during a cholera epidemic in Naples in 1884. Regaining consciousness, he manages to break out of his cheaply-made coffin, discovers in his family vault the hidden treasure of a brigand called Carmelo Neri, and goes back to his house to

[3]Auerbach, Nina. *Woman and the Demon*. Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press. 1982.

[4] Auerbach 67, 69. Also, see below how Fabio Romani in Corelli's *Vendetta* describes his dead mother.

[5]Among many studies, one may mention Bhattacharya, Prodosh. 'Revolt of the Angel in the House: Two Novels of Marie Corelli'. *Journal of the Department of English*, Professor Kajal Sengupta Memorial Volume Ed. Jharna Sanyal (University of Calcutta). Vol. XXXIII, Nos. 1 & 2 (2006-07) 88-99.

[6] Goldsmith, Oliver. *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766). Text downloaded on 1 May, 2006, <www.bartleby.com/106/138/html>.

Victorian fiction abounds with examples from all levels of society. Lady Dedlock in Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852-53) is at one end of the social spectrum, while Martha in his *David Copperfield* (1849-50) and Hardy's Tess (1891) are at the other.

[7] Corelli, Marie. *Vendetta*. 1886. Rpt. Mumbai: Wilco Publishing House. 2007 Impression. All page-references will be to the 2007 Impression.

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surprise his wife, only to be surprised himself. Hiding in his own garden, he sees her making love to his best friend Guido Ferrari, and celebrating Fabio's opportune 'death'. Fabio overhears Nina trying to explain to her lover Guido why she entered into such a loveless marriage:

> 'Why? … because he [Fabio] was rich and I was horribly poor. I cannot bear to be poor! Then he loved me,' – *here her eyes glimmered with malicious triumph* … 'I suppose I did [too] – for a week or two. As much as one ever loves a husband! *What does one marry for at all? For convenience – money – position* – he gave me these things …'
>
> (69-70; my emphasis)

Nina in *Vendetta*, like Lady Sibyl Elton in *The Sorrows of Satan*(1895)[8] after her, was 'sold' in marriage to the wealthy Fabio by her impecunious aristocrat father, who, Fabio reminisces, 'no doubt inwardly congratulat[ed] himself on the wealthy match that had fallen to the lot of his dowerless daughter.'(7) However, Corelli's women, who enter such marriages in these novels, do not behave as victims.

To reinforce Nina's status as a fallen woman, the disguised Fabio describes his dead mother to his unsuspecting wife as one whose 'sole aim seemed to be to forget herself in making others happy, and to surround her home with an atmosphere of goodness and virtue' and who, he tells us, led an 'unstained sacred life of wifehood and motherhood' (150). Against Nina, whom Fabio describes as a 'polluted though lovely creature', his mother was 'a beautiful woman unconscious of her beauty' (150). In other words, Fabio's mother was the archetypal Angel in the House. Nina violates not only the duties of a wife. She and her lover Guido neglect her daughter Stella, and when the child, weakened by such neglect, contracts diphtheria, Nina avoids visiting her because she is afraid, as the maid-servant attending Stella tells the disguised Fabio, 'of the danger of infection' (182).

With Nina, it is apparently habitual – and spontaneous – promiscuity. What she seems to share with Sibyl Elton of *The Sorrows of Satan* is a high degree of sexual appetite which leads to such promiscuity.[9] This appetite also invests her at times with demonic attributes. When Fabio, disguised as the Conte Cesare Oliva, courts Nina, he is haunted by:

> the glitter of her hair [which] flashed on my vision like little snakes of fire, – her lithe hands seemed to beckon me, – her lips had left a scorching heat on mine. (207)

The demonic quality is reinforced after she dies. Fabio, having remarried her in his new identity, takes her to the Romani vault to reveal his identity. A horrified Nina first tries to kill him with his dagger and then goes mad. An earthquake dislodges an enormous block of stone which crushes her 'into the very splinters of [Fabio's] own empty coffin':

> I could see nothing, save one white hand protruding, – the hand on which the marriage-ring glittered mockingly! Even as I

[8] Corelli, Marie. *The Sorrows of Satan*. 1895. Ed. Peter Keating. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford & New York. Oxford University Press. 1998. All page-references will be to this edition.

[9] An angry Fabio also blames 'French novels and books of their type', including 'modern plays' (410), for having taught Nina, who sullenly claims to be 'no worse than other women', that 'infidelity is no sin, – merely a little social error easily condoned, or set right by the Divorce Court'. (410) See below about Lady Sibyl Elton's claim that her reading habits are, at least in part, responsible for her sexual attitudes.

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> looked, that hand quivered violently … beat the ground … and then … was still.
>
> (422)

However, it is the adulterous Nina who has the last laugh, seeming to exercise demonic power from the hereafter over the exiled Fabio in the forests of South America:

> The hand moves … it lifts itself, – the small fingers point at me threateningly – they quiver … and then – they beckon me slowly, solemnly, commandingly onward! … onward! … to some infinite land of awful mysteries where Light and Love shall dawn for me no more!
>
> (426)

Poor Fabio had not actually murdered his faithless wife, having changed his original decision to leave her in the Romani vault, and had called to her to escape with him as soon as the earthquake began. As he claims, God's vengeance proved to be stronger than his.

With Lady Clara Winsleigh in *Thelma*,[10] whom her husband, Lord Henry Winsleigh, actually calls a 'fallen rose of womanhood' (418), it is perhaps a case of fashionable faithlessness, unlike the ingrained promiscuity of Nina in *Vendetta* and Lady Sibyl Elton in *The Sorrows of Satan*. This is probably why Lady Clara repents and avoids the lurid death that overtakes the two other wives. At first, she shares with her predecessor Nina and her successor Sibyl dislike for and contempt towards her husband. When the novel's hero Philip Bruce-Errington does not respond to her advances – he will go on to marry the ultimate Angel in the House, Thelma – Lady Clara switches her attention to the contemptible and repulsive lecher Sir Francis Lennox. Unlike Nina and Sibyl, she makes no secret of her affair. Like Nina, she neglects her marital offspring, in her case a boy, Ernest. Infuriated by Philip's choice of the Norwegian Thelma as his wife, she works assiduously to ruin their marriage and nearly succeeds. The result is not only Thelma leaving the blameless Errington, but the death of the child she is carrying. As Lord Winsleigh puts it, '… oh, my God! how much women have to answer for in the miseries of this world!' (416) But surely, that is a man alarmed by the conventional 'victim' exercising her power. However, Lady Clara exerts power not only over men, but also over a member of her own sex who, by the fact of being married to a man, is 'oppressed', and whom, certain feminists would argue, Lady Clara tries to 'liberate' from her victimhood!

As foils to her, we have not only Thelma herself, but also her husband Lord Winsleigh. His quiet endurance of his wife's 'frivolous coquetry' (410) and total devotion to the upbringing of his son is, as will be seen below, a remarkable case of role-reversal, with the conventional 'oppressor' suffering like the conventional oppressed. As a result, at first, he inspires pity and 'a sort of vague contempt' (410) even in Philip. However, as Lord Winsleigh explains to the latter, Lady Clara

> 'has long ceased to be my wife, except in name, – that she still bears that name and holds the position she has in the world is simply – for my son's sake! I do not wish,' – his voice quivered slightly – 'I do not wish the boy to despise his mother. It's always a bad beginning for a young man's life. I want to avoid it for Ernest if possible, – regardless of any personal sacrifice.'
>
> (410)

The oppressed figure in the Winsleigh household is indeed the husband and not the wife. When he confronts his wife along with Philip regarding her role in Thelma suddenly leaving him to return to her native Norway,

[10] Corelli, Marie. *Thelma.* 1887. Rpt. Mumbai: Wilco Publishing House. © 2008. All page-references will be to the Wilco reprint.

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Lady Clara is, at first, unrepentant and nonchalant regarding her actions and her lifestyle, as the adulterous Lord Carlyon in Corelli's later novel, *The Murder of Delicia* (1896) is when his wife confronts him with his adultery, and, indeed, as all men in a 'patriarchal' set-up are supposed to be. The question of gender disparity and 'privilege' in such matters is nailed by Errington when he says, '… it's a *woman* who has slandered me – what can I do? Her sex protects her! … But – by God! – were she a man, I'd shoot her dead!' (406; speaker's emphasis) Thus, given the opportunity, women are never behind men in anything, which includes being brazen about sexual disloyalty to their legal – and oppressive by virtue of their masculine gender – spouses. Women also take full advantage of being immune to violent retribution because of the standards of Patriarchy. Amber Heard in the West, Suman Singh Yadav in Rajasthan, India, and Harshita Raikwar in Satna, Madhya Pradesh, also in India, have demonstrated how much further women can go.[11]

However, when Philip reveals the truth to Lady Clara – that he has been not been keeping the *danseuse* Violet Vere as a mistress, as Lady Clara has told Thelma, but has been visiting her to persuade her to return to Neville, her husband, and that Sir Francis Lennox has deliberately misguided Lady Clara on this matter out of jealousy, Violet having been his mistress for years – her insouciance begins to crumble. In the subsequent confrontation with her, Lord Winsleigh reacts to her sullen suggestion of a divorce with the alternative suggestion of relieving his wife 'of all [her] responsibilities to husband and son' by leaving the country with Ernest, thereby giving her 'perfect freedom'. He assures her that his presence will be available whenever she requires it 'for the sake of appearances, – or to shield [her] from any calumny' (420). Again, all the passive suffering, sacrifice and submission to the unjust acts of the oppressor, traditionally associated with women, are on the part of the man here. Thelma, in this novel, does fulfil the oppressed woman's role, leaving her husband so that he can continue with what she wrongly thinks is his preference for Violet Vere (thanks to Lady Clara, and, indirectly, Violet Vere, both members of her own gender!). Feminine solidarity is well summed-up by Lord Winsleigh's identification of his wife's motives in trying to ruin the

[11] A horrific video from Rajasthan [India] went viral [on 24 May 2022], where a woman is seen beating her husband on numerous occasions with a cricket bat. This video has sparked several questions on the absence of Domestic Violence Laws for Men …

https://voiceformenindia.com/alwar-school-principal-ajit-yadav-domestic-violence-case/#:~:text=The%20couple%20has%20a%206,kept%20calm%20and%20ignored%20it. 13 November 2023

The husband found redress because he was able to produce video-evidence of his wife thrashing him. Had his wife been the plaintiff, a verbal complaint would have been enough to put the husband behind bars. Indian law does not recognize even today the fact that 'domestic violence' may be perpetrated on a man by a woman. The husband, too, never retaliated, saying that for a teacher – he is a school principal – to raise his hand on a woman was against Indian culture and his position as a teacher. The wife exulted in the protection her gender afforded her at multiple levels: legal, cultural, and personal.

More recently, Lokesh Manjhi, who married Harshita Raikwar without dowry, is similarly seen in a viral video he has submitted to the police, in which the wife brutally attacks the husband, even kicking him in the face.

https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/new-updates/my-wife-beats-me-please-help-me-husband-pleads-with-police-for-protection-from-domestic-abuse-by-his-wife-in-mp-watch-viral-video/articleshow/119900949.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst 3 April 2025.

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marriage of Thelma and Philip: 'Her object was purely feminine – love of mischief, and the gratification of private spite!' (414)

Had the genders of the abuser and the abused been reversed – as they are in future novels by Corelli, like *The Murder of Delicia* (1896) and *Innocent* (1914) – all of us would have recoiled in pious horror at such a portrayal of domestic violence and abuse, and would have indignantly rejected the expectation of a 'patriarchal society' that, faced with such abuse, women must endure silently, and/or, like Thelma, remove themselves from the lives of their male abusers so that the latter can continue with their adultery. What happens with Lady Clara? She breaks down, confessing that she has 'been vile, wicked, deceitful – but … not happy … since [she] wronged' her husband and begs for a chance to 'win [his] love again' (421-22). Lord Winsleigh agrees only in part, agreeing not to leave her, but pointing out that

> 'nothing can be done to warm to life this poor perished love of ours. We can, perhaps, take hands and watch its corpse patiently together, and say how sorry we are it is dead – such penitence always comes too late!'
>
> ` (422)

After her paramour Sir Francis is accidentally killed, Lady Clara begs, not for her husband's forgiveness, but his pity:

> 'I've been a wicked woman, Harry,' she said, with a strange, imploring thrill of passion in her voice, 'I am down – down in the dust before you! Look at me – don't forgive me – I won't ask for that – you *can't* forgive me, – but *pity* me!' (458, speaker's emphasis)

Lord Winsleigh, who has the power to make her an outcast not only as a man but as the husband she confesses to have wronged, chooses instead to take

> her hands and … [draw] her gently, soothingly, – …till he pressed her to his heart.
> 'Down in the dust, are you?' he whispered brokenly. 'My poor wife! God forbid that I should keep you there!'
>
> (458)

Should the male abuser repent and ask for forgiveness and reconciliation, and should the female abused acquiesce, there will be an outcry at men, under a patriarchal dispensation, eating their cake and having it too. Corelli enables her creation, Lady Clara, to do just that, thereby validating emotional violence in the domestic sphere, because such violence is practised by a woman against her husband and minor son – both male.

Why does Lady Clara eventually capitulate to her husband? This is because Corelli does not show her as being economically self-supporting. She is probably dependent on Lord Winsleigh. There are three additional attacks which demolish her initial brazenness.

Firstly, in trying to prove that Philip was having an affair with Violet, she was trying to reduce Thelma to her own level, that of a woman rejected by the man she had chosen. Also, in alleging that Philip was unfaithful to his wife, she was trying to reduce him as well to her idea of what all men were like, sex-starved animals who pursued one woman after another, just as Sir Francis follows her, in her own words, 'like a dog' (245). Having reduced all men so, she was able to excuse her own faithlessness to her husband, who, being a man, was, by nature, faithless himself, and therefore had no right to expect faithfulness from her. The logic, of course, is false, given Lord Henry Winsleigh's unwavering loyalty – of the kind expected of women whose husbands cheat on them, a kind of loyalty that Thelma herself displays when she

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justifies to herself the fact that her husband is having an affair (which, to repeat, he is not). When the situation is clarified, as described above, Lady Clara realizes the total falseness of all her perceptions regarding others and herself. In the process, she ends up validating the grounds on which the Victorian (male) Self based its perceptions of the (female) Other; most unfortunate for the feminist mind-set.

Secondly, Lord Winsleigh awakens her sense of guilt regarding her attitude to her child, Ernest. He is particularly successful in this because he tells her that he will always teach the boy 'to esteem [Lady Clara] highly' (421), and that he had in the past tried to convince Ernest that his mother loved him, when the boy instinctively felt the lack of her love and wondered why it was so. Also, with regard to Ernest, Lord Winsleigh engages in another case of role-reversal. He is the one in the family who provides the boy with affection and spends time with him in a distinctly maternal way to make up for his wife's neglect. Although Lady Clara at first chooses to repudiate her social identity of a mother, confronted with her husband's appropriation of that identity, she subconsciously feels threatened.

Finally, the accidental death of Sir Francis not only fulfils the curse Lord Winsleigh laid on him during his earlier confrontation with his wife, but also brings home to Lady Clara the bitter truth of her inferiority to Thelma which he had pointed out earlier while confronting her:

'Who is there more vile and traitorous than he? … Has he not tried to influence [Philip] Errington's wife against her husband? For what base purpose? But Clara, – he is powerless against her purity and innocence, – what, in the name of God, gave him power over *you*?'

(419; speaker's emphasis)

It is bad enough to be forced to admit that one's thought-processes have all been wrong and that the despised husband has always been right. But, to have the latter rub in the fact that one is inferior to another woman, whom one has always hated and looked down on, is perhaps the proverbial last straw on the back of the female dromedary!

With Lady Sibyl Elton in *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895), promiscuity has acquired an intellectual context, and is an act of conscious choice which she justifies with reference to the literature and social mores of her time. Nina's spiritual successor, Lady Sibyl is explicit when she tells her husband-to-be, Geoffrey Tempest:

> 'Marriage for me *is* a sale ... for you know well enough that however much you loved me or I loved you, [Lord Elton, her father] would never allow me to marry you if you were not ... richer than most men. I want you to feel that I fully recognize the nature of the bargain struck'.
>
> (164; speaker's emphasis)

Describing herself as 'warped in heart and mood', she says at an earlier moment in this conversation, 'I cannot feel. I am one of your modern women – I can only think – and analyse.' (161) She also specifically refers to 'these 'new women' days' which have 'fitted' her to be a wife through 'newspapers, magazines, and 'decadent' novels' (164). Sibyl's 'discourse' is based on 'Ibsenism or whatever other ism affects' her (165) and is the outpouring of 'a contaminated creature, trained to perfection in the lax morals and prurient literature of [her] day.' (242). All these comments are made by Sibyl herself, and are not authorial intrusions, even though they seem to reflect Corelli's own attitudes and opinions.

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Sibyl's elaborate suicide note, as Hallim (184) sums it up,[12] holds not only Swinburne and 'a few of the most praised novelists of the day' (327 of the novel) responsible for her moral degeneration, but one which also blames negligent and mercenary parents, vulgar servants, a morally dysfunctional aristocracy and above all, the marriage market, for not having given her proper guidance in the first place – everyone and everything is to blame except Sibyl herself. A closer look at this note is necessary for understanding Corelli's complex response to the 'Married Fallen Woman'.

The first person to be blamed in the note – something not noted by Hallim, or Sally Ledger before her [13]– is her husband, Geoffrey Tempest, the narrator. By 1895, Corelli's conception of the husband being always the injured party sinned against by the promiscuous wife – as in *Vendetta* (1886) and *Thelma* (1887) – had changed. A 'self-satisfied, complacent, and arrogant fool', Geoffrey is castigated for never having 'studied my nature, entered into my emotions, or striven in the least to guide and sustain me' (319). Instead:

> 'he has treated me precisely as he might treat a paid mistress – that is, he has fed me, clothed me, and provided me with money and jewels in return for making me the toy of his passions – but he has not given me one touch of sympathy – one proof of self-denial or humane forbearance. Therefore, I owe him nothing.' (319-20)

Geoffrey differs from Fabio Romani in *Vendetta* and Lord Henry Winsleigh in *Thelma* in having never 'shown [Sibyl] any sign of a great, true love such as one sometimes dreams of and seldom finds' (319). If he had, as the two husbands named above did, Sibyl feels she 'should … ask his forgiveness' (319), as Lady Clara Winsleigh did of her husband. Instead, Geoffrey confesses earlier in the narrative, that to prove his masculinity, he has indulged 'in every sort of dissipation common to men of the day' (143) which included frequenting low houses with 'half-nude brandy-soaked dancers' (144). Within a month of their marriage, 'a sickening satiety [had taken] the place of the so-called 'deathless' lover's passion' (242), accompanied by the realization that the 'marriage was nothing but the mere mating of the male and female animal – a course bodily union and no more' (244). Thinking of Sibyl as 'a beautiful female animal with the soul of a shameless libertine' (243), Geoffrey admits that he himself is a libertine who, however, can never hope to be redeemed by the love of a good-natured wife.[14]

It is significant that, unlike the marriage of Fabio Romani and Nina and that of the Winsleighs, that of Geoffrey and Sibyl remains and ends in metaphorical and literal sterility – no

[12] Hallim, Robyn. "Marie Corelli: Science, Society and the Bestseller." Unpublished Ph. D. thesis, Department of English University of Sydney, May 2002. <ses.library.usyd.edu.au/bitstream/2123/521/1/adt-U20030623.11115901front.pdf ->downloaded 28 September, 2004

[13] Ledger, Sally. 'The New Woman and the Crisis of Victorianism' in *Cultural politics at the 'fin de siècle'*. Ed. Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press. 1995.

--- *The New Woman: Fiction and feminism at the 'fin de siècle'*. Manchester. Manchester University Press. 1997). Both works are cited in Hallim.

[14] Similarly, the love of a good and loyal husband may redeem a 'Fallen Married Woman', witness Lady Clara Winsleigh and her husband in *Thelma*. That it may not is proved in the same novel through Violet Vere and her loyal husband Neville.

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children are born of it.[15] Before leaving the matter of Geoffrey's feelings towards Sibyl, one must cite his awareness that echoes the words of Olive Schreiner's Lyndall about women who have, purely for economic reasons, married men they do not love:

> … she whom I had loved, and whom I loved still in a way that was hateful to myself, was a thing viler and more shameless in character than the veriest [*sic*] poor drab of the street who sells herself for current coin – that the lovely body and angel face were but an attractive disguise for the soul of [a] harpy – a vulture of vice … (241)

Lyndall had said, '…a woman who has sold herself, even for a ring and a new name, need hold her skirt aside for no creature in the street. They both earn their bread in one way.'[16]

The irony, which Geoffrey never loses sight of, is that, before their marriage, Sibyl had coldly analysed her nature and had warned him of what to expect from her. Unlike Fabio Romani, Geoffrey Tempest had been made aware before marriage about the negative potential of his chosen partner. It must be added that Sybil's allegations and Geoffrey's self-flagellation notwithstanding, we do not see him subjecting her to any act of domestic abuse. The only incident that shows him asserting himself against her is when he seizes from her hands 'one of the loathliest [*sic*] of the prurient novels … lately written by women to degrade and shame their sex', which she is reading, and throws it away! Let us remember Sibyl's admission that she was corrupted by such books. Therefore, Geoffrey was perhaps doing her a favour? She is mildly amused by his outburst, and he apologizes for his act – which he describes as 'a sudden impulse of rage … [he] could not resist' (245).

After blaming her husband, Sibyl's note goes on to describe how she, to quote Keating's note on this passage, found 'Shelley physically unattractive, in spite of his free-thinking views; [grew] to despise Keats for loving Fanny Brawn who was not worthy of him; but continue[d] to admire Byron for his ruthless womanising.' (400) This is entirely consistent with the fact that as a young woman Sibyl should feel irresistibly attracted towards Prince Lucio Rimânez, the 'Satan' of the title of the novel, who, though a misogynist rather than a womaniser, Sibyl perceives as having many features of the 'Byronic' anti-hero. She then casually mentions her mother who neglected her so much – like Nina neglected her daughter Stella in *Vendetta* – that her being 'struck down by … paralysis' (322) hardly affected Sibyl. It was at this stage that she began to observe and analyse society, seeing through its immorality and pretence of respectability, such as 'women of title and renown' entertaining their lovers during their ''quiet teas' …while their husbands were out' (322).

Reaching marriageable age, she was cautioned by her father to inform him the moment a man became a potential suitor so that 'he might make strict enquiries as to their actual extent of fortune. I then understood, for the first time, that I was for sale.' (323) Soon after this comes her exposure to 'a novel by a woman'. The 'obscenities' which it hinted at and its 'vulgarities' had been praised 'in all the leading journals of the day' 'as 'daring' and 'brilliant wit' '. She therefore overcame her initial disgust for the book, and re-reading it made her

[15] Violet Vere in *Thelma* is also married yet childless. It is not clarified who is responsible for this, Violet herself, or her husband Neville.

[16] Schreiner, Olive. *The Story of an African Farm.* 1883. Rpt. New York. Dover Publications, Inc. 1998. 136.

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'appetite for that kind of prurient romance [grow] keener' (p. 324).[17] Following her subsequent exposure to the 'satyr-songster' Swinburne, whose effect on women she describes as 'far more soul-corrupting than any book of Zola's or the most pernicious of modern French writers'(325), Sibyl saw no public outrage at his anti-Christian writing (referring to the last four, and apparently the most offensive, stanzas of Swinburne's 'Before a Crucifix'). She, therefore, went on reading literature which killed '[w]hatever soul [she] had in' her (327). The result was, she 'judged men as beasts' – to be specific, 'carefully trained baboons – respectably clothed and artistically shaven – but nevertheless with the spasmodic grin, the leering eye, and the uncouth gestures of the hairy woodland monster' – '*and women as little better*' (327; my emphasis) and became indifferent to everything except her 'resolve to have [her] way as far as love was concerned' though 'forced to marry without love for merely monetary considerations' (327). Lady Sibyl is empowered enough to determine that she will rape men in retaliation for being forced into a loveless marriage: a remarkable gender-reversal of men seeking sexual satisfaction outside marriage. This love she specifies as 'precisely what Mr Swinburne and a few of the most praised novelists of the day had taught me to consider as love' (327). All very empowering and refreshingly misandrist; but, given her contempt for her own gender, perhaps misanthropic on the whole?

However, when what she thinks to be love does come to her, it is hardly anything which she can analyse with the clinical coldness she claims to have acquired through the literature of her time. It is, in her own words, 'ardent, passionate, and eternal' (327). Her reaction to Lucio reveals her to be not a realist or naturalist, but a frustrated romantic:

> 'I saw Lucio – and it seemed as if the splendid eyes of some great angel had flashed a glory in my soul! With him came his friend, the foil to his beauty – the arrogant, self-satisfied fool of a millionaire, Geoffrey Tempest – he who bought me, and who by virtue of his purchase, is entitled by law to call himself my husband …' (331)

Geoffrey acknowledges the validity of the commercial metaphor – employed frequently in arguments against marriage by New Women – by saying to himself that he is indeed 'as great a fool as all men are who barter their lives for the possession of a woman's body' (331). So, it is not only the woman who is 'sold' in marriage. In making such a 'purchase', the man too 'barters' away his life.

There is certainly a degree of intellectual detachment and emotional distancing in such retrospection and analysis. One may initially associate such qualities with the 'new' fiction of the time, as Sibyl herself does.[18] However, as the passage just quoted shows, Corelli is really using the tools of such fiction to suggest its hollowness. Passion, according to her, is inseparable from human nature, whatever 'realist' fiction may suggest. With passion and its excess come suggestions of the supernatural, again seen in the passage above. The suggestion is not confined to Lucio, who, indeed, is a supernatural being, Satan himself. After their marriage, the following thought occurs on one occasion to a satiated and disillusioned Geoffrey:

[17] After her marriage, Sibyl had told Geoffrey:

> '… indeed we know quite well what we are doing now when we marry, thanks to the 'new' fiction!'(246)

One wonders if sexual ignorance is such a great virtue!

[18] See above.

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> … that night, when I held her in my arms, … an awful dread arose in me … as to whether I might not … be tempted to strangle her … as one would strangle a vampire that sucked one's blood and strength away!
>
> (250)

When she offers herself to Lucio, the infuriated Satan thunders at her:

> 'Your vampire soul leaped to mine at the first glance I gave you – you were a false, foul thing from the first, and you recognized your master! … the kiss I gave you on your wedding-day put fire in your blood and sealed you mine! – why, you would have fled to me that very night, had I demanded it …'
>
> (288-89)

The demonic Lady Sibyl is not buried under a stone with only her hand protruding, as Nina had been in *Vendetta*. Instead, Geoffrey, who is sitting by her body, reading her suicide note, and reacting to it, has this to say:

> 'To think I loved *that*!' I said aloud, pointing at the corpse's ghastly reflection – … 'Why if there were any life after death – if such a creature had a soul that at all resembled this poisoned clay, the very devils might turn away aghast from such a loathly comrade!'
>
> The candle flickered and the dead face seemed to smile … (331; speaker's emphasis)

Sally Ledger has rightly argued that in Sibyl Corelli has conflated the New Woman and the decadent, a conflation not confined to Corelli in late-Victorian England.[19] The decadence is what is perhaps more evident both in Sibyl's deliberate abuse of the institution of marriage as well as in the connotations of the negatively demonic in her character. Other New Women in literature and life had shown greater courage in totally rejecting the married state, and daring to live with their lovers in defiance of established social norms. They had also suffered, often stoically, the consequences of their choice, social ostracism, followed sometimes, though not invariably, by economic destitution and death. Herminia, in Grant Allen's *The Woman Who Did*, published in the same year as *The Sorrows of Satan*, is such a woman who chooses to be a martyr to her convictions. Lady Sibyl, like Nina and Lady Clara before her, takes full advantage of her married status and the social-cum-economic status and security it offers, while being faithless to her husband. Unlike Lady Clara, she does not repent, and therefore, her ending is, like Nina's, suitably lurid.

The Fallen Woman: from the Domestic to the Public Sphere

This duplicity is what makes these three 'Married Fallen Women' ethically insolvent in a way the more obviously 'fallen' Violet Vere in *Thelma* is not, though, like Lady Clara, she remains guilty of abusing her loyal husband. Individual fallen women like her can turn the tables on the male Self of Victorian society. Violet Vere does so not only through defiance of the norms set by the Self and repudiating all offers of rehabilitation – she persistently refuses her husband Neville's offers to take her back – but also by becoming the source of economic sustenance for herself – which Lady Clara is not – and the men at the Brilliant Theatre. She is the one who 'makes the Brilliant draw' (370). She openly rejects her married state, and, as will be seen below, triumphs in her rejection of it. The abuse she inflicts on her husband thus stands – perhaps unwittingly on Corelli's part – vindicated.

[19] Ledger, Sally. 'The New Woman and the Crisis of Victorianism' in *Cultural politics at the 'fin de siècle'*. Ed. Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press. 1995. 102, 106, cited in Hallim 179, 184.

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Violet Vere is one of many foils to Thelma who is the ultimate Angel in the House as noted earlier. Violet has, long before her appearance in the narrative, decided to leave her husband Neville to become the corpulent singing star of the Brilliant Theatre in London.[20] This is how Corelli chooses to describe her at one point:

> – her figure was inclined to excessive *embonpoint*, but this rather endeared her to her admirers than otherwise, – many of these gentlemen being prone to describe her fleshly charms by the epithet 'Prime!' as though she were a fatting pig or other animal getting ready for killing.
>
> (368)

We do not, however, see Violet dying in shame and misery as convention required her to do, and as the last words of the description seem to predict she would. Neville, secretary to Sir Philip Bruce-Errington and Violet's husband, is far more scandalized about her profession than she ever was about adopting it. [21] Violet herself is not only unrepentant. A determined alcoholic, she bullies all the men who work at the Brilliant. She sells an ambiguously-worded letter of Philip to Lady Clara for twenty pounds, a document Lady Clara will use to 'prove' to Thelma that Violet is Philip's mistress. Immediately after this, when Tommy, her violin-player, begs her for a loan of ten shillings for his sick wife, he is told:

> 'I never give – except to public charities … [which] I'm obliged to do … by way of advertisement. … Look out! or I'll tell the manager we've got a beggar at the Brilliant.'[22]
>
> (375)

The last the reader sees of her is when she triumphantly takes 'a cab to the Criterion' to meet 'her latest conquest', the Duke of Moorlands, who 'had invited her to a sumptuous luncheon with himself and friends, all men of fashion' (376).

We do not have in Violet Vere a Fallen Woman-cum-victim who rises through her sins and sorrows to become a figure of power – which, as Auerbach has shown (183), is how Mary Ann Lewes metamorphosed into George Eliot. Rather, we see here what Auerbach would call a potentially demonic figure. Violet shows her demonic ability in callously allowing the major crisis in the narrative to precipitate itself. Compared with the witchlike Lovisa in the same novel, however, Violet is much less demonic. Lovisa consciously targets Thelma; Violet is hardly, if at all, aware of Thelma's existence.

And for all her reprehensible acts, she remains self-satisfied and unscathed till her last appearance in the narrative. The presentation goes against the blanket doom prescribed for all fallen women by not only Victorian society but by Violet's creator herself in the passage quoted above. Corelli seems to admit, perhaps unwittingly, the amoral consistency in and the resultant validity of Violet's rejection of marriage when contrasted with the duplicity of

[20] We may recall Auerbach's comment (205) about how 'the phrase 'public woman' for performer and prostitute alike was a social liability'.

[21] The degree of Neville's shame is such that he begs Philip not to reveal Violet's identity to Thelma. When Philip, on Neville's request, repeatedly visits Violet to persuade her – in vain – to return to her husband, this act of concealment becomes instrumental in creating the general impression that Violet is Philip's mistress, a misunderstanding that nearly wrecks Philip's marriage to Thelma.

[22] One is reminded of how Steerforth causes one of his teachers, Mr Mell, to lose his job in Creakle's school, Salem House, in Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1849-50).

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the married fallen women Nina Romani, Lady Clara Winsleigh, and Lady Sibyl Elton.

Thelma's husband, after all, was not guilty of adultery. Should the husband be adulterous, Corelli's sympathy for the woman with whom he commits adultery becomes unambiguous. In 1896, Violet Vere is reborn as La Marina, alias Violet de Gascon, and actually 'Jewlia Muggins' of Eastcheap, in Corelli's drastic rewriting of the *Thelma*-story, *The Murder of Delicia*.[23] Thelma only saw Violet, her husband's alleged mistress, on stage once. Novelist Delicia Vaughan meets her husband Lord Carlyon's actual mistress face to face at Lord Dexter's house in Park Lane to be told the following home-truths:

> '…why did you go and marry such a cad as 'Beauty' Carlyon? … Don't defend him … He isn't worth it! He thinks he's made a great impression on me, but lor'! I wouldn't have him as a butler! …When I take a lover – a real one, you know, – no sham! – I'll pick out a good, honest, worthy chap from the working classes. I don't care about your 'blue blood' coming down from the Conquest, with all the evils of the Conquest fellows in it …'
> (217-18)

La Marina goes on to tell a bewildered Delicia that she likes the latter's books, and that Delicia should not mind her husband running after La Marina because '[t]hey all do it – married men most of all' (218). She replies to Delicia's charge that she encourages Lord Carlyon and other aristocrats to pursue her with an explanation which is sound economics:[24]

> 'If I did not *pretend* to encourage them … I should lose all chance of earning a living. No manager would employ me!'
> (219; speaker's emphasis)

Delicia, now thoroughly disorientated, feels she may have done La Marina an injustice, and asks her:

> 'Do you mean to tell me – that you are –?'
> 'A good woman?' finished 'La Marina,' smiling curiously. … 'I'm not good; *it doesn't pay me*. But I am not as bad as men would like me to be.'(218; my emphasis)

La Marina is evidently treated with greater conscious sympathy by Corelli than Violet was. This is so despite the fact that, because Lord Carlyon's affair with her is real, it actually wrecks Delicia's marriage and eventually leads to her death (the 'Murder' of the title). Thelma's marriage is eventually saved despite the passive contribution of Violet and the active machinations of Lady Clara because Philip loves no woman except his wife. However, in keeping with Corelli's greater sympathy for the Fallen Woman in *The Murder of Delicia*, it is not La Marina who furnishes proof of Lord Carlyon's adultery as Violet had indirectly (and falsely) done in *Thelma* with

[23] Corelli, Marie. *The Murder of Delicia*. Philadelphia. J. P. Lippincott Co. 1896. The similarity and differences between the story-line of *Thelma*, *The Murder of Delicia*, and *Innocent* deserve a separate study, which has been undertaken with regard to the first two novels in the article 'Revolt of the Angel in the House', see above fn. 5.

[24] La Marina's earlier incarnation, Violet Vere, was also intensely aware of the importance and power of money as her meanness illustrated earlier and her comment on selling Philip's letter to Lady Clara show:

> 'Money's the only thing worth having – it pays your butcher, baker, and dressmaker – and how are you to get along if you *can't* pay them, I'd like to know! Lord! If all the letters I've got from fools were paying stock instead of waste-paper, I'd shut up shop and leave the Brilliant …'
> (*Thelma*. *372*; speaker's emphasis)

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regard to the alleged affair between her and Philip. Delicia herself accidentally discovers that her husband is using her hard-earned money to keep a mistress. In La Marina, the Fallen Woman's contempt for her alleged social superiors is continued from Violet, but the overall impression created by Violet's 1896 reincarnation is even less 'demonic'.[25]

The negative – and conventionally 'demonic' – potential of power seems to be the prerogative of the married fallen women Nina and Sibyl. Both of them, however, fall victim to powers greater than their own. Violet has the power to do harm, but this power eventually fails. She emerges in the end as a parody of a demonic figure, and, perhaps partly because of this, remains unharmed. La Marina is hardly demonic at all, and, as seen above, is a positively sympathetic figure. However, unlike Violet, she is an *active* participant in Lord Carlyon's adultery for monetary gain, money which is provided by another woman, Delicia, who is the victim of her husband's betrayal.

The Old Maid

Barring Thelma, Corelli's angels in the house are either 'murdered' by their chosen mate as Delicia is,[26] or live an existence, characterized by self-sacrifice for their mate, that threatens to be sterile and pointless, like Manella Soriso's life with Roger Seaton in *The Secret Power* (1921).[27] It is time to turn to the 'Heroic Old Maid' whom Auerbach describes as one of the strongest, if most subversive creations of official Victorian definitions of womanhood. In Victorian life and literature, the Victorian Old Maid might be seen, as Auerbach says (109), hopelessly swarming around lovable bachelor heroes. In Victorian England the steadily rising percentage of unmarried women made the old maid a familiar domestic appendage and a frightening social harbinger. At worst, she was, to quote from Defoe's *Appleby Journal* of the 1690s, like the Screech Owl 'the Terror and Aversion of all Mankind, the forerunner of Ill-luck, the foreboder of Diseases and Death'.[28] At best, she was a sacrificial angel to a surrogate family, as seen in Mrs Oliphant's juvenilia about 'an angelic older sister, unmarried, who had the charge of a family of motherless brothers and sisters, and who had a shrine of sorrow in her life in the shape of the portrait and memory of her lover who had died young.'[29] In other words, this kind of Old Maid is simply an Angel in the House who has been unable to find a husband.

Using 'the modern and more civil term' 'lady bachelor', Corelli focuses on an ordinary Old Maid in *The Young Diana* (1918).[30] Diana May, when the narrative begins, has 'passed the turning point of thirty years' (5) after which she

[25] As Violet puts it 'with ungrammatical candour' to Lady Clara:

> "Your Irvings and your Terrys, your Mary Andersons and your Langtrys, – they're good enough for your fine drawing-rooms … And none of them have got half my talent …! … if they're respectable enough for you, – so am I!"
> (*Thelma*. 374)

[26] This happens to Innocent as well, in the 1914 novel of which she is the eponymous heroine.

[27] Corelli, Marie. *The Secret Power*. 1921. Rpt. Middlesex. The Echo Library: 2007.

[28] Quoted in Mason, Shirlene. *Daniel Defoe and the Status of Women*. St Alban's, Vt. Eden Press.1978. 82, and cited by Auerbach on p. 109 of her book.

[29] Coghill, Mrs Harry. Ed., *Autobiography and Letters of Mrs Margaret Oliphant*. 1889. Rpt. Leicester. Leicester University Press. 1974. 16-17, and cited by Auerbach 109.

[30] Corelli, Marie. *The Young Diana; An Experiment of the Future*. 1918. Rpt. General Books. www.General-Books.net 2009. 5. All references will be to this edition.

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has become, according to her own father, not only 'superfluous' but 'as though she had the plague, or was recovering from small-pox. To be a spinster over thirty seems … a kind of illness.' (25). Faking her own death to escape from a life wasted in looking after such ungrateful people, Diana eventually fetches up in Geneva in response to a strange advertisement addressed

> To ANY WOMAN who is alone in the world WITHOUT CLAIMS on HER TIME or HER AFFECTIONS.
> 'A SCIENTIST … requires the ASSISTANCE and CO-OPERATION of a Courageous and Determined Woman of mature years. She must have a fair knowledge of modern science, and must not shrink from dangerous experiments or be afraid to take risks in the pursuit of discoveries which may be beneficial to the human race. (15; author's emphases)

What the scientist, Dr Féodor Dimitrius, does to her is an exercise in rejuvenation. The Old Maid regains her youthfulness, beauty, and sexual attraction. Early in the narrative, when Diana is about to leave her parents, we have a letter from her suffragette friend Sophy Lansing asking her to do just that instead of remaining a 'patient Grizel' because '[t]his is Woman's Day, and you are a woman of exceptional ability.' (13) Having been revalidated as a woman, Diana does not, to quote from Federico's analysis of the novel, want 'a typewriting job or the vote' but 'female sexual domination' which, according to Federico, 'Corelli seems to imagine [as being] a legitimate route to equality.'[31] The one emotion Diana can now feel is hatred, and nothing at all of 'love, interest, sympathy for other folks' (136). The angelic Griselda seems to have been transformed into something potentially demonic in the conventional, pejorative sense. This is confirmed by the reaction of the scientist's mother, Madame Dimitrius, an unquestioning 'Angel in the House', when she first sees the fully-rejuvenated Diana:

> '… this is devil's work! … It is impossible that such a thing can be done without rebellion against the laws of God! You – you are not Diana May – you are some other creature, not made of flesh and blood!'
>
> (171-2)

The rejuvenated Diana's encounter with Sophy Lansing needs to be recounted. The 'progressive' Suffragette Sophy refuses to believe that the rejuvenated Diana is the same person. She asks Diana to leave, and after Diana's departure comes this revealing soliloquy:

> 'Even if she *were* Diana, I could not have her here! – with *me!* – never – never! She would make me look so old! So plain – so unattractive!' (275; author's emphases)

Hallim presumably forgot these words when she wrote (49):

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

For all her forward-looking opinions, Sophy remains true to Diana's earlier analysis of the reaction of the two sexes to her increasingly youthful appearance:

[31] Federico, Annette R. *Idol of Suburbia: Marie Corelli and Late-Victorian Literary Culture*. Charlottsville. University Press of Virginia. 2000. 121-26.The quotation is from 124.

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> … six months ago I danced as well, skated as well, and played the piano as well as I do now – but no one ever gave me the smallest encouragement! Now everything I do is made the subject of exaggerated compliment, by the men of course! **– not by the women; *they* always hate a successful rival of their own sex!** Ah, how petty and contemptible it all is!'
>
> (208; author's italics **and my emphasis**)

Diana's first act of retaliation involves her selfish parents. When she declares her identity to her mother, she 'emit[s] a shrill scream like a railway whistle' (184) which brings Mr May and her companion Miss Preston running into the room. Mrs May hysterically asks for the police and a doctor, thinking Diana to be a lunatic. Diana draws 'herself up like a queen addressing her subjects':

> 'I *am* your daughter Diana! … Though how I came to be born of such people I cannot tell! … I was tired of my life with you and ran away. … I thought it was my duty to show myself to you alive – but I want you as little as you want me. I will go.'
>
> (184; speaker's emphasis)

Her father, who is 'afflicted by the disease of senile amorousness for all women' (193), escorts her out of the house to her car, 'taking her daintily gloved hand and patting it', then kissing it, and offers to come with her, to which Diana replies with a 'peal of mirth':

> 'No, Pa! Fond as you are of the ladies, you cannot make love to your own daughter! The Prayer Book forbids! … One year has aged you rather badly! Aren't you a *leetle* [*sic*] old for Miss Preston?'

Captain the Honourable Reginald Cleeve, Diana's one-time fiancé, who deserted her after seven years of courtship for a younger – and richer – woman, she merely confronts with two of his letters to her. The first, with what Diana now calls 'a good deal of 'gush' ', describes her as 'the most adorable girl in the world' and adds, 'if ever I do an unkind thing to you or wrong you in any way may God punish me for a treacherous brute!' (195).The second letter is the one in which he rejected her, confessing 'that the feelings I had for you no longer exist. But you are a sensible woman, *and you are old enough now* to realize that we are better apart.' (195; my emphasis). To a bewildered Reginald, Diana now declares, much to his delight, 'I only want what I can have for the asking – *you!*' (304; speaker's emphasis). Reginald Cleeve is enthralled by the Young Diana, begging her 'in Heaven's name [to] have [her] own way … and [to] come back to [him]' (196), unwittingly perhaps, using the language of a potential rape victim. Diana dismisses him mockingly, reminding him:

> 'I never left you! It was you who left *me!* – for no fault. And, now I suppose you would leave your wife, – also for no fault – except perhaps – … that of too much general weightiness! But she has given you children – are you not proud to be 'the father of a family?' Your daughters are certainly very plain – but you must not go by outward appearances!'
>
> (196; speaker's emphasis)

After hearing such cheerful fat-shaming of his wife and the shaming of his daughters' looks – none of whom have ever met Diana, let alone insulted or harmed her in any way – Cleeve bitterly complains that 'the old Diana … would never have mocked me!' The Young Diana responds with a 'rippling peal' of 'cold and cutting' laughter:

> 'She was too gentle by half! She was meek and patient – *devoted, submissive and loving* – she believed in a man's truth, honour and chivalry! Yes – the poor 'old' Diana had
>
> (185; speaker's emphasis)

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> feeling and emotions – but the 'young' Diana has none!' (197; my emphasis)

The three qualities attributed by the young Diana to her earlier self show that the Victorian Old Maid was expected by the male 'Self' of society to submerge her identity into that of the unquestioning Angel in the House. She was not to question the worthiness of the men towards whom such devotion, submission, and love were to be directed. Lord Winsleigh in *Thelma* displayed such meekness, patience, devotion, and initial submissiveness to his callously-adulterous wife Clara. A crucial exchange between Dimitrius and Diana earlier in the novel has already subverted the imposition of such attributes on the female. Dimitrius had told Diana:

> '… [Y]ou have been brave, docile, patient, obedient … All four things rare qualities in a woman! – or so men say! You would have made a good wife, only your husband would have crushed you!'
>
> She smiled.
>
> 'I quite agree. But what crowds of women have been so 'crushed' since the world began!'
>
> 'They have been useful as mothers of the race,' said Dimitrius.
>
> 'The mothers of what race?' she asked.
>
> 'The human race, of course!'
>
> 'Yes, but which section of it?' she persisted with a cold little laugh. (150-1)

The young Diana, hunting down male victims, analysing herself dispassionately as being capable of only one emotion, that of hatred, and declaring herself to be devoid of all emotions the Victorian male Self invested the female 'Other' with, seems disturbingly close to Corelli's perception of the 'New Woman', as articulated by Lady Sibyl Elton in *The Sorrows of Satan*. Cleeve's reactions on leaving her show the demonic – the last sentence below suggests the vampiric – power the young Diana has acquired:

> He left her reluctantly, his mind disquieted and terrorized. Some potent force appeared to have laid hold of his entire being … when he had gone out of her presence he was aware of a strange and paralysing weakness and tiredness …[32]
>
> (197)

For her amorously senile father, Diana had felt nothing but contempt. For her 'traitor lover' two contrary impulses rise in her. One is not to bother taking vengeance on one who is a 'mere lump of sensuality … an utterly contemptible atom.' (198) On the other hand, Diana is filled with

> undying hate, the antithesis of the once undying love I bore him! … Is he not punished enough by the gross and commonplace domestic life he has made for himself? No! – not enough! – not enough to hurt him!
>
> (198)

The conflict is resolved with the arrival of a telegram which informs Diana of the death of Professor Chauvet. This 'crusty yet kindly old' man had felt sincere love for Diana at Geneva, had proposed to her, and has now died, having made her his sole heiress. 'For the first time since her 'awakening' under the fiery ordeal of Dimitrius's experiment, [Diana] experience[s] a painful thrill of real 'feeling' ' which fills her eyes with a 'beautiful softness and tenderness' (198-9). As with Lady Sibyl Elton, all declarations of being 'emotionless' or capable of only one emotion, in Lady Sibyl's case that of lust, and in Diana's case that of hatred, prove to be rhetorical. Emotions, being

[32] This is what Montague Summers, on p. 29 of his treatise *The Vampire: His Kith and Kin "The Philosophy of Vampirism"* (1928) describes as 'the "psychic sponge" or mental vampire'. Text downloaded 17 April 2009 from www.litgothic.com

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fundamental to human nature, reassert themselves on the appropriate occasion. Lady Sibyl had felt – or, thought she had felt – the passion of true love for Lucio. Diana, awakened to the validity of sincere love from a man, abandons all thought of further vengeance on the worthless Cleeve:

> Standing before her mirror she saw her own beauty transfigured into a yet finer delicacy when this determination [to abandon her intention of avenging herself on Reginald Cleeve] became crystallized, as it were, in her consciousness.
>
> 'What is my positive mind?' she asked herself. 'It is … a centre which radiates power over a world of visible effects. So that if I choose I can vitalize or *de*vitalize other forms … why should I descend to pulverize base clay with pure fire? He will meet his punishment now without any further effort of mine, beyond that which I demand of justice!'
>
> (199; author's emphasis)

Speaking to Dimitrius, she specifies what this punishment is:

> 'My beauty fills him with longing, – the thought of me ravages his soul and body – it occupies every thought and every dream! – and with that passion comes the consciousness of age. Age! – the great breakdown! – the end of all for *him*! – I have willed that he shall feel its numbing approach each day, – that he shall grow dim, – when the rush of youthful life shall pass him by and leave him desolate. Yes! – I am avenged! – he is 'old enough now to realize that we are better apart!' '
>
> (204; speaker's emphasis)

Vengeance, by definition, is hoisting the injurer with his own petard. The young Diana inflicts on him 'the consciousness of age' (204) in return. Diana's vengeance itself does not require any further effort on her part. The memory of her restored beauty is enough to produce the necessary effect on his sensual nature. But she herself is shocked into abandoning her purely negative pursuit of misandry through the love of a departed man. Further, her rejuvenation, which makes the vengeance possible, is the result of the occult science practised by Dr Dimitrius, a man. To quote Diana herself, he 'can unmake and remake the human body, freeing it from all gross substance, as a sculptor can mould and unmould a statue'. (204)

Vengeance being over, Diana repudiates the claim of Dr Dimitrius on her 'time' and 'affections':

> 'I am no more yours,' she said, 'than are the elements of which your science has composed the new and youthful vesture of my unchanging Soul! … I have a Self …and it is … independent of all save its own elements.'
>
> (205)

The novel ends with Diana living in Paris where

> Each day finds her further removed from the temporary joys and sorrows of humanity, and more enwrapt in a strange world of unknown experience to which she seems to belong. … She feels neither love nor hate: and Féodor Dimitrius … wanders near her watchfully, but more or less aimlessly, knowing that his beautiful 'experiment' has outmastered him …
>
> (205-6)

We have already seen how in some respects the young Diana May wields the power of a vampire. Federico notes (124) that in resisting her creator Dimitrius's will, and developing mentally in ways he did not expect, she also resembles Frankenstein's monster. When she looks in the mirror, Corelli tells us that 'she had the curious impression that she was seeing the picture of somebody else in the glass, – somebody else who was young and enchantingly pretty, while she herself remained plain and elderly.' (148) This is a clear echo of

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The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891).[33] The parallel that Federico does not cite, and which Corelli would probably have repudiated, in the so-called creator claiming total control over the so-called creation and the latter denying it, is that of Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1912).[34] In addition to that text, one is reminded of Shaw's *Man and Superman* (1903) as well when Diana tells Dimitrius, 'You have filled me with a strange force which in its process of action is beyond your knowledge, – and by its means I have risen so far above you that I hardly know you'. (144) One inevitably thinks of Shaw's 'Life Force' and the helplessness of both man and woman when under its control.

In *The Young Diana* the Old Maid returns to take revenge on her faithless lover. This is a narrative pattern followed by other portrayals of this icon before and after Corelli. Auerbach cites the case of Ellen Price Wood's two-volume novel *Mildred Arkell*.[35] In it, the eponymous heroine has her heart broken after her adored cousin William marries the stylishly vicious Charlotte. Mildred leaves Westerbury after William's marriage, amasses a fortune in secrecy, returns to buy him out of bankruptcy after his business fails and Charlotte runs through his capital. Mildred's money enables William's son Travis to marry his modest, Mildred-like cousin rather than an enormous heiress, thus saving the next generation from repeating the father's mistake. This section, in which the heroine quietly wins control over not only William but also others around and associated with him, is entitled 'Mildred's Recompense'. Auerbach describes Mildred's achievement as the old maid's simultaneous apotheosis and revenge through her one source, in real life, of legal power: property-owning.[36]

The next parallel cited by Federico (123) is the heroine of Fay Weldon's *Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1984). She bears greater resemblance to Corelli's avenging Old Maid, although she is not an old maid, but an ugly wife with children, whose husband is having an affair with a glamorous authoress. The wife destroys his economic independence and his assets, amasses a fortune (like Mildred Arkell) and returns to him, after having undergone plastic surgery to look like the beautiful authoress for whom he had left her in the first place. It is in this last act of submerging her own personality that we seem to hear echoes of Corelli's Diana,

[33] Federico (124) notes that another passage in *The Young Diana* employs 'the same metaphor of the picture as the self' as Wilde's text.

[34] Dimitrius sounds very like Henry Higgins in his declaration:

> 'Thank God I have never loved any woman save my mother! … To lose one's time and peace because a woman smiles or frowns is to prove one's self a fool or a madman!'
>
> (140)

Corelli's dislike of Shaw is well-documented. For example, in 'The Whirlwind', she refers to 'our ape-like jesters of the Bernard Shaw type who have mocked at all things holy, serious, and earnest', and who 'may be peaceably forgotten.' *My Little Bit*. 1919. Rpt. Bombay: Wilco Publishing House: 1962. 28-29).

[35] Wood, Ellen Price. *Mildred Arkell*. Leipzig. Bernard Tauchnitz. 1865. Analysed on 131-34 of Auerbach's book.

[36] Auerbach quotes (132) Mildred articulating her contentment at having successfully had her 'revenge':

> If you knew what the happiness of serving you is, William! If you knew what a recompense this is for the bitter past! (Vol. II, 325)

Unlike Corelli's Diana, Wood's Old Maid has her revenge through exercising her angelic impulse of serving the man she loves, although he now belongs to others.

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except that Corelli seems to have gone further in 1918 than Weldon would sixty-six years later. To quote Federico:

> As a spinster, Diana was socially invisible; as a wife, she would have lost her individuality. … As a young beauty, she is alienated from her own face, her prettiness seems to belong to others, and her 'master' claims her as his property. The only escape to personal autonomy … is the destruction of the entire construct woman. (125)

Diana asserts her autonomy by using Dimitrius's own words against him. He had told her, 'The magnetism of sex is the thing that 'pulls' – but you – you, my subject, have *no* sex!' (138; speaker's emphasis) In the Epilogue she replies to Dimitrius's comment that her circumstances as a woman have hardly changed because she is as alone in the world as when she answered his advertisement, with the words, 'But only 'so far as I am a woman.' Now – how do you know I am a woman at all!' (204) She is answering Dimitrius with his own earlier assertion that he has reconstructed her as an ideal which has no place in the existing biological order:

> 'The love which is purely physical – the mating which has for its object the breeding of children, is not for you any more that it would be for an angel.'
> (138)

We may recall here what we learnt from Auerbach (70) about the gender of angels. In traditional Christian angelology, angels were by definition masculine, there being no unmistakably female angels till the fifteenth century. To this we must relate what Diana says about her now having 'a Self …and it is … independent of all save its own elements.' (205) Hers is a new Self, neither female nor male, and so, independent of the constraints imposed on both in society. And it owes its existence to the efforts of a man.

Conclusion

From the virulent misogyny of *Vendetta* (1886), redeemed by Fabio Romani's angelic mother and Teresa who is fiercely loyal to her beloved, the bandit Carmelo Neri, to the Olympian misandry of *The Young Diana* (1918), subverted not only by Professor Chauvet, but also by the inescapable fact that it is a man, Féodor Demetrius, who has transformed Diana May into the powerful, gender-indeterminate being she has become – Corelli proves wrong those of her critics who allege that she remained, in her last works, exactly where she was in her first published novel, *A Romance of Two Worlds* (1886). Rita Felski sees in her work as a whole 'a profound emotional ambivalence in [its] representation of gender relations, oscillating between recurring expressions of anger, frustration, and resentment toward the male sex and a yearning for oceanic dissolution of the self in an ecstatic merging of souls.'[37] The comment not only ignores Corelli's ruthless exposure of her own gender in *Vendetta* and *Thelma*. There is also, in the post-World War I novels like *The Young Diana* and *The Secret Power*, a loss of faith in any 'ecstatic merging of souls', and the urge to provide any further reassurance to herself and her readers. Humanity, which includes womankind, is no longer worth reassuring or saving. The woman who achieves the ideal state can survive only by withdrawing into a mental or physical utopia, like Diana, or Morgana of *The Secret Power* (who disappears into the Golden City in the Sahara) respectively, or by discarding her very identity of woman, as Diana does. Unfortunately, after Morgana disappears into the Golden City, Corelli tells us of the remains of her crashed airship, the 'White

[37] Felski, Rita. *The Gender of Modernity*. Cambridge Ma.Harvard University Press. 1995. 129-131, quoted in Hallim, 213.

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Eagle' found by travellers in the desert. Thus, Morgana's beloved 'baby', which she declared as being 'worth all the men and all the marriages I've ever heard of' (166) dies a premature death, and she, having rejected procreation, does not emerge as a particularly successful creator. One might wonder whether it had been at all worthwhile for Morgana to have had her mechanical 'baby'. When she abandons the real world to escape into her utopia, her action may be interpreted as showing remarkable similarity to a 'New Woman' in fiction. Corelli's 'highly evolved creature, like Sue Bridehead, is incapable of survival in a world inhabited by insensitive intellectual inferiors.' (Hallim, 253)

One may add that the intellectual inferiority cuts across genders, and is not confined to either the male or the female. For every Diana May there is a Sophy Lansing, and Morgana Royale is counterbalanced by Roger Seaton's slave-woman, Ardini more charitably calls her his 'love-woman' (183), Manella Soriso. Let us not forget Nina Romani versus Teresa, or Lady Clara Winsleigh contrasted with Thelma. And against odious men like Lord Carlyon, there is the loyal Paul Valdis, and the misguided arrogance of Féodor Demetrius is offset by the selfless love of Professor Chauvet. Corelli's fulminations against either sex seem to be subverted by her own creations. For all her polemics, deep down she was a creator of engaging stories, which are, fundamentally, works of art, not socio-spiritual pamphlets.

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