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Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, Marie Corelli's British New Woman: A Threat to Empire?

Abstract

At the height of the British Empire, England was in the midst of major social, economic and moral upheaval. The roles and status of middle-class women were particularly affected by many of these changes. In turn, as the gap between idealism and 'reality' grew, the validity or usefulness of Victorian notions or ideals of womanhood increasingly came under attack. Arising from this commotion was the figure of the late Victorian and Edwardian 'New Woman.' Her appearance provoked further confusion and ambiguity about gender that had repercussions for empire. This paper addresses the way in which the role of English women in sustaining the British Empire intensified the social pressures on them in the metropole. It examines the threat to nation and empire represented by the New Woman by looking at how she was presented to the rapidly growing general reading public at the end of the nineteenth- and beginning of the twentieth century. This is achieved by looking at the bestselling novels of Marie Corelli, a phenomenally popular turn-of-the-twentieth century author. Corelli's novels repeatedly affirm that the New Woman represented the threat of 'modernity,' that she was a danger to 'civilisation' and therefore to British imperialism.

Keywords: New Woman; British imperialism; middle-class family values; gender ideals; reading public; Marie Corelli; colonial New Woman

Marie Corelli's British New Woman: A Threat to Empire?

Introduction

Many commentators refer to the 'enigma' of English nationalism or English national identity. As Krishan Kumar discusses, the nation's position in relation to its 'internal' empire, Great Britain or the United Kingdom, as well as to its 'external' empire, extending to North America and the Caribbean and then to India and South East Asia, meant that there was little, if any, need to develop a specifically English national identity. Empire provided 'a frame for England itself, a way of knowing what it was to be English' (Hall, 1998, p180). This assertion is supported firmly by Bernard Porter. Nationalism in Britain was less developed than in other countries. Internationalism was granted much higher status in contemporary understandings of a shared or national identity (Porter, 2004, pp243-244). What common sense of national identity, or common notions of national character, there was in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century England, then, was tied overwhelmingly to the country's position in the international arena; to the nation's supreme place in the world as an industrial power. National identity was shaped crucially by the notion of Britain's international role as the 'standard bearers of modernity and progress' (Kumar, 2000, pp575, 591); as a group of people charged with the mission of bringing civilisation to others, a mission characterised by ideals of 'manliness' and 'respectability' as well as 'a corroding and pervasive racism' (Marks, 1990, p117). The nation defined itself in relation to the 'other' in Ireland, Africa and the New World, 'by constructions of civilization and progress on the one hand and backwardness and barbarism on the other' (Marks, 1990, p115).

This juxtaposition of progress and backwardness had critical consequences on the domestic scene. It was used to justify the existence of a 'natural' hierarchy at home; a belief in a 'natural' hierarchy that was then transported to the far reaches of the empire. Shula Marks, for example, contends that the 'images' middle- and upper-class Englishmen commonly held of these 'other' in the empire 'were not a million miles away from their images of the working class, women and children in Britain' (Marks, 1990, p115). (This can be seen partly by looking at the nature of much of the popular satire at the time – where 'westernized natives,' 'uppity workers'

and ‘women who demanded the vote’ were treated in a similarly harsh manner (Porter, 2004, p230).) Anne McClintock argues a similar point to Marks, invoking what she refers to as ‘[t]he family trope.’ As nineteenth-century Britain viewed woman’s subordination to man and child’s to adult as ‘a natural fact,’ then ‘the family’ was as useful image to summon when referring to other ‘natural’ hierarchies – ‘the ‘national family,’ the global ‘family of nations,’ the colony as a ‘family of black children ruled over by a white father’ (McClintock, 1997, p91). In her writing on gender, race and nationalism, McClintock adds that Britain’s ‘emerging national narrative’ at this time gendered time itself by ‘figuring women (like the colonized and the working class) as inherently atavistic – the conservative repository of the national archaic.’ And this was in direct contrast to men who, far from existing ‘in a permanently anterior time in a modern nation,’ were seen ‘to embody the forward-thrusting agency of national progress’ (McClintock, 1997, p93). However, increasing challenges to traditional notions of, and roles of, women taking place at the end of the Victorian era served to threaten the validity of this family trope and, therefore, contemporary understandings of nation and empire too.

One vital reason why changes to traditional notions of womanhood were regarded as such a serious threat to empire was that justification of Britain’s imperial mission, its ‘civilising mission,’ depended on the concept of the family remaining stable in the ‘Mother Country.’ As Bradley Deane argues in his study of ‘Lost World’ fiction, a popular literary genre at the end of the nineteenth century, what was popularly viewed as a civilising duty or responsibility ‘depended on exporting British domesticity, transplanting and then reproducing gender codes associated with the middle-class family’ (Deane, 2008, p209). The British man’s ‘mastery’ of the colonies was founded on his ‘mastery’ of his household, as well as his ‘impulses,’ (Deane, 2008, p209) and, again, this ‘mastery’ depended on ‘the prior naturalizing of the social subordination of women and children within the domestic sphere’ (McClintock, 1997, p91). Social and political agitation by women on the domestic front threatened this ‘mastery’ at home and on the peripheries.

This is not to imply that changes to Victorian gender ideals were seen as the only threat to empire, or even that the imperial mission was unambiguously accepted by all in Britain. Uncertainty and confusion about the empire was increasing among the ‘ordinary’ people at ‘home’ in the final decades of the nineteenth century (Porter, 2004, p252). In many ways, this sway in public opinion was brought about by a number of much publicised defeats on the part of the British imperialists (at the hands of the Afghans, Zulus, Boers and Sudanese, for example). Ironically, it was also prompted by Britain’s imperial successes. Such rapid expansion in the later decades of the nineteenth century left England, more precisely London, ‘in control of vast new territories’ (Deane, 2008, p213) and therefore, vast new responsibilities and costs (Jusová, 2005, p4). Public doubt about Britain’s motives for fighting for and acquiring such huge territories (for example, was the intention to bring civilisation to others, to open up new trade routes, to grow more prestigious than European rivals, or simply to protect the territories that Britain already held?) also fed this increasing level of ambivalence – what Deane terms an ‘ideological fog’ that permeated late Victorian society (Deane, 2008, p213).¹

Public doubt, unease and disagreement about empire, then, were firmly intertwined with those about gender, forming part of the same ‘ideological fog.’ Both related to increasing late nineteenth-century anxiety about shifting notions of race, ‘progress’ and ‘civilisation,’ particularly what Deane has termed ‘the apparent degeneracy of an England that had grown decadently over-civilised’ (Deane, 2008, p213). What Deane also refers to as ‘the bogey of the hen-pecked, lower middle-class clerk,’ as well as the emergence of what was often looked on as the ‘manly’ New Woman, served to feed or ‘fuel’ these anxieties (Deane, 2008, p213 and Jusová, 2005, p1). The existence of these well known gender stereotypes seemed to point to a domestic manhood that was growing more ‘feminized,’ particularly in contrast to the masculine, physical world of the frontier (Deane,

¹ Deane argues that the popularity of ‘Lost World’ Novels, those novels that explored forgotten cities, empires or civilisations, and the ambiguous relationship between the modern adventurer and the ‘primitive’ man, between the ‘barbarian’ and the civilised, reveals the existence of ‘a significant uncertainty about late Victorian imperialist ambitions and their relationship to “barbarism”’ (Deane, 2008, p205).

2008, p213), and a womanhood that was under threat from the unwomanly woman.² Indeed, Porter argues that this combined apprehension about gender and empire manifested itself in a very ‘real,’ very tangible way in that it may well have been one of the main reasons for the aggressive persecution of Oscar Wilde in the 1890s.

Wilde’s case exposed a fear ‘of the effect the example of his lifestyle might have had on the young manhood that Britain depended on to defend her place in the sun.’ (He also adds, ironically, that ‘[p]resumably [Wilde’s] persecutors were unaware of the homosexual propensities of some of their imperial heroes’ [Porter, 2004, p250].) This condemnation of gender reversals or gender ambiguity was certainly given force in the bestselling novels of Marie Corelli, arguably the most popular English novelist living at the end of the nineteenth century, and a writer that I will come to soon. Of course, ambiguity about gender was not the only factor contributing to growing fears about racial degeneration, this anxiety was also fuelled by increased contact with ‘presumably inferior races overseas’ brought about by the expanding empire (Jusová, 2005, p3), but it was a significant concern and one that was much publicised in the popular press and in late Victorian periodicals.

Indeed, the popular press and contemporary periodicals ran articles discussing gender idealisation throughout much of the Victorian era, not simply at the end. Overwhelmingly, middle-class Victorian women were held up as guardians of the nation’s and the empire’s moral health, and therefore as fundamental preservers of British character and identity. As such they were charged with ‘ruling’ the domestic sphere, a realm supposedly untainted by the rigors and dangers of the outside or public world. The family home came to symbolise a haven or a sanctuary for the husband, away from the rationalistic, abstract and impersonal market place. The Englishman was exposed, as his social role and nature allowed him, to the cruel harshness of the competitive world of business. The natural role of the English woman, on the other hand, was to be confined largely to that of wife and mother safe within the sanctuary of the home. However, the fact that England found itself on the cusp of major social, moral and economic change at the end of the nineteenth century, change that

² Sally Ledger supports this assertion: ‘Whilst the New Woman was perceived as a direct threat to classic Victorian definitions of femininity, the decadent and the dandy undermined the Victorians’ valorization of a robust, muscular brand of British masculinity deemed to be crucial to the maintenance of the British Empire’ (Ledger, 1995, p22).

affected the accepted roles of middle-class women, meant that it became even more difficult to promote this Victorian gender ideal. From these changes, the much derided figure of the Late Victorian and Edwardian 'New Woman' emerged. How important was she, and the changes she exemplified, to the British imperial mission?

Answering this question involves looking at the often complex relationship existing between gender and empire. In his book, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists*, Porter addresses aspects of this relationship when he asks whether or not women living in England were directly affected, or significantly affected, by the existence of the empire. Noting that it is extremely difficult to separate the influences of empire from other trends happening at the time, he does draw attention to the increasing appearance of works of fiction that feature 'feisty' or 'athletic' girls and women, a more 'masculinized' portrayal of women, particularly works written by writers who had had imperial experience (John Buchan and Flora Annie Steel, for example). At the same time, he points out that the domestic front was experiencing a similar shift, in the form of the 'new woman,' who, although more radical than her 'feisty' or 'athletic' sisters, was pushing notions about womanhood in a similar direction (Porter, 2004, p291). This raises the question, one which Porter believes cannot be answered with any empirical certainty, of whether or not experiences of empire had the effect of 'masculinizing' the home front (a theory that would surely please those who considered domestic manhood to be increasingly 'feminized' but not those who were concerned about the harmful effects of 'manly' women on womanhood).

Conversely, did challenges to femininity at home have a negative effect on the empire? Were the vitriolic attacks by the English popular press on the Late Victorian and Edwardian New Woman, for example, indicative of a move to quash this 'masculinizing' of women and the domestic society, and of a desire to retain the influence of the feminine in the outer reaches of the empire (a feminine influence or presence that many imperialists viewed as being beneficial to colonialism)? Perhaps negative (public or 'official') reactions to the demands and desires of turn-of-the-century women, more particularly those given the threatening label of New

Women, were related to a move to enforce a common notion of British identity, not altogether unrelated to the motivations of such moves in many colonial or 'frontier' societies.

This paper now turns to this New Woman. It looks to popular literature, particularly in the era that gave birth to the modern Bestseller, to provide an insight into how the English nation, or more specifically the growing and largely middle-class English reading public, were presented with the threat to popular notions of femininity, and therefore to notions of national and imperial character, that was embodied in the figure of the New Woman, whether the common one-dimensional New Woman caricature promoted by the press or the more everyday 'reality' of frustrated 'new' women.

The British 'New Woman'

The New Woman was, and still is, commonly used to signify the extent of the shifts that turn-of-the-century society was experiencing regarding notions of femininity. Throughout nineteenth-century England there had been so-called 'new' women – women striving for greater emancipation for their sex. What makes the 'New Woman' of the 1890s such a different phenomenon is the nature and the extent of the social change which necessitated and accompanied her emergence, and the fervour of the controversy and discussion resulting from that emergence.³ According to at least one contemporary author, the New Woman was the most notorious of late nineteenth-century journalism's 'new' phenomena:

more discussed, debated, newspaper paragraphed, caricatured, howled down and denied,
or acknowledged and approved, as the case may be, than any of them [the 'new'

³ It is widely accepted that the term 'New Woman' was first coined in 1894 by the novelist Sarah Grand, pseudonym of Frances Elizabeth Belleuden Clarke, author of *The Heavenly Twins*, 1893. Grand's article entitled 'The New Aspect of the Woman Question,' in which she uses the term 'New Woman,' was published in 1894, in the *North American Review*. (Rubinstein, 1986, pp15-16) See also Caine, 1992, p252. For an extensive discussion of Grand and the New Woman novel see Mangum, 2001.

phenomena], we have the new woman (Morgan-Dockrell, 1896, in Gardiner, 1993, p16).

Yet, so strong was her presence as a literary image in the journalism of the day that some commentators questioned the reality of her existence (for example, Morgan-Dockrell, 1896, in Gardiner, 1993, p16). And, of course, this level of keen fictional interest reflected contemporary social concern. The fact, for example, that someone needed to coin such a term, and that this term caught on so effectively, was the ‘result of a growing sense that there were changes in the behaviour, the activities, even the nature of women which needed to be articulated’ (Caine, 1992, p252).

As the historian Barbara Caine argues, the social changes taking place in England leading up to the last decade of the century that rendered the position of many women susceptible to change (increasing opportunities for secondary and tertiary education and middle-class female employment, for example⁴), were small-scale social changes. However, they combined to allow and assist the rise of the New Woman by all contributing to the build-up of a particular image of womanhood in late nineteenth-century Britain that was very different from that of their earlier Victorian counterparts (Caine, 1992, p249).⁵ This is not to imply that this image, whether of womanhood in general or of the New Woman in particular, is either clear or cohesive. The New Woman, for example, cannot be reduced to one clear image of womanhood with one clear set of characteristics.⁶ Rather, she

⁴ For information about the nature of these changes see, for example, Rubinstein, 1986, pp12, 69-93 and Banks, 1981, p181.

⁵ The New Woman is a term which, Rubinstein believes, denotes a growing unorganised leaderless movement which almost succeeds in turning Victorian values upside down. In any event, it is a ‘movement’ which helped to advance the views of English society concerning women (Rubinstein, 1986, p20). The advancement of feminist discourse proves, to some degree, the positive effect of the New Woman phenomenon on the ideas society held regarding female emancipation. By the turn of the century, and in contrast to the mid-Victorian period, feminist circles more openly discussed more controversial topics – topics their Victorian counterparts sometimes stayed away from, such as sexual autonomy for women in marriage, sexual pleasure, venereal diseases and prostitution and to some extent birth control, abortion and divorce.

⁶ Sally Mitchell discusses the array of definitions that could be applied to the term New Woman (Mitchell, 1999). As does Beamont, 2007, pp217, 221: ‘It was the result, on the one hand, of women’s new sense of social and intellectual confidence; and, on the other, of the partial loss of faith in a suffrage movement based on the collaborative efforts of men and women within the sphere of parliamentary politics.’ At this time the feminist movement was fragmented. ‘Women’s political demands or dreams differed widely, ranging easily across the family, the workplace and the public sphere. Thus the term ‘New Woman’ covered independent women of all kinds, from suffragists to cyclists to socialists.’ However, Amy Cruse paints a picture of the New Woman which is highly unified. Her set of qualifying specifications that the New Woman had to measure up to are extremely rigid, leaving little or no room for the inevitable individuality and diversity that any collection of people displays (Cruse, 1962[1935], p338).

is typically represented by a collage of ideas – all with at least one thing in common – the desire for greater female emancipation than her present society granted her. The New Woman of the 1890s, from fiction to actuality, operated across a broad spectrum of ideas and experiences.

By the end of the nineteenth century, as the number of women affected by changing social conditions grew, the label New Woman and all that it stood for became applicable less to the radical few, and more to the larger band of women who believed that their sex needed or desired greater social and personal freedom. Hugh Stutfield, in his *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* article 'The Psychology of Feminism' in 1897, agreed with this. To him the New Woman meant 'simply the woman of today striving to shake off old shackles,' anything from the existence of a sexual double standard and the inferior legal position of the wife, to the lower wages of female workers and the lack of adequate education opportunities for women (Stutfield in Rubinstein, 1986, p20).

This definition of the 'new' woman or New Woman was not simply pertinent to women in England, but rather to women in the British colonies as well. To take a Canadian example, Francoise Le Jeune's examination of the effects of the American New Woman on women living in the small colony of Vancouver Island, British Columbia, in the decades around 1900, reveals that women there considered themselves to be 'new women,' as opposed to the more radical New Woman (Le Jeune, 2004). In an article entitled 'A Plea for the New Woman' in *The Daily Colonist* on 28th May 1895 (unsigned, but acknowledged to have been written by a young local female journalist), 'In a calm tone the author affirms that women in British Columbia were now 'new women,' but not quite New Women yet, and that they were accepted as such by society' (Le Jeune, 2004, p87). The tone of the article had nothing in common with the often more radical or aggressive assertions made on the part of the more radical 'revoltees' writing for some of the New York periodicals. Indeed, Le Jeune adds that the article was actually more of a statement of fact, rather than a 'plea' as suggested by the title (Le Jeune, 2004, p87). In British Columbia in 1895, Le Jeune argues, and similar to Stutfield's comments back in the

‘motherland,’ the term New Woman meant ‘Modern Woman’ – a woman actively seeking ‘recognition of her rights as an individual’ – it was a term that denoted someone more advanced than the ‘modern girl.’

(Interestingly, the 21 year old British Columbian New Woman managed to attain the right to vote in 1917, while her 21 year old British counterpart only did so in 1929 [1918 for women over 30].)

Considerable work has been conducted recently regarding the New Woman. This scholarship has taken the study of the New Woman into frontier and colonial societies – following her ‘into the places and politics of empire’ (Mangum, 2007, p1) – as we have seen from Le Jeune’s work above. I have already mentioned the view that middle-class women were deemed responsible for the moral health of the nation and empire. However, their more obvious responsibility, in terms of Britain’s imperial ambitions, was that of producing future generations to fight for and maintain British territorial gain. In reference to this, New Woman scholar, Ann Heilmann, discussing Sutton-Rampspeck (2004), writes of ‘the housekeeping metaphor’ – a metaphor that a range of politically diverse figures (from Mrs Humphry Ward to Sarah Grand to Charlotte Perkins Gilman) invoked – which facilitated the revalidation of ‘women’s supposedly private and domestic tasks as ‘responsibilities with enormous public impact’ which, when ‘applied to cultural and socio-political agency, served the purpose of “cleaning up” society, improving the human race through “public motherhood”’ (Heilmann, 2005, p35). (Indeed, Porter writes that this increased attention on motherhood could be seen as a benefit for women of the British imperial mission in that it placed more value on their role as mothers. The reverse side of this, of course, is that in the imperial quest women may be seen simply as reproducers or ‘wombs’ [Porter, 2004, p288].)

Women, then, who challenged the roles traditionally assigned to them, such as that of motherhood, or whose moral choices rendered them less ‘fit’ or ideal in the eyes of the more conservative elements of society, were seen to threaten the future of the empire, and castigated for ‘undermining the long-term interests of the

English nation' and empire (Jusová, 2005, p4). As Sally Ledger maintains, if Oscar Wilde was represented as a danger to British masculinity (as Porter, among others, argues that he was), then

the New Woman was also frequently presented as a danger to the continuance of the 'race,' in the guise of a potential mother of physically weak and mentally feeble children. The crisis in gender definitions was accompanied by – and inextricably linked with – a crisis within the politics of empire (Ledger, 1995, p31).

The irony here, however, is that the fictional New Woman placed great emphasis on finding the most suitable partner, physically and mentally, for reproductive purposes. Moreover, as Ledger again points out, most middle-class feminists during this era championed this eugenic approach to race and were strongly in favour of 'purity' and motherhood (Ledger, 1995, p32). Indeed, in this way at least, New Women were 'complicit with residual elements of the dominant Victorian ideologies concerning gender roles, sexuality, "race," empire and social class' (Ledger, 1995, p41 and Heilmann, 2005, p35).

Matthew Beaumont delivers an interesting commentary on this connection between the New Woman and empire. He refers to the 'Appeal against Female Suffrage' which was published in the *Nineteenth Century* in June 1889 and which was signed by 104 'ladies' (Beaumont, 1998, p225). In response to this publication, a journalist and popular novelist of the time, Elizabeth Corbett, wrote a fable entitled *New Amazonia: A Forecast of the Future* – a 'feminist utopia' set in the year 2472 – in which 'odd' women from England colonise Ireland which then becomes known as New Amazonia, a semi-autonomous state from Britain. This utopian state is run along eugenic notions in that partners are chosen 'rationally' for reproduction and, in support of Malthusian notions, all 'malformed' children are 'destroyed' (Beaumont, 1998, pp227-8). Along similar lines to Ledger's point about the New Woman's complicity with some elements of mainstream Victorian class and race ideologies, Beaumont asserts that 'Corbett's creative fantasy of a realm of freedom for women is built on a simplistically essentialist as well as eugenicist conception of racial and sexual identities' (Beaumont, 1998, p228).

In another interesting example of the public attempt to align imperial ambitions and gender constructions in the late nineteenth century, the popular woman's sixpenny monthly magazine, *Woman at Home* (1893-1920), ran a series of articles on the royal family between 1895 and 1896. In her study of domesticity and desire in popular nineteenth- and early twentieth-century magazines, Margaret Beetham argues that *Woman at Home* used the biographical narrative as a tool for reinventing both the ruling female monarch and the middle-class domestic woman (Beetham, 1996, pp164-5). Victoria's image was continually negotiated to include her role as working Queen and Empress as well as the more domesticated portrayal of her as mother and widow. That her family always came before her public duties was affirmed in the magazine. And the fact that she was the mother of a large number of children herself, Beetham asserts, 'gave force to the restatement in an imperial context of the cliché that she was a mother to her people' (Beetham, 1996, p164). Moreover, not only was the Queen reinvented as a domestic woman, but royalty was also recreated as 'a family on the throne' (Beetham, 1996, p164). This notion of the family on the throne went some way towards bridging her widely divergent dual roles in the eyes of the general public and, therefore, helped to alleviate some of the tension caused by the enormous discrepancies existing between these responsibilities.

The New Woman and the British Empire in Novels by Marie Corelli

So, how was the New Woman packaged for the rapidly growing general reading public, the remarkable growth of which facilitated the emergence of the modern Bestseller? Within these phenomenally popular novels, was the New Woman presented as a danger to the future of the nation and the empire? Marie Corelli's novels offer a superb insight into the collective mentality of this burgeoning audience and therefore are a good starting point for this foray. Corelli's sensationalist bestselling novels employ a one-dimensional caricature of the New Woman as an embodiment of all that is wrong with the changing social position of women. Frequent allusions to this concept of womanhood, without accompanying explanation, makes it clear that Corelli's

audience was expected to be aware of the New Woman's presence and of all that she implied. Moreover, although Corelli's novels do not always directly refer to the empire, and it is argued that many of the most well-known writers and artists of the period likewise did not touch on issues of empire directly (Porter, 2004, p248), her works do juxtapose 'civilisation' and 'barbarism,' and explicitly link 'barbarism' with the sexual decadence and spiritual decay of the stereotypical New Woman. The New Woman was seen to oppose the more traditional and civilised values of the Victorian period and as such her ambitions and ideas were portrayed as a profound danger to the continuance of that civilisation – at home and abroad.

Corelli tries to make some semblance of sense out of this previously mentioned 'ideological fog.' She does so with a straightforward didactic approach to fiction. The New Woman is a threat to the nation and the Empire, to the whole notion of civilisation, and should therefore be ridiculed. However, Corelli is a part of the very 'ideological fog' of which she is attempting to make sense. Consequently, her 'messages' about gender and Empire are mixed, confused. Her attitude to the New Woman and to the radical feminists that she is supposed to represent is ambiguous, even contradictory. She bitterly attacks the New Woman for her manly or coarse, sexual and irreligious traits, many of which contrast with the traits that characterise mainstream feminism at the time. Simultaneously, her novels actively promote many of these New Woman aims, the desire for recognition of female intellect and a higher calling in life than that of housekeeper, for example. Moreover, a number of the characteristics of this controversial figure that she condemns as damaging to the Empire actually work in the New Woman's favour in the peripheries of that Empire. Here I am thinking specifically of a robust physique and an unsentimental or rational approach to motherhood.

Born in London in 1855, Corelli (pseudonym for Mary Mackay) began writing in 1885. In this time she achieved an astounding degree of popularity. This popularity had begun to wane in the years leading up to the First World War, although she still continued to publish fiction, and a growing volume of non-fiction, up until her death in 1924.

According to one of her biographers, Brian Masters, Corelli reigned as the bestselling writer in the world for almost thirty years, during which time at least thirty of the novels she published were ‘world best-sellers’ (Masters 1978, pp3,6). It is agreed generally that she broke all publishing records by selling an average of 100,000 copies of her books per year (Federico, 2000, p2 and Masters, 1978, p6). Indeed, as the nineteenth century drew to a close, it is reported that her yearly sales averaged 170,000 copies (Federico, 2000, p2). This commercial success went unrivalled during her era.⁷ John Lucas reaffirms the phenomenon of Corelli’s consistent bestselling status with the remark that her sales make all others, even those of enormously popular writers such as Ouida and Elinor Glyn, ‘pale into insignificance’ (Lucas, 1979, p283). Moreover, her influence was not restricted to England’s borders. Her books had widespread international appeal, including in England’s colonies.

Thelma (1887), Corelli’s third novel, Eileen Bigland tells us, was translated into ‘German, Dutch, Spanish, Italian, Persian and Hindustani’ (Bigland, 1953, p149). In 1893, her novel, *Barabbas*, outsold all previous Corelli novels (showing that her popularity continued to rise through the 1880s and 1890s) and went into seven editions in just seven months; the single-volume edition sold 10,000 copies in one week (Federico, 2000, p7). Her 1895 novel, *The Sorrows of Satan*, considered by many to be one of the first ever modern bestsellers, sold more copies initially than any previous English novel (even though Corelli decided not to send it out for review). By the time of Corelli’s death in 1924, *The Sorrows of Satan* was in its sixtieth edition and had been translated into almost every European language. It had also been adapted for both stage and film.⁸ A

⁷ Even Corelli’s closest competing novelists, although they sold extremely well, did not touch her success. Hall Caine, who, at the height of his career, sold 45,000 copies per year, was Corelli’s closest rival. He was followed by the third most popular author of the time, Mrs. Humphrey Ward, who, in her best years, averaged about 35,000 copies, and then by H. G. Wells, who at the peak of his career sold approximately 15,000 novels annually (McDowell, 1978, p84.) Indeed, McAleer points out that Corelli remained the highest selling female writer on the publishing firm Methuen’s books until her death in 1924 (McAleer, 1999, p14).

⁸ Federico claims that the novel sold 20,000 copies in one week and 50,000 in 7 weeks. (The film adaptations that she refers to were made in Britain in 1917 by G. B. Samuelson Productions and later in USA by D. W. Griffith in 1926.) (Federico, 2000, pp7, 61). According to Peter Keating, introducing the 1996 Oxford Fiction edition of *The Sorrows of Satan*, the sales of this novel (for which he

number of years later, in 1900, *The Master-Christian* reached what Annette Federico calls ‘astonishing heights of fame’ by selling 160,000 copies in two years.⁸ Corelli’s popularity continued into the twentieth century. In 1906, for example, her new novel, *The Treasure of Heaven: A Romance of Riches* achieved a first-day sales record of 100,000 copies; and even in 1909, when her popularity was beginning to decline, her publishers sold 130,000 copies of her new book and offered her an advance of £9,500 for the next (Federico, 2000, pp2, 38 and Lucas, 1979, p283). Her books were popular in America where Corelli received frequent mentioning – whether about her writing or her celebrity – in many of the more prominent newspapers, including the *New York Times* and *New York Herald* (for examples see Bigland, 1953, p141). Advertisements for her books, notes about her movements in society and some of her shorter works of fiction were even to be found in *The Worker*, a socialist newspaper in Sydney, Australia.⁹

By contrast, and despite her reputation among the general reading public being consistently high, Corelli’s relationship with contemporary literary critics was certainly less than ideal. As Sir Algernon Methuen (founder of the Methuen publishing house) commented on reviews of Corelli’s latest book, *Barabbas* in 1893:

Few books in late years have received such savage and merciless treatment from the critics as Miss Corelli’s latest romance.... Meanwhile the public, indifferent to the voice of the critic, and to charges of blasphemy, crowds to the sale (Duffy, 1989, p8).

It is difficult to access the class and gender make-up of Corelli’s vast reading public – of those readers continually crowding to the sale. Nevertheless, Federico makes an attempt to do so. She claims that Corelli’s name was sometimes used to suggest the ‘taste and intelligence’ of the kind of person who read her books.¹⁰ She adds, however, that this was difficult to do considering that Corelli had no consistent reader base (Federico,

did not have precise figures) must have been extremely high for this period. ‘As a rough indication of the book’s popularity, it went through thirty-seven editions in its first three years.’ (Keating, 1996, pxviii). See also Masters, 1978, p3 and McDowell, 1978, p84.

⁹ For example, see *The Worker*, 16 March 1901, p7; 20 December 1902, ‘Society Pages’; and, 31 January 1907, p17.

¹⁰ A casual reference to Corelli’s novels in E. M. Forster’s *Howard’s End* (Forster, 1995, pp54-55) provides one example of this. Referring to the culturally elitist, Margaret, Leonard Bast comments: ‘For all her cleverness and culture, she was probably one of those soulless, atheistical women who have been so shown up by Miss Corelli.’ Doubtless, Bast’s instinctive or careless reliance on Corelli’s wisdom and insight would have been understood by Forster’s audience to have been revealing of his lower social origins and indicative of the lower level of his literary tastes, as well as, of course, being evidence of the durability of Corelli’s widespread popularity.

2000, p64). Still, Federico's general belief is that, although she often spoke directly to Britain's middle classes, her readers existed across all class boundaries – that she appealed to 'all classes, to gentlewomen, shopkeepers, artists, and intellectuals' (Federico, 2000, pp58, 185). In specific reference to *The Sorrows of Satan*, for example, she argues that the audience was both wide and varied, the novel being read by everyone from 'noblemen to scullery maids' (Federico, 2000, p7). Much referred to in recent scholarship are the more exceptional examples of numerous prominent clergymen and male public figures, such as Gladstone and Tennyson, who were familiar with her novels. As were numerous international figures: the Princess of Schleswig-Holstein; Princess Elizabeth of Bavaria told Corelli that she loved *Ardat* (1889); and, the Grand Duke of Russia expressed his admiration for her work (Bigland, 1953, p138). On a less grand but equally international scale, Corelli received letters from soldiers fighting in the Boer War expressing admiration for her writing – a direct connection between her fiction and the fight for the Empire! A New Zealand trooper came across a copy of *The Soul Of Lilith* (1892) that someone had left behind and tore out each page as he read it to pass on to the next soldier waiting to read it. And another soldier wrote saying that he had enjoyed reading *The Sorrows of Satan*, as had many of the other men. Indeed, he added that knowledge of her work was not restricted to those fighting on behalf of the British Empire, for he found a couple of pages from her book, *The Murder of Delicia* (1896), in an abandoned Boer trench (which he then posted to Corelli) (Bigland, 1953, pp189-190). Still, apart from these more public instances, there is little evidence enabling historians to access the mass of men or women who read her works.

Corelli herself claimed that her fiction was intended to provide 'a relief from the horrible "realities" of life that sicken and weary one's soul' (Masters 1978, p30). War was certainly one of these 'realities,' but, no doubt, so too was the New Woman. Corelli's many novels wrestled with what numerous contemporary social commentators perceived to be the spiritual and moral degradation of their modern society, their modern world, and then they offered overwhelming spiritual espousals, and a reassuring escape into alternative worlds (Kowalczyk, 1974, p850 and Masters, 1978, p80). Certainly, her form of relief was much sought after. In fact,

and especially after Queen Victoria sent for copies of all Corelli's books, she was regarded by many of her English readers to be 'in some way the literary counterpart of their own dear Queen' (Masters 1978, p107), their empire's 'Empress.' Through the eyes of her vast and loyal audience she became the protector of moral and spiritual hope, and of traditional ideals. She fulfilled her role as the self-appointed 'guardian of the public conscience' (Masters 1978, p10).

This is not to say that Corelli's novels railed against the New Woman and the threat that she represented to nation and empire without any recourse to entertainment. On the contrary, her desire to portray the more sensational and sinful dimensions of life was in no way eclipsed by her continual espousals of spiritual and traditional moral ideals. In specific reference to *The Sorrows of Satan*, Maureen Duffy maintains that, even though Corelli railed against the morally dubious and controversial New Woman figure, she 'nevertheless raised the emotional temperature to a lurid pitch of unsatisfied and therefore constantly itching desire which is simply that lust she so often condemns' (Duffy, 1989, p10). It is certainly likely, therefore, that Corelli was as known for her portrayals of decadence as for her condemnation of this decadence. It then follows that these very opposing images together helped to form the basis of her widespread popularity. As Federico points out, if Corelli was the 'idol of suburbia' (as she argues she is), she wrote for suburbanites who not only wanted her unique form of moral reassurance, but also desired a look at an immoral world – they sought both 'sensationalism and safety' (Federico, 2000, p68). They sought both a scandalous story embodying a threat to the character of the British Empire, in the form of a sensationally deviant New Woman, as well as a comforting sense of moral reassurance that that very empire was safe.

As mentioned earlier, Corelli's novels are often contradictory, or at least highly ambiguous, about the place of women on the domestic front. She makes frequent derogatory references to the stereotype of the New Woman, to the coldly intellectual, Girton educated, 'Christ-scorning,' sexually knowledgeable, ugly, short-haired and bespectacled bicycle-riding and tennis-playing female (see Corelli, 1912 [1896], *The Mighty Atom*,

pp17, 104; Corelli, 1895, *The Sorrows of Satan*, pp81, 371-372, 405). But she also uses this stereotype as something of a measuring stick against which to test the limits of acceptable female behaviour. That is to say, Corelli often allows the thoughts and actions of her heroines to extend past the limitations normally set in place by Victorian idealism, particularly as these relate to their intellectual capabilities and their career goals, provided that she deems these capabilities and goals to be appropriate according to her notion of femininity. She allows their thoughts and attitudes to sometimes creep dangerously close to boundaries challenged by the New Woman, only then to completely withdraw back into a world of nostalgic romance, one safely directed by a solidly mid-Victorian sense of morality. Janet Galligani Casey argues that it was precisely this ambiguous or contradictory approach to feminism that contributed towards her extreme popularity. At a time when debates about the 'woman question' and the New Woman were rife, Corelli gave her public exactly what they wanted – what Casey deems 'the illusion of a feminist spirit couched in a fundamentally conventional Victorian ideology' (Casey, 1992, p166).

As for the place of women in relation to the empire, Corelli is unyielding in her belief that women are responsible for protecting and promoting its Christian character. Although her fiction is rarely bound by any sense of a geographical reality, much of the plot taking place in transcendental or 'other worldly' dimensions or in vague 'far away' places, it is clear that women are expected to use their feminine capacity for good, as well as their unassuming intelligence, to bring Christianity, and therefore 'civilisation,' to all corners of the world. They are expected to be modest and unselfish in carrying out this noble role. Corelli takes this combination of 'civilising mission' and 'woman's mission' quite literally. That is to say, women are expected to use their talents and skills and innate goodness to spread Christian morality, not simply by exerting a subtle moral influence on those immediately around them, but by exporting their sense of morality in a very 'real,' very tangible way, to people in all corners of the world. In some instances this involves physically accompanying a husband, being his 'help-meet,' as he spreads spiritual 'truth' through public lectures (Corelli, *The Master-Christian*, p343). In others it means writing novels and painting pictures that indisputably contain a profound

moral message and that will be read by, and therefore influence, people in all walks of life, all around the world (like Angela Sovrani in *The Master-Christian* and Mavis Clare in *The Sorrows of Satan*).

Although Corelli asserts that the New Woman, by agitating for change on the home front, threatens worldwide civilisation, she does not pull back from advocating some of the more prominent aspects of this controversial figure. The most important of these is intellectual and independent thought. In promoting this characteristic Corelli supports the New Woman's claim that women need a higher, nobler pursuit in life than that which sees them restricted to the domestic hearth. Corelli does not say that women should venture into the manly world of the newspaper or post office where their femininity risks being sullied, as some New Women do, but there are other more suitable ways of exercising female intellect and her heroines actively perform those roles.

Playing the devil's advocate in *The Sorrows of Satan*, Corelli asks if women 'should be kept in their places as men's drudges or toys - as wives, mothers, nurses, cooks, menders of socks and shirts, and housekeepers generally'? (Corelli, 1895, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p173). In *The Master-Christian*, she reiterates this challenge:

For why should a woman think? Why should a woman dare to be a genius? It seemed very strange! How much more natural for her to marry some decent man of established position and be content with babies and plain needlework! (Corelli, 1900, *The Master-Christian*, p587).

Corelli's use of irony is not subtle – its point is clear. Angela Sovrani (*The Master-Christian*'s successful, spiritual artist) and Mavis Clare (the indisputably feminine novelist in *The Sorrows of Satan*), both employed in suitably feminine roles, are far to be preferred, far more admired, than the multitude of women who spend their lives fulfilling the typical roles of wife and mother – and who are rarely presented with the opportunity of exercising their intellectual capabilities.

Corelli further contends that a husband who displays a low opinion of his wife's intellect 'coarsens and degrades her to a level from which it is impossible to rise!' (Corelli, 1911, *The Life Everlasting*, p409). The married woman brought to such a low point becomes 'a mere domestic drudge or machine, with no higher aims than are contained in the general ordering of household business' (Corelli, 1911, *The Life Everlasting*, p409). Indeed, and very much in line with mainstream feminism, Corelli asserts that this very degradation of female intellect, this act of relegating women to a lower station in life, threatens the future of the Empire. The imperial mission depends on recognition of women's innate moral superiority and implicit in this in her novels is the fact that the proper exercising of this higher morality is dependent on the ability to think intellectually and independently.

However, Corelli is in no doubt about the damaging influence of another of the traits that she attributes to New Women, that of atheism. To carry out the imperial mission, women need to possess Christian faith. The character of the Empire is 'Christian.' Christian faith is also an essential characteristic of Corelli's notion of true womanhood. Women as moral protectors of the nation and empire, as guardians of the civilising 'mission,' threaten civilisation and progress if they lose or abandon religious faith. In support of this assertion Corelli, again, calls on the stereotype of the New Woman, this time in order to demonstrate the unwomanly offensiveness of disbelieving women. For example, through the aristocratic eyes of the carousing Sir Charles Lascelles (*The Mighty Atom*), she ridicules the 'ugly 'advanced' young women who have brought their bicycles [to a castle he is visiting] and go tearing about the country all day' (Corelli, 1896, *The Mighty Atom*, p17). No doubt these young women have close connections with the unnamed woman Corelli refers to as a 'Christ-scorning [Girton educated] female, with short hair and spectacles' who was now 'eminently fitted to become the mother of a brood of atheists' (Corelli, 1896, *The Mighty Atom*, p104). Corelli equates the growing number of secondary and tertiary educational opportunities for women with what she perceives to be a rising number of female sceptics. Conveniently ignoring the fact that the majority of the period's moderate feminists based much

of their philosophy in Christianity, Corelli indignantly states that female advancement should not be sought to the detriment of religion:

Women especially, who, but for Christianity, would still be in the low place of bondage and humiliation formerly assigned to them in the barbaric periods, are most of all to be reproached for their wicked and wanton attacks upon their great Emancipator, who pitied and pardoned their weaknesses as they had never been pitied or pardoned before (Corelli, 1896, *The Mighty Atom*, p104).

The references to both the responsibilities of motherhood and to the fear of returning to the ‘barbaric periods,’ contained together in this page of Corelli’s *The Mighty Atom*, are clearly connected. The threat to the moral, and physical, character of the Empire is implicit.

Corelli’s approach to the external or physical aspects of the New Woman is also significant, as indeed it is in most New Woman discussions. Apart from physical unattractiveness, New Women are too manly in appearance to fulfil Corelli’s criteria for true womanhood. This threatens sexual difference, a notion on which the civilising mission is dependent. The general belief was that the ‘Mother Country’ would transport their understanding of Victorian culture to their colonies; implicit in this notion of culture was the belief that each gender was ascribed a separate sphere. New Woman authors, for example, endangered the naturalness of this sexual difference by infusing their writing with masculine matters (like politics), and their characters with manly traits.

Corelli satirizes these manly traits in her 1889 novella, *My Wonderful Wife*, a work that Federico describes as ‘a humorous send-up of New Women and the marriage question’ (Federico, 2000, p110). Honoria Maggs, the ‘heroine’ of the story is unequivocally a New Woman. She is a physically robust, non-sentimental Amazonian figure who likes to hunt, spend time in the company of ‘the boys,’ eats like a man, has a loud voice that frightens her husband as they are taking their wedding vows, and who, her husband informs us, he would

have kissed ‘but that vile cigar stuck out of her mouth and prevented’ him (Corelli, *Cameos*, pp180, 182, 186, 195 and 199). Again, the humorous depiction of the manly New Woman is hardly subtle but Honoria, despite her husband eventually coming to see her as ‘a sort of hybrid human growth which was neither man nor woman,’ is not presented as an overly or ‘wickedly perverse’ (Federico, 2000, p111) character. Indeed, she is described as a ‘good’ but misguided woman, ridiculous but not dangerous, by those who know her and she is certainly given far more interesting and spirited lines of argument to defend her New Woman views than those afforded to her rather insipid husband who stands for much more traditional values, including a conservative notion of femininity.

Still, Honoria does reject her one child (a baby boy that she claims she cannot cuddle because her manly strength means that she always ends up bruising him), and her continued insistence on acting like a man, of aping his habits (including writing ‘a sporting novel, full of slap-dash vigour and stable slang,’ [Corelli, *Cameos*, p181]), does mean that she rejects the sacred duty of womanhood, which is to ‘save’ the human race. As her husband declares:

When women voluntarily resign their position as the silent monitors and models of grace and purity, down will go all the pillars of society, and we shall scarcely differ in our manners and customs from the nations we call ‘barbaric,’ because as yet they have not adopted Christ’s exalted idea of the value and sanctity of female influence on the higher development of the human race (Corelli, *Cameos*, p232).

Corelli could not have been any clearer, any more unambiguous, about her intrinsic linking of Christianity, woman’s duty, and civilisation. The Empire, then, would only survive if sexual difference continued, and the New Woman jeopardised that directly.

Corelli’s didactic approach to fiction directly mirrors her polemical statements made in pamphlets and public lectures. In her pamphlet, *Woman – or Suffrage?* (published in the first decade of the twentieth century,

albeit later than most of the works discussed here, when the Suffrage question was debated extensively), she continued her warnings about the inextricable link between the potential downfall of English womanhood and that of the British Empire. She attacks the 'loose conduct and coarse speech' of campaigning Suffragists, adding that 'if the mothers of the British race decide to part altogether with the birthright of their simple *womanliness* for a political mess of pottage, then darker days are in store for the nation than can yet be foreseen or imagined' (Corelli, 1907, p3). She follows this with a direct reference to the Empire: 'For with women alone rests the Home, which is the foundation of Empire. When they desert this, their God-appointed centre, the core of the national being, then things are tottering to a fall' (Corelli, 1907, p3). Mothers of the race must maintain order and stability on the domestic front or order on the peripheries will come under threat.

Paradoxically, at the same time that Corelli was writing that New Women were guilty of sullyng English motherhood, New Women writers were advocating a 'health movement' that would ensure that only 'fit' mothers and fathers would reproduce, therefore guaranteeing a healthier, stronger future for the race (Dowie, 1995 [1895], pp112-116). Mérie Muriel Dowie's 1895 New Woman novel, *Gallia*, features a heroine who rejects the man she loves for marriage with another man based on the premise that his physically superior masculine build and health will combine with her strength and health and aid the race by producing strong, 'handsome and well made' children (Dowie, 1895, p113). *Gallia* supports a eugenicist approach to race, going as far as promoting the rationality of hiring surrogate mothers to produce children for women who are physically weak or in some way defective (Dowie, 1895, p113). Dowie, then, was presenting an image of the New Woman who would selflessly sacrifice pleasure and fulfilment for the survival of the race – far from the image of her as an active promoter of racial degeneracy.

What is particularly significant in this discussion about physical appearance and health is that far from being viewed as regressive (and therefore as a danger to the character of the Empire), as it is in Corelli's novels, a robust healthiness in the New Woman living in the wide open, rugged terrain of the 'New World' was seen as

a positive, progressive trait that ensured the perpetuation of the race. The New World was viewed by many as site for the rejuvenation of the race. Cecily Devereux, in her article on Maternal Feminism and New Imperialism, remarks that within white settler colonies there existed the notion that ‘virgin soil’ and a healthy climate brought forth ‘a new and stronger race’ (Devereux, 1999, p179). Certainly the heroine of Catherine Martin’s 1890 New Woman novel, *An Australian Girl*, thinks along these lines. Set for the most part in regional South Australia, this novel follows the story of Stella Courtland, a young woman who proudly asserts her Australianness, as well as the benefits of her keen intellect and her thirst for knowledge. In addition to reading and discussing the works of numerous German philosophers, Stella spends a great deal of time outdoors, riding horses, watching the habits of animals and insects and eating fruit straight from trees and vines (Martin, 1999 [1890], pp72, 74). Although not as phenomenally popular as most of Corelli’s novels, *An Australian Girl* was considered ‘widely read at the time,’ particularly among the ‘circles of the Intelligentsia’ and it did go into three editions within four years (Quoting Jeanne F. Young, 1937, p63, in Allen, 2004, p29).¹¹

Martin’s novel and protagonist are still proponents of sexual difference. In this respect Martin is similar to Corelli. However, she does not feel that she has to portray women as physically ‘delicate’ in the way Corelli does. Physical robustness is a positive attribute here, adding to a woman’s sense of freedom, rather than restraining it. Colonies lack many of the opportunities available to the New Woman in the more established cities of the ‘Old World,’ the freedom to roam unrestrained, then, is something of a compensation for this (Nettleback, ‘Introduction,’ in Martin, 1999 [1890], pxxiii).

Indeed, and although the ‘Mother Country’ still exerted a good deal of influence on the colonies and both domains had aims and ways of thinking in common (displayed, for example, when Stella refers to, and

¹¹ The first edition was published anonymously in London in three volumes; the second was published in London in one volume in 1891; and then the third, in 1894, was published as an Australian edition (Nettlebeck, ‘Introduction,’ in Martin, 1999 [1890], pxii). Margaret Allen quotes the critic Patchett Martin claimed that the book was widely recognized adding the comment that the ‘clever novel is now receiving in the higher social and literary circles of London’ (Patchett Martin, 1891, p100, quoted in Allen, 2004, p29).

indeed subscribes to the mission of the ‘heroic’ and ‘ardent’ Mr Ferrier who is ‘so enthusiastic about the conversion of the aborigines,’ a race that she sees as having a ‘complex social etiquette’ while living in a ‘very primitive stage of savagedom’ [Martin, 1890, pp74, 166]), in many ways the crowded cities of the Old World are associated with physical weakness, even degeneration and decay. In an introspective moment Stella ponders the ‘men delicately nurtured in the old homes of the Old World, as well as the luxurious ones of the New, and in the end going completely under, in the rough, wild manner of the veriest waifs’ (Martin, 1890, p57). This contrast between the Old World and the New continues throughout the novel. Stella and Ted, the ‘natural’ Australians in the novel, both deplore the idea of the country that they were born in as existing only in relation to the motherland and oppose the attachment that some in the New World have to Old World conventions and their unquestioning following of English fashions and fads (see, for example, Martin, 1890, p43-4).

Ironically, given Corelli’s opposition to the New Woman, Stella is very like Corelli’s ‘good’ heroines. She is intelligent, philosophical, believes in a higher calling in life (Martin, 1890, p425), believes in sexual difference, has a natural religious instinct (Martin, 1890, p431), and faints and ‘quivers’ when disappointed in love and finds that only her duty to do good for others can distract her from her selfish desires and frustrations. Like Corelli’s most famous heroines (especially Mavis Clare in *The Sorrows of Satan*), Stella believes, in the most religious manner, in performing woman’s sacred duty of ‘saving’ the men in her life, in this case saving her husband from alcoholism (Martin, 1890, pp424-6). Moreover, Martin’s style of writing was not entirely dissimilar to Corelli’s. Indeed, her heroine was often criticised by reviewers for her tendency to philosophise – again, in a manner not dissimilar to Corelli’s (Nettlebeck, ‘Introduction,’ in Martin, 1890, pxii).

The last New Woman characteristic that I will look at is sensationally presented as perhaps the most ‘dangerous’ to the ‘civilising’ mission, and that is sexual looseness. This is the scandalous New Woman attribute that rocks the foundations of the British Empire. And conveniently (for the novelist) it is a

characteristic that can undergo moral condemnation while simultaneously being exploited as entertainment. However, in employing the notions of ‘civilisation’ and ‘barbarism’ as polar opposites, Corelli, perhaps contrary to popular expectation, makes it abundantly clear that ‘modernity’ does not equate with ‘civilisation.’ Indeed, her stories of shocking decadence and debauchery rely on modernity being tainted with elements of barbarism, for how else could her brand of spirituality offer a balm to ease her readers’ minds? Nowhere is this balm needed more than in the world inhabited by Lady Sibyl, *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895).

Lady Sibyl is both a New Woman and a victim of the New Woman in that she gains all her unwomanly knowledge, sexual knowledge that leads her to her death, from New Woman novels. As she explains to her husband, Geoffrey Tempest: ‘Oh yes, indeed we know quite well what we are doing now when we marry, thanks to the ‘new’ fiction!’ (Corelli, 1895, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p306). Moreover, she conveniently leaves a suicide note explaining that her downfall stemmed from reading a New Women novel over and over again until she began to understand all of its insinuations and until she also began to enjoy them (Corelli, 1895, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p405). The writers of New Women novels, frequently female, come under bitter attack as authors who write in order to ‘degrade and shame their sex,’ authors who are ‘destitute of grammar as well as decency’ (Corelli, 1895, *The Sorrows of Satan*, pp305-306). These authors, these ‘self degrading creatures who delineate their heroines as wallowing in unchastity, and who write freely on subjects which men would hesitate to name,’ are described in *The Sorrows of Satan* as the ‘unnatural hybrids of no-sex’ (Corelli, 1895, *The Sorrows of Satan*, pp221, 305-306).¹² Not content to place all the blame on these writers, Corelli continues – this time with the poet, Algernon Charles Swinburne. Swinburne, Lady Sibyl claims, made her corruption

¹² For more anti-New Woman sentiment see, for example, Corelli, 1912 [1896], *The Mighty Atom*, p104. Corelli’s derision of New Women writers does not end with the novelists. She also singles out female journalists of the era. These women do not fulfil any of the criteria of Corelli’s ideal women. Nor do their occupations. ‘Ill-educated lady-paragraphists’ who scrounge up gossip for a small sum of money lack feminine dignity – like Corelli’s Old Lady Maravale who, ‘rather reduced in circumstances, writes a guinea’s worth of scandal a week for one of the papers’ (Corelli, 1895, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p260). Moreover, just to ensure that none of Lady Maravale’s lack of feminine dignity escapes the audience, Corelli later portrays her ‘gorging’ herself on chicken salad and truffles (Corelli, 1895, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p271). David Rubinstein writes that the number of female journalists during this era rose as the publication of women’s magazines increased and as typically female topics, such as fashion and society news, gained more attention in the press. For more information on this area of employment, see Rubinstein, 1986, pp73-86.

complete as he tended to do with most of the decadent women of her time. She voices her conviction that ‘there are many women to whom his works have been deadlier than the deadliest poison, and far more soul-corrupting than any book of Zola’s or the most pernicious of modern French writers’ (Corelli, 1895, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p406). Blame also falls on the shoulders of the ‘modern ethics’ of Ibsen, the late-nineteenth-century Norwegian dramatist (Corelli, 1895, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p205 and Corelli, 1896, *The Mighty Atom*, p150). Moreover, Corelli reiterates that sexual knowledge once gained cannot be lost or forgotten. For this, as well as for the sensational act of offering herself sexually to Satan, in disguise as the charming Prince Lucio, Lady Sibyl’s eternal damnation is secured.

What is interesting here is that Corelli, like other anti-New Woman writers, insists on portraying her New Woman as possessing a ‘voracious sexual’ appetite, and this is despite the ‘silence surrounding female sexuality within the mainstream feminist movement’ of the time (Ledger, 1995, p30). Lady Sibyl’s sexual immorality represents a threat to the race and so she has to be removed, to die (her mother also died a gruesome death because of her similarly immoral ways).¹³

Conclusion

The British Empire, it has been argued, relied on transporting middle-class family values that were at the core of domestic existence to their colonies and instating them there. This justified the civilising mission. However, the ‘ordinary’ people of the middle classes, those most susceptible to imperial propaganda, were not so enamoured by imperialism that they would allow it to threaten the domestic values that they held dear. Indeed, for most in the ‘homeland,’ empire was more or less tangential to their everyday lives. At most it was seen as a means of exemplifying ‘Britain’s more highly prized home-grown values’ (Porter, 2004, pp242-3).

¹³ Ledger also cites the example of Bram Stoker’s 1897 novel, *Dracula*. When one of the ‘good’ or innocent girls in the novel is transformed into ‘an oversexed vampire’ she has to ‘be massacred in the most appalling way by the brave young English men of the piece in order to be removed as a threat to the British ‘race’’ (Ledger, 1995, p30). Similarly, Beamont asserts that ‘The New Woman, paradoxically constructed as both sexless and sexually predatory in popular discourse, mediates between these misogynistic images of women’ (Beamont, 1998, p219).

However, what this paper has argued is that there were shifts – social, economic, moral – that were underway as the nineteenth century drew to a close that threatened the stability of these traditional middle-class family values: both at ‘home’ and in the empire. Not least of these were changing gender expectations and opportunities. The New Woman appeared, then, on both the domestic and imperial horizons. Her appearance further stirred already shaken understandings of gender and empire.

Marie Corelli’s phenomenally popular novels contributed to contemporary discussions surrounding the fear of racial degeneration – promoting its inevitability should women not stop agitating for equal rights to men. As a didactic novelist sporting a plethora of ‘conservative’ as well as ‘advanced’ ideas and ideals, Corelli had no trouble portraying the New Woman as a danger to the future of the nation and the empire. On this basis, her highly sensational literature fed and fuelled popular anti-New Woman sentiments.

Still, perhaps it was not only the one-dimensional stereotype of the New Woman who threatened the Empire. Given the experiences of Le Jeune’s British Columbian ‘new women,’ perhaps even ‘ordinary’ new women did hold, if not exactly power or authority, then at least more influence or sway than first thought. As Le Jeune points out, by identifying with the figure of the New Woman in the North American press, by reinventing themselves as ‘modern,’ young British Columbian female readers found themselves able ‘to sever their connection with the Old World of their mothers and the obsolete “sex” debate raging in Britain’ (Le Jeune, 2004, p88). By embracing ‘modernity,’ they defied the notion that they were inherently atavistic – what McClintock termed ‘the conservative repository of the national archaic’ (McClintock, 1990, p93) – whether as women or as women living in a colony. Perhaps, then, even more human, more moderate, more ‘ordinary’ new women, because they too represented ‘modernity,’ or at least the promise or threat of a modernity to come, did appear menacing in regards to Britain’s hold on its empire – at least in the popular mindset, both at home and abroad, domestically and imperially.

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