



Marie Corelli, *A Romance of Two Worlds: A Novel*. Edited by Andrew Radford. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019, 288 pp. Hb £80. ISBN 978-1474441919. Pb (Forthcoming) £24.99. ISBN 978-1474481663

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Andrew Radford's 2019 edition of Marie Corelli's *A Romance of Two Worlds: A Novel* (1886) is a welcome addition to the Edinburgh Critical Editions of Nineteenth-Century Texts series. Readers of *A Romance* will, with the help of Radford's new critical introduction and appended materials, draw comparisons between the late-nineteenth century and our own time, in which public responses to science, religion, and metaphysics are fraught with the tensions of mass media combined with an increasingly individualized perception of reality. Radford argues that Corelli saw in the creative act a way toward a more egalitarian resolution of these tensions in a future where the uninitiated had access to the scientific, religious, literary, and aesthetic discourses that determined the intellectual milieu of late-nineteenth-century Europe.

Corelli's hugely popular first novel – Radford notes that it went through 14 editions in a little over a decade following its publication – defines her idiosyncratic Christianity, which combines elements of the Christian faith with concepts from both the physical sciences and the popular occult. Indeed, Corelli's "Electric Creed" of Christianity comprises the heart of what Radford aptly calls this "energetically

eccentric narrative” (viii). The tale is told in the first person by an unnamed female pianist, who comes under the tutelage, and eventual mesmeric spell, of Raffaello Cellini, an Italian portrait artist and mystic, who offers her a potion that will both relieve her ennui and allow her insight into the nature of God: “a knowledge,” he says, “surpassing all the marvels of art and science!” (19). After taking this “mysterious potion,” the narrator falls into a deep sleep, during which, in a dream-state, she encounters an angelic, Virgil-like figure, Heliobas, who entices her to follow him on her voyage of self-discovery. During this introspective trip, she discovers that God is “pure Light” and “pure Love” and that His/Her “Electric Radiance” interpenetrates all creation (157). The narrator eventually devotes herself to becoming one with that “Radiance” through continued meditative practice.

Radford argues that for all its “interplay of voices, identities, generic codes and cosmic auras” – themes which have always endeared the novel to its readers – *A Romance* is more than fantastical. It engages fin-de-siècle debates regarding the commercialization and commodification of fictional works in a burgeoning literary marketplace, the professionalization of authorship, and the competing aesthetic valuations of Romanticists like Andrew Lang, H. Rider Haggard, and R. L. Stevenson, who emphasized those masculine virtues inculcated by the historical Romance, and Realists like Henry James and Walter Besant, who espoused the supremacy of the novel form for its facilitation of psychological realism. *A Romance*, with its playfully ambiguous title (is it a Romance, is it a Novel, or is it a new hybrid form, as the introduction suggests?), is, in Radford’s estimation, a meditation primarily on the question of who has access to these debates. Corelli carves out a new space for herself and her readers among these formidable voices with her defence of “the secrecy and mystique surrounding the places and spaces of enchantment” (x). Put differently, Corelli challenges these men’s claims to define and regulate literary discourse in what Radford deems “unexpectedly purist rather than profiteering” terms (x); for her, that is, the universally human, albeit deeply mysterious, ability to imagine and create has worth which precedes and supersedes any market value.

Radford makes a useful critical move, basing his contextualization of Corelli’s works on her conscious exploitation of the “semantic ambiguities of *possession*,” meaning possession as if by an occult/mystic force and possession as in authorial ownership (ix). Corelli, Radford concludes, rejects the notion that a given work of fiction could belong to any author solely; rather, it belongs to the age in which it was written and to posterity. *A Romance* instead, Radford maintains, shows how the author is herself possessed during the creative process, how she “channels the weird ‘presence’ of stratified pasts and alien powers which seek to shape the modern moment and the sensibility of ‘future ages’” (x). The author is mere conduit for a universal, timeless creative force and can claim control neither over the creative process nor the finished fictional work: art belongs to everyone and to no one and is, therefore, accessible to all.

As any good critical introduction does, Radford's draws together both contemporary and recent criticism to situate the novel within its historical context and to summarize its current reevaluation in academe. Radford distinguishes his reading from others by his contention that the novel is fundamentally egalitarian because it initiates the reading public into Corelli's creative process, "shifting the definition of who could become conversant with the philosophies and practice of alternative medicine and the magical arts [including authorship]" (x). *A Romance* is a "haunted house of fiction," Radford argues, "a story of thresholds crossed, limits exceeded and strange visitations" (x). In stark contrast to her literary peers, many of whom condemned "lowbrow" fiction as pandering to an expanding middleclass readership, Corelli invites her readers into this strange house, where lives that mystical, mercurial, and all-important creative force.

In all, this lovely new edition reintroduces Corelli's novel to contemporary students, many of whom continue, like the Victorians, to navigate those "profound and persistently riddling questions about the sources, facets and possibilities of human creativity, the supposedly humdrum business of authorship and copyright law, as well as the body as private property" (x). In the age of social media, Corelli's insistence that the creative act remains a morally, aesthetically, and personally edifying one regardless of its market value is refreshing, laudable, and informative. The appended selections of contemporary reviews and excerpts from Corelli's other writings, which are organized by the editor under the subtitles "Corelli on *A Romance of Two Worlds* and the literary marketplace" and "Corelli on gender politics, marriage and Christianity", make this edition useful to Corelli scholars, historians of print and media cultures, and students of the occult alike. This timely edition will also prove useful to courses covering early SF, *fin-de-siècle* Gothic, New Woman fiction, and representations of science and technology in the late-nineteenth-century novel. At the very least, *A Romance* remains a fascinating distillation of the philosophies of one of, if not the, most popular of late-Victorian authors, and one so in tune with the age in which she was writing.