



REDISCOVERING ELLEN WOOD: NEW ITALIAN TRANSLATIONS

Ellen Wood, *La Maledizione* (*The Unholy Wish*), book series “Participio Passato”, edited and translated by Salvatore Asaro, Rome: Edizioni Croce, 2022, 105 pp., € 18.00, ISBN: 978-88-6402-440-0

Ellen Wood, *Parkwater*, book series “Participio Passato”, edited and translated by Elisabetta Marino, Rome: Edizioni Croce, 2022, 267 pp., € 19.90, ISBN: 978-88-6402-453-0

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Ellen Wood, better known as Mrs Henry Wood, was the author of several popular books, including the internationally acclaimed masterpiece *East Lynne* (1861). Her narrative production consists of approximately forty novels and three hundred short stories, most of which use sensation fiction strategies. Not unlike Wilkie Collins, regarded as the pioneer of the sensation genre, Wood aimed to unveil the many contradictions of her age, and especially the weaknesses of the British bourgeoisie, the class to which she herself belonged. These contradictions also emerge in her self-representation and gender views. Although few details about her private life are known, the image Wood tailored for herself was in line with normative models of Victorian femininity, which compelled women to embody the roles of good wives and caring mothers. Yet, these roles were at odds with her professional career as well as with her frequent characterisation of women as oppressed by the strictures of the marriage institution.

By combining elements typical of Victorian domestic fiction with sensational and gothic themes, Wood managed to expose some pressing problems of her society and, particularly, to give voice to the real yearnings of womanhood without being censored by orthodox critics. For these reasons, her fictional production deserves rediscovery by both academics and a general readership. On a stylistic level, moreover, Wood's works bear evidence of the literary experimentation that many writers conducted at the time. Like other sensation novelists, she combined lowbrow and highbrow strategies in remarkable ways and she contributed to developing the Victorian novel by merging together elements belonging to different subgenres. A further noteworthy aspect of Wood's fiction is its popularity. In her lifetime, Wood achieved great success in Britain and abroad (many of her books were translated in several countries, including France, Norway and Spain) and was ranked among the best-selling novelists of her age. Exploring the reasons for this literary success and its social implications enables us to better understand the Victorian literary market, the nineteenth-century commercialisation of fiction and the efforts made by women novelists to gain professional recognition.

Unlike writers such as Dickens, who have enjoyed enduring popularity since their times, Wood was forgotten after her death and her works were not reprinted for about a century. It was only towards the end of the twentieth-century that her works started to be read again and to attract scholarly attention, especially in Britain and the United States. Since then, studies of her fiction have mainly appeared in the form of journal articles and book chapters. The only existing monograph in English wholly devoted to her so far is *Mrs Henry Wood*, by Mariaconcetta Costantini (2020), and new editions of her works are slow to appear, with only a few exceptions, including *East Lynne* (Maunder 2000; Jay 2005) and *St Martin's Eve* (Pykett 1992).

As far as Italy is concerned, the last few years have witnessed an unprecedented interest in works by Wood, some of which have appeared, in Italian translation, in the book series "Participio Passato", directed by Silvia Tatti. Published by the Rome-based publisher Edizioni Croce, the series so far includes the Italian editions of *Danesbury House* (*Casa Danesbury*) and *Within the Maze* (*Nel Labirinto*), both edited by Mariaconcetta Costantini and published in 2021, and two other novels which appeared in 2022: *The Unholy Wish* (*La maledizione*), edited and translated by Salvatore Asaro, and *Parkwater*, edited and translated by Elisabetta Marino. These four publications have several merits: besides introducing Wood to the Italian general readership, they also aim to revive critical interest in little-known Victorian texts which are seldom studied and researched, both in Italy and elsewhere.

In terms of genre and storyline, *The Unholy Wish* is a *rara avis* in Wood's oeuvre. Published posthumously in 1890, three years after the author's death, this novella offers a problematic representation of late-Victorian society, and especially of the challenges met by members of the rising professional class like doctors. Asaro's Introduction to *La maledizione* pays attention to these socio-cultural aspects while also examining the generic peculiarities of the novella, in which Wood merges elements typical of the problem novel with Gothic and fantasy paraphernalia. This combination results in a hybrid subgenre that Asaro defines "weird" – a subgenre that generally depicts human powerlessness in the face of uncontrollable forces that determine the protagonists' fate. The novella, set in the countryside village of Ebury, tells a story of love rivalry between a young doctor, James Ailsa and Tom Hardwick, son of the local squire. The contended girl, Emily Bell, is described as a woman well aware of her own

power, who triggers the fatal rivalry. The tensions created by this love triangle turn Ebury into a sensational place; but they also pave the way to mysterious, weird, and horrifying events that upset the protagonists' lives.

On a linguistic level, the novella poses interesting challenges to the Italian translator. As Asaro explains in his note to the translation, one of the problems is the existence of one edition only, which prevents the translator from understanding some incorrections or obscurities of the original through a comparison between editions. The translator also provides some examples of the adaptations he had to make when there was no equivalence between the two languages and explains that a major obstacle was the translation of the novella's title itself, which in English has a multiplicity of meanings deemed impossible to render in Italian.

The second text published in the series in 2022 is *Parkwater*, an early work by Wood that first appeared anonymously in *The New Monthly Magazine* in 1857. The novel tells the tragic story of Sophia May, a beautiful young woman who receives an education above the standards of her class. The daughter of humble parents, Sophia aspires to climb the social ladder. Driven by a strong ambition, she strives to secure a wealthy husband by any means necessary, including committing a terrible crime. Her tragic violation of gender norms and especially of the sacred duties of motherhood is a vehicle through which Wood represents the Victorian preoccupations about class mobility, which, in the public's opinion, was supposed to generate social evils and to threaten the apparent safety of the home. Highly sensational in its characterisation, this novel also draws upon Gothic literature, as it uses gloomy elements to represent a domestic environment upset by violence and crime.

These aspects are explored by Marino in the Introduction to the novel, which also focuses on some contradictions of Wood's status as a resolute woman professional who strove to succeed in a literary market dominated by men. Marino also focuses on the text's combination of different generic elements and on its effectiveness in using sensational strategies that excited the readers' senses with cautionary views of the dangers of class mobility.

In ways similar to Asaro, Marino deals with specific translation problems she tackled while preparing the Italian version of *Parkwater*. Her note to the translation offers an interesting linguistic reflection, providing examples of old idioms and culturally specific elements in the original text that posed a challenge to the translator. The English terms used to define the characters' social ranks, for instance, needed to be modified in the Italian text. Another obstacle mentioned by Marino is the lack of a critical edition of the original text, which could offer clarifications of specific textual aspects as well as of the changes occurring in different editions.

This latter problem gives additional value to the revival of Wood's fiction carried out by Edizioni Croce. Besides bringing back to life two underrated Victorian texts, *La maledizione* and *Parkwater* are also the first critical editions of almost forgotten works of fictions, which are now offered to readers (at least to Italian-speaking ones) with notes to the text and a detailed Introduction. Even though it is presently happening in Italy, this editorial enterprise is in line with the work of rediscovery of Victorian popular texts pursued by VPFA on an international level. It is to be hoped that, in the near future, more Wood works will be published by Edizioni Croce, and that this revival will convince others to publish critical editions of little-known Victorian popular novels, both in English and in translation.

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