

Title: Olive Schreiner, Marie Corelli and the Anxieties of Female Authorship

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Abstract:

This article explores the competing models of gendered authorship emerging from Marie Corelli's multiple print encounters with Olive Schreiner. Where Schreiner is cast by Corelli as the modish darling of a snobbish literary intelligentsia, who is beloved by critics and ignored by readers, Corelli herself emerges from her writings about Schreiner as the democratic author *par excellence*, a writer for the people rather than the press. In spite of the clear common ground that bridged their experience as celebrity authors, Corelli, in her writings about Schreiner, sought only to elucidate the ideological and artistic gulf that she identified as existing between them. As this essay will show, Corelli's public resistance to Schreiner was a strike not only against an unfair male literary system of which she perceived Schreiner to be an arbitrary beneficiary of, but also a rejection of the rhetoric of literary value that emerged in Britain during the *fin de siècle*. What Corelli failed to understand, however, was that to be a woman writer at this time, however successful, was to occupy an ambiguous position within dominant, masculinist discourses of artistic distinction. A fuller exploration of Schreiner and Corelli's positions within and experiences of the late-Victorian literary marketplace not only reveals the frailty of Corelli's oppositional construction in real terms, but also signals the extent to which it was their shared status as women writers that was the key determinant that shaped their respective experiences of professional authorship.

Keywords:

Olive Schreiner; Marie Corelli; Authorship; Reviewers; Newspapers; Reception; Publishing; The Silver Domino; Dreams; Gender; Women's Writing

Olive Schreiner, Marie Corelli and the Anxieties of Female Authorship

'The words flow quite easily; you cover scores of pages. Then you read it over the next morning. If you understand so little as to think some other fellow must have written it, you may be quite sure it is an allegory'

('Mr Punch's Prize Novels,' *Punch*, May 1891, p.169).

'It is surprising to what a depth you can go in an allegory. You can fall down a regular well of thought and go fast asleep at the bottom, and when you wake up you wonder what it was all about, and you have to begin that allegory all over again... I like a thing you can never make head or tail of - the brain fattens on such provender'

(Marie Corelli, *The Silver Domino*, 1892, p.229).

In April 1891, Marie Corelli's bestselling novel *Wormwood* (1890) featured in 'Mr Punch's Prize Novels', a successful series of parodies of well-known authors produced by R.C. Lehmann for the satirical magazine *Punch*. As one of the most famous and bestselling novelists of the late-Victorian period, Corelli's inclusion in Lehmann's popular series now seems inevitable. In addition to her Leviathan-like status in the literary marketplace, the author's distinctive literary style and the melodramatic plot lines of her romance novels, together with her truculent and very public spats with critics and reviewers, made her prime fodder for satirists. Lehmann's sketch, in which *Wormwood* is recast as 'Germfood' and Marie Corelli becomes Mary Morally, contains many of the hallmarks of the countless disparaging reviews and notices that would plague Corelli throughout her extraordinarily successful writing career. According to Lehmann's parody, the list of Corelli's crimes was considerable: as a novelist she operated on instinct and emotion rather than logic or talent ('Ugh! it's coming, the demon is upon me. I must write three murderous volumes'); she was an hysteric who, in turn, infected the minds of her readership with her melodramatic outpourings ('I'll give you fits, paralytic fits, epileptic fits, and fits of hysteria all at the same time'); and, in a slight that would become commonplace in negative assessments of the author in the contemporary press, Corelli is invoked by Lehmann as ambiguously gendered and therefore degenerate ('Am I am woman?' asks Mary

Morally).¹

While Lehmann's treatment of prominent male authors was no less acerbic than his sending up of Corelli, it is clear that issues of gender are very much to the fore of his lampooning of women writers, and his sketch of Corelli in particular reflects certain broader cultural anxieties about the figure of the popular female author. The paradoxical construction of female authorship as being invested on the one hand with pejorative 'feminine' features such as emotiveness, self-indulgence and a lack of discipline, while, on the other, invoked as monstrous, mannish and unsexed, is also a feature of the installment of 'Mr Punch's Prize Novels' that appeared the following month: a parody of the South African author, Olive Schreiner. Corelli and Schreiner were both prominent cultural figures in late-Victorian Britain, however the professional careers of the two women are at first glance not easily comparable. *While Corelli far eclipsed Schreiner in terms of book sales, the latter writer, who became the darling of 1890s London's *avant garde*, achieved some critical acclaim and the kind of serious press attention that Corelli, the butt of many a literary journalist's joke, could only dream of.*² In spite of these variances, the *Punch* parodies of the two authors and their work occupy clear common ground, not least in terms of the gendered stereotypes of the woman writer underpinning both sketches. The recasting of Schreiner's celebrated collection of allegories *Dreams* (1890) as 'Gasps' and 'Screams' similarly aligns the author with discourses of hysteria and unchecked feminine emotion, while her association with the degenerate figure of the 'unsexed' woman is signaled by the accompanying cartoon's depiction of Schreiner's 'Tant Sannie (from *The Story of an African Farm*) as grotesque and monstrous in her mannishness.³

¹R.C. Lehmann, 'Mr Punch's Prize Novels. No. XVI – Germfood', *Punch*, 11 April 1891, p. 169.

²There are numerous sales figures touted by biographers and critics of Corelli in order to demonstrate her extraordinary popularity with readers. One oft-quoted metric offers a neat comparison with the sales of Olive Schreiner's most successful book, *The Story of an African Farm*. According to Clive Bloom, 100,000 copies of Corelli's *The Sorrows of Satan* were sold each year from 1896 until the outbreak of the First World War, whereas Schreiner's bestseller *The Story of an African Farm* was estimated by her publishers to have sold 100,000 copies between 1883 and 1900 (Clive Bloom, *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction Since 1900*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, 2nd edn., p.25).

³ R.C. Lehmann, Mr Punch's Prize Novels. No. XVII – Gasps. *Punch*, 16 May 1891, p. 229.

Unlike Schreiner, who did not rise to the bait presented by such public provocations in the press, Corelli retaliated with her pen to any perceived slight on her work. It is precisely Corelli's view of herself as a misunderstood genius that lies at the heart of her most concentrated textual response to her hostile critics: *The Silver Domino, or: Side Whispers, Social and Literary* (1892). Published anonymously, *The Silver Domino* represents an extraordinarily pugnacious, satirical critique of the late-Victorian literary world, from which Corelli always felt alienated. With her authorship concealed behind the mask of the Domino, Corelli unleashed a torrent of anger aimed at certain reviewers, journalists, publishers and fellow authors, who were bound up in a literary system defined by sneering purism and male nepotism. As Annette Federico observes, Corelli believed that this conspiratorial literary system was contrived to deflate women writers particularly. In spite of this, it is another woman writer, Olive Schreiner, who is singled out in *The Silver Domino* for particularly scurrilous satire, with an entire chapter dedicated to the critiquing of Schreiner's literary style as well as her authorship.⁴ In Corelli's view, Schreiner was a beneficiary rather than a victim of the corrupt network of journalists and publishers responsible for propagating dominant and arbitrary narratives of literary value, and was therefore more worthy of attack than defence.

This article explores the competing models of gendered authorship emerging from Corelli's multiple print encounters with Schreiner, not least in *The Silver Domino*. In addition to revealing Corelli's reliance upon the very gendered stereotypes of women writers she protested against when she herself was a target, I suggest that her multiple, public objections to Schreiner also represent a kind of intervention in what Rita Felski has termed the 'vituperative clash of taste cultures' in the late-Victorian literary world.⁵ Corelli's invective against Schreiner, whom she thought of as an author whose reputation was secured by virtue of being 'boomed' by influential critics, was inseparable from her own experience of critical revilement, which was itself bound up with her extraordinary popularity with readers. As Felski notes, 'The more books she

⁴ Annette R. Federico, *Idol of Suburbia: Marie Corelli and Late-Victorian Literary Culture* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), p.20.

⁵ Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), p.116.

sold, the more, it seemed, she was vilified by the literary press'.⁶ Where Schreiner is cast by Corelli as the modish darling of a snobbish literary intelligentsia, who is beloved by critics and ignored by readers, Corelli herself emerges from her writings about Schreiner as the democratic author *par excellence*, a writer for the people rather than the press. A fuller exploration of Schreiner and Corelli's positions within and experiences of the late-Victorian literary marketplace not only reveals the frailty of this oppositional construction in real terms, but also signals the extent to which it was their shared status as women writers that was the key determinant that shaped their respective experiences of professional authorship.⁷

I. The New Woman and the 'Queen of Bestsellers'

Placed prominently in the front matter of *The Sorrows of Satan*, Marie Corelli's enormously successful novel from 1895, is the following 'special notice' for the attention of the literary press: 'No copies of this book are sent out for review. Members of the press will therefore obtain it (should they wish to do so) in the usual way with the rest of the public, i.e., through the Booksellers and

⁶ Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, p.116.

⁷Critics have correctly identified the 'widening gap between serious literature and popular fiction that was coming into force at the end of the nineteenth century' (Felski, p.116), however the easy polarity of popular versus 'literary' forms of writing in this period has been problematised by scholars in recent years. Mary Hammond, invoking Andreas Huyssen's formulation of the 'great divide' between artistic and commercial forms of culture in the 1890s, views this opposition as less a divide and more a 'negotiating table'. Hammond points to the complex ways in which ideas of literary value and reputation were constituted and contested at this time. See Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996) and Mary Hammond, *Reading, Publishing and the Formation of Literary Taste in England, 1880-1914* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p.6. For more on the complex relationship of literature and the market as it pertains to women writers in the 1890s, see Linda H. Peterson, *Becoming A Woman of Letters: Myths of Authorship and Facts of the Victorian Market* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007). For a consideration of the too convenient dichotomisation of avant garde and popular culture in the 1890s, with particular focus on Corelli, see Andrew McCann, *Popular Literature, Authorship and the Occult in Late Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp.86-114.

Libraries'.⁸ The vilification of Corelli's work in the literary press had risen in tandem with her extraordinary sales figures, and, understandably weary of having her work mocked by critics or, worse, ignored entirely, with this notice Corelli ushered in the practice of not sending out complimentary copies of her novels for review. It was no coincidence that this separation of her work from the influential reviewing apparatus of the day came with *The Sorrows of Satan*, Corelli's most successful book to date. In it, Corelli gives creative expression to her own views on the struggles of literary life, the pervasive corruption in the world of publishing, and the unchecked powers of the newspaper critic. The novel's Corelli-like author, Mavis Clare, is the moral centre of the narrative; as a famous and much-loved writer who enjoys huge commercial success, Clare maintains a disinterested distance from the literary establishment and the press. She feeds newspaper reviews of her novels to her Yorkshire terrier, Tricky, and, in a further display of her indifference to critical opinion, names her pet doves after the periodicals that have negatively reviewed her work, including the *Athenaeum*, *Nineteenth Century*, *Pall Mall*, *Westminster Gazette*, *Daily Telegraph* and *Morning Post*.⁹ Where the press was concerned, however, Marie Corelli had more of an axe to grind than did her serene fictive author, whose playful performance of critical aloofness masks the real author's acute resentment for her rejection by the literary press.

Corelli's treatment in the press was certainly extreme. As an unusually kind article about her in *The Bookman* in 1909 pointed out: 'no living author has been more persistently maligned and sneered at by certain sections of the press.'¹⁰ Perhaps unsurprisingly then, *The Sorrows of Satan* was not Corelli's first or only strike against the press. Two years previously in *The Silver Domino*, several of Mavis Clare's 'doves' faced the full force of Corelli's ire, with the *Athenaeum* and the *Pall Mall Gazette* bearing the brunt of some particularly

⁸ Marie Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895; Richmond: Valancourt Books, 2007), p.1. According to Teresa Ransom, the 'initial sales of *The Sorrows of Satan* in 1895 were greater than any previous novel written in English' (*The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli: Queen of Victorian Bestsellers*, Thrupp: Sutton, 1999: p.81). Peter Keating puts the initial sales at 25,000 in the first week and 50,000 over the next seven weeks (Peter Keating, Introduction, *The Sorrows of Satan*. Oxford: OUP, 1996, ix-xx: pp. x-xi).

⁹ Marie Corelli, *The Silver Domino, or: Side Whispers, Social and Literary* (London: Lamley & Co., 1893), p.235; pp.169-170.

¹⁰ Quoted in Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, p. 166.

potent criticism. The relationship between periodicals and the artists they 'boomed' was, according to Corelli, predicated on nepotism and corruption. This view is expressed unambiguously in *The Silver Domino* in a scathing send-up of the 'Great Fraternity' of the male press, written from the perspective of a male literary reviewer, who gives the following 'insights' into the world of reviewing:

A Three-volumer comes in 'for review,' nicely bound, well got up; we look at the title-page, and if it is by some individual whom we know to be a power in one or other of the cliques, we pay strict attention to it, cover its faults, and quote platitudes and epigrams. But if it is by some one we personally dislike, or it is by a woman, we never read it.¹¹

While Corelli's account of the 'Great Fraternity' overlooks the significant presence of female reviewers in newspapers and periodicals, here she identifies an important connection between critical acceptance and the gendering of authorship in the press.¹² The negative valuation of Corelli's status as a female author of 'feminine' romance novels is reflected in the author's largely negative critical reception, which, as Mary Hammond suggests, 'smacks of an adverse gendering of her work as 'female' in conception, design and execution as well as form'.¹³ Of course, male authors of popular fiction were not exempt from severe

¹¹ Corelli, *The Silver Domino*, p.296.

¹² For more on female reviewers in the Victorian press see Marysa Demoor, *Their Fair Share: Women, Power and Criticism in the Athenaeum, from Millicent Garrett Fawcett to Katherine Mansfield, 1870-1920* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000); Barbara Onslow, *Women of the Press in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000); Nicola Diane Thompson, *Reviewing Sex: Gender and the Reception of Victorian Novels* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996); Joanne Wilkes, *Women Reviewing Women in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Critical Reception of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010); and Joanne Wilkes, 'Reviewing' in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Women's Writing*, ed. Linda H. Peterson (Cambridge: CUP, 2015), pp.236-250.

¹³ Hammond, *Reading, Publishing and the Formation of Literary Taste in England, 1880-1914*, p.142. For a fuller account of the gendered expectations of male and female authors evident in Victorian press reviews, see Nicola Thompson's *Reviewing Sex: Gender and the Reception of Victorian Novels* (1996). Other scholars have argued that gender functions less coherently or consistently in reviews of women's writing in the period. See for example, Anne DeWitt, 'Gender and Genre in Reviews of the Theological Novel' in *Women, Periodicals, and Print Culture in Britain, 1830s-1900*, eds. Alexis Easley, Clare Gill and Beth Rodgers (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2019), pp. 442-455.

press criticism at this time. Popular authors such as Arthur Conan Doyle were similarly stained by their associations with the mass market. As Clare Clarke has shown, Doyle's candour about the need to profit from his detective stories along with his hack-like speed in terms of their production led to 'frequent accusations of a profiteering sensibility'.¹⁴ Hall Caine, Corelli's fellow romancer and nearest rival in terms of sales, was similarly criticised for his flagrant acts of self-publicity. In spite of this, Caine's historical take on the late-Victorian romance was largely praised by critics for introducing a manly vigour to the genre, thus allowing him to evade the accusations of excessive feminisation that affected Corelli's placement within the genealogy of the romance.¹⁵

If *The Silver Domino* underscores the privilege of male authors within the literary marketplace of the 1890s, then it also proposes that not every woman writer is adversely affected by the system of male patronage that Corelli identifies as controlling dominant discourses about literary value. Olive Schreiner is singled out as an author who is celebrated rather than denigrated by the same network of corrupt reviewers and critics that the *Domino* accuses of harbouring inherent prejudice against female novelists. While it is certainly correct that with the publication of her first novel *The Story of an African Farm* in 1883 Schreiner was much discussed in the literary press of the day, the widespread attention she received actually resulted from the varied rather than wholly positive set of responses her literary debut had elicited. As an aesthetically experimental work that meditates on such divisive themes as religious doubt, colonial exploitation, and the social and economic position of women, it is unsurprising that contemporary critics met the novel with a mixture of approbation and acrimony. Malcolm MacColl writing in *The Spectator* praised Schreiner's 'remarkable book', whereas Andrew Lang insisted in *The Contemporary Review* that the novel, 'which begins so well' is spoiled by

¹⁴ Clare Clarke, *Late Victorian Crime Fiction in the Shadows of Sherlock* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p.81.

¹⁵ For more on Hall Caine's critical reception see Hammond, *Reading, Publishing and the Formation of Literary Taste in England*, pp. 117-153. On Corelli's placement within the genealogy of the romance, see Martin Hipsky, *Modernism and the Women's Popular Romance in Britain, 1885-1925* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2011), pp.63-112.

'trivialities that would astonish a reader of penny fiction'.¹⁶

In spite of its mixed critical reception, *The Story of an African Farm* was reviewed in all of the major literary periodicals and magazines, and was taken sufficiently seriously by enough of the period's foremost cultural commentators to establish its twenty-eight-year-old author as a significant artistic and intellectual force in Britain. The success of the novel brought Schreiner into close alliance with many of the leading radical thinkers and writers of the day, such as Eleanor Marx, Havelock Ellis, Karl Pearson and Edward Carpenter, while the bold experimentalism of her second major publication, the short fiction collection *Dreams* (1890) attracted the public appreciation of high-profile proponents of aestheticism, including Oscar Wilde and Arthur Symonds. By the time Marie Corelli parodied Schreiner in *The Silver Domino* in 1892, the South African author's status as literary *provocateur* and darling of the London *avant garde* was axiomatic.

Yet the acidity of the parody of Schreiner in *The Silver Domino* cannot be explained solely in terms of her ties to the literary intelligentsia, or by the critical reception of her work, however unjustifiably fawning Corelli considered it to be. After all, many late-Victorian authors enjoyed similarly constructive relationships with individual reviewers and editors, so Schreiner was certainly not unique in having her share of loyal supporters in the press. *The Sorrows of Satan* provides a clue in the figure of the glamorous, oversexed 'vulture of vice', Lady Sibyl Elton who, as the novel's vamp, stands in direct contrast to Mavis Clare, the impossibly feminine novelist who represents Corelli's own sense of the best version of herself. Like Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray, whose downfall is heralded by his reading of a French Decadent novel (another target of Corelli's wrath), Lady Sibyl Elton is corrupted by her consumption of New Woman fiction. The description of New Woman novelists in *The Sorrows of Satan* is revealing: they are characterised as 'self-degrading creatures who delineate their fictional heroines as wallowing in unchastity, and who write freely on subjects which men

¹⁶ Malcolm MacColl, 'An Agnostic Novel,' *The Spectator*, 13 August 1887, 1091-1093 (p. 1091); Andrew Lang, 'Theological Romances,' *Contemporary Review*, June 1888, 814-824 (p. 819).

would hesitate to name, are unnatural hybrids of no-sex'.¹⁷ Corelli's views on femininity and the Woman Question were complex and often contradictory, and while scholars have importantly illuminated the serious, if unorthodox feminist undergirding of Corelli's *oeuvre*, the author's well-documented antipathy for the perceived prurience and immorality of the New Woman was unequivocal, and no doubt fueled her enmity for Schreiner.¹⁸

The Story of an African Farm, generally considered to be the first New Woman novel, was initially rejected by a number of publishing houses, including Macmillan and Bentley & Son, who believed the text to be immoral. Both publishers objected particularly to the conduct of Schreiner's girl protagonist, Lyndall, who is described by Sally Ledger as 'the prototype of the New Woman'.¹⁹ That Lyndall not only becomes pregnant out of wedlock but also refuses to marry the father of her unborn child was frequently cited in unfavourable reviews of the novel, offered up as evidence of the ostensible depravity of both the text and its author. For Corelli, who promoted an exaggerated form of feminine virtue both in her novels and in her carefully crafted public image, Schreiner's unwillingness to critique Lyndall's sexual behaviour would have been deplorable, not least because of the pernicious effects such a depiction could have on readers. As Federico has argued, Corelli's antipathy for New Woman writers can be explained, at least in part, by

¹⁷ Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, p.161.

¹⁸ For more on Corelli's ambiguous relationship to the late Victorian women's movement, as well as the serious, idiosyncratic feminist thinking that underpins her work, see Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, pp. 94-127; Janet Galligani Casey, 'Marie Corelli and Fin de Siècle Feminism', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 35:2 (1992), pp. 163-178; Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, pp. 129-131; and Hammond, *Reading, Publishing and the Formation of Literary Taste in England*, pp.137-153. Carol Margaret Davison offers an intriguing consideration of Corelli's strategic use of female embodiment, including her 'bizarre' manipulation of 'beautiful female corpses' to intercede on issues such as 'gender roles, equality and power dynamics, women's rights and spiritualism'. See 'Over her (Undead) Body: Gender Politics, Mediumship and Feminist Spiritual Theology in the Works of Marie Corelli' in *Reinventing Marie Corelli for the Twenty-First Century*, pp.137-156 (p.139). In the same collection, Angie Blumberg's essay argues for Corelli's reliance on archaeology, Decadence and the late Victorian Woman Question in order to 'craft a feminist rhetoric and aesthetic'. See "'Something Vile in the Composition": Marie Corelli's *Ziska*, Decadent Portraiture and the New Woman' in *Reinventing Marie Corelli for the Twenty-First Century*, pp. 177-192 (p.178).

¹⁹ Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siecle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 81.

her belief that they were 'directly responsible for the woman reader's damnation'.²⁰

II. The Politics of the Press

It is curious then that the focus of Corelli's satire in *The Silver Domino* is not Schreiner's risqué New Woman novel, but rather *Dreams*, the unusual collection of highly stylised allegories published by T. Fisher Unwin in 1890. *Dreams* was distinctly out of step with the prevailing trends of the late-Victorian literary marketplace, then dominated by the novel, and while critical opinion was split over the artistic merits of the allegories, the volume was not considered provocative in the way that *The Story of an African Farm* had been. The public championing of the volume by Wilde, who published several of Schreiner's allegories in his periodical *Woman's World*, and by Arthur Symons, the poet, the critic and editor of the Symbolist magazine *The Savoy*, would have placed *Dreams* within uncomfortable proximity to the decadence that Corelli openly deplored. In spite of this, it is the critical reception of the collection that forms the focus of Corelli's critique in *The Silver Domino*, although Symons's role in the 'booming' of Schreiner's volume is highlighted as especially problematic.²¹ Admirers of *Dreams* praised its bold, innovative style and musical qualities, which led to some reviewers likening it to poetry. Symons, writing in the *Athenaeum*, classified the allegories as 'poems in prose', while a critic for the *Daily Chronicle* described their author as a 'poet-painter'.²² For Corelli, whose novels were pejoratively associated with feminised mass culture rather than the more rarefied, masculine sphere of art, such eulogising reviews functioned to unfairly code Schreiner's text as worthy of serious consideration by serious readers. And it is precisely the role of critics in conferring cultural value on texts that is at the heart of Corelli's critique of Schreiner in *The Silver Domino*, and not

²⁰ Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 78.

²¹ For a cogent overview of scholarship that explores Corelli's complex, contradictory relationship with literary decadence, see Blumberg, "Something Vile in the Composition", p.179.

²² Arthur Symons, 'Dreams,' *Athenaeum*, January 1891, p. 46; Schreiner quoted in Stephanie Forward, 'Introduction,' *Dreams, Visions and Realities* (University of Birmingham Press, 2003), p. xvii.

for the first time. This particular animus has a lively history that predates this text, including a very revealing print encounter that provides an important backdrop to the later parody, and which was, fittingly, played out in the pages of Corelli's old *bette noire*, the *Pall Mall Gazette*.

Prior to the publication of *Dreams*, Schreiner's short allegorical stories were tied into the economy of periodical publishing, appearing in publications such as the *Fortnightly Review*, the *New Review*, and Oscar Wilde's *Woman's World*, always accompanied by a whirlwind of publicity. After the success of Schreiner's bestselling debut novel, it was a major publishing coup for a periodical editor to feature new fiction by the author of *The Story of an African Farm*, with such works representing even more lucrative cultural currency following the high sales of *Dreams*. Thus, the appearance of an unsigned allegorical story that was attributed to Schreiner at the offices of the *Pall Mall Gazette* in February 1891 would have given its editor cause for celebration. The allegory, which was sent 'by a correspondent as having originally appeared in an old number of an African missionary magazine, now extinct' was entitled 'God's Light on the Mountains' and, even though the authorship of the short story could not, by the newspaper's own admission, be absolutely verified as the work of Schreiner, the story nevertheless featured in the *Pall Mall Gazette* under the unambiguous headline 'Another 'Dream' by Olive Schreiner.'

The story is an impressive impersonation of some of the identifying formal and stylistic hallmarks of *Dreams*, including its lyrical qualities, the centrality of unnamed and archetypal protagonists ('Two women came into the Light'), and the Biblical imagery and cadences ('And the winged Love, who wept alone, drew near to him and kissed his feet').²³ 'God's Light on the Mountains' was considered a sufficiently close approximation of Schreiner's idiosyncratic style to be confirmed as such in a reprint of the story in the paper's weekly digest, the *Pall Mall Budget*, where it featured prominently alongside a portrait of the author and a facsimile of her signature, which functioned to authenticate her authorship.²⁴

The first reader to question the provenance of the allegory publicly was

²³ 'Another Dream By Olive Schreiner,' *Pall Mall Gazette*, 6 February 1891, p. 3.

²⁴ 'Another Dream by Olive Schreiner,' *Pall Mall Budget*, 12 February 1891, p. 18.

Arthur Symons. In a letter to the editor published in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, Symons conceded that the ‘imitation of Schreiner’s style is, on the whole, admirable,’ but concluded that the allegory is a ‘forgery,’ albeit ‘an extremely clever forgery’.²⁵ Schreiner had returned to South Africa towards the end of 1889 and did not hear about the story being attributed to her until almost a month after it had been published. At this point she sent a telegram to her publisher, Thomas Fisher Unwin, bearing the following succinct yet unequivocal repudiation: ‘allegory forgery’.²⁶ By this time, several more letters had appeared in the *Pall Mall Gazette* speculating on the mystery of the story’s authorship, until a sanctimonious letter was published from its real author, Marie Corelli, who could barely conceal her sense of triumph with how the scenario had played out:

I read with some surprise and pleasure in your issue of February 12th a little allegory of mine entitled ‘God’s Light on the Mountains.’ I am greatly honoured by your publication of so slight an effort of my fancy, and I am much indebted to your unknown correspondent who has rescued it from oblivion to which it was consigned when ‘allegories’ were not in fashion and ‘dreams’ had no chance of being revealed. Your very generous praise in terming it a ‘poetical’ allegory has made me proud indeed, as I believe it is the first laurel-leaf of approbation I have ever won at your hands. I only venture to ask of you now that you will kindly enlighten your readers as to the real author, who is *not* Olive Schreiner, but simply, Marie Corelli.²⁷

The suggestion that ‘God’s Light on the Mountains’ predates Schreiner’s ‘fashionable’ allegories is evidently disingenuous, given Corelli’s flagrant pilfering of key tropes and phrases from the stories in *Dreams*. The rolling ‘white mist’ and the towering mountains of Schreiner’s most famous allegory ‘The

²⁵ Arthur Symons, ‘Another Dream By Olive Schreiner,’ *Pall Mall Gazette*, February 11, 1891, p. 2.

²⁶ Olive Schreiner. Letter to T. Fisher Unwin, 8 March 1891, Harry Ransom Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.

²⁷ Marie Corelli, ‘Another Dream By Olive Schreiner,’ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 16 February 1891, p. 2.

Hunter' become, in Corelli's hands, 'drooping veils of mist' and 'great mountains,' while the 'eternal sunshine' of Schreiner's story is replaced, fittingly, with Corelli's 'eternal snow'.²⁸

That Corelli's allegory amounted to little more than an impersonation of the style of *Dreams* was an opinion held by Schreiner herself, who explained in a letter to her friend Mary Sauer that the story was 'a parody on my little Dream book, bits taken out of all the allegories & run one into another, without connection.'²⁹ Schreiner was irritated by the story, which she interpreted as a cowardly and mean-spirited slight on her literary style, but nevertheless declined her publisher's advice to pursue legal action for copyright infringement on the basis that such a move 'might yet get her [Corelli] into trouble & that I would not do if the sum possibly to be gained were fifty times as large as it is.'³⁰ In spite of the clear evidence that pegged the story as at best parody and at worst plagiarism, Corelli continued to claim 'God's Light on the Mountains' as an original work, and even later republished it as the lead story in her short fiction collection, *Cameos* (1895).

Whether original, forgery, parody or plagiarism, what is more significant than the squabble over the status of Corelli's story is its strategic and performative function as a cautionary tale about and protest against the unchecked powers of the press to construct culturally significant narratives about literary value. Behind the puffery of Corelli's false modesty in her letter to the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* lies the sincerer objective of exposing the bias that she perceived as being endemic in the reviewing culture of the period. Certainly, in the context of 'God's Light on the Mountains,' Corelli's sense of injustice is understandable: when attributed to Olive Schreiner, the story was granted a platform and the kind of serious consideration in the *Pall Mall Gazette* that would have been unimaginable had its real author's name been attached to it. The hostility between Corelli and the *Pall Mall Gazette* stretches back to the publication of her first bestselling novel, *A Romance of Two Worlds* in 1886, a

²⁸ "Another Dream By Olive Schreiner,' *Pall Mall Gazette*, 6 February 1891, p. 3.

²⁹ Olive Schreiner. Letter to Mary Sauer, 20 February 1890, National Library of South Africa, Special Collections, Cape Town, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.

³⁰ Olive Schreiner. Letter to T. Fisher Unwin, 8 March 1891, Harry Ransom Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.

work that was unequivocally denounced by a reviewer for that paper who heaped scorn upon Corelli's dependence on imagination over philosophical rigor, and concluded that it would be 'impossible for a sober critic to quite approve of her rush into print'.³¹ Indeed, the irony of Corelli's having received a 'laurel-leaf of approbation' from the *Pall Mall Gazette* for an allegory attributed to a more critically acclaimed writer did not go unnoticed in other quarters of the press. A reviewer at *The Speaker*, for example, was quick to point out the 'fairly steady revilement' of Corelli's work by the *Pall Mall Gazette* prior to the publication of the allegory, and wryly encouraged the author to 'appreciate to its fullest extent the praise bestowed upon her by the *Pall Mall*, which journal, by the merest hap-hazard, evidently considers her 'style' to be quite as felicitous as that of the author of 'Dreams'.³²

For Corelli, what this incident cast light on was not simply the complicity of periodicals such as the *Pall Mall Gazette* in the injudicious 'booming' of fashionable authors, but also the centrality of an author's name and prior reputation to the valuation of a given cultural product, over and above any intrinsic qualities of the work itself. As she quite rightly pointed out in relation to 'God's Light on the Mountains': 'so long as the *Pall Mall* authorities thought the story was by a woman whom they had elected to 'boom,' it was worth prominent notice; but that, on the contrary, as soon as they had learned it was by another woman, whom they were strenuously endeavouring to 'quash,' it became a different matter.³³ Here, Corelli anticipates Foucault's postulation of the primacy of the name within an author-led system of cultural value, one in which the reader's expectations for a given text is intimately connected with the authorial name attached to it.³⁴ As she cunningly demonstrated to the critics and readers of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, the value of 'God's Light on the Mountains' was altered beyond recognition once it had been disinvested of both press support and an author's name that was more readily associated with art than with the market even if, in Corelli's own words 'the story itself remained the same, - neither

³¹ 'An Audacious Novel,' *Pall Mall Gazette*, 9 April 1886, p. 5.

³² *The Speaker*, 21 February 1891, p. 221.

³³ Marie Corelli, *Cameos* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1895). p. x.

³⁴ Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. by Paul Rabinow (London Penguin, 1984), 101-120.

better nor worse for praise or censure'.³⁵

III. The Gendering of Authorship

Corelli always denied any direct involvement in either the design or the execution of the *Pall Mall* hoax, instead pinning the entire 'curious incident' on a mysterious 'waggish friend' in her highly defensive introduction to *Cameos*. This unlikely claim to innocence was, however, compromised by the fact that the same two targets – Olive Schreiner and those critics who 'boomed' her in the press – faced further merciless parody in *The Silver Domino*, a text that was first published anonymously but subsequently attributed to Corelli.³⁶ For Schreiner, it was the lack of a signature attached to the allegory in the *Pall Mall Gazette* that was particularly objectionable, more so than the content of the story itself. Schreiner was not against anonymity *per se* (she had published *The Story of an African Farm* under the male pseudonym, Ralph Iron, after all), but she did consider it cowardly for a writer to conceal his or her identity when launching any kind of critique. As she pointed out in a letter to a friend following the publication of Corelli's allegory: 'I think any thing which contains the slightest attack on a person or party, or even a book, should always be signed; you can't attack a thing unless you are willing to stand behind the attack'.³⁷ Schreiner was not alone in her disapproval of writers who attempted to safeguard themselves from accountability by issuing works of a pejorative nature without an accompanying signature. Indeed, many reviews and press notices of *The Silver Domino* criticised its author for shrouding her identity with the mask and cloak of the Domino.³⁸ A literary critic writing in *The New Century Review*, for example,

³⁵ Corelli, *Cameos*, p.x.

³⁶ While Corelli's authorship of *The Silver Domino* is assured, Teresa Ransom has advanced the possibility that the controversial MP and editor of *Truth*, Henry Labouchere could have written parts of the text. See Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, pp. 70-73.

³⁷ Olive Schreiner. Letter to Mary Sauer, 20 February 1890, National Library of South Africa, Special Collections, Cape Town, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.

³⁸ As Sarah E. Maier has noted in her excellent, recent discussion of *The Silver Domino*, some of the text's early reviewers assumed that the author was male, 'thus proving Corelli's point of gendered literary expectations.' See "'The Muses are Women: So Are the Fates": Corelli's Literary Masquerade(s)' in *Reinventing Marie Corelli for the Twenty-First Century*, pp.81-100 (p. 90).

concluded that anonymity had, in this instance, been unfairly deployed 'as a cover wherefrom to launch arrows of scorn and abuse'.³⁹

While anonymity acted in one sense as a kind of shield to protect Corelli from those she pilloried, the decision to publish *The Silver Domino* without her famous name attached (which was itself also an invention) functioned to liberate the author from the gendered constraints of her status as a woman writer of bestselling romance novels.⁴⁰ Indeed, the broader debate about anonymity in the press and in literature throughout the nineteenth century was, at least in part, mediated through the complex prism of gender. The argument in favour of signature over anonymity, for example, was often predicated on the binarism of the manly candour of the former versus the feminine cowardice associated with the latter. Yet, as Joanne Wilkes has shown, for many women writers, 'anonymity promoted manliness in another sense'; by virtue of anonymous authorship, women writers were afforded 'opportunities for adopting voices which, either implicitly or explicitly, might come across to readers as male'.⁴¹ Anonymity therefore concealed not only the author's name but also the author's sex, allowing women writers to venture safely into more 'masculine' terrain. Moreover, as Alexis Easley has argued, anonymous publication enabled women writers to 'evade essentialized notions of 'feminine' voice and identity,' and therefore functioned as an effective strategy for women writers to neutralise the gender-based strictures of the literary field.⁴² This strategy was particularly significant for an established, popular writer such as Corelli, who wanted, in the case of *The Silver Domino*, to circumvent the same factors she had sought to highlight through the incident with the *Pall Mall Gazette*; namely, the assumptions made about her work by virtue of her name, reputation, and association with the feminine mode of the romance.

³⁹ 'The Trail of the Bookworm,' *The New Century Review*, June 1898, p. 491.

⁴⁰ Marie Corelli was, in fact, born Minnie Mackay. While the details of her background remain hazy, it is supposed that she was the illegitimate daughter of Charles Mackay (a Scottish poet and journalist whom she claimed adopted her) and his servant Mary Elizabeth Mills, who later became his wife. For more on Corelli's early life, see T.F.G. Coates and R.S.W. Bell. *Marie Corelli: The Writer and the Woman* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1903), 14-26 and Ransom, *The Mysterious Marie Corelli*, 9-29.

⁴¹ Joanne Wilkes, *Women Reviewing Women in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, p.8.

⁴² Alexis Easley, *First Person Anonymous: Women Writers and Victorian Print Media* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), p.27.

Concerns about gender bias as a preclusion to serious critical consideration were also shared by Schreiner, who was motivated to adopt a male pseudonym as a way of displacing gender in critical evaluations of her work. Schreiner's chosen pseudonym, Ralph Iron, has links to Emerson, a great influence on her work, yet as Simon Lewis suggests, the 'rigidly inflexible metal' of the fictitious surname also 'emphasizes the male line of descent', and therefore signifies, in a more practical sense, Schreiner's attempt as a woman writer to bypass the constraints of that tradition.⁴³ This view was not, however, shared by her publisher, Chapman & Hall. As Schreiner explained in a letter to the literary critic Philip Kent in 1883, John Chapman believed that if *The Story of an African Farm* 'were known as the work of a girl from the Cape' instead of the work of a male author, the novel 'would be more read and more gently reviewed'.⁴⁴ Chapman was correct in his projection that the novel as attributed to Ralph Iron would be met with harsh criticism from some reviewers, however he also came to appreciate the significance of Schreiner's pseudonym in a marketing context. Even after Schreiner had been unmasked as the real author of *The Story of an African Farm*, her *nom du plume* was placed before her real name on subsequent editions of the text issued by Chapman & Hall, revealing the publisher's understanding of the commercial significance of Schreiner's pseudonym. The name Ralph Iron, as Andrew Van der Vlies argues, had become 'as much a part of the work's identity as the title'.⁴⁵

Where pseudonymity translated into cultural currency for Schreiner and her publishers, it was anonymity that paid dividends in the case of *The Silver Domino*. The mystery of the text's authorship became one of its key talking points: 'The literary puzzle of the hour,' *The Literary World* reported, was 'Who

⁴³ Simon Lewis, *White Women Writers and Their African Invention* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), p. 64. For an important corrective to the critical perception that many Victorian women writers issued their work under a male pseudonym see Catherine Judd, 'Male Pseudonyms and Female Authority in Victorian England', in *Literature in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-Century Publishing and Reading Practices*, ed. by John O. Jordan and Robert L. Patten (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), 250-268.

⁴⁴ Letter from Olive Schreiner to Philip Kent, 13 May 1883, Harry Ransom Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.

⁴⁵ Andrew Van der Vlies, *South African Textual Cultures: White, Black, Read All Over* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2007), p.31.

wrote *The Silver Domino*?⁴⁶ Rumours abounded in the press as to the identity of the author behind such a merciless attack on the literary establishment, with a number of reviewers implicating Corelli almost immediately. The *Novel Review*, for example, reported just a month after the text's publication that they had received a 'mysterious communication' that revealed the Domino as 'a lady whose books are much admired by Royalties,' as Corelli's were widely reported to have been.⁴⁷ If, as Lizzie White argues, the prominence of Corelli's signature on her books functioned as an integral aspect of her authorial persona and high sales, then it was the effacement of the authorial self as commodity that led to the very different kind of Corelli sensation in the case of *The Silver Domino*.⁴⁸ Anonymity, in this instance, granted Corelli the widespread and serious press attention she was denied in her literary life, enabling the author, for the first time, to include two pages of excerpts from laudatory reviews in later editions of the text. Significantly, the first review cited in this paratextual feature references Corelli's send-up of Schreiner: 'The parody of Miss Olive Schreiner is one of the best and severest parodies we have seen for years,' remarked a reviewer for *The Daily Chronicle*, 'The book is one to read and laugh over.'⁴⁹

The range of reputations panned in *The Silver Domino* ensured that many influential readers did not appreciate the joke. News of the controversy surrounding the text reached as far as New Zealand, with *The New Zealand Graphic* reporting the 'considerable sensation' the book had caused in Britain, and describing its content as an exhibition of mud-slinging in excelsis'.⁵⁰ The cast of characters with mud on their faces was certainly vast; from critics, reviewers, journalists and editors, to authors, publishers and their readers, few who had crossed or annoyed Corelli were spared her wrath. Schreiner features twice in *The Silver Domino*: in a chapter entitled 'The Story of a South African Dream', dedicated to lampooning the literary register of *Dreams*, and then again in a satirical round-up parody poem entitled 'English Scribes and Small

⁴⁶ Quoted in Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli*, pp. 69-70.

⁴⁷ 'Books Tabooed at the Libraries,' *Novel Review*, December 1892), p. 796.

⁴⁸ Lizzie White, 'Commodifying the Self: Portraits of the Artist in the Novels of Marie Corelli' in Ann R. Hawkins and Maura Ives eds., *Women Writers and the Artefacts of Celebrity in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012), pp.205-18.

⁴⁹ Corelli, *The Silver Domino*, p. i.

⁵⁰ 'Books and Authors,' *The New Zealand Graphic*, 15 June 1893, p. 560.

Reviewers' in the text's penultimate chapter.⁵¹ 'The Story of a South African Dream' – an unsubtle blending of *The Story of an African Farm* and *Dreams* – takes the form of a satirical allegory written in a crude approximation of Schreiner's distinctive and instantly recognisable style.

The parody allegory mocks as it mimics the multi-layered dream states, biblical tropes and sparse, pared-back language that are the identifying hallmarks of a number of Schreiner's best-known stories, including 'The Sunlight Lay Across My Bed,' the allegory which Corelli's pastiche takes as its base text. The unnamed 'woman from South Africa' at the centre of the parody is clearly Schreiner, who falls asleep on her bed and dreams that she meets God.⁵² In her dream, God tricks the woman into travelling down a hole that leads her to hell, where she encounters the critic 'X.Y.Z.' from the *Athenaeum* and the 'Religious Spirit' of the *Pall Mall*. Mocking what Corelli perceived to be Schreiner's highbrow literary pretensions and consciously esoteric style, the 'woman from South Africa' awakes to discover that her allegory was not the result of some intensive metaphysical inquiry, but was rather the by-product of a late supper she had consumed the night before which had caused her to experience 'bad dreams'.⁵³

In addition to their aesthetic shortcomings, Schreiner's 'bad dreams' were doubly problematic for Corelli on account of the role that she perceived the press played in their deification as literary art. Mocking the hyperbole that characterised some contemporary appraisals of *Dreams*, Corelli cites a real and much-quoted review of Schreiner's text by Arthur Symons in the *Athenaeum*, in a spurious appraisal of her own parody: 'It is a beautiful little story, if you ask the *Athenaeum* about it, it will tell you that it is 'like a picture by Watts'; that 'it has no forerunners in literature and probably will have no successors'.⁵⁴ The parody

⁵¹ 'English Scribes and Small Reviewers' is a play on Lord Byron's *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809). Byron's satirical poem was a riposte to a famous, scathing review of his first collection of poems, *Hours of Idleness* (1807), which had been published in the *Edinburgh Review*.

⁵² Corelli, *The Silver Domino*, pp. 186-188.

⁵³ Corelli, *The Silver Domino*, p. 189.

⁵⁴ Corelli, *The Silver Domino*, p. 184. This quotation was taken from a review of *Dreams* by Arthur Symons, which was published in the *Athenaeum* in January 1891. See 'Dreams', *Athenaeum*, January 1891, pp. 46-47. The same quotation was included in all subsequent advertisements of the text in the press throughout the 1890s, and was no doubt chosen by Corelli because it was recognisable.

review makes clear the extent of Corelli's resentment of her own, largely negative critical reception, yet, by figuratively consigning both Schreiner and her press supporters to hell, the author also consciously separates her success in the marketplace from the corruption and conceit she identified as central to Schreiner's apparent acceptance by the literary establishment. By exposing Schreiner as an author whose reputation for 'genius' was sanctioned as a result of 'shrieks, in columns of hysteric praise', Corelli extends the terms of her critique laid out in the *Pall Mall Gazette* by positioning herself as an author who is beyond criticism, and who is able to thrive without first winning the favour of influential reviewers.⁵⁵

What Corelli's account of Schreiner's critical reception effaces, however, is the hostility that Schreiner regularly faced in the British press. Dissenting views of her work appeared even within those periodicals Corelli accused of 'booming' her, including the *Athenaeum*, where an alternative assessment of *Dreams* to the one lampooned in *The Silver Domino* proposed that Schreiner's collection might have been more suitably titled 'Nightmares'.⁵⁶ Schreiner kept a watchful eye trained on the literary press throughout her writing career, and, like Corelli, was sensitive to negative reviews of her work. In a letter to the critic Philip Kent in 1883, Schreiner described her response to an unsigned review of *The Story of an African Farm* in which the novel is written off as 'terribly dull', writing: 'I felt the review in the 'Saturday' very keenly; I don't know what I cried, I think I was too much pained for that.'⁵⁷ Such an emotive response cannot be viewed, however, as a straightforward product of a wounded artistic sensibility; rather, it must be considered as bound up with the author's broader concerns about the professional implications such critical disapprobation could generate.

While Schreiner was never subjected to the same degree of sustained critical vilification as Corelli (not least because she was nowhere near as prolific), the two women shared a suspicion of the powers invested in 'what the papers say' for the formation of literary reputation, particularly for women

⁵⁵ Corelli, *The Silver Domino*, p. 344.

⁵⁶ 'English Literature in 1891,' *Athenaeum*, 2 January 1892, p. 23.

⁵⁷ Olive Schreiner. Letter to Philip Kent, 13 May 1883, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin.

writers.⁵⁸ Schreiner's adoption of a male pseudonym as a strategy for attracting serious consideration, first by publishers and then by reviewers, demonstrates her awareness of the gendered constraints of the literary marketplace. What Corelli therefore did not appreciate when she used Schreiner as an exemplar to militate against the patriarchal reviewing culture of the period, is that even women writers more readily associated with the 'masculine' sphere of art still struggled to be taken seriously as artists.

IV. Art and Democracy

Given that Corelli and Schreiner attempted to strategically obscure authorial identity in order to evade gendered assumptions being made about their work, it is unsurprising that both women viewed the increasing commodification of the author's life at this time with suspicion. Both were uncomfortable with the erosion of the line between an author's public life and private self in the journalism of the period, as represented by the escalating demand for interviews with and photographs of celebrity authors.⁵⁹ In fact, the language they use to describe this growing emphasis on an author's life at the expense of their work is strikingly similar: what Schreiner disparagingly refers to as the 'petty personal element' of literary journalism, Corelli terms the rise of the 'vulgar 'personal' note'.⁶⁰ Both writers believed that the elevation of the life of the author dislodged the work from its central position, and at the heart of this suspicion of the

⁵⁸ Olive Schreiner. Letter to Alice Greene, 25 December 1914, UCT Manuscripts & Archives, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.

⁵⁹ For an extensive consideration of women writers' emergence as literary celebrities in the Victorian period see Alexis Easley, *Literary Celebrity, Gender, and Victorian Authorship, 1850–1914* (University of Delaware Press, 2011). On the growing significance of authorial interviews and photography for women writers respectively see Richard Salmon, 'Signs of Intimacy: The Literary Celebrity in the 'Age of Interviewing,'' *Victorian Literature and Culture* 25:1 (1997), 159–77 and Linda Shires, 'The Author as Spectacle and Commodity: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Thomas Hardy', in *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination*, ed. by Carol T. Christ and John O. Jordan (Berkeley: University of Carolina Press, 1995), pp. 198–212. For more about Corelli's ambiguous relationship with celebrity culture see Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, 14-52, and for a discussion of the same in relation to Schreiner see Clare Gill, 'I am really going to kill him this time': Olive Schreiner, W.T. Stead and the Politics of Publicity at the *Review of Reviews*', *Victorian Periodicals Review* 46:2 (Summer 2013), 184-210.

⁶⁰ S.C. Cronwright Schreiner, *The Life of Olive Schreiner* (London, Unwin, 1924), p.295; Marie Corelli, *Free Opinions Freely Expressed* (London: Constable, 1905), p.17.

elevation of the 'personal' aspects of authors' lives in the press lies a passionate defence of the integrity of the female artist.

Corelli might have considered her style of authorship to be radically distinct from Schreiner's, however she did not conceive of the difference in terms of a simplistic split between the 'purists and the profiteers' as Peter McDonald has termed it.⁶¹ Rather, she refracted the whole idea of the 'serious' artist through the lens of her own experience, constructing a model of artistic genius that was buoyed by popularity and sales as opposed to the support of the intelligentsia. Corelli's outrage at what she termed 'Press-toadyism' therefore colludes not only with the author's sense of herself as a great artist, but also underpins her view of her own literary work as intrinsically democratic.⁶² By proclaiming herself a writer for the people rather than the press, Corelli aligns herself with the 'great B.P.' (that is, the British Public), the real arbiters of taste, who make their voices heard through the choices they make in the bookshops. In contrast, *The Silver Domino* casts Schreiner as an elitist villain, and her literary style is mocked as nonsense rather than rarefied art:

And so on the whole I like the 'allegory' style best, because it is both brief and obscure at the same time. It has the surface appearance of simplicity, but its depth – ah! it is surprising to what a depth you can go in an allegory. You can fall down a regular well of thought and go fast asleep at the bottom, and when you wake up you wonder what it was all about, and you have to begin that allegory over again. That is what I call 'reading' – hard reading – sensible reading. I like a thing you can never make head or tail of – the brain fattens on such provender.⁶³

For Corelli, Schreiner's abstruse literary style and desire to 'please the critics' rather than seek the admiration of readers, carried with it an anti-democratic strain.⁶⁴ The wedge she identifies between 'niche' artists like Schreiner and the

⁶¹ Peter D. McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice, 1880-1914* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), p.173.

⁶² Corelli, *The Silver Domino*, p.324.

⁶³ Corelli, *The Silver Domino*, p. 191.

⁶⁴ Corelli, *The Silver Domino*, p. 190.

mass reading public stands in opposition to the more reader-centric model of authorship she aligns herself with, one which locates the 'B.P.' as the supreme critic. A truly great artist, according to Corelli, should not have a 'lofty contempt for the public' but should, rather, 'work always for the public, and try to win their laurels from the public alone'.⁶⁵

Corelli's assessment of 'purist' authors' contempt for the mass market does have some basis in reality. As Andrew McCann notes, modern critics of late-Victorian popular culture often look to the private letters of writers such as Henry James and Joseph Conrad in order to demonstrate these authors' 'elitist disdain for commercially successful forms of writing' as well as their 'contempt for popular authors with strong sales figures'.⁶⁶ Federico, for example, cites Conrad as the embodiment of the 'modern 'artistic' author who desperately wants to make money and must generate sales but who despises the populace who would buy his books'.⁶⁷ Conrad's letters certainly provide ample evidence for this view: bestselling authors like Corelli and Hall Caine (neither of whom 'belongs to literature') are, in his view, popular because they 'express the common thought', and their books are read only by 'philistines'.⁶⁸ For Federico, Conrad's position is not unusual, but rather is symptomatic of the perspective of a range of novelists of the 1880s and 1890s who sought to avoid the 'suspiciously bourgeois stigma of popularity'. Interestingly, and perhaps even following Corelli, Federico cites Olive Schreiner alongside novelists such as Rudyard Kipling, H.G. Wells, Oscar Wilde and George Moore in an otherwise exclusively male roster of *fin-de-siècle* authors who she identifies as having wrestled with the competing claims of art and the pocket at various points in their careers.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Corelli, *The Silver Domino*, p. 296.

⁶⁶ Andrew McCann, *Popular Literature, Authorship and the Occult in Late Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 86.

⁶⁷ Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 57.

⁶⁸ Joseph Conrad, Letter to Aniela Zagorska, Senior, *The Selected Letters of Joseph Conrad*, Ed. by Laurence Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 110. For a more nuanced account of Conrad's ambiguous relationship with the commercial marketplace, see Mary Ann Gillies, *The Professional Literary Agent in Britain, 1880-1920* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005). See Stephen Dawson, *Joseph Conrad and Popular Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005) for an expansive consideration of Conrad's various forms of engagement with popular culture, from a fascination with Bovril advertising to the placement of his own work in popular magazines.

⁶⁹ Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, p. 57.

In reality, however, the lifestyle of the penniless artist held little appeal for Schreiner, who categorically did not subscribe to the lofty belief that artistic endeavours should exist outside of the cash nexus. Her letters document a clear desire to profit monetarily from her literary labour, a view that is summed up by a characteristically frank observation about her finances in a letter to her sister Frances: 'money does mean a lot in life'.⁷⁰ Contrary to Corelli's construction of her as a niche purveyor of 'hard reading' who is unconcerned with public opinion, Schreiner actually shared Corelli's desire for critical acceptance, popular appeal and financial remuneration. While she never enjoyed the phenomenal sales of one of Corelli's bestsellers, *The Story of an African Farm* had, by the end of the century, sold close to 100,000 copies in Britain alone, and had attained such an enormous popularity that it was voted one of the '100 Best Books of the Century' in the influential list published by *The Daily Telegraph* in 1899. Schreiner took great pleasure from the testimonials she received from her diverse reading audience, and, like Corelli, she was proud that her work appealed across class lines. In a letter to Karl Pearson in 1886 she boasted that she had received 'scores, almost hundreds of letters' from readers of *The Story of an African Farm*, 'from an Earl's son to a dressmaker in Bond Street, and from a coalheaver to a poet'.⁷¹ Corelli's charge of pandering to the intelligentsia rather than seeking to please readers would have been deplorable to Schreiner, given the conscious efforts she made to expand the audience for her work. As she noted in a letter to Thomas Fisher Unwin in 1892, it was at her insistence that Chapman & Hall had issued a cheap, one-shilling edition of *The Story of an African Farm* in 1890. The book, Schreiner explained, had been written for 'working men', and she considered the lower price necessary to ensure that 'boys like Waldo' (the novel's tragic boy-protagonist) could buy a copy 'and feel they were not alone'.⁷²

Schreiner did not view her fictional output as being distinct from her political activism; rather, her concerns about audience were utterly bound up with her desire to carry to the 'hearts of the people the truths (or untruths) of the Age'.⁷³

⁷⁰ Olive Schreiner, Letter to Frances ('Fan') Schreiner nee Reitz, 19 December 1914, UCT Manuscripts & Archives, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.

⁷¹ Richard Rive, ed, *Olive Schreiner Letters: Volume 1, 1871–1889* (Oxford: OUP, 1988), p. 109.

⁷² Rive, p.109.

⁷³ Rive, p.109.

Throughout the 1880s and 90s, Schreiner's fiction highlighted her political ideals and moral vision. The stories in *Dreams*, for example, were written for 'all Capitalists Millionaires & Middle-men – in England & America, & all high & mighty persons', whom she sought to reform via the socialist-feminist utopias depicted therein.⁷⁴ Thus, the charges of elitism levelled against Schreiner in *The Silver Domino* ran counter to the moral and political imperatives that underpinned texts such as *Dreams*, as well as to the author's deeply held conviction that literature could effect real social change. Corelli was no friend of socialism or suffrage, and while she may have found Schreiner's freethinking and political radicalism objectionable, her public tirades against the author do not register this discontent. For Corelli, the politically charged nature of the allegories was evidently an ancillary concern to the castigation of the elitist and anti-democratic mode of authorship that she considered Schreiner to embody.

The irony at the heart of the uncharitable and misguided characterisation of Schreiner as a pretentious purist is that it is, in fact, Corelli herself who emerges from *The Silver Domino* bearing many of the hallmarks of a bona fide literary snob. While honour and integrity certainly underpin the passionate defence of the 'Excellent B.P.' mounted from behind the mask of the Domino, Corelli's crusade against the elitism and corruption that she perceives as inherent amongst the 'inner elect' of the late-Victorian literary world is nevertheless compromised by the disdain she shows for other bestselling writers. In a chapter entitled 'Of Writers in Grooves', Corelli critiques those authors 'who, as soon as they find one particular sort of 'style' that chances to hit the taste of the public, keep on grinding away at it with the remorselessness of an Italian street-organ player'.⁷⁵ Although it is male authors who are charged with being particularly susceptible to becoming stuck in a literary 'groove' (Hall Caine is written off as a result of his 'utterly unchanged and unchangeable' literary style), Corelli's critique of predictability in fiction is notable for its biting assessment of the shortcomings of the novels produced by the bestselling female authors of the age. Mary Elizabeth Braddon's novels are likened to 'a child's marionette theatre, having the same set of puppets, who can be placed

⁷⁴ Olive Schreiner. Letter to T. Fisher Unwin, 26 September 1892, Harry Ransom Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, Olive Schreiner Letters Project transcription.

⁷⁵ Corelli, *The Silver Domino*, p.132.

in position to enact over and over again the same sort of play'; Mrs Humphry Ward is mocked for being stuck in a 'religious groove', while 'Poor' Mrs Henry Wood is written off as a 'wonderfully groovy' author who writes 'in the style of an educated upper housemaid.'⁷⁶ Other popular female writers are castigated on the basis of deficiencies of plot (Edna Lyall's novels are described as 'astoundingly dull') and language (Rhoda Broughton is criticised for the 'liberties she takes with the English language [which] are frequently vulgar and unpardonable')⁷⁷

Even if these criticisms were intended to amuse, it is difficult to square Corelli's disparagement of popular female writers with her stated preferences for anti-elitist forms of literature and authorship, and a non-gendered model of literary reviewing. The language she draws upon in her descriptions of her female contemporaries spans the spectrum of stereotypes often associated with women writers in the 1890s press, ranging from child-like and pious to boring and vulgar. In addition to highlighting Corelli's reliance on the very gendered terminology she objected to in the context of her own critical reception, her attack on popular authors is all the more revealing when positioned alongside the women writers identified in *The Silver Domino* as being worthy of defence. These figures rank among the most celebrated authors of the age, and include such established literary 'greats' as George Eliot, Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, among whose number Corelli no doubt counted herself. The contradictions inherent within Corelli's philosophy of female authorship are, therefore, considerable: she denigrated cultural elitism while remaining utterly wedded to ideas of artistic genius; she occupied the position of bestselling woman writer, yet also constructed a clear hierarchy of textual value, one in which other women writers who sell books are firmly relegated to the bottom; and she promoted a democratic model of authorship while simultaneously acting as de facto cultural gatekeeper of what she herself referred to as the 'Palace of Art'.⁷⁸ If *The Silver Domino* documents Corelli's desire for a more meritocratic literary marketplace, then it also registers the limits of her personal commitment to that vision.

⁷⁶ Corelli, *The Silver Domino*, p. 158; p.152; p.158.

⁷⁷ Corelli, *The Silver Domino*, p.158; p.155.

⁷⁸ Corelli, *The Silver Domino*, p.284.

V. Conclusion

Yet for all the spitefulness and obvious inconsistencies evident within and between Corelli's many public attacks on the whole business of literature, these writings nevertheless serve as a remarkable record of their author's staunch unwillingness to accept the standards of a literary system that she perceived to be stacked against her. On a number of fronts Corelli was not only justified but also incisive in her criticisms of aspects of the literary world of the 1890s, from her objections to the gendering of her own critical reception to her dissatisfaction with reviewers' control over dominant narratives of literary value. By turning defence into attack in works such as *The Silver Domino*, Corelli attempted to wrest back control of her authorship, her image and her legacy, in a marketplace in which her status as popular woman writer necessarily rendered her position within it to be unstable. What is remarkable about her insights into the pitfalls of female authorship, however, is that her analysis rarely extended outwards to include the experience of other women writers (the 'remorseless literary females' of the period), who were more likely to be the focus of her wrath than the recipient of her support.⁷⁹ Corelli's revealing public objections to Olive Schreiner pivoted on her perceptions of the latter author's anti-democratic aesthetic, her disdain for readers, and for the reputation and prestige bestowed upon her by the same male reviewers by whom Corelli had been rejected.

What Corelli did not realise, and what her public objections to Schreiner ironically reveal, is the degree of similarity that characterised the two authors' experience of the late-Victorian literary world. Schreiner's career may have combined popular success with artistic recognition more successfully than Corelli's, however critical judgments of her work were often similarly inflected with the gendered stereotypes about women writers, their temperaments, and the limits of their talent, which were commonplace in press responses to Corelli's fiction. At various points in their careers, and in an attempt to bypass the intrinsic biases of the patriarchal reviewing apparatus of the period, both women strategically obscured their female authorial identities by choosing not to publish books with their names attached. This reformulation of identity can be seen as an attempt to

⁷⁹ Corelli, *The Silver Domino*, p. 144.

focus critical attention on ‘the work’ and away from the gendered authorial self. If both perceived the gendered assumptions about women writers to be one of the greatest obstacles to their achieving cultural prestige, then it stands to reason that Corelli and Schreiner also shared a suspicion of the ‘cult of personality’ that was taking hold in literary journalism at the *fin de siècle*. When Schreiner was quoted in the press describing celebrity interviews as ‘abominations which accentuate the personality at the expense of the principle,’ these words could just as easily have been attributed to Corelli (‘Notes and News’).⁸⁰ The two authors’ hostility for the growing cultural value of authorial interviews, reported gossip, and the publication of photographs of famous writers, should be understood as symptomatic of their broader concern about the commodification of the woman writer, who was increasingly packaged as an object to be gazed at and consumed. That two women writers who were often considered by critics to occupy antithetical positions in the marketplace shared this concern indicates the extent to which the mechanics of commodification had become a key determinant of the success or otherwise of female authorship at this time.

In spite of the clear common ground that bridged their experience as celebrity authors, Corelli, in her writings about Schreiner, sought only to elucidate the ideological and artistic gulf that she identified as existing between them. Her public resistance to Schreiner was a strike not only against an unfair male literary system of which she perceived Schreiner to be an arbitrary beneficiary of, but also a rejection of the whole rhetoric of literary value that emerged in Britain during the *fin de siècle*. What Corelli failed to understand, however, was that Schreiner’s status as artist was far from secure; for some of the period’s leading critics and reviewers she was a genius, while for others her work was, variously, too popular or obscure, too experimental or political, too feminine or not feminine enough, to be claimed for art. To be a woman writer at this time, however successful – whether measured in terms of sales, in terms of column inches in the literary press, or both – was to occupy an ambiguous position within dominant, masculinist discourses of artistic distinction.

Yet, while Corelli and Schreiner both kept a watchful eye on critical responses to their works in the press, they also placed considerable faith in

⁸⁰ ‘Notes and News’, *The Academy* 1360 (28 May 1898), 580.

readers to bypass the period's arbiters of taste and to construct their own narratives of literary value. A revealing letter to the editor of *The Academy* published in 1897 serves as evidence of one such resistant reader. The letter writer, Huddleston J. Barker, was writing in response to a list of 'English Academicians' that had been published previously in *The Academy*, which he objected to on the grounds that it was unduly weighted towards male authors. 'I was much struck,' Barker writes, 'as I am sure many others of your readers must have been, by the scant justice done to the great modern school of female writers.' Reading against the grain of the periodical's masculine account of literary value, Barker proposes the inauguration of 'a second Academy, consisting entirely of eminent literary females'.⁸¹ Barker's diverse list of women writers, published alongside his letter, includes writers associated with the literary *avant garde*, New Woman writers, bestselling novelists and travel writers, as well as *both* Schreiner and Corelli, indicating that the hierarchy of 'eminence' suggested by critics was not necessarily reflected in the taste and reading practices of individual readers. Corelli's contention that bestsellers should not be atomised from the sphere of art was no doubt influenced by her firm sense of her own, unrecognised genius. However, her position also anticipates a shift in the author's critical fortunes that has taken place in more recent years, one which has seen her works restored, as Schreiner's have been, to scholarly accounts of the late-Victorian *avant garde*, including aestheticism and decadence, as well as to the genealogy of literary modernism.⁸² Corelli may have constructed her relationship to Schreiner exclusively through oppositions, however history has narrowed the gap between the two, indicating the extent to which it was confluence rather than contrast that characterised both authors' experience of professional female authorship, as well as their strategies for survival within the gendered terrain of the late-Victorian

⁸¹ Huddleston J. Barker, *The Academy* (13 November 1897), p.403.

⁸² On Corelli and modernism see Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, 128-164); Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, 115-144); R.B. Kershner, 'Joyce and Popular Culture: The Case of Corelli.' *James Joyce and his Contemporaries*, ed. by Diana A. Ben-Merre and Maureen Murphy (New York: Greenwood, 1989), 52-58; and Kershner, 'Modernism's Mirror: The Sorrows of Marie Corelli,' *Transforming Genres: New Approaches to British Fiction in the 1890s*, ed. by Nikki Lee Manos and Marie Jane Rochelson (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 67-86. On Schreiner and modernism see Jade Munslow Ong, *Olive Schreiner and African Modernism: Allegory, Empire and Postcolonial Writing* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018) and Anna Snaith, *Modernist Voyages: Colonial Women Writers in London, 1890-1945* (Cambridge: CUP, 2014).

literary marketplace.