

Jane Jordan and Andrew King, eds. *Ouida and Victorian Popular Culture*. Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Press, 2013. ISBN 987-1409405894. Price: US\$104.00/£60.00.

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From the 1860s through the 1890s, “Ouida” (Louise de la Ramé) (1839-1908) was a powerfully influential, best-selling, and prolific novelist, an anti-vivisectionist activist, and commentator on Italian and other international political issues. From the turn of the century until the 1990s, however, Ouida’s reputation plummeted. Literary critics tended to overlook her or to scorn her as a pretentious fantasist admired only by the ignorant. If the literary critics were dismissive, the biographers were positively virulent. Monica Stirling (*The Fine and the Wicked*), Eileen Bigland (*Ouida: The Passionate Victorian*), and Yvonne ffrench (*Ouida: A Study in Ostentation*) complained about everything from Ouida’s grating voice to Ouida’s preference for white satin. A great deal of the vitriol directed against Ouida throughout the twentieth century seems to have come from the fact that she was a plain, middle-class, single woman who nonetheless seemed to imagine she was worth seeing, reading, and hearing. Her frank sense of her own value seems to have been what scholars could not forgive.

Starting in the late 1990s, this situation began to change. Pamela Gilbert made a strong case for Ouida as a key sensation novelist (*Disease, Desire, and the Body in Victorian Women’s Popular Novels*); Jane Jordan paid attention to Ouida’s career;

Andrew King helped reveal the contours of Ouida's periodical work; Natalie Schroeder brought Ouida's fiction to a new audience; and I myself wrote about Ouida as an aesthetic innovator. A newly resurgent interest in Victorian women's writing, particularly sensation fiction, popular novels, and aesthetic texts, created contexts in which Ouida's writing could be read, not as failed attempts at realism but rather, as bold experiments in other genres. For twenty years, then, we have been able to begin to read Ouida as a prose stylist whose constructions of gender, sexuality, and nationhood offer complex political interventions, instead of sneering at her as an ugly woman with delusions of grandeur.

Ouida and Victorian Popular Culture is the newest entry in this long-overdue reconsideration, and its mere existence is cause for real celebration. A solid volume with serious scholarly work on Ouida—nine or ten scholars simply taking it for granted that Ouida is worth thinking about—is a particularly gratifying gift to anyone who knows the history of Ouida criticism. Moreover, *Ouida and Victorian Popular Culture* is no mere fan compilation, no volume of special pleading. It offers interesting accounts of a wide range of Ouida's writing, recovering her as a political writer, a theorist of international relations, a person enmeshed in Italian politics, and a keen observer of Russian ideas.

Three of the essays are particularly good. Diana Maltz's outstandingly well-informed and vibrantly written article gives an eye-opening account of Ouida's relation to Russian radical thought, which as far as I know has never been investigated before. This piece illuminates the complexity of Ouida's politics. Maltz is able to trace Ouida's fears of modern hybridity and rootlessness, which she associates with Russia, and her passion for jealousy, desire, and violence, rather than the nonviolence Tolstoy preached. Also especially rewarding is Pamela Gilbert's consideration of Ouida and canonicity. Gilbert

moves in a refreshingly unexpected direction by considering Ouida in terms of the sentimental novel tradition, a field that is far more central to American studies than British. By writing from the perspective of this alternative genre, Gilbert reveals how unthinkingly we rely on categories of filiation and complexity when we read women's writing, and how we might think about women's work in new ways. Finally, Nickianne Moody's article sheds light on Marie Corelli's and Ouida's divergent management of their popularity. Ouida and Corelli's names were often coupled together as the Queens of the Circulating Library, and they turn out to have shared some wariness about contemporary phenomena and some strategic use of essay-writing. Moody uses these two careers to move us towards a deeper consideration of the problem of empowerment in female popular writing.

Ouida and Victorian Popular Culture is especially strong in historical recovery of basic information. The articles by Andrew King, Jane Jordan, Hayley Jane Bradley, Sondeep Kandola, and Lyn Pykett will help future Ouida scholars. These articles provide close analysis of hard-won information that is always worthy and useful, although in some cases it can tip the articles too far towards literal cataloguing of results. King traces Ouida's money management, not only in terms of the minutiae of Ouida's business decisions but also, interestingly, in the context of her larger ideas about the economic nature of art and class dynamics. Ouida recognized that art was a commercial proposition, but she wanted an artisanal publishing relation (in King's useful term), rather than an industrial one. Ironically, this best-selling author resisted being categorized as "a generator of commodities" and insisted that personal aesthetic relations were the only way to resist the marketplace (19-21).

Ouida's mixed feelings, her confused but passionate allegiances, also inform Richard Ambrosini's detailed account of Ouida's history of writings on Italy. Ambrosini reveals that Ouida began by fantasizing about the Italian peasant's superiority to the English and Irish poor, but over time, she acquired a more realistic and nuanced political view. Eventually she was able to address Italian problems "as historical phenomena, and not as a violence perpetrated against a country which ought to be preserved outside history, in an eternal condition of minority" (180). Ambrosini's and Maltz's articles together make a strong case for reading Ouida as a theorist of nationhood.

Ouida's political prose is the subject of Lyn Pykett's useful article, "Opinionated Ouida," which also addresses her interest in Italian politics but puts it in the context of Ouida's response to degeneration theory, and strong support of environmentalist and animal rights causes. In "'Between Men': Romantic Friendship in Ouida's Early Novels," Jane Jordan demonstrates how differently Ouida's fiction was read when she was assumed to be a male writer. It is particularly useful that Jordan recovers the real sources for *Under Two Flags* (1867), debunking the longstanding myth that Ouida researched her male romances through all-male soldier dinner parties at the Langham Hotel.

Two articles beside Gilbert's and Moody's address Ouida's relation to other 1890s popular writing. Hayley Jane Bradley has a fascinating reconstruction of the variant versions of *Moths* (1880) as adapted for the stage, showing how each dramatist emphasized, altered, and restructured the story differently. Sondeep Kandola's article on Ouida's influence on Vernon Lee makes a persuasive case that both Lee's *Miss Brown* (1884) and *Ariadne in Mantua* (1903) owe a good deal to Ouida's 1877 novel *Ariadne*. Kandola's article, however, is somewhat marred by ending with a return to the long-

exploded theory of the anxiety of influence; it would have been more useful to use this information to think about 1890s affiliations, literary coteries, and cross-formations.

As I have summarized the articles, you may have noticed that something was missing. Oddly, not a single article does any kind of literary-critical analysis of Ouida's fiction. Anyone reading this book who does not know Ouida would come away with an impression that she was mainly important as a writer of journalism on international issues and perhaps as a source for other writers. It is as if the first collection of essays devoted to Trollope focused almost exclusively on his articles, barely mentioning his novels. This is particularly worrisome in a novelist who remains underread, because it is so easy to give the wrong impression of a career when it is not necessarily going to be corrected by knowledge on the reader's part. Thus, as excellent as *Ouida and Victorian Popular Culture* is, I wish it had paid more attention to what was, after all, Ouida's most notable contributions to Victorian popular culture. Perhaps one of the most important contributions of this volume, however, is that it suggests other books Ouida studies requires. *Ouida and Victorian Popular Culture* is not a text that covers the entirety of Ouida studies, but an indispensable contribution to a growing field.

Biographical Notice:

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