

**MARIE CORELLI: SCIENCE, SOCIETY AND THE BEST SELLER**

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## ABSTRACT

Issues which faced Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries include the effects of new scientific theories on traditional religious belief, the impact of technological innovation, the implications of mass literacy and the changing role of women. This thesis records how such issues are reflected in contemporary literature, focusing on the emergence of popular culture and the best seller, a term which conflates author and novel. The first English best seller was Marie Corelli and, by way of introduction, Part I offers a summary of her life and her novels and a critical overview of her work.

Part II of the thesis examines how the theory of evolution undermined traditional religious belief and prompted the search for a new creed able to defy materialism and reconcile science and religion. Contemporary literature mirrors the consequent interest in spiritualism during the 1890s and the period immediately following the Great War, and critical readings of Corelli's *A Romance of Two Worlds* and *The Life Everlasting* demonstrate that these novels – which form the nucleus of her personal theology, the Electric Creed – are based on selections from the New Testament, occultism and, in particular, science and spiritualism.

Part III of the thesis looks at the emergence of 'the woman question', the corresponding backlash by conservatives and the ways in which these conflicting views are explored in the popular literature of the time. A critical examination of the novella, *My Wonderful Wife*, reveals how Corelli uses social Darwinism in an ambivalent critique of the New Woman. Several of Corelli's essays are discussed, showing that her views about the role of women were complex. A critical analysis of *The Secret Power* engages with Corelli's peculiar kind of feminism, which would deny women the vote but envisages female scientists inventing and operating airships in order to secure the future of the human race.

Interest in Marie Corelli has re-emerged recently, particularly in occult and feminist circles. Corelli's immense popularity also makes her an important figure in cultural studies. This thesis adds to the body of knowledge about Corelli in that it consciously endeavours to avoid spiritualist or feminist ideological frameworks, instead using contemporary science as a context for examining her work.

## A NOTE ON THE TEXT

**Parts of this thesis contain close literary criticism of a number of Marie Corelli's works. To assist the reader, references to these works are inserted directly into the text of the thesis. The following abbreviations are used for the works discussed in detail:**

*FOFE:*            *Free Opinions Freely Expressed on Certain Phases of Modern Social Life and Conduct.* Constable, London, 1905

*LE*                *The Life Everlasting: A Reality of Romance.* Methuen, London, 1911

'*Little Bit*':     *My 'Little Bit'.* Collins, London, 1919

*MMM:*            'The Modern Marriage Market' in Marie Corelli et. al., *The Modern Marriage Market.* Hutchinson, London, 1898

*MWW:*            *My Wonderful Wife! A Study In Smoke,* 1889. Rpt: with *Vendetta! The Story of One Forgotten.* International Book Company, New York, N. D

*Romance:*      *A Romance of Two Worlds,* 1886. New edition, Bentley, London, 1887

*SP:*                *The Secret Power.* Methuen, London, 1921

*SS:*                *The Sorrows of Satan, Or, The Strange Experience of One, Geoffrey Tempest, Millionaire,* 1895. Rpt: Peter Keating, ed. Oxford World's Classics, Oxford, 1998

*Suffragette?:*    *Woman, or—Suffragette: A Question of National Choice.* C. Arthur Pearson, London, 1907