Gender and Social Resistance in Marie Corelli's *The Young Diana*

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ABSTRACT: This article explores *The Young Diana*'s subversive depiction of social norms and the novel's particularly complex representation, given Corelli's conservative brand of feminism. In this novel, Corelli's depiction of feminine disempowerment and control showcase an almost militant response to social attitudes that prize women exclusively for sexual attractiveness to men, but which consistently undervalue or despise female intellectual achievements. The eponymous heroine's initial confinement within culturally-constructed female roles – daughter, fiancée, spinster – is overturned when, after being used as the subject of a scientific experiment, she regains her physical youth and beauty. The heroine's allure to men of all ages becomes, in this work, an instrument of retribution and a social commentary on the standards by which women are unequally judged, arguing for greater equality – of a kind – between the sexes.

KEYWORDS: gender, science fiction, rebellion, romance, feminism, human experimentation

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IN THE LATE Victorian period as well as in the early years of the twentieth century, Marie Corelli's name was constantly before the reading public.[1] She sold thousands of copies and her novels were widely read, as well as widely pilloried by critics who styled her writings as popular in the most pejorative sense of the term. What was inescapable was the fact that Corelli 'rightly or wrongly, certainly occupies the most conspicuous position among our English women-novelists.'[2] Inevitably, such success could not be sustained,

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[1] This article is dedicated to the memory of Nickianne Moody. Her professional work on Corelli was pioneering, and her personal thoughtfulness is already missed.

[2] Horace B. Samuel, *Modernities* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1914), p. 114.

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and she fell out of fashion. The image of Corelli that has come down to us is one in which the negative elements all too frequently dominate. That she could be combative, and worse, with reviewers, publishers and other authors, has become inextricably linked to critical assessments of her fiction. So too, her very contemporary relevance and popularity can make her seem out of joint with a later era of readers nearly a century after her death. As one critic explains, 'Designated as popular "trash," her writings have fallen ready victim to cultural amnesia while those elements of Corelli's life that best accord with our vision of the popular author as crass simpleton or pompous crackpot have been retained.'[3] This lack of interest, other than in specialist critical circles, is a pity, as she has plenty to say. Subjects that frequently feature in her work include religion, broadly defined, contemporary society and unequal relations between the sexes. *The Young Diana* (1918), a much later work than the titles usually associated with Corelli's name, touches on all of these in an unequivocal and uncompromising fashion, though to date it has received relatively little critical attention. The comparative neglect of this particular book in favour of her place within fin-de-siècle literary culture and the history of the romance novel is unsurprising, as the work falls most decidedly outside the period of her greatest popularity. Nonetheless, its significance to the body of her writing should not remain overlooked. *The Young Diana*'s explicit engagement with questions of women's intellect, family expectations and female employment constitutes a remarkable late-career addition to Corelli's advancement of women's rights and particularly highlights the need for independent-minded women to resist social constrictions and to assert their equality.

Corelli combined progressive and traditional attitudes to women's roles. In spite of her socially conservative views, her professionalism enabled her to navigate successfully the literary marketplace of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The ostensible contradictions of her beliefs and actions which appear elsewhere in her life can easily be seen, as with her views on women's rights, through the single lens of her opposition to female suffrage. This aspect of her outlook, however, only reveals part of her beliefs, and taken alone represents a distorting perspective. Her rather complex opinions on women's rights prove more difficult to translate into twenty-first-century political terms, but Corelli strongly supported women's artistic and professional freedom, and in her fiction and non-fiction she wrote with great conviction about the social and domestic pressures exerted on women to sacrifice their intellect and ambitions for the sake of their families, their husbands and society in general. The 'boundless popularity' her writing enjoyed gave her the opportunity to create heroines who similarly embodied conservative yet independent values.[4] In striking this balance, Corelli occupied a terrain similar to but distinct from that of many of her contemporaries who published New Woman novels. As one critic has succinctly observed, the 'New Woman as a category was by no means stable,' and Corelli's fiction, while emphatically not considered New Woman fiction, frequently contains parallel tensions.[5] These heterogenous elements have been seen as a divide between 'commercialized popular literature' and 'polemic fiction', with the former frequently featuring New Women characters who were 'attractive, independent, highly intelligent young women entering a range of professions before (almost invariably) falling in love.'[6] Corelli resolutely refuses the 'polemic' of authors such as Olive Schreiner or Mona Caird, but she just as clearly often eschews the domestic happy endings of novels such as Grant Allen's *Miss Cayley's Adventures* (1899). At the same time, her heroines are often young, physically beautiful and clever, and they struggle to find their way in a society that does not know how or where to place them.

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[3] Christine Ferguson, *Language, Science and Popular Fiction in the Victorian 'Fin-de-Siècle': The Brutal Tongue* (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 49.

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[4] Thomas F. G. Coates and R. S. Warren Bell, *Marie Corelli, the Writer and the Woman* (Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs & Co., 1903), p. 18-19.

[5] Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the* Fin de Siècle (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 10.

[6] Chris Willis, '"Heaven defend me from political or highly educated women!": Packaging the New Woman for Mass Consumption', in *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact: Fin-de-Siècle Feminisms,* ed. by Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 53-65 (p. 53).

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While sharing some of the traits of New Woman protagonists, Corelli's heroines appear in novels that span her career and frequently portray varying types of conflict specifically depicted in gendered terms. In *Ziska* (1897), the narrative blends the supernatural with issues of gender and inequality to create a hybrid contemporary spirituality that 'defies a strict dogma or practice but is adaptable, modern, keeping pace with its milieu.'[7] The eponymous Ziska, reincarnated alongside the man who murdered her centuries previously, is able through this preternatural second chance to act out a form of revenge. This vengeance, it should be stressed, is seen as bringing about a kind of natural balance in a world that disadvantages women, and particularly women made vulnerable through their love for and devotion to unworthy and cruel men.

The Young Diana also addresses gender inequality through the fantastic but avoids doing so in a sensationalist way. In Corelli's works, supernatural means of redressing the divine balance are not seen as exotic or horrifying, but as natural phenomena imperfectly understood by mankind. This element of the narrative appears in other novels with such steampunk creations as Morgana Royal's airship in *The Secret Power* (1921) and Rafel Santoris's vessel in *The Life Everlasting* (1911), and a supernaturally influenced, futuristic science as an unexceptional part of life is also in evidence in *The Young Diana*. The novel's very beginning emphasises its own apparent normality. The heroine's parents are '"very well-to-do people," with a pleasantly suburban reputation for respectability and regular church attendance.'[8] The scene is not quite set for an idyllic domestic narrative, however, as Diana's prim and proper progenitors are revealed to be selfish, smug and unable to restrain their desires (her mother is a glutton, for example) while their daughter is described as an intelligent and thoughtful woman. The plot undercuts the idea of a contented prosperous family very effectively and significantly does so well before the overtly fantastical elements of the plot appear. Diana possesses all the talents that a heroine might wish for — she has a decent knowledge of languages, reads poetry and literature, manages the household skilfully and efficiently and possesses knowledge of all the latest scientific discoveries and theories. Her talents remain unrecognised and her social standing is diminished solely because she is over forty and single. In a novel concerned with 'the social value of unmarried women,' Corelli introduces her heroine as in many ways a stereotypical Victorian ideal woman.[9] Diana certainly exemplifies Corelli's pen portraits of 'the catch-twenty-two of women's experience, caught between the demands of a superior individual nature and social circumstances in which that superiority is not always recognized or rewarded.'[10] In her role as a dutiful daughter, Diana excels at all things domestic, from flower arranging and the perfect boiling of an egg to managing the servants and economising. Despite her innate gifts, her parents do not appreciate her, viewing her as disruptive of their personal ease at best and obtrusive at worst. In the past, they had rated her only for her youth and beauty and therefore for her potential to marry advantageously. As an individual, their daughter was not seen as intrinsically valuable.

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[7] Tatiana Kontou and Sarah Willburn, 'Introduction', in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Occult* ed. by Tatiana Kontou and Sarah Willburn (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), pp.1-16, (p. 8).

[8] Marie Corelli, *The Young Diana: An Experiment of the Future* (London: Hutchinson, 1918), p. 9.

This seemingly cynical authorial view of Victorian domestic life is further emphasised when it is revealed precisely how Diana came to be single. She was engaged to, and faithfully waited for, an officer. In this, as in her behaviour towards her parents, Diana exhibits all of the traits essential to a daughter, wife and mother. Corelli is unflinching in her depiction of the reward with which such love and devotion are met: having waited years to marry, Diana's fiancé heartlessly breaks off their protracted engagement and marries a younger woman as soon as he comes into money. Diana by this time is seen as too old to have any chance of success on the marriage market,

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[9] Annette R. Federico, *Idol of Suburbia: Marie Corelli and Late-Victorian Literary Culture* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), p. 100.

[10] Kristen Guest, 'Rewriting Faust: Marie Corelli's Female Tragedy', *Victorians Institute Journal*, 33 (2005), 149-177 (pp. 154-155).

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and her parents accordingly treat her in a manner not altogether different than her fiancé did. The social demands placed upon Diana as a daughter and as a potential wife are depicted as identical and she is equally devalued by those who should respect them most.

Where the novel is particularly radical, even within Corelli's oeuvre, is in its treatment of the theme of the put-upon offspring in the decisive break Diana creates for herself. She overhears her parents arguing, explicitly saying that she 'has spoilt her life and mine too' and that she 'is *in the way*.'[11] This 'final disillusion of my life,' distressing though it is, releases her.[12] She mourns the loss of the family bonds but decides to take the hurtful revelation as an opportunity to live an independent life – which is precisely what she does. Her liberation from her own social constraints paradoxically provides her parents with freedom from their own restraints. Selfish though their release is, the mere fact that it requires Diana's death or supposed death indicates how limiting their roles as parents are. Diana's parents believe she is '*in the way*' for purely selfish reasons, yet the novel gestures to the constraining nature of the family relationship. Diana has escaped marriage, but domestic ties irk and sour her parents and her former fiancé. The institution of marriage in the way it works in modern society is to blame for some, though by no means all, of the discontent among Diana's immediate circle. The breakdown of relations is due partly to those relations being so strictly enforced by the society in which the Mays live, a point Dimitrius later emphasises in a subtler fashion when he speaks of his mother's purpose in life as marrying and raising a child. The novel supports his dismissive opinion in its broader sense even as it questions the grand egotism of his sense of self-worth implicit in what he claims.

The novel repeatedly employs this dual criticism of individuals and society. Many of the characters have deeply unsympathetic aspects to their personalities, and that they form adversaries from whom Diana must break free is never in doubt. Yet despite this antagonism and the clear need for Diana to rebel against them and all that they represent, the novel hints that they can only be precisely what they are. They have been shaped by their constrictive social environment and are incapable of rising above it. Diana's parents are respected citizens within their own community, and, viewed from the community's restricted perspective, it is Diana who is the anomaly. The fact that such unpleasant people are well-regarded suggests that the fault lies primarily with the society and culture that exalts and defers to such self-interested people and such neglectful parents.

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[11] Corelli, *Young Diana*, p. 43, italics in original.

[12] Corelli, *Young Diana*, p. 64.

The novel further demonstrates that the cycle of physical and material unhappiness perpetuates itself in more than one generation. Just as Diana's parents grow increasingly physically unattractive and emotionally more juvenile as they age, so too do Captain Cleeve (her ex-fiancé) and his wife follow the example set by the previous generation, and there is every likelihood that their equally unlovely offspring will tread the same path of unhappy marriage and parenthood. Diana's escape from matrimony is providential, as she comes to realise subsequently. Both Cleeve and her father deceive themselves by not believing that any kind of relation, socially sanctioned or extramarital, constitutes part of their unhappiness. Diana's mother had certainly experienced a similar, though less overt, disappointment when her own earlier life had not turned out as hoped. She had been 'commonplace, certainly, but good-natured and willing to make the best of everything; needless to say that the illusions of youth vanished with the first years of wedded life (as they are apt to do), and she had gradually sunk into a flabby condition of resigned nonentity, seeing there was nothing else left for her.'[13] Diana's father and former fiancé, less mature, prove unwilling to concede any fault on their side or on society's. They place the blame upon their wives while lacking the self-awareness to see that their own trajectory has been identical to that of their spouses. As her friend Sophy Lansing had understood long before Diana's experiment, it is not entirely marriage itself that is problematic but the social expectations surrounding it and that joining a couple curtails a woman's freedom entirely. It is this

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[13] Corelli, *Young Diana*, p. 8.

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surrender of personal identity that Sophy resists. Similar efforts to take over a woman's personality are also seen in the various attempts that Dimitrius, Cleeve and Diana's father all make to control her after the completion of the experiment, even if none take the form of a marriage proposal. That none make an offer of marriage suggests how fundamental such assumptions are and that they underlie not only legal marriage but also all unequal gendered relationships, indicating how disadvantageous these relationships are to women. That the novel stresses Diana's perspective is unsurprising, but in showing how she fails to fit into unjust social structures while other characters conform to those identical structures, Corelli's general critique of a society that must be resisted is extended well beyond the limits of the protagonist.

Diana's personal radicalism is of a very quiet sort, and throughout she remains, like many of the early New Women, a 'fashionably feminine feminist.'[14] She emphatically does nothing blameworthy in leaving, as her rejection of her role as a daughter only arises when denial of her true, subservient, position becomes impossible. Having been denigrated by her parents, Diana comes to realise how such attitudes to women degrade both those who hold them and those who are the subject of them. Her awakening guides readers to a more inclusive view of the worth of middle-aged, unmarried women and the harmful social standards that injure them. Rather than embodying active revolt, Diana embraces a sorrowful acceptance of her new status. By doing so because this change is thrust upon her, rather than seeking it herself, her subsequent actions become more sympathetic and more in keeping with a conservative but emphatic feminism than they would have been had she espoused an explicitly radical cause from the start. Diana is 'inherently spiritual' as many of Corelli's heroines are, and her hard-won higher wisdom augments her initial morally correct choices.[15] As this source of wisdom comes from outside herself, Diana's rebellion remains an

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[14] Ann Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction: Women Writing First-Wave Feminism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), p. 194.

[15] Sharon Crozier-De Rosa, *The Middle Class Novels of Arnold Bennett and Marie Corelli: Realising the Ideals and Emotions of Late Victorian Women* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2010), p. 259.

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externally advanced course of action that this meek woman is compelled to adopt, not one which she wilfully wishes to follow herself. Her revolt against social constrictions are the actions of a woman driven to act thus after all socially acceptable behaviour has been tried and found, not only insufficient, but harmful.

Diana's ostensible drowning highlights her determination and rebellion against the social strictures binding her even as her youthful rebirth and seeming immortality advance Corelli's 'significant contribution to the popular debate on the afterlife' and develop ideas propounded elsewhere in Corelli's fiction.[16] In one regard, the more surprising element of Diana's decision is not that she pretends to have died, but that she seeks work to support herself outside the social rank into which she was born. That she must leave the country in order to do so highlights how conservative her parents' milieu was. Diana's rebellion against feminine conformity thus begins significantly earlier in the novel than the science fiction elements that more overtly enable her rejection of gendered behaviour. She rebels against the life roles she is expected to adopt – either that of unambitious married woman or rapidly aging, unmarried daughter. Upon seeing Dimitrius's advertisement she realises what she wants: an independent life that does not infantilise her. Corelli explored this theme repeatedly over the decades of her career, with one early heroine's *cri de cœur* explicitly asking 'Can you not realize that there are some among them who despise the inanities of everyday life-who care nothing for the routine of society, and whose hearts are filled with cravings that no mere human love or life can satisfy?'[17] Diana's longing for liberty finds expression in action, and her rebellion takes her to Geneva. What she does not initially know is that this brilliant but unscrupulous scientist replicates many of the behaviours and attitudes of her unfeeling parents and fiancé, and that her refutation of harmful gender roles will have to be initiated a second time. The scientist has specifically sought a female assistant who is educated, but one who is also 'of mature years.'[18] This desire is not for a gravity or intelligence that might be expected to come with age, but instead because such a woman 'was of no particular use to anybody, or, if she did happen to be of use, she could easily be replaced' if the experiment were to prove fatal, as the woman herself would be the subject of the experiment.[19] Diana has thus advanced from her former life with her parents, but not significantly and certainly not to the freedom for which she had hoped. Her intellect is admired in her new home, but her age outweighs all other considerations. Corelli illustrates that the greatest concern for society, be it English or Swiss, represented by Diana's respectable parents or a reclusive scientist, is the belief that mature or single women are unnecessary.

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[16] Nickianne Moody, 'Moral Uncertainty and the Afterlife: Explaining the Popularity of Marie Corelli's Early Novels', *Women's Writing*, 13, 2 (2006), 188-205 (p. 189).

[17] Marie Corelli, *A Romance of Two Worlds* (London: Methuen, 1903 [1886]), p. 82.

The artificial nature of these sexist beliefs is highlighted by the fact that Diana's transformation is seen gradually. She does not physically alter dramatically and quickly, but the fact of the process's delay demonstrates the social, not biological, foundation of acceptable feminine behaviour. Her contact with minor characters who do not know her history as a middle-aged spinster highlights how their approaches to and interactions with her are conditioned almost exclusively through her physical appearance, and only exceptionally are influenced by her obvious intellectual qualities or indisputably kind personality. This developing sense of Diana's power and her disdain for the sudden interest with which she finds herself regarded is in evidence in two scenes in particular before her return to England. In the first, she is present at a dinner party at Dimitrius's home, and later, when Dimitrius believes that the results of the experiment, evident in Diana's altering appearance, will begin to excite remark, she encounters a friend of her father's when she has removed from the immediate neighbourhood of Dimitrius's Geneva laboratory.

The general interest in the first instance, before the experiment fully commences, remains primarily focused upon Dimitrius and the research he conducts in his mysterious laboratory. The Marchese Farnese in particular views Diana exclusively as a conduit through which he can learn more of Dimitrius's dealings, not as a possible means through which Dimitrius's very success might be attained. His comment that Dimitrius could not possibly 'rely on an old woman' as an assistant highlights the disdain with which he views the sex generally.[20] If Diana is not herself invisible to him, he does not entertain the idea that her views might differ from his, and at dinner she becomes simply a figure to be mined for information. Subsequently Farnese will prove similarly intrusively inquisitive, but in regard to Diana as the subject of an experiment at which he only guesses. His interest in Diana as a fully-rounded person is minimal or non-existent; he views her merely as someone, or something, to satisfy his own prying curiosity. Once more, Corelli emphasises the subtle and overt ways in which sexism pervades all respectable social circles of the time without regard to national or linguistic boundaries.

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[18] Corelli, *Young Diana*, p. 28.

[19] Corelli, *Young Diana*, p. 157.

Professor Chauvet sees Diana differently. While not misanthropic, he does not regard all his fellow creatures in a highly positive light, and he is struck by both Diana's linguistic abilities and her intelligence. He appreciates many of her qualities as an individual, not as a source of information, as Farnese does, or as a tool to be used temporarily, as with Dimitrius. Chauvet's view of Diana's character hints at other perspectives than those held by people who have spent more time with and who consequently ought to be better able to judge Diana's true worth. Even so, Chauvet's knowledge of Diana is limited. He appreciates her excellent qualities, offering Diana financial security of a sort that she had not imagined to be within her reach and acting far more respectfully than many of the men she has known. Nonetheless, Chauvet's offer, conceived in this world, remains grounded in the material, not the spiritual, elements of life. As generous and kind as he undoubtedly is, Diana evolves beyond any possibility of a relationship with him. As Corelli so memorably wrote elsewhere, marriage is 'a trafficking in human bodies and souls,' and Diana's elevation places her beyond even companionate matrimonial matches.[21] Chauvet is perhaps one of the best examples of humanity with whom Diana has contact during the novel, but he does not and cannot attain the level to which Diana finds herself raised.

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[20] Corelli, *Young Diana*, p. 121.

The success of the dangerous trial causes Diana's rejuvenation and brings her into conflict with the experiment's author. She grows daily more youthful, more beautiful and more emotionally detached from the events surrounding her, including her own rapidly increasing power and prestige in a society that values the attributes she now possesses in abundance. In rebelling against the society that had written her off as a spinster and a superfluous woman, Diana's understanding of her position within such a society alters. Rejecting her first role, she no longer thinks of herself as the dutiful daughter, and, as the transformed Diana, she rejects marriage proposals, declining also to see herself as a wife. Indeed, it is this very celibacy that made her fit as a subject for experimentation; Dimitrius explicitly wants an unmarried woman as he understands the injurious effects of marital subjection. In his own attempts at healing, he has noticed that 'I can save a child's life generally – and the lives of girls and women, who have not been touched by man. The life-principle is very strong in these, – it has not been tampered with.'[22] Although cleverer by far than Diana's parents or ex- fiancé, he does not realise that the very quality he most prizes – Diana's life lived entirely as a single woman – is simultaneously the one he most despises. His own freethinking and rebellion against convention have a marked blind spot where female emancipation is concerned. The fact that these values conflict is never appreciated by him, though it is by Diana as her independence increases and her resistance becomes more marked.

The scientist's relationship to Diana presents other disturbing manifestations of this attitude towards her. In addition to being unable to see Diana as distinct from the very women he observes with such calculating scientific detachment, he views her as his possession, insisting 'I have made you as you are! – you are mine!'[23] He viewed their initial contract as in effect purchasing Diana's life, and after the experiment has proven successful he attempts to convince her of his right to maintain contact with her and control her movements. His earlier sympathetic pronouncements on social sexism notwithstanding, Dimitrius's deeper and unthinking misogyny reveals itself when his wishes are baulked. Diana succinctly denies his presumption, telling him 'When I served you as your "subject," you were ready to sacrifice my life to your ambition; now when you are witness to the triumph of your "experiment," you would grasp what you consider as your lawful prize.'[24] Throughout the novel, Diana is compelled to rebel repeatedly, emphasising both the difficulty of doing so and how deeply ingrained are the expectations she must resist.

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[21] Marie Corelli, Lady Jeune, Flora Annie Steel and Susan, Countess of Malmesbury, *The Modern Marriage Market* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1908), p. 38.

[22] Corelli, *Young Diana*, p. 139.

Diana's character exhibits some of these more assertive traits earlier in the narrative. As one astute critic notes, when Diana first leaves her parents' home, and long before her scientific treatment commences, her first explanations to Sophy of her course of action show a streak of rebellion to which she does not normally give vent.[25] That such seemingly disparate facets of personality can coexist is unsurprising. The novel suggests that seemingly incompatible personality traits such as meekness and rebelliousness must coexist, and that the common female experience as personified in Diana is an existence that must perforce contain such contradictory aspects. Such a sympathetic and incisive depiction fits well within Corelli's body of work. As one scholar observes, 'Marie was a strong, and often unacknowledged, feminist.'[26] In such explicit rebellion, Corelli shows herself willing to confront society in a more direct way than some of her peers: 'New Women were proto-feminist, after all, and they enacted their political agenda without endangering the patriarchal relationship or the family model.'[27] Diana upsets this model to the best of her ability. If Diana seems by turns defiant and docile or gentle and stern, it is not purely the result of Dimitrius's experiment. Corelli shows how women generally must embody a host of stereotypes and characters in order to survive and thrive, and even rebel, in a socially hostile environment.

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[23] Corelli, *Young Diana*, p. 318.

[24] Corelli, *Young Diana*, p. 318.

[25] Federico, p. 124.

[26] Teresa Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli: Queen of Victorian Bestsellers* (Stroud: Sutton Press, 1999), p. 122.

In depicting how women must act contradictory roles simultaneously, Corelli subtly shows the pervasiveness of negative attitudes to women generally and women's intellectual attainments specifically. Dr Dimitrius seemingly comprehends Diana's situation perfectly. She has been reticent about her life before joining his laboratory; he surmises her former situation as an unappreciated unmarried daughter of the house. Without being told directly, he knows of the drudgery women such as Diana face, and rightly believes her to be unrespected as a woman with considerable knowledge. During the early stages of their acquaintance he appears to be a perfectly considerate and supportive friend. Yet even with such awareness of the disadvantages with which women contend, Dimitrius does not follow his own precepts. He has appeared sympathetic to Diana's former situation insofar as he understands it, and yet from its inception their relationship has been grossly unequal. His advertisement, so worded as to attract the derision of those who read it, contains the germ of what he later explicitly states to Diana: he wished to work with a single woman of mature years since, in the event that the experiment proved fatal, she would not be missed. No matter how much Dimitrius might agree with Diana's liberation in principle or how much he appreciates her efforts to aid him in his work, ultimately he cares more for an abstract conception of wisdom than for the life of the intelligent, sensitive and kind woman whose personality he professes to admire. He refuses to halt the experiment, despite his fears for Diana's safety on more than one occasion. He falters, but his vacillations point to a further gender dynamic underlying their scientist-subject relationship. Characters in the novel not infrequently attribute qualities such as weakness and indecision to women,

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[27] Elizabeth MacLeod Walls, '"A Little Afraid of the Women of Today": The Victorian New Woman and the Rhetoric of British Modernism', *Rhetoric Review*, 21, 3 (2002), 229–246 (p. 239).

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yet these qualities appear in the main male characters who so denigrate and disregard women generally and Diana in especial. Dimitrius often hesitates and doubts even as he says that his resolve remains unshaken. He frequently appears emotionless and inflexible — the perfect scientist, and a man who has attained the ultimate in rational, perfected logic by his willingness to risk Diana's life for the possibility of bettering many other lives. However, he deviates from his fixed purpose, just as on the cusp of the experiment's completion, 'It was he who trembled, not she.'[28] Having without cause suspected Diana of wishing to leave or to discontinue the experiment, Dimitrius himself departs from the contracted agreement. Optimistic but not entirely assured of his ultimate triumph, he had readily agreed, provided she survived, to Diana's complete freedom at the end of her term of service. Once the experiment does indeed prove successful, and more complete than Dimitrius had dreamed, he is unwilling to adhere to the conditions he had stipulated. He becomes capricious, declining to acknowledge Diana's rights and claims, and exhibits the very behaviour he had unreasonably feared in her. His actions and fears are even more irrational than those he had contemplated Diana undertaking. In his morally questionable but scientifically thorough attitude towards ultimate truth, his concern that the experiment will be left uncompleted, while ethically dubious, clearly links with his personality and his calculating behaviour. At the conclusion of the wholly successful experiment, however, his approach to his research, his experiment and his subject change dramatically. Having previously been dedicated to his studies with an almost fanatical single-mindedness, he alters his focus so that his experiment and its great success are nearly forgotten, in order that he might focus on Diana. In short, at the pinnacle of his scientific success, Dimitrius becomes as irrational and unscientific as he had previously been logical, methodical and patient. His determination to make use of 'the secret I have wrenched from Nature' and his statement that 'I expect Nature to render me obedience!' demonstrate his personal and intellectual arrogance and the personality trait that will lead him to pursue Diana as he has pursued scientific truth.[29] The supposedly cold, calculating man of science becomes as possessive and disrespectful of her sovereignty as her father or her former fiancé. His pursuit of knowledge into the mysteries of life and health, taken to the extreme that it is, becomes an even more frightening pursuit of a living woman.

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[28] Corelli, *Young Diana*, p. 240.

In marked contrast to Dimitrius's irrational behaviour Diana maintains a dignified silence on the subject of her employment and even, in the instance of her true position in the household, agrees to the pretence of being a welcome house guest rather than acknowledging her real status as the woman who responded to Dimitrius's curious advertisement. Her discretion proves equal to any of the men in the novel. In point of fact, the gendered behaviour traditionally assigned to women and men is reversed, with the Marchese Farnese exhibiting 'very little scruple' and 'undisguisedly inquisitive' behaviour in his pursuit of his object, in marked contrast to Diana's stalwart and uncomplaining 'courage' and 'patience'.[30] Diana's discretion, though repeatedly doubted by Dimitrius, proves to be absolute. By contrast, the most prying character in the novel is male, and his pursuit of the truth regarding both Dimitrius's laboratory and Diana is depicted as underhanded and unwelcome. Other characters, particularly the Baroness Rousillon, display or stand accused of similar prurient behaviour. Despite this trait not being unique, the character with whom it is most consistently linked and who exhibits it to an extreme degree is the Marchese Farnese. Diana rejects such intrusive behaviour and acts instead in a decidedly feminine and demure fashion, retaining what others see as feminine sweetness and thereby captivating Professor Chauvet. Clearly, she retains her attractiveness in spite of her aging, calling into question the very idea, so frequently stated in the book by unsympathetic characters, that a woman's appeal to the male sex must be predicated entirely on a youthful physical appearance. By extension, Chauvet's marriage proposal implicitly undermines the assumptions made by so many of the characters – male and female – about the social restrictions placed upon, and behaviour demanded of, a young woman, and particularly a young woman

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[29] Corelli, *Young Diana*, pp. 160-161.

[30] Corelli, *Young Diana*, pp. 150-151, 210.

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assumed to be in the marriage market. What is more, Diana's conduct during this time exemplifies all of the very best attributes a young woman might be said to possess. Although flattered by the offer, she honours her first commitment to her employment contract, concealed as 'my visit to Madame Dimitrius' – something which the mature Chauvet accepts.[31] Her answer is not coy or dishonest, but dignified and professional in its adhesion to the fact that she has given her word. Diana is, above all, kind and gentle in her dealings with Chauvet and his proposal, highlighting her allegedly feminine qualities criticised by her parents and ex-fiancé. She is not heartless, but feels too greatly — the attribute that had been so disparaged in her previous life in England. Her experiences with her former fiancé have not made her cynical, as her former fiancé becomes, or cruel and dismissive as her parents are. She is not, as she is accused of being, emotionless. Yet this very proposal is, by mutual consent, kept secret from Dimitrius, who both Diana and Chauvet believe will disapprove of it. Dimitrius's selfishness is further implied by this exchange: Diana is bound by her contract, and her services are expected. Her contract is more explicit, and is for a shorter, fixed period, but Dimitrius's demands upon her parallel the dependency that her parents also exhibit. Her parents anticipated a marriage; as she did not marry she is expected to serve them. Nonetheless, they do not appreciate her labours on behalf of their comfort and financial security. Dimitrius likewise views her time as at his disposal because she is middle-aged and unmarried. She is essential to the success of his experiment, just as her presence was necessary to her parents' domestic economy, and yet he values her so little as to consider her life expendable. Without evidence, he vocalises fears of Diana acting in capricious, gendered ways independent of his control: 'With these strange ideas of yours – born of feminine hysteria, I suppose – who can foretell the folly of your actions?'[32] In many ways, although he pays lip service to the disadvantaged position of women, his selfishness and calculating beliefs and demeanour are the logical extension of what her parents displayed earlier in her life.

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[31] Corelli, *Young Diana*, p. 188.

[32] Corelli, *Young Diana*, p. 219.

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The experiment is a process of awakening. Diana, though she is perfect for Dimitrius's experiment, intelligent and resourceful, has not seen her familial and social relations for what they truly are. It is only when she has imbibed Dimitrius's distillation that she becomes, albeit slowly, emotionally detached from events in her own life. This detachment is most like the masculine tendencies that some of the male characters so frequently desire and so seldom exhibit themselves. The greater spiritual truth, to which she is raised as a result of the experiment, is the discovery that men's selfishness, however disguised, has created the unjust social conditions in which she had previously suffered so much and in which other women continue to suffer. Her actions, far from being entirely self-seeking, are guided by a higher truth that is indiscernible to those still living and thinking upon a lower plane of existence. Diana's thoughts and actions are so out of keeping with social convention precisely because they adhere to the standards of a different state of spiritual advancement. As Corelli noted in an earlier work, 'put man and woman together,— start them both equally with a firm will and a resoluteness of endeavour, the woman's intellect will frequently outstrip the man's. The reason of this is that she has a quicker instinct and finer impulses.'[33] Diana's intelligence certainly impresses Dimitrius, and her progressively enhanced spiritual knowledge only raises her further. In being so considerably elevated, Diana must necessarily bewilder and offend those beneath her.

Dimitrius sequesters Diana to avoid the over-curious nature of the visitors who have seen Diana before the effects of the experiment were noticeable. Such, at least, is Dimitrius's claim, and it is certainly true that his estimation of his neighbours' interfering natures and likely reactions to Diana's dramatic physical alterations is accurate. Yet Dimitrius's behaviour hints at more than scientific rigour or the desire for privacy. His behaviour becomes increasingly controlling and develops in proportion to Diana's decreasing interest in the result of the experiment and to her increasing personal independence. His physical removal of Diana from his home offers a provocative parallel to the dramatic and drastic manner in which she was compelled to absent herself from her parents' home. His unquestioned assumption that her home or even country of residence is for him to decide, and for her to acquiesce, reflects that of Diana's father and former lover. Upon learning of Diana's full independence, her father speaks of her as having 'deserted us' and asserts that 'we should be perfectly justified in disowning her!'[34] Diana's uncertain movements similarly confound Reginald Cleeve, who wishes first to meet her and then to follow her when she eludes his efforts to see her. The belief that they can control Diana's residence and daily movements is held by all three figures though each man manifests it differently. Their claims on her, though acknowledged formerly, have all been refuted as a direct result of their own self-centred actions, yet they all demand physical control and emotional domination over Diana's life.

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[33] Marie Corelli, *The Murder of Delicia* (London: Skeffington, 1896), p. xvi.

This form of socially sanctioned manipulation is not confined to the men in the novel, though it takes a more threatening and complex form in the male characters. Diana's newfound power is monitored by her fellow women before she returns to England. Traveling to London, she meets two fellow countrywomen who strike up a traveling acquaintance and act as informal chaperones. Struck as they are by Diana's dazzling beauty, 'after one or two embarrassing experiences at various stations *en route*' they cannot help but notice the attention, obtrusive to the point of rudeness, of men who see her.[35] They do not mention the behaviour of the men who so openly stare at Diana but instead discreetly counsel her to veil her face. Diana, aware of their motivation in suggesting such a covering, acquiesces without comment, apparently conforming to cultural expectations. Her power is socially acknowledged and monitored before she arrives, and English customs and social conventions, at least externally, suggest that nothing has altered in the years since she was first young.

On a more personal level, Diana's relationship with Sophy Lansing proves fraught. Diana's interactions with Sophy before and after the former's transformation

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[34] Corelli, *Young Diana*, p. 295-296.

[35] Corelli, *Young Diana*, p. 271.

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also serve to highlight the unequal and damaging roles into which women are forced by social convention. Such a claim might seem odd, given the extent to which the clever Sophy lives outside the stricter forms of social conventions. Sophy's intelligence and avoidance of custom, particularly the custom of marriage, encourage and materially support Diana after she has secretly left her parents. Nonetheless, despite possessing intellectual, financial and matrimonial independence, Sophy finds herself constricted by a system that forces women, even friends and independently-minded individuals, to compete with one another as she intuitively understands that a rivalry has arisen between her and her old friend. Her resistance, heartfelt though it is, can ultimately only be finite in her less spiritually elevated state. Her sense of shame and 'a helpless consciousness of her own inferiority in attractiveness' destroy the friendship before it can be resumed.[36] Where the two women had formerly been on excellent terms, upon Diana's return their relationship has altered to the point of being stopped abruptly through feminine jealousy.

Diana, for her part, does not lament this change. The continuation of their friendship would simply have been for old sake's sake and not through a heartfelt desire on Diana's part. Her explicit statement that she does not wish for Sophy's friendship gestures to the alienation both must experience. Diana has risen above Sophy's level of existence as surely as she has that of her father or former lover, but in Sophy's case the dynamic is more complex. Sophy treated Diana fairly, and yet in a society that insists upon competition both between and within genders, casting men and women against one another and forcing women to compete with members of their own sex, the only possible course of action open to Diana is for her to remove herself altogether from Sophy's presence. The critique is not so pointed or so overt as it is with Diana's male antagonists, but the novel insists upon the point that women, however well they get on with one another, are forced into antagonistic relationships through sexual envy and jealousy and through the social conditions that foster such unhealthy conditions and views of relationships.

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[36] Corelli, *Young Diana*, p. 273.

Clearly, the problem is not limited to callous individuals or rare people lacking a moral compass. Indeed, the text makes explicit the fact that Diana's parents are seen to be perfectly respectable and that the people in society with whom they associate think of Diana as an aberration, a failure and a brake on her parents' lives. Rather, the problem is a greater one and lies, not with cruel individual behaviour, but with a society that encourages and maintains such standards uncritically. Diana's rejections of these social conventions starkly depict the inherent inequality of the society in which she lives. One biographer believed that, later in her writing life, Corelli's work became 'out-dated,' yet *The Young Diana* encapsulates many of the same themes and views evident in earlier novels, expressed, if anything, more forcefully by an author who 'wrote from the heart and aimed at the hearts of her readers.'[37] Writing many years after the first wave of New Woman fiction, Corelli's attack on social restraints shows how little has altered and how urgent the need for change is. Diana literally embodies the truth of what Corelli had urged ten years earlier when she told her unmarried female readers 'I want you to refuse to make your bodies and souls the traffickable material of vulgar huckstering.'[38] Corelli's fiction is not an explicit call to arms, but it does portray and support women who are not always so sympathetically depicted.

The novel's conclusion – already hinted at in the first chapter – shows simultaneously the power of individual women to rebel and to do so triumphantly and the deeper, more difficult social barriers that other women less well situated would struggle to overcome. Diana's victory is absolute, and her elegant reversal of position is viewed as positive after her earlier trials. After years of unappreciated filial and romantic devotion, she has passed beyond the petty 'human vengeance or love' that could disturb her peace, and finds that she is now 'happy, because she has forgotten all that might have made her otherwise.'[39] Her elevation to a passionless state so different from the emotionally volatile and self-deceiving men of the novel constitutes a kind of peace. Nonetheless, the novel is careful to balance this happy ending with a more negative social commentary by stressing the lack of change in circumstances that caused the younger Diana such misery. The very society that had ostracised the aging spinster has not altered when it courts and gossips about the physically older but youthfully beautiful Diana at the end of the novel. The novel in its entirety illustrates what Corelli elsewhere emphasises, that 'Man's delightful and utter want of the commonest logic is never more flagrantly exhibited than in this vital matter of his estimate of Woman.'[40] Until fundamental social changes are made in the relations between the sexes, it is not only right, but necessary, for women to resist and assert their independence.

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[37] Eileen Bigland, *Marie Corelli, The Woman and the Legend* (London: Jarolds, 1953), p. 265; Bertha Vyver, *Memoirs of Marie Corelli* (London: Alston Rivers, 1930), p. 246.

[38] Corelli, Jeune, Steel and Malmesbury, *Modern Marriage Market*, p. 51.

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[39] Corelli, *Young Diana*, pp. 378, 380.

[40] Marie Corelli, *Free Opinions Freely Expressed on Certain Phases of Modern Social Life and Conduct* (London: Constable, 1905), p. 172.