



# Martin Hipsky (éd.), Modernism and the Women's Popular Romance in Britain, 1885-1925

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# Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens

76 Automne | 2012

Believing in Victorian Times

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## Martin Hipsky (éd.), *Modernism and the Women's Popular Romance in Britain, 1885-1925*

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### Texte intégral



Afficher l'image

- 1 Martin Hipsky addresses the popular romances of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century, that is, the best-selling novels of the time which, however, have not yet found their (rightful) place in literary history. Redressing the “romance gap”—mostly the work of women romance writers—aims at a better understanding of literary modernism and its connections with fin-de-siècle fiction. Studying the “low modern” shows how the traditional romance developed into new forms and how canonical



modernist writers (Joyce, Mansfield, Woolf) borrowed from it. It ends up in a rethinking of the notions of “high” and “low”, both being intent, according to the author, on representing interiority. Martin Hipsky’s study participates in the recent revisionist critical movement that tries to reconfigure the “low modern”. It draws our attention to the fact that when romance writers of the turn of the century wrote, they did not believe their novels to be gendered and addressed male as well as female readers.

- 2 Starting from Beer’s definition of romance as a genre that remakes the world in the image of desire, Martin Hipsky reads the romances of Ward, Corelli, Orczy, Glyn, Barclay, Cross, Dell and Hull as encoding female androgynous desires, both libidinal and spiritual—what Felski calls “the popular sublime”, which can be compared with the sense of rapture evinced by modernist texts—while eliciting features of melodramatic intensity (“respectability” in the Edwardian period being a matter not of the moral content of one’s fiction but of the volume of one’s sales). He traces lines of continuity between what was censoriously called “the sex novel” (Glynn’s *Three Weeks*, a torrid affair between a young man and an older married woman) and D. H. Lawrence’s or Joyce’s novels, lines of continuity between “low” and “high” that wouldn’t have surprised the readers of 1915.
- 3 While some critics (Keating) claim that there were no women publishing fiction between George Eliot and Virginia Woolf, in the so-called “Interregnum”, others (J. E. Miller) point out that some New Woman fiction writers of the period “forged a modernism of social content, if not of literary form”. Drawing on Bourdieu’s definition of capitalism, he shows that by the late Victorian period, women writers were either regarded as “great”, in the wake of Jane Austen and George Eliot, or as “silly lady novelists” (G. Eliot), with a low symbolic capital in the eyes of the masculine arbiters of culture but very large sales (a very useful chart illustrates this). Mary Ward published *Robert Elsmere* in 1888, a religious romance which in a way asked the readers to take its author as seriously as the most controversial thinkers of the time, Froude or Newman. A somewhat favourable review by Walter Pater owed Ward an interview with Gladstone who later reviewed her novel and criticized its theism and agnosticism, thus legitimating her; it was a popular success in England and the States.
- 4 Martin Hipsky shows how active Ward was in the marketing of her book—a feature common to successful women romancists of the turn of the century. He argues that far from being a domestic romance, Ward’s book is a tale of psychological transcendence characteristic of the discursive intensities that can be found in Marie Corelli or Elinor Glyn’s works. He broaches the history of the reception of Ward’s novels. Because she defended marriage she was not perceived as a New Woman novelist in her time; she also opposed women’s suffrage and was a staunch imperialist, which flattered her readers’ prejudices. Her later fiction took on a more melodramatic and commercial turn.
- 5 The reprint of *Marcella* coincided with the adoption of the single-volume format by big publishers and the end of the three-decker; it also helped to curtail the circulating libraries’ censorious control of women’s production and consumption of fiction. After the mid-1890s, there would be no mediating institutions between popular women writers and market forces. Ironically enough, by bypassing the lending libraries, Ward enabled the widespread distribution of woman-authored “sex novels” (V. Cross, E. Glynn), the embryos of the contemporary mass-market romance. Mills and Boon was founded in 1908 and published romances about taboo topics (divorce, premarital encounters, etc.). Highbrow modernists would then react against Ward’s conservatism and scorn her style, her “mot injuste” (Rebecca West).
- 6 Marie Corelli, prolific writer of “mystical” or “fantastic” romance and author of *The Sorrows of Satan* (1898), defended anti-elitist views and had a huge mass-market appeal. After a period of neglect, her work, which deals with class-antagonism, has been reappraised since the 1970s. Hipsky combines feminist and historicist approaches, draws on Felski as well as Jameson and reads Corelli’s ideological messages concerning gender, class and capitalism in her use of melodrama; he analyses the contradictions and the correlations Corelli establishes between vice, virtue, wealth and poverty,

reconciling the Christian discourse of virtue with the emergent free-market. In *The Treasure of Heaven*, Corelli's protagonist is poisoned by the evil city and redeemed by a rural community and in *Innocent*, the heroine who comes from an Edenic place, is victimized by the city. Corelli was ridiculed in *Blast* and regarded as degraded popular culture. However, the author argues, Modernist writers present parallels with Corelli because they reacted, mostly after World War One, against realism, as she did in her romances and Corelli writes "romances of interiority" just as the Modernists focus on the interior world but through experiments with form.

- 7 In Victorian times, romance meant moralizing; in the twentieth century, it emits more contradictory messages. In chapter 4, Hipsky discusses the generic relations of romance to realism and to emergent modernist discourses. How romance shares some features with historical realism as well as with the sublime, a "popular" version of it where transcendence is secular and the divine dwells in intimacy, in desire and interiority. He points out that the precursors of the Edwardian "sex novel" were not romance writers but late nineteenth-century realists (Hardy, Gissing, Meredith, New Woman novelists such as Sarah Grand, etc.); the "sex novel" was not a "sentimental" (i.e., "effeminate") but a more realist representation of the female libido and psychology, as in Glyn's *Three Weeks*.
- 8 In chapter 5, Hipsky looks at the Imperial erotic romance and more particularly, at the texts published in the years bridging the decline of the moralizing Victorian romance and the rise of the mass-market woman's romance (Cross, Dell, Hull). He shows how their eroticism is constructed through connections between sexual desire and the exoticizing of colonized "Eastern" lands. He draws parallels between these romances and modernist texts like Woolf's *The Voyage Out*, D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* and Mansfield's engagement with "the primitive".
- 9 In the last chapter, Hipsky reminds us that in her influential *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932), Q. D. Leavis opposed "serious" literature (Joyce, Woolf, Conrad and D. H. Lawrence) to popular novels as well as sophisticated readers of realist or modernist novels to poorly educated readers of fantasy fiction. She passes negative aesthetic judgments on these popular novelists, suggests these novels act as artificial stimulation or bogus religiosity on the common readers, diverting them from the troubles of daily life, compensating for the pain of the reality principle. Interestingly enough, the author suggests that Q. D. Leavis's argument can be read as pointing to similarities between popular fiction and modernist fiction. Modernism, indeed, borrows from religious tropes to exalt art (in his epiphanies, for example) and may perform the same compensatory psychic function as popular fiction. The sublime quest of the modernist artist may find a parallel in the ecstatic transports of the romance protagonist and reader, which would bring the two conventionally opposed types of fiction together. Modernist moments are no less an anodyne than the escapism of romance. They act therapeutically on the readers' anxieties, whether they be "elite" or common readers. This is what modernist and romance narratives share and what differentiates them from nineteenth-century realism, meant to awaken and educate. Romance, like modernism, is non referential and metaphorical. On the whole, instead of defining modernism through its differences from mass culture, as critics like A. Huyssens or P. Bürger have tended to do, Hipsky yokes them together very convincingly.

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