Marie Corelli's Popular Science Fiction and SF Criticism

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Abstract for Masters

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David Charbonneau

The impetus for this research paper originates in an interest in the significance of the recent critical identification of Corelli with generic hybridity, specifically as it relates to conceptions of science fiction (SF) as a historical genre. I will argue that Marie Corelli wrote SF and will aim to show that this argumentative position is useful for understanding the history of SF as a concept, and for understanding the generic and discursive heterogeneity of Marie Corelli's writing.

Pursuing the line of argument that Corelli wrote SF demands analysis of her idiosyncratic writings in relation to different conceptions of the genre and helps reveal SF as a historically contested generic concept. An examination of this proposition in the context of Corelli's reception history will allow me to explore the construction of the generic category of SF, and the definition of its canon.

Secondly, the close readings of what I will identify as Corelli's SF novels within the context of debates about SF as a genre allows me to highlight the distinctive formal qualities of Corelli's SF as an unlikely combination of populist Victorian ideology, proto-feminism, heterodox Christianity, and scientific enthusiasm. In my analysis of three of Corelli's novels—*A Romance of Two Worlds*, *The Young Diana*, and *The Secret Power*—I will demonstrate how Corelli's unorthodox Christian worldview works to complicate normative conceptions and identifications of SF as a form.

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Introduction

Among the largely forgotten popular writers of the long nineteenth century now enjoying modest critical revivals, none were as well-known in their day as Marie Corelli. The "Queen of Victorian Bestsellers," as aptly crowned by biographer Theresa Ransom, enjoyed popularity during a great stretch of her career which spanned from her first novel in 1886 to her death in 1924. To put her unparalleled success in perspective, at the peak of her career she vastly outsold her competition: "Corelli sold a hundred thousand novels a year on average, Caine forty-five thousand, Mrs. Humphry Ward thirty-five thousand, Wells and Arthur Conan Doyle only fifteen thousand each" (Federico 6). Generally dismissed as a purveyor of bad sentimental fiction, it is only recently that scholars have started to pay serious attention to what she wrote thanks to the rise of cultural studies and its re-evaluation of middle and low-brow popular culture. The recent consensus has been to laud her ability to merge, adapt, exploit, and mix her personal brand of spiritual romance with the multiple existing and emerging generic forms which proliferated in the market place. Curtis Herr enthuses that "Corelli is excitingly difficult to label" as her works showcase a "cross-pollination of literary trends" (ii). Annette R. Federico argues that her books freely "cross genres, mixing the conventions of romance, gothic, historical, and society novels. She invented stories that anticipate feminist science fiction, mixed bodice-ripper sex with transports of spiritual ecstasy, and daringly rewrote biblical history" resulting in "strange fictional encounters" (2). Likewise, Andrew Radford proposes that the apparent "strangeness" of Corelli's fiction comes from its "spry subversion of the laws of genre—appropriating and merging tropes synonymous with romance, popular melodrama, science fiction and the trance novel" (16). In 2019, Carol Margaret Davison qualified Corelli's novels as "innovative and generically hybrid" (139). Elaine M. Hartnell likewise points out Corelli's versatility in

incorporating popular trends, noting that she "presented her readers with romantic fantasies of all kinds and even gave them some well-thought-out science fiction" (284).

The impetus for my paper originates in an interest in the significance of this critical identification of Corelli with generic hybridity, specifically as it relates to conceptions of science fiction (SF) as a historical genre. I will argue that Marie Corelli wrote SF and will aim to show that this argumentative position is useful for understanding the history of SF as a concept, and for understanding the generic and discursive heterogeneity of Marie Corelli's writing. Pursuing the line of argument that Corelli wrote SF demands analysis of her idiosyncratic writings in relation to different conceptions of the genre and helps reveal SF as a historically contested generic concept. An examination of this proposition in the context of Corelli's reception history will allow me to explore the construction of the generic category of SF, and the definition of its canon. As we shall see, from the moment critics took SF seriously, Corelli was either trivialized or excluded from the genre, while modern re-inclusions have shown only limited interest in her. Corelli's writing can thus be understood as an early offshoot of the genre which exposes the fault lines within the various generic conceptions of SF especially when the generic concepts of SF began to harden.

Secondly, the close readings of what I will identify as Corelli's SF novels within the context of debates about SF as a genre allows me to highlight the distinctive formal qualities of Corelli's SF as an unlikely combination of populist Victorian ideology, proto-feminism, heterodox Christianity, and scientific enthusiasm. In my analysis of three of Corelli's novels—*A Romance of Two Worlds, The Young Diana,* and *The Secret Power*—I will demonstrate how Corelli's unorthodox Christian worldview works to complicate normative conceptions and identifications of SF as a form.

Corelli, Genre, and the SF Canons

While the present trend in SF criticism seems particularly inclined to look back at neglected fringe authors such as Corelli, simply picking a fitting contemporary definition with which to argue her position as a SF writer would overlook decades of essential and quarrelsome SF criticism. Exploring the relation between Corelli and SF is particularly interesting because it allows us to understand the latter as a contested generic category which boundaries varied according to historical critical moments. Outside of SF criticism, the SF elements in Corelli's works have become commonly-mentioned features of her writing in the revival of critical interest around her work, but Victorianists and scholars of popular culture have not explored the connections to the nascent genre or, as Julia Kuehn puts it, provided the "detailed textual analysis within the socio-historical context" beyond the recognition of generic features ("Eulogiseth" 582). This proves necessary, for Corelli's novels challenge many established definitions of SF, both in form and content. This section of my paper aims to offer a brief overview of SF and its theorists in contrast with the generic classification of her works. I will underscore the concerns that have played against her inclusion in SF canons, and discuss the significance of how and why many scholars (especially of SF) discuss Corelli's work in a dismissive manner.

Romance and Pre-Classification SF

Before turning to SF critics, however, it is worthwhile to consider Marie Corelli's position in the literary field at the turn of the century, for the generic classification of her novels is intricately bound to her reception as a writer of romance and popular fiction. One factor that

explains the ease with which Corelli mixed tropes and conventions from various genres is the liberty provided to writers of romance. Despite their differences, all of Marie Corelli's novels were considered romances, and it is under this broad generic category that she was most commonly understood when she was publishing, and for which she most often is remembered. While some of her works certainly fall under the modern meaning of this genre, which is to say works centred on romantic courtship, the Victorians used the term to refer to non-realist fiction. This is highlighted by Kuehn in her analysis of *Ardath* as a prototypical Corellian work, "*The Daily Telegraph* of 8 July 1889 discusses questions of narrative. With regard to genre, it considers Ardath, 'not, strictly speaking, a novel at all, it is a romance.' The reviewer thus draws a distinction between the realistic mode of the novel—the celebrated form of the time—and the imaginative nature of the romance" (*Glorious Vulgarity* 20). The distinction between "proper" literature and genre literature was thus already planted in the Victorian era, and many now recognizable genres first appeared under the category of romance. Kuehn further points out that as a result of this distinction "only the works of a few male romancers like Stevenson, Arthur Conan Doyle, Joseph Conrad and H.G. Wells have escaped cultural forgetting" (*Glorious Vulgarity* 22). The writers she mentions are principally remembered for their contributions to various genres such as detective fiction and adventure fiction which would, like SF, come into their own in the 1920s, often through the serialization and identification with specialized pulp magazines.

As a generic category, romance thus allowed Corelli to write novels borrowing from a wide range of generic forms without a major shift in style or reputation. This can be contrasted with H.G. Wells who, while widely considered the founding father of SF along with Jules Verne, famously moved away from what he called his scientific romances and wrote realistic fiction,

dismissing the former as inferior. Romance is useful in approaching SF for it gathers Corelli under the same broad generic umbrella as other early SF writers. Furthermore, early conceptions of the genre often point back to this origin. The most obvious is the designation scientific romance which was used by Charles Howard Hinton for collections of essays and stories, and as just mentioned, applied by critics to Wells' novels and retroactively by himself to label his collection of SF works (Stableford *et al.*). Similarly, Gernsback's pioneering definition of the genre identifies romance as a constituent element of SF: "a charming romance interwoven with scientific fact and prophetic vision" (Westfahl 38). Before these generic demarcations, critics and readers were more likely to acknowledge similarities between Corelli and the other romancers we now associate with SF. For example, the news of her death in the *Montreal Gazette* notes that she was the author of "popular romantic tales," but also "a leader in the school of the 'super-scientific' novel" ("Marie Corelli Is Dead" 8). The affinities between Corelli's novels and early works of SF are also noted in Bertha Vyver's biography of Corelli. A lifelong companion to Corelli[1], her assessment is obviously heavily partial and borders on the hagiography. Nonetheless, it is revealing that she stresses the scientific extrapolations of Corelli: "Yet in a sense Marie saw, with the genius within her, something of what scientific discovery was to lead towards" (58) and "Her imagination flew ahead of scientific accomplishments, as with many writers, and she had no scientific training or experience but […] how many of her visions have not come true!" (246). In the biography's epilogue, J. Cuming Walters places Corelli in the tradition which we now consider early SF: "In the realm of speculative science Miss Corelli followed Lytton and

[1] The exact nature of the relationship between Marie Corelli and Bertha Vyver is a matter of debate. Scholars and biographers alternatively read their relationship as a deep sisterhood, a case of maternal transference, a platonic life partnership typical of Victorian spinsters, or a lesbian relationship. It seems an overreach to classify her as a lesbian writer as the only evidence of a romantic attachment we have of Corelli relates to her one-sided infatuation with the painter Arthur Severn. On the other hand, there remains strong material evidence of the depth of her relationship with Vyver; their initials remain sculpted together above the fireplace of their Stratford-upon-Avon cottage along the Latin motto *Amor Vincit* and they now lay buried side by side. It is but one more of Corelli's biographical mystery.

preceded Wells. Fantastical as some of her ideas and forecasts appeared to be at the time, they proved to be not impossible, and some of them became practicable in her own lifetime" (267). Thus, before the rise of formal definitions of SF there existed a conceptual space in which Corelli was perceived as overlapping early SF works through her scientific extrapolations.

Another useful way to conceptualise Corelli is as a writer of popular fiction, another broad category which in many ways has replaced romance in our critical apparatus to denote high or serious literature from mass market genre fiction. Corelli is among the prototypical literary star, the writer of the first bestseller novel and indebted to her wide-ranging audience for her success. Ken Gelder argues that popular fiction can be understood as a field of practice deeply entwined with genre literature rather than as a generic form in itself. Corelli surfaces multiple times in his study of the field as she typifies popular fiction at the turn of the century. She had a strong personal brand and her various fictional works share unifying characteristics. Her style is characterized by often clumsily overwrought sentences. Moreover, the popular writer, as pioneered by Corelli, is loved by her public and lambasted by everyone else, especially the professional literary establishment. Federico points out that Corelli was inevitably an outsider from the tight-knit circles of literary London by both her class background and her gender (64). A feature of popular writers is their constant output. In his study of popular fiction, Ken Gelder points out that she was the "most popular writer of her time" and "wrote around 40 novels and collections of stories, as well as volumes of poetry and non-fiction" (15). A combination of the enduring stigma against her writings and her literary shortcomings has meant that even modern critics tend to qualify their appreciation of her works. While SF is widely agreed to fall under popular literature, theorists of the genre have often attempted to shake off this association. Farah

Mendlesohn, from her editorial position at the helm at the Cambridge Companion, adversely declares that SF is many things, but certainly not popular.

Born Mary Mackay, Marie Corelli carefully curated her authorial persona and cultivated an air of mystery around her. She lied about her age, closely controlled her image, and made dubious claims as to her parentage, the truth of which is still debated. For many critics, however, the bigger mystery has been the secret of her popularity despite, as it is usually widely agreed, her total lack of literary merit. Her commercial and popular triumph was mirrored by the scorn and contempt of literary critics and tastemakers. Her success went hand in hand with important changes in the literary field, such as the rise of inexpensive book formats and the expansion of the reading public, which lead to the divide between popular print culture and literature (MacLeod, "Power of Her Pen" 316). She maintained her success throughout the Edwardian era only for it to wane after the Great War. The span of Corelli's literary career makes simple categorization of her work difficult, as her writing career spanned the Victorian fin-de-siècle, the Edwardian Era, the Great War, and the early 1920s, and was to some extent shaped by these various historical periods. The generic niche she occupies as a popular novelist is even harder to circumscribe.

In order to function as a brand and popular literature, Corelli's writing needed a stable set of features. The essence of her writing is well encapsulated by Kuehn, who argues that Corelli's distinctive style operates through what she calls the "feminine sublime": "Repetition and tradition, not originality, form the secret of the bestselling author. Art, love and religion are the recurring themes in Corelli, idealism the prominent mode, romance the preferred genre and a rhetoric of excess … the characteristic style" (96). Corelli's works combined the predictable

elements of the bestseller, a necessary feature for her name to retain its appeal, with a range of plots tuned to popular interest.

Corelli's fiction defies easy classification, as her Christian romances were alternatively spiced up with gothic villains, Romantic heroes, society novel set-ups, SF tropes, and decadent motifs. While this practice of genre mixing has stimulated renewed interest in her work by contemporary critics, it has hampered her reception by SF critics, especially during the period when SF was struggling for academic legitimacy. Trendy commercial SF hybrids by a popular but reviled and forgotten novelist were not the kind of canon-forming works critics were seeking when attempting to legitimize the works that defined their field in literary studies. As a result, Corelli's own exploration and experimentation in the genre remain largely downplayed and overlooked.

Academia and the Definition of SF as a Genre and Field of Study

The biggest shift in the critical history of SF came in the early 1970s from the successful push by scholars for the genre's integration within academia. This was accompanied by a flurry of scholarship, including renewed efforts at defining the genre and establishing its canon; it also resulted in the first explicit rejections of Corelli as an SF writer. The most influential figure in the movement toward bringing the study of SF into the academia was Darko Suvin whose formalist attempt at defining the genre set the stage for academic discussion for decades to come. In his *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, Suvin argues that SF should be understood as the "literature of cognitive estrangement" (4) featuring a "novum," broadly speaking a new postulate or a "strange newness" which is a distinctive feature of SF. He offers as definition the following: "SF is, then, a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and

interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment" (7-8). The necessity of cognition is an important distinction, as it serves to mark a boundary between SF and other related genres: "As a literary genre, SF is fully as opposed to supernatural or metaphysical estrangement as it is to naturalism or empiricism" (7). This opposition serves to elevate SF above mere fantasy and further limits the genre to a form of extrapolated secular materialism.

Darko Suvin derisively recognizes Corelli's genuine attempts at uniting science and faith as exemplifying a particular reaction to the preoccupations of late 19th century novelists. In his generic scheme, however, such stories betray the rational logic which he posits as central to SF, and are thus labelled supernatural fantasy in opposition to SF:

> In supernatural fantasy proper, the supposed novelty rejects cognitive logic and claims for itself a higher "occult" logic—whether Christian, a-Christian and indeed atheistic (as is the case of H. P. Lovecraft), or, most usually, an opportunistic blend of both, openly shown in the more self-confident nineteenth century by something like Marie Corelli's "Electric Christianity" (the enormous popularity of which is echoed right down to C. S. Lewis). *Metamorphoses* 68-9.

Suvin's construction of the canon is thus an exclusionary project which constructs SF in great part by contrast with what it is not. In addition to his magnum opus, he will publish an article in the early academic SF magazine outlining books to exclude from the genre. Here again, Corelli is singled-out:

> Nonetheless, although a number of SF writings, from J.J. Astor to C.S. Lewis, have cribbed from Corelli, so that SF historians have to know that she existed, I hope it is clear

> that her type of narration is not only fraudulent (e.g., in reconciling a totally superordinated world with all the Victorian sexual, religious, political, and ethical taboos), is not only a proto-Fascist revulsion against modern civilization, materialist rationalism, etc., is not only a narration based on ideology unchecked by any cognitive logic, but is also (even in Bulwer, but much more so in his followers) cobbled together from orts and scraps of esoteric metaphysics, so that the narrative logic is simply ideology plus Freudian erotic patterns. If SF exists at all, this is not it. (49-50)

His critique suggests aesthetic and ideological motivations for Corelli's inclusion in addition to the failure to live up to his definition of SF. It is, controversially, these differences which Suvin identifies as flaws which to me justify a critical reconsideration of Corelli. His repeated insistence on her exclusion further suggests that it is in fact a difficult task which hinges for Suvin on his insistence on "cognitive logic." Paradoxically, Suvin is, as far as I am aware, the only critic to point out that she was an influence on some future writers of 'truer' SF.

Another major figure is Brian Aldiss who wrote, along with David Wingrove, one of the most cited histories of science fiction in *Trillion Year Spree* (1986), an updated and revised edition of Aldiss's previous solo work *Billion Year Spree* (1973) and an important example of canon construction at a time when SF was still yearning for academic validation. As the authors put it, they were still struggling against "the generalization which says that all science fiction is rubbish" (15). Aldiss's book is often pointed out as the most influential work which argued for starting the SF tradition proper with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and conceiving of SF as emerging from the gothic, a favorable periodization which lends itself to Corelli's inclusion, as her SF hybrids include gothic elements and *The Young Diana* can be read as a reworking of *Frankenstein*. She is, however, absent from Aldiss's history. One explanation for this absence is

that since Aldiss and Wingrove were making the case for academic consideration of SF, rescuing from oblivion a popular writer ridiculed by critics was not on their agenda. Instead, they engaged in what some modern critics refer to as ancestor hunting, which is to say that they made the case for seminal and respected authors, such as Lewis Carroll and Franz Kafka, to be seen as part of the history of SF. This work is in essence an exclusionary and elitist history as it seeks to promote what it considers to be the best works and writers of SF. In contrast to more recent academic approaches to SF, it is an illustration of the gate-keeping and contentious positions stereotypically associated with the genre, such as when it states that “true science fiction appears under threat, swamped by an avalanche of imitations and wish-fantasies” (18) or is dismissive of the early magazine fiction: “if we believe that these pathetic tales, in which the namby-pamby has intercourse with the sensational, represent some kind of Golden Age, then we can have no engagement with contemporary SF, at least in its higher reaches” (19). Corelli is thus beneath the notice of such critical projects because of her critical reputation, generic hybridity, and even subject matter. Moreover, Aldiss ponders the kind of questions SF engages with:

> SF cannot exist without divergent opinions. The material with which it deals is itself controversial. Shall we increase technology until the whole surface of the planet is covered by concrete and steel? Is all religion an aberration? Is war inevitable? Will artificial intelligence take over our governance, and is that desirable? Do we need to conquer space? How would utopia come about? What of our immortal souls? (15)

While many of these are topics Corelli engages with, we can deduce that the problem with her fiction lies in the answers she provides. Her answers on the value of religion, the nature of the soul, and the relationship between religion and science are interesting because they express the beliefs and hope of a Victorian and Edwardian public, but goes countercurrent to the genre as a

whole. This perspective on the relationship between SF and religion is perhaps best represented by Farah Mendlesohn who claims that "the scientific romance did not support a religious interpretation of the world" despite its "desire for the transcendent" and that SF "as it developed in the pulp magazines, leaned towards a much more material and ritualistic understanding of religion and, on the surface at least, this became the dominant mode of the sf encounter with religion" (264).

A different approach to the genre is represented by Gary Westfahl who distinguishes himself as an outspoken opponent of the two previous scholars. The core departure is his dating of SF exclusively to the appearance of the term itself. He thus favours Hugo Gernsback, the editor of the first SF pulp who first defined the genre under the name "scientifiction" in 1926 before successfully renaming it science fiction in 1929, as the cornerstone figure of SF history: "Literary genres appear in history for one reason: someone declares that that a genre exists and persuades writers, publishers, readers and critics that she is correct. In the case of science fiction, this did not completely occur until Gernsback began his successful campaign on behalf of the genre" (12). This approach puts greater value on the SF magazines which started with the pulps. In this chronology, if not in his favouring of Gernsback, he is joined by other scholars who date the birth of the genre along with the birth of the specialized American pulp magazines.

Hence, Corelli's persistent absence from the diversifying SF canon is partly explained by her absence from the early SF magazines. Since she was never reprinted in the genre magazines like Vernes and Wells she is as fundamentally distant from the founding SF tradition. A factor which explains why she never appeared in the pulps is that her works did not fit in with Gernsback's vision for his magazine which was overtly technophile and aimed to inspire young inventors and engineers, and thus was, as Mike Ashley notes, inhospitable to a wide range of SF

(62). Counterintuitively, Corelli's fanciful use of scientific concepts should not be seen as fundamentally different from the one of authors whom Gernsback eventually published:

> Gernsback relied on reprints: initially Jules Verne, H.G. Wells, and Edgar Allan Poe, plus some of the Munsey writers like Murray Leinster and Garrett P. Serviss and especially Edgar Rice Burroughs and Abraham Merritt. Gernsback still hoped that these stories would stimulate scientific creativity whilst entertaining the readers, but in fact he had bitten off more than he could chew. He created a magazine of adventure stories where, in most cases, the science was so speculative or fanciful—especially in the Merritt stories, which Gernsback later regretted reprinting—that they might stimulate awe in the reader but it did not lead them into the laboratory. (62)

In this regard, the divide between Corelli and the pulp tradition can be traced back to different versions of the romance, with Corelli representing a more feminine tradition which emphasizes the gothic, the sensational, and the melodramatic over the masculine focus on adventure.

The difference between pre-magazine era British (and Continental) SF and the fare of American magazines has led Brian Stableford to theorize the genre of scientific romance for these former works as distinct from the SF tradition. We might have assumed Corelli's reflection of British concerns would align her with this genre, but Stableford covers her fiction not in his books on the scientific romance but in an entry in the 1997 *St James Guide to Fantasy Writers*. The entry is notably uncharitable, as he claims that "no one out of tune with her peculiar world-view can find anything rewarding in her works". He dismisses the SF potential of *A Romance of Two Worlds* on the base of its pseudoscience:

> *A Romance of Two Worlds* is a first-person account of an amazing religious revelation, full of forceful essays in theology and morality. The unorthodoxy of the former—a strange hybrid of pious Christianity and then-fashionable pseudo-science—is excused by the rigorous conventionality of the latter. The narrative's fundamental purpose is to rescue a religious faith in decline by recruiting the language of science to 'prove' its essential truth.

His entry exemplifies the dominant critical approach to Corelli until recently: it stresses her strangeness and her popularity, and roughly dismisses her novels as expressions of "delusions of grandeur and expressions of devout wish-fulfilment." Her engagement with science and SF are implied to be mimicking and self-serving, rather than participating in the early formation of the genre. He is also dismissive of the other two novels I will explore:

> Her fantasy of magical rejuvenation, *The Young Diana*—which was written when the author was much older than she pretended to be—is undermined by the fact that even she had lost faith in the achievability of her most ardent desires. Her last fantasy novel, *The Secret Power*, tends towards science fiction in its use of advanced aircraft and atomic super-science, but fails miserably to recapitulate the naïve excitement of *A Romance of Two Worlds* while introducing a rather jaundiced heroine to a hopelessly confused 'revelation' of the true nature of God—whose attributes now include radioactivity as well as electric power.

As I hope to demonstrate in the second section of my paper, Stableford's dismissal of Corelli's SF is rooted in a narrow and uncritical conception of science. He further leaves unclear the threshold or criteria which differentiate tending toward SF and being SF. His assessment

suggests the kind of purity test which exclude generic explorations such as Corelli's from the genre.

The Return of Corelli

With scholars underlining the affinity between Corelli and SF, and the spread of digitization it seemed just a matter of time until her name returned in the conversation. As new attempts are made to theorize and broaden SF, Adam Robert's 2016 *The History of Science Fiction* includes Corelli under the heading of Mystical SF. He correctly suggests that a revaluation is in order, but his own quick summary is substantially flawed.

The most recent and significant engagement with the relationship between SF and Corelli is Andrew Radford's introduction to the 2019 critical edition of *The Romance of Two Worlds*. He spends a significant part of this introduction examining Corelli as SF, arguing that:

> Corelli's Romance contributes to an emerging SF genre because it responds in radically ambivalent ways to the seismic shift of standpoint and civilised culture prompted by technological innovations and rational empiricism. A Romance largely accords with a key trend of SF fiction at late century: to make the empirically specified natural a far more flexible category, while keeping a lay audience grounded in that which can be considered believable. But *A Romance* does much more than this. It exploits SF tropes to appraise those unexpected yet compelling intersections between the forensic and the fetishistic, the diurnal and the paranormal. (33)

This shift is also visible in less scholarly publications. Corelli is listed as SF in web bibliographies, Wikipedia articles, and mass market reprints.

The uncertainty around the genre of Corelli's novels is not only the result of her mixing of tropes and conventions, but, in the case of SF, it reflects the absence of a dominant definition among critics. The infighting among scholars over the genre's definition has become one of its characteristic features, such that works concerning the genre still often open with an attempt to define, or at the very least restrain their subject matter. Even more common today are acknowledgments of the impossibility of that task. David Seed points out that there are probably as many definitions of SF as there are SF critics, while Adam Roberts further suggests that these differing definitions of SF stem from there being in fact multiple histories of SF, each grounded in its own understanding of the unique possibilities of the genre. Others defy the trend, such as Parinder, while others elaborate on not defining SF.

Thus, the current critical paradigm for anthologies and introductions to the topic seems to be to avoid definition of SF, but to offer their own rundown of SF history as I have done, or to go back to one of SF's earliest critics; or to observe that SF is what we mean when we point at it. The Cambridge history of SF titled its recent introduction "On Not Defining Science Fiction." While they argue that such debates are present in most critical discussion of genres, I would point out that no other has spilled so much ink in disagreement and existential anguish.

Corelli is also absent from many feminist SF chronologies, despite their often radical departure from previous critics in their construction of the genre. For example, Jane Donawerth's *Frankenstein Daughters: Women Writing Science Fiction* "depends in part on conceiving of science fiction by women as a continuous literary tradition from Mary Shelley until now—even from Margaret Cavendish until now" (xiv). Corelli's exclusion from works such as the latter is perhaps also due in part to her fraught relationship with feminism.

Ultimately, there are two final things to consider. The first is that the evolution of SF theorization which I have attempted to condense above suggests that the field of SF as a genre has progressively expanded following a period of contentious boundary setting. However, there has been little interest, it seems, to look back on the early formation of the canon except for specific ideological agendas. The second is that the lack of consensus means we might not definitively classify Corelli as SF or not-SF, but as Rieder puts it: the question is, what can we gain by stretching the generic boundaries to include specific works? What are the stakes of reading Corelli's novels as SF?

Corelli's SF Novels

While the previous section has covered Corelli's liminal position in relation to SF criticism and the recent trends toward a broader conceptualization of the genre, this section aims to underline how recent scholarship, particularly in the history and sociology of science, has facilitated SF readings of Corelli by highlighting the complex entanglements of science, pseudoscience, spiritualism, and occultism. We shall also pay close attention to textual moments where science is explicitly stressed as the source of wonder. These underline how Corelli attempted to align herself with the emerging SF genre, often in order to gain credibility, but also in order to intervene in debates around science and society during the long nineteenth century. In doing so, she anticipates the concerns of much of modern SF.

Corelli's SF is distinctive in great part because of the conception of science which underlies it. She combines widely established conservative views with a positive outlook on scientific progress. Her works present scientific progress as the companion of spiritual progress. Mankind's ability in science and technology set him apart from animals and is a clear boon from God. There is no dichotomy between nature and technology, or even between religious knowledge and scientific knowledge. The problems associated with technology are in her view simply caused by our individual and collective moral failings, the source of which is an increasingly godless society.

Furthermore, she combines a gendered perspective on the scientific institutions as well as an almost naïve marvel at the wonders of science common to the average reader. As a result of her particular cultural moment, Corelli writes with a heavily didactic hand in genuine belief in the unity of science and Christian spirituality—yet aware of the general trend toward secularism.

In terms of SF, Corelli's production is thus a rarity, as it combines the genre with a sincere religious faith. This differs from the common "shaggy god story," a SF trope identified by the SFE which consists of a SF story paralleling or imitating religious texts. Her novels are rather a didactic defence of a supernatural Christianity united with science.

Corelli's conflicting positions on a broad number of issues, including gender and science, reflect popular sentiments, especially middle-class moral standards and the legacy of Romantic poets. This combination is possible without obvious contradictions because the Victorians had widely stripped the Romantic poets of their controversial elements and reimagined them as exemplars of a uniquely English culture. Unlike Morris and Wells, Corelli's conception of society is oriented from the individual outward, rather than seeing individuals as simple products of societal and technological forces. In his more political works, Wells displays people constrained by technology and the societal models it enables. For example, in *The Sleeper Awakes*, an alliance between modern finance in the form of compound interest and modern technology represented by aviation leads to a dystopic society led by a small technocratic elite. In contrast to Corelli's focus on spirituality and disdain for the limitation of our earthly bodies, Morris values a certain sensual and physical humanity while dismissing spiritual pursuits: "Morris thus urges us to seek fulfilment instead of salvation: to strive, in other words, to be happy like good animals rather than good like stern gods" (Arata, 24-5). While Corelli scorns the decadence of modern society, she is not opposed to it in the same way that Morris is. The latter seeks to destroy and reconstruct society free from its current political and economic order—a position which would outrage the conservative Corelli.

Of course, this does not mean that Corelli completely ignores this interplay—in fact, she often portrays characters as victims of societal decay. She notably dramatizes the secularization

of education in *The Mighty Atom* as an unprecedented societal ill, and Sybil in *The Sorrows of Satan* famously blames modern novels for her corruption. In her SF, however, the focus remains on personal salvation. The utopian models she suggests, whether the state of spiritual grace in *A Romance of Two Worlds* or the enclave of the golden city in *The Secret Power*, are not the products of a particular political system or technology, but the result of personal or collective spiritual enlightenment. By their character they are also exclusionary, as access is reserved for a moral elite. The most radical idea floated by Corelli in her non-fiction which is slightly apparent in both *The Young Diana* and *The Secret Power* is a kind of moral and psychological eugenics. This turn reflects a post-war pessimism in Corelli, indicative of a wider popular mood, which contrasts with the optimistic Victorian belief in evolution and self-improvement which underlies *A Romance of Two Worlds*. While there is elitism in the latter, there remains faint hope that through the endless spiritual cycle anyone could progress.

The particular form of Corelli's utopian impulses thus set her apart from the more common SF texts from authors such as Wells or feminist utopias. This is best argued by Frederico:

> Her mystical utopia is very different from that of the New Woman or, later, twentieth-century feminist, whose pragmatic dissections of social and sexual relations undermine romantic bliss. Her dreams of sexual equality are located not in politics and praxis but in spirituality, *culture*, especially her faith in the emotional power of literature, and a gendered aesthetic that involves typical 'feminine' attributes, such as outward grace and inward purity, gentleness, and beauty. (97)

Corelli's position in the cultural debates of the time is interesting as she shares with Socialists like William Morris many of the same concerns: cultural collapse, corporate greed, the position of women and the failings of marriage as an institution, a predominantly self-interested clergy and political class. Her solutions, however, are individual rather than structural and rely on a personal Christian conduct.

As critics in the previous section have pointed out, Corelli does not display a deep understanding of most scientific concepts upon which she builds her extrapolations. Even on the rare occasions where she might have acquired a better understanding, such as on the notion of the sound ray for *The Secret Power* through her correspondence with scientists, she gives up on any attempt at scientific accuracy. To be fair, Corelli's poor grasp of scientific theories must be put in the context. Unlike the male writers of early SF, her scholarly opportunities were few. Her biographers point out that her education consisted of private tutors and a few years at a convent. This also differentiates her from younger women writers whose careers overlap with Corelli's final years. As Sharp and Yaszeck point out, these women were largely well-educated, many having attended universities and some having obtained degrees. Taking in account Corelli's gender and real age, it should not be surprising that her scientific education was lacking. Moreover, because of her financial position, she did not have the leisure for education and research. As a popular writer writing to live, she was required to continue to churn out novels. While Wells laments early SF written by those with no grasp of the scientific concept, such gatekeeping would prohibit many writers, including Corelli, from attempting to work in the genre. Moreover, recent theorization and history of SF downplay the importance of scientific accuracy. Of course, the argument that SF is better when its science is accurate and with an educative value goes back to Gernsback and still has modern proponents. Nonetheless, our

conception of SF has known many changes, including the tentative division between hard and soft SF, recognizing that playing fast and loose with the science merely distinguishes kinds of SF rather than genre. We are thus in a better position to recognize that Corelli's works are early instances of so-called soft SF which is more interested in the ramifications and societal impacts of scientific advances than in the science itself.

Corelli's novels thus articulate a perspective of science and technology which is intimately linked to her religious and spiritual vision. This in turn fits in with her perspective onwomen's place in society as a beacon of specific feminine values. Women therefore have a role to play in relation to science, and the framework of SF allows her to engage with scientific debates and illustrate this relationship. Furthermore, her mixing of faith, occultism and pseudoscience challenges earlier definitions of the genre, but with recent approaches underlining the reciprocal relationship between technology and occultism, Corelli's novels appear much more coherent.

A Romance of Two Worlds: The Electric Soul of Christianity

While most critical interpretations of *A Romance of Two Worlds* hinge on the lighter element of wish fulfilment in Corelli's debut novel, for she effectively sought to reconcile religion and new scientific discoveries, my reading shall seek to emphasize how Corelli deploys SF elements in order to collapse the distinction between magic and science. Furthermore, I will stress how she intervenes in specific debates around neurology, physics, biology, and ultimately offers a hybrid divine/SF solution to entropy. Bentley published Marie Corelli's first novel, *A Romance of Two Worlds*, in 1886. While the core and style of her writings would remain constant throughout her career, Corelli's popular appeal rests in part on her grasp of public

interest. From her moralizing exploitation of French decadence in *Wormwood* to her spin on the emerging woman's romance in *Innocent*, and her reincarnation gothic romance in *Ziska*, Corelli has shown herself a versatile adapter of popular culture. For her first novel, Kristin Macleod suggests that Corelli deftly exploited the public's "fascination with mysticism, spiritualism, and with Edison's recent discoveries about electricity," summarily highlighting the entanglement in popular culture of science, mysticism, and religion which forms the center of the novel (Wormwood 15). The generic reception of the novel, however, has been primarily marked by the focus on the spiritual aspect rather than any serious engagement on Corelli's use of science.

The first part will argue that, while Corelli's use of science is lacking in credibility, she articulates a synthesis of science and religion which is distinctive in its optimism. It is also a timely intervention in the debates of the time, as her syncretic creed offers answers to concerns in physics and physiology.

Alongside *The Sorrows of Satan*, *A Romance* is Corelli's novel that has garnered the most critical attention. It cannot easily be summarized, for the central arc of the protagonist's recovery from nervous exhaustion through spiritual regeneration is repeatedly displaced by more engaging side plots and polemical asides. This polyphonic feature of Corelli's novel is present in all her novels. As a result, the stories are often muddled and the SF elements are easily disregarded or minimized. In this, it resembles more closely the historical romance than the typical early SF narratives centred on a single new invention extrapolated from current science, Suvin's novum, as exemplified by Wells. As Radford points out, "the narrative arc of *A Romance* is, then, more complex than a fictional reaction to newsworthy scientific events" (31). In the following close readings, however, we shall see the scientific content is not merely an accessory to her works.

The cultural and scientific context of *A Romance* is characterized by the rise of secularism and the scientific discoveries that are much more theoretical or abstract than the mechanical advances of the previous decades. Along with the continued discussions about evolution, the scientific community made breakthroughs in physics, particularly in electromagnetism and thermodynamics. The electrification of Britain is combined with a perceived religious anxiety. Brian Masters believes that her publisher, Bentley, saw in her first novel, *A Romance of Two Worlds*, "the possibilities of popular success in this mixture of science fiction and moral proselytism, which promised the scientific proof of Divine Existence, the certainty of immortality, eternal youth, and absolute immunity from doctor's bills, all told with a pseudo-scientific confidence which was quite hypnotic; the fact that it was banal and silly and naïve would not, he rightly judged, hinder its progress" (54-5) Corelli opens the prologue of her novel by providing her own take on the situation:

> WE live in an age of universal inquiry, ergo of universal scepticism. The prophecies of the poet, the dreams of the philosopher and scientist, are being daily realized – things formerly considered mere fairy-tales have become facts – yet, in spite of the marvels of learning and science that are hourly accomplished among us, the attitude of mankind is one of disbelief. 81

The central project of Corelli's SF, and its apparent contradictions, is contained within these opening sentences. Her work is both a generally positive reaction to new scientific developments, taking in stride the technological changes which have shaped Victorian Britain, and an opposition to the material scepticism which we paradoxically associate with scientific progress itself. This key tension is solved by her appeal to a Romantic conception of science compatible with a late Victorian heterodox Christianity. This is illustrated by her equating, "The

prophecies of the poet, the dreams of the philosopher and scientist". As we shall see, this union of the poet and scientist is a result of her vision of science as guided by genius, for both artistic and scientific genius takes their origin from the same source, which, for Corelli, is God.

Corelli draws heavily from both spiritualism and mesmerism for the construction of her sage Heliobas and his wondrous science. It is through him that we are introduced to the Electric Creed, Corelli's heterodox syncretic spin on Christianity. Despite the obvious affinity between mesmerism, spiritualism, and her creation, Corelli explicitly distances herself from both. On the one hand, this is a necessary artistic stance, as she would not want to be considered merely derivative. On the other, she builds upon the opposition between her creed and these fields to bolster her credibility. For instance, Heliobas explicitly singles out mesmerism as unscientific[2]: "In the power I possess over you and some others, there is neither mesmerism nor magnetism—nothing but a purely scientific fact which can be clearly and reasonably proved and demonstrated" (160). While Corelli lacks the knowledge to actually deliver on Heliobas's claim, her attempt at grounding his ability in science rather than in magic underlines her move toward SF and, more broadly, the societal move toward science rather than religion as a source of authority. The complicating factor, of course, is that for Corelli science exists in a world whose underlying logic is Christianity rather than material rationalism, thus blurring the line between natural and supernatural, science and magic. Nonetheless, this suggests that by the end of the century the cultural value of mesmerism had plummeted, having been mostly relegated to quackery rather than science.

Mesmerism, however, remains an important influence on Corelli's fashioning of the scientific-spiritual system which underpins her novel. Anthony Enns suggests that mesmerism

[2] Corelli's father published a list of modern follies which included mesmerism.

was “linked to the invention of telegraphy in the cultural imagination of the nineteenth century, as they were both part of a more widespread fantasy of pure communication between minds. This fantasy was based on a desire to transcend the physical body, which was increasingly seen as flawed, limited, and spatially confined […]” (62). The telegraph is, of course, an important figure in the simile which Heliobas’ uses to explain the connection between our world and the invisible spiritual world made possible by Christ.

While Corelli’s portrayal of the scientific underpinning of the fantastic elements in her narrative is rather weak, it nonetheless suggests the difference between fantasy and SF, with the latter occupying a different speculative position. As for its shortcomings, it should be kept in mind that while her science failed to impress more rigorous and learned critics and readers, it exploits the limited understanding of science which Corelli shared with most of her public. As Brenda Ayres points out, “the discovery of electricity was still relatively new in 1886 when Corelli wrote about it, so she and her readers knew just enough to believe her theories about electricity were plausible” (165). Corelli was not alone in exploiting the possibly wondrous capacities of electricity as a contemporary review points out: “Marie Corelli is not the first who has attributed wonderful curative powers to electricity, but she may fairly claim to have done it in an original fashion” (qtd. in Vyers 57). In fact, the air of wonder and mystery around electricity had been cultivated by scientists for spectacular demonstrations since the 1840s, as investigated by Iwan Rhys Morus, while the mystique attached to its pioneers would remain. For instance, both Edison and Tesla would be described in almost supernatural terms after the Great War.

The cosmic voyage by the novel’s protagonist is central to my generic reading of Corelli’s novel, but it remains a contested passage, especially because of Corelli’s slipping

notions of matter, energy, and the invisible. Those that suggest that this episode is essentially a dream trance through which the narrator explores a figurative mirror of our universe overlook the cultural milieu and scientific debates which shaped the novel. Radford acknowledges the great impact of the Romantic poets in the works of Corelli: "Corelli melds Romantic ideas about the artist-seer as mouthpiece for intense paranormal truths with the vivid narratives of female mediumship that comprise so much of *fin de siècle* spiritualism" (23).

However, when it comes to acknowledging the Romantic influences on Corelli's depiction of her cosmology, I would suggest an important forbearer is Shelley's *Ianthe*, as it prefigures Corelli's focus on femininity and her romantic associations between beauty and goodness. While the protagonist is in the care of Heliobas, Corelli underlines several times that through her feminine purity and grace she is able to go farther than him in the muddled fantastic voyage/soul projection. This ultimately fits in with Corelli's overarching worldview, which is to say that women have a unique moral and spiritual function in society. Throughout her fiction and non-fiction, Corelli stresses the higher moral and ethical duty of women, representing it as both a privilege and a burden. In *A Romance* the female spirit Azul, Heliobas's soulmate, is able to prevent through the narrator bloodshed and the damnation of Heliobas's soul. As Hartnell remarks, "the intervention of his other-worldly partner is redemptive, almost divine" (292). This is an example of a pattern which is explored by Marie Kawthar Daouda, as she argues that Corelli is reworking "Byronic patterns," often with "Byronic heroes," but rather than being doomed, these charcters are redeemed by "the feminine power of Salvation" (141).

Corelli's theology exposed during the cosmic voyage is indebted to Swedenborg and to16th and 17th-century debates where theology and physics are intertwined, particularly those around the existence of multiple worlds, aliens, and the scope of Christ's sacrifice.

The mistakes and liberty Corelli takes with the sciences in her novel often underline her lack of proper scientific education and are used to argue against her inclusion within the field of SF. However, it is worth pointing out that in this she parallels most of modern SF writers and that very few women in her time would have the required knowledge. Unlike Wells and Vernes, Corelli stands in for what will come to be the bulk of the field, which is to say professional writers whose scientific grounding comes from popular science. In this, I believe Lisa Hager is mistaken when she claims that Corelli drew from Sadi Carnot's 1824 treatise on thermodynamics *Reflections on the Motive Power of Fire* (64). While she is accurate in claiming that she "grounded her fictional universe in a spiritual form of ether, electricity and magnetism that not only structures interpersonal relationships and aesthetics but also explains the divine through the laws of thermodynamics" (64), it is unlikely that Corelli consulted such a complicated scientific text. I believe her limited understanding of thermodynamics and electromagnetism comes instead from a popular and controversial 1875 treatise by P.G. Taite and Stewart Balfour, who united science and spirituality through these scientific concepts in their *The Unseen Universe: Speculations on a Future State.*

While Corelli certainly draws from a wide array of influences in her novel, Taite and Stewart's *The Unseen Universe* is the keystone for the spiritual and scientific ideas in *A Romance*. This odd work, which sits at the frontier between science and theology, shares its central aim with Corelli's novel. Corelli certainly weaves in many elements which will become characteristic of her novels, but the core of *A Romance* suggests a narrative reworking of Taite and Balfour's book. The short introductory blurb in its recent reprinting by the Cambridge Library Collection points out that "the treatise suggests that science and religion could be reconciled, and that by using science, it could be proved that the soul survives after death. … The

Unseen Universe discusses the nature of matter and ether, Newton's laws, and the idea that, through electromagnetism, the soul upon death transfers molecularly from the visible to the invisible universe" (2). Corelli thus dramatizes the idea of two worlds, our material world and an invisible spiritual world, linked by electromagnetism.

In the prologue, she/the narrator[3] writes that her story will not be taken seriously for "a wall of scepticism and cynicism is gradually being built up by intellectual thinkers of every nation against all that treats of the Supernatural and Unseen" (82). A peculiarity of the discourse of Corelli, which is also present in *The Unseen Universe*, is the equivocation between the supernatural and the Christian religion, for the supernatural which concerns her is the existence of the soul and the proofs for "the absolute certainty of a future state of being, after the passage through the brief soul-torpor in which the body perishes known to us as Death," which is instrumental in defending "the great empire of the Christian Religion" (82). The hypotheses of *The Unseen Universe* all tend toward compatibility with Christianity.

This section has sought to reinforce and go beyond Radford's assessment that "Corelli's *Romance* contributes to an emerging SF genre because it responds in radically ambivalent ways to seismic shift of standpoint and civilised culture prompted by technological innovations and rational empiricism" (33). As I have underlined, the texts ambivalence is expressed by an embrace of the former, which is to say technological innovations and a strong opposition to the latter represented by materialism and atheism. Furthermore, by taking Corelli's attempt at science seriously, I have contextualized the scientific debates to which she responds and located

[3] Corelli entertains the confusion throughout the novel between herself and the unnamed protagonist, blurring the artistic lines between a work of fiction and a biographical trance narrative. This extends to the prologue which appears, by all accounts, to present Corelli's view in the voice of the narrating protagonist. An instance of her playing upon this layered authorship is when she declares that "In the present narration, which I have purposely called 'a romance,' I do not expect to be believed, as I can only relate what I myself have experienced" (82).

her position as coming from an older romantic scientific tradition which still held some sway in some corners of British scientific institutions.

In the context of the fin de siècle, Corelli offers an optimistic vision which conflicts with the overall trends. This simple difference in outlook can also partly explain both her popularity and her negative critical legacy, for such works are more likely to be negatively assessed as wish-fulfilment or naïve than even the most pessimistic works of the age, such as Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*. In SF, particularly, optimism is associated with the American pulp tradition whereas, as Stableford argues, the British tradition represents a less triumphalist approach to progress and science. Both Brenda Ayres and Anne Stiles note how Corelli offers a positive alternative. Ultimately, while Corelli seems always at odds with the ascending school of thoughts, be it material rationalism in the sciences or the militant gender confronting feminism of the new woman, it is essential to remember that she was regularly considered as the voice of the majority. For example, Radford cites literary critic Rolf A. Scott-James who, in his 1908 study *Modernism and Romance*, writes that Corelli's popularity is not the result of her original views but from her position as the " 'high priestess' of the 'commonplace'" (18).

The Young Diana: Frankenstein and The Divine Monster

While the core SF element of *A Romance* can be identified in the fantastic voyage, it is the transgressive experiment in the tradition of *Frankenstein* which animates *The Young Diana*. While the obvious popular element lies in the mystery of the experiment and the fantasy of Diana's transformation and gendered revenge upon representatives of the limiting patriarchal order, Corelli takes the opportunity to oppose two conceptions of science: the religious fear which seeks to stop science, and the cold and self-assured scientist who believes he will be able

to play God. To these, Corelli opposes the brave woman test subject who is elevated to an unearthly and free godly form. Decades have passed between the publication of Corelli's first novel and the composition of the Young Diana. During these years, Marie Corelli became a best-selling phenomenon, outselling every other author during the fin de siècle and remained popular at the turn of the century, publishing works that combine high moral aspirations and popular publishing trends. Her popularity and cultural relevance, however, is alleged to have dropped sharply at the turn of the decade, although without documented evidence it is hard to evaluate to qualify her position in the literary landscape. While she certainly lost her status as the best-selling novelist and stopped commanding the attentions of the newspapers, her continued output suggests that her fall might have been overstated.

What is certain is that during these years the SF as a generic concept solidified itself, in great part thanks to Wells and his imitators. Thus, by the time Corelli finally comes around to borrow from SF for her criticism of women's place in society, early SF is much more recognizable as a fledging type. The novel's complete title announces its pretension to the generic horizon of early SF: *The Young Diana, or an Experiment of the Future*.

While Corelli contributed both non-fiction and short fictions pieces to newspapers and periodicals, *The Young Diana* was Corelli`s only serialized novel, written specifically for *Nash's and Pall Mall Magazine* where it ran from November 1917 to October 1918, with most instalments lavishly illustrated by André Castaigne. While biographers have stressed the decline of Corelli's popularity around the end of the First World War, she is able to command the by-line of two issues during its serialization.

Corelli's literary and geographical position distinguishes her from what would come to be recognized as the premier arena of SF fiction of the time, which is to say the pulp magazines. Unlike the U.S. that already boasted the *All-Stories* and the *Argosy*, the U.K. had few cheap literary magazines, with the exception of *The Strand* and *Pearson's*. These, however, catered to general popular fiction rather than the specialized niche which characterized the U.S. pulps. Corelli's literary position meant that even though she borrowed from SF fiction, she was able to publish in *Nash's and Pall Mall Magazine*, a slick magazine in contrast to pulp. The difference in the quality of the paper also marked a difference in audience, a much higher pay, and multiple illustrations. Among these, the most interesting is the one depicting Feodor's lab. It aptly reflects Corelli's drawing from both modern science and mystical precedents as it presents the scientist in his lab coat surrounded by metal pipes and fittings, yet in the background one can make out an outdated alchemical retort.

Both this magazine and its predecessor, the *Pall Mall Magazine*, published historical, historic, and supernatural stories. As the SFE notes, these magazines occupied a different cultural space from the pulps: *"Pall Mall*, and even more so *Nash's*, was one of Britain's highest paying monthly magazines and regarded its market as being amongst the upper classes in society and business, so for it to run anything that would now be defined as science fiction, but was then really viewed as prophetic fiction, gave the genre both a *cachet* and a stamp of approval". In this, Corelli writes early SF that is different from the stories which women writers were to publish in the 1920s, for they needed to appeal to the publication`s intended audience which had been widely gained with stories of wild adventure, engineer supermen, and technophile inventions. Much of Corelli's peculiarities can thus to some extent be permitted by her unique position

within the literary ecosystem as an independent woman novel writer with, we can conjecture, a significant number of loyal readers and brand-name recognition.

As Bleiler has pointed out, *The Young Diana*'s central plot point owes much to *Frankenstein*, with the transformation of the titular character into a different version of herself. While a surface reading suggests a classical elixir of youth, the transformation is in fact more complex, and there is something appropriately monstrous about the angelic Diana, although it is unclear whether this was Corelli's intended objective. Dr. Dimitrius location, a château in Switzerland, his preoccupation with chemistry, and his determination to part the veil of nature all echo Shelley's famous novel. While the central thrust of the story is the use of SF to underline the outsized importance society pays to women's appearance in comparison to their moral and intellectual abilities, Corelli is also using the three central characters present during the prolonged experiment to represent three different visions of science. Dimitrius's mother represents an overly conservative approach to science which is held back by misplaced religious taboos. She is a kind character, full of natural affection and satisfied by motherhood. These characteristics are ambivalent in Corelli's novel, as these instincts are linked to the grosser body rather than divine aspirations. Her belief that new discoveries could be blasphemy or the work of the devil is portrayed as primitive by the novel.

Dimitrius represents the modern scientist. His view of science is better than his mother's, but it is still flawed, for he believes himself to be able to master nature. Despite the lofty goals he repeats, he is repeatedly shown to be an egotist and colder and more calculating than necessary. Diana, of course, represents the right view of science, echoing the general Corelli's general ideas on the subject. After her transformation, she effortlessly casts off Dimitrius, arguing that he is in

no way her master. Science can only reveal possibilities allowed by God, and while he ushered her transformation, she remains a creature of God, not of his making.

The Young Diana is a far less congenial novel than *A Romance* in great part because, in keeping with the Frankenstein motif, Diana becomes something of a monster. Corelli repeatedly articulates her alienation from the rest of humanity. A divine mirror of Frankenstein, it is not her ugliness which drives primitive response from society, but her beauty. She remains, however, fundamentally alienated by her lack of empathy and common feeling. The driving plot element of the last section of the novel is to which degree she will become monstrous—while there is some justice in her tormenting of those who wronged her, mainly her father and ex-fiancée, there is something deeply unsettling in her quest for vengeance. It is only the death of the old and kind professor which enables her to gain a new perspective and retreat from her path[4]. Diana repeatedly underlines how she feels more at one with nature than with humanity, which echoes some the broader romantic yearnings of Frankenstein, while opposing its central message toward the need for community and companionship.

The scientist in this text is far different from the learned wise man figure represented by Heliobas as he is obviously inspired by Shelley`s ambitious Dr. Frankenstein. His introduction through the journal advertisement suggests this affinity at once, as he is dealing with "very intricate problems in chemistry", and in an echo to gothic motifs the mysterious Dr. Féodor Dimitrius awaits applicants in person at his "Château Fragonard" in Geneva (34). Her representation of science also moves from the relatively small household/ medical practice of Heliobas to the more typical secret private laboratory of SF. In presenting scientific progress as

[4] There is something subversive in her sexual inversion of the cliché in this instance, for the death of a male love interest leads to moral growth from a female protagonist. Moreover, instead of ending in marriage, the story ends with an eternally young and single Diana overseeing his heritage.

the result of the work of a single mind, Corelli represents a romantic and outsider view of the laboratory science of the early 20th century, for by that time university labs and cooperation had become the norm. The lone genius plodding along with non-expert help has more in common with Dr. Moreau than with contemporary scientists. As for the representation of scientific research itself, Corelli is heavily influenced by the continuing fascination with archaeology and the belief that ancient societies possessed secret advanced knowledge. This is a common motif in fantasy and SF, most commonly represented by Atlantis. The other trope which is alluded to in reference to the representation of the scientist is the Faust figure, although Corelli differs in presenting Diana as Faust and Dr. Dimitrius as Mephistopheles.

As for the place of women in science, in this case, Diana is of help through translation work of ancient documents. This is a significant step up from the narrator of *The Romance of Two Worlds* who was merely a patient, although a particularly gifted one. Nonetheless, Diana is, like Corelli, presented as essentially self-taught, having gone through "the usual system of governesses and schools" before setting out on independent reading: "But though she reads books on science, books on psychology, books on natural and spiritual law, and studied complex problems of evolution and selection of species till her poor dim eyes grew dimmer, […]" (9) and further making her point that women are predominantly judged on their appearance:

> No one thought for a moment that she might possibly be something of a scholar,—and certainly no one imagined that above all things she was a great student of all matters pertaining to science. Every book she could hear of on scientific subjects, whether treating of wireless telegraphy, light-rays, radium, or other marvellous discoveries of the age, she made it her special business to secure and to study patiently and

> comprehendingly, the result being that her mind was richly stored with material for thought on far higher planes than the majority of reading folk ever attempt to reach. (21)

This passage also presents the scientific topics from which Corelli likes to wildly extrapolate. All these discoveries have in common an element of unseen and immaterial power, which dovetails with her anti-materialism. In its reflection of *Frankenstein*, Diana's central role, however, is not that of scientific assistant, but of test subject and, arguably, monster. The relation of the woman experiment to her master is a continuation of a theme Corelli previously addressed in her more occult novel, *The Soul of Lilith*.

The science fictional elements serve to support her criticism of women's place in Britain, especially what she views as the demeaning and dead end of bourgeois marriage which is embodied in Diana's parent. In the description of Diana's parent Corelli portrays the ill of bourgeois marriage for women:

She had been a woman of average intelligence when she married him,—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 year of wedded life (as they apt to do), and she had gradually sunk into a flabby condition of resigned nonentity, seeing there was nothing else left for her" (11).

She also presents a provocative view of society's relationship to women and spinsters: "Woman, considered in the rough abstract, is only the pack-mule of man,—his goods, his chattels, created specially to be the 'vessel' of his passion and humour,—and without his favour and support she is by universal consent set down as a lonely and wandering mistake" (13). While the solution for Diana's position is the SF experiment which grants her youth and beauty, the subtext in the narrative is that in the absence such world-changing scientific breakthroughs a greater

acceptance in scientific fields for women to support themselves and exercise their intellectual and creative powers is needed.

The Secret Power: Woman's Science and Genre Subversion

Corelli's final novel gives us her only female scientist in the fairy-like Morgana Royal. It also gives us a undercurrent of generic subversion, as Corelli exploits for her own ends a multitude of SF tropes, from the superweapon, to the subverted possibility of world peace, and the final opposition to the genre's technophilia. Published in 1923, *The Secret Power* misses by a few months the emergence of Gernsback's magazine and the consolidation of the generic field under the appellation of science fiction. Nonetheless, the development of the genre is evident in the way Corelli engages more clearly with mainstay tropes and features of SF. This underlines how the genre was coming into itself in the public mind before its modern nomenclature. *The Secret Power* combines recognizable plots from pre-war scientific romances as well as contemporary SF, notably the already cliché mad scientist developing a secret super weapon, a trope which reappeared after the horrors of the Great War. In typical Corellian fashion, however, her fascination is not with the science and technology, but with their relationship to mankind's spiritual development and their impact, or even lack of impact, on society. Furthermore, her criticism of scientific culture now targets institutions, and she features for the first and only time a fully-fledged female scientist. The focus on moral questions and seemly ambivalent relation to technology thus put off SF critics. On the other hand, through her main character of Morgana Royal, Corelli tackles issues which will come to define feminist SF, but her conservative essentialist approach to sex will continue to hamper her reception in this tradition. *The Secret Power* continues Corelli's religious didactic mission. In contrast to *A Romance of Two Worlds*, it is perhaps her most pessimistic novel, arguably reflecting the consequences of the Great War.

An echo of Keats unweaving of the rainbow, Corelli's model of the male scientist, Roger Seaton, argues that self-delusion is necessary in order to live along scientific knowledge: "Why do we all pretend? […] Simply because we dare not face the truth! For example, consider the sun! It is a furnace with flames five thousand miles high, but we 'pretend' it is our beautiful orb of day! We *must* pretend! If we didn't we should go mad!" (4)

There is a disenchantment regarding the human condition in this novel that goes further than the elitism of her previous works. As a foil to Morgana Royal, Manella is not without racist undertones, presented as embodying many traditional feminine traits but as ultimately animalistic, even by her own self-evaluation. Corelli is even more harshly critical of marital love. As such, the potential of salvation for the mass of humanity is even further reduced. Only a handful of exceptional individuals such as Morgana Royal is fit and destined to join their peers in the Golden City, the novel's combination of the Garden of Eden and City of Brass.

Despite the destructive potential of science represented by Seaton, Corelli remains adamant in representing science as the fulfillment of fantasies and a vindication of God. Scientific breakthroughs are still represented as the result of intuition if not outright revelation—Religion and poetry foresee scientific discoveries.

Corelli's depiction of futuristic airship also fits in a clear SF tradition which enjoyed booms both before and after the Great War. In combination with Roger Seaton's quest for world peace through a superweapon, Corelli is obviously referring to the Pax Aeronautica trope where both are used to ensure world peace. She subverts the genre however, as not only do the two characters don't ally, but Morgana seems to have no interest in meddling with public affairs. She also subverts the traditional lost race narrative, as we are not allowed to follow Morgana in the

golden city. The greatest subversion however is that following her entrance in the golden city, Morgana's wondrous airship is left destroyed. I read in this final scene a challenge to the logic of utopian SF. Instead of technology leading to utopia, it is a Christian moral character which leads simultaneously to scientific inspiration and utopia. Without it, our technology leaves us no better than the brain-damaged Roger Seaton.

The Secret Power has been easier to categorize as SF by critics, for Corelli's attempts at grounding the novel's super science in actual science are more explicit and thorough than in either of the two previous novels discussed. Brian Masters acknowledges the strong SF elements in *The Secret Power*, albeit not without pointing out Corelli's limitations:

> In justice to her, it must be said that some of her prophecies which crowd the pages of *The Secret Power* gave rise to some discussions at the time. The heroine, Morgana, designs a spaceship which can be stopped in mid-air by enemy use of light rays, thus anticipating Grindell Matthews by three years. There was also talk of the Sound Ray as an instrument of extra-terrestrial communication, and war by a 'holocaust of microbes'. Unfortunately, Marie was not able to show that she understood these concepts in any depth. (279)

While her knowledge remained limited, Corelli deployed more efforts to entertain a semblance of scientific plausibility. Well-known scientists are referenced more often, and attempts at explaining the functioning of the machines are more convincing than the mysterious condensation of light with radium in the *Young Diana*, if only because nuclear radiation is a more common source for wild extrapolation in the SF canon.

Conclusion

Through historical contextualization it becomes clear that Corelli meaningfully engaged with both debates in science and with the emerging genre of SF itself. Her particular conception of the relationship between scientific knowledge, technology, and personal morality has resulted in works that exploit SF generic features to go against the grain, as she opposed the secularist and materialist outlook which we consider a hallmark of early SF. Allied with a peculiar brand of conservative Victorian feminism and the whole in service to popular fiction, it is little wonder she remained overlooked or downplayed for so long. Yet her great popularity implies that she disseminated SF elements to a wider public than the central figures of the genre ever could.

Despite recent critical attention, Marie Corelli is most often linked to bad fiction, just as her name remained synonymous with literary commercial success after her death. It is arguably a hallmark of mass consumerist popular fiction that her contributions and influence are widely forgotten. Yet, there remain multiple echoes of her contributions in popular culture. For one, she is responsible for the popularization of the name Thelma, the name she gave to the heroine of the eponymous novel. Darko Suvin is among the few to note her influence on C.S. Lewis' SF cycle. Lili Loofbourow argued in the LARB that she influenced Lewis' more famous fellow writer, J.R.R. Tolkien by providing the template for Gollum and his distinctive speech pattern. Along with Arthur Conan Doyle, she is traced as one of the sources for the now universal trope of the Pharaoh's curse. Among the more distant echo is the sleeve cover art for Bauhaus ground-breaking 1982 Goth single *Bella Lugosi's Dead* which is, contrary to expectations, not taken from a still from *Dracula*, but from a 1926 film adaptation of the *Sorrows of Satan*. While not the first literary celebrity, she prefigures modern literary popularity in a way no other has before

her. She combines a cultivated authorial persona, retouched official photo portraits, a cultivated air of mystery, press attention, commercial success, ancillary products, literary tourism, a broad readership and critical scorn in a way that is prototypical of modernity. As for SF, Corelli's engagement with the genre from the position of a popular writer suggests the existence of a lesser known SF tradition buried controversially among the turn of the century occult romances and other forgotten categories of popular fiction. Her novels test the comfortable boundaries of the genre by proposing a SF that is not secular, utopian, or adventure focused. Her foresight into the versatility of the generic form is, even more than her technological imagination, vindicated by the present ever-growing diversity of the SF megatext.

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