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**Unheard Possibilities: Reappraising Classical Film
Music Scoring and Analysis**

Mariaconcetta Costantini, *Mrs Henry Wood*

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REFERENCES

Mariaconcetta Costantini, *Mrs Henry Wood* (Brighton: Edward Everett Root, 2020), 224 p., ISBN 978-1-912224-93-7

- 1 This book (224 p. including bibliography and index) focuses on one of the lesser-known Victorian women writers, Ellen Wood, who chose “Mrs Henry Wood” for a pen name, so as to ensure an image of matronly respectability, even submissiveness. This author, associated with the sensation novel and popular writing, was a best-selling, yet controverted writer in her time. She was then forgotten for a long period and recently rediscovered by feminist critics in particular. Mariaconcetta Costantini, a well-known specialist of Wilkie Collins and Victorian studies, devotes a long, richly documented introduction to provide the reader with a number of seminal biographical elements on this rather elusive novelist, but also to highlight some apparent paradoxes and contradictions in her life and work. Indeed, Ellen Wood is labeled a conservative writer, yet she is subtly critical of domestic ideologies, challenging even established institutions like marriage and questioning some aspects of patriarchy.
- 2 This book aims at reexamining Wood’s professional life and literary production (more than 40 volumes of fiction, novels and short stories, but also articles) from fresh perspectives and with reference to a variety of theoretical works (feminist studies in particular), which are combined very effectively to grant the reader a comprehensive view of Wood’s fictional universe and narrative strategies. Ms Costantini chooses to focus mostly on a wide range of women protagonists but she also develops analyses of various male characters, which enables an analysis of troubled and conflicting family relationships.
- 3 The first chapter entitled “The necessity and traps of Victorian marriage” focuses on a central Victorian institution, very often conceived as a social and financial transaction rather than a romantic union. The author develops precise examples taken from various novels, in particular *East Lynne* (1861), *St Martin’s Eve*, *Court Netherleigh*. Stress is laid on the indictment of mercenary unions and also on constraints, social and financial, hampering the freedom of Victorian wives. Maternity is also mostly connoted as “a source of suffering and self-denial”. Mariaconcetta Costantini scrutinizes also domestic space, the bourgeois home, which often becomes a site of suffering, loneliness and fear. She shows very aptly how Wood mingles fairy-tale models with gothic tropes. She also distinguishes two groups of characters that seem to challenge established gender roles: domestic men and single women (widows or spinsters). Consumerism is indicted as a cause of women’s commodification. On the contrary, self-help virtues are highlighted as testifies the example of Jane Halliburton in *Mrs Halliburton’s Troubles* or Hester Haliwell, a strong-willed spinster who also acts as amateur sleuth.
- 4 The second chapter entitled “Variations on the Griselda theme” examines the strategies used by Wood to deconstruct the ideal of female patience and endurance, in particular by making use of fairy-tale motifs and figures such as the Sleeping Beauty, Beauty and the Beast, or Cinderella. The Griselda prototype is specifically scrutinized but only partly deflated since the novels usually conflate antagonistic ideas and values: conservative views of femininity on the one hand, proto-feminist ones, on the other hand. A case in point is the contrasted portrayal of Maria Godolphin, a self-restrained, but also passive, apathetic “wifely ideal” and Charlotte Pain, a firm-tempered, energetic woman with unorthodox sexual mores. These novels also emphasize three significant elements: unrestrained passions, self-induced disease and the sacrificial model. Several of these fictions also rework “Blue Beard”, by gothicizing a tale based on women’s submission to male social and sexual control.

- 5 The third chapter entitled “Desiring subjects and the effects of immoderacy” starts with an examination of the madness motif that is foregrounded in Wood’s fiction. The author then analyses various groups of heroines: those who preserve their respectable status despite their excessive emotions and are seen as desiring subjects, those who manifest lack of control, pathological emotions verging on hysteria and insanity like Sybilla West. Murderous characters are also foregrounded such as Charlotte St John who interestingly combines female violence and insanity, but also victimization. Indeed as outlined by the author, women’s mental disorders are never essentialized, but rather related to “social constraints and adverse circumstances”.
- 6 The 4th chapter, entitled “The transgressive lady and the failings of patriarchy” is devoted to the characterization of upper-class ladies whose prototype is Isabel Vane, the adulterous heroine of *East Lynne*, who embodies bourgeois prejudices against the aristocracy seen as a degenerate immoral class, but also contributes to expose the limits of Victorian gender roles, especially when contrasted with her rival Barbara Hare stigmatized for her coldness and insincerity. Other characters like Rebecca Copp also challenge gender assumptions by displaying strength of character, courage and agency. Some of these characters are more eccentric, even verging on grotesqueness like Lady Kirton, an energetic woman also characterized by her gluttony.
- 7 The last chapter, entitled “Unconventional low-class women”, focuses on lower middle-class figures like governesses who embody some anxieties concerning the porosity of social class boundaries, but also working-class women, nurses or maid-servants who, acting as amateur detectives at times, are instrumental in uncovering criminal acts. As Mariaconcetta Costantini contends, Wood’s characterization of low-class women is “heterogeneous, class-biased but also thought-provoking”.
- 8 The conclusion, short but dense, summarizes the main ideas that have been developed in the whole book, emphasizing in particular the constant wavering between conservative anti-feminist and proto-feminist ideas, but also the cross-class nature of Wood’s fiction.
- 9 This book is extremely well researched, documented and densely written. The author’s fluid and elegant style makes it also a very pleasant, exciting reading experience. We are led to discover the many facets (also biographical) of a writer whose work is now being critically reassessed. Mariaconcetta Costantini’s approach is indebted to feminist studies that she uses very convincingly, quoting from authors like Simone de Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf, Julia Kristeva (and her concept of non-disjunction), Judith Butler (and her theorization of performativity), Luce Irigaray (and the concept of “fetish-object”), but also Foucault and Levi-Strauss. The author manages to combine different theoretical concepts, offering very innovative and stimulating readings of Ellen Wood’s novels and short stories. She also quotes from various scholars of Victorian fiction and refers to the critical reception of Wood’s controverted work. Even though she focuses mostly on the way heroines are characterized, highlighting their complexities, ambiguities and ambivalences, she also pays attention to the structure of the novels, their narrative strategies, and some formal devices. She emphasizes in particular the use of irony and of “camouflage strategies” that are used to subtly undermine or challenge the institutions and patriarchal values of Victorian society. She also stresses the way Ellen Wood aptly combines the tropes of different genres (fairy tales, gothic, crime fiction, melodrama), justifying also her status as popular writer

- 10 The author's thorough knowledge of a wide corpus of texts (novels, short stories, and biographies), rich and complex argumentation, theoretical and analytical mastery, enables a comprehensive, fascinating study that will highly contribute to Wood's critical reappraisal. It will also, hopefully, induce the readers of this remarkable essay, to go back to or discover the works of a long time discarded woman writer, well worth reading for her literary skills but also for her challenging ideas.
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Mots-clés: Agentivité, aristocratie, corps, bourgeoisie, techniques de camouflage, classe, consumérisme, crime, fiction policière, éducation, émotion, conte de fées, féminisme et anti-féminisme, gothique, époux, hystérie, immodération, ironie, maladie mentale, patriarcat, réification, roman à sensation, femmes

Keywords: Agency, aristocracy, bodies, bourgeoisie, camouflage techniques, class, commodification, consumerism, crime, detective fiction, education, emotion, fairy-tales, feminism and anti-feminism, gothic, husbands, hysteria, immoderacy, irony, mental illness, patriarchy, sensation novel, women

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