



Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW)

KONINKLIJKE NEDERLANDSE
AKADEMIE VAN WETENSCHAPPEN

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2015

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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citation for published version (APA)

Scott, F. (2015). "An exaggerated type of many lives": Ouida, women writers, and the critical reception of the representation of childbirth.

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"An exaggerated type of many lives": Ouida, women writers, and the critical reception of the representation of childbirth

By Francesca M. Scott

Huygens ING (HERA Travelling Texts)

In this paper, I take up one of the threads of Suzan's discussion, examining the possibility that the reasons for accepting or rejecting the works (in particular the novels) of a woman writer might be tied to her choice of plot elements. For this purpose, it is important to identify those elements that occur frequently in women's texts throughout the nineteenth century, and as such, might be termed "female" in the sense that women writers are engaging with them more extensively and intensively than male writers, and are liable to "generate" different perspectives, being experienced or understood per definition in different ways by men and women.

Amongst these, it is possible to immediately observe childbirth, reproduction, and its associated processes, including pregnancy and the wider context of female reproductive health. **[SLIDE]** In a recent analysis I conducted of 46 British female writers, selected because they had a broad reception in the Netherlands, as well as the four other countries of the HERA TTT project **[SLIDE]**, 59% can be seen to incorporate childbirth, pregnancy and the wider context of women's reproductive health in at least one of their texts. Frequently, this includes two or more texts. By examining these narrative topoi, we might start by considering the idea that this aspect of female life, of the female identity, immediately put women writers to a disadvantage in terms of what was—and perhaps continues to be—classified as "literary quality". These items, in being in some ways distant to men (although certainly no altogether unfamiliar, given that they could be fathers and also doctors, man-midwives or obstetricians), were perhaps not always appealing—indeed, from Ruskin's *Modern Painter* (which although admittedly about art, arguably provides a case in point), there is, as Einthe Hensen points out, a "hierarchy of response", that puts "girls and

women” and “their ‘feminine’ subject-matter” on the “lowest level”,¹ especially given the fact that critics and other “canonizers” were most often male.

My argument is, therefore, two-fold. Firstly, I consider that women writers were not simply using the themes of female biology, and in particular pregnancy and childbirth, to either drive a plot forward, following common conventions to remove a child from its mother and place it in a hostile environment, thereby facilitating the bildungsroman genre (think of Charles Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*); nor were they used because that is all they *could* write about, all that they knew (this is, of course, a very dangerous assertion): these topoi are used carefully and deliberately, and often as a means to engage with a variety of different eighteenth and nineteenth century debates—medical/scientific (the obstetrical debates that were happening across Europe at this time), social, political, women’s rights, in particular. They are also used as a way to connect with a genre, such as the Gothic or sensational fiction; as Sally Mitchell notes, novelists, and we might in particular say female novelists, “used blood as well as sex; accidents are gory; heroines (even virtuous ones) die labouring for breath and coughing up blood [...]”.² In this way, childbirth scenes provided an effective opportunity to incorporate violence and gore, without having to resort to *The Monk*-style atrocities. More importantly, they showed that this physicality/biology was an essential part of female life—unavoidable, inescapable; indeed, it is more unusual for biology *not* to feature in women’s writing.

In addition to this, I explore what the effect of this on the reception of a woman’s writing might be, both in the UK and elsewhere. In terms of the HERA *Travelling Texts* project, I am particularly interested in the reception of these topoi in British women’s writing in the Netherlands, and also, where possible, in the four other countries of the project. I have examined those writers who were received most extensively in these countries, and at the top of this list, according to our most up to date records, is Marie Louise de la Ramée, also known as

¹ Eithne Henson, *Landscape and Gender in the Novels of Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Harriet Beecher Stowe* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), p.18

² Sally Mitchell, *The Fallen Angel: Chastity, Class, and Women's Reading, 1835-1880* (Ohio: Bowling Green University Press, 1981), p.87.

Ouida, who was writing in the mid to late nineteenth century, and incorporated a number of the aforementioned elements associated with childbirth and female reproductive health in many of her texts. From the database, we can immediately see that her books were translated into Dutch, German, French, Spanish, Swedish, Italian, Russian, Danish, Polish, Norwegian and Finnish, as well as probably other languages, as well as being received in many others.

I have analysed four of her novels, and for the purpose of this paper I will focus on two of them: *Folle-Farine* (1871)³ and *Princess Napraxine* (1884), written by Ouida over a period of thirteen years in the 1870s and 1880s, both of which were translated into Dutch, according to our records, and may have been translated in other countries. Through an analysis of the elements of childbirth and reproductive female health in these texts, I will argue that Ouida can perhaps be seen to provide a snapshot of the way in which women writers engaged with these topics, and that they have the potential to transcend a number of boundaries. They almost certainly provided an extension of Ouida's feminist argument—and it is important to note that many critics have indeed recognised her as feminist—and the contemporary reception of her works more generally may have been closely linked to this.

Ouida

Ouida is an interesting writer not only in the way that she depicts childbirth and maternity, but also because she can be seen as something of a cultural mediator. She was born in England to an English mother and a French father, and spent the first part of her life in England, before moving to Florence in Italy, where she spent the remainder of her life, and wrote most of her novels. She set these novels in countries all over Europe, and this, as well as her friendship and collaboration with her publisher Baron Tauchnitz (which propelled her success from France to Germany), may have been one of the reasons why the reception of her works is so vast. Despite this, the reception of her works throughout Europe was not always favourable; in fact, it was frequently unfavourable, with Dutch and other critics—as Suzan previously

³ *Folle-Farine*: tr. 1888 by woman, present in vd Hoek lending library 1873; *Princess Napraxine*: [id. : tr. immediately by woman]

highlighted—often referring to an apparent tendency towards excess and exaggeration.

Such a reaction can be seen with the first of the texts I am interested in, **[SLIDE]** *Folle-Farine*, written in 1871. In this story we can see one of the most common themes taken up by Ouida: maternal mortality. At first glance, maternal mortality in *Folle-Farine* is used in the conventional sense, as a plot device to make way for the heroine to be left alone and thrust helpless and friendless into the world. The circumstances of the maternal mortality are, however, explored and narrated, partly through the heroine's father, who is also abusive. The scene reveals the perils of childbirth, and the potential violence of it **[SLIDE]**:

"There is a woman in labor, a league back; by the great cork-tree, against the bridge," he said to them. "Go to her some of you." [...] Under the great cork-tree, where the grass was long and damp, and the wood grew thickly, and an old rude bridge of unhewn blocks of rock spanned, with one arch, the river as it rushed downward from its limestone bed aloft, they found a woman just dead and a child just born.

Thereafter, there is an extended scene describing her burial by a crippled gypsy from the clan who takes pity on the woman, and digs her a grave under the tree. In this way, the death of *Folle-Farine*'s mother in childbirth is fully considered; it is not just a detail (common in Gothic novels) to drive the plot forward, and it is in marked contrast to *Folle-Farine*'s apparent inability—or unwillingness—to have children, or engage sexually, even with the man that she loves.

Ouida also uses maternal mortality to explore the consequences of illegitimate pregnancy and birth in the nineteenth century. In *Folle-Farine*, the mother's "sin" is inescapable; *Folle-Farine* is doomed by her mother—their fates are the same in that they make the same "sacrifice" (emotionally, physically and sexually), and neither is able to escape the cycle of abuse and patriarchal standards they are subjected to, except through death, and even in this *Folle-Farine*'s mother is denied a voice: the event of her daughter's birth—a personal and tragic moment—is narrated through the man who has seduced and abused her. *Folle-Farine* is only able to escape a similar humiliation by committing suicide, finally breaking the mother-daughter tie.

The sadism of men and/or their neglect plays a central role in a number of Ouida's novels, and the effect of this abuse—physically and emotionally—is carefully scrutinised both in *Folle-Farine* and *Princess Napraxine*. Often these women are childlike, described as “innocent” and like a “baby”, serving as a powerful contrast to the brutish power and tyranny of the men who surround them. This physical immaturity, however, has consequences for the women's ability to be mothers—they have neither the physical or emotional strength, and as such, maternity is frequently thwarted, even though there are plenty of pregnancies. Sometimes heroines long for motherhood (but usually for the “wrong” reasons (to “win back” an errant husband, for instance), and they do not necessarily regret the deaths of their infants.

This is the case in *Princess Napraxine*, a story about the love-triangle between Princess Napraxine, Othmar, who is obsessed with her, and Othmar's young and entirely inexperienced wife, Yseulte. Despite her naivety, Yseulte realises soon after her marriage that her husband does not love her, and sinks into a depression. She becomes pregnant, however, in the hope that “a living child” will allow her to reach “come higher place in her husband's heart”. An accident in a boat leads to the premature birth of her child, who “barely breath[s] for a few moments”. As with *Folle-Farine*, this private and tragic event is related through the eyes of the neglectful Othmar, who is distinguished from the gypsy in *Folle-Farine* only because he does not physically attack his wife **[SLIDE]**:

I was dry-eyed whilst that poor child wept over that little, frail, waxen body, which was so much to her if it had lived to lie on her breast. It is the most pathetic of all possible things—a girl still sixteen sorrowing for her offspring which has perished before it had any separate existence; has died before it lived; and yet I feel hardly more than if I had seen a bird flying round an empty nest, or a brood of leverets wailing in an empty form.

The father creates a sense of pathos in his description, but there is no sympathy and no remorse. We see Yseulte's reaction, but she is not given the opportunity to describe it for herself; once again, the male voice eclipses that of the female voice. In the following volume, Ouida explores fear of childbirth when Yseulte becomes pregnant again, saying: **[SLIDE]** “her woes—the mental woes of

neglected woes, the physical woes of approaching parturition—could not be told to any man”, and the heroine openly discusses the possibility of her dying in childbirth. Yseulte does not die, however, although her baby does, and Ouida directly attributes the death of this child to Yseulte’s distress during pregnancy:

Late autumn came, and her child was born as the first red leaves were blown upon the wind. But, enfeebled by the distress of her mind during so many months before its birth, it only breathed a little while the air of earth, then sank into death as a snowdrop sinks faded in the snow [...]

Thereafter, Yseulte plunges into depression, and here Ouida almost certainly explores the consequences of postnatal depression, describing Yseulte’s “intense melancholy”, which closes upon her “from which no effort [can] rouse her”. [see below about review]

Reception:

The topoi I have thus far highlighted in these two texts include maternal mortality, postnatal depression, premature birth and/or stillbirth, and fear of childbirth. Each time, the main events are narrated through the eyes of the abusive male, and serve as an opportunity for Ouida to extend her critique of male oppression, and the perils of becoming a mother. Clearly, there is in this the potential to upset the conventional, to be “transgressive”—even if these are common occurrences in women’s lives.

The critical reception, however, does not necessarily respond directly to the topoi I have been describing; in a few cases it does, in others it is implied—revealed through references to the female characters, perhaps, and by alluding to the feminist framework, of which the childbirth topoi play an essential part.

Indeed, as has been noted, for Victorian critics, “one of the most objectionable aspects of sensation fiction was its frequent depiction of women. [...]” (465-466). It was this that prompted Margaret Oliphant to write scathingly about women writers of sensation fiction in her essay “Novels” in 1867], calling Ouida’s novels in particular **[SLIDE]**:

very fine and very nasty books [...] They are so fine as to be unreadable, and consequently we should hope could do little harm, the diction being too gorgeous for merely human facilities. We note, in glancing here and

there through the luscious pages, that there is always either a mass of glorious hair lying across a man's breast, or a lady's white and jewelled fingers are twined in the gentleman's chestnut or raven curls—preferably chestnut; for “colour” is necessary to ever such picture. (269)

It is of excess regarding the depiction of women that Oliphant accuses Ouida, and this, indeed, is the criticism levelled at her by critics across Europe, including in here in Finland and in Sweden. In the periodical *Koti ja yhteiskunta* (Home and Community) from 1895, the periodical of the women's movement, we find a similar critique to Oliphant's, in which Ouida is described as a “strange phenomenon”, and sharply criticised: “Ouida worships the most rotten part of society—but she can't depict real people”.

But for one (anonymous) reviewer in the nineteenth century of ‘The Examiner’, in the UK, there is important justification for this apparent excess; it is necessary because it is an “exaggerated type of many lives” **[SLIDE]**:

To show how Folle-Farine is made the sport of the cruelties of the world, and how she triumphs over them, to show, in her story, how unjust is the treatment which women too often receive from men, and how great is the need of a revolution which will release both men and women from the tyranny of old traditions, and of ever-new falsehoods, is the purpose of Ouida's work. [...] That purpose may, doubtless, offend some, but it is an honest purpose, and ‘Folle-Farine’ can only open its readers' eyes to facts that exist, that ought to not exist, yet which cannot cease to exist so long as they are cloaked over and ignored. No women have to suffer so much as Folle-Farine is made to do; few women would be able to triumph over circumstances, by self-sacrifice, as Folle-Farine does. But many have to suffer, many are made slaves of cruelty and lust; and, until the world learns to do them justice, until “sweeter manners, purer laws” are established in their favour, the world will suffer by all the hardships which it inflicts on them.

The critic—and we might surmise a female critic—clearly recognised the feminist framework of *Folle-Farine*. There is no direct reference to the maternal mortality in the novel, but Folle-Farine's mother's death in childbirth can be understood as an essential part of this “exaggerated type of many lives”.

However, with regards to the childbirth topoi, it is often what is *not* said, and the significance of this silence, that is of the most interest to us. These I call reception “gaps”, and in *Princess Napraxine*, the reception “gap” is particularly telling. It falls around the character of Yseulte, who, as previously mentioned, gives birth to one stillborn child, and is bereaved again soon after the birth of her second. The weak and helpless character of Yseulte contrasts with the strong, intelligent and witty character, Princess Napraxine, but she appears only infrequently in Dutch critical reviews. These reviews tend to focus on Napraxine, and often in reference to her rejection of motherhood (even though she has had two children “off stage”). Here, Yseulte’s ability to become pregnant, and to want to be a mother (think of the description of her weeping over the dead child in the text), seems significant because this might mean that she represents the “ideal” woman, particularly in contrast to the masculine, “egoist” Napraxine. Thus, her fertility seems to ensure that she is acceptable, even if Ouida is complicating this picture by repeatedly thwarting maternity. But in being “ideal” she is essentially overlooked and ignored by the reviewers: they are not interested in her as a character, only in the supposedly sterile (“selfish”, “egoist”), Princess Napraxine. Aside from this, other Dutch reviews note that: “When reading about what happens to the unfortunate woman [Yseulte], one feels like [one is] assisting [in] a vivisection scene”, arguing that the novel is in this way too probing, and in a specifically medical sense: “Painters and sculptors need to know about the human body, but their vocation as artists does not lead them to provide illustrations as for manuals in medical sciences. The same for the novelist: there must be beauty”.

In conclusion, while it is impossible to draw broad claims based on the case of one female writer, it can be suggested that Ouida could be seen as representative for these narrative topoi by women writers, and that these form an essential part of understanding their reception. As such, we consider that these aspects—as well as others—should be integrated into the database we are using so that we can consider the scale on which they are used by our writers, thus further elucidating women’s authorship.

