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Marie Corelli’s Satan and *Don Juan in Hell*

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A CRITIC WROTE of *The Sorrows of Satan* on its publication in 1895, “English society is in such a thoroughly rotten state that it is not surprising that Marie Corelli had to go to hell to find a hero.” Bernard Shaw began *Man and Superman*, with its jewel of a separable dream scene in Hell, in 1901, the year Queen Victoria’s reign closed. For years he had been mulling over a play in which Don Juan and the Devil confront each other as respectful—and respectable—equals, and perhaps his ideas for it began to coalesce when he read *The Sorrows of Satan* and then reviewed a stage adaptation in 1897. Since 1886 he had reviewed her best-selling yet critically excoriated novels, all with a melodramatically religious dimension emanating from late-Victorian agonizing about faith and doubt. An “easygoing God” was “amiable theology,” but the nonbelieving Shaw preferred a deity tempered by a Miltonic Satan, the most memorable character in all his many works, a rebellious archangel who had proclaimed, “Evil, be thou my Good.”

From the medieval mystery plays with a forked-tail Evil One, through Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* and Goethe’s *Faust*, the fallen archangel was an unpleasant figure, but readers and audiences, increasingly sophisticated, were drawn to more likeable qualities and human guises, which made succumbing to temptation more persuasive. The Devil as a cunning, and convivial, English gentleman may not have originated with Corelli or culminated with Shaw. In 1941, C. S. Lewis, then a don at Magdalen College, Oxford, wrote *The Screwtape Letters*, an epistolary fantasy in which the Devil’s attractive if morally inverted character is seen through the fumbling effort of a junior tempter to recruit a young Christian to the cause of “Our Father Below.” The Devil is obviously a more attractive literary subject, whether employed for irony or for piety, if he belongs to the right clubs and disguises greed as a good.

Shaw seems to have read all of Miss Corelli’s early novels, at least through *The Sorrows of Satan*, but seldom referred to them beyond his
anonymous reviews. “Sometimes,” he wrote in his brief preface to *The Admirable Bashville*, a farce he composed just before he began *Man and Superman*,

the simple and direct passages [in the Authorized Version of the Bible] were not sentimental enough to satisfy people whose minds were steeped in modern literary sob stuff. For instance, such bald statements were made about Barabbas as that he was a robber, or that he had killed a certain man in a sedition, quite failed to interest anyone in him; but when Marie Corelli expanded this concise information into a novel in her own passionate and richly colored style [in 1893] it sold like hot cakes.

As “G.B.S.” in the *Saturday Review*, writing at length about the play based upon Corelli’s novel about religion and contemporary life, Shaw observed: “A sniveling, remorseful devil, with his heart in the right place, sneaking about the railings of heaven in the hope that he will presently be let in and forgiven, is an abomination to me.” Her devil, as his would be, is utterly the opposite—until she begins to compromise with her audiences, page and stage. Her Christlike figure, a successful and reclusive lady novelist bearing the author’s initials, is immune to worldly rapaciousness, even to the otherworldly Satan, who betrays an amorous interest in her. Most of Corelli’s loyal readers were unlike her characters from the venal upper reaches of society, guaranteeing their approval of her strictures.

Curiously, the highest tier in the English class hierarchy was an exception, and possibly for that reason she received royal approbation. As a critic wrote in an occasionally admiring overview of Corelli in the *Westminster Review* (1906): “When our late Queen ordered all her books to be sent to her this was held to be a crowning proof of Miss Corelli’s skill....” By the Nineties, Victoria’s failing sight, clouded by cataracts, made it impossible for her to read anything but boldly enlarged print, but her ladies-in-waiting read to her regularly and may have quietly evaded passages of possible indelicacy. Although Victoria might have been offended by Lucio’s reproach of Lady Sybil, with its royal innuendo, that her emotional outbursts would have graced the stage, it was accurate to the last word, and nothing changed at Court after the novel’s appearance. “You would have adorned the boards, drawn the mob, had as many lovers, stagey and private, as you pleased,” he charged, “been invited to act at Windsor, obtained a payment jewel from the Queen, and written your name in her autograph album.”

Although a reader of newspapers rather than novels, among Corelli’s admirers, too, was the Prince of Wales. When holidaying at Bad
Homburg in 1892, the Prince noticed her at his posh hotel and invited the novelist, then thirty-seven, to join him at dinner and sit at his left, which established her local reputation. “You must not stand on ceremony with me,” he said. Soon came a note via the Prince’s equerry asking her to lunch, and as she arrived, Albert Edward drew forward a black-bearded young man and said: “Miss Corelli, my son George, who is well acquainted with your books.”

After that it was impossible for Marie Corelli, born Minnie Mackay, to write anything sufficiently tasteless to diminish Victoria’s heir apparent—unless it was the open (and perhaps slyly ironic) admiration of Lucio Rimanez, her gentlemanly Prince of Darkness in her novel to come, *The Sorrows of Satan*, who writes sweepingly to the weak Don Juan figure he cultivates with his diabolic powers: “Of all the Royalties at present flourishing on this paltry planet, I have the greatest respect for the Prince of Wales.”

Although Shaw knew Corelli, a year his elder, among the denizens of the British Museum Reading Room, his irony was not even sly. “When she takes up her pen,” he wrote,

she imagines [her quirky religion] to be real, because she has a prodigiously copious and fluent imagination, without, as far as I have been able to ascertain, the knowledge, the training, the observation, the critical faculty, the humor, or any of the acquirements, and qualities which compel ordinary people to distinguish in some measure … between what they sanely believe and what they would like to believe.

It explained why she “let the devil off so cheaply.” Shaw would not. Yet internal evidence suggests that he found enough to capture his interest in the novel that he borrowed from it—as he would borrow, like all writers, from what had come before and lodged tenaciously in the creative mind. A curious clue may be a fragment of a dialogue in his *You Never Can Tell*, begun in December 1895, just after *The Sorrows of Satan* was published. Young Dolly Clandon, visiting Valentine, the fledgling dentist, for an extraction puns from *Macbeth*: “Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow.” More precisely, Prince Lucio had quoted to his pawn Geoffrey Tempest: “Pluck out the memory of a rooted sorrow.” Shaw might have thought of the line on his own, but he had just read it in Corelli. In *Don Juan in Hell* itself, the Devil denounces at length the slavish, costly artificialities of conventional obsequies from flowers and food to tomb and tombstone. Shaw had read as much in Dickens and written similarly in his early novel *An Unsocial Socialist* (1883), but the exaggerated unseemliness of the “proper forms,” the “glorious
burial” and exquisitely sculpted marble monument are memorable pages in *The Sorrows of Satan*, and more immediately at hand.

Although these may be coincidental echoes, a dialogue early in *Don Juan in Hell* is of especial interest. The Old Woman will be transformed into the twentyish Doña Ana:

DON JUAN. Nothing is real here.... How old were you when you changed from time into eternity?... Here in hell old age is not tolerated. It is too real....

THE OLD WOMAN. How can I help my age...?

DON JUAN. You forget that you left your age behind you in the realm of time. You are no more 77 than you are 7 or 17 or 27.... Well, here we have no bodies: we see each other as bodies only because we learnt to think about one another under that aspect when we were alive.... But we can appear to one another at any age we choose....

THE OLD WOMAN. Seventeen!

DON JUAN. Before you decide, I had better tell you that these things are a matter of fashion.... Just at present the fashionable age is 40—say 37; but there are signs of a change. If you were at all good-looking at 27, I should suggest your trying this, and setting a new fashion.

THE OLD WOMAN. I do not believe a word you are saying. However 27 be it. “Prince,” says Geoffrey early in *Sorrows*, “you must excuse me if I seem confused or astonished.... I had expected to see quite an old man.” “No one is old, my dear sir, nowadays!” The debonair Lucio declares lightly. “...One does not talk of age at all in polite society—it is ill bred, even coarse.... My looks belie me! I am like several of the most noted fashionable beauties—much riper than I seem.”

Later, Lucio explains to Lady Sibyl Elton:

“You are still young, Madame, and I am old. You look incredulous? Alas, why is it I wonder, I may not look the age I am! Most of my acquaintances spend a great part of their lives in trying to look the age they are not, and I never came upon a man of fifty who was not proud to be considered thirty-nine.... I judge age by the workings of thought and feeling, more than the passing of years.”

Shaw’s apparent conversion of Corelli’s concept of age into an imaginative construct for the theater may not even be a deliberate borrowing—yet this is how creativity often works. Also the operatic tirades (the long skeins of speech) of both Don Juan and the Devil in Shaw’s dream interlude, in balanced phrases and clauses, much like arias, suggest both dialogue and idea from *The Sorrows of Satan*—as with Lucio’s invective on the artificiality of sophistication beginning “Nothing English is good enough for the English.” Even Geoffrey Tempest’s...
socially elite wife, “purchased” with the Prince of Darkness’s unexplained wealth but furnished indirectly to the effete Tempest, is given her own feminist arias, her “bit of Ibsenism”; she describes each with bitterness, on women trapped on the marriage block in control of “one’s parental auctioneer.” The majority of men who sought her, Lady Sibyl claims to the “virtuous demon” (in Shaw’s words) whom she fails to seduce,

resembled carefully trained baboons,—respectably clothed and artistically shaven—but nevertheless with the spasmodic gin, the leering eye, and the uncouth gestures of the hairy woodland monster. When I was eighteen I “came out” in earnest—that is, I was presented at Court with all the foolish and farcical pomp practised on such occasions..., a guarantee of position and above all of reputation,—the Queen received none of whose conduct was not rigidly correct and virtuous. What humbug it all was!... The distinguished mêlée, [was] a thoroughly ill-mannered “crush,” which struck me as supremely vulgar and totally unfitting the dignity of our Sovereign’s court. When I curtsied before the Throne at last, and saw the majesty of the Empire represented by a kindly faced old lady looking very tired and bored, whose hand was as cold as ice when I kissed it, I was conscious of an intense feeling of pity for her in her high estate. Who would be a Monarch, to be doomed to the perpetual receiving of a company of fools! I got though my duties ... and next day found that my “debut” had ... formally put me up for sale.”

Referring to the respectable world as an illusion, Shaw’s Don Juan—more equal as an opponent to his Prince of Darkness than Corelli’s malleable Geoffrey Tempest—refers to the Devil’s “Palace of Lies” as the place of drift and pleasure, devoid of any other purpose. “Your friends,” he charges, “are all the dullest dogs I know. They are not beautiful; they are only decorated. They are not clean; they are only shaved and starched. They are not dignified; they are only fashionably dressed.... They are not moral; they are only conventional. They are not virtuous; they are only cowardly....” Words used often by Corelli reappear strikingly in Shaw’s dialogue—“spasmodic,” for example, and “vanity” and “respectability.” And Don Juan’s references to the Devil as “The Tempter” suggest the successfully tempted Geoffrey Tempest.

Corelli’s cynical Satan anticipates Shaw’s in boasting: “My experience has taught me that I can always buy everything. The sentiments called honour and virtue by the majority of men are the most shifty things imaginable—set sufficient cash down, and they become bribery and corruption....” In cadences suggesting Shaw’s dialogue he gloats:

“I am one with the beasts in honesty! The lion does not assume the manners of the dove,—he loudly announces his own ferocity. The very cobra,
stealthy though its movements be, evinces its meaning by a warning hiss or rattle. The hungry wolf’s bay is heard far down the wind, intimidating the horrified traveller among the wastes of snow. But man gives no clue to his intent—more malignant than the lion, more treacherous than the snake, more greedy than the wolf, and an hour later defames his character behind his back.”

(John Tanner in Shaw’s frame play—the Don Juan in the dream—will refer elaborately to the conniving Ann Whitefield, Doña Ana in the dream, as a boa constrictor.)

When the Statue of the Commander in Shaw tells Don Juan, as he might also have congratulated the Devil, “Your flow of words is simply amazing…. How I wish I could have talked like that to my soldiers,” we may recall Corelli’s Devil shrugging: “I think I was born to be an actor. Now and then the love of declamation masters me. Then I speak—as Prime Ministers and men in Parliament speak—to suit the humour of the hour and without meaning a single word I say!” Don Juan’s response in Shaw is “Yes, it is mere talk. But why is it mere talk? Because, my friend, honesty, purity, respectability, religion, morality, art, patriotism, bravery and the rest are nothing but words which I or anyone else can turn inside out like a glove.”

That heaven and hell are mere concepts, like calendar age, is a conceit of both Corelli and Shaw. Satan (as Prince Lucio) explains the sorrows that embitter him as “The foul and filthy crimes of men,—the base deceits and cruelties of women,—the ruthless, murderous ingratitude of children,—the scorn of good, the martyrdom of intellect, the selfishness, the avarice, the sensuality of human life, the hideous blasphemy and sin of the creature to the Creator,—these are my endless sorrows!” (But for the last “sin,” Corelli’s strategy to draw in the devout, the cadences suggest Don Juan’s jeremiads to the Devil.) In Shaw’s Hell scene, Don Juan asks, exasperated by the sybaritic excesses of the nether world, which is of course contemporary life: “Señor Commander: you know the way to the frontier of hell and heaven. Be good enough to direct me.”

“Oh,” the Statue explains, “the frontier is only the difference between two ways of looking at things. Any road will take you across it if you really want to get there.”

Corelli had used that metaphor from the start. As “the apostle of romantic religion,” Shaw quoted her from A Romance of Two Worlds (1886): “Believe in anything or everything miraculous and glorious: the utmost reach of your faith can with difficulty grasp the majestic reality
and perfection of everything you can see, desire, or imagine.” In *The Sorrows of Satan*, however, topsyturvydom reigns. The world will be—for the most part—repulsive until the conversion of Satan. For Shaw, Corelli’s novels—and stage adaptations—were neither “possible, real, or philosophically coherent.” Quoting Ibsen’s John Gabriel Borkman’s observation that “the eye, born anew, transforms the old action,” he sees only a remix of the old evangelical formulas, exploiting the novelist’s new, unidentified, and un-Wagnerian acquaintance with Wagner. Possibly Shaw did not know that Corelli had been educated for a musical career before taking up fiction (she took her penname from the seventeenth-century Italian composer Arcangelo Corelli), yet his insights were on the mark. Reviewing her *Thelma* in 1887, he had written: “Her maiden in white, singing at the spinning-wheel, is borrowed from M. Gounod, and her Odin worshiper meeting the Valkyrie,… was probably impressed on her by the scene between Siegmund and and Brynhild in Wagner’s *Die Walküre*.” Now, referring to Ibsen’s play, he wrote:

Miss Corelli’s eye, not having been born anew, transforms nothing. Only, it was born recently enough to have fallen on the music dramas of Wagner; and just as she gave us, in *Thelma* [her novel following *A Romance of Two Worlds*], a version of the scene in *Die Walküre* where Brynhild warns Siegmund of his approaching death, in *The Sorrows of Satan* she reproduces Vanderdecken [from *The Flying Dutchman*], the man whose sentence of damnation will be cancelled if he can find one soul faithful to death. Wagner’s Vanderdecken is redeemed by a woman; but Miss Corelli, belonging to that sex herself, knows better, and makes the redeemer a man…. I am unable to report the logical connection between the drowning of Geoffrey Tempest in the shipwreck of Satan-Vanderdecken-Rimanez’s yacht in the Antarctic circle, and the immediate ascension to heaven of Satan in a suit of armor; but I have no doubt it is explained in the novel; at all events, the situation at the end of *The Flying Dutchman*, with the ship sinking, and the redeemed man rising from the sea in glory, is quite recognizable.

Even the failed seduction by Satan, a powerful scene in both novel and play, is a borrowing from opera, Shaw notes, although the sexes are reversed, “as *The Sorrows of Satan* are womanmade.” Corelli

blend[s] the extremity of modern fashionableness with the extremity of medieval superstition…. All the essentials of Gounod’s Faust are in the fourth act, with even some of the accessories…. The scene succeeds, as certain other scraps of the play succeed, because Miss Corelli has the courage and intensity of her imagination. This does not, of course, save her from absurdity.

Ironically, Shaw, too, would employ Gounod. When the Statue early in the Hell scene summons the Devil, at the wave of his hand (in Shaw’s
stage directions) “the great chords roll out again, but this time Mozart’s music gets grotesquely adulterated with Gounod’s. A scarlet halo begins to glow, and into it the Devil rises slowly, very Mephistophelean….” Bowing, he identifies himself, “Lucifer, at your service.”

Elsewhere in his notice Shaw makes it clear that he had read the novel earlier. His discussion of the further absurdities of the play is for the diversion of readers of his columns in the Saturday Review. In the novel, Satan survives and even flourishes, as immortal devils do, returning to the business of temptation. On the rebound his victim is an easily susceptible Member of Parliament. Poetic justice, Shaw writes of the play version, “has to be sacrificed to stage effect”—and the wish-fulfilment fantasies of the theater audience.

While Shaw deplores Corelli’s “immunity from commonsense,” he reserves special execration for her inability to leaven her outlook with the slightest element of humor, without which satire is only cynicism: “Miss Corelli has flatly no humor: positively none at all. She is, in a very bookish way, abundantly sensuous and romantic; but she vehemently repudiates the conventional moral basis, professing, for instance, a loathing for the normal course of fashionable society with its marriage market, its spiritual callousness, and its hunt for pleasure and money. But if Miss Corelli did not herself live in the idlest of all worlds, the world of dreams and books (so idle that people do not even learn to ride and shoot and sin in it), she would know that it is vain to protest against a necessary institution, however corrupt, until you have an efficient and convincing substitute ready.”

There is even an American heiress in the novel, written in to marry into upper English society, however hateful it appears, and again Shaw—further coincidence, perhaps—reverses the Corelli situation in Man and Superman, outside the Don Juan in Hell interlude, by having a young man, heir to an American commercial fortune, romance and marry an English maiden of social standing. Much in Corelli’s novel, and in the play adaptation credited to Herbert Woodgate and Paul Berton (“I nevertheless hold Miss Corelli responsible for it,” Shaw writes), reverses or opposes what Shaw would create in Don Juan in Hell, but for the suave surface, and lively dialogue, of the attractively wicked Prince of Darkness. There was no compliment to her for Shaw to return, but in curious ways he may have owed Marie Corelli something for striking aspects of one of his most lasting works for the stage.
Sources

*The Sorrows of Satan* is quoted from the reprint edition, Julilla Kuehn, ed. (Kansas City: Valancourt Books, 2008. Unless otherwise noted, references to reviews are from its appendix, including the opening line of this essay, drawn from W. T. Stead’s anonymously published “The Sorrows of Satan”—and of Marie Corelli,” *Review of Reviews* (October 1895).

Shaw’s “Don Juan in Hell” encompasses most of Act III of *Man and Superman* (London: 1903 and subsequent reprints).

The preface to Shaw’s farce *The Admirable Bashville* (1901) is quoted from Dan H. Laurence, ed., *Collected Plays with Their Prefaces*, II (London: Max Reinhardt, 1971). Quotations from his *You Never Can Tell* are from volume I.

His reviews of Corelli are collected in Brian Tyson, ed., *Bernard Shaw’s Book Reviews Originally Published in the Pall Mall Gazette from 1885 to 1888* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991).


C. S. Lewis’s *The Screwtape Letters* was first published in London by Geoffrey Bles in 1942 and has remained in print in various editions since.