

Modernist Mental States and Marie Corelli's *Wormwood*

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<1>Marie Corelli's *Wormwood* (1890) appears to be a flamboyantly excessive warning about the dangers of absinthe. Yet at the same time, canny Corelli critics like Annette Federico and Kristen MacLeod have pointed out how much Corelli's novel draws on just the absintheur culture it appears to decry. In their view, Corelli's novel is deeply informed by decadence, not just attacking decadence. In this article I would like to extend their recognition of *Wormwood's* complex engagement with avant-garde writing of the period. I argue that *Wormwood* is notable for its engagement with changing models of subjectivity, psychology, and literary style on the cusp of modernism, and that it can be read as an experimental novel that interrogates both turn-of-the-century notions of identity and the structure of fiction. Gaston Beauvais's fall into absinthism is both a Freudian case study and an exemplar of the invention of the male subject of modernism.

<2>In this respect, the qualities that would normally bar Gaston from being a protagonist in a novel of the nineteenth century are precisely the qualities that make him the paradigmatic modernist subject. Gaston is drug-addicted, hallucinatory, malnourished, sleep-deprived. He may well be the most mentally disturbed narrator in nineteenth-century fiction. That this delirium is self-induced does not alleviate its disorienting effect on the novel's narrative style.

<3>In *Wormwood*, I argue, Corelli bases a narrative on fin de siècle understandings of the body's relation to the mind. Gaston is partly a product of the earlier nineteenth-century notion of drinking as a matter of personal choice, but he is also described in terms of the period's emergent identification of addiction with disease. His criminal acts are both treated as spiritual failures and as the result of neurological configurations. His absinthism is thus both moralized and medicalized. While Gaston's original taste of absinthe is represented as a personal decision, Gaston's insistence that he immediately became addicted moves the reader into a disorienting space in which drink alters brain chemistry in irrevocable ways that are clearly not under anyone's control. Similarly, Gaston's feelings about his fiancée appear to him to be grounded in recognizably valid cultural scripts, but to the reader, they emerge from powerful patterns of mourning and of desire. Corelli thus writes Gaston from an understanding of the mind so new that Gaston himself (and, as I will argue, the novel's first readers) failed to recognize it. *Wormwood* is interested in imagining a new kind of subject whose behavior is determined by

unconscious psychological drives and bodily drives, and it is equally interested in discovering what kind of narrative such a subject might generate.

<4>As a proto-modernist horror novel with strong psychological interests, *Wormwood* strongly resembles other fin-de-siècle fiction. *Wormwood* might most profitably be read alongside Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, published five years earlier, which does comparable psychoanalytic and narrative work, or Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, published seven years later, which expresses a similarly demonized sense of polymorphously perverse sexuality. Like these novels, *Wormwood* is not a "somewhat naïve manipulation of literary decadence" but a creative and intriguing engagement with decadent tropes and the literary culture of the late nineteenth century (Federico, "Marie Corelli" 90). Like them, *Wormwood* offers an early exploration of the ideas we have come to associate with modernism. R.B. Kershner describes Corelli as a "a Modernist hybrid" whose sense of artistic immortality, sexual and religious iconoclasm, private cosmology, and fragmented, intense, internal narratives align her with her more respected counterparts ("Modernism's Mirror" 79). Indeed, Patricia Rae's description of modernism seems apt for *Wormwood*: "unlike realism, modernist fiction shifts focus from the material world onto the psychological one, from objective time and place onto subjective time and imaginative location; it 'attenuates' outward reality in favor of detailed descriptions of the *response to* this reality in the minds of solitary individuals, and it replaces comprehensible sequences of events with absurdities" (36). *Wormwood* is a novel in which we are located within a damaged psyche, forced to endure disorienting shifts of time and space, unable to escape our narrator's absurd delusions and dangerous imagination, because it is precisely those psychological mechanisms that form the narrative itself.

<5>It is somewhat unusual to make such claims for a Corelli text. Recently, critics have begun recovering Corelli by reading her as a case study in mass culture. While this approach can be helpful for eliciting readers' feelings, it tends to reduce the author to an automatic dispenser of identical products. For instance, when Rita Felski writes that Marie Corelli's novels "are best described as moral fables," featuring allegorical figures that embody "quintessential aspects of human nature rather than psychologically individuated characters"(122), she does not allow for variation within Corelli's corpus, or for the possibility that a deeper reading might find complicate the text's apparent adherence to melodrama and allegory. Her description assumes, in other words, that everything Corelli produces is pretty much the same, and that what you see in a Corelli novel is all there is.

<6>Here is what *Wormwood* seems to be about. The narrator, Gaston Beauvais, presents himself as a good man who takes to absinthe after his fiancée Pauline de Charmilles betrays him with his friend, the noble priest-in-training Silvion Guidel. Gaston's absinthism precipitates him into a grim career. He strangles Silvion and hounds Pauline into homelessness, poverty, and ultimately suicide. He abandons his devoted father, he shocks Pauline's aged father enough to kill him, and he sends Pauline's cousin Héloïse into a decline and early death. By the end of the novel he is a homeless, starving, drug-addicted criminal wanderer through the night side of Paris. Gaston is utterly convinced that it is Pauline's affair with Silvion that has caused his fall, and virtually all critics concur, partly because his assurance is so absolute, and partly because it fits readers' expectations of popular literature to have it center on a sexual scandal.

<7>However, Gaston's fall is overdetermined, driven by a complex set of competing imperatives, some of them unconscious, of which Pauline's action is actually perhaps the least important. The fact that Gaston himself blames Pauline should be our first warning sign. Gaston is a deeply unreliable narrator. Bewildered by hallucinations, illness, guilt, and starvation, Gaston cannot arrange his experiences into a linear narrative. As he points out himself, "no 'absintheur' can be always coherent" (230), and the incoherence is in the very structure of his story. "Digression again?" he mockingly asks his readers. "Yes! — what else do you expect of an *absintheur*?" (317). But Gaston's assumption that a straightforward narrative ought to be possible itself indicates the limits of his imagination. And by tracing Gaston's impoverished understanding of psychological, social, and literary convention, we will gradually begin to uncover the alternative Corelli is championing.

<8>One of Gaston's central mistakes is to assert that his post-absinthe personality is a new self. His first drink is "the first infiltration of another life" (172). However, it may pay to be skeptical of this claim. After all, it is very much in Gaston's interest to present himself as a good man suddenly possessed by a malevolent spirit external to himself. For instance, when Gaston is planning to ruin Pauline, he claims that it was the absinthe talking:

"Some force outside of me apparently controlled my movements, — I was a passive slave to some unseen but imperative master of my will! [. . .] There is something stronger than even hypnotism — and that is Absinthe! The suggestions IT offers are resistless and implacable, — no opposing effort will break ITS bonds! And IT had placed an idea, — a diabolical conception of revenge somewhere in my brain, — but whatever the plan was it did not declare itself in bold form as yet [. . .]" (181)

<9>The flamboyance of this passage should not be read as a sign of Corelli's stylistic excess, but as a symptom of Gaston's limitations. His theory of demonic possession absolves Gaston from recognizing what is fairly obvious to the reader of *Wormwood*: that absinthe actually licenses his preexisting feelings. In fact the pre-absinthe Gaston feels the same cruelty towards his fiancée and the same vicious self-absorption that he later enacts so spectacularly. Absinthe does not suppress the real Gaston; it produces it. Like the potion that Gaston's contemporary Dr. Jekyll drinks, absinthe creates an inner self that enacts the previously repressed drives of its host body. And because the addicted self is a development of the sober self, it continues to work through that subject's deep unconscious drives, allowing for a novel whose greatest achievement, its extraordinarily rich psychoanalytic narrative, completely escapes its subject's notice.

<10>One reason Gaston remains ignorant of his real feelings is that his understanding of human relations is too shallow. He is a bad reader: a consumer of outmoded texts, a naive believer in the realism of literary devices, and a casual skimmer who misses key points. Ironically, Gaston reads his story the same way Corelli's contemporary reviewers did, believing it is merely a moral allegory. When Gaston meets Pauline, he enthuses:

The hours fled by on golden wings, and before that evening ended — before I pressed her two small white hands in my own at parting, I felt that I *loved* Pauline de Charmilles — loved her as I should never love any other woman. An overwhelming passion seized me; I was no

longer master of my own destiny; Pauline was my fate. What was her fascination? How was it that she, a girl fresh from school, a mere baby in thought, fond of *bon-bons* and foolish trifles, should suddenly ravish my soul by surprise and enslave and dominate it utterly? (83)

<11>This rhapsody about an instantaneous “passion” and “enslavement” hardly describes a realistic attraction, and, more importantly, it violates the kinds of expectations late-Victorian readers would have brought to this text. Corelli’s readers, after all, were reading Thomas Hardy and Henry James, New Women marriage-problem novels, and popular romances in which characters mistake their own feelings until blissful union late in the story. For 1890s readers accustomed to a treatment of love as a complicated, often problematic, lengthy negotiation, Gaston’s sudden declaration of irrational enslavement would have sounded as discordant as it does to us. For Gaston is not using his era’s language, but a literary vocabulary borrowed from Romanticism, in which Gaston imitates the figure of the dangerous Byronic lover. Gaston’s love, in other words, is a literary invention, and an outmoded one too. (In fact, Gaston feels considerable contempt for the object of his passion, whom he frequently dismisses as a “mere baby” or pretty trifler.)

<12>Gaston tends to assign people to crude categories. Of Pauline’s father, Gaston comments, “He was like all French fathers; yet why should I specify French fathers so particularly? English fathers are the same; all fathers of all nations nowadays” (80). As Pauline falls deeper into despair during their engagement, Pauline’s cousin and mother try repeatedly to warn Gaston that something is terribly wrong. But Gaston, secure in his categories, simply asserts that “girls will often weep for nothing” (126). When Héloïse warns Gaston that Pauline does not understand love, he sententiously informs her, “as for the comprehension of love, I think that comes instinctively to all women of marriageable age” (95). Thus he misses the clues that the Victorian realist novel reader has been trained to parse as signs of the beloved’s moral worth. For instance, he ignores the fact that Pauline boasts of her limitless appetite and desperate adoration of sweets, a sign of dangerous receptivity to sensory pleasures. When Pauline faints at Silvion’s name, he assumes it is merely girlish piety, oblivious that her emotion is romantic rather than religious. His supremely self-confident blindness frustrates the reader, who is fully cognizant of the truths that our character overlooks.

<13>Gaston writes the same conventions in which he believes. A journalist who also wrote a novel, his fiction was “very high-flown in style and full of romantic sentiment. It was about a girl all innocence, and a man all nobleness, who were interrupted in the progress of their *amours* by the usual sort of villain so useful to the authors of melodrama” (75). Interestingly, Gaston’s novel resembles Rita Felski’s description of Corelli’s work:

Her novels are best described as moral fables, which organize textual meaning and events in order to demonstrate triumphantly the overarching presence of a guiding spiritual principle. The key focus is the dramatization of ethical and emotional conflict rather than the particularities of social relations; actions and character are invariably schematized according to an overarching Manichean dualism of good versus evil. The structure of a Corelli novel typically relies upon a chain of dramatic confrontations, rapid changes of fortune, implausible coincidences and exotic tableaux, concluding in a suspense-filled denouement.

Figures are often allegorical and emblematic, embodying quintessential aspects of human nature rather than psychologically individuated characters. The body bespeaks the qualities of the soul, or in some cases cunningly conceals it; in either case the moral status of the characters is unambiguously announced to the reader. (Felski 122)

<14>In the passage describing Gaston's novel, I think we have to understand Corelli to be making fun of the very genre of which she was supposed to be the master. Not only does this passage emphatically differentiate *Wormwood* from the melodramatic romance, but it also indicates that the crudely inadequate moral understanding of such fiction can precipitate tragedy. In other words, a belief in Manichaean villains and innocence is positively dangerous; the world is far more complex, and moral nature far more intermingled, than such a novel indicates. Thus Gaston Beauvais understands the world as if it is popular fiction of the early nineteenth century, not as if he is in a world of psychologically complex individuals driven by motives he may not apprehend, the world of the late-nineteenth-century novel.

<15>By making Gaston so oblivious, Corelli conditions her readers to view the melodrama associated with Gaston as tragically inadequate to the real situation of modernity. Instead, she teaches us to want the drastically different form of writing she explores in *Wormwood*. From the novel's first words, we recognize that Corelli is reversing the expected literary structures. Gaston opens with a daring invocation not to "speak, oh Muse," but to enjoin the reader to "silence, —silence!" (69). This is a startling recognition of the powerful cooperative role of the reader, recognized in the act of refusing and negating it. The deliberate baffling of the reader is only one of the ways in which Gaston Beauvais becomes the model of the subject under modernism. Corelli makes him into an urban flâneur who explores the night side of Paris, and a psychological subject examining his own (un)consciousness. She also produces a fragmented narrative aiming to reproduce the workings of the mind under study, including surreal phenomena and mixed chronology. Gaston recognizes that his world contains nothing but representation. Commenting on one of his acts, he remarks, "now to *me*, all this disorder and excitement presented itself merely as a curious scene, — quite stagey in fact, like a 'set' from a romantic opera" (213). And as Gaston is haunted by the hallucination of a leopard following him through the streets, he grapples with the paradox of believing in what he knows is merely a construct (336). As Rae remarks, the modernist text "replaces comprehensible sequences of events with absurdities" (36).

<16>Gaston promulgates a shockingly materialist explanation of brain chemistry. In one typical image, he comments that he would "analyze my sensations thus: —namely, that when my brain was in its former normal condition before the *absinthe-furia* had penetrated to its every cell, it was like a group of sensitive fibres or cords. [. . .] Now, it seemed as if all those fibres had snapped in some strange way, leaving in their place a steel reflector of images, — a hard bright substance on which emotion simply flashed and passed without producing any actual responsive vibration" (198). Interestingly, this account of himself as a mere mirror is reminiscent of the critical idea that Corelli simply reflects popular opinion. For instance, MacLeod explains the success of *Wormwood* as "a striking example of Corelli's ability to 'feel the pulse of the people' and to reflect their 'opinions, wishes, likes, and dislikes'" (11) as if Corelli automatically mirrored back the popular emotion of the day. Just as MacLeod allows Corelli no space for a

particular “responsive vibration” that would alter the received image, so too, Gaston decides that he is merely a brightly reflective machine.

<17>In this respect, Gaston is announcing his fidelity to the relatively new model of “physiological psychology,” to use G.H. Lewes’s term, that linked mental states with neural conditions and insisted that perception was based in biological structures (Jacyna 109). This paradigm allowed no space for a purely spiritual response and refused to differentiate human cognition from animal cognition. Resisting any sense of higher spirituality, physiological psychology insisted that thought was based in nature. By the 1870s, this group included influential writers like Leslie Stephens, John Morley, and Henry Fawcett. L.S. Jacyna usefully summarizes the argument of one of the most radical of these new thinkers, W.K. Clifford:

There could be no transcendental ethics because there was nothing beyond the natural. Man's being was wholly encompassed by the physical universe; he had no additional spiritual element. He must, in consequence, seek his means and ends within nature. The clergy and other traditional elites were incompetent to offer guidance in this quest: they must give way to the new priesthood of science. (129)

This is the position with which Gaston allies himself, attacking the clergy and monitoring his own mental fluctuations with detached interest. Gaston lives in an inner world, transfixed by his own reactions to phenomena rather than the phenomena themselves. As Kershner points out, Corelli writes “inescapably *internal* narratives” (“Modernism’s Mirror” 82).

<18>Another aspect of his modern subjectivity is that, like his contemporary Ernest Pontifex, Gaston is an angry young man rebelling against patriarchal tyranny.⁽¹⁾ In Gaston’s case, however, his rebellion is all the more corrosive due to the father’s overwhelming love and the son’s intense suppression of his resentment. When *Wormwood* opens, Gaston lives with his father in the same house, socializes with him every evening, and works with him every day as partners in the bank. That Gaston finds this closeness irritating is apparent in his covert gibes against “all French fathers” (80); that he cannot bring himself to rebel openly is evident in the way his hostility is deflected onto the men of his father’s circle. Gaston takes spiteful pleasure in baffling the older man seated next to Pauline, gloating over “the complete vanquishment and discomfiture of old De Guiscard” (82). During another social evening, Gaston expresses his atheist irritation with spirituality, remarking that if all were wise “there would be no necessity for churches or priests!” and thereby offending his father and his father’s friends, who are either clergy or supporters of the clergy (102). And even in his private thoughts about Pauline’s father, Gaston expresses derision and scorn for the “old fool!” (80). Gaston’s cruelty to all these men after he becomes an absintheur is therefore amply predicted by his pre-absinthe behavior.

<19>In many other respects, Gaston’s pre-absinthe personality shows remarkable continuity with his absintheur self. When he learns about Pauline’s affair with Silvion, he has not yet tried absinthe. Yet Gaston vows to reveal her sin to her father (which will kill him), and to murder her and Silvion (150). These are precisely the plans that he carries out as an absintheur. Moreover, Gaston manifests addictive and self-destructive behaviors throughout the novel. “I, who had loved her half-timidly before, now grew mad for her!” he exclaims, “mad with a passion of

longing that I could hardly restrain—a passion that consumed me hotly like a fever and would scarcely let me sleep” (86). Falling into restless dreams of Pauline, he has hallucinations that she is beckoning him, and he “would rise and pace my room to and fro, like a chafing prisoner in a cell till morning dawned. During all this self-torment which I half-enjoyed, it being more delicious than painful experience, I might have spoken to the Comte de Charmilles, but I refrained, determining to wait till after the feast of Noël” (86-7). Gaston enjoys his madness, his all-consuming passion. Feverish with desire, exhausted, hallucinatory, he revels in his masochistic self-punishment. In other words, he exacerbates his passion for Pauline until it acts on him precisely as absinthe will. Absinthe will become desirable inasmuch as its effects remind him of his happiest time, his courtship of Pauline. But by transforming love into self-punishing hallucinatory torment, by connecting endearments with hot tears, Gaston also reveals a masochistic streak that prepares him well to become an absintheur. If *Wormwood* were solely “written with the moralistic intention of exposing the dangers of absinthe,” Corelli would hardly have worked so carefully to establish that her protagonist’s personality predated and produced his absinthism (MacLeod 27).(2)

<20>In his desires, Gaston is scrupulously following his cultural script. Having talked himself into a dramatic passion with a pretty teenage neighbor whom he has little interest in getting to know, Gaston is now energetically generating all the self-torture, anxiety, and erotic obsession that this perfectly respectable, publicly acknowledged, socially encouraged attachment fails to provide. He aims to imagine himself as a dangerous lover, in Deborah Lutz’s description: “not just aloof, the Byronic hero often, like the Giaour and the Corsair, is a criminal, an outlaw who is not only self-exiled, but who also actively, hatefully works against society, as a murderous pirate or a vengeful lover” (Lutz 49-50). Dark, tortured, deeply erotic, the dangerous Byronic lover turns against the society that has betrayed him. This is what Gaston wants to be, but until he discovers absinthe, he is hampered by his inconvenient prosperity. As a friend reminds him, he is actually a “*beau riche*. [. . .] with limitless francs at your command, and good luck showering its honey-dew persistently on your selected fortunate head” (159). Beloved, successful, privileged, Gaston is very much a product of mid-Victorian bourgeois comfort, and it takes considerable effort to make himself into the Romantic outlaw.

<21>Gaston is also following a Romantic cultural ideal in forming a romantic friendship. Like Shelley and Byron, like Victor Frankenstein and Henry Clerval, Gaston finds his soulmate in a handsome man of his own age, the priest-in-training Silvion Guidel. In this he is influenced by his father’s example too, for his father’s “special friend” is the local Curé (88). Gaston is surprised to find that his categories are inadequate for Silvion. “I found myself attracted against my will by the graceful demeanor and refined courtesy of this son of a Brittany farmer; this mere provincial” (100). Instead of a rustic fool, Gaston finds a figure for whom he feels an inexplicable attraction. “And, worst confession of all, I think, that I have to make, I learnt to love him! I—even I! A peculiar sense of revering tenderness stirred me whenever he, with his beautiful calm face and saintly expression, came into the room where I sat alone” (123). Yet this love struggles with aversion. In one emotional conversation, “his feverishly brilliant eyes seemed to probe my very soul, and I hesitated before replying, for, strange to say, the old inexplicable sense of distrust and aversion rose up in me anew” (132). For a modern reader, it is easy enough to parse this feeling: profoundly attracted to someone who is triply debarred, by class (the son of a provincial farmer), gender (male), and occupation (priest), Gaston projects his frustration onto

the object and recasts his love as hatred. Gaston's feeling for Silvion may be no more authentic than his passion for Pauline, but the point is that these cultural clichés, the Romantic beloved and the Romantic companion, are in fact central to Gaston's understanding of himself. They are the best he can do to explain his desires. If they are inappropriate to the real conditions of Gaston's emotional life, that is Gaston's limitation, not Corelli's.

<22>Following the rules of the despairing rejected Romantic lover, Gaston knows that he must drown his sorrows in drink. Accordingly, he immediately becomes an addict. The scene of Gaston's first drink has been critiqued for being unrealistic—nobody becomes an addict after one drink—but my contention is that the lack of realism is Gaston's, not Corelli's (MacLeod, "Marie Corelli"). Gaston is determined to make us believe he is a hopeless sot, just as he insists that he passionately adores Pauline. Just as he declares his "destiny" on first sight of Pauline, he declares his "addiction" on first taste of absinthe, being too assured of the inevitable course of events to bother waiting.

<23>One might assume the despairing lover would drown his sorrows in solitary misery, but in fact, Gaston goes slumming. In a park in Paris, at night, he encounters an impoverished young man, Andre Gessonex. Gessonex accosts him, they link arms, and Gaston takes the youth out to dinner, gloating over "how daintily he ate," admiring Gessonex's "musical" voice and "a certain peculiar bright limpidness" of his eyes (164-5). Both get drunk. The taste of absinthe is an intensely sensual experience. Gaston notes, "I looked at him fixedly. An odd tingling sensation was in my blood, as though it had been suddenly touched by an inward fire" (167). Swallowing the tumblerful of absinthe, gazes locked, Gessonex and Gaston share this intense pleasure, feeling warm and sleepy afterward (168). As they reel out, arm in arm, Gaston gives him a gold coin (170). Picking up the youth, treating him and paying for him, Gaston gets in return what he wants: an overwhelmingly sensual pleasure that can temporarily make him forget his troubles. In this case, absinthe stands in for the sexual relationship that the scene prepares us to expect. In short, it is the typical scene of the night wanderer in the squalid streets of the great city, picking up a casual prostitute who trades favors for a square meal and a fee. Later in the novel, absinthe leads to more such encounters; it takes Gaston to seedy brothel-type drinking places and leads him to Gessonex's bedroom—where, however, he finds a "half-naked creature" gnawing a crust of bread; Gessonex has been slumming himself (250).

<24>In this subplot, absinthism is introduced as a stand-in for male sex, an odd set-up that might lead us to suspect that Gaston's addiction has more to do with his desire for men than his desire for women. For it is not just Pauline who has betrayed him, it is also Silvion. And yet the language of reproach for Silvion is curiously, even suspiciously, absent in this book. Gaston's main fury seems to be about Silvion's violation of his priestly calling, not Silvion's betrayal of Gaston's friendship. It is possible that this deeper feeling gets enacted in his addiction instead of expressed in the facile diatribes about Pauline that litter the volume.

<25>The erotic relation between the men climaxes in Gaston's very sensual murder of Silvion. They meet in the same secluded glade where Silvion and Pauline had consummated their love. "For one panting second we stared into each other's eyes, —our faces almost touching, our very

breaths commingling; then, yielding to the natural impulse of self-defence, he closed with me,” Gaston remembers (240). He describes the murder:

My rapid glance travelled upward to his neck which showed itself bare and white just above the close-set priestly band of his black habit. [. . .] my two hands were closed fast on that smooth, full, tempting throat, gripping it hard as a vice of steel! Tighter! —tighter! —and the fair face above me grew dark and convulsed [. . .] one desperate choking struggle more, and he fell prone on the sward, I falling upon him. [. . .] and I pressed all my weight upon the swelled and throbbing arteries beneath my relentless hands. [. . .] Suddenly a great shudder shook the limbs over which I crouched brute-like and watchful, —those pulsing veins beneath my fingers stopped, —the head fell further back, —the lips parted, showing a glimmer of pearly teeth within, in the ghastly semblance of a smile. (241)

<26>Attacking Silvion is the only way Gaston can achieve physical closeness to this magnetically charismatic man; killing Silvion is the only way to blot out that attraction.⁽³⁾ Thus the murder scene both enacts and renounces Gaston’s powerful attraction to his friend. As Kershner points out, “whether heroes or villains, Corelli’s passionate couples seem to move inevitably towards a consummation that is also immolation” (“Modernism’s” 76).

<27>In a less sexualized mode, when Gaston views the body, he gloats repeatedly over the revolting condition of Silvion’s body (244, 261). In focusing on the tainted corpse, he may be attempting to overwrite the disturbing beauty of Silvion with a more repulsive image. He stresses certain qualities: hardness, blackness, convulsedness. This constructs Silvion as the precise opposite of another corpse that figures importantly in Gaston’s memory: his mother’s, which was smooth, white, and fair. And it is the visual opposition between these two bodies that leads us to the deepest need that drives Gaston’s behaviors.

<28>The memory of his mother’s death is perhaps the central moment of Gaston’s self-revelation:

We lived alone, my father and I, at Neuilly, in a large old quaint mansion, part of which had been standing at the time of the famous Reign of Terror. The rooms were full of antique furniture such as would have been the joy of connoisseurs, and everything, even to the smallest trifle, was kept in the exact order in which my mother had left it seventeen years previously, when she died giving birth to a girl-child who survived her but a few hours. One of the earliest impressions of my life is that of the hush of death in the house, the soft stepping to and fro of the servants, the drawn blinds, the smell of incense and burning candles; and I remember how, with a beating heart, I, as a little fellow, stopped outside the door of the closed room and whispered, “*Maman! petite maman!*” in a voice rendered so weak by fright that I myself could scarcely hear it. And then, how, on a sudden impulse, I entered the mysteriously darkened chamber and saw a strange, white, beautiful figure lying on the bed with lilies in its hair, a figure that held encircled in one arm a tiny waxen creature that looked as pretty and gentle as the little Jésus in the church *crèche* at Christmas-time; and how, after staring at this sight bewildered for a minute’s space, I became aware of my father kneeling at the bedside, his strong frame shaken with such convulsive sobs as were terrible to

hear; so terrible that I, breaking into childish wailing, fled to his arms for shelter, and stayed there shuddering, clasped to his heart and feeling his hot tears raining on my hair. That was a long long while ago! It is odd that I should recollect every detail of that scene so well at this distance of time! (87-8)

This powerful memory slips into what Gaston intends to be a straightforward description of his home (a mansion that is both a museum and a mausoleum). The real historical value of the home is its personal history: every trifle has fossilized the central trauma of the family, the loss of the mother. Just as the home has not progressed past the mother's death, so too is Gaston stuck in this long-ago moment. Absinthe allows him to work through his mother's death, but unfortunately, through traumatic repetition rather than recovery.

<29>Gaston suffers from melancholia, rather than working through mourning. Unable to mourn for the lost mother, his own suffering exceeded and stifled by the father's exuberant display of despair, Gaston has internalized the lost object. According to Freud, melancholia involves hostility towards the lost object; the melancholic can only recover when s/he admits to ambivalent feelings towards the person who has died.⁽⁴⁾ Perhaps a more suggestive model of melancholia is Julia Kristeva's. In *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, Kristeva ascribes melancholia to the loss of the mother. Because the entry into the symbolic means renouncing one's infantile union with the mother, it is a symbolic matricide. All males, Kristeva explains, need to kill the mother within them, a death that generates fiercely self-annihilating loathing.

<30>In reading *Wormwood* as a melancholic case study, I am not trying to affiliate Gaston to Freudian or Kristevan models; it predates Freud by a generation and Kristeva by a century. Rather, I am aiming to show how the emergent models of mental drives that would culminate in Freud's work were beginning to be formulated in the 1890s. Gaston is recognizable as a melancholic because his story presents the elements that would cohere into a diagnosis in the twentieth century. In parsing the narrative of the mother's death somewhat closely, I want to show how we can see the loose components of the case study coming together to form a story that makes sense of this novel psychoanalytically, rather than at the level of plot.

<31>The first point is that the father's hug is the climax and end of the scene. This embrace initiates a stifling paternal closeness. Gaston's mention of his "childish wailing" suggests that he resented his father's louder grieving, feeling that his own "childish" cry was literally stifled by his father's body and his father's tears. The memory helps explain why he begins his narration pleading for "silence, silence." This episode taught Gaston that speech is only possible in the gaps of more powerful speakers' utterances, that his self-expression depends on silencing the father. Physically blocked from mourning, Gaston is also irritated at losing the Oedipal contest with the father for who loved the mother best. After this experience, Gaston will also unconsciously assume that it takes extreme emotional duress to produce climactic moments of love. The moment of the death indissolubly links passionate love with grief.

<32>This death also formulates an image of womanhood that becomes, quite literally, fatal. Gaston never mentions his mother's personality or actions. Even the house that memorializes her showcases not personal mementos but publicly valuable historical artifacts. She easily slips,

therefore, into representing generic womanhood. The image of the white, lily-strewn, beautiful female body on a candlelit bed becomes one that obsesses Gaston.

<32>But the scene of the mother's death is also susceptible of a different reading. The beloved mother has been killed. The murderer was "a girl-child," a term startling in its dispassionateness. Gaston does not call her "my sister" or "her daughter." Moreover, no matter how pure the mother seems, the fact is that she has had sex, and the sex, because it resulted in the pregnancy and catastrophic childbirth, destroyed her. Gaston's rage, then, is a misogynist one. He holds females, and especially sexually active females, responsible for the death—and the scene's repeated stress on the mother's purity is a compensatory overemphasis, an attempt to mobilize the whole iconography of whiteness, wax, Catholic imagery, and lilies against the underlying truth of women's sexual experiences. Gaston has essentially split off his knowledge of his mother's sexual history in order to preserve the image of her as a frozen waxen Madonna (or, more specifically, a Pietá). Additionally, Gaston has a certain amount of rage at his mother's abandonment of him, which emerges in frequent contemptuous comments about women's foolishnesses. Here is the ambivalence that lies at the heart of melancholia, the inadmissible anger at the lost object that, in Kristevan terms, is always originally the loss of the mother.

<33>Gaston is, therefore, preconditioned to regard Pauline's "sin" with an amount of vitriol that seems wholly disproportionate to those who do not recognize how it fits into his psychohistory. In her innocence, Pauline has done the one action that Gaston cannot forgive. By becoming pregnant and asking to leave Gaston, she recreates herself as the demonic mother, the sexually active, pregnant, abandoning figure. Interestingly, Gaston reprises the grief for his mother when he hears Pauline's confession. "I wept for the bitterest loss the human soul can ever know [. . .]. The slow drops that blinded my sight were as hot as fire – they burned my eyes as they welled forth" (156). Gaston can finally equal his father, producing his own "hot tears."

<34>Gaston hounds Pauline until she hurls herself into the Seine. When her body is recovered, he "saw the fair, soft, white body of the woman I had loved and hated and maddened and driven to her death, laid out on the dull hard slab of stone like a beautiful figure of frozen snow" (337). He leers at the corpse, admiring how the river had "fondled her! —had stroked her cheeks and left them pale and pure, —had kissed her lips and closed them" (338). Finally, when he is admitted to the Morgue for a viewing, Gaston exults that "I was near enough to touch the woman I had so loved! —I could have kissed her!" (341). Shaken by strong emotion, sick with desire, excitement, and pity, Gaston experiences the pleasure of having recreated the long-lost object of desire, the mother's body. He has indeed transformed Pauline into a frozen, white, recumbent beautiful artifact. But Pauline's body is inadequate, for it is *too* sexually available. Worryingly, it can be kissed. Nobody regulates Gaston's proximity. The very river has kissed and fondled her. Moreover, the man who interrupts this deathbed communion, replacing the father in the original death scene, is a suspicious police functionary who regards Gaston's grief as potential evidence of criminal culpability. Thus just as Pauline is a version of the mother that underscores her sexuality, the guard is a version of the father that emphasizes his terrifying disciplinary power. Even more frustratingly, the climactic spectacle of his psychological drama, the vision of the corpse enshrined in flowers, is denied Gaston. Héloïse claims the body and "bore home her sacred dead, —home to a maiden funeral-couch of flowers, sanctified by tears and hallowed by

prayers” (343). Baffled of his final sight, Gaston can only scream, “defeated! —defrauded of the last drop in my delirious draught of hatred!” (343).

<35>Thus Pauline’s corpse is not enough to drive away the image of the mother. For that, Gaston needs to turn to the body of Héloïse. Héloïse, who, importantly, died an unsullied virgin, still bears a similarity to his mother that is uncanny enough to reshape his psychological landscape. For Héloïse’s corpse has all the religious iconography denied the anonymous suicide, Pauline. Gaston initially assumes that the dead woman is Pauline’s mother, partly because he really wants to relive the death of a mother, and partly because his clichéd expectations call for it (“of course! —it must be she! Bereft of husband or child, what more natural than that she should have wearied of life, and longed to join her lost loved ones! —and fresh tears sprang to my eyes as I realized the certainty that this was so,” he decides, wholly erroneously (357)). Expecting the mother’s body, Gaston deliciously defers the final climactic revelation:

The smell of fresh incense, mingling with the heavy perfume of lilies, was wafted towards me as I came nearer and nearer the chamber which was now turned into a high altar for death’s service—a glimmer of white hangings caught my eyes, —white flowers, —all white! . . .] Another step, —another—hush—hush! What beauteous still-faced angel was that, pillowed among pale cyclamens and tranced in frozen sleep? [. . .] I dashed aside the silken hangings, —like a madman I rushed forward [. . .] “*Héloïse!*” I shrieked.
“*Héloïse!*” (358)

Héloïse’s corpse uncannily reproduces Gaston’s lost mother’s. White, bedecked in lilies, upon an altar, angelic, Héloïse is not only visually identical with the mother, but even better than the mother, for she lacks the dismaying sign of sexual activity, the waxen child in her arms. Finally Gaston has found a version of his mother without the demonized sexual element, a wholly pure avatar of femininity. Gaston is therefore free to indulge in Romantic excess of grief, raving, sobbing, clutching the funereal flowers, weeping “as I had never wept before” (359). Finally he can complete the mourning that was interrupted at his mother’s deathbed.

<36>Just as Héloïse is a better version of Gaston’s mother, her deathbed boasts a fellow-mourner who is an improved model of Gaston’s father. The Spanish violinist, Valdez, acts like the father in interrupting Gaston’s sobs and asserting that he is chief mourner. But Valdez only taps Gaston on the shoulder, instead of clutching him. Moreover, whereas the parents engaged in the sex that would kill the mother, Héloïse and Valdez have had a relationship so Platonically pure that Valdez was entirely unaware of its existence (360). This ineffable aesthetic mutual adoration has left Héloïse’s body safe for worship. It is to this stranger that Gaston can utter the madly jealous Oedipal rivalry that he could not speak to his own father seventeen years previously:

“She loved you! —I feel it, —I know it —I am sure of it! she loved you! —yes! [. . .] and I —I hate you for it—I hate you! For now I know she never would have pitied me, —never would have loved me again as she loved me once, —for in dying, she had no thought for me —she only thought of you—you, on whom Fortune smiles from day to day! Judge then how I hate you! —how I cannot do otherwise than hate you! —for she has given you all—and left me nothing! Nothing! [. . .] my God! —nothing!” (361)

Thus Héloïse's death marks the real end of *Wormwood*, as it finally enables Gaston to work through the unresolved trauma of his childhood. Gaston restages his mother's death. Whereas he had psychically split the mother into a demonized sexual figure and an idealized Madonna, he now replays it by producing two different corpses. Pauline's is the sexually accessible body; Héloïse's is the pure virginal icon. The double bodies enshrine the split in the image of the mother and permit him to feel the emotions associated with each in turn. Meanwhile, the paternal stand-ins, the guard and Valdez, allow Gaston to express his raw resentment, fear, and jealousy at the dead woman's preference for another man. No wonder, then, that *Wormwood* ends directly after Gaston's encounter with Héloïse's corpse. The psychodrama that had driven him to generate the novel's tragedy has finally been resolved. His rage articulated, he can move out of the paralysis of melancholia at last.

<37>Gaston's recovery means the end of the novel. The final few pages, the "L'Envoi," reveal a static character who has become "an *absintheur!* *Absintheur, pur et simple—voilà tout!*" (363). Gaston has lost his individuality and subsided into nothing more than the generic symbol of decadent evil Corelli promised in *Wormwood*'s preface: "a very ordinary type of a large and every-increasing class. Men such as 'Gaston Beauvais' are to be met with every day in Paris" (61).

<38>This ending fascinatingly problematizes Gaston's final declaration that he has finally become "*what I am*" (363). If Corelli begins the novel by rewriting the invocation, she ends by rewriting the *Bildungsroman*. "What I am" is nothing, an empty cartoon, one of a million interchangeable examples in a city full of such examples. In *Wormwood*, Corelli reverses the *Bildungsroman* by working backwards, not forwards, showing a man driven to rewrite a childhood trauma, and ending not with the achievement of mature subjectivity but with the evacuation of identity itself.

<39>As well as providing a neat reversal of literary structures and mocking the reader's expectation of closure, "L'Envoi" participates in a pragmatic campaign to "sell" the novel according to the terms the readers expected. Corelli provides anti-absinthe rants in her preface and "L'Envoi," thereby framing what is actually an experimental proto-modernist exploration of a man's unconscious psychosexual drive between two brief diatribes that catered to her readers' more conventional expectations. If *Wormwood* functions to show the dynamic unconscious drives that develop and express themselves through the somatic changes of inebriety, it is presented as if it were something else: a warning about a human demon who cannot change.

<40>No wonder, then, that contemporary readers missed the novel's ambition. In her introduction to the invaluable Broadview edition of *Wormwood*, Kirsten MacLeod reviews some of the famously vicious critical judgments of Corelli. "Q.D. Leavis, for example, declared that "high-level reader[s] of Marie Corelli [are] impelled to laugh" at her writing, "so ridiculously inadequate to the issues raised is the equipment of the mind that so resolutely tackles them," while Rebecca West accused Corelli of having an "incurably commonplace mind." Similarly, J.M. Stuart-Young declared that no intelligent reader could enjoy Corelli's books and that her "appeal" was only to the "unthinking classes" (MacLeod 9). Examples could be multiplied—

although it is also fair to note that some of the most elite literary and political figures of the nineteenth century admired Corelli's fiction.

<41>Indeed, Corelli wanted “the critical favour of highbrow critics and the literary élite,” in Macleod's words (16). In correspondence with her publisher, she called *Wormwood* “the best I can do,” and refused to alter scenes that she felt to be artistically necessary (in Corelli 370). Unfortunately, nineteenth-century reviewers tended to evaluate *Wormwood* solely in terms of its verisimilitude and moral helpfulness. An enthusiastic review in the *Atheneum* actually depressed Corelli. She wrote, somewhat poignantly:

But when I *know* and *feel* in my secret conscience that I have done a good piece of literary work, in pure nervous language, without showiness, without drag or *padding* or short of dramatic interest, I feel it a trifle hard that when others who do less good work can get high praise, that I should not also win a trifle of honest *recognition*. It would help me so much—it would bring out much better and stronger creations, and the world would not lose by it. As it is, discouragement sits on me like a cold night, —some would I know be perfectly happy with *material* success, with the money earned and the steady sale, — but all this does not help me so much as a few words of earnest encouragement. (Corelli 376)

In spite of *Wormwood*'s enthusiastic reviews and enormous sales, Corelli was disappointed. What she really wanted was consideration of her literary craft.

<42>In this article I have hoped to suggest a way of considering that craft. Viewing Corelli as a participant in fin-de-siècle debates about decadence and physiological psychology, a writer experimenting with new notions of subjectivity and new ways of writing, might open up *Wormwood* to the kinds of readings we give other novels of the period. In the course of this novel, Gaston lives the central literary types of his century: the prosperous bourgeois fiancé, the dark Romantic, the modernist psychological subject. Perhaps that is one last use of absinthe: to push the novel forward, to make of Gaston a better writer than he is himself. Absinthe liberates Gaston from his life of cautious homilies and conventional wisdom. Forced into startlingly modern vision by a modern drug, Gaston, like his author, may seem like nothing but a shiny steel mirror, but in fact achieves a new kind of literary originality, a sustained and complex exploration of illicit desires that replaces the nineteenth century's cultural scripts. In *Wormwood* Corelli critiques melodrama, Romantic tropes, clichés, automatic reflection of others' opinions —indeed, all the qualities ascribed to her by critics over the past century. Absinthe names the alternative: the “inescapably internal narrative” that Kershner recognized, the meandering, unreliable, illogical, unconsciously driven story of a tortured addictive subjectivity. In imagining this perspective as the representative narrative of modernity, Corelli was smarter than her protagonist, and smarter than her readers.

Endnotes

(1) Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* was written between 1873 and 1884, although not published until 1903. (^)

(2) We need to recall that Gaston is writing as an absintheur, so that this narrative is already untrustworthy. It is quite possible that his pre-absinthe self was indeed more gentlemanly, more perceptive, and more accommodating than his absintheur self is able to articulate. However, as we only have his own testimony to his pre-absinthe state, it is the information Corelli evidently wants us to use; moreover, the pre-absinthe state has such explanatory power as to strongly suggest that it is a credible account. (^)

(3) Pauline and her cousin Héloïse appear to have a similarly passionate same-sex relationship; at one point, Pauline proclaims that "Héloïse will love no one but—but me!" (106). When Pauline dies, Héloïse places a wreath that says "Amour" on her grave. Yet their love is not nearly as fraught or violent as the men's. It seems, rather, to fit the model Sharon Marcus has developed in *Between Women*, in which friendship between women functions to facilitate the women's eventual disposition in heterosexual romance. No disguised, tormented, half-hidden homoerotic attraction, the Pauline-Héloïse relationship is one of fully-expressed, trusting love that enables each woman to warn Gaston about signs of trouble in the other. That Gaston is incapable of following their advice does not make it any less mutually supportive. (^)

(4) Gaston's case is not a precise match with Freudian melancholia. He shows none of the symptoms Freud describes, "a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity" (252). If anything, he has an exaggeratedly narcissistic self-regard. Since *Wormwood* predates "Mourning and Melancholia" by 27 years, it is not surprising that it should propose a different model of the grieving process gone awry. I am tracing Corelli's version of what happens when normal mourning is blocked, rather than trying to fit her into Freud's. However, some elements of Freud's theory are particularly suggestive, including the idea I invoke here that the melancholic has suppressed hostility towards the dead, and his theory that the melancholic believes the ego itself is empty and lost. One might read Gaston as a person whose megalomaniacal self-assertion is attempting to compensate for private belief that the ego has disappeared. (^)

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