

## An Appreciation of Ouida

By G. S. Street

### I

THE superfluous champion is a foolish being, but his superfluity lies, as a rule, not in his cause, but in his selection of adversaries. In a world of compromises and transitions there is generally much to be said on both sides, and there are few causes or persons for whom a good word, in a fitting place and time, may not be spoken. I acquit myself of impertinence in stating what I find to like and to respect in the novels of Ouida. For many years, with many thousands of readers they have been popular, I know. But ever since I began to read reviews, to learn from the most reputable authorities what I should admire or avoid, I have found them mentioned with simple merriment or a frankly contemptuous patronage. One had, now and then in boyhood, vague ideas of being cultivated, vague aspirations towards superiority : I thought, for my part, that of the many insuperable obstacles in the way of this goal, this contempt of Ouida's novels was one of the most obvious. I enjoyed them as a boy, and I enjoy them now ; I place them far above books whose praise is in all critics' mouths, and I think I have reason for the faith that is in me.

One

1870  
The first of the year  
was a very dry one  
and the crops were  
very poor. The  
winter was also  
very cold and  
the snow was  
very deep. The  
spring was also  
very dry and  
the crops were  
very poor. The  
summer was also  
very dry and  
the crops were  
very poor. The  
autumn was also  
very dry and  
the crops were  
very poor.

During the winter of 1870  
the crops were very poor  
and the winter was very  
cold. The snow was very  
deep and the spring was  
also very dry. The crops  
were very poor and the  
summer was also very dry.  
The autumn was also very  
dry and the crops were  
very poor. The winter of  
1871 was also very cold  
and the snow was very  
deep. The spring was also  
very dry and the crops  
were very poor. The  
summer was also very dry  
and the crops were very  
poor. The autumn was also  
very dry and the crops  
were very poor.

he does not swagger. His one affectation is, that if by chance he has done something great in the ways of sport or war, he looks as if nothing had happened. There are things in life which he puts before the main chance. Such, more or less, is the sort of man in question, virile certainly, and one whom only the snobbery of intellect can despise. His is not a very common type in a materialised age, when even men of pleasure want their pleasure, as it were, at store prices, and everybody is climbing pecuniary and social ladders; it is a type that, I confess, I respect and like. At least it is indisputable that such men have done much for our country. Now Ouida, as I have admitted, has made many mistakes in her dealings with this type of man: who has altogether avoided them? They are many who find the pictures of him in Mr. Rudyard Kipling, superficially at least, far inferior to Mr. Kipling's "natives," and his three immortal Tommies. Ouida has made him ridiculously lavish, inclined to translate his genuine emotions into terms of sentimentalism, and to say things of his social inferiors which such a man may sometimes think, but is careful not to say. To affirm that the subject is good and the treatment of it bad, would be to give my case away. My contention is that the treatment, with many imperfections, leaves one assured that the subject has been, in essentials, perceived.

But her guardsman belongs to Ouida's earlier manner, and it is most unfair, in estimating her, to forget that this manner has been mellowed and quieted. In "Princess Napraxine" and in "Othmar"—the two most notable books, I think, of her later period—there are types of men more reasonably conceived and expressed more subtly. Geraldine, the cosmopolitan, but characteristic Englishman; Napraxine, the amiable, well-bred savage; Des Vannes, the calculating sensualist; Othmar himself, the disappointed idealist, these are painted, now and then, in somewhat  
glaring

glaring colours, but you cannot deny the humanity of the men or the effectiveness of their portraits. And when you remember how few are the male creations of women-writers which are indubitable men, you must in reason give credit to Ouida for her approximation.

I submit that it is not an absolute condemnation to say of Ouida's women that they are "hateful." There are critics, I know, who deny by implication the right of an author to draw any character which is not good and pleasant. That there may be, at one time or another, too pronounced a tendency to describe only people who are wicked or unpleasant, to the neglect of those who are sane and healthy and reputable, is certain; but the critics should remember that there is no great author of English fiction who has limited himself to these. One may regret that any writer should ignore them, but only stupidity or malevolence refuses to such a writer what credit may be due to him for what he has done, because of what he has left undone. Of Ouida's women much the same, *mutatis mutandis*, may be said, as has been said so often of Thackeray's: the good women are simpletons or obtuse, only the wicked women interesting. That criticism of Thackeray has always seemed to me to be remarkably crude, even for a criticism: it argues surely a curious ignorance of life or lack of charity to deny any "goodness" to *Beatrice Esmond* or *Ethel Newcome*. But of Ouida it is tolerably fair. There *is* an air of stupidity about her good and self-sacrificing women, and since there is nobody, not incredibly unfortunate, but has known women good in the most conventional sense, and self-sacrificing, and wise and clever as well, it follows that Ouida has not described the whole of life. But perhaps she has not tried so to do. It is objected occasionally, even against a short story, that its "picture of life" is so-and-so,  
and

and far more plausibly can it be objected against a long tale of novels: but I have a suspicion that some of the writers so incriminated have not attempted the large task attributed to them. Granted, then, that Ouida has not put all the women in the world into her novels: what of those she has?

Certainly her best-drawn women are hateful: are they also absurd? I think they are not. They are over-emphasised beyond doubt, so much so, sometimes, that they come near to being merely an abstract quality—greed, belike, or animal passion—clothed carelessly in flesh. To be that is to be of the lowest class of characters in fiction, but they are never quite that. A side of their nature may be presented alone, but its presentation is not such as to exclude, as in the other case, what of that nature may be left. And, after all, there have been women—or the chroniclers lie sadly—in whom greed and passion seem to have excluded most else. The critics may not have met them, but Messalina and Barbara Villiers, and certain ladies of the Second Empire, whose histories Ouida seems to have studied, have lived all the same, and it is reasonable to suppose that a few such are living now. One may be happy in not knowing them, in the sphere of one's life being too quiet and humdrum for their gorgeous presence, but one hears of such women now and then.

They are not, I think, absurd in Ouida's presentment, but I confess they are not attractive. One's general emotion with regard to them is regret that nobody was able to score off or discomfit them in some way. And that, it seems, was the intention of their creator. She writes with a keenly pronounced bias against them, she seeks to inform you how vile and baneful they are. It is not a large-hearted attitude, and some would say it is not artistic, but it is one we may easily understand and with which in a measure we may sympathise. A novel is not a sermon,

sermon, but *sæva indignatio* is generally a respectable quality. I am not trying to prove that Ouida's novels are very strict works of art : I am trying to express what from any point of view may be praised in them. In this instance I take Ouida to be an effective preacher. She is enraged with these women because of men, worth better things, who are ruined by them, or because of better women for them discarded. It would have been more philosophical to rail against the folly of the men, and were Ouida a man, the abuse of the women might be contemptible—I have never been able to admire the attitude of the honest yeoman towards Lady Clara Vere de Vere ; but she is a woman, and “those whom the world loved well, putting silver and gold on them,” one need not pity for her scourging. It is effective. She is concerned to show you the baseness and meanness possible to a type of woman : at her best she shows you them naturally, analysing them in action ; often her method is, in essentials, simple denunciation, a preacher's rather than a novelist's ; but the impression is nearly always distinct. You may be incredulous of details in speech or action, but you have to admit that, given the medium, and the convention, a fact of life is brought home with vigour to your sympathies and antipathies. You must allow the convention—the convention between you and the temperament of your author. As when in parts of Byron a theatrical bent in his nature, joined with a mode of his time, gives you expressions that on first appearance are not real, not sincere, you may prove a fine taste by your dislike, but you prove a narrow range of feeling and a poor imagination if you get beyond it ; so I venture to think in this matter of Ouida's guardsman and her wicked women, the magnificence, the high key, the glaring colours may offend or amuse you, but they should not render you blind to the humanity that is below the first appearance.

And

And if the hateful women are unattractive, is there not in the atmosphere that surrounds their misdeeds something—now and again, just for a minute or two—vastly and vaguely agreeable? I speak of the atmosphere as I suppose it to be, not as idealised in Ouida's fashion. It is not the atmosphere, I should imagine, of what in the dear old snobbish phrase was called "high life"—gay here and there, but mostly ordered and decorous: there is too much ignored. It is the atmosphere, really, of a profuse Bohemianism, of mysterious little houses, of comical lavishness, and unwisdom, and intrigue. I do not pretend—as one did in boyhood—to know anything about it save as a reader of fiction, but there are moments when, in the quiet country or after a day's hard work in one's garret, the thought of such an atmosphere is pleasant. We—we others, the plodders and timid livers—could not live in it; better ten hours a day in a bank and a dinner of cold mutton; but fancy may wander in it agreeably for a brief time, and I am grateful to Ouida for its suggestion.

### III

I do not propose to discourse at length on Ouida's style. As it is, I do not admire it much. But I cannot see that it is worse than the average English in the novels and newspapers of the period. It is crude, slap-dash if you will, incorrect at times. But it is eloquent, in its way. It does not seem to have taken Swift for an ideal; it is not simple, direct, restrained. But it is expressive, and it is so easy to be crude, and slap-dash, and incorrect, and with it all to express nothing. There are many writers who are more correct than Ouida, and very many indeed who are a hundred times less forcible, and (to my taste) less

tolerable to read. It may be true that to know fully the savour and sense of English, and to use it as one having that knowledge, a writer must be a scholar. I do not suppose that Ouida is a scholar, but I am sure that the scholarship that is only just competent to get a familiar quotation aright is not a very valuable possession. In fine, I respect an unrestrained and incorrect eloquence more than a merely correct and periphrastic nothingness. I would not take Ouida's for a model of style, but I prefer it to some others with which I am acquainted.

Perhaps to be a good judge of sentiment one should not be an easy subject for its influence. In that case nothing I can say on the question of Ouida's sentiment can be worth much, for I am the prey of every sort of sentiment under heaven. If I belonged to a race whose males wept more readily than those of my own, I should be in a perpetual state of tears. Any of the recognised forms of pathos affects me with certainty, so it be presented without (as is sometimes the case) an overpowering invitation to hilarity. In these days, however, if one does not insist on sentiment all day long, if one has moods when some other emotion is agreeable, if one is not prepared to accept every profession for an achievement of pathos, one is called a "cynic." At times the pathos of Ouida has amused me, and I too was a cynic. But, as a rule, I think it genuine. Despised love, unmerited misfortunes, uncongenial surroundings—she has used all these motives with effect. The favourite pathos of her earlier books, that of the man who lives in a whirl of pleasure with a "broken heart," appeals very easily to a frivolous mood, and may be made ridiculous to anybody by a touch, but its contrasts may be used with inevitable effect, and so Ouida has sometimes used them. Dog-like fidelity, especially to a worthless man or woman, can be ridiculous to the coarse-grained only. Love of beauty unattainable, as of the country in one  
condemned

condemned to a sordid life in a town, can hardly be made absurd. But the mere fact of unrequited affection, being so very common, requires more than a little talent to be impressive, even to a sentimentalist, in a novel, and Ouida, I think, has made this common fact impressive over and over again, because, however imperfect be the expression, the feeling, being real, appeals without fail to a sympathetic imagination.

## IV

The two qualities, I think, which underlie the best of Ouida's work, and which must have always saved it from commonness, are a genuine and passionate love of beauty, as she conceives it, and a genuine and passionate hatred of injustice and oppression. The former quality is constantly to be found in her, in her descriptions—accurate or not—of the country, in her scorn of elaborate ugliness as contrasted with homely and simple seemliness, in her railings against all the hideous works of man. It is not confined to physical beauty. Love of liberty, loyalty, self-sacrifice—those moral qualities which, *pace* the philosophers, must in our present stage of development seem beautiful to us—she has set herself to show us their beauty without stint of enthusiasm. Nobody can read her tales of Italian peasant life without perceiving how full is her hatred of inhumanity and wrong. In a book of essays recently published by her this love and hatred have an expression which in truth is not always judicious, but is not possibly to be mistaken. They are qualities which, I believe, are sufficiently rare in contemporary writers to deserve our attention and gratitude.

In fine, I take the merits in Ouida's books to balance their faults many times over. They are not finished works of art, they do not approach that state so nearly as hundreds of books with a  
hundred

hundred times less talent spent on them. Her faults, which are obvious, have brought it about that she is placed, in the general estimation of critics, below writers without a tenth of her ability. I should be glad if my appreciation may suggest to better critics than myself better arguments than mine for reconsidering their judgment.