

# Ouida (Marie Louise Ramé)

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“Ouida” (1839–1908) was one of the best known and profitable names in late Victorian publishing. The contradictions of Ouida’s writing – popular and elitist as it was, as well as sexually, socially, and politically conservative and radical, sentimental and cynical, outspoken and reserved, outrageous and moralistic – opened it to a very wide demographic.

After the signature first appeared in mid-1859, it quickly became associated with witty stories of the British aristocracy and military, and soon there appeared serials and volume-form novels of passionate romance and deceit among the beaux and demimondes that fashionably exceeded the bounds of marriage and prudence. In the 1870s, Italy and the role of art in society became a focus, along with animal rights (especially dogs). In the following two decades Ouida once again signed witty novels of high society – by now a satirized European one – as well as sentimental short stories and novellas of Italian, mainly peasant, life, along with nonfiction articles on political and literary subjects from an anticapitalist, humanitarian perspective. Among the latter is one of the pieces Ouida is now most notorious for: the naming of and attack on the “New Woman” in the *North American Review* in 1894 (revised in *Views and Opinions* the following year; see [Ouida 1895](#)). In all, Ouida was assigned twenty-nine novels, thirteen collections of short stories, and two volumes of nonfiction articles (apart from many uncollected stories and articles and numerous unpaid campaigning letters in the *Times* and other newspapers). Many “Ouida” novels were adapted for the theater. Race horses, boats, and daughters were named “Ouida.” The name was a gold mine, not only for publishers but for the entire gamut of what, in the nineteenth century, came to be organized as the entertainment industry. In consequence, a mythology grew around Ouida that comprised amusing fantasies of sexual impropriety, financial extravagance, and cultural pretension – a mythology revealing less about the reality of the author than about anxieties concerning women and popular culture in the late Victorian period and about a structuring of the entertainment industry that generated spite in publishers and envy in fellow writers. These anecdotes, despite all the evidence pointing to their falsity and the author’s strenuous attempts to counter them, still persist in many reputable accounts, having been asserted as true in commercial biographies produced for commercial ends – for Ouida has always made a good story, both as writer and as subject written about.

“Ouida” was the pen name of Marie Louise Ramé (it derived from her childhood pronunciation of “Louise”). She was born on January 1, 1839 in a modest house on the outskirts of Bury St Edmunds, a small market town in Suffolk. Her mother was of local bourgeois stock (the Suttens)

were minor wine importers); her French father, Louis Ramé, remains mysterious, though all accounts agree that he was a French teacher. Fragments of Ouida's childhood diary were published by Henry Huntingdon in 1911 under the title *Memories: Personages, People, Places*, and from it we learn that Monsieur Ramé left the family in 1850, Ouida and her mother meeting him for a holiday in Boulogne later that year. Thereafter he disappears. For unknown reasons, Ouida, with her mother and her eighty-four-year-old maternal grandmother, left Bury in 1857, to live in a new villa on what was then the edge of west London. There they met a local surgeon, William Francis Ainsworth, when he was called in to attend old Mrs. Sutton. William was the cousin of Harrison Ainsworth and helped him edit the monthly *Bentley's Miscellany*. Over the two issues of April and May 1859, *Bentley's* published Ouida's first story ("Dashwood's Drag: or, The Derby and What Came of It"), and the signature "Ouida" appeared for the first time.

Along with work by Ellen Wood (*East Lynne* was serialized from 1860), Ouida helped revive the fortunes of *Bentley's*. For the next two years her stories appeared there almost every month and were repeatedly described in the press as particular attractions. The first story sets out many elements that recur in Ouida's later output, and for that reason it is worth discussing (see [Ouida 1859](#)). First of all, it has an unreliable narrator, in this case Johnnie, the naive younger brother of the hero "Dash" (a typical Ouida hero: "a splendid fellow, cool, proud, plucky as a terrier, strong as a bruiser, and generous as the winds," who "can learn a whole language in three minutes"). Second, it opens by highlighting exotic vocabulary and turns of phrase, while always being careful to ensure that readers can work out what is going on. The opening paragraph, for example, flaunts the slang of upper-class sportsmen (we guess that a "drag" is a kind of fast carriage; "Spades, Clubs, Hearts, and Diamonds ... the best bits of blood that were ever rubbed down" are the names of the horses that pull it). Until 1866 reviewers believed the author to be a gentleman rake who wrote "brilliant nothings" about his own set, a little too indiscreetly. With hindsight we can see how this lower-middle-class young woman is carefully using language to construct gender, class, and sexuality positions far from her own. This in turn suggests that, rather than assuming that Ouida took her plots and characters to be realistic (as many contemporary critics claimed she did), we might read them as critiques of the arbitrary nature of linguistic identity. Third, the story is *funny* not only in its wit but in its plot, involving the widow of a wealthy Indian general, Mrs. Curry-Dohl (= curry dahl, the spicy Anglo-Indian dish), an old flame of Dash's who now seeks to get him to marry her. However, Dash, who hitherto has been a selfish, homosocial, and irresponsible bachelor (Johnnie calls him a "misogamist"), falls for her younger cousin. He eventually elopes with the cousin even though he knows he will be disinherited, forced to get a job and give up his extravagant lifestyle – including those signs of his masculinity, his beloved drag and horses. The story ends with his wife recovering her property and buying him back his drag. Mrs. Curry-Dohl meanwhile happily marries Lord Winter, while Johnnie seems to have understood the value of love in shoring up masculine identity. In its combination of humor, irony, preference for linguistic play over character or plot, underlying moralism, depiction of a woman who acts on her desires, in its interest in money and fascinated criticism of aristocratic values, aesthetics, and sexual mores, this story is a miniature version of Ouida's later and more famous society novels. In its unreliable narrator and interest in subject positions far from the author's, it anticipates several of Ouida's Italian tales.

In January 1861 *Granville de Vigne: A Tale of the Day* began in the *New Monthly Magazine* (which Harrison Ainsworth also owned and ran). The thirty-part serial combined a story of homosocial military bonds (the Crimean War looms large), which had proven its commercial worth in the hands of G. A. Lawrence, with a bigamy plot involving a developed version of the Mrs. Curry-Dohl type of scheming woman. William Tinsley, Lawrence's publisher, brought it out as a triple-decker,

under the title *Held in Bondage* (1863). *Strathmore* immediately followed in the *New Monthly* (July 1863–February 1865), though it was published in 1865 in volume form by Chapman and Hall, whose “stable” Ouida now joined (others in Chapman’s stable at that time included Ainsworth, Trollope, and Meredith). Ouida meanwhile negotiated the American rights to *Strathmore* with the Philadelphia publisher Lippincott, with whom she was to enjoy a happy relationship for almost forty years. Even though America did not have a copyright agreement with Britain until 1891 – Ouida suffered from this (probably in ignorance) as early as 1859, when “Dashwood’s Drag” appeared unattributed in the *Sacramento Daily Union* (December 23 and 24) – Lippincott would give British authors decent sums “by trade courtesy” and thereby secure copyright advantages for himself in North America. In 1866 Ouida began publishing with the Leipzig-based Baron von Tauchnitz, who specialized in continental editions of English-language prose. With the firm of Tauchnitz she entertained an even longer and better relationship, which lasted until her death. Despite her good relations with these two publishers, Ouida obtained pitiful sums (from £50 to £1,300) by comparison to the profits British publishers made from her work.

The chronology, and indeed the textual identity of Ouida’s most celebrated novel, *Under Two Flags*, has almost always been misrepresented. Its first half (down to chapter 26 = book 2, chapter 6) was serialized from August 1865 to June 1866 in the *Army and Navy Review*, with some significant differences from the later triple-decker version of 1867. It appeared therefore simultaneously with the very different political romance *Idalia* (March 1865–February 1867), which continued Ouida’s uninterrupted presence in the *New Monthly*. The much repeated anecdotes about the origin of *Under Two Flags* in unlady-like attention to the conversation of guardsmen at the Langham Hotel are merely malicious fabrications that derive from Tinsley’s *Random Recollections*. Ouida’s knowledge of military life, evident from her very first stories, came from reading (Jordan and King 2013, ch. 3).

The mid-1860s are a crucial period in Ouida’s career. In July 1865 Geraldine Jewsbury, in a review of *Strathmore* in the *Athenaeum*, revealed that Ouida was a woman. While there remained some quarters in which the author’s gender was still in doubt, in fact word spread rapidly, almost all reviews using the feminine pronoun from 1867 on. In 1866 Ouida’s grandmother had died and her mother sold some property. This temporary financial independence coincides with Ouida’s turn away from serials and short stories to volume-form fiction with *Chandos* (1866), followed by *Tricotrin* (1869), *Puck* (1870), and *Folle-Farine* (1871).

In August 1871, after the end of the Franco-Prussian War and the ensuing Paris Commune, Ouida and her mother went on a tour of the continent. They went first to Belgium, where they stayed in Brussels, visiting the Ardennes and Antwerp. The experience resulted in a series of pro-French antiwar tales for *Lippincott’s Magazine* that included the best known of all her work today outside academia (especially through its cinematic and television versions). “A Dog of Flanders” is the story of a dog faithful unto death and a poor Flemish would-be artist, which mobilizes sentimental tropes to demonstrate the superior value of transhuman relations over human (Ouida 1872). Ouida had already started campaigning for animal rights before leaving London and for the rest of her life would become active in their pursuit, both publicly and in private letters; “A Dog of Flanders” remains, however, her most famous intervention.

Ouida and her mother arrived in Florence, Italy, in November 1871. Ouida was to live in Tuscany for the rest of her life. There she lived among the kind of people she had once only written about. While she met literary Anglo-Florentines like Vernon Lee, she preferred the company of Italian peasants and the European aristocracy (both social groups very far from her English provincial petty bourgeois origins). Her lyrical celebration of northern Italy and the Risorgimento, *Pascarèl* (1873), marked a change in the focus of her fiction: it also signaled her

entry into Italian-language publishing, a translation being serialized in the prestigious Florentine monthly *Nuova Antologia* just two months after its volume-form appearance with Chapman and Hall. Four novels set in Italy followed – *Signa* (1875), *In a Winter City* (1876), *Ariadne* (1877), and *Friendship* (1878) – each concerned with a different art form – music, painting, sculpture, literature. *Signa* and *Ariadne* explore in greater detail the scenario of “A Dog of Flanders”: What fate does society allow a talented peasant artist (in *Ariadne's* case, a talented woman peasant artist)? *In a Winter City* and *Friendship* are both satirical *romans à clef*, the former affectionate, the latter a scandalous – even libelous – publication of the private life of Ouida's circle in Florence. Chatto and Windus, who had bought Ouida's copyrights from Chapman and Hall in 1877, were not pleased and told her so. The following year she was forced back into writing short stories for magazines, this time not only for *Lippincott's Magazine*, but for Chatto and Windus's *Belgravia* and (in French) for the *Revue des Deux Mondes*.

*Moths* (1880), Ouida's next novel, is now her best known after *Under Two Flags*, thanks both to a modern paperback edition and to its reputation for being the first novel in which a divorced woman ends happily (see [Ouida 2005](#)). It was certainly popular in its day, its huge sales helped by numerous stage versions and the scandalized vituperation of the critics at its immorality. With *A Village Commune* (1881) Ouida entered the political arena even more forcefully, though rather than gender and sexual politics this novel was concerned with the deleterious effects of property and progress on personal happiness. Ouida was now very concerned to influence the fate of Italy: her next volume, *Bimbi* (1882), a collection of children's stories, was dedicated to the thirteen-year-old prince Vittorio Emanuele, thereby seeking to mould the moral vision of the future king of Italy.

In the mid-1860s Ouida had been writing opinion pieces (from a man's point of view) for the *Army and Navy Review* on topics such as dueling. In 1878 she returned to the form, without the regendering, to disseminate her political vision and to add to her precarious income. This was something she would do for the next twenty years, starting with pieces in the center of what the mid-twentieth century will call the “Establishment,” the *Whitehall Review* and the *Gentleman's Magazine*, and later publishing in the *Fortnightly Review* and *North American Review*. Meanwhile Ouida's remaining long novels retained the aristocratic settings of *Moths* and of her earlier work, though there is an even greater emphasis on brilliant and flippant dialogue that anticipates Wilde's plays (as [Schaffer 2000](#) pointed out). *Wanda* (1883), *Princess*

*Napraxine* (1884), *Othmar* (1885), *Guilderoy* (1888–89), and *Syrlin* (1890) are *romans à thèse* on a variety of themes that castigate society for its selfishness and lack of that fellow feeling so important to the mid-nineteenth century: sympathy. Ouida was feeling the lack of it especially with her publishers. After her unpleasant initial dealings with Chatto and Windus, they kept driving hard bargains. Having given her £1,000 for the copyright of *Othmar*, they had sold the serial rights to Tillotson's Fiction Bureau, which ran it in various provincial newspapers for several months just before Chatto brought it out in volume form in December 1885. Rather than remain a passive commodity, Ouida dealt directly with Tillotson's after that, selling it a trio of novella-length pieces that it placed in various newspapers.

Just before Christmas 1886, Ouida returned to London for a few months, determined to renew and expand her network. The trip was financially ruinous, but she did meet Wilde (she published four articles in his *Woman's World* over 1888–89) and her experiences fed into her subsequent work. In May 1891, spurred on by her exploitation by Chatto, Ouida wrote a long letter to the *Times*: “New Literary Factors” (a “factor” was an “agent”). It attacked the factory-like entertainment industry that now seemed to control literary endeavor. Her letter provoked responses from Walter Besant and Mary Braddon, who both defended the new system of agents,

syndication, and authors' guilds. Though she certainly participated in it, Ouida more and more resisted the industrialization of entertainment: she preferred personal relations in general. Chatto and Windus meanwhile was paying her less and less, while its profits were dramatically increasing through cheap reprints of her earlier work (and, later, through sales of film rights). Incensed and in need of cash, Ouida not only changed publishers (from now on she kept changing them, Unwin being her longest-lasting) but focused again on short stories and opinion pieces in periodicals, just as she had done at the start of her career.

Ouida's late stories always have a clear political point: they are fictional versions of her essays, adapted for specific publishing venues. Thus the very fine "Toxin," written originally for the 1895 summer holiday number of the *Illustrated London News* (Ouida 1895), not only takes place in Venice – a possible holiday destination for the paper's wealthy readers – and provides wonderful opportunities for an illustrator (duly taken advantage of), but it dramatizes the point of an essay by Ouida that had appeared in 1893: "The New Priesthood: A Protest against Vivisection." The villain, a doctor who preys indifferently on animals and humans (there are some shocking descriptions of vivisection), is a kind of scientist Svengali – but an English predator on Italy, not a Jewish one on England (*Trilby* had originally been published in *Harper's* in the first half of 1894). Longing for domination and acquisition under the mask of a desire for scientific progress, he ingeniously kills the beloved of a noble Venetian widow, a Sicilian prince, by exchanging the antitoxin for diphtheria for the toxin itself. This illustrates not only the heartlessness of "physiologists," but how greed and lust for power keep north and south Italy divided (a topic Ouida addressed in several of her essays).

Although *The Waters of Edera* (1900) is technically Ouida's last completed novel, it is really a long novella that echoes the polemics, politics, and poetics of her short Italian tales and her articles about conservation. The novel that most readily forms the bridge between the novels of the 1880s and her final one (*Helianthus*) is the brilliantly comic *The Massarenes* (1897; Ouida 2011). In many ways it is a retrospective of the nineteenth-century novel, updating *Pride and Prejudice* in the heroine and hero while at the same time revisiting Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* and *The Eustace Diamonds*, Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* and sensation fiction as well as Ouida's own early fiction, all the while making sharp topical reference to Parnell, the Prince of Wales, British imperialism, globalization and technology – topics she addressed in her nonfiction. By the start of the twentieth century Ouida was publishing very little. After an exceptionally interesting piece, "The Culture of Cowardice," in Henry Salt's organ for the Humanitarian League, *The Humane Review*, in July 1900 on how modern society was being controlled through the state manufacture of fear (Ouida 1900), she only published two more new pieces in her lifetime, both in 1906 and in the *Fortnightly Review*. Ouida's public silence can partly be explained by the chaos of her domestic life. In November 1903 she was evicted from her rented villa and, in lieu of unpaid rent, her landlady's sons carted away her possessions, including the manuscript of a novel contracted to Macmillan, *Helianthus*. Ouida was effectively homeless and forced to live in hotels. There resulted a series of court cases during which Ouida tried to recover her chattels, with legal but no practical success (the landlady's family absconded to Belgium). Ouida had to reconstruct *Helianthus* from memory. Macmillan kept sending advances but eventually brought it out posthumously, unfinished. Even though Ouida had effectively stopped publishing by 1906, that year did not, however, see the end of Ouida in print: the mythological accretions around her continued to grow. In the summer of 1907 two newspapers owned by Harmsworth, the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Mirror*, ran sensational exposés of her poverty, complete with fake photographs. Enraged, Ouida protested in the *Times*. In her defence, Vernon Lee wrote a piece in the *Westminster Gazette* while Frank Harris, who had been editor of

the *Fortnightly Review* when Ouida had begun to write for it, supported her in *Vanity Fair*, the weekly he had just begun to edit. The same summer she was awarded a Civil List pension of £150 a year. Ouida died of pneumonia in Viareggio on January 25, 1908 and was buried in the Protestant English Cemetery at Bagni di Lucca. In a public relations coup, the *Daily Mirror* raised a subscription for an elegant monument in Bury St. Edmunds that highlights animal rights activism and sentimentality.

There is a strange postscript that undermines any simple notion of Ouida as a misogynist conservative that may derive from a superficial reading of her “New Woman” essay. In 1909 *Lippincott's* published two essays on “The Woman Problem,” which Ouida had sold them 25 years previously but which she had directed should be published only after her death. Unequivocally praising women's rebellion against the domestic, both essays call for better education for women – an education designed to make them more aware of the realities of public life and the possibilities open to them. Women, Ouida stresses, can and must take charge of their lives to effect “the noblest and highest revolution that has ever broken the chains of effete prejudices.”

SEE ALSO: [Adultery](#); [Animals](#); [Art](#); [Italy](#); [New Woman fiction](#); [Sympathy](#)

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