

OUIDA [Marie Louise de la Ramé] (1839–1908)

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Ouida was the enormously prolific and highly eccentric author of some forty-seven novels and collections of short stories, as well as numerous essays, children's stories, political pamphlets, and works of literary criticism. As a small child, her attempts to pronounce "Louise" came out "Ouida," and she later adopted the name as a pseudonym because, true to her flamboyant eccentricity, it suggested to her a vaguely foreign romanticism. Born Marie Louise Ramé in Bury St. Edmunds, Ouida was the only child of Frenchman Louis Ramé and his English wife, Susan Sutton. Although she was raised almost entirely by her mother and grandmother, her father did arrange for his quick-witted and precocious daughter to get an unusually good education for a country girl of her background. In return, she seized on the glamorous rumor that her usually absent father was a Napoleonic spy by lengthening her name to "de la Ramée" and claiming aristocratic French ancestry.

In 1857 the eighteen-year-old Ouida moved with her mother and grandmother from Bury St. Edmunds to London, a move she clearly welcomed. Precocious and headstrong, her ruling passions were men, dogs, information, and social ambition. Capitalizing on being introduced to editor Harrison Ainsworth, she serialized her first story "Dashwood's Drag; or, the Derby and What Came of It" (1859) in *Bentley's Miscellany*. She followed up its success with a series of similar tales of high society and sporting life, many of which she collected to form *Cecil Castlemaine's Gage and Other Novelettes* (1867). Lord Strangford's sarcastic attack in the *Pall Mall Gazette* on her first full-length novel *Granville de Vigne*, later published as *Held in Bondage* (1863), only increased her popular appeal by calling even greater attention to the formula that she later perfected in *Under Two Flags* (1867) — a combination of dashing military life, extravagant luxury, tortuous romantic intrigue, and a hero of almost impossible beauty, courage, and style. Her shocking presentation of the improprieties of the upper class and the military, a depiction that greatly disconcerted them since it disclosed subjects they had intentionally concealed, appealed to the prurient, romantic fantasies of the British public. *Tricotrin* (1869) and *Folle-Farine* (1871) added a new element to her fictional formula: the peasant heroine who becomes tragically enmeshed in the snares of high society, a device that she again exploited in *Two Little Wooden Shoes* (1874).

Ouida's expensive flair for the dramatic and her dogmatic pride in her odd costumes only served to emphasize for many that she was a homely woman who suffered under an obsession with beauty. However, the public attention (and financial rewards) her fiction attracted allowed her to live out the fantasies that were otherwise denied by her lack of beauty and legitimate social status. During the 1870s, bedecked in gowns by the renowned House of Worth and surrounded by hothouse flowers, she held court to largely male audiences in London's Langham Hotel, frequently dressing to resemble the heroine of her latest novel. Intolerant, demanding, vulgar, and rude, Ouida nevertheless succeeded in receiving many attractive visitors, although with the occasional exception of such as Sir Richard Burton, the literary and artistic were rarely among them. Although she was essentially conventional in her own behavior, she flouted Victorian codes of respectability

by encouraging people to smoke throughout dinner and by remaining with the men over brandy and cigars, collecting material for her novels from their conversation.

At her zenith in the 1870s Ouida earned annually as much as £5000 (approximately one million dollars in today's buying power), but also spent recklessly. Forced in 1859 to move out of the extravagant Langham Hotel and live with her mother, she eventually settled in Florence in 1870. From 1860 on, "O" spent much time in Italy, establishing herself in expensive London hotels upon her return, and consciously cultivated the image of a glamorous and successful writer. She was indeed the subject of much public attention, not all of it flattering, although Edward Bulwer-Lytton declared that *Folle-Farine* (1871) was a triumph of modern English romance. In 1871 she began a notorious affair with the unmarried but philandering Marchese della Stufa, which collapsed in embarrassing public scenes. Her novel *Friendship* (1878), which Ouida insisted was based on absolute truth even as it outrageously idealized her role and vilified Stufa's, was her revenge on her former lover for his refusal to marry her, but it also marked the beginning of her popular decline. She settled permanently in the Villa Farinola outside Florence from roughly 1874 to 1888, living for a time in considerable style surrounded by her beloved dogs.

Her personal disappointments helped turn her attention from the glamor of polite society to its failings. The satire *Moths* (1880), in some ways her most successful work, shows the social fabric being eaten away by the vice and hypocrisy of society's fashionable "moths." Ouida increasingly lamented, most effectively in works like *The Massarenes* (1897), the failure of the upper classes to live up to the ideals of taste and breeding she believed she set for them, as well as their surrender to the values of the vulgar and encroaching middle classes whom she had detested all of her life. As the 1880s waned, so too did Ouida's popularity as her audience turned from three-decker romances to more realistic one-volume works. During the 1890s she turned increasingly to criticism and commentary, the best of which were collected in *Views and Opinions* (1895) and *Critical Studies* (1900).

In her final years, having sold her copyrights (as was common practice among women writers of the time), Ouida lived in near destitution, a civil list pension being the only things standing between her and brutal poverty. Her extravagant lifestyle continually outran her income, leaving unpaid bills and pending lawsuits behind her as she moved from place to place, her only companions after her mother's death being a servant or two and the pack of spoiled dogs on which she lavished her affection. But she remained indomitably proud, bitterly resenting, for example, Marie Corelli's vulgar attempt to publicize her plight in the London papers. Ouida died penniless in Viareggio of pneumonia and was buried in the English cemetery at Bagni di Lucca. She is commemorated by a monument in Bury St. Edmunds, even though the town never figured in her cosmopolitan fiction.

Ouida's wish-fulfilling fictions fed her own and her audience's longing for the glamor, romance, and luxury that were beyond their reach. She owed her considerable success in the 1870s and 1880s to her abundant imagination for sensational plotting, vivid detail, and local color, which even Henry James claimed to admire. But while Ouida was praised for her ability to create a fast-paced plot and evoke atmosphere, she was severely criticized for factual inaccuracies, redundancies, and two-dimensional characters. The

sentimental *A Dog in Flanders and Other Stories* (1872), based on her observations of the Belgian peasantry, and particularly *Under Two Flags* have sold millions of copies and are still popular today, but for the most part Ouida's novels have not stood up well over time. Although some Victorian contemporaries considered her one of the best interpreters of the modern Italian scene in such novels as *Adriadne* (1877) and *The Massarenes* (1897), many current assessments hold that her essays may be the works that will prove to have the most lasting literary merit.