

‘Certain passages of it are quite as bad and immoral as anything that Zola has ever written’: Lucas Malet and the Victorian Bildungsroman

***Lucas Malet, Dissident Pilgrim; Critical Essays* (eds.) Jane Ford and Alexandra Gray, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2019, xx + 241 pages, £115 (hardback), ISBN 978 0 367 15615 3**

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This powerful and enjoyable collection of essays reflects on the little-known work and life of the controversial late nineteenth and early twentieth-century lesbian novelist Lucas Malet (the pen-name of Mary St Ledger Harrison). Malet, the daughter of the Christian Socialist Charles Kingsley and later a Catholic convert, is perhaps best known as the author of *The History of Sir Richard Calmady* (1901), an extremely popular novel in its own day about the life and loves of a disabled aristocrat and his turn to a form of charitable socialism and a mannish New Woman to escape the hereditary curse that has hitherto blighted his life. Associating with writers such as Henry James, Thomas Hardy and Vernon Lee and with her novels exploring topics such as Englishness, empire, religion, the woman writer, aestheticism, heredity and sexual desire, Malet can be credited with adding a distinctly somatic and Gothic edge to the Victorian bildungsroman. The subject of only one biography and scholarly monograph so far, Malet's life and works offer a fascinating addition to the growing body of research that explores the relationship between Victorian culture and Modernism, a particularly vexed relationship for Malet whose twentieth-century works were frequently misread as relics of the Victorian past.ⁱ Thus, this collection asks the question 'who was Lucas Malet?' and why has her work essentially disappeared out of view? In response (and aside from the gender bias that has traditionally shaped literary canons and university curricula), the editors and critics such as Catherine Delyfer and Talia Schaffer variously indicate that it is Malet's 'formal traditionalism', her 'religious reverence' and equivocation on the 'Woman question' that has made her less attractive to contemporary students and scholars alike (18-21; 119). And yet, in the age of Brexit, the 'Me Too' movement *and* our continued recovery of progressive forebears in history (whether it be the New Woman or the anti-imperialist), Malet suggests herself as a woman for our times

since her life, work and reception bring into sharp focus that highly charged battle between the liberal and inclusivist *and* the conservative and isolationist aspects of our culture today.

While such collections are inevitably hamstrung by the descriptive demands of introductory recovery work and its attempts to bring scholarly attention to its subject *per se*, this set of essays -structured in four parts (Maletian Bodies, Dissident Women, Malet and Her Contemporaries and Catholic Proto-Modernism) - finely balances such requirements with nuanced textual criticism of its material. Tantalisingly, the editors tell us that at the *fin de siècle*, Malet 'wrote beautifully crafted aesthetic prose featuring arcane objects and gorgeous sartorial description, imperial narratives, and tales of gothic horror' while in 'the twentieth century, [she] contributed to developments in modernist prose, producing frequently oblique dialogue, moments of temporal dislocation, and symbolic scenes of Sapphic pleasure'(2). However, it is Malet's rerouting of the Victorian bildungsroman and attendant realist mode with a new focus on embodying it in disabled, Gothic and (putatively) foreign bodies that strikes the reader as the more important of her contributions to the turn-of-the century novel. As the editors reveal in their lively introduction to the collection, Malet consciously and controversially (given her paternity) aligned herself to the naturalist vein of realist writing, publicly citing the influence of Balzac, Gautier, Flaubert, De Maupassant, Bourget, Zola and Daudet on her writing. Although Malet praised George Eliot as 'immeasurably the greatest' of women writers, as Louise Benson James's essay reveals, where Eliot turned a less intrusive 'variable microscopic lens' on her characters, Malet's realist method in her novels *The Wages of Sin* and *The Survivors* saw her utilise a 'surgical scalpel' to dissect the 'hysterical bodies' engendered in modernity (1; 33).

Where Benson James offers a persuasive discussion of Malet's use of the medical Gothic to offer visceral descriptions of the tics and neuroses that affect the characters of *The Wages of Sin*, in turn, her discussion of Malet's post-war novel *The Survivors* (1923), suggests that "Malet's characters project their bodily symptoms, disabilities, and neuroses onto the body politic' and, significantly, that this time her surgical scalpel affords 'an act of simultaneous vivisection and healing, seeking to both dissect and restore' a nation shattered by war(48-9). Benson James's discussion of Malet's depiction of disability dovetails with Clare Walker Gore and Jill R. Ehnenn's discussions of the subject. Here,

Walker Gore and Ehnenn's respective readings of *The History of Sir Richard Calmady* afford new ways of thinking about the manner in which its titular hero's disability for Walker Gore 'expose[s] the nexus of ideas of the straight male ideal' while Ehnenn makes the existential proposition that Malet's novel teaches us 'how we learn who we are, who we should become and how' as '*embodied* subjects', a point that sees Malet sensitively arraign the able-bodiedness and compulsory heterosexuality that was (and continues to be) privileged in society (54; 148-9). Ehnenn, in her comparison of *Richard Calmady* to Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, is also one of a number of critics in this collection who reflects upon Malet's implicit subversion of the bildungsroman and the realist mode. Reminding us of the normative and assimilationist drive traditionally undertaken in the Victorian bildungsroman and its equation of disability with deviance, Calmady's 'happy ending' highlights how 'contra traditional bildungsromane' Malet's novel 'teach[es] the reader, there is more than one possibility, more than one narrative and more than one kind of progress' (159).

The recognition of Malet's formal onslaught against the bildungsroman continues in Alani Hicks-Bartlett's analysis of Malet's post-conversion novel *The Far Horizon* (1906). Highlighting Malet's interest in alterity *per se*, this essay charts how the novel comes to actively reject the integrative goals of the bildungsroman because its hero's Spanish and Irish antecedents and Catholic faith bars him from a normative Protestant English narrative. Tantalisingly, Hicks-Bartlett's essay introduces a discussion of how the aridity of capitalism and the narrowness of the Protestant English world view is offset in the novel by Dominic Iglesias's Catholic faith, a point that could perhaps have accrued increased significance by placing Malet in a trajectory of English realist novelists stretching from George Eliot to D.H. Lawrence.

In terms of style, Malet's use of the naturalist mode and her medicalisation of female bodies in tandem with her non-realist writing would appear to place her novels in the corpus of New Woman fiction. However, Malet's controversial 1905 article 'The Threatened Re-subjection of Women' in which she called the New Woman 'sexless, homeless, unmaternal', according to the editors incensed Mona Caird to the point of accusing Malet of 'ingratitude' and 'pessimism ...[in] undermining the progress made by her long-suffering female literary forebears' (20). In contrast to Malet's reception by contemporaries such as Caird, Catherine Delyfer in her essay argues that the aforementioned article was 'sometimes misinterpreted by suffragists partially because of

Malet's scepticism concerning the impact of the women's movement on certain social classes and partly because of her celebration of the modern middle-class woman as "ambitious", 'impatient of authority' 'sexless' 'nomadic' and 'increasingly unmaternal' (117). Delyfer's essay also challenges the antipathy towards aestheticism and aesthetes traditionally ascribed to the New Woman, as signalled by Ruth Robbins's astute essay on Malet's unpublished skit on aestheticism ('In Memoriam, Ernest D. Chesterfield), an appendix to the collection. Like Talia Schaffer before herⁱⁱ, Delyfer importantly proposes that in her novel *Adrian Savage* (1911), Malet's 'engagement with the values of aestheticism which celebrates individual choice, the transformative power of art, the life of the senses, and emotional, physical and intellectual self-development' indicate that her 'contribution to fin-de-siècle feminism is specifically aestheticist' (119). This assertion of the aesthetic pleasure to be distilled from *Adrian Savage* represents something of a rejoinder to the more Gothic aspects of Malet's fiction and yet equally the reader concomitantly finds themselves regretting the general absence of the instances of Sapphic pleasure promised in the introduction in the collection as a whole. (Although once married to her father's protégé William Harrison, in later life Malet appears to have been involved in a lesbian relationship with her adopted daughter, the opera singer Gabrielle Vallings). However, Jane Ford in her erudite essay on telepathy in *The Survivors* goes some way in ameliorating this absence by noting that Malet deploys 'the trope of telepathy (an analogue of scriptural revelation) to make the point that intercourse founded on (heterosexual) bodily desire is volatile', while '[b]y contrast, Malet inverts the principles of electrical polarity, to structure same-sex eroticism as a more stable electric current, or telepathic missive' (218).

Both Holly Laird's essay on Malet's *The Far Horizon* and Crescent Rainwater's essay on her novel *Deadham Hard* (1919) explore English national identity with the latter, in particular, focusing on the ramifications of imperialism on its Anglo-Indian heroine Damaris Verity as she returns to an England she has previously not known to eventually become a writer. According to Rainwater, Damaris's 'exposure to non-European culture is key to [her] desire for opportunities beyond the restrictions of traditional English middle-class femininity' (135). Certainly a truism in our day, India is the linchpin for an English woman's journey of self-discovery. While Malet's equivocation about the British Empire -she despised the First Boer War as a 'war of Capitalists' but later praised the English for having an 'unbroken' spirit and 'sensitive' conscience 'actively ready to affront momentous

decisions and accept incalculable risks' – might make her unattractive to the modern reader, such authorial ambiguity and elisions can but pave the way for future directions in imperial, *fin-de-siecle*, New Woman/Suffragist, and Modernist studies (9). Moreover, this collection will generate further reflections on the Kingsley inheritance, an intellectual dynasty it seems as significant as that of the Huxleys and the Stephens. A woman for our times, Lucas Malet, this highly readable, 'gender bending' and formally innovative Catholic writer, at the very least, offers a palliative to our post-millennial malaise (xviv).

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ⁱ Patricia Lorimer Lundberg, *An Inward Necessity: the Writer's Life of Lucas Malet* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003); Catherine Delyfer, *Art and Womanhood in Fin-de-Siècle Writing: The Fiction of Lucas Malet* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011)

ⁱⁱ Talia Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late Victorian England* (Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2000)