Abstract
This essay considers how the New Woman writer Mona Caird engaged with John Stuart Mill’s ideas on liberty of discussion. It offers a brief history of Caird scholarship and considers the importance of free discussion to fin-de-siècle New Woman debates. It outlines four elements of Millian philosophy which Caird draws on in her fictional depictions of conversation: male-female friendship, independent thought, self-development, and a quest for precision in word choice and usage. Finally, it traces these elements through Caird’s novels and short stories, charting a development from her nineteenth-century fiction – which focuses on private discussion in upper-class domestic settings – to her twentieth-century novels – which consider directly how private conversational practices translate into political and scientific discussion groups open to a greater diversity of participants.

Mona Caird was an essayist and novelist who became well known at the end of the nineteenth century for her unflinching criticism of marriage laws and customs in an article for the Westminster Review entitled ‘Marriage’ (1888). Caird’s controversial article initiated a thoroughgoing nationwide debate about the marriage question, conducted through the letters columns of the Daily Telegraph and other national publications. In 1910, the writer and editor Elizabeth A. Sharp declared that Caird’s essays and novels ‘have been potent in altering the attitude of the public mind in its approach to and examination of such questions, in making private discussion possible’ (142). Caird not only encouraged debates about marriage during the 1880s and 1890s, she made liberty of discussion one of the major themes of her fiction. Discussion was also important to the form her fiction took. Her novels and short stories consist largely of dialogue: it drives her plots and through it her characters are created. This essay considers the philosophical context to Caird’s exploration of open and unrestricted discussion by examining links between her fiction and John Stuart Mill’s On Liberty (1859), The Subjection of Women (1869), his Autobiography (1873) and his essay on ‘Nature’ (written in 1854 but published posthumously as part of Three Essays on Religion in 1874).

In an interview with the Women’s Penny Paper in 1890 Caird said that reading John Stuart Mill had had a formative role in her intellectual development. She recalls that her views on gender equality were pronounced at an early stage of her life, but that Mill ‘was the first to help me to bring these thoughts and feelings into form by his writings’ (421). In her introduction to The Morality of Marriage (1897), a collection of her own essays which had first appeared in the periodical press, she links Mill’s philosophy with journalism by saying that

What John Stuart Mill saw so clearly about half a century ago is gradually and slowly coming to be recognised and proved, bit by bit, through observation and research directed to the subject. (13–4)
Caird quoted from *Subjection* to illustrate what Mill saw so clearly: that the whole organisation of society tended to the distortion of women’s natures, so that it had become impossible to say what their true character and capacities were. In her fiction, Caird took as her point of departure Mill’s assertion in *Subjection* that the discussion about women’s legal and social position ‘must be a real discussion, descending to foundations, and not resting satisfied with vague and general assertions’ (492). Throughout the seven novels she wrote, Caird engages with the forms of free discussion Mill argues for in *On Liberty* and the model of self-developmental conversation he sets out in his *Autobiography* (1873). In doing so she offers an ideal of creative, liberating conversation and explores many deviations from this ideal, including persuasion, manipulation, mockery, banality and silence. Embedded in the fin-de-siècle New Woman debates, her nineteenth-century novels – *Whom Nature Leadeth* (1883), *One That Wins* (1887), *The Wing of Azrael* (1889), *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894) and *The Pathway of the Gods* (1898) – focus on private discussions in upper-class domestic settings. *The Daughters of Danaus* and *The Pathway of the Gods* begin to explore how private conversations relate to public debate; and her early twentieth-century novels – *The Stones of Sacrifice* (1915) and *The Great Wave* (1931) – depict political and scientific discussion groups, which are accessible to a greater diversity of participants, and consider directly how private conversational practices can translate into public discourse.

**A Brief History of Caird Scholarship**


In her afterword to The Feminist Press edition, Margaret Morganroth Gullette declared that *The Daughters of Danaus* – which tells of the stultifying domestic and social arrangements that thwart Hadria Fullerton’s musical talent – was the novel in which Caird most successfully combined feminist convictions with literary achievement. Perhaps aware that acknowledging Caird’s polemicism would cast doubt on her artistic credentials, Gullette contrasts her with Mill, observing that in *The Daughters of Danaus* Caird made the inequities/iniquities of the [marriage] system exceptionally vivid – far more vivid than Mill had done in his scrupulously reasoned essay on *The Subjection of Women* in 1869. Clearly what this author valued were women’s points of view: their subjectivity and their subjection. (497, Gullette’s emphasis)
Gullette was making the case for the importance and authority of Caird’s voice in the New Woman debates of the 1890s and her continued relevance to feminist studies in the twentieth century, but in so doing she overlooked the complexity of Caird’s engagement with Millian philosophy. Most critical accounts of Caird mention Mill and *Subjection* in order to position Caird’s work in the context of first-wave feminism and to note that Caird borrows a Millian rhetorical strategy when she likens women’s position under nineteenth-century marriage laws and customs as equivalent to, or worse than, that of slaves. However, it was Angelique Richardson’s *Love and Eugenics in the Late Nineteenth Century* (2003) which established the extent to which ‘Mill’s ideas on nature, society, and the individual had a formative influence on Caird’s thinking’ (187). In *Love and Eugenics* Richardson demonstrated that by ‘positioning Mill’s ideas on individual liberty in a biological context’ Caird was able to offer a powerful challenge to biological determinism and the eugenic discourses of other New Women writers such as Sarah Grand (207). By paying close attention to how Millian ideas of freedom permeate her journalism and fiction, and the way she, like Mill, ‘exposes the social and economic concerns which underpin discourses on the natural’, Richardson made clear that Caird held very different views from many of the New Women writers with which she is habitually grouped (187).

**New Women and Discussion**

Just as Caird and Grand diverged in their views on biological determinism and eugenics, their fictional representations of the role of conversation differed. In Grand’s short story ‘In Search of a Subject’ (1928) the narrator, a writer, finally settles on *The Fine Art of Conversation* as a fitting topic for an article (397). She recalls sitting down to talk in her preferred way, with

> a party of intimate friends ... the kind of people who don’t break a party up into bits by talking together in pairs, each on a different subject, instead of listening so that each one at a time may speak and be heard. (397)

Talk is defined as one of life’s enduring pleasures, vital to individual wellbeing, and this corresponds somewhat with Caird’s concerns. However, in its portrayal of the fine art of conversation Grand’s story privileges the group over the individual, focusing on interaction still bounded by convention and superficiality: ‘sprinkled with wit and humour, laughter-provoking; sweetened with sympathetic insight’ (397). Diversity of subject matter and interlocutor give way to well-regulated group discussion. In her portrayals of the art of conversation, Caird depicted dialogues with the potential to break through class barriers and unsettle preconceptions. In Caird’s short story ‘A Romance of the Moors’ (1891), she explores the possibilities conversation offers for creativity and for turning what is quotidian into something significant. When farmer’s son Dick Coverdale meets Mrs Ellwood, an artist and New Woman, walking on the moors, their dialogue quickly achieves mutual sympathy and insight:

> Mrs Ellwood had no difficulty in persuading Dick to tell her more about his life and his surroundings. She listened to him in amazement. The picture that he drew had all the qualities of a work of art. The critical faculty in her made her appreciation as delicate and perfect as his own unconscious masterpiece. (72)

Where Grand’s narrator eschews potentially disruptive one-to-one conversation in favour of restrained group discussion, ‘A Romance of the Moors’ emphasises the productive intensity of unreserved conversation between two people.
Despite the title of Caird’s short story, the most meaningful conversations she imagines take place between men and women in a spirit of friendship and collaborative work, not romance. While Heilmann has observed that Grand ‘combined social purity discourses with an at times spectacular exploration of female libidinal desire’ (New Woman Strategies 3), Caird’s work shows a preoccupation with intimate but Platonic friendship between the sexes, unrestricted by possible accusations of impropriety. In The Morality of Marriage she asserts that

It is certain that we shall never have a world really worth living in, until men and women can show interest in one another without being driven either to marry, or to forego altogether the pleasure and the profit of frequent meeting. (103)

Accordingly, there is very little flirtatious conversation in Caird’s fiction. When it does occur it is deeply problematic. In The Daughters of Danaus Hadria’s sexual attraction to Professor Theobald complicates her normal facility for negotiating the world through words. Aware that Professor Theobald talks to manipulate, exploiting ambiguity to flatter and seduce, Hadria craves clarifying conversation with her friend and mentor Professor Fortescue. Caird’s Platonic ideal is reminiscent of Mill’s account of his relationship with Harriet Taylor, where ‘all subjects of intellectual or moral interest [were] discussed between them in daily life, and probed to much greater depths than are usually or conveniently sounded in writings intended for general readers’ (Autobiography 183–4). Millian conversation is invariably rigorous and demanding and Caird takes her cue from this serious tone in order to insist on the importance of free discussion in the face of those who wish to mock, dismiss or undermine it.4 In ‘Foibles of the New Woman’ (1896) Ella W. Winston, a little–known American writer who had previously written against women’s suffrage, suggested that the New Woman ‘is a stranger to logic’ and ‘she has made many strange statements’ (170). By filling her work with allusions to Mill’s ideas and prose style, Caird claims him as her ally in challenging the accusations of illogicality and irrelevance made by Winston and many other commentators: Mill’s voice is the voice of logic and reason, and yet he was also a controversialist, no stranger to making challenging statements which commanded attention.

Millian Free Discussion

In addition to an emphasis on male–female friendship, there are three other elements of Millian free discussion which are particularly relevant to Caird’s work: independent thought, self-development and a quest for precision in word choice and usage. In On Liberty Mill warns against the complacency which sets in when the truth of an opinion becomes undeniable: if a topic ‘is not fully, frequently, and fearlessly discussed, it will be held as a dead dogma, not a living truth’ (On Liberty 40). The idea of origination, both in the sense of being the first to offer a new perspective, and in the sense of individuals thinking things through for themselves, is as central to Caird’s fiction as it is to Mill’s philosophy. Her interest in conversation is strongly connected to individuals working out their ideas independently, rather than, as Mill would put it, unthinkingly inheriting or deferring to the opinions of those closest to them. This strand of thought is particularly evident in One That Wins, as I show below. The Autobiography is an analysis of different manners and modes of discussion, at the heart of which lies conversation as a means of self–education and development. The Autobiography culminates in Mill deploying, as a member of parliament, the discussion skills he has been developing all his life. Describing James Mill, his father, Mill uses an image of him warming ‘into life and activity every
germ of similar virtue that existed in the minds he came in contact with’ – and he does this through his extraordinary conversational ability (92). This image of transformation is very important to Caird. Ever-present in her fiction is the contrast Mill sets up in his *Autobiography* between the harmful small talk and conventional phrases of what he terms ‘General Society’, and meaningful conversation which has the power to transform individual lives, and the wider public, for the better (173). While Mill’s *Autobiography* describes his retreat from general society, contemporary accounts of Caird portray her as an enthusiastic participant in society life, living for part of each year ‘at a pleasant house in South Hampstead, in the midst of quite a little colony of artists and literary people’, attending and hosting parties (‘The Literary Mirror’ 350). This did not, however, stop her from being extremely critical of ‘the washed-out flattened humanity of the British drawing-room’ (*One That Wins* 1: 146).

Part of meaningful conversation for both Mill and Caird was paying attention to the precise meanings of words. In his essay ‘Nature’, Mill had complained that the word natural and its derivatives are used in confused and vague ways and are often deployed in discussions of ethics and morality to indicate approval of a mode of behaviour or characteristic. Caird took up this idea in ‘Marriage’, when she asserted that ‘no protest can be too strong against the unthinking use of the term “woman’s nature.” An unmanageable host of begged questions, crude assertion, and unsound habits of thought are packed into those two hackneyed words’ (188). This Millian preoccupation with exposing the unthinking use of words is addressed most directly in *The Wing of Azrael*, where Harry Lancaster challenges the cherished convictions of the witty but superficial Lady Clevedon, seeking to pin down the precise meaning of the words she uses:

‘I wish I knew what you mean by “gentleman,”’ ’ Harry said ... ‘I think you are inclined (perhaps we all are) to make the word stand for a certain sublime something which we mix up in a glow of excitement with qualities purely social’. (1: 22)

**Conversation in Caird’s Fiction**

In Caird’s first novel *Whom Nature Leadeth* the heroine, Leonore Ravenhill, is an heiress who struggles to reconcile her intellectual curiosity and love of freedom with the conventional values repeatedly impressed upon her. From Leonore’s impulsive pronouncements against her scheming stepmother, to her deeply meaningful talk with the writer Austin Bradley, *Whom Nature Leadeth* explores possibilities for free speech and the dangers of its absence. The conversational traits of a host of supporting characters are analysed, from disastrously uncommunicative married couples like Josephine and Sidney, to the destructive sophistications of the conventional Mrs Bleek. Most strikingly, Caird’s passionate opposition to animal cruelty and her belief in the value of free discussion are brought together in the clamour of the Meredith household, where conversation is as savage as fox hunting:

It was very seldom that the most dextrous member of the family, much less Mrs Meredith, succeeded in finishing a sentence of any length; the old lady spoke slowly, and her daughters spoke quickly, so that she was, as they technically expressed it, ‘quite out of the hunt’ ... Then the conversation again closed in, becoming a medley of broken phrases, impossible to reproduce. (1: 81)

In a drawing room where conversation resembles hounds barking and yelping as they close in on a fox, self-improvement is impossible. Not only is there no chance for ideas to be brought to fruition before they are killed off, dissentient opinions are unintelligible. The image of broken phrases can be applied to Leonore’s plight over the course of the
novel’s three volumes. Marriage, motherhood and frustrated artistic ambition mean that her bold statements in support of individual liberty eventually break down into trite remarks and epigrams. Though Leonore finds engrossing discussion and a sense of intellectual equality with Austin Bradley, she opts to marry her cousin George, whose conversation is ominously halting and awkward. Like Caird, Leonore pays close attention to verbal exchange:

She was fond of studying the formation and expression of ideas, she told George. Some people let them ooze lazily out without superintendence – these were generally stupid people. Others on the contrary, appeared to take pride and pleasure in their fit: they liked to feel the vigorous grasp of two colliding minds. (1: 198)

Despite their obvious mismatch intellectually and conversationally, Leonore convinces herself that George belongs to the second category of people and marries him. Her misjudgement results in the loss of her own conversational skills, along with all her opportunities for self-development.

In contrast, as an example of the liberating potential of conversation, in One That Wins Launcelot Sumner becomes captivated by the conversation of the artist Oenone Evelyn and the unexpectedly thought-provoking socialite Nelly Erskine. Impressed by the eloquence with which Oenone narrates the story of her own life, he is also sympathetic to Nelly’s struggle to make the most of an average intellect. Unexpectedly, as Nelly endeavours to expand her own view of the world, her talk provokes new insights for Launcelot: ‘Previously unregarded hints that he had met in reading, in conversation, flashed back upon his memory, no longer dead and unmeaning, but clothed with vivid significance’ (1: 137). The novel ends with the suggestion of a domestic arrangement involving all three protagonists, but most importantly, with a conversation between the two women which is revelatory, consolatory and developmental. Oenone tells Nelly:

I want you to try and put the thing I say to your mind and your heart, not to your social instincts and sense of propriety. Don’t think who it is that says it, or how, or why, or how extraordinary; think only of the thing said. (2: 192, Caird’s emphasis)

In the mode of receptivity to ideas and counter-arguments which Mill sets forth in On Liberty and the Autobiography, real conversation in One That Wins opens the way for experimental forms of living. Nelly acknowledges that Oenone’s words cause her to think more deeply and to develop intellectually; however, the process is not just one way. Nelly reminds Oenone that there needs to be practical application of knowledge gained through talking: ‘““Remember we are in a real world of desperate issues ...””’ (3: 192).

In The Wing of Azrael it is the desperate issues which come to the fore: the novel ends grimly with Viola Sedley stabbing her abusive husband Philip Dendraith and then committing suicide. The Wing of Azrael explores what happens when ideas and discussion are suppressed and language becomes a destructive force. Throughout the novel Caird dramatises the disconnection between what people say and what they really mean, elaborating on Mill’s warning about what happens when an opinion becomes habitual:

The words which convey it, cease to suggest ideas, or suggest only a small portion of those they were originally employed to communicate. Instead of a vivid conception and a living belief, there remain only a few phrases retained by rote; or, if any part, the shell and the husk only of the meaning is retained, the finer essence being lost. (On Liberty 45)

This disjunction is also explored in Caird’s short story, ‘The Yellow Drawing Room’ (1892), where the floundering narrator St Vincent is unsettled by the eloquence of the
story’s heroine Vanora. Vanora speaks with directness and poise but St Vincent is out of control conversationally, as his narration reveals: ‘I replied crazily’, ‘I pleaded like a lunatic, argued, urged’ (27, 28, 29). His desire to dominate Vanora fails because he cannot convincingly articulate it, only mutter it inaudibly: ‘She shall love me, and she shall learn, through love, the sweet lesson of womanly submission’ (27, Caird’s emphasis). Discomposed by Vanora’s conversational mastery St Vincent longs for the type of ‘conversational repose’ he imagines her quiet sister Clara would provide (24). Vanora meanwhile sees clearly how the doctrines St Vincent expresses have the potential to translate into restriction of her freedom (24). She also recognises that though St Vincent’s sentiments are deeply rooted, he is a passive inheritor rather than an active adopter of those opinions, telling him ‘they seem to me like soap-bubbles; full of emptiness’ (28). Though Vanora’s conversational prowess is narrated by St Vincent, it has the power to disrupt by its unconventionality.

In Caird’s last two Victorian novels, she begins to pay more attention to how private conversation relates to public. Though The Daughters of Danaus tells the story of Hadria’s frustrated musical career, much of the novel depicts how she, like Vanora, practises the art of conversation. The ‘Preposterous Society’ is a forum for debate among the Fullerton siblings and through it the novel explores the role of discussion in individuality, family life and wider society (7). For Hadria, and her sister Algitha, discussion is a serious business because it is how they interpret their circumstances, define their positions and decide what action to take. With the ‘Preposterous Society’, they formalise discussion because so much is at stake for them. Though their brothers are part of this group, their role is more playful and flippant. The discussions the sisters have with each other, and later with their friends/mentors Professor Fortescue and Valeria Du Prel, are concerned with examining their own lives and how they fit into wider social arrangements. The wide-ranging and inclusive interlocution of Hadria’s friend Professor Fortescue is set against that of Hadria’s eventual husband, Hubert Temperley, whose conversation never descends below the surface. Hubert’s speech betrays his closed-mindedness, sweeping ‘away whole systems of thought that had shaken the world, with a confident phrase’ (77). Convinced of his own infallibility, as all silencers of discussion in On Liberty are, Hubert observes that Hadria and her siblings: ‘“don’t know the real import of what they say”’; he then ‘hugged this sentence with satisfaction’ (134). Hubert perceives a disconnection between what the Fullerton family say and what they mean, when in fact it is his own words which are unreflectively uttered. Hubert’s sister Henriette has coached him to engage with Hadria’s insistence on liberty by avowing that he will not take full advantage of her legal subordination as his wife. However, Hadria sees the genuine disconnection between Hubert’s words and their meaning. The Daughters of Danaus, like On Liberty, insists that words should have a meaningful connection with a person’s inner life of reason and imagination. Though impeded in her attempts at expressing her artistry, Hadria’s ability to make sense of and create her life through discussion with others is ultimately positive and life-affirming.

The Pathway of the Gods tells the story of a failed romance between Julian Ford and Anna Carrington. Anna’s story is the story of Mill’s women who ‘pine through life with the consciousness of thwarted vocations’ (Subjection 579). Caird also considers how social arrangements may have a harmful effect on men. Anna recognises her potential and how it has gone to waste, lamenting:

I wanted to be a speaker, to hold sway over the emotions of men and women ... I had so much I wanted to say, so much that others had said that I wanted to send flying, with winged words, into the very hearts of my generation! (95)
Denied the opportunity of becoming a successful public speaker, Anna attracts attention within her social circle by the use of wit and epigram, and Julian regrets that this superficial mode of talk is a bar to more open and meaningful conversation with him. As the novel progresses, Anna demands of Julian an all-consuming, individuality-denying love, which takes them even further away from the ideal of frank, mutual conversational exchange. Anna comes to rely on Julian’s conversation for intellectual pacification and emotional fortification, at the expense of his own well-being, leading eventually to a complete breakdown of communication between them.

The Stones of Sacrifice, which was published in 1915 but set in the 1890s, returns to the Millian model of male-female friendship. Alpin Dalyrymple and Claudia Temple both find themselves alienated by their interactions with a small community whose conversation features ‘haver’ and ‘blether’ (nonsense talk), ‘artless prattle’, ‘spiritual filibustering’, ‘baby-language’, ‘pitiful sentences’, ‘disjointed words’ and ‘sentimental phrases’ (139 and passim). The Stones of Sacrifice juxtaposes the drawing room – where young women are advised by even the more open-minded older women to discuss unconventional thoughts about motherhood ‘in camera’ (77) – with a guild for the discussion of socialism founded by Alpin, where he is expected to speak ‘ex cathedra’ (174). Alpin’s motivation for forming the discussion group is to raise possibilities rather than promulgate foregone conclusions:

Socialism is a tendency, an idea, acting as a principle of growth, like the life-principle that guides the development of every living organism. Believing that the capitalist system is increasingly a failure, we are simply trying to suggest the gradual substitution of a less cut-throat idea. (124, Caird’s emphasis)

However, as some of the speakers at the guild begin to emphasise the need for individuals to be sacrificed for the good of the race, Alpin realises their eugenic ideas are in direct opposition to his own views. Caird’s depiction of this type of forum pays attention to dissentient voices by including the character of Mr Scrase, who objects vociferously every time something is said in support of religion or the wealthy classes. The eugenic views which begin to dominate the club become bound up with their proponents’ mode of address. Recalling Vanora’s ‘soap bubbles’ in ‘The Yellow Drawing Room’, Alpin thinks of their speeches as composed of ‘rhetorical ragdolls’, which dazzle with their eloquence, thus obscuring their ill-thought-out doctrines (221). As an alternative to the frustrations of general society and the one-sidedness of debate at the political discussion club they establish, Caird offers the ‘creative, liberating process’ which Alpin and Claudia experience when they talk together:

They plunged into still more intimate talk, as if in truth they were old friends meeting again after long absence. Claudia brought floating to the surface all sorts of ideas that her companion had not definitely known were in his mind, as if she had set going in him a creative, liberating process. (36)

The effect of their conversation recalls Mill’s description of life with Harriet. Like Mill and Harriet, Claudia and Alpin’s relationship is companionable, respectful and above all productively communicative.

In Caird’s final novel The Great Wave discussion becomes an important feature of the novel’s call for humane and responsible use of scientific developments. After listening to a lecture advocating the view that ‘the average and weakly must ever subservce the superior and the powerful’ (161), the novel’s hero Grierson thinks that:

Waldheim’s baldness of statement was to be welcomed. Keeping the brutal nature of the teaching hidden under scientific jargon and generalities – as English men of science almost always
did – led to its getting mushed up by the Mrs Verrekers and so spreading, hopelessly bowdlerized – like a sugar-covered virus – to the general public. And the general public eventually decided the destinies of the world. (161)

As well as his concerns about obscure or misleading scientific terminology, Grierson worries that one of his interlocutors ‘has a genius for what might be termed, in technical phrase, “reducing the chemical potential of human conversation to the condition of unavailable energy” ’ (211). As in all her previous novels, Caird contrasts unproductive conversation such as this with the transformative potential of free discussion, with Grierson’s wife Nora helping him to come to terms with the implications of his scientific discoveries, and encouraging him to see meaning in future research when he returns from the First World War.

‘What John Stuart Mill saw’: Caird’s Dialogue with Mill

In George Bernard Shaw’s You Never Can Tell – published in 1897, the same year as The Morality of Marriage – references to Mill and Subjection in the stage directions are used to indicate Mrs Clandon’s impersonal approach to relationships: ‘passion in her is humanitarian rather than human; she feels strongly about social questions and principles, not about persons’ (219–20). This reflects a strand of thinking about Mill’s work evident earlier in the nineteenth century. Charlotte Brontë responded to reading ‘The Enfranchisement of Women’ (1851), which was in fact by Harriet Taylor, by declaring that

J. S. Mill’s head is, I dare say, very good, but I feel disposed to scorn his heart. You are right when you say that there is a large margin in human nature over which the logicians have no dominion, glad I am that it is so. (qtd. in Gaskell 369)

In 1859, Caroline Fox, who elsewhere in her diaries praises Gaskell’s Mary Barton (1848) for its stimulating sympathy, records a very different experience of reading the work of a once close friend: ‘I am reading that terrible book of John Mill’s on Liberty, so clear, and calm, and cold ... He looks you through like a basilisk, relentless as Fate’ (2: 269–70). In contrast to Shaw’s representation and the accounts of Mill by Brontë and Fox, Caird saw that sympathy and compassion animated Mill’s scrupulous reasoning. She embodied his views on liberty of discussion in her imaginative world, so opening up possibilities for improvements in the face of social impediments or overwhelmingly adverse circumstances. Her nineteenth-century fiction articulates an ideal of private Millian conversation and her twentieth-century novels develop the ramifications of this for public debate of politics and science.

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Short Biography

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nineteenth century. She explores representations of Mill in images and articles from the periodical press, letters and diary entries, as well as ways in which authors such as Mona Caird, Thomas Hardy and Olive Schreiner engaged with his philosophy in their fiction.

Notes

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2 In Subjection Mill said that ‘I am far from pretending that wives are in general no better treated than slaves; but no slave is a slave to the same lengths, and in so full a sense of the word, as a wife is’ (504). For discussion of how Caird uses the slavery analogy, see Patricia Murphy’s Time is of the Essence: Temporality, Gender and the New Woman in 2001 (163), Lisa Surridge’s Bleak Houses: Maternal Violence in Victorian Fiction in 2005 (192) and Warwick’s introduction to The Wing of Azrael (viii).

3 Tracey S. Rosenberg’s unpublished thesis ‘Gender Construction and the Individual in the Work of Mona Caird’ (2006) also considers Mill as an intellectual influence on Caird, emphasising their shared views on gender construction: neither denied the existence of biological differences, but both refused to accept these as an argument for determining social position (28).

4 ‘Millian conversation’ here denotes Mill’s writings about liberty of discussion. In his biography of Mill, Alexander Bain says that Mill was unable to render humour well in writing and so did not attempt to do so, but that in person Mill’s sense of humour was of the sympathetic rather than the mocking kind (185, 187–90).

5 Whom Nature Leadeth was published under the pseudonym of G. Noel Hatton, as was Caird’s second novel One That Wins.

6 I discuss the destructive force of language and conversation in The Wing of Azrael further in the article ‘“Falling Over the Same Precipice”: Thomas Hardy, Mona Caird, and John Stuart Mill’ (2010).

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Further Reading


