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## READING THE ROMANTIC TEXT

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## Submissions

This periodical is only as substantial as the material it contains: therefore, we more than welcome any contributions that members of the academic community might wish to make. Articles we would be most interested in publishing include those addressing Romantic literary studies with an especial slant on book history, textual and bibliographical studies, the literary marketplace and the publishing world, and so forth. Papers of 5–8,000 words should be submitted by the beginning of April or October in order to make the next issue, if accepted. Any of the usual electronic formats (e.g. RTF, Microsoft Word, WordPerfect, HTML) are acceptable, either by post or e-mail. Submissions should be sent to Dr Anthony Mandal, Centre for Editorial and Intertextual Research, ENCAP, Cardiff University, PO Box 94, Cardiff CF10 3XB, Wales (UK), *mandal@cardiff.ac.uk*.

# Mary Meeke's 'Something Strange'
## The Development of the Novel and the Possibilities of the Imagination

*Michael Page*

The familiar story of the rise of the modern novel has been told often enough that I need only briefly summarise it here. Most narratives credit the printer Samuel Richardson with initiating the discourse of the modern novel when he published *Pamela* in 1740, though it is hard to imagine Defoe being left out of the conversation. What Richardson did that made him so 'modern', and thus marked a breakthrough, was to introduce psychological realism into narrative fiction (a psychological realism, do not forget, that was wish-fulfilment fantasy). Soon after, Horace Walpole opened the modern conversation up to the dark side of human psychology with *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). What Walpole in effect did was to suggest that the unconscious—the unknown, terror, the sublime—was just as much a part of the modern mind as the realism of Richardson. So at this point the two sides of the creative discourse of Modernity were set and the novel would become the central literary form in which that conversation took place. The two aspects of Modernity—consciousness and the unconscious—were to be explored in depth, sometimes oppositionally and sometimes, in the very best of novels like *The Brothers Karamazov* or *Moby-Dick,* in concert. So by the end of the nineteenth century, American novelist Frank Norris could declare, 'naturalism [i.e. extreme realism] is a form of romanticism [i.e. sublime imagination]'.[1]

It wasn't long after Richardson and Walpole that the novel blossomed in Western culture. The 1780s and '90s saw an enormous increase in the production of novels. Many factors are included here, not the least of which is literacy. However, as Clifford Siskin has pointed out, until recently, 'once we rise novelistically past Fielding, Richardson, and Sterne, and the 1780s and '90s come into view, critical attention shifts to the supposedly lyrical advent of Romanticism'.[2] What Siskin is here suggesting is that the rise of the novel parallels the rise of Romanticism, that most potent expression of modern consciousness, making it clear that the novel (and here is where that often misleading differentiation between the 'serious' and the 'popular' begins to come in) is not a separate or peripheral part of the conversation of Romanticism, but central to it. Until recently, the Romantic novel has been largely ignored because, for the most part, it has been seen as mere 'popular fiction'—'popular fiction' being a catch-

all term for any fiction that presumably does not have the psychological depth of 'serious literature'. This supposedly makes it more accessible to the 'masses' and therefore it can't possibly have much to say.

What I have tried to suggest in these opening paragraphs is that the Romantic period is the time when the novel began to take shape as a principal form of cultural expression because it initiated the process of wedding the psychological realism of Richardson with the imaginative sublime of Walpole, thus helping to define modern consciousness. Certainly with a writer like Dickens this becomes quite clear. Unfortunately, imagination has too often taken a back seat to realism and form in literary studies. Consequently, works described as 'imaginative literature' are deemed 'popular' and therefore vulgar and/or shallow. As a result, most of the fiction of the Romantic period has been glossed over or just plain forgotten. But the Romantic period is in truth one of the most fertile periods in the development of the novel.

Working within this novelistic ferment were a number of female novelists, subsequently ignored because of their gender, not the quality of their work, and who are now re-emerging on the scholarly scene. Not the least of these is Mary Meeke, whose output of thirty-four novels (including many four-deckers that would amount to a 700-plus-page novel today) and numerous translations from French and German over a twenty-year period is in itself worthy of study simply for the insight it can provide regarding the literary marketplace. Indeed, Roberta Magnani has shown that Meeke was likely the most prolific novelist in the Romantic period, even exceeding Sir Walter Scott.[3] Meeke would certainly qualify as a writer of 'popular fiction' and it is unfortunate that because of this label she has all but disappeared from literary history. Thomas Babington Macaulay was immensely fond of her work, as was Mary Russell Mitford, but beyond that she was already forgotten by the Victorians (at least as indicated by those canonical figures who wrote and published literary memoirs and letters). Nevertheless, Meeke clearly had a readership in her day given her output; and since most people don't write about what they read, at least not for publication, who is to say that Meeke's readers didn't extend on through the nineteenth century? Today, for example, Grace Livingston Hill's romances of the 1920s and '30s still circulate frequently at public libraries in the United States, but seldom is she mentioned in literary circles. We could say that there is no 'scholarly discourse' surrounding her work. But any series of observations at a public library, systematic or casual, would reveal what we could describe as a 'popular discourse'. Arguably, Meeke's work may have had similar cultural distribution, except, unlike Hill, she has fallen out of print.

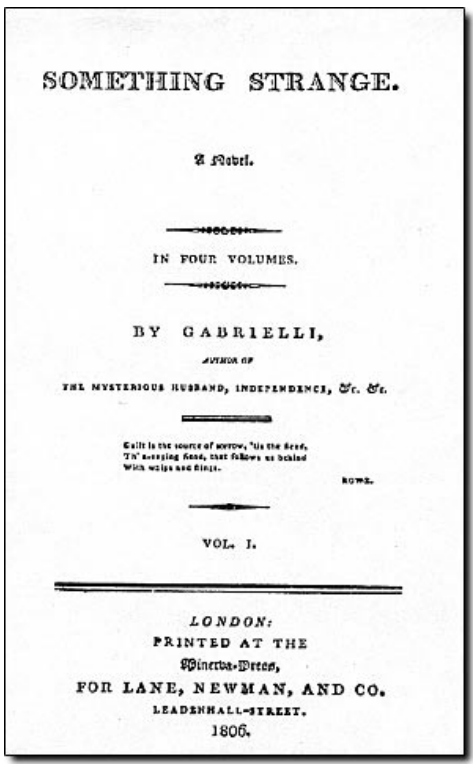
Most of Mary Meeke's novels were published under the by-line 'Mrs. Meeke', but since her output was so prolific, she also published many under the pseudonym 'Gabrielli' and some of her works were published anonymously, though they are traceable by references to other titles on the title page. Magnani has investigated Meeke's by-lines in her recent *Cardiff Corvey* article 'The Mysterious Mrs Meeke', suggesting that Meeke may have used the 'threefold authorship'

as a way to combat criticism regarding the repetitiveness and contrivance of the plots.[4] But this argument suggests that Meeke is trying to deflect the harsh opinion of reviewers rather than simply using pseudonyms as a way to get her works on the fiction market. Many prolific writers today still use this tactic, sometimes as a way to distinguish two different styles of their writing, often so as not to over-saturate the market. Meeke, then, can be seen as a case study on how the institution of the literary marketplace first developed at the end of the eighteenth century. Although Meeke has a lot to offer as a sociological study of the literary marketplace, literacy, and the development of popular fiction, her actual fiction deserves analysis too. What kind of stories was she telling and why did people read them? Was her 'popular' approach to the imagination merely 'pure trash of the commercial variety',[5] or did her novels 'play their part in expressing something of the prevailing *Zeitgeist* of the age which produced the Romantic poets'?[6] Finally, did she contribute anything to the development of the novel and is she still worth reading today?

Let us consider Meeke's four-decker novel *Something Strange,* published by the Minerva Press in 1806, when Meeke's production was in full swing. First, some background. *Something Strange* is one of the later 'Gabrielli' novels; Meeke was by this time moving away from the Radcliffean gothics of her earlier career into fiction that is more about the concerns of the emerging commercial class, an important consideration in *Something Strange*. The novel hinges on what has been called 'the basic inheritance plot',[7] which Meeke employed again and again in her novels and which I will describe in full later in this essay. In a more sophisticated manner, Meeke's contemporary Jane Austen wrote her canonical novels around the same basic concern. By the time she published *Something Strange,* Meeke had already published at least half of her thirty-four novels. The novel received one notice in James Mill's *Literary Journal*, in which the reviewer gives a fresh response, suggesting that he has not previously encountered any of the other 'Gabrielli' novels and is not therefore jaded by the repetitious plot structure. He writes: 'It is written with some spirit and humour, and will not suffer by a comparison with most of the novels of the day'.[8] From this we can see that the reviewer found Meeke's novel satisfying and that John Garrett is correct in saying that while Meeke's works 'may often fail to move, they seldom cease to entertain'.[9] Nevertheless, the reviewer also reveals his own elitist perspective in differentiating the 'popular' from the 'serious': 'The person who chose the title seems to have understood the taste of the multitude. Let them have something strange, and they will never inquire whether it be in the smallest degree consonant to nature or common sense'.[10] Here we see the standards of literary taste being put into place that will shape the canon for the next two centuries. Such standards have silenced many voices and lost many texts that are only now re-emerging in the cultural conversation.

Indeed, *Something Strange* is an extremely rare title. In Frederick Frank's bibliography, *The First Gothics,* it is not among the nine Meeke novels surveyed. The gothic enthusiast Montague Summers described the problem inherent in gothic bibliographic research as long ago as the 1930s in *The Gothic Quest,* re-

peatedly alluding to the rarity of titles even then before the disasters of the Blitz. The books just simply no longer existed either through attrition (meaning they were read to tatters); through disinterest (meaning they were simply thrown out); or through the inherent problems of the multi-volume format (meaning there are difficulties in keeping a complete set together over time—if you lose volume two, why keep volumes one, three, and four?). Curiously, *Something Strange* is one of the handful of titles mentioned in the Meeke entry in the recent *Cambridge Guide to Women's Writing in English*, which suggests that the contributor simply selected titles from Meeke's *oeuvre* at random, or had read extensively and *Something Strange* had left an impression as one of her best works. Whatever the case may be, *Something Strange* is simply unavailable in book form: there is no copy listed in the OCLC WorldCat database.[11]


SOMETHING STRANGE.

A Novel.

IN FOUR VOLUMES.

BY GABRIELLI,

AUTHOR OF

THE MYSTERIOUS HUSBAND, INDEPENDENCE, &c. &c.

Guilt is the source of sorrow, 'tis the seed,
Th' avenging seed, that follows us buried
With wails and sighs.

ROWE.

VOL. I.

LONDON:
PRINTED AT THE
Minerva-Press,
FOR LANE, NEWMAN, AND CO.
LEADENHALL-STREET.
1806.

Fortunately, Die Fürstliche Bibliothek (Princely Library) at Schloss Corvey in Germany and the invaluable Corvey Microfiche Edition have reintroduced this and many other lost works from the Romantic period to the scholarly community.[12] In *The Size of Thoughts* (1996) and *Double Fold* (2001), novelist Nicholson Baker has campaigned passionately for the necessity of library preservation and conservation, arguing why we must do our best to save cultural documents in their original forms.[13] For Baker these documents are the very lifeblood of culture, no matter how obscure, and to lose one is to silence a voice and diminish the voices of those to come. The library in Schloss Corvey is a testament to why these issues and Baker's passionate arguments are so important. Without the Corvey Library, *Something Strange* would simply not exist and that aspect of the conversation of which this essay, Roberta Magnani's article, the text of the novel, and the entry in the *Cambridge Guide* are a part, would be rendered silent. Luckily, it is possible not only to preserve this forgotten novel, but to reintroduce it into the cultural conversation.

One way to reintroduce a forgotten writer into the cultural conversation is to trace that writer in the conversations of canonical figures. Meeke's reputation has largely been sponsored by Thomas Babington Macaulay's enthusiasm for her works: 'I wish that I knew where my old friend Mrs. Meeke lives. I would

certainly send her intelligence of the blessed effects of her writings'.[14] In several letters to his sisters, Macaulay makes numerous references to Meeke as one of his favourite writers. Subsequent biographical entries on Meeke in various literary encyclopaedias have too often read these anecdotes in a negative light, giving the impression that Macaulay's enthusiasm for Meeke was merely a guilty, vulgar pleasure and not a true reflection of his own literary tastes.[15] This reading arises from a passage in *The Life and Letters of Lord Macaulay* (1876) by Macaulay's nephew G. O. Trevelyan who quotes his mother's (the former Hannah Macaulay) reminiscences of her brother's fondness for Mrs Meeke:

> Macaulay thought it probable that he could rewrite 'Sir Charles Grandison' from memory, and certainly he might have done so with his sister's help. But his intimate acquaintance of a work was no proof of its merit. 'There was a certain prolific author,' says Lady Trevelyan, 'named Mrs. Meeke, whose romances he all but knew by heart; though he quite agreed in my criticism that they were one just like another, turning on the fortunes of some young man in a very low rank of life who eventually proves to be the son of a duke.'[16]

Here we are also introduced to the notion of the basic inheritance plot that has led critics to dismiss Meeke as an uninteresting hack—hack she may be, but far from uninteresting. This criticism in fact becomes less problematic if we approach a novel like *Something Strange* by itself. Alone, *Something Strange* is compelling and satisfying, as is an individual work of Austen or Dickens. Certainly if we were to read many of Meeke's novels consecutively it might prove tiresome, but isn't that the case with any writer? Take Hemingway, for example. In other words, even the most specialised reader of fiction likes variation from time to time because otherwise the imagination becomes dulled. At the same time, there is something to be said for stories that are 'one just like another'. This is, after all, part of the attraction of detective fiction, for example. With this in mind, Meeke can be seen as a proto-genre writer. Through her and her many contemporaries we see the emergence and development of popular genre fiction which holds much more cultural currency than we like to give it credit for. Many readers return to the same type of story again and again—be it horror (Stephen King), thriller (John Grisham), romance (Barbara Cartland), western (Louis L'Amour), action (Tom Clancy), science fiction (Anne McCaffrey), mystery (Agatha Christie), or even 'serious literature' (Salman Rushdie)—because *the fiction translates into how they shape their own personal identity and how they interpret the world around them.* Macaulay clearly saw Meeke's novels in this light. His incessant reading of her work most certainly was a touchstone as to how he saw himself in the world.

In many ways *Something Strange* reads like a Dickens novel. The narrative style seems to anticipate the methods of Victorian fiction and is unlike the canonical and semi-canonical novels of the Romantic period. It particularly anticipates Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *Nicolas Nickleby,* which are easily

identifiable as inheritance plot novels. *Martin Chuzzlewit* has been Dickens's most ignored novel for various reasons, not the least of which being his scathing criticisms of America and Americans. Nevertheless, *Chuzzlewit* contains some of Dickens's most delightful characters—Pecksniff, Sari Gamp, Tom Pinch, immediately come to mind. David Lodge describes his own experience with *Chuzzlewit* while adapting it for a television serial: 'it so happened that *Martin Chuzzlewit* was, at that date, the only one I had never read—partly because it is not highly rated by modern critics of Dickens and seldom studied in English Literature courses'.[17] This from a man who had taught courses on Dickens. Lodge goes on to tell how he found *Chuzzlewit* ideally suited for cinematic adaptation, the structure being more akin to the visual medium, and how he discovered that despite some flaws, the novel more than stood up to Dickens's usual list of 'best' books: *Oliver Twist, David Copperfield, Bleak House, Great Expectations.* One gets the same sense from *Something Strange*. My point is that Meeke's popular fiction is anticipating the decades in which the novel would totally eclipse poetry as the primary medium of cultural expression. *Chuzzlewit* has been ignored because it falls between Dickens's early work, like *Oliver Twist* (also an inheritance novel), and the later, darker novels, like *Great Expectations* (also a sort of inheritance novel). But *Chuzzlewit* is the beginning of Dickens's great middle period when he was still closer to an idealistic Romantic than a defeated Victorian. This Romanticism runs throughout the novels beginning with *Chuzzlewit, A Christmas Carol, Dombey and Son, David Copperfield,* and even on to *Hard Times*. These novels in particular can be seen to be operating in a manner similar to Meeke's *Something Strange.* So, in this respect, what makes *Something Strange* such a good novel is that it bridges the gap between the leisurely storytelling that makes so many eighteenth-century novels slow going and the faster paced modern narrative much more suited to today's reader. Few can deny that one of Dickens's 800-pagers is far easier (and much more fun) to read than Goldsmith's 150-page *The Vicar of Wakefield.* Something changed between Goldsmith's 1760s and Dickens's 1830s, and Meeke's narrative gives us a great deal of insight as to when that change took place.

Lady Trevelyan's plot description does, however, succinctly describe the plot of *Something Strange.* Nonetheless, Meeke's inheritance plot seems to be moving forward beyond the Gothic and anticipating something new, something more modern: that is what we see in Dickens during Lord Macaulay's own time. I will briefly summarise the story here. Theodore Seymour is the principal student at Atherstone House school in Wakefield, Yorkshire. Abandoned by his profligate father while still an infant, following the unfortunate death of his misused mother, Theodore has been maintained by his miserly Uncle Benjamin, who manages a small legacy left for the boy by his mother's family. As events unfold, we find out that Theodore's mother was the daughter of a Portuguese Marchioness and an English Duke, who were divorced due to religious incompatibilities and sexual infidelity on the part of the Marchioness. Raised incognito away from her zealous mother, the daughter, Theodora St Germains, was seduced by Henry Seymour, an English soldier driven by a

desire for fortune. From this ill-fated liaison Theodore was born and in order to keep the boy's legacy out of the hands of his grasping father and his soul out of the hands of his fanatical grandmother, his grandfather, the Duke of Ravensburgh, leaves him in the condition of anonymity until his coming of age when he will no longer be legally bound to his father. The plot hinges on the intrigues, deceits, and turns of fate that reveal the circumstances and ultimate claiming of the legacies to which Theodore Seymour is entitled.

Sound at all familiar? Harry Potter? Indeed, the same story elements that have made the Harry Potter novels so compelling for children and adults alike are present in *Something Strange*, and by inference in Meeke's other novels that hinge on the inheritance plot. As Magnani puts it, 'The theme of the abandoned child, whose virtuous life and fine education are finally rewarded with the improvement or restoration of his rank, and his social and economic status, is reprocessed in a variety of shapes'.[18] What then is the inheritance plot other than a variation of the archetypal messiah theme: the gifted chosen one come to save the world. Meeke's novel is not quite as boldly archetypal as, say, Arthurian Romance, *The Lord of the Rings, Star Wars*, or Harry Potter: Theodore's is not the task to save the world from the forces of evil, but only to lay claim to his rightful place in society. Or so it seems. If we consider *Something Strange* within the context of its times, perhaps the story is closer to the messiah archetype than one might initially suspect.

Consider the historical and social context of *Something Strange*: the novel was published in 1806 and one of its appeals is the amount of unencumbered travel that the characters engage in throughout England and Continental Europe. The characters are constantly on the move and there are few barriers placed in their path. It seems that they are able to move around at will and no one, most notably M. Bonaparte, seems to stand in their way. One must ask, though, what about Napoleon? What about the aftermath of the French Revolution? Have the events of the last twenty years had no effect upon the Europe of *Something Strange*? The story is clearly meant to be contemporary, yet the world is strangely untouched by current events. It is indeed something strange. We must step back for a moment and ask why? Why in this realistic novel (realistic in that there are no supernatural events) have the realities of the contemporary world been left out? This was not unusual in the fiction of the time, as Stephen Behrendt has pointed out:

> The Romantic novel offered its readers very desirable choices among *alternative* realities, whether those alternatives took the form of gaudy Gothic romances set in remote times and places or sentimental social romances into whose edenic settings no 'ancestral voices prophesying war' were admitted. In this respect some of the most signal Romantic novels may be said to reflect their time by their specific and systematic banishment of those times from their pages.[19]

What Behrendt is suggesting is that the imaginative flight into *alternate* realities is in some sense a political response to the upheavals of Europe. We need to look at the situation with Napoleon very closely for a possible explanation for what Meeke is doing in her novel.

Napoleon was proclaimed emperor in the spring of 1804. By 1805, he had made himself King of Italy, formed an alliance with Spain, and provoked England, Austria, and Russia into an alliance to thwart his further expansionist agenda. In October of that year, Nelson's fleet was victorious at Trafalgar, securing the seas for the English and forcing Napoleon to pursue his aggressions on land alone. Nelson's death at the moment of victory created a hero that defined stability and tradition in opposition to the demonic, revolutionary, anti-hero that Napoleon had become.[20]

By writing about English aristocrats and ignoring the political and social upheavals in Europe, Meeke is actually expressing patriotism and cultural stability—the superiority of English society and its institutions over Napoleon and his regime—at a time when the security and safety of England was at risk of being overwhelmed by the French threat. Her fiction was no doubt comforting to readers whose anxiety about the future was certainly great. Thus, *Something Strange,* and works like it, were instrumental in shaping English identity—what it meant to be English—when the future of that identity was in crisis. In his autobiography *Voyage to a Beginning,* present-day novelist and philosopher Colin Wilson expressed the importance of the BBC broadcasts of Shakespeare and Shaw during the Blitz because it instilled a sense of courage and fortitude through cultural identity; people found comfort in their own identity with these great writers and their work.[21] The same argument can be made for *Something Strange* and other novels of the Romantic period in that they helped shape a clearly defined English cultural identity in opposition to that of their French adversary.

Meeke's novel is also providing an emotive release from the realities of the world, not unlike fiction and film today. Fiction (and poetry) may also function as an emotional outlet, a stimulus for catharsis. Fiction and the reading experience are often just as much about feeling as about thinking. Great works are able to combine the two, but for many readers the emotive values are all they are looking for, and this serves an important social function. An interesting study on recent romance fiction, Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984), offers a great deal of insight into this phenomenon. While studying the reading habits of a group of women in a midwestern American city, Radway discovered that the *act* of reading was more important to the readers than the meaning of the text, and that the fiction needed to be investigated in light of these values (reader response) rather than by critical values (textual analysis):

> Because the women always responded to my query about their reasons for reading with comments about the pleasures of the act itself rather than about their liking for the particulars of the romantic plot, I soon realized I would have to give up my obsession with

> textual features and narrative details if I wanted to understand their view of romance reading. Once I recognized this it became clear that romance reading was important to the Smithton women first because the simple event of picking up a book enabled them to deal with the particular pressures and tensions encountered in their daily round of activities. Although I learned later that certain aspects of the romance's story do help to make the event especially meaningful, the early interviews were interesting because they focused so resolutely on the significance of the *act of romance reading* rather than on the meaning of the romance.[22]

It is easy to make the argument that this is to be expected because of the apparent depthlessness of the stories, but I would counter-argue that one could extrapolate Radway's conclusion to all types and all levels of reading. Whether one is reading Tolstoy or Batman, Sartre or Seuss, the act of reading is significant to how we create meaning, even when the act itself is the meaning. And this very act of reading, employing the imagination as opposition to the realities of the social world, can be seen as a subversive act in and of itself. (It can also be a conservative act of cultural, mental, and moral stasis, as Radway also suggests.) Seen in this light, Meeke's apparent conservatism—'They enforce passive obedience and assert the values of the aristocracy, and can be connected with the increasing dominance of conservative values in the fiction of the early 19th century' (Lorna Sage)—suddenly appears far less assertable.[23]

Was Meeke, then, a conservative? In a political sense the answer, perhaps, is yes. But this must be qualified when we consider the embedded opposition to Napoleon's aggressions. Economically, perhaps; though I have only implied it here, Meeke clearly favours the old aristocracy and has suspicions and doubts about the emerging commercial world as witnessed by the chicanery of the brothers Seymour, though this is tempered by Theodore's worthy companions Lambert and Chenvier, both sons of commercial figures. At the same time however, Meeke, as popular novelist, is herself a member of this emerging commercial class: her critics have consistently denigrated her for her playing to the whims of the literary marketplace. And as novelist, she champions the imagination as a valuable and necessary mode of expressing human consciousness and self-identity, and this, in an age when literacy was on the rise, is difficult to call conservative. Contemporaneous with Meeke, the Marquis de Sade had this to say about the novel as imaginative expression:

> Of what use are novels? Of what use, indeed! Hypocritical and perverse men, for you alone ask this ridiculous question: they are useful in portraying you as you are, proud creatures who wish to elude the painter's brush, since you fear the results, for the novel is—if 'tis possible to express oneself thuswise—the representation of secular customs, and is therefore, for the philosopher who wishes to understand man, as essential as is the knowledge of history.[24]

As literacy increased and the social world became more complex, the possibilities of the imagination expanded dramatically. No longer was human consciousness locked into a narrow tunnel: ideas were in ferment on all levels of society and change was inevitable. As De Sade suggests, the novel became the medium through which this new consciousness was explored. The novel becomes the project of the imagination, and it is through imagination that the social world is transformed. Charlotte Smith's *Desmond* (1792) contains this insight on the novel voiced by her female heroine Geraldine Verney:

> It may be said, that, if they do no good, they do no harm; and that there *is* a chance, that those who will read nothing, if they do not read novels, may collect from them some few ideas, that are not either fallacious or absurd, to add to the very scanty stock which their usual insipidity of life has afforded them.[25]

This discourse runs throughout the novels of the period; they are rife with intertextuality, the supposed reserve of 'postmodern' novels. But novelistic self-reflectivity is there from the very beginning, as seen in Smith and De Sade. Though not directly engaging this discourse as did Smith and De Sade, Meeke participated by the very production of novels within the marketplace of ideas. Like these more notable contemporaries, Meeke's novels are part of the foundation upon which this discourse can take place. Her work extends the discourse into the future so that one can very well imagine a volume of Meeke, perhaps *Something Strange,* providing comfort, fortitude, and instruction to little David Copperfield (let alone Lord Macaulay) as he suffered at the hands of the indifferent and malicious Murdstone's:

> My father had left a small collection of books in a little room upstairs, to which I had access (for it adjoined my own), and which nobody else in our house ever troubled. From that blessed room, Roderick Random, Peregrine Pickle, Humphrey Clinker, Tom Jones, the Vicar of Wakefield, Don Quixote, Gil Blas, and Robinson Crusoe, came out, a glorious host, to keep me company. They kept alive my fancy, and my hope of something beyond that place and time—they, and the *Arabian Nights,* and the *Tales of the Genii*—and did me no harm, for whatever harm was in some of them was not there for me; I knew nothing of it.[26]

Like Dickens in this, one of his most moving passages, Meeke achieves with *Something Strange* that rare quality of taking the reader on a delightful imaginary tour of one aspect of the early-nineteenth-century novelistic discourse on the imagination. By telling her tale well and providing all of those cathartic, emotive moments one gets from really effective fiction, Meeke is able to expand our notions of literature and the imagination. This in itself is a worthy legacy for a novel, alas long forgotten. Though *Something Strange* does not reach the level of a great novel like *David Copperfield,* it is, nevertheless, a valuable reading experience. In the end, Mary Meeke's legacy, as one of many representative popular writers from the Romantic period who have until recently been lost

under the weight of the canon, may simply rest on how she sheds light on the development of the novel as a forum for the formation of personal and cultural identity. As further recovery efforts proceed, and more scholars examine her works, we will begin to determine which of her many novels are most significant. It may turn out that *Something Strange* is given this honour, but there is much more work to be done.

## Notes

1. 'Zola as Romantic Writer', in *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*, ed. Donald Pizer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), p. 72.
2. 'Eighteenth-Century Periodicals and the Romantic Rise of the Novel', *Studies in the Novel* 26:2 (Summer 1994), 26.
3. 'The Mysterious Mrs Meeke', *Cardiff Corvey: Reading the Romantic Text* 9 (Dec 2002). Online: Internet (Oct 2003): <*http://www.cf.ac.uk/encap/corvey/articles/cc09_n04.html*>, § 6.
4. Ibid., § 6–9.
5. Stanley J. Kunitz, *British Authors of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1936), p. 583.
6. John Garrett, 'Introduction' to Mary Meeke, *Count St Blancard or the Prejudiced Judge* (New York: Arno Press, 1977), p. xxix.
7. Janet Todd, *British Women Writers: A Critical Reference Guide* (New York: Continuum, 1989), p. 460.
8. *Literary Journal* 2 (Aug 1806), 218.
9. Garrett, p. xxvi.
10. *Literary Journal* 2 (Aug 1806), 218.
11. For further details of WorldCat see *http://www.oclc.org/worldcat/default.htm*.
12. The Corvey Microfiche Edition holds twenty-three out of Meeke's twenty-seven original works.
13. *The Size of Thoughts: Essays and Other Lumber* (New York: Random House, 1996); *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper* (New York: Random House, 2001).
14. *The Letters of Thomas Babington Macaulay*, ed. Thomas Pinney, 6 vols (Cambridge: CUP, 1974), I, 219.
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