

**Women readers romancing the South Seas:
Mary Russell Mitford's *Christina***

'The possibility of reading', wrote Paul de Man, 'can never be taken for granted. It is an act of understanding that can never be observed, nor in any way prescribed or verified'.¹ The history of women's reading is inseparable from the history of women's writing, but its subject matter, as De Man intimates, is far more elusive. I wish here to outline some of the problems raised by this elusiveness, and to show how these problems are complicated by our own desires and projections when it comes to that simultaneous site of prohibition and censorship, of liberation and imagination, that is the site of reading. In particular, I want to consider how one assesses one's engagement with a text, and whether the choice, in reading, is between – as Jonathan Culler would have it – an affective or a cognitive response, or whether the rules of emotional engagement are not somewhat more complex.² I shall focus my observations on a particular case study, looking at the early 19th-century English writer Mary Mitford, and, especially, her narrative poem of 1811, *Christina, or the maid of the South Seas*.

To read is to enter into a dialogue, in which there is the possibility of transformation on both sides: transformation of the words on the page into meanings generated through the discursive positioning of the reader, and transformation of a reader prompted into action, stimulated into thought, made aware of possibilities beyond her immediate field of experience.³ Reading is both a means of developing subjectivity, and of consolidating social relations, whether these involve orthodox positions towards family and home, or lead to bonding in oppression or anger or shared forms of desire. Moreover, discussing the woman reader entails a further oscillation beyond the individual versus commonality axis: it involves examining how – I borrow Judith Butler's familiar terms – because

gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities [...] it becomes impossible to separate out 'gender'

¹ De Man 1983, p.107.

² See Culler 1983, p.39. The whole of the first section of this work (p.31-83) provoked some useful questions about reading, and about women readers in particular.

³ On the issue of reading as dialogue, and the particular implications of this in relation to women's reading, see Kaplan 1996, especially p.7-19.

from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained.⁴

Throughout the history of print culture, it is easy enough to trace dominant attitudes towards women as readers, whether in spiritual or secular contexts. In turn, these need to be located within further, material conditions: records of women's libraries, accounts of reading that are found in letters, diaries, marginalia. Such individual testimonies are themselves frequently constructed in response or relation to prevalent views concerning the practice of reading, and this has frequently helped to ensure that for women, reading is something much more liable to self-conscious interrogation than is the case for men. Instantly, of course, consumption and production are united. As woman reader formulates her response, woman reader becomes woman writer: inevitably, in considering records of affective reactions, we re-enter the realm of the textual. What I want to consider in more detail is how we might go about discussing woman as reader when the subject-matter is not self-referential, and when the burden of hypothesis – about how a woman might be positioned by a text which at least appears targeted at a woman readership – falls on the later historian and critic.

Mary Mitford is a particularly interesting writer to examine in this respect, since her career became shaped by a need to write for profit, yet she balanced a shrewd awareness of a market, and the probable tastes of women readers, with literary aspirations drawn from her own very varied reading. Born in 1786, she was initially educated at home, in Hampshire, but when she was ten she was in a position to pay for her own schooling – she won the lottery. Her father, though trained as a doctor, never worked: a gambler, he quickly spent his way through his daughter's money. Mitford published her first book, *Miscellaneous poems*, in 1811: an eclectic collection. She almost immediately started work on a longer narrative, *Christina*. By the time it was ready for publication, in 1811, her father had been in debtor's prison, and her correspondence shows that financial negotiations with publishers had come to matter far more than she had originally anticipated. This situation never improved, and around 1820, Mitford started to write for money in earnest. Initially, she turned to writing plays,⁵ resisting taking up the obvious chance of profit that novel writing might offer, holding back both out of apprehension at her own ability at fiction, and, perhaps even more clearly, out of her distaste at feeding the demands of a popular readership. 'I shall be driven to spinning out wretched trash of novels', she writes in a letter of 1825: 'I know it – & I know how utterly contemptible they will be – & how completely I shall sink to the level of the Minerva Press'.⁶ She found a niche in the market which suited her: prose sketches of village life – a kind of gossipy, discursive journalism, making copy out of the domestic, they were drawn together in five volumes as *Our village* (1824-32) and followed by similar works (*Belford Regis*, 1834;

⁴ Butler 1990, p.3.

⁵ Mitford decided on this course of action after having heard that C.E. Walker's historical drama *Wallace* had made several hundred pounds for its unknown author, but although *Julian*, *Foscari*, *Rienzi* and *Charles the First* – the Byron/Shelley influence is obvious – were all accepted at London's two major theatres, only the first of these was performed.

⁶ Mary Mitford to Thomas Noon Talfourd, 29 July 1825: letter in John Rylands Library, Manchester, quoted in Coles 1957, p.38.

Country stories, 1837). P.D. Edwards, in his *Idyllic realism from Mary Russell Mitford to Hardy*, convincingly maintains that Mitford's 'absorption in humble rural life, and her predilection for images of social harmony and stories of personal and social reconciliation, helped open up one of the richest and most distinctive veins of Victorian fiction'.⁷ Driven by her father's debts, she continued to produce work for a newly commercialized female readership, supplying poetry and prose to anthologies, keepsake books and almanacs.⁸

I want, however, to return to *Christina*, a work balanced on the cusp between Mitford writing to explore her own interests, and producing a text with at least one eye on its possible audience. This four-book poem takes as its starting point the Mutiny on the Bounty, and the way of life which became established on Pitcairn Island subsequent to the settling there of a number of the mutineers, their Tahitian wives, and male Tahitian servants.⁹ It is a fanciful development of the events of 1808, when an American ship, the *Topaz*, briefly landed at Pitcairn, thus uncovering the hiding place of those mutineers who were still alive, and their descendants. Mitford knew of this discovery from an account published in the *Quarterly review* in 1810, which drew on the logbook of the *Topaz*'s Captain Folger, and also from conversations with James Burney – Fanny Burney's brother – who had talked with those who had sailed on the ship, and who had first-hand knowledge of the South Seas, having travelled there with Cook on his second and third voyages.¹⁰ In reality, Folger went ashore only briefly, after what must have been a surreal encounter with an English-speaking, native-looking young man in a canoe, who proved to be Friday October Christian, son of Fletcher Christian, the leader of the mutineers, and his wife Mauatua. In Mitford's poem, however, both Folger – rechristened Seymour – and an English sailor, Henry, land: their host is a young chief called Hubert, son of the one remaining white survivor. Christian's offspring in the poem is Christina, figured as somewhere between a timid child of nature and a classical nymph, mourning gracefully over the urn that contains the remains of her mother. Significantly, there is no visual hint of miscegenation, despite the maternal parentage:

The towering youth, the graceful maid,
Were both in Indian garb array'd;
But not a trace of Indian feature
Appear'd in either glorious creature:
For his warm blood as brightly glow'd

⁷ Edwards 1988, p.29.

⁸ For keepsake annuals, see Booth 1938, Renier 1964 and, for a stimulating if more specifically focused discussion of their social role, Manning 1995, p.44-73.

⁹ The literature on the Bounty, and on Pitcairn Island, is extensive. On the Mutiny, I have found Denning 1994 of particular use, and, on Pitcairn, Lummis 1997. Lummis is anxious to give due weight to the 'role of the women in shaping events on the island and their input into the unique identity of the community, so often ignored' (p.4). Rennie 1998 places the poem in the wide context of writing about the South Seas and, in chapter 6, in the context of Bounty literature in particular, but his account of Mitford's poem (p.169-172) is disappointingly descriptive, rather than analytical. As he states (p.172), there 'is no reason to believe that Byron had read *Christina*', but his poem *The island, or Christian and his comrades* (1823) offers another imaginative narrative account of the episode, this time very much from the point of view of the 'gallant', 'bold' Captain Bligh.

¹⁰ For James Burney's career, see Manwaring 1931.

As if in British veins it flow'd;
And she – the roses of her cheek
Might shame the dawn's refulgent streak.¹¹

Henry falls passionately in love with Christina, but she is betrothed to Hubert: indeed, the *Topaz* has turned up on the eve of their wedding day. She and her fellow islander are bound by 'childhood's silken tie', she explains to the full-blooded Englishman, by 'our sweet fraternal amity',¹² although she acknowledges that he does not possess her heart. By contrast, Hubert is devoted to her. Yet when she turns up to wed Hubert, the next day, he is not there. When he arrives, eventually, at the simple chapel, he is accompanied by Henry, and makes his sacrifice:

Oh hands should meet, where hearts entwine,
Take her, bright stranger, she is thine!¹³

The poem offers a double dose of escapist fantasy:

Oh! It is sweet, in this disjointed age,
To 'scape awhile life's sad realities

comments the narrator in its conclusion: one is reminded of Janice Radway's remark, in *Reading the romance*, that the value of romance reading depends as much on the 'time-out' provided by the act of reading as by any specific relationship with an individual text.¹⁴ It increasingly pivots around Christina's consciousness and her desire: the woman reader is offered that most familiar of identificatory positions: that of seeking, and obtaining, emotional bliss. The conservatism of the plot's resolution, at a romantic – and, indeed, a racial level – is underscored by the domestic codings in the poem. Henry is initially recommended to us since, in the storm with which the action opens,

British Henry breath'd a prayer
For mother dear, for sister fair;¹⁵

the orderly pastoral charms of the 'rustic cot' are stressed.¹⁶ But although Christina is recuperated for pure-blooded Britishness, it is not clear whether the married couple will return to England, or remain on the island. For Mitford's descriptions of its charms offer an escape of a different kind, to a luxuriant site where everything – including the inhabitants – 'blossoms in healthful beauty':¹⁷ a south-seas paradise, the fertile, fragrant feminized land welcoming the encircling sea in terms which naturalize romance:

¹¹ Mitford 1811, p.12.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.161.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.185.

¹⁴ Radway 1987, p.89-93.

¹⁵ Mitford 1811, p.5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.55.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.11.

Nature, fair bride, in all her charms,
Woo'd her gay bridegroom to her arms.¹⁸

Moreover, the self-sufficient super-abundance ensures harmony of labour: a contrast to the trade relations in which Captain Bligh had been engaged, taking breadfruit trees from Tahiti to provide easy food supplies for the West Indies sugar plantations. For on Pitcairn, along with the 'plantain, palm, and cocoa tree'

Rose too – unconscious instrument
Of crime and woe, to mortals sent!
That cane, whose luscious juice supplies
Europe's blood-purchas'd luxuries.¹⁹

A humanitarian, political alertness is presumed from the poem's readers.

Or, to put it another way, the modes of reading encouraged by this volume are not just passive ones. This is true even at a simple level of identification. For further female positions are offered beyond the model of woman-as-exchange-gift which, effectively, is occupied by Christina. At the dynamic centre of the poem is a long account by Fitzallan – Mitford's name for John Adams, the surviving *Bounty* member – of the Mutiny, and of the history of Pitcairn, including the role played by the Tahitian women. All the white men apart from Adams were massacred by the male Tahitians: 'fiend-like slaves' (there is certainly no compassion shown for their exploited position).²⁰ In retaliation, the women rose up and killed their fellow-islanders. This episode raises interesting enough questions about gender, colonization and maternity in its own right. Two things are particularly significant about Mitford's treatment, however. First, although the role and status of women was to be treated at length by later commentators, Mitford was seizing on the barest hints in Folger's account and placing them centre stage in her own narrative. She took the topical subject of the Mutiny of the *Bounty*, with its necessarily male cast-list, and its masculinist emphases not just on maritime adventure, but on structures of authority within a hierarchized male community, and re-cast it in woman-centred romance form. But second, and together with this, we must note Mitford's sympathy for the Tahitian women's violence. Christina's mother, Iddeah, is like a transfigured Lady Macbeth, carrying daggers to the other women 'still dripping with the white men's gore', whilst her dark hair

Hung round that sad and pallid face.
And that tall form of loftiest grace;
Like prophethess in gifted mood.²¹

Their vengeance is given divine justification –

Swift as the thunder-bolt of Heaven
Deep were the buried poniards driven.²²

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.139.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.129.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.131.

²² *Ibid.*, p.132.

They are imbued with something of the energy of the maenads of the French Revolution, an episode to which Mitford repeatedly returned in her later writing: her fascination with violence is something which exists in an interesting dialogue with the writing of tame domesticity for which she is more widely known, and which made her money. In *Christina*, Mitford makes it quite clear where our sympathy should lie:

Heroines! What Greek or Roman name
To glory boasts a purer claim?²³

They are impelled by their love for the men to whom they had borne children, rather than by an allegiance to their origins: it is made clear, however, that there is a higher authority backing their actions:

Remote from their dear native land;
Bereft of every succouring hand;
They bow'd them to th'avenging rod,
They sought His help – the Christian's God!²⁴

Mitford, however, resists any temptation to turn the events on Pitcairn into religious exemplar – unlike many later 19th-century commentators in the island, who were to look back at the theological basis laid down in the community by John Adams, and expressed their 'wonder and gratitude to contemplate so exemplary a race, sprung from so guilty a stock'.²⁵ She was perennially suspicious of designedly didactic writing.

Beyond its attempts to work up affective responses, however, the volume invites the reader to participate in a reading experience which goes beyond these appeals to the emotions. Mitford provides substantial notes to her poetic narrative, drawn from her own reading in, among other volumes, Hawkesworth's *Collection of voyages*, Bougainville's *Voyage round the world*, Captain Cook's *Voyages*, Dalrymple's collection of *Voyages and discoveries in the Pacific Ocean*, a missionary account of a storm in the Pacific, and even – in order to reinforce a point about Nature's sublimity – Dr Garnett's description of Fingal's Cave in his *Tour through the Highlands of Scotland*. Now, one could see the careful citation of authorities as an attempt to legitimize her own romance, giving weight and worth through the words and experiences of brave and respected men, particularly since, in the *Advertisement*, she acknowledges the help offered by Captain Burney in assembling the evidence. But I believe something else is happening, at least when we consider the potential for reader-response that is generated by these passages of prose. Mitford herself, just after she had published *Christina*, expressed her awareness of the customary limitations of women's reading and education when she wrote that 'everything is taught to women except that which is perhaps worth all the rest – the power and habit of thinking'.²⁶ What the dialogic positioning of these other writers in relation to her own account

²³ *Ibid.*, p.133.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Boyles Murray 1854, p.xiii.

²⁶ Mary Russell Mitford to Sir William Elford, January 1812, quoted in Hill 1920, p.144.

offers is the potential to see romance as one type of narrative among others; to offer exotic locations as a source of interest and cognitive stimulation in their own right; to present indigenous ceremonies – such as the lengthy account of human sacrifice taken from Cook's *Last voyage round the world* – as objects of anthropological interest, rather than as moments of Gothic horror – 'scenes on which nature may not dwell!' as the lines in Canto II put it, from which Christian turned 'dismay'd and shuddering at the sight'.²⁷ The reader's imaginative eye, however, is given much to contemplate in Cook's graphic details.

Christina offers an interestingly positioned case when it comes to the consideration of women's reading, since it presents, in the first instance, the documentation of one woman's reading in preparation for writing a fictional extrapolation from recent history, and allows one to trace something of the interpretative and appropriatory use which she made of this reading – above all, the bringing of a woman-centred approach to her source material. For *Christina* presents a narrative which seems, quite deliberately, to have been crafted to appeal to elements in literary taste which were conventionally gendered feminine at the time, and which explicitly tender escapist pleasure to the reader. Yet the inclusion of the prose material in the volume offers more. It could be seen, certainly, as legitimizing the activity of reading, offering something serious alongside the escapism. But it provokes imaginative engagement in its own right with unfamiliar topography and human lives, enables some vicarious travelling and, I suggest, renders inseparable affective response and the acquisition of empirical knowledge. Moreover, the opportunity afforded to observe Mitford's transformation of her material, and her processes of selection and elaboration, implicitly encourages interpretative activity on the readers' own part, and alerts them to the degree to which they, here and elsewhere, are complicit participants in the establishment and perpetuation of generic conventions.

Necessarily, to some extent this presentation of the possibilities which *Christina* offers the woman reader of its time is a projection of my own desire: my own desire to recognize that affective and cognitive responses are necessarily bound in with one another: that there is pleasure to be found not just in empathic identification, nor even in the practice of interpretation and in the acquisition of knowledge, but, in the sense that Roland Barthes envisaged in *Le plaisir du texte* in the obtaining of knowledge, in the extension of horizons. I argue that, especially for a woman disadvantaged through her educational and social positioning, there may be a particular affective pleasure to be taken in the empowerment these cognitive acts entail. Whilst reconstructing, as far as possible, the material opportunities and conditions of women's reading is an essential part of our activity as literary historians, we also need to consider the varied possibilities for reading contained within, and provoked by, texts which appear to be deliberately aimed at women readers.

²⁷ Mitford 1811, p.86.

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Johanna Desideria Berchmans
(1811-1890)



Drij roosjes

Drij jonge lenteroosjes groeiden,
En geurden op denzelfden stam;
Zij werden meer en meer bewonderd,
Door elk die in den bloemtuin kwam.

Met afgunst sloegen al de bloemen
De pas ontloken zustren gâ,
Zo wel het nedrig madeliefje
Als hooggestamde dahlia.

En de oudste van de lenterozen,
De meestgeliefde van de drij,
Stond fier als bloemenkoninginne.
Met de andere zustren aan haar zij.

De zwier waarmee haar bloemkroon zwaaide,
Verried de heerszucht, pronk en waan;
Der vleiërs taal had haar begoocheld,
En, trots, sprak zij haar zustren aan.

Behaagt u, dierbren, onz' bestemming?
Wilt ge eeuwig hier in de open lucht,
En tussen blaën en doornen zeetlen,
Bij doodsvervelend boomgezucht?

Hier, waar de wind ons in zijn woede
De lucht doorslingert, en onz' blaën
Ter prooi geeft aan de morsige aarde,
Of meê doet tuimlen in de orkaan?

Mijn zustren! 'k wil dit oord ontvluchten,
'k Wil heden nog, bij fakkelglans,
Op 't bal een maagdenkruin versieren;
'k Wil mede slingren door den dans.–

Het jongste zusje zweeg en zuchtte;
Het tweede sprak: mijn zusterkijn,
'k Wil ook dees dorre streek ontvlieden:
Mijn graf zal op het altaar zijn;

Drei Röschen

Drei junge Lenzesrosen standen
An einem Stamm zu duften da,
Sie wurden mehr und mehr bewundert
Von jedem, der sie blühen sah.

Mit Neid im Garten jede Blume
Die kaum erblühten Schwestern sah,
Sowohl das nied're Tausendschönchen,
Wie die erhab'ne Dahlia.

Die älteste der Lenzesrosen,
Die meistbewunderte der Drei,
Stand als die Königin der Blumen
Inmitten da der andern Zwei.

Das hohe Tragen ihrer Krone
Verrieth den Stolz, der in ihr wach,
Bethöret hatten sie die Schmeichler,
Und so sie zu den Schwestern sprach:

'Behagt Euch unser Loos, ihr Lieben,
Wollt Ihr hier stets im Garten steh'n
Und zwischen Blättern, zwischen Dornen
Euch wiegen bei des Windes Weh'n?

'Der Bäume Seufzen immer hören,
Und plötzlich dem Orkan zum Raub
Gewirbelt werden in die Lüfte,
Und dann zerstreuet in den Staub?

'Ich will von hinnen, meine Schwestern,
Ich will noch heut bei Fackelglanz
Ein Mädchen auf dem Balle schmücken
Und mit ihm fliegen durch den Tanz'.

Die jüngste Schwester schwieg und seufzte,
Die zweite sprach: 'mein Schwesterlein,
Auch ich will fort aus diesem Garten,
Mein Grab soll auf dem Altar sein.'

'k Wil needrig voor de Algoede geuren.
Nu sprak de jongste en teerste spruit:
– Hier, waar mij 't daglicht werd geschonken,
Hier, zustren, blaas ik 't leven uit.

'k Blijf op de grafstee mijner moeder,
Trots storm en woede van den wind,
Trots boomgezucht en zonnebranden,
Sterft hier uw moeders jongste kind.–

't Werd avond.– In de zaal der weelde,
Verscheen een maagd, en de oudste roos
Geurde in heur opgesierden haarvlecht,
En juichte in 't lot, dat zij verkoos.

't Werd morgen.– En, op 't heilig altaar,
Als offerande voor den Heer,
Stond 't tweede roosje nog te geuren;
En de oudste zuster was niet meer.

En weder daalde de avond neder,
En weder rees de morgenglans,
En, stervend, hing het tweede roosje
In de uitgebloeiden bloemenkrans;

Het schudde zijn verslenste blaadjes,
Nog onbevlekt op 't altaar af;
En nog stond 't jongste roosje, blozend
En geurend, op zijn moeders graf.

From: Johanna Desideria Berchmans, *Vlaemsche poëzy*. Lier: Joseph van In, 1856, p. 54-56.

Die jüngste, zarteste der Rosen
Sprach nun die leisen Worte aus:
'Hier, wo das Licht mir ward gegeben,
Hier hauch'ich auch mein Leben aus.

'Ich bleib' auf meiner Mutter Grabe,
So wild mich auch umbraust der Wind,
So traurig auch die Bäume seufzen
Hier stirbt lieb Mutters letztes Kind'.

Und Abend ward's. Im reichen Saale
Da war ein Mädchen schlank und schön,
Das trug im Haar die ält'ste Rose
Bei Fackelglanz und Festgetön.

Und Morgen ward's. Ein Gottesopfer
Lag auf dem Altar heilig hehr
Die zweite Rose lieblich duftend –
Die ält'ste Schwester war nicht mehr.

Und wieder sank der Abend nieder,
Und wieder kam der Tag voll Glanz,
Da hing die zweite Rose sterbend
Im abgeblühten Blumenkranz.

Die unbefleckten Blätter streute
Sie auf den Altar still herab.
Doch blühend stand die jüngste Rose
Noch duftend auf der Mutter Grab.

Translation by Ida von Düringsfeld, in: *Von der Schelde bis zur Maas. Das geistige Leben der Vlamingen seit dem Wiederaufblühen der Literatur.* Leipzig/Brussels: Lehmann/Claassen, 1861, vol. I, p.126-128.

