William Courtney
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2
William Courtney studied at Merton, where the Hegelian F. H. Bradley had been appointed
to a fellowship in 1870, and himself held a fellowship at Merton for a year after his graduation in
1872; he gave this up when he married in 1874, more for financial reasons than because of the ban
on married fellows which had just been lifted. After three years as headmaster of his old school,
he taught philosophy at New College from 1876 to 1890. He was also Treasurer of the University
Boat Club (in which role he had the title of ‘Commodore of the Fleet’) and participated
enthusiastically in Oxford theatrical activities. He was recalled (in a description which contrasts
with the austere image presented by Herkomer) as ‘a man with the dash and swagger of the cavalry
officer rather than the “remote and ineffectual don” he should have become’. Alan Ryan described
Courtney as ‘an excellent philosopher, who held the unfashionable view that it was possible to
defend Hegel in decent, clear English and demolish J. S. Mill in terms which any second-class man
could understand’.
2

Courtney’s book on The Metaphysics of John Stuart Mill (1879) was followed by Studies in
Philosophy, Ancient and Modern (1882), which included a chapter on ‘The New Psychology’, also
tracing the development from Mill to George Henry Lewes, with its discussion of the implications
of psychology for ethics foreshadowing his Constructive Ethics (1886). This substantial work,
intended to be the first of two volumes, was thoroughly Hegelian in its conception:

If I am right in supposing that the progress of thought is a gradual transition from an
ambitious attempt to decipher ethical facts, through a period of criticism, to a
reconstruction of morals on a metaphysical and indeed an ontological basis, then it
would seem clear that the ethics of the future, whatever other features they may contain,
need not be merely interpretative, and must not be exclusively critical. . . . Whether the
details of the Hegelian system be or be not accepted, the contention of the present work
is that a properly constructed system of morals can only be reared on the foundation of
Absolute Idealism.
3

In 1890 Courtney left Oxford to join the Daily Telegraph. A sonnet penned to mark his departure
from the New College Senior Common Room mourned his loss: ‘Courtney! by Nature formed in
genial mood / (How loved, too well, missing thy smile we learn) / To set just bounds to courts
and rule the flood—/ The praise of unborn centuries to earn’.
4
 In 1894 he also became editor of
the Fortnightly Review, which he edited until his death. He also wrote on a wide range of topics, with
books including The Idea of Tragedy (1900) and a study of Maeterlinck (1904); the latter included
shorter chapters on Georges Rodenbach, Huysmans, D’Annunzio, Turgenev, Tolstoy, Gorky,
Dmitry Mereykovsky, Chekhov, and the ‘reactionary statesman’, as Courtney described him,
Konstantin Pobedonostsev.
His last books included Armageddon—and After (1914), calling on ‘the young idealists of all
countries’ to make a better world after the end of what he correctly estimated would be a ‘long
stern war’.
5
 In Pillars of Empire (1918) he differentiated between imperialism (bad and exemplified
by Germany) and empire (good, especially in its British form). His autobiography, The Passing Hour

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The question of women’s education was clearly an important one for William Courtney,
and he addressed it in his introduction to The Feminine Note in Fiction. Virginia Stephen pointed to
his equivocations about the nature of ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ writing and took issue with his
comment that women are seldom artists ‘because’, in Stephen’s paraphrase, ‘they have a passion
for detail which conflicts with the proper artistic proportion of their work’. She also raised doubts
about his suggestion that the rise of fiction written by women for women was ‘extinguishing the
novel as a work of art’. Her measured conclusion was that:

It is, at any rate, possible that the widening of her intelligence by means of education
and study of the Greek and Latin classics may give her that sterner view of literature
which will make an artist of her, so that, having blurted out her message somewhat
formlessly, she will in due time fashion it into permanent artistic shape. Mr Courtney
has given us material for many questions such as these, but his book has done nothing
to prevent them from still remaining questions.

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You can tell a woman that it is not her business to attain knowledge, that her life work
is anything but the prolonged study indulged in by the recluse and the ascetic, and that
if she be wise she will confine herself to those gifts and graces which a benign
Providence ordained, let us say, in the Garden of Eden. Or else you may tell her that
she ought to make use of such intellectual powers as she possesses, that it is the simplest
of all duties when you have a brain to give it exercise . . . But what you cannot do—
what is so illogical and contradictory as to be absolutely ridiculous—is to acknowledge
the necessity of cultivation, and yet solemnly warn the woman of to-day that she is
forfeiting thereby her right place in the economy of nature.
17

The emphases of Laura Marholm’s work, and those of many women writers of her
generation, in their insistence on the ‘enigma’ of woman and their celebrations of anti-rationalism,
remain fascinating aspects of an age which was posing the charged issue of what, in Woolf’s words,
a woman might become. W. L. Courtney might not have had the answers, but I like him for having
posed the questions.

Laura Marcus
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