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Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne* in the *New Monthly Magazine*

*East Lynne* and its readers

In 1862 a young Englishman touring Egypt declined an invitation to join his travelling companions on an expedition to the tombs, choosing instead to finish a particularly engrossing novel. When his friends returned to the camp they found him still reading, and he later insisted that they read it too. The young man was Queen Victoria’s eldest son, Edward, and the novel was Mrs Henry Wood’s *East Lynne*. The Prince of Wales went on to organize an ‘East Lynne’ evening, and one of the company, Arthur Penryn Stanley, Professor of Ecclesiastic History at Oxford, later boasted, ‘I came off with flying colours, and put one question which no one could answer – with whom did Lady Isabel dine on the fatal night?’ The ‘fatal night’ in question is when Isabel, the novel’s erring heroine, runs away from her respectable bourgeois husband to join a dissipated aristocrat. Disfigured by a railway accident and regretting her hasty action, she returns to East Lynne disguised as a governess to suffer the emotional torments of witnessing her husband with his new wife, and having to educate her own children without acknowledging that she is their mother.

Since its serialization in W. Harrison Ainsworth’s *New Monthly Magazine* from 1860 to 1861, *East Lynne* has had a complex history. It became one of the most enduringly popular novels among subscribers to circulating libraries following its appearance (with minor revisions) in three volumes. The novel’s popularity continued well into the twentieth century. It was adapted for the stage shortly after the three-decker was published and for decades theatre audiences on both sides of the Atlantic flocked to hear Lady Isabel’s heart-rending line as she watches her son die: ‘Dead! And never called me mother!’ Popular film versions of *East Lynne* appeared in

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1916 and 1925. However, by the mid-twentieth century *East Lynne* had declined into a joke, a tired Victorian melodrama which was no longer capable of generating emotion. More recently feminist critics have rescued the novel from obscurity, largely because of its powerful representation of the maternal melodrama and its articulation of the constraints of proper Victorian femininity.

*East Lynne* is today considered the archetypal woman’s novel, its mixture of sentiment and sensation forming a model for later examples of popular romantic fiction. Indeed, Wood’s famous direct address to the reader as ‘Lady–wife–mother’, an exhortation to women to bear any burden in the cause of domestic unity, appears to firmly establish *East Lynne* as ‘women’s’ fiction. However, as Prince Edward’s and Professor Stanley’s enthusiasm make clear, *East Lynne* was also received as an exciting novel by men as well as women. Indeed, during its serialization in the *New Monthly Magazine* Wood directly addressed male readers, although she chose to exclude this from the subsequent volume text. In the original serial, in Chapter 5, the reader is invited to witness the hero lawyer, Archibald Carlyle, at work. Wood describes his ‘noble’ tendency to smooth over his clients’ disputes by promoting a spirit of reconciliation, rather than profiting by their disagreements. She imagines the male readers of Ainsworth’s magazine ‘sneering’ at Carlyle’s virtuous working practices, directly addressing them with the words, ‘No, rest you assured, sir, that when business is conducted upon honest and sincere principles, it must and does prosper.’ This interjection indicates that Wood expected her novel, at least in its original serial form, to attract male readers as well as women; indeed, the *New Monthly Magazine*’s preference for political and military articles suggests that most readers of the magazine were men. One of Wood’s major concerns, as this direct address to the ‘sneering’ male reader indicates, is her championship of businessmen and entrepreneurs. This type of middle-class hero dominates her fiction and is consistently displayed as a ‘gentleman’, despite his need to earn a living. Indeed, as Wood insists, the more gentlemanly the businessman the greater his profits, and this ethos is a significant feature of *East Lynne* and subsequent novels.

Here, we examine *East Lynne*’s origins as a magazine serial in order to show that the sad maternal sob story which has dominated the focus of recent criticism is not the only story embedded in Wood’s novel. *East Lynne* appeared in fragmented form over nearly two years, each instalment surrounded by a variety of other texts all addressed to a specific magazine readership. This context complicates any reading which suggests that the maternal melodrama forms the only dynamic of the