

**FORTHCOMING IN RAVON #62 (OCTOBER 2012)**

Elsie B. Michie. *The Vulgar Question of Money: Heiresses, Materialism, and the Novel of Manners from Jane Austen to Henry James*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011. ISBN 978-1-4214-0186-7. Price: US\$70.00.

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Elsie Michie's thought-provoking study is concerned with one of the most pervasive plot elements of the nineteenth-century novel of manners, in which a status-conscious, materialist, rich woman is pitted against a virtuous, altruistic poor one, posing many economic and emotional dilemmas for the hero who has to choose between them. Michie discusses how the terms of this opposition shift through the nineteenth century, and considers what these changes imply for the meanings and uses of wealth and money in the novel. Her focus is on the rich woman herself—the “symbolic lynchpin” (1)—who embodies the materialism that the hero must reject. “I put money, vulgarity, and disgust first rather than introducing them as afterthoughts,” Michie stresses, casting a new light on “the way the relationship between gender, property, desire, and exchange have typically been understood to operate in the novel” (3).

These are large claims, and to develop her case Michie is necessarily selective; but in tracing the process from Jane Austen to Henry James, via Frances Trollope, Anthony Trollope, and Margaret Oliphant—all key figures in the development of domestic realism—she elaborates a fascinating literary history. Her Introduction reworks the triangular model, set out by Gail Rubin and developed by Eve Sedgwick,

in which the woman is placed between two men, by drawing on Lacan's idea (suggested by Freud's Rat Man case) of a quartet—a four-sided psychic structure in which the Oedipal pattern is complicated by the splitting of the male subject's object of desire into two counterpoised women. Michie historicizes this formation by placing it within nineteenth-century economic and anthropological discourses which linked issues of property to structures of marriage and kinship. The heiress poses a threat to normative systems of exchange in which women are traded exogamously, and needs to be reassimilated through endogamous marriage in order to keep wealth within the group. At the same time she embodies “engrossment” (11), the ostentation of wealth—a position, Michie argues, that is renegotiated through nineteenth-century fiction as money and the structures of capital become increasingly disembodied.

Michie traces this process by linking each of her five novelists, some more explicitly than others, to roughly contemporary political economists: Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus, Walter Bagehot, J.S. Mill, and Georg Simmel, in a series of pairings which is always productive, if occasionally (in the case of Oliphant and Mill) slightly unconvincing. Reading Austen in relation to Smith's concern about how to live morally in a commercial society surrounded by the corrupting influences of wealth, she traces how the wealthy woman is gradually given a subtler and more complex role. In *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), figures such as Mrs. John Dashwood, Miss Bingley and Lady Catherine de Bourgh display a caricatured kind of engrossment in contrast to more virtuous wealthy men; in *Manfield Park* (1814) Mary Crawford, though set against the virtuous Fanny Price, has far more wit and intelligence and is shown as actively formed by her environment; while in *Emma* (1815) the wealthy heroine experiences a revolution in consciousness as she comes to internalize Smith's concept of sympathy.

Frances Trollope is read alongside Malthus's theory of appetite, and his deployment of bodily metaphors to describe violent economic fluctuations, together with George Combe's model of the economy of the body. Wealthy women are associated with appetite and insatiability, and with the desire for commodities that drive the economy in Frances Trollope's fiction. The Widow Barnaby's "sublime vulgarity" (72) and excessive appetite sexualize the fluctuations of the market in the 1840 novel of that name; Sophia, the diminutive heroine of *The Ward of Thorpe-Combe* (1842), deceptively performs the role of altruistic virtue in order to inherit from her uncle, and then enjoys her luxuries in secret. Sophia is an embodiment of the "mushroom classes" that accompanied economic expansion around 1830, yet in her very repression and restraint she represents the separation of consumption and engrossment—her desires have almost a spiritual dimension. The later *Life and Adventures of a Clever Woman* of 1854 illustrates in the figure of Charlotte Morris the ways in which the bourgeoisie is now able to deploy Protestantism to conceive of material consumption as virtuous—a shift, Michie argues, that chimes with Malthus's own revisions of his *Principles of Population* (first pub. 1798), which "displays a similar draining off of the sensual component of the appetites understood to drive the economy" (95).

This growing abstraction and de-materialization of wealth emerges as a pattern within the work of each of the novelists, as well as intensifying through the century. Anthony Trollope is read through Bagehot's writings as radically reconfiguring many of his mother's concerns, and turning the heiress into a positive force in an economy increasingly based on marketing and banking. In the process, Michie shifts the critical lens away from the chimerical capital embodied in Melmotte, the alien male financier in *The Way We Live Now* (1875)—these women actually possess their wealth, and

their money is both real and absorbed into more traditional landed structures through the marriage plot, albeit ambivalently. In *Doctor Thorne* (1858), Emily Dunstable, the ointment heiress who evolves through the Barsestshire series, is placed against Mary Thorne as a match for Frank Gresham in a traditional love triangle; but these terms shift when she instead marries Doctor Thorne, the older middle-class professional who can appear financially disinterested. This marital exchange enacts, Michie argues “a kind of symbolic money laundering” (113), as new commercial wealth is removed of taint by being passed through the middle class. In contrast, the marital choices made by the heiresses in the Palliser series embody a more contradictory process when seen in the light of evolutionary anthropology, and complicate Bagehot’s notion of progress through increasing social variation. While Alice Vavasor and Emily Wharton both finally resist the impulse to marry exogamously, keeping wealth within the group, Lady Glencora, whose wealth comes from mixed sources, enacts a more disturbing form of social and economic mixing by using her money to exert political influence, exposing it rather than land to be the basis for political power. She is set against an actual historical figure, the heiress Lady Frances Waldegrave, whose money from rents and mining was also assimilated by the establishment while retaining some of its taint. This ambivalent pattern culminates, in *Phineas Redux* (1874), in the figure of Madame Max Goesler, whose career also parallels Frances Waldegrave’s and whose hybrid, cosmopolitan, Jewish identity encapsulates the absolute intangibility of wealth. She, too, uses money for political purposes, but her marriage to Phineas Finn does not count as exogamy, Michie argues, as Phineas too is a hybrid figure, though his Irishness and Catholicism have become curiously empty, and thus washed clean.

If Trollope reworks some of the concerns of his mother, James revisits and radically rethinks the narrative of rich woman/poor woman as it has permeated the nineteenth-century novel. Although *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897) seems to replay the traditional novel of manners in exaggerated form in the polarization of Fleda Vetch and Mona, Michie argues that it does so critically and self-reflexively, and in the process lays bare these fictional mechanisms by exposing them as bound up with Mrs. Gereth's own interests and fantasies. The pattern is completely inverted in *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), in which the heiress Milly Theale represents money completely etherealized, as opposed to the materialist Kate Croy, while in *The Golden Bowl* (1904) James explores the question of whether the rich woman might be able to circulate through economic and anthropologic systems of exchange. In revising the earlier marriage plot, James is able to expose its underlying structures, as, Michie writes, "money is acknowledged to mediate all forms of cultural interaction" (215).

*The Vulgar Question of Money* forms part of a wider tendency in literary history to stress the pivotal role of the economic and of money within nineteenth-century culture and representation. At times I've wondered whether this trend is an aspect of the ideological ascendancy of market liberalism in our own times, in which entrepreneurialism permeates all cultural, social and personal relations, as much as an implied critique of it—or at least a sign of twenty-first-century neoliberalism's capacity to dominate the agenda. Such a claim should not be laid against Michie's book though, for in investigating how the figure of the rich woman "functions as the vehicle ... through which the novel seeks both to represent and contain the monetary interests that press against its romantic stories" (215), she dismantles the ideological power of the market itself as much as the romantic narratives it presses against. And in linking narrative patterns to precise debates in political economy, within a broadly

anthropological framework, underpinned by psychoanalytic concerns, she has produced a rich, densely argued and fascinating study that makes a crucial contribution to materialist cultural history.

Biographical Notice:

Jenny Bourne Taylor is a professor of English at the University of Sussex, UK. She has written widely on nineteenth-century literature and culture, and one of her recent publications is *The Oxford History of the Novel in English, Vol. 3: 1820-1880* (Oxford University Press, 2011), edited with John Kucich.

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