



NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

ISSUE 3.2 (SUMMER 2007)

“You, Madam, Are No Jane Austen”: Mrs. Gore and the Anxiety of Influence

By [April Nixon Kendra](#), Independent Scholar

Mailing List

Submissions

Editorial Board

Back Issues

Issue 3.2

<1>In the preface to her 1831 novel *Pin Money*, Catherine Gore makes a seemingly innocuous announcement:

It has become so much the custom to connect every character introduced into a work of fiction with some living original, that the writer of PIN MONEY feels it necessary to declare its incidents and personages to be wholly imaginary. Exhibiting an attempt to transfer the familiar narrative of Miss Austin [sic] to a higher sphere of society, it is, in fact, a Novel of the simplest kind, addressed by a woman to readers of her own sex;--by whom, as well as by the professional critics, its predecessor, “THE MANNERS OF THE DAY,” was received with too much indulgence not to encourage a further appeal to their favour.(1)

By appealing to the authority of Jane Austen, that most respectable of women writers, Gore attempts to direct the reading of her novel and to establish the generic context for the work. *Pin Money*, she explains, is not the roman à clef one might expect from a fashionable novelist, but a fictional novel of manners. Unfortunately, her strategy backfired badly.

<2>Gore’s announced adoption of Austen as a literary model was a red flag to the “indulgent” critics, who leapt to challenge her claim. The *Westminster Review* (Oct. 1831) shrilly protests:

We do not deny the smartness, and occasionally, the shrewdness, of Mrs. Gore’s views of manners and life, but still we are far from tracing even a remote resemblance between the labours of the two ladies. Miss Austin’s [sic] novels are histories of the human heart, and in the more occasional parts, wonderfully exact analyses of character and disposition: whereas, in Mrs. Gore’s books, we can see little more than a series of brilliant sketches, bordering occasionally on the caricature. (441-42)

<3>The reviewer’s tone of outraged proprietorship set the pattern for the contemporary criticism of Catherine Gore: “You have the audacity to compare yourself to Jane Austen, but we knew Jane Austen; Jane Austen was a friend of ours; and *you, madam, are no Jane Austen.*” (I am, of course, paraphrasing.) However, Gore did receive a consolation prize. Despite her unworthiness of comparison to “the greatest artist that has ever written” (“The Lady Novelists” 73), Gore could safely be acknowledged as a successor to Frances Burney. Presumably Burney was not so valuable that her name could be tarnished by a brush with popular, commercial fiction.

<4>R. H. Horne’s *A New Spirit of the Age* (1844) is an excellent illustration of this bait-and-switch technique of literary criticism. Indeed, its review of Gore is strangely conflicted, betraying a profound difference of opinion between the unidentified author (probably Robert Bell) and the book’s editor, Richard Horne. The essayist praises Gore’s abilities in terms that clearly beg comparison to Austen:

She never succeeds so well as in that class of experiences which come within her own immediate observation. Her gentry are capital. She excels in the portraiture of the upper section of the middle class, just at the point of contact with the nobility, where their own distinguishing traits are modified by the peculiarities of their social position. (Horne 238)

<5>Nor is the author afraid to draw explicit comparisons between a contemporary popular writer

and the giants of the past. He claims that Gore surpasses Samuel Richardson as a “painter of society, possessing knowledge of human nature,” and further asserts, “The elasticity of her manner is perfectly unrivalled. If she rarely reaches the quiet humour of Madame D’Arblay [Frances Burney], and never realizes the Dutch fidelity of Miss Austen, she preserves, upon the whole, a more sustained flight than either” (236-37). This is strong praise indeed, but it is greatly weakened by an editor’s footnote: “We hardly feel at ease in the above classification of Richardson with the author of the ‘Fool of Quality.’ We also think that Miss Austen preserves a very sustained flight: it may be near the ground, but she never flags in a feather.—Ed.” (237). Clearly, Horne is unwilling to allow Gore any superiority over Austen, although he passes over the implied slight to Frances Burney.

<6>Similarly, in an essay on “The Lady Novelists,” the *Westminster Review* (July 1852) speaks generously of Mrs. Gore, but refuses to honor her with comparison to Jane Austen, although the similarity to a less valued Frances Burney is allowed to stand:

Mrs. Gore, again, who might perhaps, with more care bestowed upon her works, have been the Fanny Burney of our age, exhibits in every chapter the marvellous [sic] finesse and quickness of Observation, winged with a certain airy gaiety of style which, if it not be wit, has half the charm of wit; and this faculty of Observation has allowed her to write heaps of fashionable novels, as fugitive as the fashions they reflect, yet as gay and pleasant.(2)

<7>This pattern continues into the twentieth century with Matthew Whiting Rosa’s influential study *The Silver-Fork School* (1936). Rosa points out that Burney, like Gore, participated in London’s literary and musical coteries, and he describes Burney’s presentation of high society as “light-hearted caricature,” some of which was “recaptured by the fashionable novelists” (11). However, he finds only superficial evidence to support Gore’s professed imitation of Austen. Apparently assuming that Gore intended a similar prose style, Rosa scoffs, “Would Jane Austen ever have called, for example, a stuffy boudoir, ‘a reeking sudatorium, past the ascertainment of Reaumur or Fahrenheit?’” (128). The question is hardly fair, as this unfortunate example of Gore’s prose appears in *Mothers and Daughters* (1831), which does not claim Austen as a model; however, Rosa has additional objections. He insists that there are fundamental differences between Austen’s provincial society and Gore’s fashionable London, and he deplores Gore’s habit of name-dropping well-known vendors, which places her “in the line of descent from [Theodore] Hook rather than from Jane Austen” (129).

<8>If the early critics acted to protect a lady’s honor, later scholars have relied upon the safeguards of genre construction to separate true artists from merely popular novelists. Although these scholars grudgingly acknowledge some faint resemblance between Gore and Austen, their development of the similarities is limited. For example, Vineta Colby asserts that both Austen and Gore contributed to the rise of domestic realism in the novel, but she discovers only one significant parallel in their works: “The guiding spirit hovering over Mrs. Gore’s novels is Mrs. Bennet and the five unmarried daughters of *Pride and Prejudice*. Matrimony and maternity are the household goddesses. The maneuvering and calculation involved in marriage-making are the raw materials of her plots” (73-74). Alison Adburgham notes that both writers depend on shrewd observation for their portraits of society, but quickly goes on to discuss the differences between their travel and experience. Richard Cronin makes the strongest claim, stating matter-of-factly: “[Austen’s] influence is clear enough, in the sharp dialogue as well as in the sharply ironic narrative voice of Gore’s novels” (132). However, Cronin declines to explore this influence, declaring that “in their plots the novels that I turn to now look back not to Jane Austen but to Robert Plumer Ward’s *Tremaine*” (132). Significantly, he chooses to examine *Women as They Are; or Manners of the Day* (1830)—Gore’s first, most tedious, and least representative fashionable novel—rather than *Pin Money*, which displays her characteristic wit and brilliance.

<9>The implication is clear: Gore’s fiction belongs to the category of “silver fork novels,” and everyone knows that such novels are shallow, formulaic, and virtually interchangeable; therefore, it hardly matters which text one examines.(3) Furthermore, Gore’s claim of Austen as a model must be specious and self-deluding. A fashionable novel, no matter how witty and charming, can only be compared to the works of Theodore Hook, whom Hazlitt dubbed “the most wearisome of interminable writers” (148), or to *Tremaine*, which Ian Jack characterizes as an “extremely dull” novel, “a sort of literary equivalent of a vegetable marrow” (252).

<10>Furthermore, silver fork fiction is notoriously preoccupied with material goods and

consumption, which disqualifies the genre as art. Let us return to the *Westminster Review*'s frequently-quoted review of *Pin Money*, which likens the novel to a "London Directory" and speculates that Gore is actually sponsored by the many vendors she mentions by name:

"Good morning Mr. Storr! what put it into your head to send in my bill? I have not the least idea of paying it.' 'Whenever you please Madam!'"

Does not this, in the plainest manner, announce, that Messrs. Storr and Mortimer are accommodating creditors; and give any length of credit that may be agreeable to ladies of fashion. (434)

"I expect a man with silks from Harding's [query the same Harding— Mrs. Gore should add an appendix of addresses]. At half-past one, Mawe's people are coming to clean my alabaster vases; at two, Ridgway's clerk will come here to see how many of the pamphlets I keep."

Silks, alabaster vases, and pamphlets; now here are three necessities of life pointed out; and not merely as to the fact where they may be had. But further—Harding will send silks to be seen; Mawe will clean vases, and Ridgway will let you have his publications on sale or return! (434-35)

<11>In his eagerness to annotate every offending passage, the reviewer either ignores or fails to apprehend Gore's satiric purpose. The plot of *Pin Money* follows the difficulties of a young bride, Lady Frederica Rawleigh, during her first London season as a married woman; the passages quoted above are indictments of secondary characters whose flightiness, indiscriminate

spending, and self-important name-dropping tempt the heroine into similar follies. The pernicious influence of her fashionable friends and her own lack of experience in managing money soon lead Frederica into debt. Too ashamed to admit her mistakes, she becomes uncharacteristically secretive, and this breakdown in communication threatens Frederica's relationship with her husband, a new MP who has committed some financial indiscretions of his own. Far from a celebration of consumption, *Pin Money* is actually a comic cautionary tale about the value of money.

<12>The *Westminster Review*, however, is not amused and utters a dark warning: "Mrs. Gore and others of her tribe must bear in mind, that entertainment is the honey to the poison; and that, if we have nothing but shop business carried on in these novels, persons will cease to look for their tradesmen in one of Colburn's fashionable Directories" (435). Henry Colburn, who published the majority of Gore's novels, was known as "the prince of puffers," and his reputedly poor taste, scurrilous business practices, and shameless advertising made him responsible, in no small part, for the fashionable novel's poor reputation (Gettmann 55). It is ironic that while the reviewer was making a valiant effort to protect Austen from the contaminating influences of the marketplace, Colburn's partner, Richard Bentley, was working to acquire the copyright for Austen's novels. The following year, 1832, Bentley and Colburn began publishing them as part of the Standard Novels series at 6 shillings apiece, a shockingly low price (Sutherland 31, 35). Despite the protests of her high-minded champions, Austen had become a commodity.

<13>Contemporary responses like that of the *Westminster Review* have led scholars to regard such dense peppering of vendors, venues, celebrities, and brand-name products as puffery or even early examples of paid product placement. However, Richard Altick suggests that the use of time-specific details should not be regarded as evidence of poor artistry, but recognized as a hallmark of nineteenth-century fiction, first popularized by Scott and most famously utilized by Dickens. In his study *The Presence of the Present*, Altick argues that topicalities "provided novelists with the materials that would most satisfy their readers' insatiable interest in the contemporary scene and at the same time authenticate a novel's characters and settings, ensuring the ready imaginative assent on the part of readers" (1).

<14>Now I would like to propose a radical idea: let us consider what parallels Gore herself might have seen between Austen's work and her own. If we were to take Gore's claim at face value, ignoring conventional notions of "greatness" and rejecting the pejorative construction of the silver fork, we might discover a legitimate relationship between the two authors. We have received an idea that all of Gore's novels are the same, but in fact *Pin Money* represents a

significant departure for Gore—a “light & bright & sparkling” romantic comedy in the vein of *Pride and Prejudice*, quite different from the heavy domestic melodrama of her other early works. Perhaps Gore invokes Austen’s name as a kind of apology for daring to experiment after she had already found favor with the public with a different sort of novel.

<15>We would also discover that Gore inverts the familiar courtship narrative of *Pride and Prejudice* by beginning rather than ending with the heroine’s marriage in order to explore one of Austen’s favorite themes: the economic realities of marriage. Although there is a great deal of comedy in *Pin Money*, Gore is quite serious in identifying financial management as the key difficulty in married life. The novel begins with negotiations for the marriage articles between Lady Frederica Rawdon and Sir Brooke Rawleigh. Frederica’s officious aunt, Lady Olivia, insists on a generous settlement of pin money; otherwise, Frederica will have to ask her husband for money as the need arises. Pin money would give her a greater measure of independence and discretion, but Frederica objects that receiving an allowance “places one exactly on a level with the butler or the dairymaid”; she would much prefer to share a common purse with Rawleigh.

Lady Olivia dismisses this as romantic naïveté, countering: “Do you suppose . . . any other person of fashion of your acquaintance, condescends to go blushing to her husband for a twenty pound note, if she wishes to perform some charitable action—or subscribe to some laudable institution—or pay her shoemaker’s bill?” (8). Confronted with the choice of becoming a paid dependent or a beggar, Frederica reluctantly accepts the pin money:

And so deeply did her ladyship’s counsels sink into the minds of her sister and niece, that within six weeks, as rigid an act of marriage settlement was signed in the drawing-room in Charles-street as if Sir Brooke and Lady Rawleigh were about to marry chiefly in contemplation of a divorce; and to swear an eternal unity of mind, body, and estate, chiefly for the maintenance of separate interests and opposing rights. (9)

<16>These separate interests soon become apparent. “As indifferent respecting money matters as prosperity and ignorance of the world could render her” (13), Frederica regards her £400 as an inexhaustible treasure and spends her money freely. She finds it difficult to confess her extravagance to her husband, however, and uses her independence as a justification for secrecy: “no one has a right to interfere with the distribution of my pin-money” (25). After she allows an acquaintance to gamble on her behalf, Frederica totals up her debts and realizes that she owes far more than she can pay. Too ashamed to confess her imprudence to her husband, she agonizes over her bills alone:

“Oh! that horrible pin money!” murmured she, in the restlessness of her reflections. “Had I found it necessary to have recourse to Rawleigh for the detailed payment of my debts,—had full and entire confidence been established between us in the defrayment of my personal expenses,—never, never should I have plunged into the excesses which embitter a destiny so especially blest by Providence!” (280)

<17>Scholars like Louis Parascandola accept Frederica’s foolish overspending as evidence of Gore’s anti-feminist evaluation of women’s intellectual capacity; however, Gore is equally critical of the heroine’s husband, which suggests that she does not regard folly and financial imprudence as uniquely feminine failings. Jealous Sir Brooke Rawleigh is so distressed by the thought of his wife putting her beauty on public display that he refuses to purchase a box at the opera or bring Frederica’s horse to London, although he cites reasons of economy for denying his wife these pleasures. Taking him at his word, Frederica buys herself a new horse at a bargain and shares the cost of an opera box with a friend, reasoning that if she uses her own money, these purchases won’t affect the household budget. Although her pin money allows Fred to circumvent her husband’s restrictions, it also prevents the confrontation that would expose and allay his jealous fears. Rawleigh further sacrifices any moral authority in the text by purchasing the right to represent Martwich, a rotten borough, in Parliament. Aware that Frederica does not approve of his method of entering politics, Rawleigh hides from her the sordid and expensive details. As their separate bank accounts permit them to follow separate interests, they each become more secretive and defensive about their purchases and suspicious of the other’s activities. At one point, each is convinced that the other is having an affair.

<18>The inevitable crisis is resolved when a late wedding present allows Frederica to pay off her debts. As a gesture of reconciliation, she proposes that the couple dispense with the pin money arrangement and keep a common purse instead—as she had originally planned. Rawleigh protests

management and help a common purpose, as she has originally planned. I might protest that she is legally entitled to her pin money, but Frederica interrupts: "Nothing has been, or ever shall be, legally specified between us. Besides, I have proved myself incapable of the management of my revenue, and am bound to appoint a chancellor of the exchequer. Should I ever become as worldly-wise as my aunt Olivia, I will re-demand my abdicated rights" (301).

<19>This scene may disappoint readers who had hoped for a more overtly feminist conclusion, but Gore's solution is not as reactionary as some have claimed. For example, Louis Parascandola concludes, "The message seems apparent; women should concentrate on family affairs and leave financial matters to men" (126). On the contrary, I would argue that the new plan suggests a movement toward a more equitable model of marriage based on open communication and joint decision-making. Frederica recognizes that she still has much to learn about household economy and vows to educate herself by consulting with her husband before each major purchase. For his part, Sir Brooke admits (at least to himself) his ineffectiveness as a politician, promises to conquer his jealousy, and reminds Frederica that if she becomes dissatisfied with his financial management, she retains the right to claim her pin money at any time.

<20>In this compromise, we discover a final parallel to Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. In *Romanticism and Gender*, Anne Mellor reminds us that, although Elizabeth and Darcy's union suggests the possibility of a more equitable future partnership, Elizabeth has little financial independence; like Frederica, Elizabeth receives an allowance from her husband. Mellor explains, "Jane Austen advocates a marriage of genuine equality between husband and wife—and has seduced many readers into believing that such is the case with Darcy and Elizabeth—but she is honest enough to remind us that such marriages may not yet exist in England" (57).

<21>By insisting on the importance of women's education, critiquing patriarchal abuses of power, and holding out the promise of greater equity in marriage, Gore establishes herself well within the tradition of feminine romanticism, which also includes many of the women writers Gore admired, such as Maria Edgeworth, Susan Ferrier, and of course Jane Austen. Thus, we see that her profession of kinship with Austen is not the false claim of an impostor or the self-aggrandizement of an inferior artist, but the grateful acknowledgement of a sister.

Endnotes

(1)Quoted from the 1834 Philadelphia edition of *Pin Money*, published by E. L. Carey and A. Hart. All other quotations are from the 1854 edition of *Pin Money*, which does not include the controversial preface.(△)

(2)"The Lady Novelists," 75. This evaluation appears more flattering when compared to the reviewer's judgment of Burney: "Miss Burney, for example, had a quick Observation, notably of ridiculous details, and with a certain broad vulgar gauge of human nature, contrived to write one or two novels that admirably reflected the passing manners of her age; but when—as in the 'Wanderer'—she attempted to interest by Sentiment, her failure was hopeless" (75).(△)

(3)Andrew Elfenbein asserts: "Like today's Harlequin romances, silver-fork novels assimilated the mentality of the assembly-line to artistic production. One novel virtually identical to the next poured from Colburn's presses" (79).(△)

Works Cited

Adburgham, Alison. *Silver Fork Society: Fashionable Life and Literature from 1814 to 1840*. London: Constable, 1983.

Altick, Richard. *The Presence of the Present: Topics of the Day in the Victorian Novel*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State U P, 1991.

Austen, Jane. *Pride and Prejudice*. Ed. Donald Gray. 3rd ed. New York: Norton, 2001.

Colby, Vineta. *Yesterday's Woman: Domestic Realism in the English Novel*. Princeton: Princeton U P, 1974.

Gore, Eliza Follen. *Pin Money*. Philadelphia: E. L. Carey and A. Hart, 1834. 1854. P. 301. IV.

Cronin, Richard. *Romantic Victorians: English Literature, 1824-1840*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2002.

Elfenbein, Andrew. "Silver Fork Byron and the Image of Regency England." *Byromania: Portraits of the Artist in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Culture*. Ed. Frances Wilson. New York: St. Martin's, 1999. 77-92.

Gettmann, R. A. *A Victorian Publisher: A Study of the Bentley Papers*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1960.

Gore, Catherine. *Pin Money: A Novel*. 1831. London: George Routledge, 1854.

---. Preface. *Pin Money; A Novel*. Philadelphia: E. L. Carey and A. Hart, 1834.

Hazlitt, William. "The Dandy School." *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*. Ed. P. P. Howe. Vol. 20. London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1934. 143-49.

Horne, R. H., ed. *A New Spirit of the Age*. London: Smith, Elder, 1844.

Jack, Ian. *English Literature, 1815-1832*. The Oxford History of English Literature 10. Ed. F. P. Wilson and Bonamy Dobrée. Oxford: Clarendon, 1963.

"The Lady Novelists." *Westminster Review* 58 (July 1852): 70-77.

Mellor, Anne K. *Romanticism and Gender*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

Parascandola, Louis J. "Catherine Gore (1800 – 29 Jan 1861)." *British Romantic Novelists, 1789-1832*. Ed. Bradford K. Mudge. Detroit, MI: Gale, 1992. 122-29.

"*Pin Money*" [review]. *Westminster Review* 15 (Oct. 1831): 433-42.

Sutherland, John. *Victorian Novelists and Publishers*. Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 1976.

