

The Scandal of Marrying for Money

The Vulgar Question of Money: Heiresses, Materialism, and the Novel of Manners from Jane Austen to Henry James. Elsie B. Michie. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 2011. 292 pp.

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<1>Elsie Michie's new book, *The Vulgar Question of Money*, makes a blazingly smart revelation. The Victorian marriage plot has a shape: it pits a vulgar rich woman against a virtuous poor woman. The "rich woman . . . represents the vulgarity and wealth the hero must eschew. This rich woman is the subject of my book; she is the vehicle through which nineteenth-century novelists articulate cultural anxieties about the changing forms of money and their impact" (1). Meanwhile, the poor woman is associated with art and virtue, a bodiless, transcendent, purer realm that the novel endorses. The heiress embodies what readers mistrusted about wealth, particularly its tainted origins in disreputable industries and its limitless greed in consumption. In watching her get rejected or reformed, readers could see a symbolic resolution of the problem of money.

<2>Precisely why wealth was worrisome varied. For Austen's period it was a problem of taste and manners. In the industrial era of Frances Trollope, money was associated with swelling appetites and powerful drives. Frances's son writes about money that was made through the worrisomely abstract means of international banking and manufacturing interests, which had to be quarantined so as not to affect the older landed property interests. Margaret Oliphant, however, defends the legitimacy of professional earning, in which one trades service for pay, and Henry James writes as the beneficiary of a world in which the origins of wealth no longer seem worrisome tainting; money pervades all.

<3>Michie is showing us how to read the marriage plot symbolically. Isolating a structure shared by diverse novels, she demonstrates that it works through recurrent and continuing financial worries while simultaneously elucidating the specific anxieties in each particular era. Michie also manages to put each work of Victorian fiction in tension with political and philosophical writing of the period, showing how intricately the novel engaged with the issues of will, morality, and appetite theorized elsewhere. In other words, Michie is not just revealing the persistence of the heiress-poor woman rivalry plot, but also justifying why we should read this way, and demonstrating how to do it with sensitivity to the specific elements of each period. She does so, moreover, through delightfully unexpected subjects. I relished being introduced to Frances

Trollope's Sophia Martin (*The Ward of Thorpe-Combe* [1842]) instead of rehashing Amy Dorrit, Miss Swartz, or Bertha Mason, and I also enjoyed using Michie's theory to think through these more canonical figures for myself.

<4>After an exceptionally well-argued introduction, Michie launches her investigation of the wealthy heiress with Jane Austen. Austen's early works simply caricature wealth (in *Miss Bingley* and *Lady Catherine de Bourgh*, for instance), but in *Mansfield Park* (1814) a wealthy woman (Mary Crawford) is, for the first time, allowed to be appealing, and by *Emma* (1816), the rich woman can actually become the heroine, overcoming her own faults. Significantly, Emma conquers the very faults of bossiness and interference we saw in *Lady Catherine de Bourgh*, thus transforming the heiress within.

<5>We move from the moral imperatives of Regency England into the flamboyant physical world of industrial might, embodied in Frances Trollope's big, blowsy, rich women. I defy anyone to read this chapter and not want to pick up *The Widow Barnaby* (1839) immediately. This vibrant figure of vulgar comfort fascinated readers but also led critics to reject Trollope for the same sins against taste that she depicted so memorably in her fiction. "The extraordinary accomplishment of Trollope's novel, what made it such a success," Michie explains, "is the fact that in it Trollope evokes the consumerist desires that were part of her time period so vividly that her contemporary audience was able simultaneously to enjoy them and recognize them as vulgar" (78).

<6>An especially fine chapter in *The Vulgar Question of Money* is the subsequent one, on Frances's son Anthony, who chronicled the new forms of wealth available in the 1860s and 1870s: international finance (associated with Jews), commercial fortunes, and manufacturing interests, in short, a fluid, abstract form of wealth in uneasy distinction to older landed property. The ointment heiress Miss Dunstable, the owner of mines and lands Glencora Palliser, and the financial beneficiary Madame Max Goesler represent these new kinds of wealth. Their marriages are difficult: their money has to be carefully laundered through professional disinterest or policed by accusations of vulgarity before it can be allowed to mingle with other people's estates.

<7>Anthony Trollope's contemporary, Margaret Oliphant, focused on the professionalization of the middle class, depicting clergymen and ladies alike as people who provided helpful services for material benefit. In the professional code, this is a perfectly rational exchange. Lucilla Marjoribanks (*Miss Marjoribanks* [1865]) and Phoebe Beecham (*Phoebe Junior* [1876]) are both heiresses who offer coolly calculated assistance to the men they might marry; here the marriage plot becomes, in Phoebe's words, "a Career."

<8>Michie ends with an excellent chapter on Henry James. James rewrites the nineteenth-century marriage plot by making its characters acutely aware of their participation in it, and restive under the parts they are assigned to play. In *The Spoils of Poynton* (1896), *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904), James executes dazzling riffs on the old structure of the virtuous poor women competing with the vulgar rich woman. In *The Spoils of Poynton* he makes Mrs. Gereth engineer this plot unsuccessfully; in *The Wings of the Dove* he switches the roles, making the rich woman virtuous and the poor woman greedy; and in *The Golden Bowl* he

explores the psychological effect of becoming aware of oneself as the heiress figure in this plot. While a brief “Afterword” shows that the marriage plot survived in Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca* (1938), Henry James’s career marks the real end of this story. The heiress plot was “a century-long reaction to the social transformations brought about by the evolution of capitalism in England” and it ended when the century, and England’s economic dominance, waned (25).

<9>One reason the Henry James and Anthony Trollope chapters work so well is that they are relatively light on intertextual readings of prose writers. The three chapters on women writers draw tight connections between each novelist and a corresponding political economist. Although such links can be interesting (who knew Oliphant was so intricately engaged with John Stuart Mill’s thought?), they tend to distract the reader from this book’s groundbreaking argument. Often Michie intensively tracks a single word, toggling back and forth to find “delicacy” in Austen and Adam Smith, “genius” in Oliphant and Mill, or “appetite” in both Frances Trollope and Malthus. This hyperspecialization makes it harder to see the big picture and might possibly suggest that the novelists are just commentators on the political economists.

<10>Moreover, Michie’s central argument sometimes does not acknowledge information that might disprove (or at least complicate) its claims. For instance, the Austen chapter requires us to read Mary Crawford as an heiress, but her fortune (acceptable, but by no means enormous) is hardly mentioned, and her faults seem far more ascribable to her upbringing in a sexually permissive household. While Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Miss Bingley are both unpleasantly bossy rich women, are we therefore justified in assuming that Austen is critiquing the bossiness of rich women? After all, the heiress Georgiana Darcy is exceptionally shy, while it is the penniless Mary Bennet who better resembles those obnoxious ladies. It is true that *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and *Mansfield Park* address the value of female manners, but I am not convinced that this is necessarily closely tied to the financial status of the female in question.

<11>Similarly, in the Oliphant chapter, Michie wants us to take seriously Lucilla Marjoribanks’s judgment of the suitors who had proposed to her rivals. Lucilla thinks, “Poor men! They had had two ways set before them, and they had not chosen the best” (163). Yet the fatuous comedy of this line is self-evident, and to take it seriously as a kind of moral authority for this novel is to ignore Oliphant’s ironic tenor. Moreover, Michie claims that her “movement from short story to novella to novel [“The Executor” (1861) to *The Doctor’s Family* (1863) to *Miss Marjoribanks* (1866)] suggests that as Oliphant turned to the apparently negative aspects of the triangle that traditionally structures the marriage plot, she found herself with more and more to say” (155). This progression sounds plausible, but it leaves out the fact that between “The Executor” and *Miss Marjoribanks*, Oliphant also published “The Rector” (1861), *Salem Chapel* (1863), *The Perpetual Curate* (1864), *A Son of the Soil* (1863-1866), and *Agnes* (1865). These texts actually display varied views of money in marriage; *Agnes*, for instance, focuses on the problematic marriage of the rich man to the poor woman.

<12>What I am explaining is that *The Vulgar Question of Money* has the faults of its most impressive qualities. It is excitingly direct, assured, and focused – but its intensive concentration on one theory can inadvertently backfire, either when Michie knots the texts too closely into

political economy, or when she ignores factors that might complicate her theory. It would be a shame if these weaknesses led readers to doubt the central idea, however.

<13>For, regardless of occasional too-close readings, *The Vulgar Question of Money* is one of the most valuable pieces of criticism this year. The emphasis and clarity of its writing is a delight in itself, as one cheers to see complicated issues nailed with certainty, over and over again. For instance, “the heiress functions as what Lévi-Strauss calls the scandal in the system of marital exchanges. She must be included in order for the novel to establish the values that exclude her” (16). Indeed, at its best, this book is dazzling, and will change the way we read the Victorian novel. Here’s what I’ve learned: The marriage plot uses romance not as an end in itself, but rather as a way to negotiate financial anxieties. The marriage plot is as much about refusing marriage as achieving it. To court a rich woman, and then to refuse to wed her, is part of the morally improving mission of the Victorian novel. As Michie writes, the marriage plot is “a simplification, a violence done to the tangled materials of existence in order to give them a morally and aesthetically clear form, one in which the rich woman absorbs and carries the negative associations of the possession of wealth, thereby freeing the novel’s other characters from that taint” (213). To understand how wealth could be a taint, and how the nineteenth-century novel could work to educate the reader about how to reject wealth in different ways over the course of a century, until the omnipresence of money finally made that impossible, is Michie’s great achievement here.