

**Elsie B. Michie, *The Vulgar Question of Money: Heiresses, Materialism, and the Novel of Manners from Jane Austen to Henry James*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011. Pp. 303. \$70. ISBN 9781421401867.**

Elsie Michie's book is an interesting and well-written one that will certainly need to be consulted by students of women in the nineteenth-century novel. It rotates very firmly — indeed exclusively — around five novelists (Austen; the Trollopes, *mère et fils*; Margaret Oliphant; and Henry James), and generally discusses three texts in each case: *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Emma*; *The Widow Barnaby*, *The Ward of Thorpe-Combe*, and *The Life and Adventures of a Clever Woman*; and *The Spoils of Poynton*, *The Wings of the Dove*, and *The Golden Bowl*. (Where Anthony Trollope is concerned, Michie follows three characters — Miss Dunstable, Lady Glencora Palliser, and Madame Max Goesler — through the various fictions in which they are involved; and where Oliphant is concerned she centres her attention on *Miss Majoribanks* and *Phoebe Junior*, but also examines some of her short fiction.) Michie is nothing if not the possessor of a tidy mind, and each chapter has its introductory section relating the literary discussion to the saga of nineteenth-century capitalism, and most possess a 'coda' (where Austen is concerned, an epilogue) that ties the foregoing discussion together. As if this was not enough, each chapter is presided over by a guru from the realms of 'thought' generally speaking, and political economy in particular: Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus, Walter Bagehot, John Stuart Mill, and Georg Simmel. The whole affair is introduced — as one might expect — by a discussion of rich women and poor ones, bad women and good ones, and the choices nineteenth-century fiction expects its menfolk to make between them.

All this is perfectly fine. But it is true one sometimes yearns for something a little more driven on what should be a delectably fascinating topic. Michie's introduction ticks all the boxes, from Bourdieu to Lacan, Freud to Deleuze, and Derrida to Levi-Strauss, and does so lightly. But I wanted more — much more — on Victorian anthropology (for example) as a contemporary correlative, and on the rich woman as exogamete. Here are, or were, two rival accounts of society, one fictional the other discursive, one modern the other primitive: yet on the matter of marriage and inheritance were not the social scientists trying to *historicise* what the novelists *dramatised*? That avenue of argument seems to me far more seductive than yet another conspectus on the phases of capitalism — the details of which are probably best left to economic historians anyway. Michie is absolutely on to something when she says that the rich woman is anomalous in nineteenth-century culture in a way no rich man could be, by virtue of having nothing to *do* with her money. How fascinating it might have been to compare such an ideological fact with Victorian anthropology's travails over mother-right and father-right, monogamy and polygamy, family and inheritance.

Michie's chapter on Jane Austen will perhaps be of most direct relevance to BARS readers, and Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Mary Crawford, and Emma Woodhouse make a fascinating set of variations: the first so insulated by wealth as to become preposterously otiose; the last so oddly similar to Lady Catherine in her 'imaginist' stupidity; the middle one so powerfully ambivalent in terms of 'blunted delicacy' and charm as to make Henry James' novels at the other end of the study look laboured and wearisome. (Mary Crawford's attractiveness, surely, is by no means restricted to her wealth, as Michie seems to think (45).) Michie's neat and tidy method of progress, in which the novels are separated out into their discursive sections into discussions that teeter sometimes on the verge of plot summary, makes it difficult for her energetically to gather up the women her authors describe, and their attitudes to them. Her wealthy heroines are like a row of Siamese fighting fish in a pet shop, each in its little tank: it would be exciting to have a more ranging and less passive discussion that used the fiction concerned to argue for what its authors wanted to *say*. In seeking to

commit itself to both political economy (loosely conceived) on the one hand, and to detailed discussion of fiction on the other, the book manages somehow to insulate the one from the other.

That having been said, everybody knows that women, with or without money, are the driving forces in nineteenth-century English novels (even those written by an American like Henry James). The ‘golden dolly’ of the eighteenth century had translated herself in the following hundred years into something strangely rich: a source of anxiety as well as cupidity. Michie’s study is not as bold with this powerful theme as it might have been, but everyone interested in that theme will need to read it.

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