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0521616166 - Women Writing about Money: Women's Fiction in England, 1790-1820

Edward Copeland

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

“Oh! mother, how happy I should be” said she, as she passed a toy shop, “if I had all those pretty things!”

“What, all! Do you wish for them all, Rosamund?”

“Yes, mamma, all.”

Maria Edgeworth, “The Purple Jar” (1796)

I made my first acquaintance with the subject of this study, the consumer agenda of women's fiction, 1790–1820, early. Of all the stories my grandmother read, Maria Edgeworth's “The Purple Jar” was far and above the one my cousin and I liked the best.¹ She would read of little Rosamund, of wise spending and careful budgets, and we would see bloody feet in the snow. It was our favorite story. Every time we heard it, it enchanted us, it terrified us, it disappointed us, but it was still the one story in Grandmother's collection that truly touched our souls – F. W. Woolworth's and Sunday School packed into one disturbing tale.

The best part of “The Purple Jar,” the part that really drew us in, was the heroine's total, dizzy delight in shopping. Everything that Rosamund sees on her trip to London enchants her: artificial flowers, jewelry, pretty buckles, and some beautifully colored jars in the window of a chemist's shop. The jewelry, “ranged in drawers behind glass,” stops her in mid-step: “Mamma, you'll buy some of these?” “Which?” asks her mother, but Rosamund doesn't care: “Which, – I don't know which; – but any of them, for they are all pretty.” She looks only to take some small part in the great consumer spectacle before her. Her mother tells her patiently that she has no “use” for these objects, that they are in town to buy her some new shoes. Rosamund, however, yearns for a purple vase she has seen in the chemist's shop. When her mother gives her the choice between shoes and the vase, she takes the vase. Now for the sad part. When she gets home, she finds that the vase is not the beautiful object she thought

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

it was at all, but an ordinary glass jar filled with a disgusting purple liquid. She wants to return to town for the shoes. “No, Rosamund, you must abide by your own choice,” says her mother, “and now the best thing you can possibly do, is to bear your disappointment with good humour.” Rosamund repents and promises to do better next time, but Edgeworth, brilliantly, leaves her story of consumer desire open ended: “I am sure, no not quite sure,” Rosamund confesses to her mother, “but, I hope, I shall be wiser another time.”

“The Purple Jar” has it all: passion, happiness, heartbreak, suffering, and redemption. More than that, it speaks to the self-awareness of a generation of women, who in 1796 were reading “The Purple Jar” to their daughters both for their own instruction and for their daughters’. Recent studies shed particular light on Edgeworth’s story by demonstrating that a strong retail culture had developed in England from the seventeenth through the eighteenth centuries, and that by the end of the eighteenth century the country possessed a large network of retail shops.² In other words, Edgeworth’s story turns its attention to an already done thing. Shopping was an established fact of middle-class life. Edgeworth’s contribution was in bringing to children’s literature her perception of a market culture that, as Chandra Mukerji notes ominously, owed its existence to the disturbing fact that “material interests are not ... subservient to other social goals.”³

I began reading women’s novels, 1790–1820, thinking that “money in Jane Austen’s novels” was to be my subject, that I would read the lesser fry to illuminate her, and that whatever I found, Jane Austen would remain the primary focus of the study. Instead, a discourse in women’s fiction presented itself that had shape, direction, and a consistency of engagement that merited attention on its own.⁴ As one critic of women’s fiction from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries has wisely remarked: “The unread is not necessarily the unreadable.”⁵

My concurrent discovery of yet a different literature, the equally heady excitements of Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, and Mikhail Bakhtin, along with feminists like Elizabeth Janeway, Terry Lovell, Mary Poovey, Nancy Armstrong, and Teresa de Lauretis, has left its unmistakable tracks on the study as well, together with provocative essays and studies of consumerism by Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Bourdieu, and Colin Campbell.⁶ As one might suppose from such tutors, this study inevitably assumes that late eighteenth- and early

Cambridge University Press

0521616166 - Women Writing about Money: Women's Fiction in England, 1790-1820

Edward Copeland

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

nineteenth-century women's fiction, including fiction in the popular magazines and Minerva Press novels, comes ideologically freighted, that it speaks in codes loud enough to contemporary ears, if faint to ours. As I now read "The Purple Jar," I wonder where the greatest burden of anxiety really rests in that story: with Rosamund, or with her poor author, whose earnest labor to attach "use" to consumption provides so feeble a dam against the enchanting powers that attract her heroine.

Women's fiction between 1790 and 1820 turned its attention to the "meaning" of consumption, especially its meaning for women, as a concern of defining importance. Although emulation, as Lorna Weatherill argues, was a doubtful contributor to the retail economy of the eighteenth century,⁷ "fashion" – not always the same as emulation⁸ – emerges in the last quarter of the century as a certain attraction for women of the middling ranks: in fiction as a focus of comic revelation, as in Frances Burney's novel *Evelina* (1778), and in the *Lady's Magazine*, a popular woman's journal of fashion, fiction, and news that flourished from 1770 to 1832, as a focus of monthly temptations.⁹

The *Lady's Magazine* with its emphasis on the doings of the *haut ton* marked "fashion" as a structure around which middling rank women could mount their conversation about consumption. The *Lady's Magazine* tapped a grass-roots response to the subject, too, since it drew on its eager readers for the contributions that filled its pages. The magazine offered women the opportunity to speak to other women, to argue with one another, and often to provide one another with specialized information otherwise hard to come by. The *Lady's*, together with other women's magazines at the end of the century, nurtured a culture for women centered on material culture. Year by year, the women's conversation in the magazines intensified, as it did in women's novels, charting a narrative of shifting ideologies devoted to explaining just what it meant to be female and middle class in a market economy.¹⁰

One of the most fragile lines of evidence in the history of eighteenth-century consumption, as all researchers admit, lies in the scanty evidence available on the relation of women and money.¹¹ But "the limited ability of women everywhere to control capital," as Carole Shammas describes it, affects any reading of women's literature of the period.¹² Lorna Weatherill, in citing the sheer hard work expected of women in managing households, notes that conduct books continued

Cambridge University Press

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Edward Copeland

Excerpt

[More information](#)

to advise that husbands should control the spending of the money.¹³ But Amanda Vickery finds ample evidence that women of the lesser gentry at mid-century exercised control over routine spending decisions in their households.¹⁴

And Hoh-Cheung Mui and Lorna H. Mui's study of shopkeeping demonstrates that women, particularly those in urban areas, had day-to-day experience with consumption in their relations with "petty" shopkeepers, a not insignificant part of the retailing trade. These operators of small shops, often no more than the corner of a room, catered to the daily needs of families ("subsistence purchasing") with such groceries and staples as tea, sugar, flour, coffee, soap, candles, and salt. Many of the shopkeepers were women themselves, according to the Muis, since the small amounts of capital needed to set up shop did not automatically place such activity out of their reach. In addition, they catered to customers also likely to be women, who in their day-to-day shopping had the hands-on management of the family's daily budget for consumption. Here, at this most localized level of domestic spending, with the shillings and pence for the immediate needs of the family's subsistence in their control, women seem to have been granted significant, if limited, economic responsibility.¹⁵ Debts to petty shopkeepers are in fact the debts that most often wring cries of desperation from women authors applying for help from the Royal Literary Fund, a charity set up during the last decade of the century to aid destitute authors: "We have lost by a lodger and boarder, a considerable sum," Emily Clark, a contemporary novelist and poet, wrote the trustees of the Fund, "A note of hand given to our Baker by my mother for a bill due, will be presented for payment on the seventh of April next and if we do not pay it, will be the ruin of a house. Fifteen pounds would relieve our distress."¹⁶

As the Muis note, the petty shopkeeper was omnipresent in villages, towns, and cities throughout the century. As a consequence, the world of credit with its ever-present threat of prison for unpaid bills was directly in the experience of women. Elizabeth Somerville, widowed with two children and in hiding from her creditors, wrote the Fund for help with her debts, but omitted a return address, "for personal safety."¹⁷ Emily Clark, still in difficulties six years after her first letter in 1811, claimed, "On the thirty first of December we have a bill of fifteen pounds to pay for bread, and at Christmas, taxes to the amount of six pounds, which makes me shudder to think of." The

Cambridge University Press

0521616166 - Women Writing about Money: Women's Fiction in England, 1790-1820

Edward Copeland

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

trustees sent her £5.¹⁸ At the very lowest edge of solvency, Mary Matilda Bentham, diarist and poet, reported to the Fund that her rent was 5 shillings a week, but that she could get her room for 2 shillings a week by giving up the bed and sleeping on a mattress on the floor. Such disturbing tales were not, one assumes, the experience of all women, but they were certainly a part of the general imagination of an uncertain economic future.

Women authors of all ranks, not just the economically distressed, addressed the subject of women and money in their works. In the 1790s, however, the credit anxieties of the domestic budget – the usual material of real-life pleas to the Royal Literary Fund – became the regular subject of novels published by William Lane's Minerva Press, gothic tales characterized by Joseph Wiesenfarth in his study of gothic literature as caught between the confusions of gothic fantasy and the confusions of social order.¹⁹ In Lane's Minerva novels, for which the publisher paid his authors notoriously little, we find a literature of consumption poised at the very edge of economic disaster, the "horrid" novels of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. Authors with claims to genteel status approached women's participation in the economy with less melodrama, but with their attention equally focused on women's economic liabilities. Frances Burney's heroine in *Camilla* (1796) has severe problems with credit, in fact almost as melodramatic as her sister heroines from the Minerva Press. In Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, a novel conceived in the 1790s, Elinor Dashwood must actively monitor her mother's and sisters' expenses to keep the family free of debt. In *Pride and Prejudice*, also conceived in the 1790s, it is the threat of comparative poverty facing the Bennet women after Mr. Bennet's death that drives the plot. Charlotte Smith's string of novels, ten of them, offer an unmitigated series of economic disasters for genteel women who are long on claims to station, but short on funds.

Ten years later, still focused on women and money, women's novels move away from depictions of economic liability to entertain visions of economic empowerment. Among the Minerva writers, the emphasis turns to marking out social respectability for their heroines from the commercial ranks. Probity, honesty in all financial affairs, and a frank celebration of commercial life are the signs of the later Minerva novel. Didactic authors from the genteel ranks are more concerned to link the domestic budget to social action. Their novels feature useful suggestions for projects in the village that their heroines

Cambridge University Press

0521616166 - Women Writing about Money: Women's Fiction in England, 1790-1820

Edward Copeland

Excerpt

[More information](#)

can undertake for the deserving poor. And finally there are those authors, like Austen, writing for the carriage trade, who offer a highly specific economic vision for their own rank's favored place in society. Jane Austen, as I discovered, most certainly does not represent the print culture of all women. She responds to it, depends on it, and has valuable stock holdings in it of her own, but she must share the larger culture of women's literature with competing voices from different levels in the middle ranks.

The circulating library supplies a paradigm for the organization of women's literature. A seasoned borrower could take one look at the books on the crowded tables of the library and tell the essentials at a glance: a check for the date and title, a look at the author's name, or failing that, a glance to see who the publisher might be, usually a giveaway to the contents.²⁰ From such casual browsing, an observant patron could be almost certain of what she held in her hand, the kind of story she would find, the issues that would interest her, the ideological tack the book would take, and, as a significant consideration, the social rank the book was intended to appeal to. Genteel readers could be comfortable with something from one of the established publishers – Longman, Hookham and Carpenter, the Robinsons, Cadell, Johnson, or Noble. Readers from trade or from the lesser professions, though they could find pleasure in the genteel books, would discover that the Minerva Press addressed them specifically and as a matter of policy. The women's magazines also divided their readers by rank. The genteel reader might take home *La Belle Assemblée*; the tradesman's daughter might be more likely to choose the *Lady's Magazine*, but, again, both magazines could appeal, like the novels, across the entire span of the middling ranks.²¹

The image of a conversation among women, from one book to another, from one magazine to another, from one rank to another, becomes clearer. Marilyn Butler and Gary Kelly some years ago recognized the importance of this conversation in the fiction of the period, but not with an eye turned to the wider print culture, the "horrid" novels of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, for example, or the fiction of the magazines.²² Jane Spencer, Dale Spender, and Ann Jones listen for the less frequently noticed voices, but over a wider span of time and not with a focus on fiction as a function of rank or publishing conditions.²³ In fact, from 1790 to 1820, there was a more free-wheeling conversation in print among women than at any time before or since. After the publishing industry began a rapid, market-

Cambridge University Press

0521616166 - Women Writing about Money: Women's Fiction in England, 1790-1820

Edward Copeland

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

driven expansion around 1820, women's publications became far more specialized, less responsive to the general conversation. In short, the years immediately prior to this change in the book market are optimum years for listening-in on women's concerns in fiction.

Money, like the weather, is the one topic on which every novel has an opinion. Whatever the political argument, whatever the social agenda, whatever the romantic entanglement in women's fiction, women can be heard talking about money, the lack of it, how to spend it, or how to get it.²⁴ The conversation shifts tone as decade by decade new styles of heroines conspire to fit new ideologies of expense to the middle-class woman's world. The single essential key to consumption, however, as women's fiction always acknowledges, is an adequate income. This study organizes its chapters around the edges of that conversation.

The first two chapters examine the 1790s as a "marker" decade. We now know that the concept of a "revolution" in the eighteenth-century economy – industrial or consumer – is a dubious assumption. Michael Fores' influential essay, "The Myth of a British Industrial Revolution" (1981), argued that the so-called "industrial revolution ... turns out to be more a part of myth than historical reality."²⁵ And, except for recent and much-qualified objections from Maxine Berg and Pat Hudson,²⁶ economic historians tend to accept "evolution" rather than "revolution" as the term best describing economic change in the eighteenth century.²⁷ The question for the 1790s then becomes: *why* was the perception of economic change so overwhelming in women's literature of these years when real change in the economy was, as the evidence indicates, not as great as contemporary outcry would indicate?

For women's literature, the answer may lie in the troubles that circle around matters of credit. Certainly the gothic literature of the 1790s, both in novels and in short magazine fiction, concerns itself with the pressing dangers to women from debt: harassment, humiliation, confinement. Sometimes the "horror" of the pieces is translated into less specific anxiety – loss, dispossession, forced removal, isolation – depicted through lonely castles, remorseless barons, blasted landscapes, and the like, but the action is inevitably economic. Always at the center of the story there is the bereft, penniless, and wandering woman, victim of an unforgiving economy.

Inflation, aggravated by an author's residence in London, may also be part of the "gothic" economic dilemma. Emily Clark, forced

Cambridge University Press

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Edward Copeland

Excerpt

[More information](#)

to live outside London for cheaper lodgings, wrote angrily to the Royal Literary Fund, “I have written another work... which I negotiated with a bookseller to purchase... [W]ishing to take advantage of my distress being at a distance (East Grinstead) he has offered me a mere trifle, which it would be injurious for me to accept and which was never offered by any other bookseller.”²⁸ Women situated in London and employed at the lower end of the publishing trade – with William Lane’s Minerva Press, for example, the major publisher of gothic fiction – were exposed to the concentrated hazards of credit in an expensive city where all daily provisions had to come from the shops, often from the shops of those petty, equally hard-pressed shopkeepers, who, as the Muis explain, had to pay their suppliers promptly to stay in business and could not extend credit for long. Charlotte Smith found herself in receivership for petty debts in Storrington, where she had fled to escape the higher prices of London: “There is now an execution in my house at Storrington for £25 – & my books the only things I had been able to reserve, are seized for rent & will be sold.”²⁹ There is no reason to disbelieve the testimonies of contemporaries about increased economic hard times, especially the sufferings of those people already at the edge of subsistence incomes, but a desire for luxury is certainly not the source of their complaints: “Their characters are irreproachable,” the character witness for an applicant to the Royal Literary Fund reports, but “the increased [*sic*] prices, of late years, of the necessaries of life has quite sunk down their Fortunes, & render’d them true objects of Charity & Commiseration.”³⁰

Even women authors more comfortably situated financially in the 1790s saw a bleak economic landscape before them. This seeming anomaly suggests a different, and, I think, a far more interesting explanation for the general anxiety to be found in women’s fiction of the period, one that rests on our understanding of economic change in the eighteenth century as having evolved in a gradual process over a period of many years. The difference between “necessaries” and “luxuries,” an ancient distinction, as John Sekora demonstrates in his study of the history of luxury,³¹ had become by the end of the eighteenth century a distinction fixed in contemporary minds more or less as Adam Smith defined it:

By necessaries I understand, not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the

Cambridge University Press

0521616166 - Women Writing about Money: Women's Fiction in England, 1790-1820

Edward Copeland

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

country renders it indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without.³²

Thinking in these terms, Charlotte Smith complained in a letter to a friend,

My house is indeed triste & what is worse, I have embarrassed myself in getting into it, by paying for pictures & having furniture still to pay for ... I could not help it. My family is *such*, that a small house will not hold us – nor a small number of servants suffice. And I have the character of being expensive, when perhaps no Woman brought up as I was, was ever so *little* expensive.³³

With the long, gradual evolution of a market economy, unfulfilled expectations of women of all ranks for “necessaries,” depending on how they defined *their* necessities, would be perceived as a severe economic threat. It would seem that the war, an increase in taxes, a general rise in prices, and periodic economic depressions must have acted upon each other as self-magnifiers of economic distress for everyone of the middling sort, no matter where situated, who looked simply to secure the “necessaries” of their lives. The heroine of Eliza Parsons’ *The Castle of Wolfenbach*, published in 1793, for example, looks into her “Portmantua” to “take out some linens for the ensuing day,” and bursts into tears at the sight of “the small quantity of necessities she possessed; she cast a retrospection on her past calamities, they made her shudder; she looked forward to the future, all was dark and gloomy” (I, 16). Certainly there is little economic rejoicing to be found in women’s fiction of any sort in the 1790s.

The marked improvement in the tone of response of women’s fiction to the economy that emerged after the turn of the century fits the same pattern, paradoxically, of the earlier gothic response. If 1790s fiction met a perceived economic threat to the “necessaries” of life (Adam Smith’s definition) with gothic protest, the new fiction of the next decades continued the focus on women and money, but with an altered code that supplied an answer to the economic crises of 1790s fiction through an aggressive new image for woman’s economic role, this one employing the tropes of the domestic budget. As a matron in Margaret Cullen’s *Home*, published in 1802, says firmly, “My expenses are regulated by my judgment, with very little regard to appearances,” adding pointedly: “An important part of my economy is the paying ready money for every thing I purchase” (II,

Cambridge University Press

0521616166 - Women Writing about Money: Women's Fiction in England, 1790-1820

Edward Copeland

Excerpt

[More information](#)

29–30). Nancy Armstrong's powerful study, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, brings this economic program of women's fiction into focus as a conscious political act.³⁴

Unfortunately for today's reader of fiction written in the period between 1790 and 1820, prices and incomes as they are experienced variously, that is across the span of society's middle ranks, present an impenetrable puzzle. Without a guide, the cries of distress from middle-class fiction, and also from letters, diaries, guides to domestic economy, cookbooks, and newspapers, are lost. As a means of negotiating the uncharted distances between the world of contemporary reader experience and the coded world of the heroine, the first chapter of this study offers a "competence scale."

A "competence" is that amount of money that it takes to live "genteelly," a negotiable sum of course, but well enough established in the contemporary mind to be instantly recognizable. Readers could calculate in the wink of an eye what a given competence could buy in those specific comforts appropriate, "necessary," to a particular station in life. The competence scale, universally understood, settles even the most outrageous plots into a translatable, recognizable social perspective.

The decade of the 1790s, the subject of the first chapter, produced the most extravagant fiction of the period. The gothic tropes of the circulating library novels remain painfully attached to their writers' lives. Whether with romance, politics, or the patriarchy, the bottom line in novel after novel, story after story, rests in the amount of spendable income in the heroine's pocket at any given moment of her history. Credit, of the "petty" shopkeeping kind, haunts this fiction with no convincing knight in shining armor anywhere on the horizon. Authors may provide last chapters in which well-bred young men with landed estates and sensitive feelings appear to spirit the heroine away from her crumbling castle, but the next novel with the same birds of prey immediately takes its place on the tables of the circulating library. The terrors of a threatening economy are not to be dispelled so easily.

Chapter 3 shows how fictions of active economic engagement displace the 1790s fictions of loss. Duties of domestic spending grant the heroines of the new decade the keys to the kingdom. Maria Edgeworth's "The Purple Jar," for example, drives away the gothic shadows of consumption with the clear light of "use." Hannah More and Susan Ferrier reorganize nature itself: no more terrifying