
Part I

Before Sensation, 1830–1860

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“The Aristocracy and Upholstery”: The Silver Fork Novel

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One of the progenitors of the sensation novel was the “silver fork” or “fashionable” novel. These novels, perhaps the first bestsellers, portray in detail the social lives of aristocratic exclusives during the Regency. They reigned from the mid-1820s to the mid-1840s and survived through the 1850s. As late as 1887, Marianne Stanhope’s 1827 novel *Almack’s* was reprinted in a three-volume edition, which the *Athenaeum* thought worthwhile in order to take the sense of a wider audience on this chronicle of *haut ton* in the reign of George IV (review of *Almack’s*, 1887: 253). In 1890 “H.R.H.” authored *Lothair’s Children*, a novel which Graves derided for its devotion to “the aristocracy & upholstery” (Graves 1890: 433).

These late Victorian comments echo the responses made by reviewers of silver fork novels sixty years earlier. Those reviewers saw fashionable novels as realistic, but dismissed them as trivial and often attacked them as immoral. The novels also provoked parodies, notably by Thomas Carlyle, Charles Dickens, and William Makepeace Thackeray. After 1850, however, silver fork novels were largely ignored. It was not until 1936 that Matthew Rosa published the first book on them, *The Silver-Fork School: Novels of Fashion Preceding Vanity Fair*. Rosa does a thorough job of describing silver fork novelists and summarizing their works, but, as his subtitle suggests, he sees fashionable novels as an interesting popular phenomenon with little intrinsic value. For him their primary importance lies in leading to the apogee of the genre, Thackeray’s 1848 masterpiece, *Vanity Fair*. Kathleen Tillotson’s *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* similarly suggests that silver fork novels are important only as they increase our understanding of those authors, such as Thackeray, who reacted against them (1954: 5).

It was almost fifty years later, in 1983, that the next significant work on these novels appeared: Alison Adburgham’s *Silver Fork Society: Fashionable Life and Literature from 1814–1849*. Like Rosa and Tillotson, Adburgham dismisses silver fork novels as

essentially trivial. While she provides much useful information, she is primarily interested in using the novels as a source of historical information, a task for which their verisimilitude makes them well suited.

Recently, however, fashionable novels have received renewed attention and a critical re-evaluation. In 2005, Harriet Devine Jump edited *Silverfork Novels, 1826–1841*. Jump's collection includes six novels: *Granby* by Thomas Henry Lister (1826); *Romance and Reality* by Letitia Elizabeth Landon (1831); *Godolphin* by Edward Bulwer, later Bulwer-Lytton (1833); *The Victims of Society* by Marguerite, Countess of Blessington (1837); *Cheveley: A Man of Honour* by Rosina Bulwer (1839); and *Cecil, or the Adventures of a Coxcomb* by Catherine Gore (1841). (In addition to authoritative texts, the collection provides a general introduction to the genre and an essay on each novel.) Silver fork novels were the subject of a special edition of *Women's Writing* in 2009, edited by Tamara S. Wagner. These essays trace the novels' reception by Victorian reviewers and elaborate on contemporary references such as Almack's, the exclusive dance club run by Lady Patronesses. Most importantly they discuss the genre's literary legacies, both individual novelists such as Charlotte Brontë, Dickens, Thackeray, and George Eliot, and later genres such as the Victorian domestic and sensation novels.

Besides Wagner, the most significant critics of silver fork fiction are Winifred Hughes, April Kendra, and Muireann O'Cinneide. These critics reject the notion that fashionable novels are inherently trivial or important only for providing historical information or leading to *Vanity Fair*. Rather, they examine the genre as important evidence in the transition from the Romantic to the Victorian novel. They interrogate the grounds for excluding fashionable novels from the literary canon, place them in the context of the shift from the novels of Jane Austen and Sir Walter Scott to those of Dickens, Thackeray, and Eliot, and examine their influence on subsequent fiction, especially the Victorian novel of domestic realism.

The descriptor "silver fork" was coined by William Hazlitt in his 1827 *Examiner* article, "The Dandy School." In this attack on the genre, Hazlitt's primary targets were Theodore Hook's *Sayings and Doings* (1834) and Disraeli's *Vivian Grey* (1826–7). Perhaps alluding to the *Don Quixote* proverb that "Every man is not born with a silver spoon in his mouth," Hazlitt insists that the fashionable novelist is concerned only with "the admiration of the folly, caprice, insolence, and affectation of a certain class" and that "provided a few select persons eat fish with silver-forks, he considers it a circumstance of no consequence if a whole country starves" (*Works*, 11: 353, 355).

Hook's *Sayings and Doings*, a three-volume collection of stories, was the first work of silver fork fiction. His tales of "the balls, the dinners, the hunts, the teas, the gossip, the electioneering, the opera, the theater, the clubs, the marriage settlements, the love marriages, the fashionable marriages, the gambling, and the dissipation" contained all the components of fashionable fiction and proved so popular that they were followed with two subsequent collections in 1825 and 1828 (Rosa 1964: 62). The first full-fledged fashionable novel was Robert Plumer Ward's *Tremaine, or the Man of Refinement* (1825), an atypically moralistic tale which traces the search of a wealthy young man for an appropriate occupation.

Other early examples of fashionable fiction were Lord Normanby's *Matilda* (1825), Lister's *Granby*, and Disraeli's *Vivian Grey*. *Matilda* traces the love story of Lady Matilda Delaval and Augustus Arlingford, later Lord Ormsby. Persuaded that Arlingford is unworthy, Matilda marries Sir James Dornton, only to re-encounter Ormsby, realize her mistake, and elope with him, eventually dying in childbirth. *Granby* is a courtship novel, in which Sir Thomas and Lady Jermyn consent to their daughter's marriage to Harry Granby only when he rather than his cousin is proven to be the rightful heir to a title. *Vivian Grey* is a *Bildungsroman* which follows the adventures of a precocious young man who, searching for a vocation, settles on politics and becomes organizer in chief of the political faction headed by the Marquis of Carabas. After the scheme collapses, Vivian kills a political rival in a duel and escapes to Germany, where he drinks with Rhineland dukes and meets Beckendorf, prime minister of Reisenberg, whose success leads Vivian to reflect on his own failures.

Collectively these early examples illustrate the typical plots of the silver fork novel. Intellectual and self-educated young men, searching for an appropriate way to distinguish themselves, settle on politics. Beautiful and wealthy young women, searching for appropriate husbands, are pressured by family and friends into inappropriate matches. All of these tales are set against vivid descriptions of balls, dinner parties, teas, clothes, food, and shopping.

At the height of their popularity, silver forks dominated the circulating libraries. In 1838, the London Statistical Society tabulated the volumes held by ten of the humbler libraries. Of the 2,191 volumes available, 1,488 (68 percent) were fashionable novels. Forty-one were by "Theodore Hook, Lytton Bulwer, etc.," 439 were "Fashionable Novels, well known," and 1,008 were "novels of the lowest character, being chiefly imitation of Fashionable Novels, containing no good, although probably nothing decidedly bad" (Altick 1957: 217–18). While this list counts volumes and not titles, it still attests to the popularity of fashionable novels, as well as indicating the breadth of that popularity.

Despite these large numbers, only two handfuls of fashionable authors have survived. Rosa suggests that only eight of them deserve attention; Hook, Ward, Lister, Disraeli, Bulwer, Blessington, Lady Charlotte Bury, and Catherine Gore. Further, he allows only Disraeli, Bulwer, and Gore more than historical interest. Of these three, Disraeli and Bulwer wrote only two fashionable novels apiece, *Vivian Grey* and *The Young Duke* (1831), and *Pelham* (1828) and *Godolphin* (1833), respectively. After that, Disraeli moved to political and social problem novels, while Bulwer turned to historical and mystical ones.

Gore, on the other hand, wrote a substantial number of silver fork novels and was the only one of the three who continued writing them into the 1840s. Among Gore's best novels are *The Hamiltons* (1834), the story of a heartless dandy who marries a young girl and is then unfaithful; *Mrs. Armytage, or Female Domination* (1836), which tells of a wealthy mother who attempts to rule her son's life; *Cecil, Or the Adventures of a Coxcomb* (1841), the memoir of an aging roué; and *The Banker's Wife, Or Court and City* (1843), which traces the life of an ambitious and dishonest banker.

Of Rosa's eight authors, Jump's six-novel collection keeps Lister, Bulwer, Blessington, and Gore, and adds Landon and Rosina Bulwer. Lost are such authors as Charles White, who wrote *Almack's Revisited* (1828) and *The Adventures of a King's Page* (1829); Samuel Beazley, who wrote *The Roué* (1828) and *The Oxonians: A Glance at Society* (1830); Robert Pierce Gillies, who wrote *Basil Barrington and his Friends* (1830); and Caroline and Henrietta Beauclerk, who together wrote *Tales of Fashion and Reality* (1836). Even more completely lost are the many anonymous authors whose identities have not been unmasked.

It must be noted that the majority of fashionable novels were published anonymously, or at most as by "the author of" a previous novel. This enabled publishers to exploit the possibility that the authors were actually aristocrats, and readers to presume that the material in the novels was the expression of inside knowledge, which was a major attraction to readers of fashionable novels. It was assumed that the novels were *romans-à-clef*, a belief reinforced by the publication of "keys" to the more popular of them, such as *Vivian Grey* (1826), *The Exclusives* (1829), and Blessington's *The Repealers* (1833).

While some of the fashionable novelists such as Lady Charlotte Bury, the daughter of the Duke of Argyll, and Constantine Phipps, the first Marquess of Normanby, were actual aristocrats, many others were, at best, on the edge of aristocratic society. Marguerite, the Countess of Blessington, for example, began life as Margaret Power, the daughter of a newspaper publisher. She married the abusive Captain Maurice St. Leger Farmer and was rescued from him by Captain Thomas Jenkins, with whom she lived for about six years. She then attracted the attention of the Earl of Blessington, with whom she lived until the death of her husband in 1817 enabled them to marry (Rosa 1964: 159–61).

Despite this questionable and scandalous biography, Blessington's title was enough to assure her insider authority. The value of such authority is indicated by the differing amounts paid by publishers depending on an author's title. In 1836, for example, Lady Blessington was paid £800 for a novel and Mrs. Gore only £120 (O'Cinneide 2008: 53). This was so even though most of Blessington's novels "would never have been published if she had been untitled and obscure" (Rosa 1964: 159).

The dubious qualifications of fashionable authors were often recognized by reviewers, and piercing their anonymity became a game for them, though their identifications were often inaccurate. As a reviewer of *Matilda* indicates:

It has been much the fashion, of late years, to ascribe anonymous novels to persons moving in the higher ranks of life. Thus *Tremaine* has been imputed to several noblemen, without being as yet owned by any body; thus, too, *Matilda* has already glittered under four or five distinguished names . . . (review of *Matilda*, 1825: 435)

Besides identifying anonymous authors, reviewers also delighted in suggesting that the authors of silver fork fiction were not aristocrats but rather their footmen or maids. The *Athenaeum* suggested that some of the novels

were produced by the fashionables themselves, and some by the footmen of those fashionables; some by literary young gentlemen, who occupy fourth stories, in retired situations, and whose knowledge of the great world is acquired through the medium of Sunday promenades in Hyde Park, and a rare visit to the Opera, when their finances permit the sacrifice of half a guinea. (review of *The Exclusives* [1829]: 782)

The following year the *Athenaeum* went even further. Andrew Picken proclaimed that since “every lady or gentleman, no matter how incapable, who was known, or was supposed to be known, in the fashionable world” was encouraged to write, it was clearly no longer the work but the author who mattered. And of these fashionable authors, he asserted, nine-tenths were frauds: “demireps and black-legs, broken-down gamblers, roués, and half-pay dragoon officers, with a sprinkling of imbecile honourables and romantic spinsters,” all “as cheap as Irish labourers” (Picken 1830: 626).

Nonetheless, the presumption of aristocratic authorship and therefore authority was widespread. For example, when the author of *Vivian Grey* was discovered to be Benjamin Disraeli, not only “an obscure person for whom nobody cares a straw” but also “a mere Jew boy,” there was a critical outcry which so upset Disraeli that he worked unsuccessfully for years to suppress the book (Rosa 1964: 101–2).

The content of silver fork novels was generally dismissed as stereotypical and predictable. Like other popular genres such as Newgate and historical novels, they are easily identified by their titles. *High Life* (1827), *A Marriage in High Life* (1828), *The Young Duke*, *The Fair of Mayfair* (1832), *The Victims of Society* – these are typical titles which announce their aristocratic subjects. Reviewers repeatedly suggested that these novels were written according to a formula which included a ball at Almack’s, a duel, a visit to a gambling club such as Crockford’s, an arranged marriage, and at least the suspicion of adultery. The *Athenaeum* suggested that such novels typically included “coronets, fine gentlemen, and still finer ladies, court plumes, diamond necklaces, the Prince Regent, masquerades, money-lenders, vindictive Italians, vicious tempered old dowagers, gay Lotharios” and that it was a great curiosity if a novel lacked the “dukes, silver forks, kitchen stuff, mysteries, foundlings, murders, suicides, dueling” of silver fork fiction (qtd. in Casey 2009: 254).

As indicated by “coronets, fine gentlemen, and still finer ladies,” an essential part of the silver fork formula was its aristocratic characters. As the *Athenaeum* exclaimed, “When did a novel ever prosper without a Lord!” (review of *The Merchant’s Daughter*, 1836: 883). The social life of these exclusives, centered on the London Season and London clubs, formed the center of fashionable novels.

Another component of the silver fork formula was its location in London. In the 1820s, the novel moved from the country to the city, from Austen’s small villages and country houses to metropolitan London. While the other bestseller of the period, the Newgate novel, was set in the East End, the silver fork novel was set in the West End, and, in particular, west of Regent Street and south of Oxford Street.

Formally, silver fork novels were characterized by plotlessness. Most of the novels were picaresque in form, following the adventures of a male protagonist in his travels

across Europe or the movement of a female one from shop to tea to dinner party to ball. This plotlessness troubled Victorian critics, who saw it as a “convenient symbol for the wider bankruptcy of the traditional ruling class” (Hughes 1995: 205).

The formulaic nature of the novels was reflected in the number of “recipes” offered for their writing. Normanby’s *Yes and No: A Tale of the Day* (1828) gives this recipe for a silver fork novel:

Do you know the modern receipt for a finished picture of fashionable life? Let a gentlemanly man, with a gentlemanly style, take of foolscap paper a few quires, stuff them well with high-sounding titles – dukes and duchesses, lords and ladies, *ad libitum*. Then open the Peerage at random, pick a suppositious author out of one page of it, and fix the imaginary characters upon some of the rest; mix it all up with *quantum suff.* of puff, and the book is in the second edition before ninety-nine readers out a hundred have found out that the one is as little likely to have written, as the others to have done, what is attributed to them. (qtd. in Adburgham 1983: 70–1)

A few years later, in 1841, *Punch* published “Literary Recipes: How to Cook up a Fashionable Novel”:

Take a consummate puppy . . . – baste with self-conceit – stuff with slang – season with maudlin sentiment – hash up with a popular publisher – simmer down with preparatory advertisements. Add six reams of gilt-edged paper – grate in a thousand quills – garnish with marble covers, and morocco backs and corners. Stir up with magazine puffs – skim off sufficient for preface. Shred scraps of French and small-talk, very fine. Add “superfine coats” – “satin stocks” – “bouquets” – “opera-boxes” – “a duel” – an elopement – St. George’s Church – silver bride favours – eight footmen – four postilions – the like number of horses . . . and serve with anything that will bear “frittering.” (“Literary Recipes”)

While these formulae and recipes create the sense that silver fork novels were homogeneous, they occlude important distinctions and oversimplify the genre. As April Kendra argues in “Gendering the Silver Fork,” for example, there are two major subcategories of these novels, the masculine “dandy novel” and the feminine “society novel.” The first concerns “a swaggering male protagonist whose experiences lead him to greater self-awareness and maturity,” while the second follows a large cast of interdependent characters with an “emphasis on family and community relationships” (Kendra 2004: 26–7), typically recording the introduction of an innocent female protagonist into high society (O’Cinneide 2008: 48).

The gendering of these types is at once supported and undermined by the most famous of the dandy novels, *Cecil, or Adventures of a Coxcomb* and *Cecil, A Peer*, both published anonymously by Gore in 1841. Although by this date Gore regularly published either under her own name or as the author of previous novels, she deliberately published these two anonymously in order to preserve the believability of their

first-person male narrator, the dandy Cecil Danby. She succeeded, for in the furor of speculation that ensued, the novels were attributed to several male writers, including Disraeli and Thackeray. These identifications were aided by Cecil's convincing voice and by Gore's publication that same year of a series of comic essays in *Bentley's Miscellany* as by "Albany Poyntz, the author of *Cecil*." On the one hand, the reviewers' presumption that the Cecil novels must be by a masculine hand confirms Kendra's categorization of dandy novels as masculine and society novels as feminine. On the other hand, Gore's successful ventriloquism of Cecil's masculine voice undercuts the idea that the sex of the author determines a novel's subject.

The satirical "recipes" for silver fork fiction illustrate the negative response to fashionable fiction by most Victorian critics, if not by the readers who made them so popular. Victorian reviewers attacked silver fork novels as superficial and trivial, dismissing their "fashionable gabble," their "fopperies of exclusiveness," their "hackneyed affectations," and their preoccupation with "Turkey carpets, and artificial flowers, and wax candles." They judged them as immoral and blamed them for clothing characters "either in foppery or harlotry." They thought these novels cheapened readers with their "blighting influence of artificial manners, cynical egotism, and corrupted morals." Even when they praised them for presenting an accurate picture of "the well-padded, curled, painted, and perfumed body of fashion," there was a satiric note to the praise (Casey 2009: 255).

This satiric note was extended in a number of parodies of the genre, the most noteworthy of which are those by Carlyle, Dickens, and Thackeray. Ironically, these parodies have survived better than their originals. "The Dandiacal Body" in Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1833–4) attacks fashionable novels in general and Bulwer's *Pelham* in particular. Professor Teufelsdröck, Carlyle's philosophical mouthpiece, observes that England's newest religious sect is the Dandiacal Sect, which boasts "great hereditary resources" and which attracts to itself the Positive Electricity of the nation, namely its money (Carlyle 1987: 216–17). The sect's Sacred Books are Fashionable Novels, which put Teufelsdröck to sleep when he tries to read them, and its "mystagogue, and leading Teacher and Preacher" is Pelham, who provides the "Articles of Faith" (1987: 210–12).

In chapter 28 of Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–9), Kate Nickleby reads aloud to Mrs. Wititterly from a new three-volume novel entitled *The Lady Flabella*, in which "there was not a line . . . from beginning to end, which could, by the most remote contingency, awaken the smallest excitement in any person breathing." The novel's bad French, its description of "blue satin slippers," "rich hangings of silken damask," and "two valets-de-chambre, clad in sumptuous liveries of beach-blossom and gold," and most of all a letter to Lady Flabella from "Befillaire, the young, the slim, the low-voiced" overwhelm Mrs. Wititterly because they are "so voluptuous . . . so soft" (Dickens 1982: 270).

The most extensive parodies of silver fork novels were written by Thackeray. In 1847 he published several burlesque novels in *Punch*, including "*Lords and Liveries, by the authoress of 'Dukes and Dejeuners', 'Hearts and Diamonds', 'Marchionesses and Milliners'.*"

This was aimed primarily at Gore, who had actually written *Peers and Parvenus* in 1846. In *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray imagines how he might have set his story in Grosvenor Square and told “how Lord Joseph Sedley fell in love, and the Marquis of Osbourne became attached to Lady Amelia with the full consent of the Duke her noble father” (Thackeray 1994: 49). More vividly, when Becky appears at Lord Steyne’s “private and select parties,” Thackeray imagines the “August portals” of the elites guarded by grooms of the chamber with “flaming silver forks with which they prong all those who have not the right of the *entrée*” (1994: 500). *Vanity Fair* as a whole, of course, is both a repudiation of the silver fork genre and its apex.

One value which Victorian critics saw in fashionable novels was their historical accuracy. In Gore’s *Women as They Are* (1830), Lord Willersdale defines the aim of such novels “to be the amber which seeks to preserve the ephemeral modes and caprices of the passing day” (qtd. in Rosa 1964: 117). Sydney Owenson Morgan echoes this notion of historical value when she suggests:

We are inclined to assign to Mrs. Gore’s novels a rather prominent place among the historical documents of the day; and we would bind her volumes up, with those of Mr. Dickens, the forthcoming reports of Chartist trials, and a few similar books of fact and fiction, as contributions towards an encyclopaedia of the class-morality of the nation. (Morgan 1839: 888)

The sources of the silver fork novel were various – literary, commercial, and socio-political. The novels owed their literary origin to the picaresque novels of the eighteenth century, to the German *Bildungsroman* epitomized by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1795–6; translated by Carlyle in 1824), to Byron’s *Don Juan* (1819–23) and Byron’s own notorious life, and to the novel of manners by such authors as Fanny Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane Austen. Silver fork novels modified these forms, however. While “the intellectual dandy is, in essence, a picaresque rogue” (Rosa 1964: 9), dandy novels melded the picaresque with the *Bildungsroman* and the European tour. The dandy was searching for meaning in a way that his eighteenth-century predecessors had not, and his travels went beyond the English countryside of *Tom Jones* to the courts of Europe. Society novels often began rather than ended with a marriage, which not infrequently resulted in a separation or even a divorce. Both types moved their eighteenth-century models up the social ladder. As Gore said in her preface to *Pin Money*, they worked “to transfer the familiar narrative of Miss Austen to a higher sphere of society” (Rosa 1964: 127).

Commercially, the novels owed their greatest debt to Henry Colburn, who published the majority of fashionable novels. Rosa estimates that Colburn was responsible for publishing nine out of ten silver fork novels (1964: 178), while Sutherland suggests that a figure of 75 percent (1989: 577). Regardless of the exact number, Colburn was more than just the presenter of the genre. He was its conceptor, producer, editor, publisher, and – most effectively – promoter (Aldburgham 1983: 23). He originated

the genre, publishing all five of the earliest examples cited above. He recruited aristocratic authors such as Normanby and Bury so that he could assure readers that his novels were written by insiders. He published novels written by non-aristocrats anonymously so that he could hint at nonexistent aristocratic identities.

Colburn was an expert “puffer,” adept at exploiting both the mystery of his authors’ identities and the *roman-à-clef* nature of their products. He used his own journals, the *London Literary Gazette* and *New Monthly Magazine*, to hint at forthcoming novels “of outstanding interest to high society,” at their aristocratic authors, and at the originals of their characters (Adburgham 1983: 25). He bought ads in other journals as a bid for favorable reviews and advance notices. Most subtly, he placed “paid paragraphs” in these journals. These “advertorials,” the Victorian equivalent of “infomercials,” looked like reviews but were in fact paid for by the publisher.

The “review” of Disraeli’s *Vivian Grey* which appeared in the *Literary Gazette* describes the “hubbub” this anonymous novel caused and is illustrative of Colburn’s adeptness at puffing and of the advantages of anonymity:

Some ten or twelve months ago a two-volume work under this name appeared, and has excited, from then till now, a great deal of curiosity. The newspapers have teemed with conjectures about the authorship, and whole coteries have disputed about the application of the characters to living individual. (review of *Vivian Grey*, 1827: 134)

As Henry Fothergill Chorley noted years later, “A temporary mystery as to the authorship . . . is a ‘sure card,’ as Mrs. Gore found out when she played it so dextrously on behalf of her Cecil . . .” (1866: 330).

While Colburn’s puffs may have sold books, they did not always persuade reviewers. In its review of *Crockford’s, or Life in the West*, the *Athenaeum* rejected the attribution of the novel to an aristocratic author:

We see there have been some puffs in the papers, intimating that the work is by “a certain sporting nobleman.” The impudence of this is too sublime; for the writer of these volumes has about as much knowledge of the manners and habits of civilized society as we have of the natives of Timbuctoo. (1828: 83)

Even though not always successful, Colburn’s role in promoting silver fork fiction contributed greatly to its status as a commodity text, one produced by a publisher such as Colburn who “from the returns of his ledger . . . collects with statistical accuracy the sort of book which is wanting” and dictates to “‘tradesmen’ authors how to appeal to ‘customer’ readers and produce works which the publisher drives through the market” (Casey 2009: 258).

The sociopolitical sources of the fashionable novel lie in the social tensions which arose in the battle over the Reform Bill of 1832. The old order, in which wealthy landowners who had always had power got to keep it, was under attack from the newly rich manufacturing classes, who felt that their money entitled them to political

and social power. Silver fork novels are a culturally important expression of a newly unstable society which could no longer presume that birth alone defined a gentleman and in which the central issue was a mediation of inclusion and exclusion. It had become necessary both to define “gentleman” and to protect the aristocratic hegemony which was perceived as under attack. One way in which fashionable novels reveal this social instability is by demonstrating the extent to which the Regency dandy was dependent for his identity on the gaze of others. The dandy, who, Carlyle argues, wants to be looked at, unsettles his age because his gentlemanly status is revealed not as essential but as the creation of others.

Silver fork novels appealed to two audiences, “great people” who took pleasure in hearing about themselves, and “little people” who delighted “in hearing about great people” (review of *The Exclusives*, 1829: 782). The details of aristocratic life provided by the novels’ information about Almack’s, tailors, brand names, and merchants led upper-class readers to examine them for accuracy and to look for characters modeled on their friends and acquaintances. At the same time, these details appealed to middle-class voyeurism and enabled readers from the rising bourgeoisie to mine them for instructions on how to move up the social ladder. In *The Voyage of Aylmer Popanilla* (1828), Disraeli sneered at these novels which aimed to educate the newly rich – termed Millionaires – who

picked up a considerable quantity of very useful knowledge; so that when the delighted students had eaten some fifty or sixty imaginary dinners in my lord’s dining-room, and whirled some fifty or sixty imaginary waltzes in my lady’s dancing-room, there was scarcely a brute left among the whole Millionaires. (qtd. in Rosa 1964: 111)

At a time of newly permeable class boundaries, fashionable novels reflected a society in which it was possible to move into elite society by acquiring the right dress and manners and provided instructions for how to do so.

But if silver fork novels served both to confirm the status of the exclusives and to instruct the rising middle class in how to achieve that status, they also attacked the materialism of the elites. In *England and the English* (1836), Bulwer argues that the middle classes hoped to be quasi-aristocrats and therefore they

eagerly sought for representations of the manners which they aspired to imitate, and the circles to which it was not impossible to belong. But as with emulation discontent also was mixed, as many hoped to be called and few found themselves chosen, so a satire on the follies and vices of the great gave additional piquancy to the description of their lives. (1836:)

Bulwer even suggests that fashionable novels helped to bring about the Reform Bill, by revealing “the falsehood, the hypocrisy, the arrogant and vulgar insolence of patrician life” and by rousing the indignation of all classes of readers (1836: 212).

Bulwer was not the only Victorian to recognize this complex tone of mixed adulation and satire. As the reviewer of *The Exclusives* notes, in early days the portraits of the leaders of fashion were

done with proper humility and respect for the great personages brought upon the scene. But a bolder spirit has appeared among men, and the avowed object of the work before us is to trample upon the pride of the exclusives . . . and to hold up their morals and manners to the contempt and ridicule of readers . . . (1829: 782)

Recent critics have explored this tonal intricacy in detail, refusing to read fashionable novels as simple *romans-à-clef* or as unproblematic glorifications of high society. As O'Conneide argues, the silver fork novel combined "a display of opulent, leisured fashionable life and a moralising strain on the wickedness of such a life" (2008: 47). Hughes suggests that fashionable novels manifested a "radical instability of tone," for whether the rising middle class "wanted to emulate or to abolish the ruling elite" (1992: 330) they could not ignore them. As a result, the novels celebrated and attacked, glamorized and censured, defended and satirized the lives of the Regency aristocracy, expressing "both nostalgia and disapproval" (1996: 160).

While Rosa declares that the fashionable novel was a "weedy growth" whose popularity led to overproduction and a loss of interest (1964: 98), recent critics argue that the novel gradually and inevitably was modified into other forms, contributing to the later political novels of Disraeli, to the domestic realism of the mid-Victorians, and to the sensation novels of the 1860s. Early criticism dismissed silver fork novels as compositions of fad and fashion written only to appeal to popular taste and to make money, but recent work has embedded them in the history of the novel and explored their influence on subsequent fiction.

Hughes, for example, analyzes the ways in which Gore's dandy and society novels document the shift from Regency aesthetic frivolity to the moral seriousness and bourgeois democracy of the Victorian domestic novel. Other critics have explored fashionable novels' connections to the sensation novel. Royce Mahawatte suggests that the Gothic, the silver fork, and the sensation novel all seek "to link the experience of the material to the construction of meaning" (2009: 330). Tamara Wagner discusses what she names "silver-fork sensation novels" which explored the shabby-genteel and the class "amphibiousness" which it created.

While the sensation novel would move down the social ladder and leave London for the country, it owed a significant debt to silver fork fiction. Prior to the marriage reform law of 1857, fashionable fiction such as Gore's "The Divorcée" in *The Fair of Mayfair*, Bury's *The Divorced* (1837), and Rosina Bulwer's *Cheveley* established as a topic for fiction the unhappy marriage, a subject which the sensation novel continued in such novels as Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860) and Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861). Further, fashionable novels anticipated the sensation novel's relation to its readers, instituting the bestseller and developing as a subject secrets in the houses of one's neighbors. It is perhaps no accident that one of the best known of

the sensation novels, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), has a title which could be that of a silver fork novel.

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