Capital and the Heroine:
Reconfiguring Gender in the Victorian Novel

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Abstract

Drawing upon Lukács’s theories of bourgeois totality and its representations in realist novels, I seek to analyze the ideological influences of capital upon the work of gender in mid- and late-Victorian novels. By integrating Marxist economics with feminist criticism, I will demonstrate that the contradictions of capital (both empowering and constraining women) give rise to the uneven emergence of gender in works by Victorian novelists from Gaskell to Hardy. By focusing upon the specific representations of women’s agency defined as a “female heroism”— I suggest that, as parties to what I call “the capitalist contract,” literary heroines empower themselves through feminine labor and capital acquisition. On the one hand, deploying various kinds of capital women co-opt the gendered division of labor and the marital system dominated by men, even as they eventually reinforce patriarchal conservatism as wives. On the other hand, women’s labor transgresses commodity fetishism and promotes social and cultural reform. They seek to subvert patriarchal violence and reform institutional marriage in the post-enlightenment feminist context. Specifically, in Mrs. Gaskell’s Mary Barton (1848) and North and South (1855), Charlotte Brontë’s Shirley (1849), and George Eliot’s Felix Holt (1866) and Middlemarch (1872), economic, cultural and social capital empower women as modern consumers challenging domestic gender roles whilst realist narratives—including George Eliot’s rewriting of Matthew Arnold’s national culture—seek concurrently to employ marriage to subsume women’s agency. By contrast, in The Return of the Native (1878) and Jude the Obscure (1895), Hardy’s women, newly transformed from angels in the house to rebellious heroines, seek to embrace Romantic individualism and subvert the marriage institution. Ultimately, by invoking possible alternatives to matrimony that marks the cessation of female empowerment, another mid-Victorian heroine, Rebecca Sharp in Thackeray’s Vanity Fair (1848), deploys the exit strategy of credit and colony so as to effectively distance herself from the hegemonic violence of capitalist patriarchy.
Table of Contents

Declaration .................................................................i
Abstract ..............................................................................ii
Acknowledgements .........................................................iii
Table of Contents ..........................................................iv
Abbreviations .......................................................................vi

Introduction

“A Revolution in Female Manners” : Capital and Gender in the Victorian Novel……1

Chapter One

Body Politics and Marriage Redeemed: Spaces of Capital in

Mary Barton (1848), North and South (1855), and Shirley (1849).................... 51

Chapter Two

“Between Two Worlds”: Mediating Between Culture and Capital

in Felix Holt (1866) and Middlemarch (1872)........................................... 95

Chapter Three

Marriage and Its Discontents: Invading Capital and the Failure of National Culture

in The Return of the Native (1878) and Jude the Obscure (1895)............... 156

Coda

Reading Credit and Colony as Alternative Spaces of Engenderment

in Vanity Fair (1848)................................................................. 218

Notes ..................................................................................241

Works Cited ........................................................................257