Edward Copeland

THE SILVER FORK NOVEL: FASHIONABLE FICTION IN THE AGE OF REFORM


Reviewed by Maria K. Bachman

This book aims to examine what has long been considered a literary lowland between Austen and Dickens—the fashionable fiction of the 1820s and 1830s. In studying these ephemeral novels from the "age of reform," Copeland shows how they marked a manifold juncture in the social history of the early nineteenth-century. This is no small feat.

Despite its enormous popularity in the early decades of the nineteenth century, the silver fork novel has often been denigrated. Contemporary critics relentlessly deplored its crass commercialization and its "anti-literary" obsession with lifestyles of the rich and famous—what William Hazlitt called "the folly, caprice, insolence and affectation of a certain class" ("The Dandy School" 1827). Indeed, masquerading as the work of insiders in the most exclusive, glamorous, and aristocratic spheres, silver fork novels were often regarded as conduct guides for the upwardly mobile. Almost a decade after this would-be fashionable genre had fallen out of fashion, Charles Kingsley continued to lambast silver fork novelists for ignoring the social upheavals going on around them:
Dynasties may fall, and democracies arise; parliamentary reform bills may pass and sanitary reform-bills, alas! be stifled in the birth; sham Chartists may plot and real Chartists, poor fellows, starve. . . . [T]he novelist hears without a shudder the crash of falling thrones, the roars of starving millions. . . . For he has renounced the world, except, of course, those few thousand fine gentleman and ladies who monopolize that name, when they go out of town leave London "quite empty." (Fraser's, 1849)

While Kingsley's disdain for the genre was hardly new in 1849, his complaint--that silver fork novels were irresponsibly apolitical--implicitly describes the challenge that Copeland takes up here: to make fashionable fiction critically respectable, at least to some degree. "The danger for present-day scholars," Copeland contends, "is to underestimate these novels" (6). A recent dismissal of fashionable fiction as "drek" in an online scholarly forum underscores the enduring challenge of Copeland's endeavor to rescue these novels from the dustbins of literary history.

Since the 1990s, a number of critical studies have tried to place the silver fork novel within the nineteenth-century literary marketplace and to explain what it reveals about gender and culture in its time. These studies include Cheryl A. Wilson's overview of the genre, *Fashioning the Silver Fork Novel* (Pickering and Chatto, 2012); a collection of essays on silver fork fiction in a special issue of *Women's Writing* (2009); a chapter on the genre in volume three of *The Oxford History of the Novel in English* (2012); Winifred Hughes's "Silver Fork Writers and Readers: Social Contexts of a Best Seller," *Novel* 25 (1992); and at least two dissertations: Maria K. Bachman, *Tarnished Silver: The Silver Fork Novel and the Rhetoric for*
Reform (1998), and Claire Bainbridge, Noble Bastards: The Silver Fork Novel (2003). In addition, Pickering and Chatto published scholarly editions of six silver fork novels in 2005. Expanding significantly on this earlier work, Copeland broadly investigates silver fork novels as both "reporters and active participants in contemporary struggles for Reform" (7)

In arguing that silver fork fiction played a major part in the quest for reform, Copeland takes his cue from Bulwer Lytton, who offered one of the earliest and most telling assessments of the genre:

Few writers ever produced so great an effect on the political spirit of their generations as [the silver fork novelists]. . . . The novels of fashionable life illustrate feelings very deeply rooted and productive of no common revolution. In proportion as the aristocracy had become social, and fashion allowed the members of the more mediocre classes a hope to outstep the boundaries of fortune and be quasi-aristocrats themselves, people eagerly sought for representations of the manner which they aspired to imitate, and the circles to which it was not impossible to belong. But as with emulation discontent was also mixed, as many hoped to be called and few found themselves chosen. (England and the English, 1833)

Building on this point, Copeland argues that "novels of fashionable life were novels about power, who has it, who doesn't. Reform produced the issues that silver fork authors engaged, the renegotiation of traditional systems of power, including the shifts in social relationships and status that come along with such momentous change" (2).

Copeland begins by examining the cultural factors--the flood of print ephemera (newspapers, magazines, journals, annuals, advertisements, calendars) and emerging "visual technologies" (museums, scientific demonstrations, panoramas)-- that swelled the popularity and proliferation
of silver fork novels in the early decades of the century. Copeland compellingly shows what fashionable fiction owed to Maria Edgeworth, Fanny Burney, and Jane Austen, whose novels strongly appealed to the "Reform generation" because they "have everything to do with the politics of power . . . whether from class, land, money, gender, or inheritance" (64). The silver fork novelists are "at their best," Copeland contends, when their novels resonate, however briefly, with the "deep structure" of an Austen novel; indeed, he writes, "[t]he canniest thing silver fork novelists ever did was to steal from Jane Austen" (50). In a fairly lengthy discussion of Catherine Gore's *The Hamiltons* (1834), which he calls "a small masterpiece of silver fork writing," Copeland shows how Gore extends the plot of *Sense and Sensibility* by taking Elinor and Marianne Dashwood -- re-created as Marcia and Susan Berkeley -- "into their imagined futures in marriage."

In *The Hamiltons*, Copeland observes, "[w]e follow the sympathetic extensions of [Austen's characters] through the crucial choices that the women must make in their married lives during the social and political turbulence of reform" (55-57).

Politics gets short shrift in this book. Though Copeland's central argument (according to the book's dust jacket) is that silver fork novels were tools of political persuasion, he gives only one chapter to their myriad accounts of the contemporary political scene. But this chapter is usefully informative. In the years leading up to the passage of the Reform Bill in 1832, we learn, silver fork novels chronicled and responded to elections,
party propaganda, and high-profile politicians, not simply to increase sales, but to "lever power, to bring about the major changes in attitude necessary to make an effective union of the middle classes and the traditional ruling classes" (5). In T. H. Lister's Granby (1826), for instance, the "stumbling, divided Tory government and the stock market collapse of 1825-26" are the "dual catastrophes" (71). Similarly, constitutional strife and partisan politics animate Lord Normanby's Yes and No (1828), published when Catholic Emancipation was the most volatile and divisive issue of the day.

Alive as they were to politics, silver fork novels rivaled journalism even while reflecting its influence. According to Copeland, the daily newspaper's "obsession with commerce, fashion, society, and politics" was a "global trade in news that contemporary novelists join[ed] with enthusiasm" (103). Besides featuring narrators and characters who repeatedly cite politically biased London dailies such as the Morning Post and the Times, silver fork novels often borrowed their content and structure from the "straw and clay" of the daily newspapers. But they also re-organized this material. While newspapers (then as now) divided their news into various categories such as political, financial, domestic, commercial, and social, the silver fork novel threw these categories "into active, challenging relationships" (109). They also used the geography of London to define its networks of power. In their way of representing the politics of urban space and urbanism in the novel, Copeland writes, "streets
become the way to match the body, face, dress, and rank of a character to a symbolic topography" (137).

Finally, Copeland argues that in the wake of the Reform bill, silver fork novels largely ceased to be written by men. In the post-Reform years (1833-1841), he says, women authors such as Lady Blessington, Catherine Gore, and Lady Bury "more or less had the genre to themselves" (149). In the same period, many male authors such as Bulwer Lytton, Benjamin Disraeli, T. H. Lister, and Lord Normanby left the genre behind because "[w]hatever they formerly had to say about politics in their novels could now be said more plainly in Parliament and government" (149). Meanwhile, the silver fork novel pushed overt politics into the background and foregrounded the role of women. In the first generation of fashionable fiction (1825-1832), female characters--particularly those portrayed by male novelists--have no active presence beyond their reputation and social status; in the post-Reform era, the silver fork novel highlights the fate of the aristocratic woman, whose political moves take social form. Beyond "[t]he celebrity power granted them by wealth and titles," the aristocratic heroines of post-Reform silver fork novels make political points by means of various "accomplishments" (151). In deciding what music to sing or play, for instance, the Reform-minded heroine knows that Handel may be considered "highly respectable" because he is "English-by-adoption," while "[f]oreign music must be tucked away in a dark cupboard" (153).
But here Copeland's argument prompts a question. If politics is thus attenuated in post-Reform silver fork novels written by women, is the genre—as Copeland claims—so intimately attached to the political and cultural issues of the Reform years that it can be neither fully understood nor appreciated outside that context? If second generation silver fork novels were no longer relevant to the political scene, what exactly were their contributions to literary history?

We might also question Copeland's principles of selection. With incisive and richly contextualized close readings of particular novels, Copeland aims throughout this book "to give present-day readers a sense of the wit and sharp observation that contemporary readers would have appreciated" (6). Yet despite the plethora of titles available—the appendix lists in detail over 50—Copeland heavily favors the novels of Catherine Gore while slighting authors such as Theodore Hook, one of the first innovators of the genre, and Robert Plumer Ward, whose enormously popular *Tremaine* (1825) is generally considered the "first" silver novel (it also launched Henry Colburn into the successful publishing of fashionable fiction). In addition, though silver fork novels sprang in part, as Hazlitt recognized, from popular fascination with the decadent dandy—the self-absorbed, affectedly careless, foppishly gallant man of perfect taste and manners—Copeland has little to say about this quintessential Regency figure, the stock character of fashionable fiction.
Finally, rather than considering the literary legacy of the silver fork genre, the epilogue explains what ended it. I think Copeland has missed a golden (or shall I say "silver") opportunity here to consider how the silver fork novel helped lay the groundwork for the Victorian realist novel— as Cheryl Wilson does, albeit tentatively, in her book. The silver fork novel not only amalgamated various literary forms (such as the novel of manners, bildungsroman, roman a cle, philosophical novel, and picaresque mode); by closely scrutinizing the political and social behavior of its time, it also led the way to realism and thus played a crucial part in the development of the nineteenth-century novel.

In spite of these gaps, however, Copeland’s literary "search and rescue" effort is thoroughly impressive. Indeed, perhaps the most valuable part of this study is its appendix, where a “reader’s companion” to the silver fork novel includes an alphabetical listing of authors with a brief biography of each, relevant novel titles and publication dates, and detailed plot summaries. Well written, informative, and thoroughly engaging, Copeland’s book offers fertile ground for further sustained study of a genre still largely unplumbed.

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