

Silver Fork Novels, 1826–1841

Catherine Gore,
Cecil: or, The Adventures of a Coxcomb (1841)

Edited by
Andrea Hibbard and Edward Copeland





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Volume 6

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INTRODUCTION

[S]he had an adroit power of masking – witness Cecil.¹

I might become pretty nearly what I liked. Most people might, if they only knew it; – the faculty of knowing it, constituting what the world has come to the determination of calling genius.

(vol. iii, p. 298)

Catherine Grace Frances Gore was born in 1799 or 1800 in London or East Retford, Nottinghamshire. The obscurity surrounding her origins is telling. So carefully did she conceal details of her early life that when she died in 1861, the *Athenaeum* resorted to hearsay to publish an obituary for her, venturing, ‘We have heard that she was a Miss Nevinson’.² Likewise, *The Times* obituary began its summary of her life with her 1823 marriage: ‘Of her personal history, little more is known to the public than that she was the wife of Charles Arthur Gore, of the 1st Life Guards; that at the time of her death she had attained the age of 61; and that she was one of the most brilliant women of her time, whose talk overflowed with epigram and jest, and whose most commonplace remarks were more witty than the best wit of others.’³ Profiles published during her life are no more revealing. The *New Monthly Magazine*’s 1837 ‘Memoir of Mrs. Gore’ begins by calling her ‘the survivor of a highly-respectable Nottinghamshire family, from whom she inherited a handsome fortune’ and concludes by asserting that she ‘lives a life of great seclusion’ and that ‘she devotes herself to the interests of domestic life’.⁴

In fact, her father, a wine merchant named Charles Moody, died soon after she was born leaving her mother free to marry the London physician Charles D. Nevinson in 1801, and the young Catherine went on long visits to her mother’s titled relation Frances, Lady Wentworth, where she presumably mixed with the aristocratic circles that were to populate her marriage and her silver fork novels. She seems, in other words, to have relied on her ‘adroit power of masking’ to become in life, as in her anonymously published *Cecil*, ‘pretty nearly

¹ Anon., ‘Mrs. Gore’, *Athenaeum* (9 February 1861), p. 196.

² *Ibid.*

³ Anon., ‘Mrs Gore’, *The Times* (4 May 1861), p. 5.

⁴ Anon., ‘Memoir of Mrs Gore’, *New Monthly Magazine*, 49 (1857), p. 436.

what I liked'. In London, she found her way into literary and Whig circles. In Paris, she presided over a salon in her fashionable Place Vendôme home. In 1843, her play *Quid Pro Quo: or, The Day of the Dupes* beat ninety-six other entries to win a prestigious Haymarket Theatre contest for the best new English comedy. In 1850, she came into a large inheritance only to have her banker defraud her of it five years later. Along the way, she had ten children.

Gore's publishing career began in 1824, and her astounding productivity suggests that her growing family may have relied on the money it furnished.¹ She wrote poems, plays, sketches, stories, reviews, essays, translations, travel books, music, a gardening book, and novels, leading William Makepeace Thackeray to marvel,

How Mrs. Gore can write so much, so often, and so well, must have been a question often ere this asked with wonder by every frequenter of the circulating library. She is the most productive of English writers ... 'Cecil,' 'Agathonia,' 'A Prize Comedy,' 'An Essay on Roses,' 'A Christmas Book,' 'A Dissertation on Witchcraft' (under the pseudonym of Albany Poyntz). Who knows what this indefatigable author does or does not do? She is capable of the Lives of the Chancellors or a volume of sermons. Many well-informed persons insist that she wrote 'The Vestiges of Creation,' and there is a strong and influential party which attributes to her the 'New Timon.'²

Despite the sweeping range of writings Thackeray attributes to her, Gore was known most of all for her silver fork novels. With their thick, supposedly eyewitness descriptions of the amusements, manners, fashions, menus, matches, and gossip of the Season, silver fork novels exoticised aristocratic lifestyles for their mainly middle-class readers. Henry Colburn, the leading silver fork publisher, brilliantly exploited the ambient class consciousness of the Reform Act era to make a fortune for himself and to make celebrities of his high-society authors. In these years of social exclusivism, no author wrote more silver fork fiction than Catherine Gore.

Beginning in 1830 with *Women as They Are, Or the Manners of the Day* (1830), a novel George IV deemed 'the best bred and most amusing novel published in my remembrance', Gore produced over twenty three-volume silver fork novels during the next three decades. And

¹ Gore not only published more than sixty books, she also contributed extensively to some of the most influential periodicals of her day. Of the more than 11,000 writers indexed in the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals*, Gore is one of only eleven women with fifty or more listings. Moreover, her correspondence with her publishers suggests that she did not write merely for pleasure. These letters reveal an author who is savvy about the market value of her novels and skilled at driving a hard bargain.

² William Makepeace Thackeray, *Contributions to the Morning Chronicle*, ed. by Gordon N. Ray (Urbana, IL: Illinois University Press, 1945), p. 139.

although she was decidedly ambivalent about the genre to which she owed her fame and fortune, she has the hero of *Women as They Are* defend silver fork novels by characterising them as ‘the amber which serves to preserve the ephemeral modes and caprices of the passing day’.¹ Gore called *Cecil: or, The Adventures of a Coxcomb* ‘my best book’,² and *The Times* obituary writer concurred, declaring, ‘What can be more lifelike and true ... than such novels as *Cecil* ... in which [Gore] displays to the height all her happy art of pourtraying character and describing manners’.³ One cannot help but suppose that Gore would have been pleased to find her favourite apology for the genre applied to her favourite novel.

George IV’s endorsement notwithstanding, Gore entertained reservations about some of the silver fork novels she authored. In 1833, as *The Sketch Book of Fashion* was about to be published, Gore wrote to C. W. Dilke, editor of the *Athenaeum*, requesting that he oblige her by not reviewing the novel and adding, by way of explanation, ‘[I have become] somewhat ashamed of my sickly progeniture of fashionable novels’.⁴ Gore’s unsigned 1844 article for *Blackwood’s Magazine* titled ‘The Monster-Misery of Literature’ explicates the source of her reservations. In this article, Gore, whose novels dominated the shelves of circulating libraries in the 1830s and 40s, castigates those same libraries for the ‘paralysing influence’ they exert over authors. According to Gore, the inferior taste of circulating library ‘customers’ (‘Lady Daggerwood and all her daughters’) guides and restricts purchases by the libraries. Booksellers, in turn, will only publish the novels that the circulating libraries will take. And, consequently, authors are ‘made to drivel’. That is to say, for Gore, authors are at the mercy of their readers. She argues that the circulating libraries and the ‘hateful factory system of the twice three volumes per annum’ they sustain killed Sir Walter Scott and would have – if given the opportunity – ruined Defoe: ‘Conceive the interlarding of a funny Mrs Friday to eke out the matter, with a comical king of the Cannibal islands “to lighten the story” – according to circulating library demand!’⁵ Through this essay, Gore echoes some of the silver fork novel’s fiercest critics. In particular, she voices anxieties about the growing influence of woman

¹ Gore, *Women As They Are, or the Manners of the Day*, 3 vols (London: Colburn and Bentley, 1830), vol. ii, p. 233.

² Gordon N. Ray, ‘The Bentley Papers’, *Library*, 7 (1957), p. 190.

³ Anon, ‘Mrs Gore’, *The Times*, p. 5.

⁴ Matthew Whiting Rosa, *The Silver Fork School* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), p. 132.

⁵ Catherine Gore, ‘The Monster-Misery of Literature’, *Blackwood’s Magazine*, 55 (1844), p. 558.

readers and the commodification of literature.¹ She also echoes the teasing conclusion of *Cecil* in which she casts her publisher as ‘the Diabolus of New Burlington Street’ who comes calling for her manuscript in the final pages of volume three, just as ‘I am coming to the very pith of my Adventures’. That some critics sensed this ambivalence in Gore’s novels is apparent; they insinuated that she could and ought to write other kinds of novels for a more discerning audience. As a case in point, in 1832, *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine* opined that Gore’s talents were wasted on silver fork fiction:

When as in the instance of Mrs. Gore, the artist is evidently equal to the accomplishment of something better and more enduring; when, instead of the fantastic fopperies and contemptible extravagances of fashionable society, he might give us pictures of general life, and sketches of the first specimens of humanity, one does regret to see him tied down to employment so little congenial to his taste, and scarcely consistent with what his reflection must whisper is the right and the proper as well as the lasting and the novel.²

By presuming that Gore must have a bad conscience about her ‘fopperies’, *Tait’s* not only expresses the prevailing critical bias against silver fork fiction, the magazine also dramatises why the ideological investments of Gore’s novels have proven as difficult to unmask as her early biographical history.

While some critics accused Gore’s novels of triviality, others read in them the decline of the whole social order. The novels functioned as a kind of literary hologram on the subject of the aristocracy. Some nineteenth-century critics interpreted Gore’s novels as chauvinistic celebrations of aristocratic circles. For instance, an 1831 *Westminster Review* essay about Gore’s *Mothers and Daughters* complains that ‘the author has fallen a little in love with the people, he would only sketch: he has run some risk of being considered an advocate instead of a satirist. The fashionables are almost uniformly witty and agreeable, the unfashionables stupid and disagreeable’.³ But another review in the

¹ N. N. Feltes, in *Modes of Production of Victorian Novels* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986) articulates the logic behind the powerful sense of paralysis Gore rails against in ‘The Monster-Miser of Literature’. He brings Marxist analysis to bear on the same mutually reinforcing complex of forces Gore describes to show how a nineteenth-century ‘articulation of high price, lending library, and the three-decker format’ functioned ‘as a hegemonic structure of market control, creating and sustaining a particular kind of readership, as it produced a particular kind of commodity with its own specific ideology’ (p. 24). For Feltes, the nineteenth-century economics of publishing, or what he calls the system of “petty commodity book production” conspired with circulating library domination to guarantee that novels would conform to a series of rigid formatting and thematic requirements.

² Anon., ‘Fair of Mayfair’, *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine*, 1 (1822), p. 39.

³ Anon., ‘Mothers and Daughters’, *Westminster Review*, 14 (April 1831), p. 436.

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Westminster Review a mere year and a half later comes to the opposite conclusion. In this review, the critic charges that Gore's novels disparage the aristocracy too emphatically:

The Honourable Mrs. Gore is evidently bent upon undermining the House of Lords; that august body could not have had a more dangerous enemy. Under the guise of a fashionable novel, there is scarcely an aspect under which she has not made the peerage ridiculous ... Nay such a traitor is she against the very idea of privileged orders, that she has aimed at the very distinctions themselves, which, as all the world knows, so widely separate the nobility from the mobility.¹

The point is that Gore's novels mingle raillery and fantasy. They call for reform even as they invite emulation. She satirises the aristocracy even as she romanticises its scenery. No theme has been sounded more often in writing about Gore's novels. The *New Monthly Magazine* tried to turn this feature of her novels into a virtue by suggesting that Gore 'satirises, as well as depicts, the gay world. She shows it, and something more – she shows it up'.² But most writers and reviewers interpreted this characteristic as a flaw. For example, a stanza about Gore in Leigh Hunt's 'Blue-Stocking Revels' includes the lines, 'Only somewhat he found, now and then, which dilated/A little too much on the fashions it rated'.³ More recently, Winifred Hughes has attributed the corresponding 'instability of tone' to the mixed motives of Gore's readership. As she notes, 'Along with the rampant lordolatry of the day ... came sharpened social resentments'.⁴ And while the unstable tone of the novels does signify a complex amalgamation of reader fantasy and envy, as *Cecil* demonstrates, it also exposes the fault lines in Gore's attempt to negotiate the changing gender roles and Whig fortunes of the early Victorian period.

THE DANDY

Autobiography, a popular genre with nineteenth-century authors and readers, was as a rule premised on the very earnestness that Gore rejects when she characterises *Cecil* as a 'good flippant writer'. One

¹ Anon., 'Fair of Mayfair', *Westminster Review*, 17 (1832), p. 468.

² Anon., 'Female Novelists. No. II. – Mrs Gore', *New Monthly Magazine*, 95 (1852), p. 158.

³ Leigh Hunt, 'Blue-Stocking Revels', *Monthly Repository*, 11 (1837), p. 000, ll. 11–12. Some literary critics have continued to make this same argument about Gore. According to Vineta Colby, Gore's 'tone [was] too much influenced by the *ton* she condemned' (*Yesterday's Woman: Domestic Realism in the English Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 47).

⁴ Winifred Hughes, 'Silver Fork Writers and Readers: Social Contexts of a Best Seller', *Novel*, 25 (1992), p. 341.

has only to think of the great classics of the genre to appreciate how Cecil's digressive, sarcastic, and epigrammatic memoirs constitute a calculated assault on and a brilliant satire of the tone of moral seriousness and the plot of self-discovery that informed so much of the century's life writing. Cecil is serious, but his seriousness is reserved for his coxcombry. Where nineteenth-century autobiographers often tell their stories of crisis and conversion or of development in the service of some larger message about, for example, poetry, religion, or political economy, Cecil offers himself to his readers and to his country as a model of discernment about food, drink, and clothing. His main purpose for writing seems to be to divert his readers and to display his discrimination. He has opinions on everything from opera dancers to piano makers, from waistcoats to art collecting. Likewise, he doesn't set out, as the conventional middle-class hero must, to discover a vocation, make his fortune, recover his patrimony, or find a wife; rather, his narrative is impelled by a crisis peculiar to the dandy. After his debut at Carlton House in volume one, he asks himself, 'But how to distinguish myself, – *how?* – The first of gladiators cannot conquer without a fight; and where, alas! was I to find an arena?' (vol. i, p. 91). The rest of the novel can be read as the record of Cecil's endeavour to answer this question.

Although Cecil humorously traces the origins of dandyism to the Prince's efforts to disguise his age, the dandy as a type achieved a social currency that resonated well beyond court circles. Because he was simultaneously an icon of aristocratic exclusivism (witness the Prince and Cecil) and a figure for middle-class social emulation and mobility (witness Beau Brummell and Jack Harris), the dandy also became, beginning in the late 1820s, a favourite target of leading middle-class journalists, novelists, and cartoonists. *Fraser's Magazine* seized on the figure of the dandy to contest aristocratic prerogative and power, a trend that culminated in the magazine's 1833–4 serialisation of Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, with its parodic misrepresentation of Edward Bulwer Lytton's silver fork hero Pelham. For Carlyle and others, the Regency dandy, with his aristocratic affectation of ennui and his unmanly dedication to dress, served as the other to the earnest, industrious middle-class gentleman.¹

¹ For background on the history of *Fraser's Magazine's* representation of the dandy, see James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995); Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986); Robin Gilmour, *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981); and Ellen Moers, *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1960).

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Despite the fact that Cecil is a coxcomb in decline (at one point, even confessing that 'he no longer masticates with his own grinders'), so unflagging is his flippancy, so unregenerate is his frivolity that he threatens to wreak havoc with these binaries, which had by 1841 accumulated around the dandy as a figure. Recalling the days when '[k]nowledge did not pretend to be useful' (vol. i, p. 41) and predicting a future in which Brummell will be celebrated as 'a great reformer, – a man who dared to be cleanly in the dirtiest of times' (vol. i, p. 88), Cecil poses as a noble hold-out resisting the spread of middle-class utilitarianism and moral seriousness. In the novel's Preface, Cecil congratulates himself on having 'reviewed the reviewers' (vol. i, p. 4), and in a larger sense, this is precisely what Gore accomplishes with her dandy. Nowhere is this more obvious than when she has Cecil imagine and reply to the sage's reception of his *Adventures*:

Away with such triflers! Cries the sage, flinging aside our pages into the depths of his gloomy library, as if the grubbers among the dry bones of history did more to expedite the progress of the times, than those fluttering butterflies who oppose, at least, no dead weight to the general impetus. The truth is that, like a straw thrown up to determine the course of the wind, the triflers of any epoch are an invaluable evidence of the public mind. They are always floating on the surface, – always ostensible! – They are a mark for general observation. Statesmen and beaux are the only really public men. (vol. i, p. 88)

Gore defends her 'fluttering butterflies' for what they reveal about 'the public mind'. Their legibility is all by itself a virtue. For her, the dandy's devotion to surface constitutes the same truthfulness she claims for silver fork novels more generally and which she contrasts with the version of history produced by the Carlylian 'grubbers among the dry bones'.

But Gore's dandy hero not only reveals the precariousness of aristocratic domination and the trouble with middle-class moralists and historians; just as importantly, he undermines gender binaries. To begin with, consider the sheer outrageousness of a woman author defying decorum by adopting the persona of a coxcomb to produce what must surely be one of English literary history's most brilliant performances of narrative drag. With *Cecil*, Gore temporarily abandoned the novel-writing style for which she had become so famous, a style she describes in the Preface to her 1831 novel *Pin Money* as 'of the simplest kind addressed by a woman to readers of her own sex'. With her sarcastic, club-going, peripatetic, womanizing alter-ego, she belies the critical commonplace that novels by women authors were inevitably sentimental, unassuming, and autobiographical. In this novel, Gore indulges in a transgressive act of self-creation, an act that mirrors the dandy's own performance of self-fashioning. She becomes

a pretender playing the role of a pretender. She impersonates a feminised man and, in doing so, we might say that she reveals the constructedness of gender identity.

Perhaps, though, it would be truer to say she conceals that fact. With Cecil's credibility and her own reputation equally at stake, Gore relied upon *Cecil* being mistaken for the work of a man. She knew that she had no choice but to insist on its anonymous publication despite the fact that the immense popularity of her many novels had, by 1841, transformed her name into an important selling point. In a letter she wrote to Richard Bentley, *Cecil's* publisher, she laid out the case for withholding her name from the novel:

[T]his work is written in a most peculiar style and with a degree of freedom on all subjects, to which my name would do an injury and the book an injury to me ... All that would be impertinence from Mrs. Gore, becomes witty sarcasm when attributed one day to Lord Brougham and the next to Lord Gardner ... The book affects to be an *autobiography of one of the friends and companions of Lord Byron in Italy*. Judge how absurd for my name to appear on the title page, and destroy the illusion.¹

Bentley acquiesced to this logic and published *Cecil* anonymously.

Letters capture the sensation the novel created when it first appeared. Thackeray wrote that some readers suspected him of being the author: '[I]t appears the whole town is talking about my new novel of Cecil. O just punishment of vanity! How I wish I had written it – not for the book's sake, but for the filthy money's, which I love better than fame.'² Disraeli observed that others attributed the book to him: 'I am spoken of with great *kudos* in *Cecil* (le livre du jour), which indeed was given to me for some time and is an imitation of the *Vivian Grey* school.'³ And Gore's letters to Bentley confirm her delight in the guessing games *Cecil* instigated. She wrote, 'I heard "Cecil" much canvassed last night, both at Lady Morgan's, and at Lord Normanby's [fellow fashionable authors]. I perceive that Bulwer and the literary world think it mine; but the fine world has decided it is Lord Howden's – a notion that will do the book some service, as he has 12,000 a year, and no one is entitled to be clever nowadays who does not keep a French cook.' She also confided, 'Bulwer has left no means untried to force me to avow it [*Cecil*].'⁴

¹ Quoted in Ray, 'The Bentley Papers', pp. 192–3.

² Gordon N. Ray (ed.), *The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray*, 4 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1945–6), vol. ii, p. 13.

³ Quoted in Alison Adburgham, *Silver Fork Society: Fashionable Life and Literature from 1814–1840* (London: Constable and Company, 1983), p. 314.

⁴ Quoted in Ray, 'The Bentley Papers', pp. 193–4.

Finally, though, at least one perceptive critic divulged her secret. And, as the scandalised responses that this revelation occasioned demonstrate, Gore had good cause for concern. The ‘fright’ William Makepeace Thackeray expressed was facetious:

How does she come by her knowledge is the wonder. She knows things which were supposed hitherto to be as much out of the reach of female experience as shaving, duelling, or the bass viol ... It is next to impossible that she should have ever been a member of a club; but she is as well acquainted with all the mysteries of those institutions as the oldest Pall-mall lounge. She talks about Ude and Soyer with a familiarity and justness of appreciation perfectly frightful; she is so familiar with the bow-window of White’s, that you might fancy she had, by special permission, been allowed to take a place amongst the exceedingly venerable dandies there.¹

But the disapproval of others was undeniably sincere. In a largely favourable essay about Gore, the anonymous contributor to R. H. Horne’s 1844 *A New Spirit of the Age* singled out *Cecil* for censure: “‘Cecil’ is a perfect representation of the worst, but certainly the most dazzling aspect of Mrs. Gore’s genius. It abounds in flashy, high-mettle fashionable slang, and is thrown off in such a vein of upsetting egotism, with such a shew of universal knowledge, and in a style of such dashing effrontery, that it carries the multitude fairly off their legs’.² It was only after Gore’s secret was out that reviewers like this one could complain that the coxcomb’s pose constituted ‘upsetting egotism’ and his learning ‘dashing effrontery’. In other words, when Gore wrote *Cecil* she violated conventions of feminine propriety which ironically accorded women power only to the extent they repressed self and displayed modesty.³

Even twenty years later, Gore’s secret still had the power to titillate. The *Athenaeum*’s obituary for Gore records the story of *Cecil*’s authorship in the same gossipy language and with the same relish we might expect from one of Gore’s own silver fork Exclusives:

This ‘Cecil’ history is as odd a story as can be recalled. Everybody was claimed as author of the book. Now that all are gone, an anecdote concerning it may be told: – Lady Stepney, a sweet-tempered but not strong-minded woman, who had written novels and had been a beauty in her salad days, during the period of doubt was heard to say, ‘People are so ill-natured! They say that Sydney Smith and I have written ‘Cecil’.⁴

¹ Thackeray, *Contributions to the Morning Chronicle*, p. 140.

² R. H. Horne, *A New Spirit of the Age*, 2 vols (New York: Garland, 1986), vol. i, p. 235.

³ See Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 169.

⁴ Anon., ‘Mrs Gore’, *Athenaeum*, p. 196.

By representing Gore's authorial cross-dressing as an anomaly and subsuming it into this society anecdote, the *Athenaeum* writer skirts the more vexing problems Cecil and his creator symbolised for a Victorian sexual economy in which gender roles had become so polarised that they could only be imagined in terms of entirely separate spheres.

In *Gender on the Divide: The Dandy in Modernist Literature*, Jessica Feldman comments on the paradoxical way that 'the dandy's distance from woman repeatedly collapses into direct resemblance to her', or, more specifically, the way the dandy 'punish[es] women or dall[ies] with them' even as he appropriates their characteristics.¹ By the same token, Gore records the amorous intrigues of her hero even as she distinguishes him from the 'bang-up' Regency bucks, 'dandies of a secondary order, whose gallantry consists in staring women out of countenance, and whose heroism in knocking a man down' (vol. i, p. 54). Cecil is a misogynist who appropriates the trappings of femininity, and Gore exploits this doubleness to powerful effect. She uses it to satirise the emerging forms gender binaries were assuming in the Victorian period, as well as to dramatise literature's role in creating and reinforcing those forms.

Gore's Cecil is a thoroughly feminised dandy. The infant Cecil attends his mother's toilet where he neglects his rattle for 'jewels, feathers, flowers, and frippery of all descriptions' (vol. i, p. 7–8). 'Gegaws', he confesses 'were my earliest playthings; and my primer consisted of the flourishing capitals at the head of a milliner's bill' (vol. i, p. 8). Indeed, Cecil traces his coxcombry to the first glimpse he catches of himself in his mother's dressing-room mirror: 'I looked and became a coxcomb for life!' (vol. i, p. 7). And however much he might later affect to carouse through Italy with Byron and Scotland with George IV, in the end, he derives his greatest pleasure from returning to his mother's 'drowsy boudoir' to read and reminisce. He is 'Lady Ormington's son' (vol. i, p. 21), a turn of phrase Gore literalises by hinting so often at his illegitimacy.

Gore feminises Cecil in other ways, too. He reacts more often than he acts. He fantasises about himself as the object of admiring looks. The narrative he tells moralises taste ('I flatter myself that my tie *was* irreproachable!') and politicises dress (Lady Votefilch 'was caballing with Madame Le Brun, the Talleyrand of modern modistes, concerning revolutions in caps, and conspiracies against turbans that be'). Furthermore, he recurs with comic regularity to the subject of hair. Cecil introduces the subject in his very first chapter. He preens him-

¹ Jessica R. Feldman, *Gender on the Divide: The Dandy in Modernist Literature* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 11.

self on his 'hyacinthine curls' and pities his sister for her red hair ('Of all physical defects, red hair is one of the least remediable'). He is reduced to tears by the haircut he gets at school ('they began with me as in a lunatic asylum, by cutting off my curls'). He scorns a Church living because he would have to wear a wig ('Angels and ministers of grace ... defend us, – the episcopal wig!'). And he speculates about the significance of the French Revolution according to the hairstyles it inspires ('The Reign of Terror had frightened people out of their wits, and out of their hair-powder. Buckles had given place to shoe-ties; and love-locks and *chignons* to crops *à la victime* and *à la guillotine*'). In this one chapter, Cecil broaches all of the conventional autobiographical subjects – family, school, vocation, and historical backdrop – by way of hair. And by the end of the novel, he finally earns the distinction he has been seeking by breaking with George IV to popularise a new hairstyle: 'I was the first man who appeared about town with his locks combed straight down on either side in the style that has since been called *moyen âge* ... I invented it, as the antipodes of the Adonis-wig Majesty' (vol. iii, p. 299).

But as Cecil himself realises, more than ever as the century wore on, manliness came to mean not-feminine, and it is in this context that Cecil's complaint, 'Society, now so blue, was *couleur de rose*' (vol. i, p. 41), acquires its meaning. During the Regency, dandies were referred to as 'pinks of ton', so when Gore contrasts the femininity of these men (their 'couleur de rose') with the supposed masculinity of women who pride themselves on their intellect (the blue-stockings), she gestures toward the Victorian world of sharpening gender binaries even as she mourns the waning power of the dandy to confuse those categories. Moreover, in so far as middle-class intellectuals criticised the dandy for this same lack of manliness, they implicitly devalued femininity and rendered gender roles themselves the ground for class conflict.

We must, however, be wary of oversimplifying. After all, Cecil's dandyism is not simply feminised and feminising; it is also fatal for the women who succumb to its attractions. The description Cecil offers of himself as he embarks on his career of coxcombrity is explicit about this relationship between his effeminate beauty and his rakish disregard for the women taken in by it:

Standing five feet seven in my pumps, and five feet ten in my boots, with a trifling hint of the Piping Faun softening the severity of my Roman nose and finely-chiselled mouth, I should, perhaps, have passed for effeminate, but that the sentimental school was just then in the ascendant ... My languid smile and hazel eyes were the very thing to settle the

business of the devoted beings left for execution ... I had always a predisposition to womanslaughter, with extenuating circumstances, as well as a stirring consciousness of the exterminating power (vol. i, p. 16).

Cecil's beauty, however feminising, quite literally makes him a lady-killer. Up and down the social scale, the women he pursues invariably end up, if not seduced and ruined, still dead or discredited. As he surveys the damage he has wrought, Cecil appeals to his readers, 'I was never more cruel to them than could be helped. Why, why has Providence created them with such feeble temperaments, or the coarser with such powerful attractions' (vol. iii, p. 212). But the trail of corpses he leaves in his wake, nevertheless, serves as evidence that he is the 'arch-coxcomb of his coxcombical times' (vol. i, p. 17), a point he makes at the conclusion of his memoirs when he boasts, 'I have dwelt modestly on my personal merits; conceiving them to be sufficiently manifested in my deeds, – as the prowess of the lion is attested by the whitening bones of his victims, heaped round his den' (vol. iii, p. 342). Indeed, in large part, the novel is structured – if it can be said to have a structure – according to the Don Juan-like sequence of women who fall prey to Cecil's coxcombry, and one moral it offers – if it can be said traffic in anything as overt as a moral – ironises the nineteenth-century fascination with literature and art that celebrate the death of the beautiful woman. Gore's novel satirises the conceits and defamiliarises the attractions of this most sentimental of subjects.

Cecil almost seems to prefer his women dead or dying so he can wax poetical. He blazons Emily Barnet's beauty and his desire for her in images of death. For example, her throat is as 'long and slender as that of Anna Boleyn' and her cheek as 'fair as monumental alabaster' until Cecil abandons her, when she becomes 'sad as a white rose over a sepulchre'. In these early chapters of the novel, Cecil finds himself caught up in the machinations of a sentimental tale and playing the man of feeling. By the time we get to the Helena Winstanley episode, however, Gore achieves a complete inversion of the conventional formula. In this part of the novel, Cecil does not sentimentalise the death of a beloved; rather, he comes to love Helena *because* she is dying. It is only after she is safely married to his cousin and in decline that Cecil allows himself to become 'amazingly struck by her loveliness', and it is only after she is dead, that she becomes 'all that was gentle – all that was beautiful'. In this way, Gore imparts a curious reflexivity to the sentimental formula. Furthermore, by having Cecil relate Emily's and Helena's sad fates, Gore exposes the shallowness of her hero's grief and lays bare the artifice of the tropes he uses to express it.

Along the way, Gore's novel also demystifies the corresponding role the visual arts play in this romanticisation of the beautiful dead woman. While Emily is the sentimental, middle-class heroine who dies of a broken heart and a tainted reputation and Helena is the fashionable, gentry heroine obliged to submit to the mercenary demands of a social-climbing mother, Franszetta is the lower-class, melodramatic heroine who succumbs to domestic violence. In Venice, Cecil wants an 'adventure' to compete with Byron's; accordingly, he takes up the cause of this beautiful gypsy girl in an effort to 'overcrow' his poet-companion. From the first time Cecil meets Franszetta, he assumes the part of her protector, but, as in the Helena episode, she has to die to inspire him with ardor. As Byron and Cecil make their way through Venice's canals, their gondola comes across Franszetta's corpse being retrieved from the water. Cecil narrates the scene this way:

[T]hey were taking the body of a young girl out of the water. 'Dead?' – said I, with some interest ... 'It is a poor peasant girl ... and beautiful as an angel!' – At this declaration, I looked again ... What a realisation of the famous picture of the internment in Atala. – *There* was Chactas, – *there* the dead virgin they were bearing away to the grave ... That cold, white face, – that raven hair, from which the chilly waters were dripping as they bore her along, – those delicate and slender limbs – *were those of Franszetta!* (vol. iii, p. 279)

Throughout the novel, when Cecil looks at women, he sees art. He describes Emily as 'a study for an artist' (vol. ii, p. 127). When he observes Susan cradling her son, he enthuses, 'it required no great stretch of imagination to fancy oneself looking at the Riposo in Egypt, painted by some great master. All the truth of Parmigiano, all the grace of Correggio, were concentrated in the little group' (vol. ii, p. 211–2). Cecil's sister has a face 'such as Raphael or Titian would have delighted to paint' (vol. i, p. 95), and Wilhelmena has 'lips that Leonardo would have delighted to paint' (vol. ii, p. 234). But in the case of Franszetta, it is her dead body (with its 'delicate and slender limbs') that excites him and elicits this aestheticisation. Gore uses this passage to comment on how art has been used to spectacularise and even eroticise the beautiful female corpse, a comment all the more ironic when we recall that the character of Atala from Chateaubriand's Romantic novel chooses death in order to preserve her virginity. Significantly, too, Gore makes a point of having Byron contribute the inscription for Franszetta's gravestone ('Franszetta Implora Eterna Quietel!'). We might say, then, that Cecil borrows from the realm of art and literature to romanticise the dead Franszetta, and Byron returns her to that realm by way of his epitaph, perhaps suggesting that

Romantic art and poetry proceed from a kind of circulation of the beautiful female corpse. As Andrew Elfenbein notes, 'Franszetta's tragic tale is Gore's rewriting of Byron's Turkish tales from the point of view of a woman'.¹

But Gore not only uses Cecil to de-romanticise traditional male fantasies about the dead woman who is 'beautiful as an angel'. She also uses him to convey aristocratic unease about what the rise of the middle-class domestic angel signifies for the fate of the dandy in the Victorian period. However much Cecil professes to admire the happy domesticity his brother and sister-in-law temporarily enjoy, he admits that he is not only 'afflicted with no innate propensity for falling in love' (vol. ii, p. 224), but that he is also 'born without a genius for family affection' (vol. i, p. 77). And while in the case of Emily, Cecil's incapacity for love and family proves tragic, in the case of Wilhelmina, the outcome is decidedly comic. Cecil is horrified by the displaced version of Victorian middle-class domesticity he encounters in Wilhelmina. When Cecil first sees Wilhelmina, he idealises her in language that spiritualises her beauty: 'What an ethereal creature ... She was attired in a floating filmy dress of muslin; and between its silvery whiteness, the aerial form of the wearer, and the profusion of flaxen hair accompanying that seraphic face, I could have persuaded myself, when she vanished from the window, that I had been gazing on an angel' (vol. ii, p. 223). As he spies on his 'heavenly visitant', he composes 'a new beatitude' in her honour, and he tells himself, 'There was an almost Scriptural purity in [her] looks and gestures' (vol. ii, p. 225). He declares that her 'secluded domesticity' makes her seem 'still a child' (vol. ii, p. 225). Moreover, he associates her with all the standard iconography of the Victorian angel in the house, including flowers, a caged songbird, and white dresses.

When, however, Cecil contrives to have himself invited to her home for dinner, when he finally penetrates the domestic space that has been the site of his fantasies, he discovers a woman whose body flouts this aestheticisation. Not only does Wilhelmina lack the discrimination to fall in love with Cecil, abandon her husband, and die of a broken heart, her diet and appetite disgust him. 'I should as soon have expected the Venus de Medicis or Belvidere Apollo to sup on cheese and onions, as that ethereal creature', he laments (vol. ii, p. 234). And that is not all. Her table manners disconcert him (she eats her fish with a knife, and not, as silver fork etiquette supposedly requires,

¹ Andrew Elfenbein, 'Silver-fork Byron and the Image of Regency England' in *Byromania: Portraits of the Artist in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Culture*, ed. by Frances Wilson (London: Macmillan, 1999), p. 88.

INTRODUCTION

with two silver forks),¹ her piano playing rouses him to contemplate murder, her knitting embarrasses him, and – worst of all – her spitting drives him from her house. And while this entire episode expresses a characteristically English contempt for the German aristocracy, cuisine, and manners of the time, it also conveys a revulsion from the idealised form of middle-class femininity embodied in the Victorian angel in the house. Indeed, it is perhaps because the details of this episode are so hyperbolic and the conclusions it invites so unsettling that Gore must displace her middle-class angel not only historically but also geographically. Ultimately, though, however much we may come to share Cecil's repugnance, we also laugh at his coxcombical predicament. In the words of one nineteenth-century critic, 'Cecil Danby is the satirist and eke the slave of the beau monde'.²

POLITICS AND HISTORY

Possibly an even more potent measure of the shock hidden in the female authorship of *Cecil* was the novel's insistent preoccupation with the historical implications of contemporary politics. Gore's attention is always focused on the political doings of the aristocratic class, its social pretensions, its rigidity, its missed alliances with the middle classes and its selfish blindness to its own good. *Cecil* enters an essentially male preserve, politics, but does it through the back door of fashion and the materiality of consumer life. In effect, Gore marks the momentous political failure of the Whig party, that most aristocratic of political parties, to capitalise on the extension of life for the aristocracy that the party had itself bought through the Reform Bill of 1832. Her narrator, both a participant in and an outsider to the consequences of reform politics, becomes her perfectly positioned observer. As a younger son, 'a detrimental', a cruel but accurate term, Cecil pos-

¹ When Cecil describes Wilhelmina's style of eating fish, he not only classes her, he also makes a joking reference to the silver fork genre. William Hazlitt's review of novels by Theodore Hook and Benjamin Disraeli, titled 'The Dandy School', refers to the aristocratic practice of eating fish with two forks (instead of with a fork and knife) as a way of generalising about the inferior class position of some authors writing fashionable novels. Hazlitt writes, 'provided a few select persons eat fish with silver forks, he [Hook] considers it a circumstance of no consequence if a whole country starves; but these privileged persons are not surely thinking all the time and every day of their lives of that which Mr. Theodore Hook has never forgotten since he first witnessed it, viz. that *they eat their fish with a silver fork*' (*Examiner* (18 November 1827), p. 146). Fashionable novels became known as silver fork novels based on this review.

² Anon., 'Female Novelists', *New Monthly Magazine*, p. 161.

sesses entrance to all the system's sites of privilege, but at the same time has no money or title to give him a share in its power.

David Cannadine's *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain* notes that Dickens and Thackeray, the great London writers of the next generation, are not concerned with 'collective social categories', that is to say, with politics. Patrick Brantlinger, likewise, claims in his *Fictions of State: Culture and Credit in Britain, 1694–1994* that Dickens and Thackeray simply reduce larger public questions 'to the machinations of individual frauds, villains, and skinflints'.¹ In striking contrast, Catherine Gore and the silver fork novelists of the previous generation are not only concerned with 'collective social categories', they are obsessed with them. Manners, consumer luxuries, social ambition and pretensions to gentility may furnish out the social comedy of silver fork novels, but the real energy that drives the action is an aggressive search for social and political power – who has it, who is seeking it, who is losing it.

Movement through the streets of London is the essential experience of social space in the novel, the movement of horses, carriages, shoppers and strollers, the rounds of the water carts and ordinary street traffic, but also there is the movement of new social and political alliances brought about through the Reform Act of 1832. In silver fork London, a good address is the key to the kingdom. As Cecil's rival in dandyism, Jack Harris tells him, 'If I had Lord Ormington's house in Hanover Square to fall back upon ... would I mulct myself, think you, of rent and taxes at the rate of ten guineas per inch, for a snail-shell in Dean Street, Park Lane? – I have my way to make in town; yours is made for you' (vol. i, p. 20). But if the topography of London is a matter of comic urgency for the London fashionables, for Gore it is also a trope of national significance. Cecil circulates through a compass of competing powers: Downing Street and Parliament in Westminster; the Italian Opera in the Haymarket; the clubs in St James's and Pall Mall; the drawing rooms and salons in aristocratic Mayfair; the 'little mousetraps' of socially aspiring Marylebone; even 'the wilds of Bloomsbury', the very home of the middle classes. Cecil may suffer enforced diversions outside of London, dreary trips to Ormington Hall in Lancashire, a catastrophic time in Oxford ('the city of high churchmen and sausages'), occasional visits to 'stinking' Putney and a lengthy exile on the continent, but the topography of central London is the index of his world.

The arc of narrative and the examination of power in Gore's novel are indexed by the topography of silver fork London. As a young man,

¹ Patrick Brantlinger, *Fictions of State: Culture and Credit in Britain 1694–1994* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1966), p. 157.

says Cecil, 'I regarded London as the Hesperides, where demi-goddesses and the golden apples of preferment awaited the all-subduing club of that great Alcides, Cecil Danby.' Jack Harris, an ambitious 'new man' of no family, considers London to be, 'a game of skill, where the cleverest player wins the greatest number of court-cards, – *Anglice*, where a low-born man consorts with the greatest number of lords and ladies'. Cecil's older brother Danby, the family's high-minded philosopher MP, looks 'upon it as an unmeaning hubbub, interrupting the great business of life; *i.e.* the study of dusty, fusty, musty tomes'. Lord Ormington, his Whig aristocrat father, sees it, 'as a place where a man was compelled every Christmas to the unprofitable waste of certain monies, carefully screwed out of his tenants four times a-year' (vol. i, p. 40), that is, the place where it is his expensive duty to appear for the winter meeting of the House of Lords. As a matter of course, these divisions of male privilege follow the patterns of the London streets. Cecil parades his dandyism from the Foreign Office in Downing Street; Jack Harris displays his social powers at the Prince Regent's Carlton House on Pall Mall; Lord Ormington goes to the House of Lords. In fact, one of Cecil's earliest recollections of Lord Ormington is the nightly 'rumble of wheels from the door of our house in Hanover Square' towards Westminster, a sound that produces the regular blessing of Cecil's under-nurse, "'There he goes to the 'ouse; – much good may it do 'em!'" (vol. i, p. 9).

For aristocratic women, however, the only public institution in which they could appear in a political role, and were expected to do so, was The King's Theatre in the Haymarket, the city's pre-eminent showcase for aristocratic power, located significantly at the exact center of London's topographical power vectors – Downing Street and the Houses of Parliament to the south, the clubs of St James's and Pall Mall to the immediate west, and the domestic residences of Mayfair to the north, the middle classes and the City to the east. The King's Theatre becomes Gore's centrally located symbolic space for presenting the dashed hopes of Whig reform. It is in this potent setting that the aristocratic young Cecil conducts his on-and-off courtship of his first love, the middle-class Emily Barnet, in the private boxes, the back staircases and the public lobbies of The King's Theatre where its hierarchically divided arrangements define the political stakes involved. Cecil, for example, sits by custom in the aristocratic boxes of the first and second tiers of the theatre, but when he spots Emily seated in the distinctly unfashionable fifth tier of the house, he ventures out of his seat and out of his class: 'I made my way to the upper tier of boxes; pigeon holes, to which I had occasionally glanced upwards from Fop's Alley, as a boy looks upon a kite traversing the fields of air, and without about as much idea of ever finding

myself elevated to the same enviable attitude.' There, Cecil discovers a prospect beyond his experience: 'now, with the brilliant light of the chandelier irradiating her fair face and tingeing with gold her chestnut ringlets, I was startled by her surpassing loveliness.' He instantly compares the middle-class Emily with his aristocratic companions in the boxes below, 'the withered complexions and hardened countenances of fashionable life' and recognises that in 'the aspect of this young, bright, innocent-looking creature' there could be, 'no severer criticism of the deficiencies of Lady Harriet and her companions' (vol. i, p. 50).

When Cecil rescues Emily from her fifth tier opera box besieged by a set of impudent dandies, he finds that the task of extracting from the opera house entails negotiating its public corridors and stairs, the open portico in the Haymarket to secure a carriage, and the streets that lead him to her home in distinctly middle-class Bloomsbury, all this before the mocking eyes of his aristocratic acquaintance. Since the streets have eyes and ears, Cecil's mother soon reproaches him sharply, comparing him to his older brother, 'I'll tell you what he does *not* do, Cecil. He is not seen skulking down the back-stairs at the Opera, with women in bonnets, whom he shuffles into a hackney-coach!' (vol. i, p. 72).

This opera house story is, of course, a social parable with political implications. Emily, as it happens, is from a thoroughly respectable family, not aristocratic, but the daughter of a wine merchant, a genteel profession, and certainly not an unheard of match for a younger son, especially when sufficient funds from the merchant are available for his daughter's dowry. Cecil's aristocratic pride, however, causes him to hold back in making a commitment to Emily even though she clearly loves him. The crisis remains stubbornly topographic: 'She *cannot* suppose, poor girl, that there is anything in common between the son of an English peer and the daughter of a Lisbon merchant, – between a Downing-street diplomat, and the ward of a snuffy old solicitor in Southampton Buildings!' (vol. i, p. 93).

The political lesson of *Cecil*, however, lies in the aristocratic Cecil's repeated lament that his failure to declare his love for the middle-class Emily has been the greatest mistake of his life. Catherine Gore's marriage in 1823 to Captain Charles Arthur Gore, an officer in the fashionable Guards, brought her, like Emily, into an aristocratic world where she would have experienced Emily's dilemma first hand. In fact, Mrs Gore's background may well be the reason her biography has remained so stubbornly vague. But Emily, unlike Gore, returns to the house of her merchant father in Lisbon after a particularly long period of Cecil's neglect where she dies of a broken heart.

When Cecil abandons London for self-imposed exile on the continent, penance for the loss of Emily, the energy of his narration diminishes considerably, just as it tends to do in Gore's other silver fork novels when her heroes and heroines abandon the arena of power. London gossips would have found delightful fuel in Cecil's disparaging remarks, thinly disguised, concerning recent London publications of the Countess of Blessington and reports on the scandal given Roman society by the Blessington party's living arrangements, but in the larger sweep, the political operation of 'collective identities' controls the narrative of Cecil's foreign travels as well. In France, after a riding accident makes him a temporary invalid, the hero recovers his health in the home of Therèse, la Comtesse Anacharsis de la Vrillière, one of the newly reinstated French aristocracy who is, most pointedly, a *femme incomprise*, neurotic, designing, posing, intent on cuckolding her husband and sexually obsessed with the handsome young Cecil. Therèse becomes Gore's most disparaging representation, among others in these pages, of the aristocratic governing class of post-Napoleonic Europe. In Germany, he nurses his infatuation with a beautiful German woman, Wilhelmina, the wife of a mine-inspector, the Excellent Bau-Berg-und Weg-Inspector von Schwanefeldt, a new-made man just raised into the minor German nobility. After a protracted courtship-seduction he finds his German beauty, his 'Schätzchen', to be soporifically boring, trivial and disappointingly faithful to her fat husband, and, in a moment of sheer fastidious horror for Cecil, grossly physical in her eating habits – a stock comedy, as mentioned above, of contempt for the embourgeoisement of German aristocratic culture. Finally, in Venice, he meets the Armenian gypsy girl Franszetta, oppressed, passionate for independence from her cruel master, imprisoned for her rebellion against him by the Austrian authorities, desperate, and, finally, murdered by her master – a likely stand-in for Cecil's sympathy, shared with Byron, for Italian independence from Austrian rule, but in Venice transposed onto this doomed female spirit. Byron's harem of Italian women, also introduced, would hardly suffice for the purpose.

In short, in the account of each of these representative female figures there is a representation of Gore's disapproval of the reactionary regimes established in post-Napoleonic Europe. When Cecil returns to England following a distinguished military career in Wellington's army in Portugal, he is appalled at the new political dispensation he discovers there: 'When I quitted England, I left the Prince of Wales surrounded by all that is ultra among the liberals in politics, – his very terrier barking Whiggery'. Upon his return, he complains, 'I find the Prince Regent surrounded by all that is narrowest in Toryism, – his very cockatoo screaming "Huzza for Castlereagh!"' (vol. ii, p. 173). One

of Cecil's first acts on his return is to refurbish his bedroom with the 'sea-green damask' that is precisely the pattern sent out to Longwood, Napoleon's house on St Helena.

Although Gore's engagement with history in *Cecil* reaches major prominence in the final volume of the novel, the subject is never far from her mind. In the first volume of the novel, she contrasts Victorian sages with Regency dandies to make her case for the historical significance of silver fork novels (what they reveal about 'the bent of the public mind'). And, in fact, as Gore goes on to suggest, 'the public mind' might have something to say about historical progress that would be unwelcome to the sage's ears, Carlyle's specifically, in a slowly building and melancholy conclusion that presses upon Cecil through his reflections on the momentous years he has lived through. Anticipating his return from the Continent, Cecil predicts bitterly, 'I knew I should abhor London' (vol. iii, p. 283). This is not the prediction of an effete dilettante, but the promise of a politically charged review of a changed political world. He assesses the orders of society in turn, even the lower orders which until this moment have played little part, though he always mentions this order with sympathy, noting, for example, that Lord Ormington, his father, regularly 'screwed' money out of his tenants for his well-heeled London life. The people, writes Cecil, hold no promise of progress:

A popular assemblage in England, is the dullest-looking thing in nature. Its dinginess seems arrayed in sackcloth and ashes; diversified here and there by the diabolism of a chimney sweep, black with the sins and soot of a sea-coal-fire-warmed generation, too selfish to sweep its flues with machinery. In gazing on a mass of this description, one might fancy, indeed, that the House of Hanover ruled over a nation of dustmen. (vol. iii, p. 250)

As for the hopes of the old Whig aristocracy, the symbolic Hanover Square house of his traditionally Whig father, Lord Ormington, the old house 'looked doomed, – deserted, – sorrow-stricken ... It was scarcely possible to recognise its dull, dingy, dispiriting façade' (vol. iii, p. 295). His mother, representative of the *ancien régime* at its most frivolous, 'all Watteau', he says, has become a recluse and an invalid, confined to her dressing room 'redolent of parrot, toady ... and a villainous compound of patent medicines' (p. 297). Lady Harriet Vandeleur, his mother's friend and the woman who introduced him to fashionable society and, it is hinted, to her bedroom: 'Everything about her now, was *postiche* [*sic*]; – bandeaux, teeth, bloom, shape, lips, eyebrows, *all* as per advertisement! So false did she appear to me in every item, that, when guilty of a laugh, I longed to ask her where she had bought it' (vol. iii, p. 297). As for Cecil's own role as a Regency

dandy, this too has passed away, a victim of utilitarianism, the leading new philosophy of the middle class:

I saw clearly that the Kingdom of Dandyism was in its Lower Empire. As coming events cast their shadows before them, one felt already, even in the early part of the reign of George IV. A weary chill of mind and body, foreshowing the age of utilitarianism. The ornamental was about to pass away, – the graceful to evaporate. (vol. iii, p. 299)

The King's Theatre returns in the last pages as the site, again, of aristocratic failure. In fact, the action date of Cecil's narrative, supposedly 1823–5, reflects the politics of the year of Gore's composition of the novel, 1840–1, when the fall of Lord Melbourne's Whig government was generally expected. Public interest was so agitated by the prospect that the governing committee of the Traveller's Club, Cecil's London club, alarmed by a rash of blackballing attributed to the imminent political upheaval, earnestly entreated its 'members to divest their minds of prejudices arising from recent unpleasant circumstances'.¹

Cecil's final romantic adventure in the novel, which reaches its culminating catastrophe at The King's Theatre, thus marks another missed political alliance for the aristocracy, a repetition and variation of the tale of Emily Barnet. The woman this time, Helena Winstanley, is higher in social rank than Emily, the daughter of a country baronet, and here the symbolic representative of an urgently needed alliance for Lord Melbourne's failing aristocratic government. Sir Gabriel Winstanley, Helena's father, is thoroughly admirable, even by Cecil's demanding standards – good food, good taste, good conversation, a man who is comfortable in urbane society. Helena, like Emily, makes a glowing contrast with women in high life, with her admirably 'plain, rational, common-sensical conversation' (vol. iii, p. 309). Cecil is deeply interested in the potential of the alliance with this family, this time from the titled upper gentry, but again he does not exert himself, exactly like his political analogues in the Whig party, and, worse, takes a place in the entourage of the king, George IV, accompanying the sovereign on his triumphal tour of Scotland.

At this crisis there is no opera in performance at the theatre, but a benefit night for the starving Irish, with 'the brilliancy of the Italian Opera House, – floored into a ball-room, decorated with flags and lustres, garlands and trophies.' Aristocratic power is literally on stage, 'in its finest gauds' says Cecil (vol. iii, p. 310). Despite broad hints from her mother that Helena needs an escort, he avoids a commitment in order to join the court group from Carlton House. At the ball, he reports that when he by accident, 'came suddenly upon Lady

¹ Sir Almeric Fitzroy, *History of the Traveller's Club* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1927), p. 39.

Winstanley's party, I saw the cheeks of Helena flush crimson, and turn to an ashy paleness' (vol. iii, p. 311). That very evening, as he later discovers, Helena's ambitious parents insist on Helena's acceptance of an offer of marriage from Cecil's grotesquely unattractive titled cousin, the Earl of Wolverton, known to his friends as 'Squeamy', a suitor repellant to Helena, but now unavoidable. Cecil's response is to flee to the Mediterranean on a lengthy cruise, only to return to find Helena dead in childbirth with Squeamy's still-born son.

Cecil blames everyone for the catastrophe but himself – Helena for her weakness, the Winstanley's for their social ambition, Squeamy for his lust, all reasonable enough places to set the blame. But, as Gore makes clear, the major fault rests with Cecil, a man of proven talent and abilities, conscious of the high significance of the political and social options offered to him, who once again fails to assume a responsible role as an aristocrat in a new society, a society in which the feminised dandy will one day give way to the muscular Christian and the sentimental heroine will be subsumed by the domestic angel.

Cecil's elegy for The King's Theatre, written in nostalgic retrospection in 1841, makes a topographic sweep of London that includes all the architectural symbols of aristocratic privilege and power that held sway during the Regency, the silver fork world in summation:

Yet, after all, there is something sacred and classical in the old den! – The Opera House is pretty nearly the only place of public amusement of the Prince's time, left standing. Carlton, House, Buckingham House, Ranelagh, Lords, Commons, Whitfield's Chapel, Vauxhall, Forzard's Riding School, the Argyll Rooms, and the King's Mews, – all evaporated, – all flown off *in fumo!* This is the age of demolition, – the era of rubbish. The very nature of London buildings interdicts even a pretension to the venerable ... Newgate and the Tower have recently been dug up and unrolled, like mummies, for the contemplation of the curious in villainy. Between ourselves ... there is good ground still to be broken at the Opera! (vol. i, pp. 102–3)

Taking note of the money that modern speculators had recently made by turning the mast of *HMS Victory* into snuff boxes, Cecil suggests a similarly bourgeois and now suitably Victorian conclusion for the aristocratic old opera house, that is, turning its boards 'into articles of domestic furniture' (vol. i, p. 104). As this bitter mockery suggests, Cecil finds historical progress to be a more ambiguous concept than the Victorians he now lives among would be willing to concede. The ironic melancholy that accompanies Gore's most ambitious novel is not merely 'a straw thrown up to determine the course of the wind', but a baleful exposure of the political miscalculation and cynicism that her political survey of the reform years has discovered, a failure that rocks the world of silver fork London and promises no resolution on the Victorian horizon.

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- 1856 *A Life's Lessons*, 3 vols (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1856)
- 1857 *The Two Aristocracies: a Novel*, 3 vols (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1857)
- 1858 *Heckington: a Novel*, 3 vols (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1858)

PLAYS

- 1831 *Lords and Commons*, 3 acts, Theatre Royal Drury Lane (20 December)
The School for Coquettes, 5 acts, Theatre Royal Haymarket (14 July)
- 1834 *Modern Honour; or, The Sharper in High Life*, 3 acts, Covent Garden (3 December)
The Queen's Champion, 2 acts (10 September). Gore's translation of *Salvoisy; or, The Queens Lover*, by Scribe, De Rougemont, and De Camberousse, 2 acts, Paris (18 April)
- 1835 Gore's translation of Casimir Delavigne's *Don Juan D'Autriche*, 5 acts, Théâtre-Français, Paris (17 October)
King O'Neil; or, The Irish Brigade, a Comedy in Two Acts, Covent Garden (9 December) (London: J. Dicks)
The King's Seal, (with James Kenney), 2 acts, Drury Lane (10 January)
The Maid of Croissey; or Theresa's Vow, a drama in 2 acts (London, J. Dicks)
- 1836 *Don Juan of Austria*, 3 acts, Covent Garden (16 April)
- 1837 *The Tale of a Tub*, 2 acts, Theatre Royal Haymarket (15 July)
- 1839 *A Good Night's Rest; or, Two in the Morning, a farce in one act*, The New Strand Theatre (19 August) (London: J. Dicks)
- 1840 *Dacre of the South: or, The Olden Tyme, a drama* (London: R. Bentley)
- 1844 *Quid Pro Quo; or, The Day of the Dupes*, 5 acts, Theatre Royal Haymarket (18 June). Winner of prize competition for £500

CHRONOLOGY

- 1799/1800 Gore born in London or East Retford, Nottinghamshire, youngest of four children, to Charles (a wine merchant) and Mary Moody (daughter of General George Brinley and Mary Wentworth Brinley).
- 1801 Mary Moody widowed; she marries Dr Charles Nevinson, a London doctor.
- 1810–13 Gore lives for extended periods with Frances, Lady Wentworth, the mother of her godparent Sir Charles-Mary Wentworth. She is nicknamed ‘the Poetess’.
- 1823 (15 February) Gore marries Lieutenant Charles Arthur Gore at St George’s Church, Hanover Square. Gore publishes her first novel, *Two Broken Hearts: A Tale*.
- 1824 Gore publishes a historical romance titled *Theresa Marchmont, or, The Maid of Honour*, which she claimed was written in one week, and a dramatic poem titled *The Bond*.
- 1827 Gore makes a name for herself as a composer. She writes music for several popular poems, including ‘And Ye Shall Walk in Silk Attire’ and ‘The Song of the Highland Chiefs’.
- 1829 *Hungarian Tales* is published.
- 1830 Gore’s first silver fork novel, *Women As They Are; or, The Manners of the Day* is published.
- 1831 First play, *The School for Coquettes* is published; it is a success and runs for thirty nights at the Haymarket Theatre. *Pin Money* and *Mothers and Daughters* are published.
- 1832 Gore meets Benjamin Disraeli at an Edward Bulwer soirée. The Gores move to the Place Vendôme in Paris, where Catherine presides over her own *salon* and Charles has a diplomatic post. *The Opera* and *The Fair of Mayfair* are published.
- 1833 *The Sketch Book of Fashion* is published.
- 1836 *The Diary of a Désennuyée* and *Mrs. Armytage; or Female Domination* are published.

- 1837 *Stokeshill Place; or The Man of Business* and *Memoirs of a Peeress* are published.
- 1838 *The Heir of Selwood* is published.
- 1839 *The Cabinet Minister* is published.
- 1840 *The Dowager* and *Preferment; or, My Uncle the Earl* are published.
- 1841 *Greville; or a Season in Paris* is published. That same week, *Cecil; or, The Adventures of a Coxcomb* appears. Gore publishes a sequel, *Cecil, A Peer* and a series of articles for *Bentley's Miscellany* under the pen name of Albany Poyntz.
- 1842 *The Ambassador's Wife* is published.
- 1843 Prize-winning play, *Quid Pro Quo; or, The Day of the Dupes*, opens at the Haymarket Theatre. *The Banker's Wife, or Court and City* and *The Money-Lender* are published.
- 1844 P. G. Patmore fictionalises Gore as Lady Bab Brilliant in his *Chatsworth*.
- 1845 *Self*, Gore's final 'Cecil' novel is published.
- 1846 *Peers and Parvenus, The Débutante: or the London Season, Men of Capital, and Sketches of English Character* are published. Charles Gore dies in Brussels.
- 1847 *Castles in the Air* is published.
- 1850 Gore receives a large inheritance from a cousin and moves to Hampshire with her only surviving daughter, Cecilia Anne Mary.
- 1853 Cecilia marries Lord Edward Thynne, MP, a younger son of the 2nd Marquis of Bath. *The Dean's Daughter, or the Days We Live In* is published.
- 1854 *Progress and Prejudice* is published.
- 1855 Gore loses almost £19,000 in the bank failure of Strahan, Paul, and Bates. *Mammon, or the Hardships of an Heiress* is published.
- 1857 *The Two Aristocracies* is published.
- 1858 *Heckington* is published.
- 1859 Gore goes blind.
- 1861 Gore dies at Linwood, Lyndhurst, Hampshire.

C E C I L :

OR,

THE ADVENTURES OF A COXCOMB.

A NOVEL.

He was such a delight, – such a coxcomb, – such a
jewel of a man!

BYRON'S JOURNAL.¹

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:

RICHARD BENTLEY, NEW BURLINGTON STREET.

1841.



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PREFACE.

'Go little book! – (to Paternoster Row,
I cast thee on the waters, – go thy ways!
And if, as I suspect, thy vein's so-so,
The world will find thee after many days.'²

SO sang a great poet! – So saith Cecil Danby.

Timid authors, as yet unprivileged to address their readers in the plural number, are exceedingly apt to inscribe their *Nota Benes* to their 'little book.' Mine, I flatter myself, is a prodigious one, and requires no patting on the back. I consequently do not hesitate to speak out to my public, like a man. No need of claptrap speeches from the hustings. I am *sure* of my election; that is – if merit ever carries the day.

Nothing more absurd than to appeal to the indulgence of the public, or the leniency of the press. The public is about as indulgent as the head usher of a preparatory school, or as her Majesty's Attorney-general; while as to the press, its humanity shows 'begrimed and black' beside that of Greenacre or Courvoisier.³

Critics resemble Eastern mutes, who exist by bowstringing⁴ their fellow-creatures, and venting their envious spite on the beauties committed to their hands. Nothing generous, – nothing manly in their nature. The cleverest of them sees in the cleverest book only an occasion to let fly some well-hoarded joke; like the schoolboy who, in a general illumination for some national victory, cares only for his little foolish squib or cracker, whizzing in a corner.

As to the various quarterlies, their articles are only so many sealed tenders sent in to Government for Under-secretaryships to the powers that be, – or want to be. Every now and then, indeed, when the public shows symptoms of discovering that 'their bullets are made of lead, lead, lead,'⁵ they fire off articles of cork and feather.

But even these occasional explosions of gas, (which resemble the pink paper wherewith apothecaries embellish their vials and pillboxes by way of rendering the physic more palatable,) serve only to render darkness visible, like a sexton's rushlight in a charnel-house.⁶ Better adhere to their dulness. Ne sutor ultra crepidam.⁷ No review beyond its heavy artillery: 'adeò nihil motum ex antiquo, probabile est.'⁸

Such Tartuffes,⁹ too, as they are; – highwaymen, who, like Robin Hood, pillage and plunder disguised in the demure weeds of a church-

man! Every now and then they raise an outcry of infection, as for the plague or cholera, and establish a *cordon sanitaire*¹⁰ as in the instance of the modern French novelists; like coiners, who give out that some house is haunted, to pursue their fraudulent practices unsuspected in the cellars.

I discern from hence their puzzled look in perusing these accusations! – Like the young Sultan on the death of his father, they know not what attitude to take. Ten to one, they will try to Burke my book, and render it the prey of the resurrectionists;¹¹ that is, instead of drawing attention to its merits by an impartial criticism, will take me, like Romeo, and ‘cut me out in little stars,’ –¹² dissecting me to ornament their hideous museum. Bless their five wits! Every inch of me would be discovered in their dull pages, glittering like diamonds on the brow of some dingy dowager!

It is some comfort that their denunciations are as little attended to as those of Cassandra, –¹³ or the striking of the parish clock, – or the morning gun of a garrison, – or the ringing for arrivals at Bath, – or the tolling for funerals at Hastings, – or Lord —’s promises to pay, – or any other matter of course. As to influencing the public taste, they have about as much power as the railway train upon the engine that impels it. The public taste drags them after it, like so many baggage wagons, to which it consigns its goods and chattels. No author was ever written up, except by his publisher, (in a cheque,) – or written down, except by himself.

So now, having reviewed the reviewers, I dare their worst. They may ‘damn by faint praise,’ –¹⁴ they may show the white feather, or goose-quill, by shirking my challenge; – they may immortalise themselves by my annihilation, like Major Sirr by the capture of Lord Edward Fitzgerald, or Bertrand de Gourdon by the manslaughter of Richard Cœur de Lion.¹⁵

Let them only, I beseech, eschew excessive laudation. I am still in the swaddling sheets of infant authorship; and the Crowner’s Quests, as reported in the public journals, will instruct them how many promising babes are daily destroyed by excessive doses of Godfrey’s Cordial.¹⁶ Besides, that single act of honesty might get their hands out, and destroy their practice.

Meanwhile I am able to favour the public with a private view of a criticism promised me by a friend in the confidence of the ‘Times’ newspaper, – on payment of a small gratuity. It may have already appeared in that luminous journal, as editors keep this sort of article cut and dry for the first comical book sent in for reviewal. – I really cannot take upon me to say. – I never read the ‘Times,’ unless when I have lost my poodle or a bunch of keys, and choose to ascertain that

my advertisement has been correctly inserted. The notice is to runs as follows: –

CECIL; or the Adventures of a Coxcomb. – 3 Vols. 8vo. – *Bentley*.

‘Flippancy, when it does not merely consist in spiriting forth common-places, learned by heart at some early period in life, to form a stock-in-trade, from which payments may be thrown out *pro bono publico* whenever occasion shall require, and which, so paradoxical in its nature, is not at all diminished thereby, but still remains an inexhaustible source of pleasantries and dogmas, – flippancy, when more than this, is not necessarily a vice. Your dull, heavy, inanimate log cannot be flippant with good grace; it requires talent to skim a surface glibly, to dart among a number of ideas without fathoming one. Skating is an art as well as diving. To make a good flippant writer, there are many requisites: his mind must have been well educated; he must have acquired an easy versatility, a nice mixture of courage and caution, the one to startle his reader with some strange fantasy, the other to steer clear, while in his rapid course, of what may be dangerous, or at any rate, too much for him. If he knows nothing very profoundly, he must know something of a great many matters; and just that which will suit his purpose to fling into an image or point an allusion. He must also catch the tone of society, to pass off his little vagaries on the public; the good sense not to shock anybody, though occasionally tempted into irreverence; and, above all, a very tolerable opinion of himself, which he need be at no pains to conceal, but should rather put forward, as if his careless manner of dismissing objects half-considered did not at all proceed from his own incompetence to go deeper, but rather as if such little things as the interests of nations, philosophy, science, literature, and the fine arts, were not of so much importance that his august self should take too much trouble about them, although very familiar with all, and perfectly ready to sport good-humouredly with any. In a word, your first-rate flippant writer must be a very pleasant, clever, well-bred, lively, smart, slippery, facetious, and last, not least, unblushing sort of person.’

Such is the opinion entertained of me by the ‘Times.’ If, on the other hand, any gentleman find cause for offence in these my pages, I am to be found at the Traveller’s any time from three to eight; or at Crockey’s¹⁷ any time from eleven to six in the morning. My weapons are Mantons, – my friends the two most long-winded K. C. Bs. of the United Service.¹⁸ Unless prosed to death previously by my seconds, I shall on the slightest summons, have the honour to be, their most obedient humble servant.

C. D.



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CECIL;
OR THE
ADVENTURES OF A COXCOMB.

CHAPTER I.

‘Vanitas, – vanitatis!’¹⁹

BIOGRAPHERS are fond of attributing the dispositions of their heroes to heroic sources. Since it is my fate to tell my own story, I choose to tell it in my own way; and am free to confess that the leading trait of my character has its origin in the first glimpse I caught of myself, at twelve months old, in the swing-glass of my mother’s dressing-room. I looked, and became a coxcomb for life!

My Self consisted, at that epoch, of a splendid satin cockade, with a puny infant face thereunto attached; while a flowing robe of embroidered cambric, four feet by ten, disguised my nonentityism, – and veiled, –

Thought shrinks from all that lurked below!²⁰

The spectacle, enhanced by a showy sash of gorgeous ribbon, was the very thing to captivate a baby’s eye; and it was soon discovered that Master Cecil was always screaming, unless danced up and down by the head nurse within view of the reflection of his own fascinating little person.

‘Take him to the glass, nurse!’ was my mother’s invariable mode of pacifying my shrieks, when my fractiousness interrupted the process of her toilet, rendering it inconvenient to contemplate her beauties in her own. ‘Take him to the glass, poor little fellow! He loves to look at his ribbons fluttering in the light.’

I suspect that, even then, what I loved to look at, was the same personal reflection that delighted the eyes of her ladyship. But no matter.

When my little self, or rather my great nurse, grew tired of the dancing system, there were other glittering objects in my mother’s sanctum which I found almost equally attractive, – jewels, feathers,