The Upstart Peril in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel

Lydia Craig

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THE UPSTART PERIL IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH NOVEL

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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BY
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For Caleb and Sarah.
No, Becky – our hearts neither bleed for you, nor cry out against you. You are wonderfully clever, and amusing, and accomplished, and intelligent, and the Soho ateliers were not the best nurseries for a moral training; and you were married early in life to a regular blackleg, and you have had to live upon your wits ever since, which is not an improving sort of maintenance; and there is much to be said for and against; but still you are not one of us, and there is an end to our sympathies and censures. People who allow their feelings to be lacerated by such a character and career as yours, are doing both you and themselves great injustice.

Elizabeth Rigby, Lady Eastlake
“Review 1,” Little’s Living Age (1849)
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ABSTRACT

Responding to the French Revolution (1789-1799) with his widely read text *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), conservative Whig politician Edmund Burke influentially accused an ambitious bourgeoisie of inciting the lower classes to revolt against the aristocracy and Bourbon dynasty. He also insinuated that only the class hierarchy and feudal respect prevented a similar upstart peril in England from occasioning revolution. For the English middle classes, this demonization of upstarts, or *parvenus* posed an ideological challenge to their public consolidation as a political and cultural force. Bourgeois authors from Jane Austen to Charles Dickens utilized an upstart rivalry device in the English novel to convey the moral differences existing between the selfish, ambitious, and rebellious lower-class upstart and the civic-minded, selfless, and industrious bourgeoisie. Initially, this moral distinction rejected the allegations of a bourgeois upstart peril, didactically instructing readers to practice dignified contentment rather than jeopardize class distinctions through aristocratic aspirations, but it also represented a literary defense of ongoing middle-class rise. Similar socioeconomic backgrounds of upstarts and authorial reluctance to entirely blame the selfish upstart, suggests resentment of the hereditary elite in failing to address societal issues in the first part of the nineteenth century, tasks assumed instead by the bourgeoisie following the Reform Bill (1832). Ultimately, the literary upstart rivalry in the English novel will be shown as assisting in the portrayal of Victorian middle-class desires as distinct in selflessness and public use from aristocratic hedonism or lower-class greed, leading to the cultural celebration of the bourgeois hero and heroine in England.
INTRODUCTION

THE UPSTART PERIL IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH NOVEL

Within the Victorian novel, a bourgeois-dominated genre, often appear fascinated allusions to a recent period occurring before the first Reform Bill (1832) and the cultural arrival of the middle-class by the 1840s as a literary and cultural power. Describing her own life through the device of a fictive male narrator, Eliza Lynn Linton stresses in *The Autobiography of Christopher Kirkland* (1885) how different things were during her childhood in 1820s England (Saudo-Welby 2). Then, according to the novel’s narrator, the poor and homeless were execrated, Jamaican slaves and the working-class labored without redress, and rigid laws were unreformed. What marked the “true gentleman’s creed” during this turbulent epoch was

Belief in the divine right of Kings; in the saintly martyrdom of Charles I.; in the criminality of Cromwell and the hypocrisy of Puritanism; [...] in the diabolical origin of the French Revolution, of which the echoes still reverberated through the awakening world; in the infinite iniquity of Bonaparte [...] as well as belief in the damnable instincts of the ‘many-headed monsters,’ as the people proper were called. (5)

Logistically, many of these allusions would seem to refer to separate historical and contemporary beliefs espoused by an early nineteenth-century gentleman, an individual defined at the time as a property-owning non-titled man located just beneath the landed gentry (French 269). However, the discerning reader might wonder if they are linked somehow by a class-based ideology. Is there a precise relation between the violent culmination of the English Civil War and recent events in France, the anathematization of the regicide Oliver Cromwell as a criminal and the “infinite iniquity” of Napoleon Bonaparte, self-proclaimed Emperor of France? In the twenty-
first century, the French Revolution (1789-1799) is an event largely interpreted as occasioned by monarchical excess, a press campaign against the Bourbon dynasty, and food shortages among the French poor; therefore, in the 1820s, what was considered to be its “diabolical origin”?

Upstarts, or those suddenly rising into a higher social rank, were considered to be the cause of the French Revolution, according to Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) which was widely read and debated until the 1830s (69). It will be argued that in England an ideological panic ensued regarding what will be referred to as “the upstart peril,” the contemporary perception that ambitious citizens from the middling ranks of merchants, lawyers, and politicians, similarly intended to rouse the discontented poor to overthrow the Hanoverian dynasty and abolish the aristocracy. Upstarts were not a new phenomenon, frequently marked for cultural scrutiny when military success and mercantile endeavors led to extreme economic gains during, for instance, the Elizabethan period. This study insists that though English upstarts had been perceived as politically corrupt or a hindrance to establishing a clear social hierarchy of rank, they were not interpreted in the novel or cultural discourse as murderous, lethal, and pervasive until after the French Revolution. Fermented by a population boom during the Regency and the perceived explosion of upwardly mobile individuals from the middle-ranks in the two decades prior to Reform, the upstart peril then caused a bitter division between liberal Whigs and conservative Tories, with Linton marveling in retrospect at the high degree of “party spirit” caused by this crisis: “As well ask Juliet for Romeo, as ask of a Tory father his daughter in marriage for the son of a Whig” (6). In large measure, the worst of this contest ended with a decisive Whig political victory in 1831 and the passage of the Reform Bill championed by Earl Grey, with aristocratic support for liberal measures refuting prior allegations that reforming
Whigs were unprincipled, designing upstarts. Throughout this period, the English novel acted as a vital site of debate regarding the presence of upstarts in English society, culturally negotiating an obvious compromise between Tory abhorrence and Whig support for social climbers.

The thesis of this dissertation is that bourgeois authors used the novel to defend against Burke’s allegation of the murderous upstart by creating a didactic contrast between what will be termed “deserving” and “undeserving” upstarts engaged in a rivalry; this competition generally acts to exhibit the moral blamelessness and social utility of the bourgeois upstart in contrast to the unbridled greed and selfishness of the corrupted bourgeois or lower-class other, the dreaded closet revolutionary. Written by the bourgeoisie for the bourgeoisie, this upstart rivalry does not advocate for aristocratic overthrow, but acknowledges abuses of the haughty elite perpetrated against their social inferiors. While not wholeheartedly condemning the lower classes for their illicit social desires, the rivalry insists on their imitation of bourgeois ideals and manners as a qualification for moderate social mobility. Rather than join the aristocracy, as often attempted by undeserving upstarts in the English novel, the deserving upstart creates a new identity in the middle of the social hierarchy that leads to a recognizable middle-class ethos in the English novel by 1850 predicated upon philanthropy, selflessness, and industry. Rather than represent the catalyst for revolution, the bourgeois nineteenth-century upstart is the preventative, a moderate, if not wholly disinterested agent in realizing the enactment of social reform. First appearing in the novels of Jane Austen drafted in the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution, the upstart rivalry acts as an instructional behavioral guide to the bourgeoisie of how to avoid behavior that would render them morally undeserving of their permanent social place located above the lower classes. In novels published between 1811 and 1850, this device either
endeavors to combat greed and self-interest by displacing these qualities from the bourgeois to the lower ranks, or rebukes avaricious climbers attempting to rise above the middle ranks into the aristocracy for betraying the best and brightest moral promise of their steady social rise.

**Literature Review**

Before delineating specifics of this argument, terminology used to define and distinguish between English social classes in this dissertation will be briefly explained, acknowledging the subjective nature of any descriptors for historical sociological developments. The late eighteenth-century iteration of the English bourgeoisie has been defined by Peter Earle as a population inhabiting a “middle class or ‘middle station’” composed of “commercial and industrial capitalists and professional men who work hard to make profits and improve themselves” (327). John Seed notes that besides needing to “generate an income from some kind of active occupation(s),” the middle classes “were distinguished from the labouring majority by their possession of property – whether mobile capital, stock in trade, or professional credentials – and by their exemption from manual labour” (115). By the early Victorian period, these kinds of bourgeoisie had “arrived” in their own eyes, a population block newly enabled by greater political freedoms permitted under the Reform Bill, though they continued to distinguish types among themselves based on gradations of middle-class rank, i.e., “between entrepreneurial and professional modes” (Goodlad 144). To differentiate between the Victorian bourgeoisie and their recent ancestors, terms such as “middling ranks” or “middle classes” will refer to the early nineteenth-century bourgeoisie while “middle class” will designate the same population group at mid-century. “Aristocracy,” “upper-class” and “elite” generally will refer to the hereditary gentry and nobility of Great Britain, positioned above landed gentlemen in the upper bourgeois or
middle class ranks and beneath royalty and the reigning monarch, whose wealth derived from land ownership before also accruing from investments at mid-century (Bush 61). Finally, “lower classes” and “working classes” will refer to the nineteenth-century proletariat, though upstarts from their ranks will be designated as “lower class” owing to their frequent refusal to perform manual labor as they strive upwards into the bourgeoisie and even the aristocracy.

By scrutinizing English novels of the first half of the nineteenth century that responded to the upstart peril and marking the ideological progress of the deserving and undeserving upstart rivalry to mid-century, this dissertation intervenes in several areas of scholarly discourse. Firstly, it traces a reactionary ideological influence of the French Revolution on the English novel, which has not been studied, though historians and literary critics have observed that English bourgeois identity formation was profoundly influenced by the French Revolution, which caused the rising middle-class to define itself as a social good rather than a chaotic revolutionary development. Dror Wahrman has noted that the idea of the middle class as a buffer against lower-class discontent emerged in response to Burke’s accusations that the French bourgeoisie, eager to supplant the aristocracy, had motivated the poor to revolt. Contemporary opponents insisted instead that the revolution had been caused by the absence of bourgeois influence and systemic reform. After the English reform movement accumulated support in the 1820s by associating socioeconomic improvements with the bourgeoisie, Wahrman claims that the Reform Bill (1832) “was the crucial factor in cementing the invention of the ever-rising “middle class” (18). Yet in his dating, Wahrman focuses exclusively on the emergence of such ideological rhetoric in the public press, as a purely political phenomenon. Faulting Wahrman’s sole insistence on how “middle-class” construction occurred, Simon Gunn points out that such a view “exaggerates the
extent to which the ‘political’ itself can be divorced from other discursive categories, moral, social, economic, and cultural” (32). However, Gunn himself does not mention other cultural avenues such as the English novel when discussing the development of early nineteenth-century bourgeois ideology in the wake of the French Revolution and the subsequent Napoleonic Wars.

Secondly, this study reveals the role of popular literature in assisting the formation of middle-class identity, which was negotiated not only in the press, but through the novel of the 1810s-1820s, which debated the merits of deserving and undeserving social climbers into the bourgeoisie. Regarding the growing popularity and influence of the novel in England, Nicholas Hudson notes that the late eighteenth century saw increased interest in the social vision provided by writers in this genre, especially in regard to class:

By the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the novel had gained sufficient authority as a literary genre to enter fully into the debate about the nature of the modern social hierarchy. Novels became highly sensitive to issues of ‘class’ in a more modern sense—that is, the conflicting claims and rights of the landed elite, the newly wealthy, and people without either status or money. (2015)

Yet his examples of such explorations into Jacobin and high society novels are dated prior to the French Revolution, an event which provoked extreme fear, debate, and apprehension regarding the question of natural preeminence. Bourgeois authors contended that moderate social rise tended to improve social morality in an age of aristocratic excess, with domestic virtues like economy, philanthropy, and industry replacing the *nouveau riche* impulse to imitate aristocratic luxury and decadence. Conventionally, in late eighteenth-century novels following Samuel Richardson’s influential *Pamela* (1740), such as *Evelina* (1778) and *Cecilia* (1782) by Fanny Burney, the upstart plot had been softened by the device of having the heroine be raised by members of the English middle classes, eventually to discover aristocratic ancestry or inherit a
fortune. Besides forestalling criticism of anti-feudalist tendencies, this device importantly explained the heroines’ access to corrupt aristocratic circles that could then be viewed with bourgeois moral dismay. After the French Revolution, it was necessary to drop this tactic and present these values in their right aspect as belonging to the justifiably rising middle classes.

Thirdly, with few exceptions, the period between 1800 and 1840 is interpreted as a dead zone for literary depictions of class, overwhelmingly dominated by fanciful Gothic and Romantic genres, a view presented as premature, the result of primarily considering male writers within the Regency and late Georgian eras rather than the thriving and female-dominated “silver fork” novels containing plots set among London’s aristocratic *beau monde*, a genre largely discredited by Victorians, as described in Chapter 3. Influentially, Arnold Kettle explores novels by Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, and Laurence Sterne, only examining those by Jane Austen and Sir Walter Scott on the way to Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, and other well-known novelists (86). Similarly, James Kilroy progresses from Austen to Thackeray and Dickens. In his study of eighteenth and early nineteenth century novels, Homer Obed Brown turns from Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1759) to Jacobite works by Sir Walter Scott, such as *Waverley* (1814), *Rob Roy* (1817), and *Redgauntlet* (1824) (138). *The Cambridge History of the English Novel* similarly skips from Richardson to Romance and Gothic narratives to Sir Walter Scott’s historiography and from thence to the Victorians. Consequently, as argued by critics such as Peter Knox-Shaw, Rosa Slegers, and Judith L. Fisher, certain novels from the first half of the nineteenth century which powerfully valorize Victorian middle-class qualities of industry and social empathy, are considered to be in exclusive dialogue with eighteenth-century novels and philosophical texts, the “liberal tenets of a previous generation,”
in Knox-Shaw’s phrase (131-132).\(^1\) However, he notes that opinions of Austen’s work are held back by “a reluctance to admit how widespread the concern with social stability was in the post-revolutionary period, and how fully coexistent it was with an active belief in the need for reform” (131-132). It is time to investigate how bourgeois novelists responded to the upstart peril and thus participated in a vital socio-political movement waged through literature.

Fourthly, scholars investigating class anxieties in the nineteenth-century English novel mostly focus upon mid to late Victorian novels written after 1850, whereas this study establishes that heightened anxieties centered around the upstart discussion reached their zenith in those published between 1811 and 1850, with a flurry of interest in re-historicizing upstarts following the passage of the Reform Bill. Generally, the nineteenth century is acknowledged as a time of great social change, in which Great Britain emerged as the dominant world power after the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815), consolidated imperial acquisitions, and enjoyed unprecedented economic success during the reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901). Quoting Humphrey House’s designation of the Victorian era as a consciously “parvenu civilisation,” Robin Gilmour perceives it as a time in which reform measures and the transition from an aristocratic to a mercantile order were spearheaded by the middle classes. These were, “the chief agents and beneficiaries of these unprecedented developments, the parvenus who transformed a ‘feudal’ society into a ‘modern’ one” (Gilmour, *The Victorian*, 3). Adjusting to the new class dynamics required the bourgeoisie to ascertain what they should do with their new prominence and how they should behave, a discussion occurring in the English novel. In the 1830s-1840s fiction of William Makepeace Thackeray and Charles Dickens, Gilmour notes a “defensiveness about re-

definitions of gentility” at a time when “the new middle classes sought to define their identity in relation to aristocracy” (Gilmour, The Victorian, 20-21). However, this is perceiving a later stage of the ideological conversation as held by the “arrived” and consolidated mid-century Victorian middle-class, rather than the middle-classes as they responded to the French Revolution, Burke’s prognostications, socioeconomic turbulence and the reform movement, the Whig victory of 1831, and the passage of the Reform Bill (1832). Earlier novels focusing on upstarts appeared concurrent with the social need for these critical historical moments to be interrogated and ideologically situated for bourgeois benefit.

**Literary Upstarts Before 1789 and After 1850**

To register the galvanizing force of the French Revolution in challenging bourgeois conceptions of the middle classes as portrayed in literature, it is helpful to briefly compare how upstarts were presented in English culture and the novel on both sides of this seminal world event. Before events in France, they appeared in the novel as repentant malefactors, unwilling aspirants, or successful newcomers to London society who would always be lowborn in comparison to dukes and earls. Afterwards, as upstarts were suspected revolutionaries, whether bourgeois or lower-class, novelists felt compelled to remonstrate against this reactionary accusation by emphasizing the lower-class, not bourgeois potential for revolution, and arguing instead for reform. Impatient with aristocratic reluctance to cede power, some novelists like Gore even express sympathy for the downtrodden poor abused by wealthy hereditary elites, providing a foretaste of the Victorian emphasis on philanthropy and public service. That such interventions were influential over succeeding decades seems likely, as by the time of the 1850s, the consolidated Victorian middle class confidently anticipated building on their newfound cultural
influence and continued to debate and argue for a series of influential political reforms in the novel genre. Despite the disguise of their new social identity, an equivalent for the Victorian bourgeoisie had not featured in the feudal system. Risen from the occupational classes, enriched by mercantile gains and industrial activity, this was an upstart class if regarded in a long historical sense, over several centuries, whose elevation and purpose had sought justification and worked out their own ethics through the depiction of upstarts in the English novel.

The common practice of partitioning areas of literary study, has caused scholars specializing in eighteenth-century literature focusing on social mobility as a central theme to miss the turn-of-the-century reactionary shift in the English novel mulling the dangers of upstart activity when engaged in by the lower classes. The question of upstarts had long preoccupied literary attention in this genre, a question taken from wider literary discourse starting with the medieval peasant quatrain memorably recited by radical John Ball on the field of Blackheath during the Peasants’ Revolt of 1388, led by himself and peasant Wat Tyler:

When Adam delv’d and Eve span,
Who was then a gentleman?
Upstart a churl and gathered good,
And thence did spring our gentle blood. (Justice 108)

While this line of thought suggested coyly that rank was a social and financial construct, pamphlets like Robert Greene’s *A Quip for an Upstart Courtier* (1592) and *Pleasant Quipps for Upstart Newfangled Gentlewomen* (1596) by Stephen Gosson satirized social climbers as arrogant and crass newcomers from the working classes who had entered a station not rightfully

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their own. Michael McKeon perceives the Early Modern iteration of the novel as compelled to answer key cultural questions as the gentry and middle classes of tradesmen formulated, notably, “Should social mobility be taken to alter the group identity of those undergoing movement and to swell the ranks of the group toward which movement is directed, or do the socially mobile bring their former group identity with them to their new locale?” (160) Combining the gentry and nobility together as the “aristocracy” was a neat solution that avoided the question, according to McKeon, allowing the Tory party to support conservative ideology and Whigs progressive ideology, without the realization that ambitious bourgeois members of both parties opposed the full implications of aristocratic privilege; consequently, it was left to the novel of the future to debate the merits of heredity compared to natural talent.

While seeing this literary focus as contributing to modern social concepts, McKeon’s study ends in 1740, only noting this question appeared with renewed emphasis in the eighteenth-century English novel as individuals without land or title prospered, financed by the industrial revolution and colonialism. Occasional lower-class incursions into the middle ranks were permitted by literary characters if they demonstrated repentance for any lucrative crimes committed prior to the time of writing or displayed self-effacing respect for class superiors that assuaged concerns that they would act arrogantly towards hereditary superiors. Richard Head’s *The English Rogue* (1665) prefaced by the epigram, “Read, but don’t Practice: for the Author findes/They which live Honest have most quiet minds,” is narrated by Meriton Latroon, who tantalizingly warns readers not to imitate the tactics that secured his fortune; he is now allegedly

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3 Randle Cotgrave’s *A French-English Dictionary* (1650) provides a clue as to the term’s developing usage in this period, by defining “mouscheron,” or mushroom fourthly as “an upstart Gentleman,” one who has seemingly been raised up overnight into the quality (193).
remorseful for his lucrative crimes committed in Great Britain and abroad (np). Deeming *Moll Flanders* by Daniel Defoe (1722) “The Original American Novel,” which traces the narrator’s rise to “respectable and propertied English citizenship,” Elizabeth Maddock Dillon observes, that it “as a whole is about nothing so much as the success of social mobility figured as primarily commercial; Moll moves from her unpromising start in Newgate, through a series of marriages and a criminal career, eventually attaining a repentant and wealthy state” (248). Because Moll obeys the moral imperative to repent, she can enjoy her new status in Defoe’s novel, which is set during the turbulent Civil War (1642-1651). Two decades later, *Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) by Samuel Richardson features a servant girl so hesitant to cross the vast social gulf between herself and her lecherous bourgeois master Mr. B— that she only agrees to marriage to preserve her virtue (236-237). This “modern variant of the age-old Cinderella theme,” as Ian Watt describes it, speaks to bourgeoisie desire for similar advancement (204). However, Pamela never forgets her obligation to Mr. B— for raising her up so far out of her station, seemingly intent on a posture of humility that negates the social destabilization suggested by the fact of her ascension to the status of gentlewoman.

In the 1850s, the established English bourgeoisie are advised in the English novel to guard against lower-class upward mobility into their ranks that is facilitated by crime or greed, a clear signal that something has occurred in the interregnum to put them on their guard. The treatment of upstarts reveals that a clear notion of middle-class identity has been articulated as exemplifying the entrepreneurial traits of honesty, industry, and social empathy, whereas the lower classes are felt to be by nature deceitful, lazy, dangerously exploitative, and a menace to the preservation of bourgeois status when illicitly ambitious. Lara Baker Whelan observes, “That
the middle class came into its own in Britain in the nineteenth century is well documented, but despite its continued consolidation of power and cultural dominance throughout the century, the issue of class identification – who was in, who was out and how one was to know – remained a contested issue, primarily among those who considered themselves ‘in’” (2). Whelan cites Augustus Mayhew’s *Paved with Gold, or The Romance and Reality of the London Streets: An Unfashionable Novel* (1858), in which a workhouse boy turns to crime while penetrating the middle-class, a novel focused on “the dishonesty of the poor, the possibility of financial ruin by mistaking a lower-class person for middle class” (47). Introducing the subject as inspired by his brother Henry Mayhew’s journalistic offering *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851), Mayhew insists, “Of course, crime means – unrestrained selfishness, or, in other words, the gratification of desires, regardless of the misery the indulgence may inflict on others” (Preface). Repentance is not sufficient to atone for lower-class selfishness, desire, and the absence of care for fellow citizens, as these negative traits threaten the welfare of the bourgeoisie and the very stability, it is insinuated, of English society itself.

Though the lower-class upstart represents a menace if pursuing selfish and illegal activities illustrative of a grasping nature, this figure is welcomed if demonstrating bourgeois traits as a hard-working, honest, and empathetic self-made gentleman. Gilmour has traced how authors of the 1830s and 1840s helped to alter the term to refer not to landed men of leisure but to a bourgeois “interdependence of morals and manners, the ethical and the social” as Gilmour has summarized (*The Idea*, 12). A morally upright ideology for achieving upward mobility is offered for the lower class in *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1857) by Dinah Mulock Craik, a narrative praising this upstart hero for doggedly and bravely working his way to well-deserved
prominence as a thriving industrialist and man of fortune. Found at the dawn of the nineteenth century as an orphaned and illiterate street urchin, John refuses to accept alms from the Quaker tanner Abel Fletcher when he holds out a coin and asks significantly, “Art thee a lad to be trusted?” Though he is sorely tempted owing to his hunger and fatigue, the boy resists: “John Halifax neither answered nor declined his eyes. He seemed to feel that this was a critical moment, and to have gathered all his mental forces into a serried square, to meet the attack. He met it, and conquered in silence” (4). Choosing to work for the coin rather than exploit society, John begins a life of incessant physical toil, rewarded for his virtue and kindness to the poor and those in distress by winning the love of an upper class heiress. Gaining aristocratic friends impressed by his worth ethic, public service, and staunch morality, John realizes immense success in the Victorian era, a triumphant emblem of the entrepreneurial bourgeois ethos delineated in Samuel Smiles’s *Self-Help* (1859). Smiles insists, “National progress is the sum of individual industry, energy, and uprightness, as national decay is of individual idleness, selfishness, and vice” (16). By this decade, the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie has improved national character by setting an example of personally profitable and socially beneficial labor that enables, rather than precludes, social rise.

In the English novel, a shift had not only taken place between the 1740s and 1850s in how the middling ranks and lower classes were presented in relation to each other, but also in how bourgeoisie should regard the aristocracy. Between the 1740s and 1789, novelists of class and manners such as Charlotte Lennox and Fanny Burney, as aforementioned, became increasingly preoccupied with the immoral behavior of the English elite in the urban setting and the gaucheness of newcomers to their elevated society. Barbara Zonitch perceives Burney’s
heroine Evelina in particular as acting as an apologist for aristocratic misdemeanors on the one hand and becoming frustrated on the other by the upstart Branghton family’s repeated ignorance of rigid social conventions, emotional violence, and embarrassing faux pas that threaten Evelina’s own chances to make a good marriage, which she eventually achieves by becoming the bride of Lord Orville (48). However, the full implications of bourgeois encounters with aristocracy and nobility are elided by the frequent Cinderella-like conclusions of novels of this kind. Unlike the French novel *Gil Blas* (1715-1735) by Alain-René Lesage, in which a servant rises to become a nobleman, the shock of a hero or heroine’s eventual social rise is lessened in the mid to late eighteenth-century English novel by the penultimate revelation that each has been, unwittingly, a lady or gentleman all along by birth and will now inherit an already established estate and financial income in his rightful social sphere, as in Henry Fielding’s *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling* (1749) and Fanny Burney’s *Evelina* (1778). Only after the French Revolution would bourgeois authors begin to prioritize their own in comparison to the aristocracy, retaining respect for rank but valorizing merit to a greater extent.

Rising gradually out of the feudal system, the Victorian middle-class clarified its intentions and ethos in reference to the classes above and below by employing the novel as a means of identity exploration and formation. So prevalent are novels containing these themes after mid-century, that scholars perceive this dialogue as innately Victorian, rather than an inheritance from the Regency and late Georgian eras, continuing to morph after 1850 in response to increasing opportunities for education, social Darwinism, and insistence on the moral and industrial power of the industrious bourgeoisie in relation to the aristocracy and poor. Kevin Swafford suggests that the novels of Anthony Trollope anxiously illustrate the social “fantasy”
of an almost divinely appointed order, his characters demonstrating that “snobs, upstarts, and crass materialists seek to perform or act out the roles of social distinction and superiority, whereas the rightful exemplars and heirs of status and power simply exist” (4). Such concern suggests that all class identities are performative and can be falsified, Swafford explains:

> For Victorians of all sorts and conditions, the public discourse concerning class was articulated as anything but contingent and performative; and yet the prescribed boundaries of class identity (significantly between the aristocracy and the middle class) could not be distinguished securely except through a perpetual recognition of and adherence to a realm of symbolic action and cultural production. The sense that one must *perform class*, through a host of symbolic actions, practices, beliefs, tastes, and desires, was an unspoken source of anxiety that was often avoided and repressed within the ruling classes of Victorian society and culture. Aware of the worrisome possibility that class distinction might be based upon something thought to be ultimately false (i.e., performance, or playing a studied and calculated role), Trollope hopes to elaborate an idea and a means of marking authentic and inauthentic class distinctions. (3-4)

Publishing his first novel, *La Vendée: An Historical Romance* in 1850, Trollope belongs to a later generation of Victorian writers than Dickens or Thackeray and benefits from their clear literary message that the middle class cannot be absorbed into the aristocracy if the feudal structure is to endure. Experiencing anxiety that class itself is not an accurate determinant of personal worth, Trollope is strangely concerned that the boundaries between the new gentlemen and old aristocracy will fracture, hindering accurate assessment of hierarchy. Victorian middle-class social anxieties like those evidenced by Trollope that the bourgeois and aristocracy might become indistinguishable are echoes of the upstart peril succeeding the French Revolution.

**The French Revolution and the Upstart Peril**

Initially, the British sympathized with the desperate French advocating for increased liberty and condemned the corrupt aristocracy. However, when stories reached London of the storming of the Bastille prison on 14 July 1789, public figures like Edmund Burke deplored
revolutionary excess. A Whig politician who had supported the American Revolution, Burke now adopted a conservative perspective in his widely read *Reflections*, which was quickly co-opted by members of the Tory party. He maintained that the French proletariat, egged on by an ambitious bourgeoisie, had foolishly discarded the feudal structure. Lamenting, “You might have repaired those walls; you might have built on those old foundations,” Burke suggests that had the French chosen better aristocratic patrons to replace corrupt nobility, they would have become instead:

> a protected, satisfied, laborious, and obedient people, taught to seek and to recognize the happiness that is to be found by virtue in all conditions; in which consists the true moral equality of mankind, and not in that monstrous fiction, which, by inspiring false ideas and vain expectations into men destined to travel in the obscure walk of laborious life, serves only to aggravate and imbitter [sic] that real inequality, which it never can remove. (53-54)

Aristocratic paternalism solved social ills, Burke claimed, “arguing that society was so complex, intricate, and fragile that it must be held together by bonds of deference, affection, and habit” (Roberts 30). In England, according to Burke, respect for the “liberal decent [sic]” of aristocrats as defenders of liberty, “inspires us with a sense of habitual native dignity, which prevents that upstart insolence almost inevitably adhering to and disgracing those who are the first acquirers of any distinction” (47-50). Thus, hereditary privilege ordered and regulated society.

Initially, Burke’s animus against the upstart met with bourgeois disapproval, with respondents rejecting the notion of rightful aristocratic supremacy and restraints for middle-class rise in a literary exchange known as the Revolutionary Controversy. British respondents believed conservative calls to venerate feudal structures directly conflicted with the capitalist ideology of industry, profit, and self-betterment. An anonymous writer observed,
Mr. B—’s notion, of considering the foundation of all our rights to be an inheritance from our ancestors, may do well for those who have received from their ancestors a good inheritance, but what are they to do whose liberty has no bearings or ensigns armorial, “no gallery of portraits nor settlements in tail [sic]. They must purchase freedom, though it be with their blood: well may such men feel that honest pride, which Mr. Burke calls “upstart insolence;” well may they be proud of acquiring for their posterity what others are so proud of receiving from their ancestors “it is better to give than to receive.” (Anonymous (“Irishman”) 25)

Industry was useless if financial gains could not be passed on to descendants, with subsequent generations benefitting from higher social status in consequence, as seemed natural and even beneficial for the country. To an appreciative British readership in Rights of Man (1792), Thomas Paine wrote, “The greatest characters the world have known, have risen on the democratic floor. Aristocracy has not been able to keep a proportionate pace with democracy” (33). Economically, innovation and genius could galvanize Britain as a nation, but potential leaders from the middle classes were politically restrained. England itself was in dire need of reform, Paine pointed out, with the majority of the population lacking suffrage rights or political influence in a land overwhelmingly ruled by aristocrats according to woefully outdated laws.

With the start of The Terror (1793-1794), Burke’s anti-revolutionary views gained traction, the British appalled at press portrayals of wholesale extermination of aristocrats and mass imprisonments even of radical thinkers like Paine. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall claim “the growth of a native revolutionary movement and the campaign for political reform, together with the excesses in France, produced a backlash which drew all property owners together (19). With Burke’s prophecy fulfilled in France, the English condemned the executions of the Bourbon king and queen and began to vilify the French revolutionaries, fearing a popular uprising by the disaffected lower classes. In The Maid of Normandy; or, The Death of the Queen of France, a 1794 play by Edmund John Eyre, the lovely and maternal Queen Marie Antoinette,
is executed by what horrified French witnesses term “An upstart, desperate race, who vulture
like, /Will, with rav’rous beak, and cruel talons, /Prey on the entrails of our bleeding land”
(Eyre, Act 4, Scene 3, 74). To join Burke in condemning revolution overthrowing the monarch
and ruling classes, historians sought to represent analogous moments of English lower-class and
bourgeois rebellion against the social hierarchy, such as the Civil War (1641-1651), the
execution of Charles I (1649), and The Glorious Revolution (1688) as either dastardly but brief
occurrences by traitors or partially justifiable measures to secure English civic and religious
freedoms. Instead of learning from the fate of the French aristocracy to pursue systemic
restructuring and alleviate poverty, what H.T. Dickinson terms “a powerful conservative reaction
against reform” now stressed deferential respect for social superiors, following Burke (8).
Conservatives sought to detach the British from philosophic liberalism, urgently extolling the
dubious benefits of aristocratic rule amidst food shortages and riots.

Cultural animus against the upstart intensified as the general Napoleon Bonaparte, an
Italian, justified the late Burke’s earlier prophecies by seizing power in France in 1799,
proclaiming himself emperor in 1804, and proceeding to topple European dynasties. Vilifying
those who “find, on all sides, bounds to their unprincipled ambition in any fixed order of things,”
Burke had claimed upstarts benefitted from revolution, a liminal state of turmoil envisioned as a
“fog and haze” under cover of which boundless social possibilities could occur (69). He insisted
that such a one in France would arise preeminent in the power vacuum:

[…] [S]ome popular general, who understands the art of conciliating the soldiery, and
who possesses the true spirit of command, shall draw the eyes of all men upon himself.
Armies will obey him on his personal account […] But the moment in which that event
shall happen, the person who really commands the army is your master; the master (that
is little) of your king, the master of your Assembly, the master of your whole republic.
(318)
Concerning this apt prediction, Jesse Norman comments, “The King would be dead already. But otherwise this is a frighteningly exact description of the emergence of Napoleon Bonaparte” (153). The British press followed the lead of Samuel Taylor Coleridge in terming Bonaparte an “upstart Corsican,” a “monster,” and a “base-born usurper” (Bainbridge, The Oxford, 49; Bainbridge, “Napoleon,” 452). Reportedly, Bonaparte’s own minister Prince Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord explained to a fellow aristocrat, “This is the age of upstarts and I prefer bowing to them, to being trampled upon and crushed by them” (Stewarton 111). A self-serving figure abused in the early nineteenth century as a revolutionary, fraud, frog, parvenu, and villain, among other epithets, the English upstart was loathed as never before as a societal menace.

For members of the economically thriving and upwardly mobile middle classes, the upstart peril did not only threaten king, country, and aristocracy, but also the success of their own dynastic ambitions for themselves and their children. To be called an upstart was a bitter insult, awakening social insecurities and obscure familial antecedents better forgotten. By contrast, in the nineteenth-century French novel, the cognate parvenu, “individualistic and egotistic, never collective,” was a heroic figure, according to S. Sasson. Explaining the literary fascination of this character, Sasson asserts,

> After the execution of the king, the disappearance of his overbearing figure created a void, which, at the symbolic level, meant a sense of infinite possibility. The postrevolutionary society, like the new hero it produced, favored youth, but a restless one, avid, irreverent, belligerent, and eager above all to conquer everything, for Old Regime measures of one’s status and corresponding destiny legally disappeared altogether. (9)

What complicates the reception of the upstart in English literature is the perceived association between social climbers and revolution that threatens the position of the upper class, who stand
in the way of the rising bourgeois. Every action of the upstart in destabilizing English class hierarchies seems to render an English Revolution inevitable, while those of the parvenu, after the French Revolution, are perceived as an exciting emblem of the limitless social potential available to the average citizen after the destruction of feudalism.

Ultimately, the reality of reform in the 1830s enabled the formulation of a middle-class bourgeois identity in the novel at mid-century that cast the rising middle class as heroic, preservers of the aristocracy and agents addressing the condition of the poor. Until then, an uneasy tension appears in the upstart rivalry device utilized in the English novel to refute Burke’s slurs, because the competition of deserving bourgeois upstart and undeserving lower-class upstart for the prize of upward social mobility brings them into an unwanted closeness. Desire itself is radical; in Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia (1972), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari interpret its unchecked manifestation as the antithesis of systemic stability:

> If desire is repressed, it is because every position of desire, no matter how small, is capable of calling into question the established order of a society: not that desire is asocial, on the contrary. But it is explosive; there is no desiring-machine capable of being assembled without demolishing entire social sectors. Despite what some revolutionaries think about this, desire is revolutionary in its essence. (126)

Awareness of shared desire with a social inferior visibly troubles the deserving upstart, who wishes to end the embarrassing rivalry but cannot relinquish the original shared impetus. Lacking a similar reason for shame and benefitted, rather than humiliated by the association, the undeserving upstart is not troubled by the revolutionary nature of desire, but rather celebrates the possibility of discomfiting the rival and trampling upon social inferiors following success. To portray the guilt and occasional empathy of discovering shared social desire, first Austen and then her successors drew upon the Romantic figure of the double. Speaking of its appearance in
prose fiction, John Herdman claims that “Its heyday corresponds approximately to the span of
the nineteenth century, but its immediate literary roots are in late-eighteenth-century
Romanticism” (x).4 Because self-appraisal follows desire, the deserving upstart is aided in
identity formation by viewing bad social behavior in the person of the undeserving upstart,
which leads to recognition of superior moral standards. Both upstarts are often similarly situated
beneath an abusive aristocracy, leading them to choose between attempting to rise into the elite
ranks of society to escape their conditions of life, or find alternative means of achieving stability.

**Chapter Summaries**

Though each author investigated in this study has been chosen for making significant
ideological contributions to the developing nineteenth-century conceptions of the bourgeois
through the upstart rivalry, they are only the most prominent and illustrative among the many
novels of the period exploring upstarts, as can be gleaned from the titles listed in Appendix A.
Moreover, the following chapters cannot engage with all of the general nineteenth-century
literature on upstarts and the upstart peril, but a short list of significant interventions in various
genres besides the novel is provided in Appendix B. Subsequent chapters of this study
investigate the upstart peril in English culture and the literary upstart rivalry as it emerges in the
English novel after the French Revolution. Revealing their deliberate interaction with the history
of the upstart peril, most of these novels published from 1811 to 1850 are set within the most
intense cultural period of upstart animus, the first two decades of the nineteenth century during
the Napoleonic Wars.

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4 Herdman’s own examples of the double phenomena throughout the nineteenth-century favor Gothic and
psychological realist fiction by exclusively male authors and do not recognize the additional utilization of the double
in the early nineteenth-century novel to explore differences in class and civic ideology.
Chapter One presents the romantic contention in Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) between Elinor Dashwood, a lady in reduced circumstances, and the ungenteel and impoverished Lucy Steele, for the gentleman Edward Ferrars. The upstart rivalry foreshadows the moral superiority of the bourgeois upstart in contrast to her designing lower-class rival, who represents a new type of character in English literature, indicating Austen’s lively awareness of Burke’s allegations against upstarts. Framing this class-based contest as an upstart rivalry not only responds to critics judging Lucy for a “monstrous” display of self-interest, such as John Halperin, Gary Kelly, and Mary Poovey, but also suggests how deeply modern-day readers of the English novel have embraced bourgeois ideals established through this very device. Against critics like J.A. Downie who insist Austen cannot be a middle-class writer in advance of the mid-century consolidation of the Victorian middle-class, her interest in upstarts throughout every novel and emphasis on the deserving variety, mark her as bourgeois.

Chapter Two contrasts the moderate social aspirations of middle-class Julia Somerville, heroine of *Fashionable Connexions* (1822) by Alicia Le Fanu, with the money-minded local gentry and impoverished Sanderson daughters in a landscape of greedy *parvenus*. Julia opts for a life of contentment in the middling ranks rather than marrying into the aristocracy or faking wealth like her brother Horace and aristocratic sister-in-law Amelia, whose selfishness proves their ruin. By contrast, a lower-class upstart, Jane Sanderson joins forces with freed West Indian slaves, the *nouveau riche* Creole Mr. Tornado and his fashionable black sisters, Theodora and Mariamne to exploit and penetrate London’s aristocracy in the quest for prestige and security. Extolling Julia’s bourgeois virtues of moderation and deliberate choice to remain in her middling
station to enjoy domesticity and minister to the poor, Le Fanu also sympathizes with the Sandersons and Tornados, aware of the volatile political climate in the era just prior to reform.

Chapter Three outlines Catherine Gore’s remedial championing of upstarts in “silver fork” novels of high society published after the 1831 Whig victory and Reform Bill (1832), especially *Peers and Parvenus* (1846), which contrasts the unfair aristocratic abuse meted out to academic Jervis Cleve, a rising genius from the lower-class, with that experienced post-French Revolution by his evil rival and long-lost brother, Dick Cleve. Like Austen and Le Fanu before her, Gore clearly pitied Dick for the abuses suffered during the upstart peril but cannot approve of his selfishness. She sees gifted upstarts like Jervis as offering great promise for society, a task she hints the Victorian middle class must espouse after the hero’s own radical arc ends in tragedy. Recuperating Gore from the public aspersions cast by William Makepeace Thackeray (and later privately retracted), this chapter presents her as keenly focused on the upstart peril.

Chapter Four casts *Vanity Fair* (1848) by William Makepeace Thackeray as another historical revisitation of the upstart peril, with Becky Sharp linked with Napoleon Bonaparte as a snobbish upstart hoping to become the aristocracy. Her schemes and bribes parallel the honest career of lowly born but honest Major William Dobbin, whose choice to avoid snobbery, practice industry, and protect the helpless in English society makes them natural foes. In making the observation that demonstrations of superior virtue are not always rewarded with socioeconomic wealth, Thackeray refuses to portray Becky or Dobbin as the clear winner in what remains an ideological stalemate.

In Chapter Five, Charles Dickens derives inspiration from Thomas Carlyle’s philosophy of the Hero and the Quack in the fraught psychological rivalry between David Copperfield and
Uriah Heep in *David Copperfield* (1850) as they compete to become a gentleman. Whereas David succeeds in his goal through performing honest industry and giving proof of accurate social sight that verges on the prophetic seer-like abilities of the Man of Letters, Uriah’s rapid rise is revealed as quickish and fraudulent, confirming the narrator as Hero and signifying the concrete formation of a bourgeois identity in the mid-Victorian novel predicated on the permanent success of industry and social empathy.
CHAPTER ONE
THE “SELFISH SAGACITY” OF LUCY STEELE IN JANE AUSTEN’S

SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

Throughout her teenage years, Jane Austen may have lived in rural Steventon, Hampshire, but she still registered the turbulent cultural impact of the French Revolution and ensuing Revolution Controversy. Until now, Austen’s unusual failure to engage explicitly with this famous contemporary event within her writings and novels has provoked comment. This chapter will demonstrate that, in keeping with Austen’s interest in social fluctuations in English society, she demonstrated career-long awareness of the upstart peril theorized by Edmund Burke in Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790), beginning with the rebellious self-serving heroines of her juvenilia. In her initial novel Sense and Sensibility (1811), first drafted c. 1795 as “Elinor and Marianne” before undergoing two major revisions in 1797 and 1809-1810, Austen features an undeserving upstart, Lucy Steele, as the principal villain. Though critics despise Lucy, even considering her to be a monster, they judge her according to standards established with the mid-century Victorian bourgeois identity Austen first began to develop. Deviating from the brief glimpses of cunning lower-class characters found within Austen’s favorite eighteenth-century novels of high society by Samuel Richardson and Fanny Burney, the undeserving upstart Lucy proves a formidable romantic rival to middle-class heroine Elinor Dashwood, who is largely indifferent to fortune, well educated, and morally superior to London’s corrupt elite. Admitting with gleeful irony that self-interest does propel undeserving lower-class upstarts
upward, Austen argues that the social empathy and moderate socioeconomic desires of the truly heroic bourgeoisie like Elinor should be recognized as a valuable corrective to the nonchalance and greed of the aristocracy and designing upstarts like Lucy.

**Middle-class Social Mobility in the 1790s**

In *Sense and Sensibility*, Lucy Steele is a lower-class social climber, whose entry into London society is orchestrated through claiming a distant cousin relationship with Mrs. Jennings, the wealthy widow of a merchant and mother of Lady Middleton of Barton Park and Mrs. Palmer, wife of a Member of Parliament. It can be glimpsed that the gentry have united with the mercantile classes to rejuvenate their fortunes, and that Lucy’s worldly aspirations are shared in some form by most characters in the novel. Critics despise Lucy for slyly revealing her prior engagement with the gentleman Edward Ferrars and initiating a passive-aggressive romantic rivalry with the heroine Elinor Dashwood, who was raised as a lady despite her current poverty. An opportunist, Lucy is dubbed “the unprincipled mercenary warrior,” a character who deserves “to be judged harshly indeed” by John Halperin (85). In particular, her decision to abandon Edward once he is disinherited due to their engagement and elope with his younger brother Robert, appears unconscionable, especially in contrast to Elinor’s rural contentment with Edward after he becomes a clergyman. Gary Kelly argues that the “actively scheming” Lucy makes “what is obviously a morally mistaken choice, abandoning Edward Ferrars for his selfish and decadent brother, thereby leaving Elinor to be rewarded for her self-sacrifice and endurance in love” (164). Mary Poovey compares Lucy to the monster from Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel *Frankenstein*, claiming, “Austen’s final comments on Lucy are decisive: her behavior exposes “a
wanton ill-nature” characterized by “an earnest, an unceasing attention to self-interest” (The Proper 190). More shrewd social pronouncement than judgment, Austen’s portrayal of Lucy’s social triumph justifies Burke’s fear that upstart ambitions can succeed in England, but argues that aristocracy blames the wrong culprit, overlooking the morality of heroic individuals of the middle ranks.

Given her family’s connection to the French Revolution, Austen was unlikely to have supported any social ambitions leading to the demise of the English aristocracy. She was thirteen when travel to and from the Continent became limited due to this incident and experienced concern over the safety of her relatives. Adopted as the heir of their childless relatives Thomas and Catherine Knight of Godmersham Park, Kent, her brother Edward managed to return to England after touring Europe from 1786 to 1790 (Le Faye, Jane Austen, 54-55). Also fleeing back to her home country was cousin and future sister-in-law Eliza Hancock Capot, Comtesse de Feuillide. On 22 February 1794, Capot became a widow when the Comte was guillotined by order of the Committee of Public Safety. His demise grimly illustrates the personal connection of many British families, even those from the middling ranks, to events in France (Le Faye, Jane Austen, 77). In her writings from this period, Austen avoids referring to the ongoing situation by name, in what Warren Roberts terms a “deliberate choice.” However, he stresses that “no other writer, and indeed no other evidence, brings out as well the qualitative change that occurred in English society as it was assimilating the stresses of the Revolutionary Age” (8). In Northanger Abbey (1817), first drafted as Susan in the late 1790s, Roberts notices that Austen makes light of the increased security around the Tower of England and the Bank of England in 1792 as rumors spread of domestic rebellion, references a meeting of thousands of disaffected citizens held in St.
George’s Fields in January 1795, and acknowledges a network of “voluntary spies” existing in England in the 1790s, ready to expose any un-English activity through unprecedented access to “roads and newspapers” (Roberts 26-29). When immediate alarm subsided, Austen’s humorous allusions to public unrest appear to vanish entirely, but her immediate interest in the subject of upstarts suggests she noted Burke’s warning of the upstart peril and responded through her fiction to the insinuation that ambitious individuals of the middle ranks were dangerous to the stability of society and aristocratic continuance.

Recently, the contention has arisen among scholars that Austen should not be considered a bourgeois writer in advance of the later Victorian consolidation of the middle-class as a cultural and political power. Below the English aristocracy, which J.A. Downie contends is composed of the landed gentry and nobility, appear increasingly diverse middling ranks filled with the leisured wealthy, merchants, and industrial elite, and beneath them, the laboring poor. Downie contends, “Despite the challenge to the old, established gentry posed by the burgeoning bourgeoisie which is chronicled with such perception and precision in Austen's novels, the situation had not changed by the turn of the nineteenth century” (Downie 76). Since there was, as yet, no modern middle-class entity, definitions of Austen as middle-class are made retrospectively by scholars influenced by later Victorian developments. However, as a proto-bourgeois writer, she helped to formulate the early social role of the “bourgeoning bourgeoisie.”

Rejecting “exaggerated” belief in a recognizable and definite British middle-class emergence between 1780-1820, David Cannadine claims,

On the contrary, if the middle class arose as anything during these years, it was largely as a new rhetorical formation. For the widely articulated claims (or denials) that this new middle class enjoyed a monopoly of decency, piety, charity, responsibility, judgment,
intelligence, and sobriety were no more than idealized, imaginative assertions, incapable (as usual) of empirical validation. (74)

Interpreting these “rhetorical formations,” Austen’s among them, as responding to the cultural impact of the upstart peril provides new insight into why intellectuals from the rising middle class would need to claim moral supremacy to justify their social advancement in Great Britain.

Notably, Burke’s recent condemnation of the ambitious as revolutionary upstarts, denigrated an upward economic movement in which Austen’s own affiliates eagerly participated, financed by colonialism, trade, and war. According to Burke’s opponents, upstart activity was a mere reflection of capitalist success, motivating the middling ranks to labor for their family’s progress and thus contribute to society’s further advancement. Even Burke, when reflecting on the English history of upstarts like Oliver Cromwell, tentatively admitted that some may have actually improved society through their actions:

These disturbers were not so much like men usurping power, as asserting their natural place in society. Their rising was to illuminate and beautify the world. Their conquest over their competitors was by outshining them […] I do not say (God forbid) I do not say, that the virtues of such men were to be taken as a balance to their crimes; but they were some corrective to their effects. (71)

Though Burke instantly insists that the detractions of the upstarts outweighed their civic usefulness, his suggestion provides an ideological in-road for the post-Revolutionary middle classes to emphasize their contributions to society and plead their total disinterest in challenging aristocrats for their eminent positions. Those attaining similar wealth to England’s ruling classes were eyed askance, interpreted as entering a sphere to which they had no natural right by birth and breeding. Subjected to a futile impeachment trial in the House of Commons from 1785-1795, Warren Hastings, Governor-General of Bengal and his wife were regarded by contemporaries as “the perfect exemplars to illustrate the crimes of the newly-moneyed, of their luxury,
extravagance, and upstart pretension” (Raven 225). Since Hastings was the patron and rumored father of Austen’s cousin Eliza Capot, now the widow of a French aristocrat, Austen would have marked public disapprobation of his success and expensive lifestyle.

Within her own large sibling group, Austen shared the understanding that all must make their own way in the world in order to find success and, in particular, hoped for great things for her brothers. During the Napoleonic Wars, Francis and Charles received eminent naval promotions after a process of petitioning for them, experiences later recalled in Mansfield Park (1814) when Fanny Price urges her brother William, a mere midshipman, not to mind social discrimination in advance of his eventual elevation: ““It is no reflection on you; it is no more than what the greatest admirals have all experienced, more or less, in their time. […] When you are a lieutenant! only think, William, when you are a lieutenant, how little you will care for any nonsense of this kind.” In response, he complains, “Every body gets made but me.” (Volume 2, 164). Joyfully, Austen wrote to her sister Cassandra in 1798, “Frank is made. He was yesterday raised to the rank of Commander, and appointed to the “Petterel” sloop, now at Gibraltar. […] As soon as you have cried a little for joy, you may go on, and learn further that the India House have taken Captain Austen’s petition into consideration, —this comes from Daysh, —and likewise that Lieutenant Charles John Austen is removed to the “Tamar” frigate,—this comes from the Admiral.” (28 December 1798, 33). With her brother Edward now owning multiple landed properties in Steventon and Kent, Austen had remarked two years previously, “I am tolerably glad to hear that Edward’s income is so good a one,—as glad as I can be at anybody's being rich except you and me.” (8 January 1799, 34). The straitened sisters had a private joke that when Frank, the future Sir Francis Austen, returned with a fortune, he would “help us seek
ours” (23 August 1796, 5). Yet, when it arrived, Austen turned down her own opportunity to enjoy financial security and drastic social elevation among the minor gentry. Rejecting an 1802 proposal from Harris Bigg-Wither, owner of Manydown Park, the morning after she accepted it, this clergyman’s daughter proved her desire for economic stability was ultimately not strong enough to sanction what would be a blatantly mercenary marriage (Butler, Jane, 45-46).

**Upstart Animus after the French Revolution**

With few exceptions, the late eighteenth-century novel in which Austen delighted generally pictured the heroine contracting a socially advantageous marriage, albeit out of love. Tracing the eventual sentimentalism of the Victorian era in regard to this preference, a practice growing out of emphasis on familial emotional ties rather than economic gain, Jennifer Phegley remarks, “The companionate marriage had become a common aspiration by the dawn of the 19th century” (Phegley, 2). Austen felt unable to contract an alliance for purely financial acquisition, though it would have greatly benefitted her situation and that of Cassandra, who spent most of their adult lives living in a cottage, “at the bottom margin of gentility” (Hume 290). She likely resolved similarly to her heroine Emma in the unfinished 1803 novel *The Watsons*: “To be so bent on marriage – to pursue a man merely for the sake of situation, is a sort of thing that shocks me; I cannot understand it. Poverty is a great evil, but to a woman of education and feeling it ought not, it cannot be the greatest. I would rather be a teacher at a school (and I can think of nothing worse), than marry a man I did not like” (302). In part, this attitude derives from Austen’s own enjoyment of rural life, but it also reflects the post-Revolutionary cultural insistence that young women from the middle-classes be satisfied with their social station rather than pursue a *mésalliance* or mingle among aristocratic circles. Furthermore, it also charts a turn
in the 1790s towards class-consciousness and boundary-reinforcement that is evident in Austen’s novels set within this period, and which could subject upward class mobility to intensive and even interfering scrutiny.

According to conduct books of the 1790s, British females of the middle ranks were expected to set a good example for others by restraining their own social prestige and maintaining humility in the case of coming into additional wealth or acquiring rank, possibilities that seemed increasingly likely for the classes below the aristocracy. Thomas Gisborne’s *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* (1797) discourages “ambitious fondness for distinction” as contrary to the “happiness of society,” which depends on structured order (11).

Praising contentment, Gisborne instructs,

Pursue not the society of women of higher rank than your own; be not elated by their notice; look not down on those who enjoy it not. If one of your neighbours, one who in the drawing-room was accustomed to be ranged below you, is suddenly raised, in consequence of a title being conferred on her family, to pre-eminence in her turn; envy her not, love her not the less, pant not for similar advancement. (296-297)

If women find themselves unexpectedly raised in society, they should avoid lording it over their friends, Gisborne states, as this behavior is “observable even in England, particularly in the wives of new-created Baronets, and the families of new-created Peers.” Ominously, the footnote directly below this sentence directs readers to “Dr. Moore’s View of the Causes and Progress of the French Revolution, Vol. i., p.131,” the source of the citation and a work which claims bourgeois upstarts to be the cause of discord with the French noblesse (297). Striving after or permitting caste elevation in the years after The French Revolution and The Terror could be interpreted as a selfish and inadvisable action that could harm social stability.
Aristocratic reactions to the possibility of alliance between Elizabeth Bennet, daughter of a bourgeois gentleman with a small property, and Fitzwilliam Darcy, a wealthy gentleman of the landed gentry, are not only negative, but violent in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), with the upstart peril an unspoken factor. Hesitant to commit such a social folly by marrying far below his rank, Darcy also believes Elizabeth will jump at the chance to rise, motivated by ambition. When he proposes to her without much semblance of a courtship, he only anticipates his family’s disapproval: “His sense of her inferiority—of its being a degradation—of the family obstacles which had always opposed to inclination, were dwelt on with a warmth which seemed due to the consequence he was wounding, but was very unlikely to recommend his suit” (Volume 1, 124). At the time, Elizabeth clearly gathers “that he had no doubt of a favourable answer. He *spoke* of apprehension and anxiety, but his countenance expressed real security” (Volume 1, 124). When she rejects him, Darcy eyes Elizabeth with “mingled incredulity and mortification” (Volume 1, 126). Later, he shamefacedly confesses, “I believed you to be wishing, expecting my addresses” (Volume 3, 281). Taught to believe that those within Elizabeth’s sphere wish for nothing more than a *mésalliance*, Darcy must adjust his conceptions of the bourgeois as crass and sordid grappers after his family’s fortune like the scheming upstart George Wickham, son of his father’s steward. However, explicitly preferring “to have the distinction of rank preserved,” his aunt Lady Catherine de Bourgh believes Darcy to be deceived by “the upstart pretensions of a young woman without family, connections, or fortune” (Volume 3, 250). Journeying to Elizabeth’s home, invading it, and upbraiding the young woman with supposed designs on Darcy, Lady Catherine is not only an offensive snob, but an aristocrat guarding against the incursions of upstarts in a post-Revolutionary England.
Even aristocratic philanthropy towards the lower orders takes on a self-protecting edge, with members of the middle ranks sharing alarm over the breakdown of rank and order in France and the possibility that upstarts might cause the same crisis in England. In *Mansfield Park* (1814) Austen traces the legacies of the three Ward sisters, whose marriages make them, respectively, “rich, a middle-class, and a lower-class woman” (Tarpley 146). When Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram take in their impoverished niece Fanny Price in the mid-1790s, the bourgeoise Mrs. Norris urges them not to allow her the same educational standards and aspirations as the aristocratic children, even informing the little cousins when they wonder at Fanny’s ignorance, “though you know (owing to me) your papa and mama are so good as to bring her up with you, it is not at all necessary that she should be as accomplished as you are; —on the contrary, it is much more desirable that there should be a difference” (Austen, Volume 1, 35-36). Unwittingly attracting a proposal from the gentleman Henry Crawford, who is drawn to her social empathy and good morality, Fanny finds herself resented by this caste-enforcer who “grudged such an elevation to one whom she had been always trying to depress” (Volume 3, 47). According to Joyce Kerr Tarpley, Mrs. Norris’s class-consciousness poisons the Mansfield Park household, as it “leads her to promote the disastrous marriage between Maria and Rushworth. At the end of the novel, Sir Thomas acknowledges that her corrupting effect has been so powerful that her removal, though caused by his daughter’s scandal, almost justifies the latter evil” (146). Excusing the family’s insistence on caste differences under Mrs. Norris’s influence, Sir Thomas tells Fanny, “The principle was good in itself, but it may have been, and I believe has been, carried too far in your case” (Volume 3, 5). Post-Revolutionary conservatism is unnecessary, after all, since, like Elinor Dashwood, Fanny instead opts for marriage to her cousin Edmund, a
clergyman with similar ideals, refusing a life of wealth and ease for rural domesticity and a retiring existence.

Despite having passed on her own opportunity to achieve significant social mobility, Austen could imagine the contrary impetus of less fortunate individuals whose financial desperation was not eased by “education and feeling” (Austen, The Watsons, 302). Extreme social changes were ongoing, as individuals yearned for greater prestige and easier lives spent in the classes above them. Observing the Regency, Samuel Taylor Coleridge denoted it, “an Age of Anxiety from the Crown to the Hovel, from the Cradle to the Coffin; all is an anxious straining to maintain life, or appearances – to rise, as the only condition of not falling” (Coleridge 183). Between the period 1795 and 1810, Austen formulated the rivalry between Elinor Dashwood and Lucy Steele around this central difference, which demonstrated the ideological gap between an uneducated lower-class woman willing to marry for money and status and a refined woman of the middling ranks to whom wealth was not a key aspiration. Though lower-class Lucy should be the one unable to associate with the elites rising into the aristocracy, it is actually Elinor whose virtues and contentment disqualify her from mingling with social superiors, who are apprehensive of her mutual affection for the affluent gentleman and future politician Edward Ferrars. This distinction is a critical moment in the respective developments of the marriage-for-love plot in the English novel, the insistence on bourgeois moral excellence, and the emphasis on domestic contentment and moderate economic growth, three strands of middle-class identity formulated in response to the upstart peril. Since the corrupt aristocracy are not capable of appreciating the bourgeois heroine, they are penetrated by the lower-class villain, causing a more drastic breakdown of English class distinctions in England, of the kind Burke predicted.
Constructing the Lower-Class Upstart

Though Elinor Dashwood foreshadows the contented bourgeoisie and Lucy the dangerous cunning of the lower-class discontent, these ideological positions are only consolidated at the end of *Sense and Sensibility* after the denouement of their rivalry. Elinor and Lucy come from different social classes but experience similar poverty and social dependency on the minor aristocracy. Both depend upon the hospitality of Sir John and Lady Middleton at Barton Park, with Lucy and her older sister Anne visiting the estate while Elinor lives with her mother and two sisters, Marianne and Margaret in an adjacent dwelling, Barton Cottage. Though Elinor is distantly related to Sir John and the Miss Steeles to his wife, Lady Middleton, she resents Sir John’s ignorant implication that she and Lucy should consider themselves “family” as well as natural companions (Volume 1, 279). Disliking Lucy already for lacking critical intellectual and behavioral qualities, Elinor is devastated to discover that the gentleman she loves is engaged to this woman. Having often learned of Elinor through Edward’s unguarded letters, Lucy is aware that this lady, sister-in-law to Edward’s sister Fanny Dashwood, is a potential romantic rival. Preemptively, Lucy reveals that her secret engagement gives her an unmistakably prior claim:

“We have been engaged these four years.”
“Four years!”
“Yes.”
Elinor, though greatly shocked, still felt unable to believe it.
“I did not know,” said she, “that you were even acquainted till the other day.”
“Our acquaintance, however, is of many years [sic] date.” (Volume 1, 305)

Chafing from the blow and shrinking from her rival’s scrutiny, which she believes to be malevolent, Elinor watches Lucy seek refuge in a handkerchief while bemoaning how rarely the lovers can meet, fearing his family’s disapproval; but, as the narrative pointedly states, “Elinor
did not feel very compassionate” (Volume 1, 312). Besides her heartache, Elinor is shocked that a social and moral inferior has “usurped” what she believes is her rightful romantic destiny.

Perceiving what Lucy can reveal about Austen’s opinion of lower-class social mobility necessitates moving beyond Elinor’s bourgeois viewpoint, to establish the social implications of their romantic rivalry for a gentleman. Overwhelmingly, Lucy’s actions are focalized through her rival, creating what James O’Rouke has termed an “Elinorcentric” narrative that Austen means the reader to question. He argues, “As the novel both solicits identification with Elinor’s sense of personal rectitude and generates doubts about the reliability of her narrative authority, Sense and Sensibility illustrates the fictional quality of both the inner lives of individuals and the agreed truths of an organic social unit” (773-774). Socially, Elinor’s rivalry with Lucy encapsulates the urgent desirability for the Regency middle class of establishing a culturally “agreed truth” limiting drastic upward mobility for inferiors, pictured as dangerous and socially-damaging climbers. Though neither Elinor or Lucy are desirable brides for Edward, whose mother destines him for the Honorable Miss Morton, daughter of a lord, Elinor is more suitable, having been raised at Norland Park and educated as a lady. Uneducated and crass, Lucy would appear to be unfit for a position in London society as the wife of an MP, should Mrs. Ferrars’ aspirations for her eldest be realized, though her marriage to Edward would, in essence, transform her into a lady. Memorably, Samuel Richardson’s Pamela in her Exalted Condition (1742) had explained that British women, unlike men, were enabled to climb socially by assuming their husband’s class position. After Mr. B. marries his servant Pamela, he assures his outraged sister Lady Davers that he does not lose status by the unusual alliance, “[…] a Man innobles [sic] the Woman he takes, be she who she will; and adopts her into his own Rank, be it what it will”
After the French Revolution, Elinor does not think this social alchemy sufficient: “Could he ever be tolerably happy with Lucy Steele; could he, were his affection for herself out of the question, with his integrity, his delicacy, and well-informed mind, be satisfied with a wife like her—illiterate, artful, and selfish?” (Volume 2, 4).

Disagreeably the rising bourgeoisie are alerted to the prospect of socioeconomic competition from inferiors like Lucy, a movement which Austen considers to be theoretically as permissible as its effects are socially destabilizing.

To firstly explore what Lucy symbolizes, it is important to grasp that Austen’s undeserving upstart working to gratify immense social ambition on her own behalf represents a new major character type in the English novel. Untrustworthy and malignant members of the lower-class had previously appeared in eighteenth-century novels set in high society, but as helpless thralls to unprincipled members of the upper classes. *Cecilia, or Memoirs of an Heiress* (1782) by Fanny Burney, a novel whose disapproval of upper-class insolence apparently inspired the title of *Pride and Prejudice*, contains such a hanger-on (Bander np). She is literally a nobody:

Miss Bennet, the lady, was in every sense of the phrase, the humble companion of Lady Margaret; she was low-born, meanly educated, and narrow-minded; a stranger alike to innate merit or acquired accomplishments, yet skilful in the art of flattery, and an adept in every species of low cunning. With no other view in life than the attainment of affluence without labour, she was not more the slave of the mistress of the house, than the tool of it’s [sic] master; receiving indignity without murmur, and submitting to contempt as a thing of course. (Burney Volume 1, 14)

Meriting nary a mention in two-thirds of the text, Miss Bennet is a minor character behaving with “fawning courtesy” towards the heroine and providing “parasitical conversation,” hinting at her hypocrisy and insincerity in pretending to respect social superiors (Burney, Volume 2, 8; Volume 4, 262). Under orders from Cecilia’s duplicitous guardian Mr. Monckton, she
mysteriously forbids the bans at Cecilia’s wedding to Mr. Delvile before fleeing the scene, leaving chaos behind. However, though evil, this old maid has no class aspirations beyond her present circumstances, whereas Austen’s Lucy actively plans to marry a gentleman. With the invention of Lucy Steele, Austen indicates that the lower classes now share the aspirations of the English middle classes, or in literary terms, intend to usurp the position of the bourgeois heroine.

Secondly, Lucy’s prior claims threatening Elinor’s anticipated marriage to a gentleman, demonstrate a new social tension existing between lower and middle-ranked women. If obviously presumptuous, Lucy’s hopes are neither illegal nor different from pre-Revolutionary encouragement of advantageous marriages for the bourgeois female, though they defy what Ingrid H. Tague has termed contemporary emphasis on prioritizing affection and compatibility (77). Indicating Austen’s early realization of upstart caste tensions, a Welsh forerunner to Lucy appears in the juvenilia work *Jack and Alice* (circ. 1790-1791). Confiding her low origins, this Lucy explains that her aunt educated her in “Dancing, Music, Drawing & various Languages, by which means I became more accomplished than any other Taylor’s [sic] Daughter in Wales.” Adoring a gentleman, Charles Adams, Lucy regrets her social status: “I was fearfull that tho’ possessed of Youth, Beauty, Wit & Merit, & tho’ the probable Heiress of my Aunt’s House & business, he might think me deficient in Rank, & in being so, unworthy of his hand” (Austen, *Jack and Alice*, 66-67). Charmed by Lucy, Lady Williams offers to chaperone her in society, confessing, “I know not indeed how I shall ever be able to part with her. She never was at Bath & I should think that it would be a most agreeable [sic] Jaunt to her” (69). Housed with the three Miss Simpsons, Lucy finds that Caroline openly possesses “an unbounded ambition” with “every wish […] centered in a titled husband” (58-61). Wooed by the Duke of —, Lucy considers
accepting to secure “Rank & Fortune” and a “home,” but fears Sukey’s response: “I have reason
to think that the admiration I have met with in the circles of the Great at this Place, has raised her
Hatred & Envy; for often has she threatened, & sometimes endeavoured to cut my throat” (71).
These fears are justified, as Sukey fatally poisons Lucy and is hanged. While Caroline promptly
weds the Duke of —, Cecilia leaves England to even more ambitiously become the “favourite
Sultana of the great Mogul” (73). Developing Lucy from cultural “other” and victim into
Englishwoman and villain in Sense and Sensibility, shows Austen’s growing awareness of what
the lower-class upstart peril could mean for her own caste’s ambitions, inspiring bourgeois
women to violently contend against these insolent rivals.

Thirdly, Lucy’s ignorance should disqualify her from associating with accomplished females, but these women allow her access into their homes, motivated by charitable impulses
she deliberately exploits. Confronted by the signs of her social, as well as moral discrepancies,
upper-class ladies fail to read them correctly, which irritates and perplexes her bourgeois rival.
Carol Percy explains, “Vernacular grammar, a foundation of both learning and virtue, accorded
with the aims of leisure children’s education. Denied to poor children, grammar also had
thematic connections with social position and authority” (Percy 78). Linguistic and social faux
pas expose lower-class Lucy, whose efforts to be genteel should alert others to her ambitions:

Lucy was naturally clever; her remarks were often just and amusing; and as a companion
for half an hour Elinor frequently found her agreeable; but her powers had received no
aid from education, she was ignorant and illiterate, and her deficiency of all mental
improvement, her want of information in the most common particulars, could not be
concealed from Miss Dashwood, in spite of her constant endeavor to appear to advantage.
(Volume 1, 298).

Besides low birth, Elinor dislikes Lucy’s exhibition of “insincerity and ignorance,” reflecting
that her fawning “conduct towards others, made every shew of attention and deference towards
herself perfectly valueless” (Volume 2, 298-299). Vital to the rise of English nationalism, as Gerald Newman claims, sincerity was felt to be a unique cultural legacy, “a virtue at the head of all the others, a moral innocence without which no other virtue could exist” (127-133). To her rival, Lucy’s insincerity, obvious desire for social betterment, total disregard of caste boundaries, and unseemly eagerness for intimacy with the more refined Elinor reveals a self-seeking desire equally at odds with the national virtue of honesty and contemporary anxieties about upstarts.

Fourthly, influenced by Burke’s insistence that upstarts provoked the French Revolution, Austen shows Lucy Steele to be an agent of social chaos in the upper classes. Endearing herself to Mrs. Ferrars and housed in the very home of Fanny Dashwood with her sister Anne, Lucy appears poised to strike at the family’s peace. Fanny gifts the pair needle-books, or huswifes, as they were colloquially termed, symbols of their unusual interclass friendship, like that contracted between Lady Williams and Lucy in the juvenilia: “Mrs. Dashwood had never been so much pleased with any young women in her life, as she was with them; had given each of them a needle-book, made by some emigrant; called Lucy by her christen name; and did not know whether she should ever be able to part with them” (Volume 2, 277-278). According to David Selwyn, these cloth items were likely made by desperate members of the French nobility who had escaped their native country and sought refuge in England” (66). Having purchased some out of charity, as D.W. Harding interprets, Fanny economically regifts them to her visitors (50). As Lucy sheathes her steel needles in this French needle-book, it becomes a metaphor of the British elite’s blindness to the lower-class upstart, the true viper in the bosom. Even after being expelled after Anne imprudently reveals Lucy’s engagement, the sisters retain their cherished needle-books, according to Anne, who “took care to keep mine out of sight” while exiting (Volume 3,
46). In fact, Lucy smooths over their consequently fraught sibling dynamic by resorting to needlecraft, presumably using the French huswife, as Anne relates: “I never saw Lucy in such a rage in my life. She vowed at first that she would never trim me up a new bonnet, nor do any thing else for me as long as she lived; but now she is quite come to, and we are as good friends as ever. Look, she made me this bow to my hat, and put in the feather last night” (Volume 3, 38). With materials gleaned from the French aristocracy and the English elite, Lucy allays Anne’s suspicions and lays the groundwork for her grand elopement with the gentleman Robert Ferrars. This lower-class character absolves Elinor of the guilt of upstart intent, but in creating her, Austen proves her allegiance not to the struggling poor, but to the ideology of the more affluent and cultivated middle ranks of society.

**The Bourgeois Miss Dashwood**

Though Austen’s depiction of Elinor as a bourgeois heroine in reduced circumstances is not original in previous novels conceived in the late eighteenth-century, it does unusually feature her as an advocate for living moderately in English society rather than ultimately receiving extraordinary socioeconomic gains. Her fate is to live as a rural clergyman’s wife in a small parish, rather than occupy a position among the *beau monde* like Lucy, and Austen presents this fate as preferable. Alluding to the national implications of their contest for Edward, Marilyn Butler insists, “we hear so much about the two heroines of *Sense and Sensibility*, especially Marianne, that we are in danger of thinking it has to be read as a story about two sisters, when it is palpably designed at the same time as a story about England […] It is Elinor who is placed in direct competition with the anti-heroine, Lucy Steele, for the same man, Edward Ferrars” (Butler, “Jane,” 59). This rivalry is a “story about England” after the French Revolution, a
society which now advocates for restraint in social mobility, contentedness in station, and is concerned that bourgeois upstarts might urge the poor to unseat the upper classes, as Burke claimed occurred in France. Often, Elinor’s virtuous moral behavior during the rivalry is hailed by critics as justifying her eventual happy union to Edward, illustrating the cultural inheritance of admiration for women who marry for love, not mercenary reasons. Allowing Elinor’s bourgeois social and moral standards to largely function as the novel’s moral conscience, Austen defines important ideological differences emerging between her and Lucy which are based in class and morality. Whereas Lucy’s quest for individual enrichment benefits no one but herself, Elinor limits her own ambition and would be an excellent moral influence in high society. Among an elite wary of upstarts, the heroine finds herself mistaken for an interloper striving to enter a wealthy family.

One major distinction between Lucy and Elinor is that the latter possesses moderate desires and has adjusted economically to what is almost a lower-class tier. Unlike the Steeles, Elinor does not shop constantly or pay special attention to clothes (Copeland 95). During a visit from Edward to Barton Cottage, Mrs. Dashwood interrogates him about his reluctance to pursue an ambitious career in politics, a discussion that soon develops into an argument between her daughters as to the precise financial amount that would facilitate their enjoyment of life. Prudently, Elinor maintains that happiness would be elusive without a sufficient annual income:

“Strange that it would!” cried Marianne. “What have wealth or grandeur to do with happiness?”
“Grandeur has but little,” said Elinor, “but wealth has much to do with it.”
“Elinor, for shame!” said Marianne, “money can only give happiness where there is nothing else to give it. Beyond a competence, it can afford no real satisfaction, as far as mere self is concerned.”
“Perhaps,” said Elinor, smiling, “we may come to the same point. Your competence and my wealth are very much alike, I dare say; and without them, as the world goes now,
we shall both agree that every kind of external comfort must be wanting. Your ideas are only more noble than mine. Come, what is your competence?” (Volume 1, 213)

At minimum, Marianne’s “competence” is two thousand pounds, a sum she believes to be moderate, but which is twice the number Elinor names as sufficient for domestic bliss. When young Margaret expresses a wish that the assembled company would each be gifted a fortune, Elinor says ironically but honestly, “We are all unanimous in that wish, I suppose […] in spite of the insufficiency of wealth” (Volume 1, 213). Certainly, extra money is welcomed in the Dashwood household of four unprotected females, but Elinor only desires enough on which to live comfortably and practically, rejecting the notion of unnecessary surplus.

Austen sees the true upstart peril as affecting the middle ranks, who are mistaken by the elite as designing villains: instead of being rewarded for her virtues by society, Elinor is persecuted, while the undeserving upstart is cherished. Observing the social tensions fomented by this plotline and unexpected outcome between heroine and anti-heroine, Butler notes,

The outcome in this competition is pointed, even a little bitter: the immaculately behaved Elinor gets Edward, but Lucy the status, the income, the family approval. Elinor’s choice is in the author’s eyes the better part – a modest competence and independence in a country vicarage – but Lucy’s success in achieving her aims is meanwhile a decided comment on the state of the rest of the nation. (Butler, “Jane,” 59-60)

Knowing Edward’s preference for her and ignorant of his entanglement with Lucy, Mrs. Ferrars and Fanny treat her with contempt and graciously condescend to the Miss Steeles, unwittingly cultivating the undeserving upstart: “Elinor could not now be made unhappy by this behavior […] But while she smiled at a graciousness so misapplied, she could not reflect on the mean-spirited folly from which it sprung, nor observe the studied attentions with which the Miss Steeles courted its continuance, without thoroughly despising them all four” (Volume 2, 227). Lumpiing the avaricious lower-class with the avaricious elite, Elinor sees them as fatally bound
by worship of money and status, unable to value her merits. Other members of the extended family seek to redirect Elinor’s supposed social ambition by promoting a match with Colonel Brandon. Anxious for her enrichment, as long as it costs him nothing, John Dashwood advises his half-sister to deliberately woo the wealthy gentleman: “A very little trouble on your side secures him. Perhaps just at present he may be undecided; the smallness of your fortune may make him hang back; his friends may all advise him against it. But some of those little attentions and encouragements which ladies can so easily give will fix him, in spite of himself. And there can be no reason why you should not try for him” (Volume 2, 205). Having secured marriages for her two upstart daughters, chronic matchmaker Mrs. Jennings eagerly supports the scheme, while even Edward believes it likely to occur after his reluctant marriage to Lucy. Though Elinor would enjoy acquiring wealth, as she previously stated, her affection for Edward operates independently of his prospects, while Lucy’s follows the vicissitudes of the Ferrars fortune.

Unlike Lucy, Elinor does not ingratiate herself with the wealthy or seek an advantageous marriage, encouraging signs of bourgeois restraint in Post-Revolutionary England. Unlike Burney’s heroines, she disapproves of the urban spectacle of excess and does not marry into the aristocracy or gentry. Having frequently judged Lady Middleton for her indolence and lack of interests beyond her children, Elinor also finds fault with Lucy for spending her four-year engagement, as she fancies, “in inferior society and more frivolous pursuits.” This waste of time, coupled with her “defects of education,” must, she feels, have robbed Lucy “of that simplicity, which might once have given an interesting character to her beauty” (Volume 2, 2-5). By the end of the eighteenth century, as Kathryn Sutherland relates, “the middle-class woman […] emerged as her sex’s genuine representative with the power to censor by her criticism the excessive
femininity of the luxury-identified aristocrat and to redeem by the example of her conduct and instruction the undifferentiated existence of her labouring counterpart” (Sutherland 25). Soon, Elinor recognizes that Lucy speaks the same language of self-interest as the elite. Allowed “time and address,” she believes, Lucy will achieve her goals, as “Her flattery had already subdued the pride of Lady Middleton, and made an entry into the close heart of Mrs. John Dashwood; and these were effects that laid open the probability of greater” (Volume 2, 276). Eloping with Robert, a plan financed by leaving her sister Anne destitute, the triumphant upstart manages to cut out Edward and his new bride through “selfish sagacity,” bringing “respectful humility, assiduous attentions, and endless flatteries” to bear on the arrogant Ferrars family. Consequently, Elinor finds herself a disregarded member of the family in comparison: “Elinor, though superior to her in fortune and birth, was spoken of as an intruder, she was in everything considered, and always openly acknowledged, to be a favourite child (Volume 3, 293). Any positive moral impact Elinor might have had on the Ferrars as a deserving upstart is prohibited by Lucy’s vindictive operations and the blindness of the British upper class.

Interpreted as a novel responding to contemporary social feeling as it was drafted in the 1790s, Sense and Sensibility’s apparently unfair ending provides a reassuring vision of a contented bourgeois and blames potential social upheaval on the undeserving lower-class upstart. While Elinor lays out shrubberies and pastures cows in her new parsonage home, Lucy triumphs ungraciously over her former friends and seems “vastly contented” in her luxurious situation (Volume 3, 239). Concluding Lucy’s plot, Austen sagaciously remarks,

The whole of Lucy’s behaviour in the affair, and the prosperity which crowned it, therefore, may be held forth as a most encouraging instance of what an earnest, an unceasing attention to self-interest, however its progress may be apparently obstructed,
will do in securing every advantage of fortune, with no other sacrifice than that of time and conscience. (Volume 3, 290)

Critics have struggled to interpret this conclusion, Moreland Perkins insisting, “Austen’s treatment of Lucy does illustrate her acceptance of the general effect of an upward social mobility she also found often unfortunate and unpleasant in its concrete details. Insofar as this acceptance is subtly signaled by Austen’s not quite suppressed pleasure in Lucy’s success, Lucy’s place in the novel does contribute to the work’s democratic thrust” (Perkins 64). Her final remarks on Lucy do exhibit keen literary enjoyment of a character type descended from the “outrageous self-seekers” of the juvenilia, who “run their worlds with never a moral scruple” but receive “few punishments” (McMaster, Austen, 9-10). Undeserving upstarts will succeed, given opportunity. It is a reproach to English society that deserving bourgeois like Elinor Dashwood are refused acceptance by an elite banning the wrong upstarts from joining their ranks.

**Conclusion**

Having crafted the first distinction between undeserving lower-class and deserving bourgeois upstarts in the nineteenth century English novel with the publication of *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), Austen proceeded to delineate her view of the middle classes as constituting a positive moral influence in subsequent novels like *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). Because Elizabeth Bennet initially rejects a marriage with Mr. Darcy on mercenary grounds, she can refute accusations that she is an unprincipled upstart. When urged by Lady Catherine not to be so foolish as to “quit the sphere in which you have been brought up,” Elizabeth insists that she already attains a genteel status as a landed “gentleman’s daughter,” and therefore the “equal” of her untitled suitor, a claim which Lady Catherine partially concedes (Volume 3, 250). Neatly, Austen demonstrates how the bourgeois heroine’s apparent disinterestedness in rank and status
counters the unjustified alarm of aristocrats keen on maintaining their social position. Her fiancé thanks her for removing the prejudice inherited from his wealthy family, which taught him to “think meanly of all the rest of the world, to wish at least to think meanly of their sense and worth compared with my own” (Volume 3, 280). Answering Burke’s upstart peril with the rivalry between Elinor and Lucy, Austen valuably participates in the new “rhetorical formation” establishing a defense by the middle-class unfairly suspected of interest in aristocratic downfall. From this point until the 1850s, Austen’s rivalry will be utilized by other English authors as a literary device by which to demonstrate the heroic moral capabilities of the developing middle class as agents of positive social change. The English novel will also indicate the potential villainy of lower-class upstarts like Lucy, who are able to exploit a credulous elite and rise in society at the expense of the deserving bourgeoisie.
CHAPTER TWO

“BETTER BE ENVIED THAN PITIED”:
WHITE AND BLACK “PARAVANTS” IN ALICIA LE FANU’S

FASHIONABLE CONNEXIONS

A previously undiscovered novel, Fashionable Connexions (1822), the second of two novels in a four-volume series entitled Tales of a Tourist, illustrates awareness of the continuing upstart peril in rural and urban societies, who are newly forced to absorb parvenus in the 1820s. Between 1815 and 1825, Great Britain experienced great economic hardship, the brunt of which was borne by the lower classes. Aristocrats and landholders were warned in 1819 that upstarts from the rising middle classes were intent on bringing down the country’s institutions of liberty. Foreshadowing the high society dramas of the “silver fork” genre (1825-1845), this novel written by Dublin-born writer Alicia Le Fanu (1791-1867), continues to develop the distinction between deserving and undeserving upstarts inherited from Jane Austen. In a rapidly transforming late Georgian society, Le Fanu pictures parvenus and African-descended West Indian nouveau riche alike contending against a class-obsessed and racist aristocracy. Presenting the English elite as corrupt and defensive, a view also evident in Austen’s Sense and Sensibility (1811), Le Fanu indicates that the rising middle classes must abandon parvenu ambitions performed in imitation of the aristocracy, and instead cultivate a bourgeois identity founded on contentment and moderation. Focusing on the ideological divide between Julia and Horatio Somerville, siblings and sole survivors of an upstart family destroyed by financial corruption, Le Fanu shows through
the upstart rivalry that the desire to live beyond one’s means for social approval can destroy character and even life itself. With Julia’s decision to remain bourgeois despite unexpectedly inheriting wealth, Le Fanu argues that deserving members of the middle-classes do not wish to rise above their station into the aristocratic sphere and actually prefer the physical and moral comforts of bourgeois domesticity.

A Race of Frogs in 1820s England

Until now, the rarely-studied Le Fanu has been explored not as a writer of class, but in terms of her engagement with other writers in her famous Sheridan-Le Fanu family and the themes of Irish nationalism, literacy, and female agency. Though critics do refer to Tales of a Tourist (1823), their commentary reveals that most if not all have only read The Outlaw, the first of the collection’s two novels. Focusing on the English traveler Mr. Pendennis, who visits Ireland to write a travelogue, Katie Trumpener chiefly notes Le Fanu’s awareness of exaggerated British views of Irish culture (56-57). James Kelly examines Le Fanu’s depiction of an exiled United Irishman who sues for English pardon, as proof of her support of a unified United Kingdom but sympathy with former rebels in social distress (62). Other Romantic novels of high life set in England such as Strathallan (1816) have been viewed as commenting on the novel form, with Christina Morin claiming it is among works of the era that “self-consciously highlight their textuality in a bid to underline the manufactured nature of all prose fiction” (76). Anna M. Fitzer has posited that Alicia Le Fanu inherited her literary Dublin aunt and identical namesake’s “seeming disaffection with private society,” as evident in her novels set among the aristocracy (“Feeling,” 33). The continuing interest in this latter theme in Fashionable Connexions has been overlooked by critics in the mistaken belief that Tales of a Tourist contains only one novel,
entitled *The Outlaw, and Fashionable Connexions* (Fitzer, “Relating,” 36). Consequently, no attention has been paid to Le Fanu’s fascination with using the upstart character both as a means to criticize the bourgeois tendency to imitate the aristocracy and to advocate for an obscure life of content and service in the middling ranks.

Little is known concerning Le Fanu’s life and activities, except that she lived most of her adult life in England, chiefly residing in Bath and other seaside towns with her mother, and, like Jane Austen, chronicled extensive social transformations from the vantage point of a single, petty-bourgeois woman. Granddaughter of Irish novelist Frances Sheridan, Le Fanu also was cousin to Sheridan Le Fanu, Victorian author of the macabre, and women’s rights campaigner Caroline Norton, but unlike both, lived on the verge of gentility. Well connected, but positioned at the bottom of the middle ranks, Le Fanu describes increased upper lower-class mobility, with bourgeois and mercantile families equally ambitious for social elevation. These desires are revealed in *Fashionable Connexions* through characters making a show of wealth not representative of their socio-economic realities. After the reopening of European intellectual channels, the British had adopted a new word from the French to describe upstarts – *parvenu*. Viewing this nineteenth century social type as expressed by French and German literature, S. Sasson insists that a “garish display” of wealth characterizes the *parvenu*, inspiring a consensus of “universal opprobrium” for his attempts to appear authentic among the nobility, which will always be vain since “he is not of noble birth, birth being the tautological textual signifier of virtue and authenticity” (3). In the novel, concerned aristocrats eagerly stress hereditary privilege as they are warned of upstart designs on their wealth and property, while the elite bourgeois similarly resent an influx of inferiors, but neither can stem the tide of enterprising newcomers.
Set between 1821-1822, *Fashionable Connexions* contains Le Fanu’s opinion that not only were upstarts on the rise, but that they were making the critical mistake of attempting to imitate their social superiors instead of cultivating a new ideological identity. She provides a view of the late Georgian era as an age of petty-bourgeois ambition, as had Austen previously. Austen’s late fiction had already pictured gentry and bourgeois irritation as economic prosperity enabled newcomers from the middling ranks to flaunt new privilege and wealth in competition with the landed aristocracy. In *Emma* (1815), Mr. Weston complains of the familial influence exerted by his son Frank’s maternal aunt by marriage and adopted mother, the wealthy Mrs. Churchill of Enscombe. To the new Mrs. Elton, Weston complains,

“Mr. Churchill has pride; but his pride is nothing to his wife’s: his is a quiet, indolent, gentlemanlike sort of pride that would harm nobody, and only make himself a little helpless and tiresome; but her pride is arrogance and insolence! And what inclines one less to bear, she has no fair pretence of family or blood. She was nobody when he married her, barely the daughter of a gentleman; but ever since her being turned into a Churchill she has out-Churchill’d them all in high and mighty claims: but in herself, I assure you, she is an upstart.” (Volume 2, 345)

Eagerly, Mrs. Elton responds, “I have quite a horror of upstarts” (345). Recalling the Tupman family of Maple Grove as “very lately settled […] and encumbered with many low connexions, but giving themselves immense airs, and expecting to be on a footing with the old established families,” she lets slip that her own relatives, the Sucklings, are also recent arrivals (346-47). Moving into country houses, a signifier of feudal wealth, these *parvenus* now revel in luxury and cheapen the rural show of wealth formerly reserved for the aristocracy (Christie 18-19). Emma, the novel’s heroine and a member of the gentry, considers Mrs. Elton herself to be “A little upstart, vulgar being” (Volume 2, 274). Climbers from the middling and lower ranks were now
part of the neighborhood in the mid-1810s, perplexing the hereditary elite and even wealthy bourgeoisie with their pretenses.

When Julia relocates from London’s West End to Rothbury, Northumberland, she discovers the small town to be a hotbed of class warfare, in which lower-class parvenus desperately attempt to thrive. Leadership is critically lacking, while greed and ambition are prevailing influences for both high and low. Disgusted by the pride of society leader Lord Lulworth and resentful of the cruel and bombastic Squire Birkit, citizens also find the aging heiress Miss Ravenshawe tedious and detest their local curate, Adolphus Lascelles, who married above his station. Among themselves, society members vigorously defend their own family’s claims to prominence and respect, while those feigning status and wealth they do not possess are mocked for upstart pretensions. The affluent old maid Miss Nelthorpe kindly takes Julia into her confidence, alerting her to the true social origins and identity of several townsfolk, such as Mrs. Sanderson and her family of five dowerless daughters:

“‘You must know,’” lowering her voice, “‘she is a paravant’ – we presume Miss Nelthorpe meant a parvenue – ‘she was a butcher’s daughter; and an accurate observer may still see something very butcherly about her. Then there is Mrs. Mapleton – that is another paravant, as you may plainly see, poor woman! the moment she opens her mouth.” (Le Fanu, Volume 3, 130)

Determined to distinguish herself from the rising classes of butchers and linen drapers in Rothbury, Miss Nelthorpe dresses plainly, to the point of obscuring her own genteel status. The narrative clarifies, “A superficial observer might have supposed her one of the most insignificant persons in the society. But Miss Nelthorpe adopted this mode of dress, to distinguish her from the showily-decorated parvenues, or paravants, of whom she so frequently complained” (Volume 3, 132-133). Whereas the isolated and drastic ambition of Austen’s lower-class upstart
Lucy Steele was comparatively unique in a novel set among the middle and upper classes, bourgeois society now records multiple lower-class climbers attempting to alter their caste.

Le Fanu indicates men and women of the lower classes like the Sandersons are ambitious for socioeconomic prosperity amid the crisis, though they conceal financial struggles which, if known, would result in loss of caste. Deflation caused by the post-Napoleonic Depression (1815-1822) led to a prolonged period of economic instability. According to Larry Patriquin, “In the late 1810s and throughout the 1820s, outright unemployment was becoming the primary cause of destitution, more so than bad harvests or high prices” (122). Riots broke out as Parliament refused to repeal the Corn Laws (1815-1846), which artificially kept grain prices high to benefit landowners (Burwick 310-311). Rothbury citizens discuss these ongoing events: “the men got into a knot, discussing politics and agriculture; the woman talked of the markets and the price of washing” (Le Fanu, Volume 3, 118). Fashionable wardrobes illegally furnished for Rothbury females by Madame Coquelicot, a Jersey smuggler-turned-French milliner, enable locals to hide their financial situation, as was increasingly common in small Georgian towns (Stobart 487).

When Horatio unexpectedly visits Mrs. Sanderson to court her markedly fashionable and genteel daughter Eliza, he spies the reality behind the Sandersons’ deliberate illusion of affluency:

In a coloured gown and apron of the coarsest and most inelegant materials, her tresses all uncurled, eyes as red as ferrets, and cheeks as wan as wax, sat his Dulcinea, shelling peas. Opposite to her, robed in a flannel wrapper, with her hair in papers and her elbows on the table, lolled her beautiful sister Mary […] Mrs. Sanderson, who piqued herself upon being a heavy hand, was giving “superior Jane” a lesson in salting beef, while Eleanor was employed measuring out mugs of beer for the servants. (Le Fanu, Volume 3, 208)

Consequently, the would-be suitor turns his attentions elsewhere, disgusted by a maneuver calculated to save the five girls from penury by netting them wealthy husbands. Parvenue she
may be, but Mrs. Sanderson has taught her children well that matrimony to a rich man is their only avenue out of socially shameful poverty and rural domesticity.

With Eliza’s eventual success with Tom Birkit, heir of Squire Birkit, Le Fanu demonstrates that the Sandersons’ false pretenses lead to decisive social success. Despite being a butcher’s granddaughter, she has now entered the gentry class, which are on high alert against upstarts from the middle classes seeking to wrest away political influence and property. Forcing Tom to study law while denying education to his other sons and daughters, Squire Birkit has previously demanded that he learn the tricks utilized by professional men,

Why, is there not thy uncle James, who has lost half his estate, by not knowing how to defend it against the tricks of an attorney? And it is only last month I was cast in a suit about tithes, with that grousing, farming parson Sams, of Hay Hill, when, if I had known as much of law as thou mayest, Tom, I should have been able to right myself. Why, Tom, thou art not fit to take care of thy own property. (Le Fanu, Volume 3, 236)

In 1819, William Cobbett had warned in *Cobbett’s Weekly Register* that upstarts “huddled together and confounded with” aristocrats in Parliament were scheming to raise property taxes for the aristocracy and gentry in order to see to “the utter ruin of the Noblemen and Gentlemen and to the putting in their stead, an upstart race, wholly unknown in this nation forty years ago. This race has *the press at its command*” (Cobbett, “To,” 537-538). Cobbett implies that upstarts are actively seeking systemic power and political office in order to pass legislation that will injure their social superiors, enabling them to acquire even more wealth and increase their chances of usurping the weakened elite. Deliberately, he rouses apprehensions that the overthrow of the monarch and aristocracy which was occasioned by force during the French Revolution may occur in England nearly three decades later through legal guile and shrewd political tactics.
With Cobbett’s assertion that upstarts are in league, no longer solo but a race of similar-minded individuals, the increasing numbers of middle-class aspirants noted by Austen and Le Fanu could be viewed as contributing towards the breakdown of social order, especially during Britain’s economic crisis. If this kind of people could only be content with replacing their superiors, as conservatives claimed, there appeared to be no limit to their desires or the damage they could cause. Supporting this concept of upstarts as a race apart from the deferential and contented British citizen, William Hone published an influential illustrated pamphlet, “The Political House that Jack Built” (1819) that metaphorized upstarts, pictured as politicians, lawyers, writers, churchmen, and soldiers, as the Biblical second plague of pestilential frogs (Figure 1). Hone blares in the caption: “These are THE VERMIN/That Plunder the Wealth,
That lay in the House, / That Jack built” (Hone np). As pictured in surrounding images in the pamphlet, these entities are determined to destroy Magna Carta, English liberties, and the aristocracy itself, who are helpless against their depredations. Apprehensive of male upstarts seeking to undermine the British class system for personal gain, as befits his political conservatism, Squire Birkit is blind to his son’s infatuation with a female upstart. While Le Fanu does not believe upstarts wish to overturn society or even replace the aristocracy as such, she recognizes that the unbridled greed of many individuals from the middling ranks has exerted a bad moral influence on British society by justifying unprincipled self-interest and displays of vanity. To prevent the bourgeoisie from this mistake, when they could instead act as moral exemplars, Le Fanu demonstrates alternative ways of seeing one’s social self as an agent for positive civic and domestic redress.

In Le Fanu’s novel, the arrived upstart’s triumph is accompanied by constant awareness of the need to outshine imitators from beneath and personal difficulty in adjusting to the new social self, symbolizing the self-seeking parvenu’s false position. Previously, Eliza’s inability to purchase fine clothes led her to lounge in Madame Coquelicot’s milliner’s shop and memorize patterns to copy illegally and cheaply with her “uncommonly-quick eye” (Volume 3, 144). Analyzing patterns of theft of clothing in rural areas and sale of contraband fashion, Alison Toplis has suggested that, “Clothing was also a tool that could be used to deceive” (318). Like the resourceful Lucy Steele, Eliza takes to her needle to create expensive fashions to imitate current fashions she cannot afford. Once married to Tom and liberated by Squire Birkit’s sudden death, she can now indulge her desire for display by purchasing new clothes and parading in a London bazaar among aristocrats and urban elite. Believing she has seen the upstart Mapletonfs
in London, wearing nearly identical attire to herself and her new husband, the elegant young bride is astonished and wants to question them about the clothes: “With her usual jolting jerk, Eliza bolted forward; but, oh ye swans of Mantua! give me a feather from your wings to paint the rest. Instead of an agreeable rencontre with her country neighbour, Eliza experienced a rude concussion, and was scarcely preserved from falling by her adoring husband, who caught her in his arms, covered with blood” (Volume 4, 88). She has run into a floor-length mirror, unable to recognize herself or Tom decked out in London finery. This check to her pride proves useful, as the public humiliation and additional snobbery she encounters from the aristocracy teaches the new Mrs. Birkit to know her place. She reaches social stability by embracing her dislike of the urban setting and discovering a new preference for Rothbury, assisting Tom in transforming the once miserable Bear Hall into a “seat of mirth, hospitality, and good-humour” (Volume 4, 248). In Eliza’s case, the upward mobility of this upstart from the lower ranks is checked by prudent moderation and wholehearted embrasure of her domestic duties as a squire’s wife.

**Creole and African Parvenus in London Society**

Recuperating Eliza might signal Le Fanu’s preference for contentment in a grasping age, but, like Austen, she acknowledges the potential of upstarts to disturb the status quo and succeed. Wealthy scion of a white plantation owner and an African slave, Mr. Tornado, is another parvenu type from the West Indies, whose different skin color pronounces this immigrant doubly other. Whereas English upstarts like the Sandersons are resented for defying social identity as established at birth and occupying a frustratingly liminal position within the class system, the Creole is additionally resented for embodying the mixture of racial categories. Daniel Livesey explains that these thousands of interracial immigrants “were an ever-present reminder, across all
imperial spaces, of those regimes’ failures to regulate families completely” (5). Historical examples of parvenus of African descent from the period include Nathaniel Wells, who became his father’s heir in the absence of legitimate white children, built a country house after arriving in England, and became Britain’s first black sheriff in 1818 (Gerzina). Though her death interrupted her progress on Sanditon (1817), Austen had just originated her first black character in the “half-caste” West Indian heiress Miss Lambe (Sanditon, 368). Later, in Vanity Fair (1848), Thackeray would depict Rhoda Swartz, a St. Kitts heiress with a Jewish father and African mother, who attends school with the heroine until 1814 (Vanity Fair, 4). Common in the late Georgian era, the West Indian Creole, a racial outsider possessed of colonial wealth, proves an added social stressor for alarmed aristocrats already on the lookout for white English upstarts.

Sympathetically, Le Fanu chronicles Tornado’s resolve to succeed in England despite the constant attempts of the racist English elite to stymie his progress. In Rothbury, Tornado seeks the hand of Isabella Birkit, the ill-favored but elegant daughter of his father’s friend Squire Birkit of Bear Hall. Warmly responsive to his suit, she changes her name to Belinda, Le Fanu’s sly reference to the sympathetic inclusion of similar interracial relationships between West Indians and whites in Belinda (1800) by Irish author Maria Edgeworth, who later caved to paternal demands and removed them in the third edition (Kirkpatrick 331-332). Alert to this development for similar reasons, Le Fanu sees the black parvenu, even with wealth already in hand, as suffering additional persecution in contrast to the typical experience of the white upstart. Opposed to miscegenation, Squire Birkit expels Tornado, declaring “that not a drop of black blood should intermingle with his family, and, as the young gentleman was a Creole, sternly forbade him to think of her more” (Le Fanu, Volume 3, 175). If Tornado were white and
nouveau riche, his courtship might be encouraged by gentry willing to tolerate the upstart
dimension, but racism leads to his total exclusion from polite society in Rothbury.

Situating another Sanderson daughter as willing to take immense social risks in order to
escape penury and enter a more elevated sphere, Le Fanu emphasizes how the otherness of the
English upstart attracts the immigrant of African ancestry, leading to a union based on common
purpose. Using her situation as a messenger between the lovers and playing on Tornado’s
impatience with the romantic but hesitant “Belinda,” Jane Sanderson expertly cuts out her friend
and gains a fortune. Before spying her chance, Jane had relinquished her futile attempts to attract
a husband and resigned herself to becoming a bookish old maid in Rothbury like Miss
Ravenshawe. Local gossip and parvenu Mrs. Mapleton quotes the following letter written by the
new Mrs. Tornado to her devastated friend Isabella Birkit: “Friendship is the second sentiment in
nature; but ‘tis no treachery to put love before it. I prefer my Belinda’s interest to every thing in
the world except my own; but her elder sister will remind her that ‘charity begins at home’”
(Volume 4, 26-27). Punning on the name of Charity Birkit, Jane admits that overwhelming self-
interest motivated her elopement with the wealthy West Indian. With Tornado’s wealth opening
doors to her everywhere, Jane is “transformed, by the ‘magic of wealth,’ into a very fine lady,”
and becomes an associate of Amelia De Ross, daughter of Lord Lulworth and wife of Horatio
Somerville (Volume 4, 100). Like Austen, Le Fanu enjoys the dramatic value of an impoverished
upstart acquiring wealth in defiance of society and does not entirely condemn the perpetrator for
a marriage of self-interest.

Social reception of the white upstart, once arrived in high society, is far more welcoming
than the frosty reception extended to the black parvenu, a fact Tornado has considered while
pursuing courtships of Belinda and Jane, though the new Mrs. Tornado is permanently estranged from judgmental members of her family and former neighbors. Head of his family in England, if not in the West Indies as yet, Tornado desperately requires a white chaperone for his two black half-sisters, Theodora and Mariamne, as they come out in London society. In general, Jane answers his expectations by accepting the girls readily, valuing their company, and boasting of their educational accomplishments without highlighting their racial differences. Still, their lack of white ancestry exposes them to even worse responses by the elite. Meeting the elegant and beautiful pair, Amelia gasps to a mortified Julia, “No, never […] will I submit to the horror of being seen in public with those creatures on each side for supporters! If you knew, my dear Miss Somerville, my antipathy – my horror of blacks –” (Volume 4, 106). Whether from admiration or interest in their fortunes, some members of the elite are not so intolerant, Jane experiencing delight when the heiresses marry well, one “to a rich Jew merchant; and the other to a Christian peer” (Volume 4, 248-249). In positively resolving the Tornado family’s need to establish themselves in Great Britain and refusing to judge them as outsiders unworthy of prestige, Le Fanu departs from the typical use of the nineteenth-century English novel to warn against West Indian immigrants and the issues they expose surrounding British “family inheritance and interracial coupling” (Livesay 16). Instead, she celebrates the social success of the West Indian family and recognizes the upstart’s part in facilitating it. At the same time, Le Fanu does not consider Jane Sanderson to be setting a good moral example by gambling at London parties, backed by the Tornado fortune and seduced by the thrill of competition with aristocrats.
An Upstart Gentleman

Admitting that the potential exists for an ambitious social rise to succeed, Le Fanu does not approve of the cultural impulse to compete with aristocratic wealth. Her undeserving upstart Horatio Somerville represents the unfortunate ability of men from the middling ranks to pass themselves off as wealthy gentlemen, aided and abetted by recent economic developments that exacerbate the current financial downturn. In Le Fanu’s telling, remaining in the “middling state of society” necessitates renunciation of ambition and economic participation in new financial practices that generally carry extreme risk.\(^1\) Despite incorporating elements of eighteenth-century family history, Le Fanu notices that rising interest in speculation allows posturing individuals to become, ever so briefly, “fashionable connexions,” inspiring wild hopes of permanent wealth and greater status. Mary Poovey insists that after the war with France ended, newspapers gave Britons unprecedented access to widescale share-buying and information about stocks, leading to a “culture of investment” (Poovey, “Writing,” 17-18). Fortunes could be made and lost in a single night, as Julia explains to Amelia: “My father was the head of a mercantile house in London, of which the concerns were so extensive, that he might literally be said not to know the limits of his own wealth. My mother’s parties at the west end of the town vied with the most distinguished of the wives of the nobility” (Volume 3, 250). It is implied that her father was a climber, who seeks unlimited social success through making dynastic alliances and holding exorbitant parties for the aristocracy. However, disaster strikes, as her father’s junior partner, the Irishman Mr. De Burgh, loses the company’s assets in a foolish speculation. Hearing a gunshot,

\(^1\) Tamara Wagner has argued that the nineteenth-century English novel interprets “anything fraudulent or unstable as an exception, a mere fluke, or, even more conveniently, an infesting element that could then be expunged from the system” (Wagner, *Financial*, 6).
the horrified Somerville siblings find their father has committed suicide after learning he has lost almost everything to creditors, diverting the pair into a new life away from high society that largely depends on Horatio’s legal salary. Prior to the beginning of the novel, the siblings have experienced that upper-class status is tenuous for the bourgeois and difficult to maintain without sacrificing vital principles such as parental affection and moderation.

Having witnessed his father’s bloody end, Horatio should have taken the lesson to heart that speculation and exorbitant living wreak havoc, but he instead chafes at the social losses sustained and intends to regain them through similarly inauthentic and equally lethal means. Beginning in 1797, as Mary Poovey explains, “the Bank of England suspended its promise to redeem its paper notes with gold, the authenticating ground of paper credit seemed suddenly to disappear, and the nation’s welfare seemed to be imperiled by a fiction whose effects had been contained for most of the eighteenth century” (Poovey, Genres, 6). England had followed the lead of France, which went off the gold standard in 1789 (Alborn 58-63). Operating during the post-Napoleonic depression within a credit economy, the upstart is given unprecedented license to self-fashion through funds that, at least initially, seem limitless. Living in Rothbury, Horatio opens lines of credit in London and begins to “make as advantageous an appearance as he could; his horses, his equipage, his establishment, all were on a scale that exceeded his present limited fortune” (Volume 3, 203). This attracts upstarts like the Sandersons to set their caps at him and encourages the interest even of aristocratic women like Amelia De Ross. Overstraining his resources, Horatio then becomes reliant on borrowing from creditors and tradespeople in order to fund a lavish lifestyle in London for himself and his new wife, Amelia, who expects to be maintained in a similar manner to her aristocratic siblings, such as the independently wealthy
Lady Claremont. Deliberately, Horatio’s behavior has encouraged belief in his boundless wealth, “without any more sinister intention than that of indulging the vanity of the moment, of making every one believe him a man of fortune” (Volume 3, 266-267). However, as Britain resumes the gold standard in 1821, a move that reassured conservatives but dried up economic growth, Horatio finds his exorbitant lifestyle exposed as a sham by clamoring debtors, the spectacle of his empty and disassembled townhouse becoming symbolic of the instability of upstart pretensions at the end of a period in which Britain’s banking system was perceived as unregulated and ungrounded.

Rather than base his expenditure on economic realities, Horatio appreciates flaunting the veneer of wealth, regardless of its authenticity. As previously witnessed, he recoils at the upstart Sandersons in their natural state and urges Julia not to reveal to their London acquaintances that the Rothbury house they have taken does not resemble its glowing advertisement in the newspapers: “Leave the plantations, pleasure-grounds, and shrubbery, where my friend Puff’s plastic hand has placed them. It is not necessary we should be supposed to be gone to rusticate in a hovel. Better be envied than pitied, you know” (Volume 3, 96-97). This constant refrain, a motto inherited from his late father, is the chorus to Horatio’s rise and fall. Even his marriage to Amelia is orchestrated through misconceptions, her aristocratic family being deceived as to the extent of the Somerville fortune. Wishing to provoke this envy of his outward expenditure, Horatio’s pretenses are at odds both with aristocratic insistence on hereditary privilege and the middling classes’ preference for honoring the self-made man. Formulated in the wake of the Industrial Revolution was a new bourgeois ideology, as Isaac Kramnick summarizes, “Merit, talent, and hard work should dictate social, economic, and political rewards, not privilege, rank,
and birth. The individual stood alone. At the center of the new bourgeois ideology was the solitary individual responsible for his or her own fate” (100). Despite making encouraging progress in his profession before marrying and moving to London, Horatio fails to recognize the difference between making and borrowing his fortune. Jane Sanderson may have similar spending habits, but her expenditures are solidly backed by Mr. Tornado’s West Indian fortune, while nothing supports the Somerville establishment but loans.

Tragically, Horatio’s upstart greed alters his character from that of a good brother and respected man of business to that of an exploiter and hopeless debtor. Though praising her brother’s fairness in splitting their remaining financial assets between them, his sister Julia confides in her friend Amelia that she dreads that Horatio will be undone by his moral failures: “Still the steadiness of his character has other enemies more dangerous – vanity and pride. Somerville has more false pride than any man in England” (Volume 3, 261). Despite receiving this caution, the frivolous and fashionable Amelia also believes in Horatio’s show of wealth, running up immense bills on his credit with no care for the future. Regardless of the accumulation of thousands of pounds of debt in one season, Horatio outwardly pretends that nothing is wrong: “Still he was, to the world, the gay man of fashion and talent, distinguished alike in the more flowery and thorny walks of life; and still it was, as much as ever, his aim to appear more blessed in friends, in fortune, even in health, than he really was” (Volume 4, 138). When Julia learns of his debt and offers to lend him part of her dowry, Horatio stifles his reproving conscience and accepts, soon taking all of it (Volume 4, 133). Violating the trust of his sister, he refuses to give consent to her marriage with the new widower Adolphus Lascelles, hoping instead to arrange a far more elevated match between her and the incredibly wealthy Earl
of Rothbury, which will improve his own standing in London and render the return of her dowry unnecessary. So deeply does this action betray the brother-sister sibling bond, a unique familial relationship understood in the nineteenth century as a unique “place of safety” and trust, that Julia temporarily leaves him to establish her own independent life, a remarkable movement towards female autonomy (Sanders 4). Instead of adopting a morally nobler code of ethics, Horatio has recreated his father’s mistakes in competing with the aristocracy, failing to regulate his finances, and treating Julia as a financial asset.

In line with the aspirations of upstarts resented by Squire Birkit and other aristocratic conservatives, Horatio pursues a political appointment, believing that a salary from the ascendant Tory party will help cover his financial deficiencies. Applying to his father-in-law, Lord Lulworth, Horatio seems within grasp of the new office, when the overthrow of his finances becomes public knowledge, sending creditors swarming to his doorstep in a decade when bankruptcy hearings sky-rocketed not only in London, but also throughout the nation (Finn 236). Lying on his death bed and ministered to by Julia and Lascelles in the absence of his heartless wife, Amelia, Horatio maintains that his upstart ambitions only required more time:

“At all events,” he continued, speaking more rapidly, “I might have been appointed. So near it too!” directing his eye forwards, and stretching his feeble hand, as if to grasp some object of speedy and delightful attainment; “I might have had the appointment, sir, I say – if it had been but for an hour, I might have had it. I should have enjoyed the congratulations of my friends, their visits, their cheerful prognostics. Better be supposed, at least, likely to prosper and live – better be en – en – vied than –” (Volume 4, 238-239)

This “unfortunate victim of worldly love and worldly ambition” has maintained throughout that his sickness is not physical (Volume 4, 239). Humorously, he insists that “gold was the sovereign ‘medicine potable,’ which, if it could be obtained, would soon cure him of all his ills” (Volume 4, 226). With Britain back on the gold standard, Horatio longs for legitimacy, but lacks the
ability to acquire it through his own efforts and industry. Instead, he has collapsed under the stress of the financial discrepancy existing between his lawyers’ salary and his borrowed loans.

Excessive displays of wealth and means are unacceptable for the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, as Le Fanu makes clear. Though this undeserving upstart does unexpectedly recover his father’s fortune through a new financial speculation made by his father’s former partner, who honestly returns it to the Somervilles, she does not allow Horatio or Amelia to live to enjoy it. He has been irreversibly poisoned by greed, his actions and sickness leading to the loss of “a noble heart, round every fibre of which the world, like a poisonous weed, had so banefully twined itself” (Volume 4, 238). With a public reputation in tatters and the female members of his family alienated from him, Horatio represents all that the nineteenth-century Victorian middle-class would despise in a man unable to represent honesty and sincerity in matters of finance. His failure to pay back creditors serves as an instance of what John Kucich terms “gentlemanly commercial conduct” (8). Happy to establish his credit in the world before he leaves it, Horatio does however, repent of his former selfishness and heartlessness. Joining the hands of Julia and Lascelles, he makes what he terms “all the amends in my power for endeavouring to divide two hearts mine was unworthy to understand” (Austen, Volume 4, 243). With the characterization of Horatio Somerville, Le Fanu firstly uses him as a cautionary example of the effects of unsustainable greed upon members of the middling classes, who are unable to avert the practical consequences of their illicit desire. Secondly, she pictures the immorality of wanting to inhabit a loftier sphere in life for no better purpose than inciting social envy. Thirdly, she eloquently illustrates the effect upstart ambitions can have on supportive family members drained by multiple loans that amount to so many thefts, as the debtor spends funds ineffectually and can
never achieve repayment. Le Fanu insists that this kind of behavior will not enable the bourgeoisie to achieve a stable position in society, but instead will lead to catastrophe.

**The Bourgeois Heroine**

Looking to Julia for her bourgeois ideal, Le Fanu valorizes the distinction made by the middling ranks between themselves and the aristocracy, the latter representing a different class of people superior in rank but lacking intellectual and domestic interests. Most of the heroine’s experiences delineating this philosophy derive from the 1784-1790 London adventures of Le Fanu’s mother Elizabeth “Betsy” Sheridan. This eighteenth-century diarist associated with the Prince Regent and aristocracy due to her father Thomas Sheridan’s career as a playwright and the political influence of her brother Richard Brinsley Sheridan, an influential Whig. At a lavish dinner with the *bon ton*, Betsy asked herself what she was doing there,

> conscious that I was the only person in the room who had not some consequence in life from fortune, rank, or acknowledg’d abilities, I felt alone in the croud [sic] and could not wholy [sic] banish the mortifying ideas this consciousness necessarily brought with it. Yet the people were all civil and attentive to me, but I have no business among them. I never coveted the honor of sitting at great people’s tables and every day I live I wish for it less. There can be no true pleasure derived even from the most delightful society unless you feel you have a right to your place in it. (44)

To her sister in 1785, Betsy expressed the wish of spending “the remainder of my days in that middling state of society where people are sufficiently raised to have their minds polish’d though not enough to look down on a person in my situation” (44). Admiring her mother’s prescient decision to turn her back on the elite by marrying her sister’s brother-in-law Captain Henry Le Fanu out of affection, Le Fanu promotes middle-class domesticity with Julia’s similar fate.

Le Fanu protects Julia from the continuing animus against upstarts by positioning her heroine as an unwilling accessory to upstart pretenses, who knows better than and is superior to
her posturing brother. Even when recounting to Amelia De Ross the loss of her two elder sisters and mother through illness and death caused by London’s bad atmosphere, Julia describes herself as only reluctantly participating in the social whirl and gaiety of the *beau monde*. She claims she was “against my will, put at the head of a magnificent establishment, and, as the presumed inheritor of great wealth, found myself followed, caressed, and flattered” (Le Fanu, Volume 3, 252). Even her engagement to Lord St. Adelm was contracted by her ambitious father “without consulting my inclinations” (Volume 3, 257). Responding to her brother’s adoption of their father’s fatal maxim, “Better be envied than pitied,” Julia implores him, “Do not – oh, do not, dearest brother, again repeat that false – false maxim! What is it but, in other words, to say, better hang out false colours – better appear what you are not – better lie, cheat, and deceive” (Volume 3, 97). Like ambitious professional men based in the city who “recognised the particular importance of image to their own professional ambitions,” Horatio takes a townhouse in London, but Julia feels this expenditure to be a dangerous step backwards to their past (Stewart 50). Watching her brother incur tremendous debts, Julia sickens, as her sisters and mother did previously: “Gradually deprived of every thing that makes life valuable, this amiable and warm-hearted being, who was formed to diffuse happiness over the most extensive circle, might literally be said to drag on a kind of living death” (Le Fanu, Volume 4, 116). Removed from her home and quiet domestic life in Rothbury, the heroine is morally and physically repulsed by the spectacle of unbridled greed, far more so than Austen’s Elinor Dashwood, as she actually wishes for a speedy demise in her new, unproductive situation. If Horatio requires gold to rejuvenate his mind and body, at least in his opinion, Julia can only be resuscitated by the love of a good bourgeois gentleman and a rural home of her own where she can perform charity.
Civic-minded, generous, and educated, Julia represents the ideal bourgeoise, a pattern for young women from the nineteenth-century middle classes. Though she shines in society among those appreciative of her virtues as well as beauty, Julia prefers remaining in the domestic realm, enjoying housekeeping for Horatio in their small home, called “the Lodge,” in Rothbury. She also engages in philanthropy, which Kathryn Gleadle claims “emerged not merely out of the conservative vocabulary of Evangelicalism, but was vitally connected to the growing civic consciousness of British women at the turn of the century” (66). By visiting the Rothbury poor, she encounters the curate Lascelles, who leaves material “comforts” behind when spiritually ministering to the local poor and is adored for his kindness (Le Fanu, Volume 3, 211). This cements the bond of respect and admiration between them, which can only be acknowledged as love once his adulterous wife has died. Educated and literate, Julia reads widely, yet she refrains from exhibiting her knowledge loftily like Miss Ravenshawe, Jane Sanderson, or her bluestocking friend Lady Claremont. Viewing what she recognizes as superior merit, Julia’s aristocratic sister-in-law Amelia conflictingly respects and detests her: “she looked down upon Miss Somerville’s connexions and family, and she stood in awe of her talents and understanding” (Volume 4, 76). Even her faults are virtues, as when she observes Horatio to be “reveling in the prospect of a future golden harvest” and spending accordingly but does not warn him sufficiently enough, since “her youth, her timidity, and, we may add, her modesty, prevented her from giving very strong or efficacious advice” (Volume 4, 203). Because she thinks of others before herself, repeatedly avoids marrying into wealth and aristocratic privilege for material considerations, and values life among the middling ranks, Julia is a forerunner of the Victorian middle-class heroine.
Virtuous Julia, however, is an easy prey to her grasping brother, who, despite swearing to protect her like a father, values luxury and marital peace over her well-being. Evidently hearing of the traumatic experience of Betsy Sheridan as a young unmarried woman dependent on her parvenu brother, Charles Sheridan, and his new wife, Le Fanu utilized the dramatic impact of this domestic drama for her most realistic novel. Managing to head to London and live with their father, Betsy scornfully ignored her brother’s request that she return to his Dublin home where she had been treated like a burden as the couple pursued social prestige. Referring to his requests for a family reunion, Betsy asked bitterly, “Can anything be more sickening. I confess there is scarce any emetic more powerful to my stomach than an affectation of sensibility where I know the heart to be truly selfish” (Sheridan 48). Frequently, Charles sent less of Betsy’s allowance than expected, and eventually withheld it altogether due to incurring increasing debts despite his large income. Two years later after briefly encountering the pair in Dublin, Betsy remarked, “God knows I am sufficiently sick of the whole farce they have acted so that nothing can be more irksome than the necessity I am under of assuming an appearance of kindness where I owe so little” (Sheridan 104). Responding with irritation to his sister’s engagement to an impecunious captain, who had respectfully courted her through correspondence, Charles spitefully tried to estrange the couple with false rumors, provoking Betsy to term him her “Evil Genius” and finally sever all ties (Sheridan 173). By showing Julia to be chronically injured physically, mentally, and financially by Horatio’s greed, Le Fanu acknowledges the misery of selfless women who are taken advantage of by family members pursuing materialism and self-interest. By contrast, Julia cares little for money except as it can help others, telling Horatio, “no employment I could find for my money would be half so grateful to me, as that of proving my
sincere attachment to my brother” (Le Fanu, Volume 4, 133). Resolving not to ask for the return of her dowry despite being financially injured, Julia proves herself selfless.

When freed by her brother’s death to choose her own destiny, Julia refuses to continue as an upstart in London high society. Even after the return of her fortune and the inheritance of more from her late brother, Julia eschews materialism and refuses to return to the urban setting, evidencing the “restraint and self-denial conducive to bourgeois capitalism” (Franklin 3). She desires a life of public service that is in keeping with a moderate mode of existence founded in realities. Already loving Lascelles for his kindness and nobility of purpose, she now admires him for refraining from pressing his suit upon her now that she is an heiress and capable of attaining a higher sphere as did Eliza and Jane Sanderson and the Tornados. He resolves,

“If I was mistaken in believing myself distinguished by her – if higher connexions, and higher views, have succeeded to the slight preference she may have formerly betrayed for me […] she has but to make it known. It shall not be said, a second time, that I was the cause of removing any woman from the more distinguished sphere in which her friends wished to fix her.” (Volume 4, 141)

Because he is a clergyman, Lascelles is sworn to a life among the common people, able to access wealthier classes only through the duties of his occupation. Upward mobility is not desirable for him and though appreciative of Julia’s good fortune, he deplores it as another obstacle to their matrimonial union. Enabled to marry by Horatio’s decisive intervention, the couple possess the same values of empathy and self-sacrifice rather than greed and self-interest that make them a valuable asset to society by assisting the poor.

At first glance, Julia’s character arc strongly resembles that of Austen’s Elinor Dashwood, both women placed within an upstart rivalry who ultimately become members of the middle ranks of society. Both have suffered financial difficulties and learned to practice
domesticity in a far more modest situation in contrast to their original position among the British elite. The heroines have been exploited emotionally by an undeserving upstart and have acquired a hearty contempt of London society. Each marries the man she has loved hopelessly, with little hope of a happy conclusion, andretires to a rural setting to live as a clergymans wife. What is different between these heroines revolves around the aspect of choice Le Fanu introduces into the resolution. Whereas Elinor marries Edward, who is irrevocably disinherited, only because Lucy has released him, and becomes a clergymans wife in a rural setting because Colonel Brandon has given him a living, Julia deliberately chooses a similar class position though she possesses immense wealth. No more is said about it, as if the fortune did not exist. Presumably, Julia keeps it by for a rainy day, but her wealth does not constitute any part of her new social identity and she does not attempt to increase it through risky economic practices. Le Fanus deserving upstart has received well-deserved riches, but she does not intend to be defined by them.

As Alicia Le Fanu concludes her novel, the deserving upstart has placed herself in the middle classes, where she is most content and active, diffusing social content rather than chaos. Julias actions answer the concern that women could not participate in philanthropy to the lower classes that critically restored social harmony and also cultivate a happy home life (Elliott 4). Removing to a new curacy in Berkshire, Julia, Adolphus, and his daughter Celestina, enjoy the domestic ideal for which the heroine has longed throughout the entirety of her misfortunes:

There, in the practice of the duties of religion and benevolence, in literature, and the embellishment of their small but paradisiacal abode, and the exercise of the thousand generous and delightful sympathies that flow from their mutual and ardent attachment, they actually contrive to fill up life to their satisfaction, though visiting London very seldom, and never going to watering-places. (Volume 4, 250)
Le Fanu’s comical irony is laid on thick here, combating the disbelief of readers addicted to expensive urban and coastal excursions, but she outlines the domestic ideal prescribed at mid-century for Victorian women. In the bourgeois idyll, the heroine is not fundamentally changed by wealth or need to triumph over her neighbors by demonstrating her financial superiority. With Julia’s happy ending, religion, benevolence, intellectualism, domesticity, and familial love are bourgeois practices and ideals, fundamental cornerstones of a growing middle-class consciousness responding to the cultural threat posed by the undeserving upstart.

**Conclusion**

While Austen’s upstart rivalry between Elinor and Lucy in *Sense and Sensibility* relates gripping tension between two women of different social classes in love with the same gentleman, Le Fanu’s juxtaposition of the bitter financial misunderstandings between the Somerville siblings in *Fashionable Connexions* indicates deeper, more painful concern that the rising middle classes were exploiting society during a time of economic crisis and widespread greed. Inspired by Betsy Sheridan’s deliberate decision to remain in the middling ranks, Le Fanu follows Austen in praising a life of service and philanthropy rather than one spent idling away in aristocratic excess. Vanity and ambition could not be the characteristics displayed by the bourgeoisie if Great Britain was to recover from the Napoleonic Wars and rediscover its value as a country, both morally and financially. Wealthy bourgeoisie like Miss Nelthorpe and aristocrats such as Squire Birkit and Amelia De Ross resent the incursion of *parvenus* and people of color into their ranks but are ultimately powerless to keep them out. Despite the success of some lower middle-class aspirants like the Sandersons and the *nouveau riche* West Indians accepted into the aristocracy and elite classes, Le Fanu wants more for the deserving bourgeoisie than empty
imitation and lavish spending. Instead, she believes they are best suited to a successful and happy life between the lower and upper classes rather than pursuing the inordinate elevation and pretentious public demonstrations desired by a vainglorious upstart like Horace Somerville. Containing a discerning view of the perils of egocentric upstart activity as the Georgian era drew to a close, *Fashionable Connexions* suggests the vital importance of the illustrative upstart rivalry device in the English novel in warning the bourgeois to exemplify more for English society than self-interest and vanity.
CHAPTER THREE

AT THE VERY FOOT OF THE THRONE: POST-REVOLUTIONARY
UPSTARTS IN CATHERINE GORE’S PEERS AND PARVENUS

Between early nineteenth century views of upstarts by Jane Austen and Alicia Le Fanu and those later depicted by Victorian novelists William Makepeace Thackeray and Charles Dickens, intervenes another critical vision of the rise of upstarts in Great Britain, furnished by the prolific pen of novelist Catherine Gore (1798-1861). A preeminent writer of the “silver fork genre,” the soubriquet for novels set in high society among the wealthy, “Mrs. Gore” enjoyed great success in the late Georgian and early Victorian eras. Due in major part to Thackeray’s parody of Gore’s supposed Gallicisms and elevated descriptions of luxury, the silver fork genre rapidly fell out of public favor. This decline obscures Gore’s shrewd and accurate social commentary in works of the 1830s and 1840s which chart significant cultural shifts in perception of the parvenu. Her liberal view of the upstart exerted a significant impact on subsequent works exploring the upstart peril by recalling the period between the French Revolution (1789-1799) and the Reform Bill (1832) as one in which public opinion turned unfairly against the parvenu. Within her most comprehensive revisionist historiography, Peers and Parvenus: A Novel (1846), Gore’s deserving upstart Jervis Cleve is male, a hard-working bourgeois hero who succeeds through educational access and effort. He exerts a positive impact on a female member of the aristocracy by unwittingly inspiring her to educate herself intellectually and embrace bourgeois ideology. A decade after the bloodless transition of political power from Tory conservatism to
Whig liberalism, Gore can reinterpret upstart animus as unjustified aristocratic fears of bourgeois supplantation and blame the greed and villainy of the novel’s undeserving upstart, Colonel Cleveland, on aristocratic abuses by an elite insistent on maintaining total dominance of society after the French Revolution.

**Silver Fork Novels and the Upstart**

Novels of social manners by writers like Austen and Le Fanu in the early nineteenth century were succeeded by the silver fork genre circa 1825. Because they often focused on dramatic tension between aristocrats and their social inferiors, silver fork novels observed the progress of class warfare in Great Britain, though their descriptions of aristocratic wealth have obscured their continuing focus on the upstart. Most were written from a middle-class perspective, satirizing urban excesses and snobbery. Explaining that it constitutes a new post-Regency literary genre, Dianne F. Sadoff claims, “Silver fork fiction also feeds on a rapidly changing social scene during decades of status anxiety, class instability, and social mobility” (630). Such novels enabled “a voyeuristic fascination with aristocratic manners and appearances,” but also sought a definition and social role for their upwardly mobile class:

Whether they wanted to emulate or to abolish the ruling elite, members of the rising middle orders could do anything but ignore the still unmistakable dominance of their traditional social superiors. When the commercial and industrial classes began to assert themselves politically, it was the landed aristocracy that they had to contend with. Similarly, when they came to engage in the subtler and more far-reaching process of self-definition, it was in terms of the established aristocratic standard that they were inevitably forced to measure their own system of values and code of conduct. (Hughes 330-331)

Arguably the queen of silver fork fiction during the 1830s and 1840s, publishing over seventy novels and other literary productions, Gore “achieved more visibility and sold more books than any other writer in the popular marketplace” (Engelhardt 65). As the daughter of a wine-
merchant, Gore hailed from the middle classes like Austen and Le Fanu, and was a social climber by her marriage to Captain Charles Arthur Gore of the Lifeguards, as Molly Englehardt asserts. Moving in high society, Gore “straddled not only Romanticism and Victorianism but also social classes, using her insider position to observe the private mannerisms of those in the top rank and then to share them with her middle-ranked readers” (Englehardt 69). Among these was Charlotte Brontë, whose rapturous response to Gore’s 1850 revision of *The Hamiltons* (1834) expressed gratitude for its glimpse of high life, finding in her descriptions a comprehensive portrait of aristocratic manners.

Other critics declared their doubts as to the accuracy of elite life as pictured in novels by Gore and her silver fork contemporaries, often slyly inserting references to the authors’ bourgeois origins. Generally, Gore’s novels centered around the London Season, when the sitting of Parliament coincided with courtship opportunities, illuminating “class inequalities” (Wilson 40). Imitating elevated silver fork rhetoric in *The Book of Snobs*, serialized in *Punch* (1846-1847), Thackeray influentially if lightheartedly cast these productions as wishful bourgeois descriptions of elite living. To regale a bourgeois country snob, the *Snob* narrator Frank invents stories about current aristocrats, conversing “just in the style of Mrs. Gore’s last fashionable novel.” Responsively, Frank relates, Mrs. Ponto “began to trot out scraps of French, just for all the world as they do in the novels; and kissed her hand to me quite graciously, telling me to come soon to caffy, ung pu de Musick o salong” (Thackeray, *The Book*, 94). Amidst Thackeray’s lampooning, he does not grasp Gore’s critique of aristocrats. According to Juliet McMaster, in “Lords and Liveries” in *Novels by Eminent Hands* (1844), Thackeray draws and portrays his heroine Amethyst Pimlico as Catherine Gore herself (Figure 2) (McMaster, “*Novels,“* 315).
After a wild tale replete with Lord Bagnigge’s derring-do in high society, the couple marry. Sadly, they “have not more than nine hundred thousand a year, but they live cheerfully, and manage to do good,” Thackeray snickers (“Punch’s,” 257-258). Acknowledging some accuracy in Thackeray’s mimicry of Gore’s occasional “shallow moralizing,” McMaster keenly observes, “If Thackeray is the best parodist of the Silver Fork novel, he was also a practitioner. *Vanity Fair* has been claimed as […] ‘the culmination of the fashionable novel’” (“Novels,” 325). Hughes objects to Thackeray’s sketch as inaccurate, since it does not contain the miserable aristocratic marriage common in Gore’s plots: “This is wonderful, but it is not Mrs. Gore” (Hughes 174).

McMaster insightfully speaks to the prohibitive effect of *Novels by Eminent Hands*, arguing that Gore is overdue for reassessment: “Nowadays it is difficult to read Mrs. Gore or G.P.R. James except through Thackeray’s parodies of them. Their texts are inevitably colored – heightened, and perhaps distorted – by Thackeray’s rendering, for he has made us re-perceive them, as Jane Austen made us re-perceive *Udolpho*” (“Novels,” 327). To break the Thackerayan spell requires examination of how Gore described the clash between the aristocracy and bourgeoisie and how she interpreted the upstart.

Figure 2. Thackeray’s “Amethyst Pimlico”
Before Thackeray invented famously sly Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair*, Gore featured enterprising upstarts and *parvenus*, upwardly mobile individuals facing extreme discrimination. Though critics refused to compare her favorably to Austen, in her earlier work, Gore demonstrates the powerful influence of Austen’s themes (Kendra, “You,” np). Gore’s preface to *Pin Money* (1831), explains the purpose of writing in this tradition: “Exhibiting an attempt to transfer the familiar narrative of Miss Austin [sic] to a higher sphere of society, it is, in fact, a Novel of the simplest kind, addressed by a woman to readers of her own sex” (Gore, *Pin*, 1). Evocative of the struggle between Elinor Dashwood and Lucy Steele, female readers are expected to understand the upstart rivalry between Lady Maria and Sophia Willingham for the position of matriarch in *Mothers and Daughters: A Tale of the Year 1830* (1831) because it speaks to the familiar stranglehold of patriarchal power over their bodies and social identities. When Sir Claude Willingham’s sons Charles and Joseph respectively marry an indigent aristocrat and clergyman’s daughter, the old man maliciously plays favorites with his daughters-in-law. Though unable to practice the “capitalist individualism” operating between the 1790s and 1830s that Mary Poovey has claimed caused more of a “challenge to traditional English society and its ideology” than the more “dramatic” French Revolution, the women compete with their wombs and wiles (*The Proper*, xv). The “freemasonry among the artful” reveals them to each other as master tacticians, just as Elinor instantly comprehends Lucy’s illicit ambition to rise in the world (Gore, *Mothers*, 48). Knowing that producing the male heir will guarantee elevation, both despair when the first three grandchildren are girls, disappointment causing Sir Claude to term the exhausted Sophia “a mere hypocrite – a very crocodile,” “worse than ugly – mean-looking contracted; an upstart in every feature, every gesture, every tone!” and a “bride […] with
her plebian fingers covered with the paste of the dumplings she had been kneading all her life” (Mothers, 35-37). When Lady Maria gives birth to young Claude, she, Sir Claude, and aristocratic society triumph over the upstart Sophia. However, fate allows the bourgeoise the ultimate victory when Charles and his son both die, Lady Sophia’s return to Heddeston Court signaling the uncertainty of continuing aristocratic dominance.

**The Reform Bill**

Following the passage of the Reform Bill (1832), Gore’s view of the upstart immediately evolved from portraying a view of the issues as rooted in class and gender to exploring conservative animus against upstarts in politics and rising middle classes, as did Le Fanu. Since the French Revolution, calls for reform by the liberal Whig party had been cast by the ascendent Tories as upstart machinations calculated to destabilize the aristocracy and draw elite wealth into bourgeois pockets. Contesting Cobbett and Hone’s misleading representations of the political upstart, John Wade in his incendiary *The Black Book* (1831) had sensationaly revealed that the Tories, rather than the liberal Whigs, had participated in widespread nepotism. This sent shockwaves through a country previously asked to believe the Tories to be the party of the aristocracy protecting Great Britain against grasping upstarts. In Gore’s *The Hamiltons or the New Æra* (1834), political upstarts are acknowledged as Tories, affiliated with the corrupt court of King George IV, “a kind master, and gracious to his frogs,” as Gore snidely puns, in an allusion to Hone’s pamphlet (*The Hamiltons*, Volume 2, 279). He epitomizes the upstart described by the *The Literary Examiner* in 1833: “A man climbing is the type of English society – grasping something above and spurning what is below. He strikes against his footing for his
spring” (645). For Gore, the Tory upstart Mr. Hamilton represents such selfish individualism in his desperate need to stay on top.

Describing the fraught years prior to the passage of the Reform Bill, this 1834 novel exposes the upstart peril as a lie perpetuated by greedy conservative upstarts and alarmist aristocrats while the nation suffered unalleviated poverty. The feudal spirit of Laxington, a Northampton town ruled by the Earl of Tottenham, is startled when the upstart Mr. Hamilton leases Weald Park in the late 1820s. His son Augustus marries Susan, daughter of straitened Lady Berkely, and whisks her away to the Hamiltons’ opulent London home:

“‘The furniture is new,’” replied Mrs. Hamilton, looking round, somewhat bewildered. “‘New as yourself, my little wife; who have much ground to go over before you discover that all my father’s proceedings are directed to the approbation of that great staring œil de bœuf – the eye of the world!’” (Gore, *The Hamiltons*, Volume 1, 181)

By exploiting his government position to gain vital funds, Mr. Hamilton becomes Lord Laxington, perhaps in allusion to Edward Bulwer’s sketch of the Tory “Lord Lacrymose,” whose deference to superiors ensures “No man calls him *parvenu* – he has confounded himself with the *haute noblesse*” (Bulwer 19-20). Exhibiting “fearful worldliness,” “moral atheism,” and “incredulity in virtue,” Lord Laxington carefully regulates his starving constituents, knowing that should their “yelping grow too clamorous, or their bones too gaunt,” this will lead to his political dismissal (Volume 1, 233). Instead of carefully tending to the poor, he exploits them, a heartless abuse of his new prestige.

Unsurprisingly, the former Mr. Hamilton opposes much-needed reform, though he later repents of his efforts to oppose the legitimate political rise of the bourgeoisie as voters. Awaking to the hypocrisy of Toryism, the British public began to clamor for reform, a call intensifying to a roar following the death of George IV in 1830, the ascension of William IV, the landslide 1831
victory of the Whigs, and the 1831 failure of the Commons Bill in the House of Lords. Even in the conservative town of Laxington, Gore describes the populace rioting “even to the last blue stage of extreme Revolution!” (Volume 3, 238). The novel captures terrifying social turbulence, but as Kendra remarks, “clearly endorses the principles of reform” (“Gendering,” 35-36). Repentantly urging fellow aristocrats to support the bill, Lord Claneustace cautions fellow aristocrats, “We have been blind and deaf too long. It is time for all England to know that A NEW ÆRA of our national history is approaching. Let us devoutly trust that its hopes may not be regenerated by a baptism of blood” (Volume 3, 12-13). Only fear of revolution leads to aristocratic capitulation, with Gore describing a successive slew of public projects for the poor’s education and employment that would otherwise have been sorely lacking.

Furthermore, Gore delights that the aristocratic leadership of reform by Earl Grey represents a critical blow to association of liberalism with revolution and upstart schemes. She observes, “It afforded […] a considerable source of aggravation to the mortification of the Tories, that the new party, which it had announced as a gang of democrats, intent upon overturning the ancient institutions of the country, should be at once recognized by the world, as forming a nucleus of all that was venerable in descent” (Volume 3, 111-112). With this reactionary period giving way to political reform, which in turn enabled the rise and cultural influence of the Victorian middle-class, Gore began the important work of re-historicizing English reception of the upstart and predicting the next stage in the bourgeois rise to prominence. Particularly, she reflects upon the alarmist conservatism of the past decades and charts its effect on upstarts from the lower classes of society who have managed to reach the bourgeois class despite aristocratic hindrance. Lowborn Jervis Cleve transforms himself into the embodiment of
bourgeois potential through his ability to learn and excel in intellectual subjects. While incorporating the upstart rivalry device used by Austen and Le Fanu to showcase bourgeois restraint in opposition to a greedy upstart, Gore deviates from their characterization by faulting aristocratic superiors for depriving the British lower classes of education. By resisting reform and prohibiting other channels by which self-improvement and enterprise could be achieved, they have created the undeserving upstart.

Creating a Parvenu

Critical belief that Catherine Gore wrote less provocative fiction after 1832 has disregarded the galvanizing action of reform legislation, which in a sense authorized her within a liberal political moment to revisit past prejudices against the upstart, and by extension, middle-class authors like herself. Perceiving Gore as limited in social scope in her post-Reform fiction, Edward Copeland contends that the “passage of the Reform Bill had altered public opinion towards fashionable aristocratic society,” rendering their interrogation less urgent and weakening the silver fork novel (125-126). Published in 1846, Peers and Parvenus: A Novel boasts characters exemplifying the total range of social caste in Great Britain and contains Gore’s most radical view of the lower-class British upstart in relation to the gentry. However, it comes after the 1825-1841 heyday of silver fork fiction identified by Copeland and thus has remained unobserved, even by those like Ellen Miller Casey who seek to appreciate Gore on her own merits (Casey 15). Yet, at the time it was remarked upon even by critics as raising several important issues in high society itself, as one reported in the press,

That highly important topic of the education of the poor, has seldom been more actively discussed in the leading coteries of the day or at the dinner parties of the season, than now that its powerful interest has been so strikingly impressed upon the public in Mrs. Gore’s new novel of “Peers and Parvenus.” We have to thank that lady for having led the
way to a battle-field which cannot be too eagerly disputed, till the good cause shall prevail. (“Peers and Parvenus,” *The Sun*, 7)

Eloquently picturing the hopelessness of uneducated Britons, both male and female, Gore’s novel also lionized academic access and literary mastery. *The Scotsman* stated, “The question of the position occupied in English society by men of letters is boldly but fairly discussed in its pages, forming an agreeable relief to the sprightlier sallies connected with the whims and follies of the gay world with which the works of this popular writer ever abound” (“Peers and Parvenus,” *The Scotsman*, 3). Depicting how events in France occasioned the upstart peril, Gore insists upon valuing future intellectualism and effort promised by the rising middle class.

Set in the early decades of the nineteenth century and ending on the verge of reform, *Peers and Parvenus* represents Gore’s most comprehensive historical vision of the lower-class *parvenu* struggling upwards against the Napoleonic-era Tory. Prior to reading the novel, the *Morning Post* reviewer had noted the forthcoming title as somewhat anachronistic in 1846: “In these times, when certain ‘parvenues’ are becoming still more powerful than ‘Peers,’ it seems absurd to place them thus together in juxta position” (“The Markets,” 8). Four decades prior, the power disparity, especially between social climbers from a far lower strata and the rural gentry, was far more entrenched and unyielding. Gore’s Victorian silver fork novel charts the gradual ideological shift from liberal Enlightenment philosophy to retroactive conservatism, exemplified by young and civic-minded Maria Hecksworth.¹ Brought round to the Tory viewpoint after reassessing the cause of the French Revolution and shaken by the rise of Napoleon, she comes to

¹ Despite several anachronistic references to cultural works and issues of the 1830s and 1840s, such as the decline of English theatre, references to the recent widowhood of Mary Shelley and calculating Jervis’s age as stated multiple times, establishes that the novel’s action takes place roughly between 1808-1830, concluding on the very eve of reform.
resent the rise of an upstart from her village, one facilitated through paternalism. Newly married to Squire Hecksworth of Bilston Hall, Bilston Park, in the rural town of Bilston, Mrs. Hecksworth decides to set up a Sunday School for the ignorant village children, in imitation of Hannah More’s interest in aristocrats who generously funded “an age of benevolence” (More 43-44). Gore notes, “At that time, the cry for educating the poor had not gone forth in the land. Like other valuable acts of reform, it is the growth of the present century” (Gore, *Peers and Parvenus*, Volume 1, 39). Keen on reforming “existing abuses” with the privilege of her gentry position, Mrs. Hecksworth is “an amiable young woman, disposed to do her best in this world, in the hope of enjoying her best in the next” (Volume 1, 40). Hoping to eliminate crime in Bilston by teaching good conduct, Mrs. Hecksworth plans to make a positive impact that will benefit the rising generation by teaching the lower-classes obedience and religious instruction. She only warms to one of the “dirty, stupid, ill-conditioned brats she had undertaken to train into Newtons and Hannah Mores” (Volume 1, 39-42). This is Jervis Cleve, a motherless child from a tenant family on her estate, whose crude gallantry and pale looks rouse the lady’s interest.

In first harboring Jervis as a minor gardener and then financing his education, Mrs. Hecksworth participates in feudal paternalism, distinguished from nineteenth-century philanthropy in its support of nostalgic conservatism, which reinforced feudal privilege even as it temporarily relieved poverty. Under this system, claims David Roberts, “The wealthy were not the only ones with duties. In a system of paternalism obligations are mutual. The poor too had duties, those of conscientious service, promptness, politeness, and deference” (6). Yet, even her conservative actions in teaching religious doctrines from the Bible and employing a schoolmaster and schoolmistress undergo intense scrutiny for their likeness to Enlightenment ideologies as the
French revolution rages across the channel. Referring to his constant battles with Maria over “Education, or no education” before her brother Sir William Davenport, Squire Bilston finds a staunch conservative ally:

“Education of the poor? Ay, ay! – Maria’s a theorist; - Maria’s an enlighten-ment-arian! – Much good may it do her!” cried Sir William, a stanch Tory of the times when Toryism and darkness were over the land.

“It will do her good! – I never doubted the good which Maria herself would derive from the exercise of her charitable impulses,” observed the squire, in fond vindication of his pretty wife; “the question is what good it will do the poor children she is cramming with accomplishments. In my opinion, you might as well stuff a green goose with pearls!” (Gore, *Peers and Parvenus*, Volume 1, 46-47)

However, at Mrs. Hecksworth’s urging, Sir William recommends the fourteen-year-old boy to Fairford free school, where he learns at her expense under the tutelage of Peter Parmenter (Volume 1, 48). Visiting two years later, she expects a “second Blaise Pascal” or a “new Jean Jacques Rousseau” envisioned as “pale, thin, intellectual-looking” and destined for premature death, and is stunned to instead find a gawky and precocious scholar. Rejecting the aristocrats’ lame suggestion that Cleve be allowed to become a steward, or a parish surveyor, Parmentor bursts out that Jervis is not only “the first Grecian of the sixth form,” but also “the first mathematician in the country!” (Volume 1, 100-102) Beating a hasty retreat, Mrs. Hecksworth is mortified by the unexpected social consequences of her actions in educating Jervis.

Mastering mathematics and science, Jervis attends Cambridge University on a scholarship, Gore communicating details that prove the author to be surprisingly well informed about bourgeois attainment in both disciplines. Disillusioned and beating a permanent retreat from Enlightenment philosophies, Mrs. Hecksworth sends a five-pound note to a cheap London school-library asking that Jervis be sent volumes suitable for a sixteen-year-old scholar. The purveyors seize the opportunity to rid themselves of an overstock of mathematical works.
Accordingly, the ambitious Parmenter and his dutiful pupil Jervis mistakenly believe Mrs. Hecksworth wishes for him to be a mathematician. In the late 1810s, mathematics was tainted by continental liberalism and associated with Cambridge University, a Whig-affiliated institution. Already an institution which, unlike Oxford, allowed poor but gifted students, known as sizars, to earn their way to a degree, Cambridge benefitted from the post-Napoleonic influx of European scholarship, which led to increased matriculation between 1819 and the mid-1820s. By contrast, Oxford practiced conservative “safe learning” and rejected Continental imports as “radical or subversive” (Stray 34). Another reason for the high enrollment was the increased establishment of reformed public schools between the 1780s and 1790s, bankrolled by “urban middle-class prosperity.” Though working-class, Jervis joins this trend by attaining a scholarship at Fairford and receiving another to attend St. John’s College, Cambridge, which was then experimenting with speculative algebra, or “French analytic mathematics” (Stray 34-35). At eighteen, he is known as “The Fairford Youth” and “the first mathematician of his day” (Gore, Peers and Parvenus, Volume 1, 107-108). A new cultural Renaissance for the sciences is advanced by the educated parvenu, ideological descendant of the brilliant commoners Leonardo da Vinci and the Admirable Crichton, to whose legacies Gore repeatedly appeals.

From this point onwards, even as Jervis gains honors, prizes, and begins to dress like a gentleman, Mrs. Hecksworth withdraws from him, offended by the spectacle of this inadvertent upstart mathematician. Abandoning her paternalism after visiting Jervis around 1814, she has adopted the conservative views of her brother and late husband regarding the upstart peril, alarmed by how rapidly Jervis has advanced from a cottage on her estate to prestige. For the epigraph of Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education (1799), More had quoted Lord
Halifax in her advice to female philanthropists, “May you so raise your character that you may help to make the next age a better thing, and leave posterity in your debt, for the advantage it shall receive by your example” (More, title page). Discarding paternalism causes Mrs. Heckworth’s moral character to degrade into a fearful caricature of her former well-meaning self.

Summoned to visit Mrs. Hecksworth, Jervis is wounded that his much-adored patroness should bestow upon him, through the hands of her eldest girl, a pocket-book containing a ten-pound note. That she should receive him standing, and offer him no seat, did not strike him even with surprise; for in the presence of his benefactress, he still felt as in that of a superior being. But the money was a grievance; and the deep blush with which Lucy Hecksworth stepped awkwardly across the room to drop the note-case into his hand, depressed his spirit with the consciousness that the whole family had united in the act of charity. (Gore, Peers and Parvenus, Volume 1, 114-115)

Shocked, Jervis muses, “It was impossible for him to forget that the domineering squire’s widow, by whom he was despised as a parvenu, was the identical creature who, in her kindlier youth, had extended a hand of compassion to his miseries” (Volume 1, 178-179). Realizing that success does not await a man of his class position in England within this climate of fear, Jervis succumbs to “the master-workings of ambition,” applying for a European fellowship (Volume 1, 52-53). Consequently, in the 1820s, he pursues a magnificent academic career abroad, fêted by European aristocrats rewarding merit not with anger and hauteur but with limitless opportunities and funding.

Instead of accepting her mother’s anathematization of the upstart, Lucy leaps to the defense of Jervis and ranges herself on the side of the rising middle-class in conscious opposition to post-Revolutionary conservatism. Mrs. Hecksworth insists that she does not wish Jervis ill, but “What I disapprove is his advancement to a place in society above his proper sphere.” Lucy counters, “But what is his proper sphere? – certainly not his native village, and the company of
the exciseman and tax-gatherer! – To that you have rendered him superior” (Volume 2, 251).

Rather than goad her mother, Lucy desperately craves some redeeming acknowledgement that Jervis’s rise is a blessing, rather than a catastrophe. When Mrs. Hecksworth protests, “His sphere is that of school-masters, - professors, - artists, - professional men,” Lucy dares to express the very apogee of upstart ideology, hinting, “But the sphere of professional men often rises to the foot of the throne” (Volume 2, 251). Mrs. Hecksworth is driven to clarify the reason for her resentment of the upstart:

“I will not pretend to dispute with you, Lucy,” cried Mrs. Hecksworth, getting very angry, because out-argued. “I can only repeat my regret at hearing you adopt the dangerous jargon of the disaffected classes. It is unbecoming your age, - it is unbecoming your situation in life. – It is an extension of the levelling principles which have brought so many of the countries of Europe to the verge of a revolution.” (Volume 2, 252)

Speaking of the nervousness of the aristocrats while observing the incursions of the *bourgeois*, Deborah Simonton comments, “To many among the élite, the framework of society was threatened not only by radical ideas, but also by the increasing wealth and social ambition of the middle classes” (Simonton 36). The higher Jervis climbs, the more Mrs. Hecksworth trembles for her gentry prestige, and Lucy glories in the prospect of inevitable social change. Rebelliously if respectfully, she verges on proto-Marxism as she tells her mother, “The world has grown almost as liberal as I could wish. Everything tends towards a fair equalization of rights, - a fair fusion of classes. – I am quite content. I should be sorry to see the reformation of society progress more rapidly, - for all sudden changes are liable to a re-action. All I regret is, to find a person I revere desirous of restoring the bigotries of former times” (Gore, *Peers and Parvenus*, Volume 2, 251).

Rejecting the previous animus against upstarts and inspired by the *parvenu* to pursue her own
forbidden aspirations for intellectual self-betterment, Lucy becomes an unlikely and conscious ally of the rising middle classes.

With Mrs. Hecksworth’s bad treatment of Jervis, which other elite gentlemen like George Joddrell enthusiastically imitate throughout the novel, Gore has shown firstly that the British aristocracy hindered the ideological creation of a middle class, prior to reform, by classing all social climbers as dangerous. A deserving upstart from the lower class is classed as a revolutionary, rather than as an example of the massive gains the bourgeois could achieve for Britain if they were given cultural leeway and could define their social role. Conservative Toryism has interpreted deserving upstarts as dangerous to English liberty and aristocracy, when they actually consider themselves to be bourgeois allies. Simon Gunn states that between the 1790s and 1840s, “the identity of the middle class was defined principally in moral and political terms. The middle classes represented the backbone of the nation against revolutionary and radical excesses of all kinds as well as the antidote to a corrupt and parasitic aristocracy” (Gunn 34). Secondly, Gore makes the provocative suggestion that Jervis’s industry and scholastic aptitude, above all, his genius, qualify him for more than the moderate middle-class life envisioned by Austen and Le Fanu for the deserving bourgeoisie in more reactionary times. If Jervis could find a place in England benefitting his merit, as Lucy comes to believe, society would benefit. Accidentally inheriting the entirety of her father’s fortune through a legal mistake, Lucy has become an emancipated heiress of ten thousand per annum and is able to stand in opposition to her mother. So inspired is she by Jervis’s accomplishments that she refrains from appearing in high society and secretly educates herself to be worthy of being his wife. Ranged together against the aristocracy who deny Jervis status and Lucy education, this represents
another alliance of illicit desire, comparable to the marriage between Le Fanu’s upstart Jane Sanderson and Mr. Tornado. Formerly constrained by the narrow educational purview open even to a woman of her position, Lucy eventually confesses to Jervis’s astonishment, “the whole study of my life has been to render myself deserving of you […] And though still immeasurably beneath you in all the higher endowments of the mind, I have, at least, learned enough to enable me to estimate my own ignorance, and your noble superiority” (Gore, *Peers and Parvenus*, Volume 3, 276). Promising him the ownership of Bilston Hall after their marriage, Lucy attempts to not only make amends for her mother’s cruelty, but also to promote the ideology and reality of a British meritocracy, a gradual system which will transform the aristocracy’s basis in hereditary.

**A Dangerous Levelling**

However, on the eve of Jervis’s triumphant success and entry into the upper classes at the end of *Peers and Parvenus*, an undeserving and even dangerous upstart reveals himself, seemingly justifying aristocratic fears. Colonel Cleveland, an American adventurer frequently encountered by Jervis Cleve and the Heckworths in Italy, is handsome, clever, and immensely talented. Boasting immense wealth, the charming gentleman gambles with wealthy aristocrats, amuses Lucy and other ladies with his stories of colonial adventure, and agrees to accompany the smitten Mrs. Hecksworth back to England where he pays assiduous court to Lucy’s younger sister as an honored guest in Bilston Hall. To his horror, Jervis discovers from Cleveland’s discarded Creole mistress, Virginia, that this man is a murderer, sharper, and criminal. She tearfully relates to Jervis how at a shamefully young age she and her dowry were carried off from her father’s plantation by Col. Cleveland, who shot a slave and her brother when they tried to prevent the elopement. She adds, “But these ill-gotten gains were regarded only as the means
of doubling his fortune. The expenditure of every guinea by one who seemed so reckless in money matters, was as closely calculated as by a miser. Every showy expense was a mere decoy!” Besides physically abusing Virginia, Cleveland has committed a slew of colonial outrages as the “infidel” pirate Henriquez, benefitting from systemic upheaval in the New World: “Acts of piracy on the high seas and excesses beyond even the license of that terrible South American war of independence, had placed his life in jeopardy on the other side the Atlantic. Europe was consequently his mark” (Gore, Peers and Parvenus, Volume 3, 101-171).² Furthermore, Jervis discovers that his friend Lord John Howard has been fleeced of thousands of pounds by Cleveland, who now desires the fortune of his adored Lucy. Heading back to Bilston, where his family still resides, to expose Cleveland’s true nature, Jervis becomes the self-appointed champion of the Hecksworths, proving his loyalty to the aristocracy despite their hauteur.

If Gore had chosen to have Jervis rescue Mrs. Hecksworth from the consequences of her greed and vanity by unmasking Cleveland as an unscrupulous villain, marry Lucy, and become master of Bilston Hall, Peers and Parvenus would end with the aristocracy’s acceptance of the deserving upstart, who has courageously fended off the revolutionary variety and evil other. At first, it appears that the story will progress in that direction, with Jervis receiving Lucy’s unexpected confession of love and promising to help her eject the snake in her family’s bosom. Knowing that Cleveland’s rapacity is nearly equaled by Mrs. Hecksworth’s eagerness for fortune, Lucy realizes she must break the shared devotion to greed linking the undeserving upstart and the aristocracy: “With my mother, (you know it so well that I am betraying no family

2 Likely the Mexican War of Independence (1810-1821) or the Argentine War of Independence (1810-1818), given the dates.
secret in the disclosure,) – with my mother opulence is a virtue. – Cleveland has dazzled her eyes by the display of his ill-gotten wealth, till she has all but courted his pretensions to my sister’s hand. How, how are we to undeceive her!” (Volume 3, 282-283). Unsurprisingly, when Mrs. Hecksworth discovers the source of the information, she believes Cleveland’s infamy to be a lie originated by Jervis for his own greedy purposes and to further his ambition: “Not an opprobrious epithet but was lavished on the presumptuous parvenu. It was to avenge his own consciousness of inferiority, - it was to give vent to the mean enmity of a low-born mind – that he had devised these slanders against a man of spirit and condition” (Volume 3, 294). Unwilling to rely on Jervis, Mrs. Hecksworth misses her opportunity to join with Jervis and Lucy and close ranks against Colonel Cleveland before he retaliates after receiving a polite message of dismissal from Lucy. Outraged by his exposure, a drunken Cleveland bursts into Lucy’s presence and terrifies even Mrs. Hecksworth by threatening to spread lies about his sexual access to the females at Bilston and pointing pistols at the brave heiress to enforce her silence regarding his crimes. Admiring “a man of spirit and condition” when his military and imperialist thefts are committed overseas against elites and ethnicities, as she was already half-aware, Mrs. Hecksworth demonstrates a confusing discrepancy in conservative logic by assuming these skills will not be turned on her own family in England for the same purposes by a daring adventurer.

Though it might seem that Gore softens her radical message by admitting that some upstarts are indeed revolutionary and must be controlled, she actually intensifies her ideological imperative for reform, educational access, and meritocracy when Colonel Cleveland reveals himself to be Jervis’s long-lost older brother, Richard Cleve. That the upstart rivalry was between siblings adds a far more emotionally-gripping component, similar to the intimacy of the
ideological divide between Le Fanu’s Julia and Horatio Somerville. Vanishing during the hero’s childhood, Dick was a lazy wastrel who refused to follow his peasant father into field labor or remain apprenticed to lowly tradespeople. While being arrested by Squire Towler for the theft of Lord John’s funds, a crime justifying the death penalty, Dick sensationally exposes him as the prejudiced judge who first led him to form criminal associations: “no one has a better right […] to fix the halter on the neck of one who, more than thirty years ago, he was the means of branding with infamy for life, by an unjust conviction. Ay! For my first step in villany [sic], I am indebted to you! (Volume 3, 310). Accused of poaching on her estate by the Hecksworth family, Dick was arrested, and became affiliated with other prisoners desperate to survive, as he states: “The month in jail to which I was condemned on a false accusation of wiring hares in this very park of Bilston, formed the groundwork of the education which ended with embuing my hands in blood. – Lay that to your heart, Mr Magistrate, and sleep the better for’t! -” (Volume 3, 310).

Game laws were notoriously stringent in the early decades of the nineteenth century, with the issue of poaching frequently coming before Parliament in the 1820s. Following the Napoleonic wars, the gentry excessively enforced antiquated laws through gamekeepers and local officials to imprison and transport offenders, many of whom were starving. During the depression, according to P.B. Munsche, “Poaching offered a way out […] It was, in short, pride as well as necessity which turned men into poachers” (138-149). Ultimately, the Game Reform Act of 1831 softened consequences for poaching and allowed landowners to lease and sell game. Even if Dick was guilty, he would have just cause to complain of his treatment by the aristocracy, but his insistence upon his innocence renders their persecution of the Bilston poor all the more abhorrent.
Bearing the brunt of alarmist conservatism, Dick has missed out on the first wave of education reforms and increased opportunities for more rewarding lower-class employment, suggesting that another reason for turning to crime was opposition to meaningless drudgery on behalf of the luxurious aristocracy. Portraying this undeserving upstart as an ambivalent figure of great misfortune, Gore utilizes one strength of the silver fork novel in depicting what Muireann O’Cinneide terms “Pre-Reform aristocratic corruption […] embodying – even facilitating – the changes in status and social mobility which Reform exemplified” (1231). In contrast to Jervis’s later patronage from the Hecksworths, Dick describes an adolescence without prospects, living as an urchin “whom neither pastors nor masters had been at the pains to teach” (Gore, Peers and Parvenus, Volume 3, 317-318). Times have since changed as the 1830s approach, with upward mobility increasingly apparent even on the part of the lower-class. Another Cleve brother, Jem, values “his fine inn and the fortune he is making,” and two of their sisters work in London as servants in fine families (Volume 3, 215). But Dick urges Jervis, whom he apotheosizes as a “slavish dupe,” to realize the error of his evident belief that he can join an aristocratic class whose existence depends upon keeping him down:

“To please these people, who despise you, - to purchase your advance by a step nearer the threshold of this house, where you will never be more than a hireling, you have slain your father’s son! – But what then? – The smile of an heiress is a dog-cheap bargain, when paid for with the blood of a poor vagabond like poor Dick; - Dick, who was kicked and cuffed in his helpless, harmless boyhood, for the mere crime of being one of a starving family; - and who, driven by want of knowing how to gain an honest livelihood to the privilege which by right divine belongs to kings […]” (Volume 3, 313)

Mercifully, Lucy has long since fainted and been removed from the room, leaving Jervis to reflect upon his new position as the Cain to his brother’s Abel, a comparison Dick deliberately makes (Volume 3, 313-314). In attempting to rescue the aristocracy or demonstrate respectful
intentions, Gore indicates, the deserving upstart forgets that the aristocracy are responsible for creating the conditions of revolution by perpetuating lower-class poverty and crime.

Despite admitting crimes including redirected violence against European merchant ships, foreign class superiors, and New World peoples as an officer in the Mexican War of Independence (1810-1825), Dick also demonstrates humanity, further complicating his characterization as a mere villain. Now he deserves punishment for what he has become, but if he had been educated and given proper employment by the ruling classes, Dick might have turned out very differently. Unwisely, the adventurer has returned to Bilston in his forties, not only to pursue the Hecksworth heiress and her sisters, but also to ensure that his father and family are well, a task Jervis has occasionally neglected. Passing by the cottage every day and even venturing to speak to his sister, Dick suffers agonies at being separated from his kin and secretly manages to secure them an allowance. Moreover, he has missed his childhood home, as he admits wistfully to the deeply affected officers and assembled company:

“I wanted to see the copse where I used to go nutting, and the stream where I tickled my first trout. Though there’s not a quarter of the globe but what I’ve abided in, this place was still home, and I’d a mind to see and feel it again. – Niagara’s a fine thing, - but the sound of the old brook was like a voice never to be forgotten […] Often since I’ve been staying at the Hall, have I gone loitering about Glebestone, for a glimpse of my sister Jenny’s sweet face!” (Volume 3, 317)

Now hearing “inflexions of the voices of his family” in every word, Jervis is broken-hearted, utterly devastated by his part in betraying his brother to the aristocratic powers oppressing them both. Mocking the “smooth-faced, smooth-tongued young gentleman, snivelling younder in the corner, whom I have the honour to call brother,” Dick rejects Jervis’s offer to assist him legally and financially in the months to come, declaring, “I shall fall as I have stood, by myself!” (Volume 3, 321). Yet, as he is dragged from the room to await his trial and execution, Dick
momentarily abandons his bravado. Reaching his brother, both embrace and weep, though they are powerless to undo the mistakes of the past or counter the all-power authority of the elite.

Though the ending of this novel does not contain the final triumph of upstarts, but rather the reverse, Gore shows how a post-Reform society could “finish the book.” In the final chapter of *Peers and Parvenues*, it is a shock to discover that twelve months have gone by since Dick’s arrest and hanging, the shock of this event having terminated the lives of Jervis’s shamed father and his delicate fiancée. Instead of becoming the master of Bilston Hall, the deserving upstart returns to Cambridge, the only sphere in which he is accepted in Great Britain. A delighted Mrs. Hecksworth marries her daughters, Julia to the aristocratic gentlemen George Joddrell and Helen to Herbert Davenport, aristocratic alliances ensuring that “the stain inflicted on Bilston Park was cleansed for ever!” As she observes to others, “Julia and her husband have no nonsense in their heads. Julia and her husband know what is due to their rank in life. Julia and her husband understand the difference between peers and parvenus; and though as fond of books as their neighbours, choose that artists and authors and those kind of people should be kept in their proper place” (Volume 3, 334). For now, the window of opportunity for societal “levelling” through educational access has closed with the death of radical Lucy, and the aristocracy appear stronger than ever. Gore’s insistence in closing that deserving upstarts like Jervis are languishing in seclusion instead of serving their country and occupying a higher position in life is intended to discomfort readers and provoke reassessment of how social hierarchy should function in early Victorian England. Suggesting some already were prepared for an ending in which Lucy married Jervis, the reviewer for *John Bull* praised the work but complained, “We cannot, however, help wishing that a happier fate had been reserved for the Parvenu, Jervis Cleve” (11). It would be
left to Thackeray and Dickens to negotiate the literary rise of the bourgeois gentleman out of this stalemate between the aristocracy and the parvenu, but Gore had enabled their novels set in the early part of the century and surrounding the histories of upstarts by re-historicizing the hypocrisy of the conservative upstart peril in the wake of the French Revolution.

**Conclusion**

A forgotten novel of the silver fork era, production of a largely ignored popular writer, *Peers and Parvenues* is a key link between Jane Austen’s views of the upstart during the Regency and Thackeray’s more lastingly popular *Vanity Fair* (1848). As Kendra has observed, the question is not whether Catherine Gore influenced the plot and themes of *Vanity Fair* (1848), whose love triangle between Amelia Sedley, George Osborne, and Becky Sharp strikingly imitates that of *The Hamiltons*, but to what extent Thackeray utilized and reworked Gore’s themes and style (Kendra, “Silver-Forks,” 198-199). She had described public rancor against the upstart from 1789 to 1832, supported social reform, and even projected the end of class itself through the ameliorating influences of education. The parts were there, ready for Thackeray’s assembly. After reading the 1850 revised version of *The Hamiltons*, sent by Gore, Thackeray responded with admiring approval, also affecting to be shocked by the political sentiments of her 1834 novel: “What an awful radical you are Ma’am or you was! There’s tremendous revolutionary sentiments in the Hamiltons” (Thackeray, “To Mrs. Gore,” 724). With her portrayals of upstarts, reform, and levelling, had Catherine Gore gone too far ideologically even for the author of *Vanity Fair*? Unexpectedly, at this juncture Thackeray composed a revealing, if playful apology for his previous caricatures of her *oeuvre*:

And I think some critics who carped at some writers for talking too much about fine company ought to hold their tongues. If you live with great folks, why should you not
describe their manners? There is nothing in the least strained in these descriptions as I now think – and believe it was only a secret envy & black malignity of disposition which made me say in former times this author is talking too much about grand people, this author is of the silver fork school, this author uses too much French &c. There’s none in this book to speak, perhaps that’s why you sent it to me you malicious woman. (“To Mrs. Gore,” 725)

Reading Gore’s descriptions of upstart pretensions, Thackeray now admired her writerly touch. Reputationally secure after the overwhelming success of *Vanity Fair*, the satirist admitted the injustice of his attacks, albeit privately. Whether she admired *Vanity Fair* is unknown, but Gore would have recognized Thackeray’s use of her historical understanding of the *parvenu* as a figure much-maligned by the aristocracy before the passage of the Reform Bill.
Neither *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Fashionable Connexions* (1822), nor *Peers and Parvenues* (1846) achieved the astounding nineteenth-century cultural success of *Vanity Fair* (1848) by William Makepeace Thackeray. With Becky Sharp, the cunning lower-class upstart who nearly reaches the aristocracy in her quest for social success, Thackeray captured the grasping quality of British ambitions, lamenting the snobbery prevalent in a class-based society.

Among critics commenting on his critique of vain consumerism in Becky’s ambition, none have comprehended that, nearing mid-century, Thackeray’s social climber is a vintage exploration of the post-Revolutionary upstart peril during the Napoleonic era which concludes just before Reform in England. Association of Napoleonic sentiments and imagery with Becky, along with visual and textual insinuations of her murderous potential, participate in a past dialogue Thackeray’s generation recalled from their childhoods and adolescences. Though their shared gender has caused the scheming Becky to be seen as the rival of the bourgeois Amelia Sedley, her true opposite and rival for Amelia’s trust is the *nouveau riche* Captain William Dobbin, whose upright conduct and distrust of the undeserving upstart demonstrates his moral rectitude. Because neither Dobbin nor Becky effectually wins out over the other, the social and moral threat of the Napoleonic snob is not laid to rest at the end of *Vanity Fair*; Thackeray doubting virtue will triumph over self-interest, at least as worldly wealth is concerned in a materialistic
age. Instead, Becky’s threat to systemic order remains active until the activities of the bourgeois definitively prove more socially and financially successful than those of the lower-class upstart.

**Napoleon and English Snobbery**

Deeming his fellow citizens of the 1840s as consumed by snobbery, characterized by fawning respect for the wealthy and elite and the urge to dominate social inferiors, Thackeray mourned, “it seems to me that all English society is cursed by this mammoniacal superstition; and that we are sneaking and bowing and cringing on the one hand, or bullying and scorning on the other, from the lowest to the highest” (178). Raised in an English family made well-to-do in the employ of the East India Company and sent to Cambridge University, Thackeray assumed himself to be a gentleman before unexpectedly losing the majority of his twenty-thousand-pound fortune by 1834 due to gambling and failed financial schemes (Taylor, 65). As he struggled to rebuild his assets after his 1836 marriage, his writings reveal his personally relevant explorations of class and gentility (110). Seeing Thackeray as inspired by the “indignity” he suffered as a former gentleman, Ann Monsarrat traces a “savagery reflected in much of his early work with its dark emphasis on wickedness, rogues and class toadies” (97). Early social targets of his sketches were “snobs,” particularly those drawn from the bourgeoisie. Though Richard Faber’s contention that Thackeray recognized snobbish tendencies in himself as well as his surrounding culture may be overblown, it is clear that the author of *Vanity Fair* had ample opportunities of mixing with class superiors as the serial gained in popularity (102). D.J. Taylor claims that, as the author began to achieve fame in 1847, “Thackeray’s social life increasingly resembles a kind of high-wire act, across a tight-rope stretched from Kensington to the great houses of the West End”
Regardless of his newfound prestige, Thackeray completed *Vanity Fair* faithful to his vision of exposing snobbery as an ideological and political trap for the middle class.

The blatant snobbery on show in *Vanity Fair* situates the novel as a cautionary tale for the emergent British middle-class following reform. In a tale encompassing Napoleon Bonaparte’s escape from the island of Elba and the Battle of Waterloo, the orphan Becky Sharp is associated in Thackeray’s text and personally drawn illustrations with the deposed Emperor of the French and given qualities that denote her as similarly ambitious, ruthless, and systemically destabilizing. Daughter of a penniless alcoholic artist and a French dancer, she leaves her thankless employment at Miss Pinkerton’s Academy where she is begrudged rightful wages, gleeefully discarding her parting gift of Samuel Johnson’s English dictionary. To her shocked and affluent friend, Amelia Sedley, Becky explains her hatred of the schoolmistress:

“For two years I have only had insults and outrages from her. I have been treated worse than any servant in the kitchen. I have never had a friend or a kind word except from you; I have been made to tend the little girls in the lower school-room, and to talk French to the Misses until I grew sick of my mother tongue. But that talking French to Miss Pinkerton was capital fun, wasn’t it? She doesn’t know a word of French, and was too proud to confess it. I believe it was that which made her part with me, and so thank Heaven for French. Vive la France, Vive l’Empereur, Vive Bonaparte!” (Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, 8-9)

This is the “greatest blasphemy,” the narrator explaining that, “in those days, in England to say ‘Long live Bonaparte,’ was as much as to say ‘Long live Lucifer’” (9). Vowing, “Revenge may be wicked but it’s natural […] I’m no angel,” obscure Becky embarks upon a quest to improve her social station and prospects in England (9). As she climbs the social ladder, her husband Captain Rawdon comes to believe in her “as much as the French soldiers in Napoleon” (309). Even the initial-letter illustration at the beginning of Chapter LXIV “A Vagabond Chapter,”

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1 All citations from *Vanity Fair* derive from the 1848 first edition published by Bradbury and Evans.
stresses this analogy, with the upstart clad as an exiled Napoleon, after the painting Napoléon Bonaparte (c. 1831) by Benjamin Haydon (577). A rebellious outsider, Becky can be temporarily foiled but seemingly never is defeated, just like the persistent Corsican upstart.

Figure 3. Thackeray’s Initial letter “W.”

Lacking awareness of the decades-long upstart peril in the English novel, critics comprehend that the frequent mention of Napoleon in connection with Thackeray’s upstart refers in some way to the contrast between French and English societies. Interpreting *Vanity Fair* as describing the alarming infection of French manners and language permeating English society in the early nineteenth century, Patricia Marks claims, “the historic/fictive metonymic association between Napoleon invading Europe and Becky Sharp invading society is carried over in linguistic terms” (76-77). She proposes that, fascinated throughout his life with the legacy of Napoleon as a self-made emperor, but now disaffected with his radical appeal for English Chartists in the 1830s and 1840s, Thackeray is “transferring the mythic resonance of Napoleon to Becky Sharp” (78). Still, Marks cannot explain why Becky’s own campaign for social success
should be paralleled by the threat of Napoleonic invasion or her character empowered with the emperor’s charisma, except as both participate in a Bakhtinian suspension of order. Arguing that the novel was serialized “from 1847 to 1848, during the same years when revolutionary fervor ignited the Continent,” Ilsu Sohn recognizes that the novel, “not only reflects but also ideologically attempts to contain the revolutionary spirit that presumably threatens to compromise Britishness” (72). Insofar as *Vanity Fair* engages with the threat of revolution, Sohn is correct, but Thackeray’s comparison between Becky and Napoleon appears from the very first chapter, an installment published in January 1847 long before the European revolutions began in February 1848. Unquestionably, *Vanity Fair*’s serialization during a period of renewed revolutionary activity may have brought home Thackeray’s reflection on the upstart peril to British readers expecting a lower-class English or Irish uprising during the “Hungry Forties.” However, the primary reason for Thackeray’s linkage of Becky with Napoleon relates to the upstart peril announced by Edmund Burke, witnessed in the French emperor’s rise, and feared in Regency England.

Spanning the period between 1800 and 1831 like Catherine Gore’s *Peers and Parvenus* (1846), Becky’s upstart ambitions and her identification with Napoleon act firstly as a campy reappraisal of the ideology and reality of the upstart peril and secondly as a condemnation of the Victorian bourgeois class of the 1840s. Until now, the thirty-year timeframe and Thackeray’s decision to draw the characters in contemporary attire, has also caused bemusement among critics as to why the novel is apparently historically confused. Calling the novel’s narrative a “sort of time-machine,” Mary Hammond notes, “Ever since the appearance of the first instalment […] reviewers and critics have been troubled by the novel’s confusing mixture of historical
references. To what extent is it ‘about’ 1815, or the 1840s?” (19) According to critical consensus, the woodcuts and illustrations more closely depict fashions of the 1840s, not those of 1815, with Ruth M. McAdams terming them “historically ambiguous” (18). In the text, these periods are referred to as distinct, yet the illustrations and narrative of the novel blur historical boundaries. One example of this odd amalgamation appears when the narrator addresses Victorian readers while praising Dobbin, requesting them to consider how many gentlemen they personally know:

Perhaps these are rarer personages than some of us think for. Which of us can point out many such in his circle – men whose aims are generous, whose truth is constant, and not only constant in its kind but elevated in its degree; whose want of meanness makes them simple: who can look the world honestly in the face with an equal manly sympathy for the great and small? (Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, 562)

Though they had gained political influence and wielded the power of the press following Reform, Thackeray felt that ambitious members of the consolidated Victorian middle-class still sought aristocratic preferment. Despite the invention of Lucy Steele and the more sweeping portrayals of bourgeois corruption in aristocratic circles provided by Le Fanu and Gore, the English novel had not yet spelled out the lesson clearly. It fell to Thackeray to argue in *Vanity Fair* that the middle-class must avoid the temptation to yearn for aristocratic rank or face the miserable end of the fallen upstart, Napoleon Bonaparte.

Examining Thackeray’s writings on Napoleon reveals his interpretation of the emperor as an enterprising upstart who lost everything by joining the nobility he once despised, betraying democratic principles by becoming a snob. Writing “The Second Funeral of Napoleon” (1841) as “Michael Angelo Titmarsh,” Thackeray described the 1840 return of Napoleon’s body from St. Helena to Paris for reinterment, a magnificent ceremonial event referred to as the *retour des*
Watching the funeral procession on 15 December, Thackeray became intrigued by the elaborate coats-of-arms affected on the occasion by Napoleon’s bourgeois generals. To the fictitious reader, imagined as a shrewd middle-class Londoner named Miss Smith, Titmarsh confides his skepticism that those of their rank can ever truly become noble:

You and I, dear Miss Smith, know the exact value of heraldic bearings. We know that though the greatest pleasure of all is to ACT like a gentleman, it is a pleasure, nay a merit, to BE one—to come of an old stock, to have an honorable pedigree, to be able to say that centuries back our fathers had gentle blood, and to us transmitted the same. There IS a good in gentility: the man who questions it is envious, or a coarse dullard not able to perceive the difference between high breeding and low. (Thackeray, *The Second*, 66)

At first glance, this reads as an immensely conservative perspective urging the upstart to abandon social mobility. “Titmarsh” admits firstly that the impulse to imitate aristocrats is not only enjoyable for the bourgeoisie, but also “the greatest pleasure” (66). Secondly, he states that aristocratic heredity cannot be authentically replicated in fact by a show of gentility. Thirdly, he suggests there is a natural preeminence or superiority evident in descendants of the elite that the bourgeoisie cannot equal. He and his ilk are better off as plain cocks-and-hens in the barnyard rather than imitators of the beautiful peacock, that is, the aristocracy.²

However, Thackeray conveys a more radical message as he positions the upstart as a self-interested agent caught between contending feudal and democratic systems. Foreshadowing *Vanity Fair*’s narrator linking “past and present” views of upstart activity and bourgeois gentility, “Titmarsh” also indicates what Dehn Gilmore describes as Thackeray’s interest in “writing history” to recover lost or find new interpretations (30). Attributing Napoleon’s downfall to his adoption of “wretched misbegotten imperial heraldry,” the trappings of which

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² Mistakenly, Julia Kuehn interprets Thackeray’s article as a call to avoid hero-worshipping the late emperor, “characterized […] as a ‘peacock,’” though “Titmarsh” only uses this symbol to characterize the aristocracy (8).
could not merge with democratic principles, Titmarsh sighs, “How fatal to the parvenu, throughout history, has been this respect for shoebuckles” (Thackeray, The Second, 70).

Explaining that the two systems cannot “amalgamate,” he asserts, “A country must be governed by the one principle or the other. But give, in a republic, an aristocracy ever so little chance, and it works and plots and sneaks and bullies and sneers itself into place, and you find democracy out of doors” (70). After founding a “great, glorious, strong, potent republic, able to cope with the best aristocracies in the world,” Napoleon was betrayed by the French aristocracy (71). Therefore, Napoleon’s downfall should caution upstarts to never place faith in those who possess a vested interest in destroying upstarts. Even adoring and imitating elite society risks middle-class autonomy and independence. Bitterly, Titmarsh states that “the slavish respect that we pay to it, from the dastardly manner in which we attempt to imitate its airs and ape its vices, goes far to destroy honesty of intercourse, to make us meanly ashamed of our natural affections and honest, harmless usages” (69). Instead, he agrees with Miss Smith that the “honesty and personal wealth” of “Nature’s gentleman” are preferable to “politeness and high breeding” (67). Turning back to the approaching coffin, Titmarsh sums up the point of his thesis on Napoleon’s downfall and death: “If it teaches nothing else, my dear, it teaches one a great point of policy—namely, to stick by one’s party” (71) With this advice to English upstarts, Thackeray urges them to choose a side; they can either reinforce the right to preeminence of their mortal enemies by useless affectation, or they can join the new middle class in creating a gentility based upon merit.

Throughout the 1840s, the British middle-class loudly condemned their own who behaved dismissively to class inferiors and equals but toadied before superiors, with such persons labelled “snobs,” an epithet popularized by Thackeray. With emphasis, he insists in the
1846-1847 sketches that would eventually be gathered and published as *The Book of Snobs* (1848), “THE NATIONAL MIND IS AWAKENED TO THE SUBJECT OF SNOBS” (177).” Mimicking aristocrats and despising inferiors is the cardinal sin of the middle-classes in a work that includes a vignette capital for “Continental Snobs” of Napoleon gazing out to sea, an allusion to snobbery Thackeray would shortly recreate two years later for *Vanity Fair* (Stevens, 128). The author mourns, “it seems to me that all English society is cursed by this mammoniacal superstition; and that we are sneaking and bowing and cringing on the one hand, or bullying and scorning on the other, from the lowest to the highest” (Thackeray, *Book*, 177). Risen, but not yet arrived in their own minds, the British middle-class needed to be reminded again to eschew the undeserving upstart. A popular play by Edward Ranger, *The Gentleman and the Upstart* (1845), hammered home the contention that such persons, whether affluent or not, were better off remaining in their proper station. Witnessing the selfishness of the upstart stockbroker Chink in contrast to the dignity of Lord Darran and the middle-class writer Leontine, the merchant Mr. Twill sensibly abandons his social ambitions. He tells Chink, “Why, I mean to give you a little advice: - the fact is, different people are born to different purposes, - some to be gentlemen, some not to be gentlemen; - you could never make a racer of a brewer’s horse; and as for us – you and I trying to do the quality – it’s all d – n nonsense – it’s no go, Chink” (Ranger, Act V, Scene 3, 51). Snobbery could affect everyone on the social scale below the British monarch, but was especially on display among the bourgeoisie.

Epithets for the ambitious middle-class *parvenu* like “tuft-hunter,” a term referring to the gold tassels worn in the caps of aristocrats studying at Oxford University, mocked those who sought to curry favor with titled individuals at university and in London society. Aristocratic
writers joined in bourgeois irritation with these hangers-on, whose snobbery led them to seek acquaintance and patronage from lords, baronets, earls, and dukes. A novel by Lord William Pitt Lennox entitled *The Tuft-hunter* (1843) condemns the “creeping thing” Lionel Crouch:

> Should the inquisitive pursue their inquiry, they will find the latent merit which gives vogue to a man of low extraction and vulgar habits is that he is a *useful man*; endowed with small abilities and great subserviency; who toadies the leaders of fashion [...] A being of this M’Sycophant order, once favoured by an auspicious opening into society, is sure of rising to its highest point. (164)

Describing the same type at great length in *The Analysis of the Hunting Field* (1846), Robert Smith Surtees, descendent of a gentry family, warned that tuft hunting was “an hereditary instinct” and bred social discontent when a toady was lifted by a nobleman “over the heads of his companions, and thus made an object both for envy and ridicule (225). Promising in *The Natural History of Tuft-Hunters and Toadies* (1848) to detect these “monsters” afflicting society’s hereditary elite, Theodore Alois Buckley insists that they spring up like fungi (xi). Regarding the tuft-hunter, Buckley remarks, “His position in society is even more doubtful than his humours. Respectable people don’t know him, and his aristocratic acquaintance won’t, unless it be for some purpose of their own. He seems to hang between two stages of society, never ascends, but often comes down” (19-20). Speaking to the urgent bourgeois need to eradicate this pernicious race of upstarts, accompanying illustrations by H.G. Hine depict a host of middle-class insects drawn to the consuming flame of aristocracy, while a skewered “tuft-hunter” waves imploringly at the viewer (Figure 4).
In *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray meets this cultural emergency with a two-pronged approach, by using Becky to illustrate the vanity of upstart pretensions to aristocratic status and additionally seeking to provide a bourgeois ideology of duty and public service as an alternative to snobbery. Robin Gilmour has observed that “there is a point at which the Napoleon parallel breaks down. Despite her initial ‘Vive Bonaparte!’ [Becky] is no revolutionary: [...] her own ambitions remain conventional: to be accepted by the fashionable world” (*The Idea*, 63-64). However, like the French Emperor, the cunning English upstart is not so much a revolutionary as an opportunist, too blinded by greed to realize she is playing a losing game in reference to the aristocracy. Among the other characters, Becky is only one of many obsessed with rank and status in the “vanity fair” of English, and even European, high society. Because many bourgeois men in this novel such as Jos Sedley and George Osborne exhibit vanity and inordinate boastfulness comparable to that of Beau Brummell, dandified Regency leader of fashion and
low-born son of a valet, Sarah Rose Cole believes Thackeray portrays their foibles to chide the middle-class for arrogance unrealistic within a class system founded upon noble ancestry:

In his 1841 essay on Brummell, as in his later full-length satires The Book of Snobs (1846-47) and Vanity Fair (1847-48), Thackeray mischievously suggests that the Victorian bourgeoisie was driven not by utilitarian calculation or domestic ideology, but by the desire for aristocratic status – a desire that turns ordinary middle-class men into lesser versions of Beau Brummell. (Cole 138)

Snobs and tuft-hunters are ridiculous, a corrupting social influence, and a hindrance to the establishment of an English empire, as Thackeray delineates in this serial novel subtitled Pen and Pencil Sketches of English Society, to “indicate, in cheerful terms, that we are for the most part an abominably foolish and selfish people” (May 18). Rescuing the English bourgeoisie from the consequences of its own immorality required utilizing the device of the upstart rivalry to juxtapose the social consequences of selfish snobbery and unselfish generosity.

Becky and Dobbin “Take Their Choice”

Selfishness and snobbery alike, which Thackeray believes to be the worst faults of English society in the nineteenth century, are roundly condemned in Vanity Fair: A Novel Without a Hero in the person of Becky Sharp, while the noble bourgeois contrast is provided by the gawky Captain William Dobbin. A short essay written by young George Osborne in 1827 explains the dangerous ambitious tendencies of selfish individuals like Napoleon, a schoolboy production all the more ironic as its author is markedly selfish:

On Selfishness—Of all the vices which degrade the human character, Selfishness is the most odious and contemptible. An undue love of Self leads to the most monstrous crimes and occasions the greatest misfortunes both in States and Families. As a selfish man will impoverish his family and often bring them to ruin, so a selfish king brings ruin on his people and often plunges them into war. Example: […] The selfishness of the late Napoleon Bonaparte occasioned innumerable wars in Europe and caused him to perish, himself, in a miserable island—that of Saint Helena in the Atlantic Ocean. We see […]
that we are not to consult our own interest and ambition, but that we are to consider the interests of others as well as our own. (Thackeray, *Vanity*, 529)

In reading this to Dobbin, Amelia even more ridiculously communicates this lesson to the character least in need of a reminder to practice selflessness and empathy, rather than Becky, who could use this reminder. Beloved of the narrator, whom he meets in person in Chapter 62, Dobbin represents a new kind of bourgeois English gentleman, whose heroism in battle is matched by his social benevolence and generosity: “his thoughts were just, his brains were fairly good, his life was honest and pure, and his heart warm and humble” (562). Discussing his thematic role in the novel, Michael Flavin interprets Dobbin as “one of society’s alternatives to the debauched aristocrat” and the “antithesis of Becky Sharp” (115). With this unassuming and upright character, Thackeray offers the closest approximation to a solution to social problems and suggests snobbery is not the right response to frustration with class.

Besides Flavin’s observation, Becky Sharp’s uneasy relationship with Dobbin in *Vanity Fair* receives little consideration. Typically, commentators contrast the anti-heroine Becky with the other central character, the chaste and maternal Amelia, to ascertain how either accords with the Victorian ideal of bourgeois femininity (Ingham 23-24). Lisa Jadwin insists that “Becky successfully lies her way to the top without appearing unvirtuous because her culture deems female duplicity not merely permissible but compulsory” (666). Kit Dobson claims Becky’s artificiality causes her ultimate detection, whereas Amelia remains sincere (13). However, the upstart’s social other is not the bourgeois stock-broker’s daughter, but Dobbin, the son of a thriving grocer, whose own unselfishness and insistence on duty in the face of similar social stressors alerts him to the upstart’s scheming nature. When they meet, each instinctively comprehends and dislikes the other’s character: “As for Rebecca, Captain Dobbin had not been
two hours in the ladies’ company before she understood his secret perfectly. She did not like him, and feared him privately; nor was he very much prepossessed in her favour. He was so honest, that her arts and cajoleries did not affect him, and he shrank from her with instinctive repulsion” (Thackeray, *Vanity*, 210). Seeing these two as the only “distanced outsiders” in the novel who “maintain some double perspective on themselves,” Elizabeth Ermarth muses, “A reader may wish that the two people who can laugh at themselves, Becky and Dobbin, might get together; but that sort of mutuality is unavailable in the moral universe of *Vanity Fair*” (24).

Their moral differences alone prohibit any such romantic pairing, though Becky is oddly jealous of his interest in Amelia and later sighs, even after their bitterest argument, “if I could have had such a husband as that—a man with a heart and brains too! I would not have minded his large feet” (Thackeray, *Vanity*, 608). She is fascinated by Dobbin, he is repulsed by Becky, but neither can ignore the powerful social influence and pull of the other. Similarly situated but morally opposed, Becky and Dobbin function as the undeserving upstart and honest bourgeois in Thackeray’s upstart rivalry, ultimately competing for the trust of Amelia Sedley.

Setting up the final confrontation between these two upstarts, Thackeray provides the full history of each from childhood, indicating that each chose a different morality in the face of social deprivation. Brought to Miss Pinkerton’s academy as an orphan, Rebecca isolates herself in misery: “She had a little room in the garret, where the maids heard her walking and sobbing at night; but it was with rage, and not with grief. She had not been much of a dissembler, until now her loneliness taught her to feign.” Surrounded by wealthy girls, both black and white, Rebecca feels “inexpressible pangs of envy,” believing herself to be “a thousand times cleverer and more charming” than the Creole Rhoda Swartz and “as well bred as the Earl’s grand-daughter, for all
her fine pedigree,” and lamenting, “yet every one passes me by here” (12). To find a way out, Becky begins to perfect her musical and linguistic abilities and demands payment for teaching piano in addition to French, becoming in Miss Pinkerton’s eyes a “rebel,” “monster,” “serpent,” and “firebrand” (13). When she leaves to make her fortune, Becky has responded to her admittedly difficult situation by considering others her enemies and resolving to exploit them:

All the world used her ill, said this young misanthropist, and we may be pretty certain that persons whom all the world treats ill, deserve entirely the treatment they get. The world is a looking-glass, and gives back to every man the reflection of his own face. Frown at it, and it will in turn look sourly upon you; laugh at it and with it, and it is a jolly kind companion; and so let all young persons take their choice. (9)

Having “taken her choice,” Becky pursues an individualistic course as she attempts to seduce Amelia’s brother Jos, a wealthy tax-collector in India, marries Rawdon Crawley, son of her employer Sir Pitt, and embarks on a self-serving career among aristocrats in Europe and England. According to Sohn, “with no normative domestic virtues acquired, Becky's later years embody the ruthlessly meritocratic and potentially anti-establishment narrative of development which the British saw as deriving from the French Revolution” (74). According with the selfishness of the undeserving upstart, her sole concern in life is to gratify her own ambition, leading her to neglect her husband, child, and friends.

In contrast to Becky’s selfish response to social inequity and deprivation, Dobbin’s misery at hailing from a tradesman’s family in the lower middle-classes merely inspires him to defend others bullied by the elite. He “takes his choice” of how to respond to social oppression by rising to the challenge with heroism, moral courage, and gentility. Initially, at Dr. Swishtail’s academy, he finds himself, like Becky, at the bottom of the social and educational hierarchy, mocked by classmates aware that “the expenses of his board and schooling were defrayed by his
father in goods, not money” and contemptuous of his “scraggy corduroys and jacket, through the seams of which his great big bones were bursting” (33). Mocked as “Figs,” he tries to defend himself by pointing out that some of his schoolfellows also hail from trade families, but the ensuing discussion merely causes him further embarrassment:

“Your father’s only a merchant, Osborne,” Dobbin said in private to the little boy who had brought down the storm upon him. At which the latter replied haughtily, “My father’s a gentleman, and keeps his carriage”; and Mr. William Dobbin retreated to a remote outhouse in the playground, where he passed a half-holiday in the bitterest sadness and woe. Who amongst us is there that does not recollect similar hours of bitter, bitter childish grief? Who feels injustice; who shrinks before a slight; who has a sense of wrong so acute, and so glowing a gratitude for kindness, as a generous boy? (33-34)

This generosity constitutes the moral difference between Becky, who has “no soft maternal heart” to devote to the other school-girls, and Dobbin, who is roused to the defense of his bully Osborne when he is in turn beaten by the aristocratic dandy Cuff, “king of the school.” Motivated by a republican dislike of “tyranny” and indulging a “hankering feeling of revenge,” he bests Cuff, whose surprise at the contest is compared to that of “our late monarch George III when he heard of the revolt of the North American colonies” (37). Dobbin’s ensuing popularity, even with Cuff, represents a bourgeois victory over snobbery that is simultaneously empathetic and communal.

Her devotion to selfishness allows Becky few chances to help others as does Dobbin or reconsider the snobbery that has elevated her out of poverty at the cost of her sincerity. However, while depicting Becky’s various schemes, pretenses, and connivances, Thackeray does allot the upstart a brief period of self-reflection, in which she wonders, now that she has “seen the world and lived with great people, and raised herself far beyond her original humble station,” whether her morals might have been different had she been born to wealth (429). Walking in the
countryside in the early 1820s near her late father-in-law’s estate of Queen’s Crawley, the upstart imagines a leisured life of philanthropy away from the unprofitable gaiety of London’s elite:

“I could be a good woman if I had five thousand a year. I could dawdle about in the nursery, and count the apricots on the wall. I could water plants in a green-house, and pick off dead leaves from the geraniums. I could ask old women about their rheumatisms, and order half-a-crown’s worth of soup for the poor. I shouldn’t miss it much, out of five thousand a year.” (376-377)

Despite never paying her servants, Becky can imagine being generous were she a member of the ruling classes and not forced to scrounge for handouts from the elite to gratify her ambition.³ Richard A. Kaye insists this momentary impulse towards goodness shows her to be indulging in “characteristically outlandish avarice” by listing what is still an immense sum and insisting on a financial basis for morality (724). Remorse is possible for this upstart, but not repentance, since she cannot relinquish her all-consuming greed. Reluctantly agreeing with Becky that “a comfortable career of prosperity, if it does not make people honest, at least keeps them so,” the narrator suggests that her ambition for wealth, especially acquired through investment in the most profitable stocks of the day, precludes the upstart’s reformation: “It may, perhaps, have struck her that to have been honest and humble, to have done her duty, and to have marched straightforward on her way, would have brought her as near happiness as that path by which she was striving to attain it” (Thackeray, Vanity, 377). John Reed insists, “there is no reason to suppose that the narrator does not feel some affinity for Becky’s jaundiced view of society. Just because Becky is wicked does not mean that she is not acute” (335). Though the narrator would

³ Writing to George Henry Lewes, the author seemed to justify Becky’s belief in her goodness had she been rich: “If Becky had had 5000 a year I have no doubt in my mind that she would have been respectable; increased her fortune advanced her family in the world: laid up treasures for herself in the shape of 3 per cents, social position, reputation &c [...] like many a person highly & comfortably placed in the world” (“To G.H. Lewes” 354).
rather see Becky honest and happy than the daughter-in-law of a baronet, he acknowledges her selfishness has achieved results.

Steadily receiving promotion from Captain to Major to Colonel by the novel’s end, Dobbin exemplifies how goodness of character and doing one’s duty are rewarded socially. Living a life unmarked by selfishness as he attempts to bring together the woman he loves and his careless friend who does not deserve her, Dobbin is generally adored, the narrator stating, “All the poor, all the humble, all honest folks, all good men who knew him, loved that kind-hearted and simple gentleman” (610). In marked contrast to Becky, he is “as busy and eager in the conduct of George Osborne’s affairs, as the most selfish tactician could be in the pursuit of his own,” to the point of neglecting his own interests. He is one of the few men Thackeray references “whose aims are generous, whose truth is constant, and not only constant in its kind but elevated in its degree; whose want of meanness makes them simple,” a character “who can look the world honestly in the face with an equal manly sympathy for the great and small” (562).” Writing to his mother mid-way through the serialization, Thackeray listed him as the only character not “odious,” who had “real humility” (“To Mrs. Henry” 138-139).” Confronted by future brother-in-law Joseph Sedley’s hero-worship of the aristocratic Lord and Lady Bareacres and eager consultation of a travelling Peerage, Dobbin’s response to both evidences of snobbery is inordinate laughter. Spurning the “showy gentility of an insecure bourgeoisie that wanted to get into the aristocracy,” as Cole summarizes Thackeray’s social vision, Dobbin has made peace with his origins and realized success in his military profession (139). Wares on offer at Vanity Fair such as empty materialism and vain ambition do not provoke his desire or lead him to commit the constant acts of selfishness that fuel Becky’s hopes of acquisition.
The Upstart’s Mercy

Why the similarities between Becky and Dobbin have not inspired previous exploration is likely due to the ambivalent resolution of their struggle for supremacy over the Sedley family. Both achieve a measure of success in the 1830s despite their vastly divergent moralities, but neither clearly achieves dominance over the other in status or wealth. In *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray suggests “poverty of pocket or of spirit is as likely to be fortuitous as it is to be earned, and the punishment for either capricious” (Reed 331). This is a continuation of the satiric moral Thackeray had been forced to clarify at the end of his serialization of *The Luck of Barry Lyndon* (1844): “worldly success is by no means the consequence of virtue […] if it is effected [sic] by honesty sometimes, it is attained by selfishness and roguery still oftener” (“The Moral” 3). For Victorians, as for subsequent readers, this moral nihilism seems to teach a false lesson that selfishness and vice do, after all, reap socioeconomic rewards, or, as Catherine Peters phrases it, that “there are no inviolable standards of good and evil available in this world” (151). Reviewing Thackeray’s novel, Elizabeth Rigby, Lady Eastlake, shuddered at the possibility of readers identifying with Becky and cultivating the guile and wiles she exercises on her hapless victims. Rejecting the suspicion of emotionally connecting with the heroine, she defies her:

No, Becky – our hearts neither bleed for you, nor cry out against you. You are wonderfully clever, and amusing, and accomplished, and intelligent, and the Soho ateliers were not the best nurseries for a moral training; and you were married early in life to a regular blackleg, and you have had to live upon your wits ever since, which is not an improving sort of maintenance, and there is much to be said for and against; but still you are not one of us, and there is an end to our sympathies and censures. (157)

Seduced somewhat into accounting for negative influences that might have fueled Becky’s ambition and desperation, Rigby nevertheless insists on rejecting the conventional power of the
novel in inspiring identification with and sympathy for its central characters. To Rigby, it is important that the readers of *Vanity Fair* realize that the upstart is “not one of us.”

Instead of despising Becky as a selfish and greedy adventuress, the polar opposite of middle-class readers, some critics felt drawn to her entertaining and ambitious career, as Rigby seemed to fear, while largely overlooking Dobbin’s plodding example of faithfulness and unprofitable concern for others. In contrast to previous upstart rivalries, this pairing is less ideologically effective since the undeserving upstart dominates the novel’s landscape. In his review of the novel, George Henry Lewes confessed that “It is very strange that the reader has a sort of liking for her in spite of his better knowledge [...] We are in some sort under her spell” (796). As Thackeray intended, Dobbin was perceived to be the one shining example of virtue in a novel depicting the bleakest view of society imaginable, but evidently the uncertain but faithful actions of this good character lacked in efficacy. Otherwise, with that exception, Lewes remarks, “What a mass of scoundrels, blacklegs, fools, and humbugs Mr. Thackeray has crowded together. There is scarcely a good or estimable person in the book and as little of affectation as of virtue” (795). Giving Dobbin a brief moment of her time amidst her condemnation of Becky, Rigby exclaims, “Dobbin sheds a halo over all the long-necked, loose-jointed, Scotch-looking gentlemen of our acquaintance [...] Dobbin – lumbering, heavy, shy, and absurdly over-modest as the ugly fellow is – is yet true to himself” (160). In contrast to previous deserving upstarts, Dobbin fails to decisively exhibit the social rewards of good behavior in reference to Becky, that would defeat Thackeray’s didactic point that goodness is not always rewarded with wealth. Instead, as Reed insists, Dobbin actually suffers because of his refusal to engage in the Vanity Fair of snobbery and selfishness and is punished for his very empathy towards Amelia and others
of her family in this “topsy-turvy” world (347). Because his morally upright behavior is clearly a rebuke of Becky’s sordid aspirations, Dobbin successfully indicates how the bourgeois should not behave. However, since he cannot materially triumph over the undeserving upstart whenever the pair are drawn into altercation, the novel remains “without a hero.”

Due to their vastly different responses to snobbery, one embracing ambition, the other rejecting it, Becky Sharp and William Dobbin are headed for inevitable conflict. Because her selfish machinations are antithetical to his own morality, Dobbin detests Becky, becoming deeply apprehensive once he, Amelia, and Jos Sedley cross paths with her again in Germany. At this juncture, the narrator reveals that Dobbin “never had had the slightest liking for her, but had heartily mistrusted her from the very first moment when her green eyes had looked at, and turned away from, his own” (595). As Rigby remarked, “It was the instinct of a good nature which made the Major feel that the stamp of the Evil One was upon Becky” (160). Two sides of the same coin, the pair are separated only by their moral choices and are thus out of sympathy but still deeply attuned to one another’s actions and motivations, as at this first meeting. Rosa Slegars has noticed that Dobbin “is […] the only man in Vanity Fair who is impervious to Becky’s artfulness” and that though he “sees the danger,” he “does not share in the fascination” (109). When compelled to be in close proximity to her in former times, Dobbin has suffered agonies, aware of the double meaning of every sly gesture, but his warnings to the other characters that Becky is duplicitous fell on deaf ears: “‘What a humbug that woman is!’ honest old Dobbin mumbled to George, when he came back from Rebecca's box, whither he had conducted her in perfect silence, and with a countenance as glum as an undertaker’s. ‘She writhes and twists about like a snake. All the time she was here, didn’t you see, George, how she
was acting at the General over the way?" (Thackeray, *Vanity*, 250). But George, blinded by hubris and lust for Becky, cannot see with Dobbin’s eyes, with Amelia adopting similar willful ignorance of Becky’s nature after reencountering her friend.

Aware that he lost George to Becky, though an actual elopement never took place, Dobbin deviates from his usual conduct in attempting to match and forestall the upstart’s schemes against the Sedley family by exposing the woman he terms “a little minx” and “that little devil” as a charlatan (595). Reminding Amelia of her late husband’s flirtation with Becky, an action intended to revive previous emotional pain and thus warn her away from her new house guest, Dobbin is chagrined to find the allusion has destroyed any chance of their relationship ripening into love. Yet he remains fixated on the mission at hand, becoming uncharacteristically agitated in his ineffectual resistance to the upstart’s renewed ascendancy over the family:

William, though he saw by Amelia’s looks that a great crisis had come, nevertheless continued to implore Sedley, in the most energetic terms, to beware of Rebecca; and he eagerly, almost frantically, adjured Jos not to receive her. […] What a dangerous companion she would be for his sister, who knew nothing of the affairs of the world! William implored Jos, with all the eloquence which he could bring to bear, and a great deal more energy than this quiet gentleman was ordinarily in the habit of showing, to keep Rebecca out of his household. (604)

Entering at this juncture, Becky immediately comprehends what has occurred, making “a shrinking, but amicable salutation to Major Dobbin, who, as her instinct assured her at once, was her enemy, and had been speaking against her” (604). Leaving the home in a passion, Dobbin makes unusual inquiries about Becky’s history from the corrupt Lord Tapeworm and learns of her possible extra-marital sexual adventures abroad. Consequently, the major returns home “astonished and horrified” by the “frightful secret in bed with him” until the morning permits communication with Amelia (606). This episode and imagery indicates the extreme reaction
Becky provokes in Dobbin, who loathes but is seemingly unable to avoid closeness with her. Despite revealing somewhat of Becky’s alleged offenses against sexual propriety and social mores, Dobbin finds himself baffled and defeated at every turn.

In her moment of triumph, however, Becky also displays unusual leniency and even attraction to Dobbin, enabling him to marry Amelia and leave the Continent. Dramatically, the two have clashed, with Becky coming off victor by nobly offering to efface herself, crying, “Let me go: my stay here interferes with the plans of this gentleman,” an assertion unflinchingly confirmed by Dobbin in apparent heartlessness: “Indeed it does, madam” (Thackeray, Vanity, 607). Yet her posture of dignified resentment and feminine martyrdom under his masculine bullying conceals her continuing admiration for his goodness, the morality she could have chosen, and now can only feign, when facing the world. Impressed by the moral superiority of the bourgeois despite his insults, Becky responds with a rare moment of what appears to be empathy. Instead of finishing Dobbin’s misery by completing her domination over Amelia, she resolves to bring the estranged pair together and remove herself from Jos Sedley’s home until they have married: “‘What a noble heart that man has,’ she thought, ‘and how shamefully that woman plays with it!’ She admired Dobbin; she bore him no rancour for the part he had taken against her. It was an open move in the game, and played fairly” (Thackeray, Vanity, 608).

Writing directly to Dobbin, she promises to assist him with Amelia, though he does not acknowledge her attempts at partnership in any way, and through repeated conversations in which she extols his virtue, gradually influences her friend to accept the man she describes as “one of the best gentlemen I ever saw” (618). Like Austen’s Lucy Steele, Becky relinquishes
some part of the proceeds, the part she does not want or need to finally acquire wealth from the Indian nabob and achieve social status.

Figure 5. Thackeray’s *The Triumph of Clytemnestra* and Becky’s second appearance in the character of Clytemnestra

Extending mercy to Amelia and Dobbin, regardless of his hatred of her, Becky finally realizes her fortune, getting Jos Sedley to take out a life insurance policy and then apparently murdering him for it, despite Dobbin’s last-minute attempt to pris him free of her clutches.

Regarding Becky’s brief flash of mercy, Rigby comments, “She is even generous – when she can afford it. Witness that burst of plain speaking in Dobbin’s favour to the little dolt Amelia, for which we forgive her many a sin. ‘Tis true she wanted to get rid of her; but let that pass” (Rigby 159). Nodding to common assumptions that Jos’s death represents a remnant of Thackeray’s previous interest in writing Newgate novels, Keith Hollingsworth argues instead that “the murder is not to be seen as the last-minute impulse of a writer hastily winding up the affairs of his
characters. A careful reading discloses that Rebecca’s ultimate evil is at least prepared for” (Hollingsworth 212). He mentions Thackeray’s two illustrations of Becky in the character of Clytemnestra (Figure 5), the first being *The Triumph of Clytemnestra*; she bows before the Prince Regent with a knife held in her hand, with which she has just stabbed Agamemnon, while her aristocratic lover Lord Steyne, a man who later dies of shock during the European Revolutions of 1830, exclaims convincingly through his teeth, “By -, she’d do it, too!” (Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, 458). Becky’s second appearance in the character of Clytemnestra is still figurative, but more a more literal illustration, as Becky’s grasp on the weapon refers to her evident murder of Jos Sedley for his insurance money as Dobbin vainly attempts to save his wretched brother-in-law: “The Colonel besought Jos to fly at once—to go back to India, whither Mrs. Crawley could not follow him; to do anything to break off a connection which might have the most fatal consequences to him” (Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, 623). But Jos, the useless snob, lacks the “courage” to “come with” Dobbin and abandon the upstart. Hearing of Jos’s untimely end, and receiving part of his fortune, courtesy of Rebecca, Dobbin sends the money back, refusing to partake in the upstart’s spoils even to such a justifiable degree. In light of the upstart peril, this is not merely the legacy of the Newgate novel, but the threat of the domestic revolutionary, the greedy *parvenu* whose threat of violence against the elite and wealthy eventually comes to fruition, suggesting the accuracy of Burke’s fear in regard to the lower class.

In an English society valuing material wealth over moral worth, both Dobbin and Becky overcome their low birth to join the Victorian middle-class, evidence of the consolidation of a general upward movement following the Reform Bill of 1832, at least in the public, cultural, and literary consciousness. Fifteen years have passed since Waterloo, meaning that Amelia and
Dobbin marry and return to England in 1830, just prior to the death of King George IV, in a social climate in which the elite are placed on the defensive, forced to relinquish a degree of their political power to the newly enfranchised middle-class. The Dobbins live a moderate life in the very neighborhood in which Becky walked and imagined being good if she had wealth:

When Colonel Dobbin quitted the service, which he did immediately after his marriage, he rented a pretty little country place in Hampshire, not far from Queen's Crawley, where, after the passing of the Reform Bill, Sir Pitt and his family constantly resided now. All idea of a Peerage was out of the question, the Baronet’s two seats in Parliament being lost. He was both out of pocket and out of spirits by that catastrophe, failed in his health, and prophesied the speedy ruin of the Empire. (Thackeray, *Vanity*, 621-622)

Returning to London, Becky becomes philanthropic, as she fancied in her previous musings, reinventing herself as the generous, wealthy, and religious “Lady Crawley,” a spurious title to which her husband’s death prior to her son’s accession disqualifies her. Mingling bourgeois activities with the accoutrements of aristocracy, Becky attracts a host of adoring snobs and proves herself adept in conforming to a changing era in which humility and public service is becoming the fashion. Since “almost everybody is now an adventurer and consequently society is unstable,” Flavin argues that at the end of the novel “Dobbin’s moral constancy eventually triumphs, but as Becky prospers too the social order can no longer be relied upon to reward virtue and punish vice with unfailing efficiency” (117). Picturing Dobbin and his family fleeing from a chance encounter with Becky at a fair, Thackeray shows the upstart to be an integral part of Victorian society, visible around every turn as she tempts the bourgeois to buy her false wares.

**Conclusion**

*Vanity Fair’s* Victorian readers interpreted its moral message in reference to Thackeray’s previous exposure of the British as a race of snobs, vulnerable to the undeserving upstart. Connecting Thackeray’s vision in this novel to the previous sketches of “Michael Angelo
Titmarsh,” *Fraser’s Magazine* reviewer Robert Bell praised his “same constitutional instinct for seizing on the ridiculous aspect of things, for turning the ‘seamy side’ of society outwards, and for exposing false pretensions and the genteel ambition of *parvenus*” for the benefit of the middle-class (320). Thackeray had portrayed the middle-class as permeated with designing upstarts and the aristocracy as susceptible to the ambitious climbers, but unfettered masculine access into various strata of society and harnessing the anticipatory form of the burgeoning serial had widened the audience receiving the message. Though Austen and Gore were widely read, Thackeray brought the dangers of upstarts home to the early Victorian middle-class, warning them that they very likely were among these snobs, Becky Sharps in the making. If the British bourgeoisie were to avoid the selfish example of Napoleon, they needed to reject hero-worship of the aristocracy and instead learn to see a figure like William Dobbin as the ideal model, a man of action, honor, and whose moderate rise into gentry living did not destabilize the social structure. However, if the rejection of upstarts was to be hammered home to the middle-class readership of the Victorian novel, a further ideological development needed to occur that moved the character of the deserving upstart to a position of unquestionable supremacy over the undeserving upstart; otherwise, the undeserving upstart’s antics would continue to be guiltily attractive to the bourgeoisie. As Thackeray concluded *Vanity Fair*, a more prominent and established novelist had finally justified to himself why he should be considered a gentleman despite the secret manual labor he had performed as an impoverished adolescent, changing the moniker of landed leisure to apply to a man of honest industry. In his next novel, Charles Dickens would eliminate the threat of the greedy, menacing *parvenu* who preys on society and
possesses no social empathy for others by providing the English novel with a successful bourgeois Hero.
CHAPTER FIVE

THE HERO AND THE QUACK: BOURGEOIS INDUSTRY AND UPSTART GUILE

IN CHARLES DICKENS’S DAVID COPPERFIELD

Originating a decisive bourgeois hero and unmasking the undeserving upstart in the English novel were tasks fittingly performed by Charles Dickens, a Victorian novelist secretly haunted by class anxieties. Believing in the bourgeois values of sincerity, honesty, and moderate contentment in station that had been articulated by novelists from Austen onwards, Dickens remained confused as to how to define the precise value of the industrious bourgeois to English society in their new role of cultural power. On the one hand, Dickens shared William Makepeace Thackeray’s firm beliefs in the dangers of bourgeois imitations of the aristocracy, as evident in sketches and early novels before Thackeray’s Book of Snobs (1847-1848) and mocked similar affectations by the lower classes in his first novel, The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club (1837). On the other hand, he demonstrated discontent with merely delineating such errors through satire, as Thackeray did in Vanity Fair (1848). Instead, he searched for a positive bourgeois ideology that explained the emergence of a self-made gentleman author such as himself, despite a working-class background, and consolidated a moral purpose and social role for the Victorian middle-class. Locating this in Thomas Carlyle’s depiction of the “Hero as Man of Letters” who portrays an accurate vision of society in opposition to the greedy and ambitious Quack who leads Dupes astray, Dickens resituated the upstart rivalry in these terms. In The Personal History and Experience of David Copperfield the Younger (1850), Dickens uses Carlyle’s ideology to valorize
the narrator and hero in contrast to Uriah Heep, a selfish and undeserving upstart ultimately revealed to be a quack, showing David Copperfield’s honesty and industry to be more socioeconomically rewarding than the false temporary success of his deceitful rival.

**Counterfeit Upstarts, Swells, and Pretenders**

In Dickens’s *David Copperfield*, the hero yearns throughout his childhood and adulthood to reach the socio-economic status of gentleman and escape the grinding toil and social hardship caused by parental abuse and poverty. Over the course of his adolescent education and work as a journalist, David experiences confusion regarding his status and wonders if his stint as a working-class urchin resulted in permanent loss of social standing: “Was there anything about me which would reveal my proceedings […] all those pawnings, and sellings, and suppers – in spite of myself?” (Dickens, *David*, 163). Pam Morris insists, “as with the construction of moral hero, so this narrative-making of the hero as English gentleman necessitates the repression of all that is other to this genteel identity,” seeing David as constantly in danger of being “assailed by some frenetic and menacing figure from the lower class” who will taint him by association and reveal his sordid past (74). Noting the suppression of “social themes and History” in David’s narrative, John O. Jordan claims that the boy’s aristocratic friend James Steerforth and the cringing law clerk Uriah Heep partially serve as “boundary figures in the class system, indicating respectively the class affiliation that David wishes to strengthen and the class entanglement he most strongly seeks to avoid” (63). When David arrives at the Wickfield home in search of a boarding school, skeletal, red-haired Uriah becomes a psychological symbol of this sordid secret threatening his class position and prospects. David’s first action upon seeing the family portraits is to go “in search of Uriah’s picture” to ascertain his precise place there (Dickens, *David*, 156).
Detecting Uriah’s false humility and greed almost from the start, David is tortured for years by the apprehension that the similarity of their social goals might mean that he is the same as Uriah, in other words, an undeserving upstart.

Though Dickens himself was the product of a lower-middle class upbringing, he had experienced a period of extreme financial poverty and social loss during his adolescence and was forced to perform manual labor reserved for the working classes while his father John Dickens remained confined in the Marshalsea Debtors Prison. In the 1847 autobiographical reminiscences that formed part of the inspiration for David Copperfield’s journey to gentility, Dickens confides the shameful secret of his work at a blacking-warehouse to future biographer John Forster:

That I suffered in secret, and that I suffered exquisitely, no one ever knew but I. How much I suffered, it is, as I have said already, utterly beyond my power to tell. No man’s imagination can overstep the reality [...] I soon became at least as expeditious and as skillful with my hands as either of the other boys. Though perfectly familiar with them, my conduct and manners were different enough from theirs to place a space between us. They, and the men, always spoke of me as “the young gentleman.” (“Reminiscences,” 58)

However, as the grandson of a gentleman’s valet, Dickens could not in actuality lay claim to this class identity, though his father, a naval clerk, had written “Gentleman” under “occupation” in the baptismal register (Slater 5). Regardless, the idea of appearing to be a gentleman despite his circumstances sustained and protected young Charles through intense social degradation. At the very beginning of the young man’s writing career, he expresses his deep and personal interest in altering the meaning of the word “gentleman” to instead designate mental and moral excellency rather than hereditary or economic privilege, which would reward deserving upstarts with status.

A powerful, if predictable effect of the nineteenth-century industrial age was the middle-class literary recuperation of the upstart, a figure now posited not as a revolutionary menace but
as a useful symbol of the rewards of diligence and civic responsibility. The term “gentleman” had not yet acquired what Robin Gilmour terms its mid-Victorian, middle-class definition encapsulating moral uprightness which has proved so lastingly pervasive, but reevaluation of the upstart’s social import was instrumental in enabling this gradual transformation (The Idea 12). Before Dickens, a cultural line of thought had argued that healthy capitalism would necessarily create social climbers. Published in The New Monthly Magazine in the year of John Dickens’s imprisonment, “Upstarts” (1824) had as its epigram the second part of radical John Ball’s medieval quatrain on the origins of rank: “Upstart a churl, and gather’d good, /And thence did spring your gentle blood.” Explicitly rejecting Edmund Burke’s fear of upstarts, the anonymous author “M.” urges, “there is ‘no greater’ absurdity, no wider self-disagreement ‘going,’ than that which is implied in the generally received prejudices against upstarts – a race of people most unmercifully and unreasonably vilipended. The very aristocratic pride in which these prejudices arise, is itself founded on the thing it derides” (431). Failure to accept upstarts represents a fatal misunderstanding of the social force of upstart ambition, which should be viewed as “an encouraging prospect for industry, a feather in the national cap.” However, “M.” also warns, “‘Beware,’ gentle reader, ‘of counterfeits, for such are abroad.’ But let them not bring the condition of an honest upstart into contempt. Let the false pretenders act as they may, the ‘true sort’ will ever be regarded by the judicious as a worthy, innocent, and useful portion of the community” (435). If Dickens read this piece, the young teenager would clearly have found support for his future understanding that the upstart climate of the Regency and late Georgian eras encouraged pretenders whose snobbity gave deserving upstarts a bad name.
Like Thackeray, Dickens comprehended that a disturbing and disappointing greed characterized some bourgeoise, a type depicted in his fiction as motivated, like his parents, by unbridled ambition and lust for materialism rather than honest and well-meaning ambition. John and his wife Elizabeth spent inordinately, entertaining lavishly and enlisting family members as patrons of their talented children, resulting in John’s incarceration, devastating and demeaning the entire family (Slater 21). The gifted but unlucky Micawbers in *David Copperfield* represent Dickens’s more mature reflection on his parents’ complicated spendthrift legacy. Still smarting from their fiscal recklessness in his early twenties, he was less considerate in his first short story, “A Dinner at Poplar Walk” (1833), in which the grasping Buddens rekindle a friendship with their rich cousin, Augustus Minns, hoping for an inheritance for the son they proudly exhibit (Dickens, “Mr. Minns,” 264). Another treatment appears in *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* (1839), as the petty-bourgeoise Kenwigs practice aristocratic manners and display feigned elegance to attract patrons for their talented and ever-expanding brood despite protesting financial disinterestedness:

“Was it money that we cared for?” said Mr. Kenwigs. “Was it property that we ever thought of?”
“No,” cried Mrs. Kenwigs, “I scorn it.”
“So do I,” said Mr. Kenwigs, “and always did.” (Dickens, *Nicholas*, 521)

After temporary setbacks, success occurs when Mrs. Kenwigs’ uncle Mr. Lillyvick, a water collector, designates their gifted performing children as sole legatees, but Dickens’s disgust for their greed evidences throughout the comedy of this petty bourgeoise satire. Endeavoring to break into the literary scene in the 1830s with sketches for periodicals and magazines and theatricals, Dickens was often focused on this issue, simultaneously acutely aware of his own ambivalent status, “an amateur and idler,” struggling to make ends meet as a Parliamentary
reporter (Chittick 45). In particular, he demonstrates how selfishness and ambition rendered greedy members of the middle class vulnerable to the counterfeit upstart.

Located lower on the socioeconomic scale than his later contemporary Thackeray, Dickens did not fasten on the snob so much as on another social-climbing figure, the lower-class “gent,” or “swell,” whose imitation of a real gentleman was lampooned on stage and visible in the street. Regarding the 1830s phenomenon of the theatrical “counterfeit swell,” Peter Bailey observes that this “knowing,” posturing type was utilized in music-hall theatre to create a mocking caricature of gentility (69). As he haunted the London theatres in the 1830s, Dickens obviously delighted in the theatrical and literary potential and social defiance of the gent. Besides depicting a bumbling nouveau-riche aristocrat at war with legitimate members of the aristocracy, John Poole’s Drury Lane comedy *Patrician and Parvenu, or Confusion Worse Confounded* (1835) includes such a counterfeit upstart and swell. Disguised in false mustachios, the Honorable Captain Augustus Fitzmoonshine removes them on the first of many occasions to reveal his real identity as Dick Moonshine, explaining his machinations during his years away from the rural English town to his astounded kinsman and innkeeper Jack Ruby,

> Numerous have been my employments. When I – quitted the army – I became a strolling actor, next quack doctor, Punch-and-Judy man, rope dancer, gentleman on the turf, marker at a billiard table, went abroad and served as a gentleman’s gentleman, vulgarly called a lacquey; in short, finding all other trades fail, I am now trying what I can do by setting up as gentleman on my own account. (9)

In an aside, Ruby groans, “A respectable relation I have here – vagabond, adventurer, and imposter, by his own shewing” (9). Fitzmoonshine’s game is to woo the affluent Miss Sally Sanders, a fat spinster of fifty, thus financing his own social rise and transforming Ruby’s wayside inn into a grand hotel as payment for his lengthy stay. Appeased by the scheme, Ruby
informs him, “You are the Honourable Captain Fitzmoonshine” (11). Based on the similar names employed for Dickens’s first upstart characters, such as the “Honourable Captain Fitz-Whisker Fiercy” from “The Pantomime of Life” (1837), he delighted in Poole’s campy character. Two other of Poole’s earlier scoundrel upstarts also are referred to by derivatives of this name, showing how deeply the pretender resonated with Dickens’s own interest in class.

Figure 6. “Horatio Sparkins”

With his first in-depth exploration of a counterfeit upstart, “Horatio Sparkins,” (1836), Dickens manages to mock credulous bourgeois snobs and at the same time suggest the rising aspirations of working members of the lower-middle class, whose ambitions lead them to reinvent their class personas by becoming swells. Dagmar Kift notes, “The counterfeit swell was

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1 Indicating his early debt to Poole’s naughty upstarts, Dickens wrote his similarly themed stage play The Strange Gentleman (1836) for John Pritt Harley, the actor who portrayed Fitzmoonshine (Butt and Tillotson, 47-48).
especially attractive to upstart clerks and apprentices who were able to make use of cheaper mass-produced clothing to dress up in style if not in substance” (50). Members of a comfortable middle-class family, the sisters Miss Theresa and Miss Marianne Malderton become deeply fascinated by a mysterious and misleading young gallant, Mr. Sparkins, who seems to offer them the chance for further elevation. They are snobs, as Dickens clarifies: “as frequently happens in such cases […] they affected fashion, taste, and many other fooleries, in imitation of their betters, and had a very decided and becoming horror of anything which could, by possibility, be considered low” (339). Social discontent fuels their romantic interest in Sparkins, whom they meet at a public ball and believe to be the “Honourable Augustus Fitz-Edward Fitz-John Fitz-Osborne,” a gentleman in disguise: “The family were ambitious of forming acquaintances and connexions in some sphere of society superior to that in which they themselves moved” (339). On a shopping excursion, the sisters are devastated, outrage well depicted in George Cruikshank’s illustration for *Sketches by Boz* (1836), to discover their secret admirer is Mr. Samuel Smith, clerk in the tailor establishment Messrs. Jones, Smith, and Spruggins, whose access to expensive fabrics enabled him to maintain the charade of wealth and social stature (Figure 6). Yet the spinsters become no wiser from this encounter, as, years later, they still “have the same predilection for aristocratic personages, with an increased aversion to anything low.” (352). Bourgeoise greed for status is mirrored and exploited by the classes below, who also desire to move up the social ladder by any means possible. Moreover, the ability to tell who is and who is not a gentleman is becoming increasingly difficult in the early Victorian period, as outward appearances can be deceiving. Detailing the sighs and romantic overtures of the

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2 Besides “Captain” and names containing the Anglo-Norman “Fitz” prefix, similar names are reused between an upstart in *The Village Coquettes* (1836) and “Horatio Sparkins” (1836), such as “Sparkins” and “Flam/Flamwell.”
designing Sparkins at great length in this humorous tale, Dickens seems to both delight in the theatrical ability of the counterfeit upstart and refrain from allowing such blatant deceit to reap social rewards. Shortly, the portrait evolved to indicate more seriously the menace of an upstart whose schemes depend upon and helpfully expose snobbery, but still offer no ideological solutions to the limiting tendency of class.

Figure 7. “Dr. Slammer's Defiance”

In Dickens’s second and most detailed exploration of this counterfeit upstart, a ragged, hungry, and out-of-work strolling actor embodies this tragi-comic realism in his first novel *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (1837), set in the late 1820s, and influenced by the early Victorian theatrical swell. Using the “knowingness” of the counterfeit swell to become a counterfeit upstart, Alfred Jingle, Esq. of “No Hall, Nowhere” courts multiple middle-class heiresses with a series of fake aliases, a constantly improving wardrobe, and by pretending aristocratic intimacy. Were he not pursued at every turn by outraged gentleman and celebrated
man of science Samuel Pickwick, who has assumed the “duty” of exposing this “gross imposter,” Jingle would succeed in becoming a gentleman through trickery rather than industry (277), as indicated by Robert Seymour’s illustration of the trickster ascending a staircase (Figure 7). Interpreted through John Kucich’s description of how lying functioned within the Victorian novel to reallocate social power through “moral disorder,” Jingle’s deceit is a form of illicitly acquired social power, enabling him to come within grasp of the fortune he craves (2).

Additionally, the revolutionary imagery accompanying Jingle, who fantasizes about the death of Charles I as he passes the execution site at Whitehall, and describes fighting in France during the July Revolutions of 1830, harken back to the Burkean notion of the upstart and the intensification of animus against the social climber during the economic unrest of the 1820s.

When he is finally imprisoned for unseen banking theft committed outside the novel’s general plot, a repentant Jingle is sent to Demerara, now Guyana, a colony to which Dickens had once debated emigrating during his employment struggles in the 1830s (Page 51). He repays Pickwick’s loan and evidently becomes a model citizen but does not trust himself enough to return to Great Britain, where he might resume his ambitions. Dangerous and insincere, Jingle in his undeniable poverty exposes the failures of pre-Reform British governance as he lacks resources, is prevented from satisfying his hunger through illegal gaming by rigid enclosures, and longs for permanent stability, but his sole emphasis on personal wealth and success makes him a villain who cannot be a stable model of bourgeois behavior in relation to the elite.

Problematic as Jingle is, the bourgeois Pickwick’s violent attempts to unmask and contain him are also embarrassing failures that reveal the ideological difficulty encountered when attempting to permanently banish the undeserving upstart whose only clearly defined crime
besides false identification is a similar ambition. Unaware of the upstart peril, John R. Reed states, “Although Pickwick regards himself as a champion against evil, his enemies are surely minor offenders and his character is ultimately unsuited to the genuine punishing of any of them” (73). Though Jingle represents far more than a petty criminal, Reed is correct in assessing Pickwick as unable, from the vantage point of his comfortable affluency, to do more than make noise. Hysterically, he unmask “Captain Charles Fitz-Marshall” on one occasion as Jingle, “an unprincipled adventurer—a dishonourable character—a man who preys upon society, and makes easily-deceived people his dupes” (Dickens, Pickwick, 275). Yet, despite Pickwick’s efforts to impart a “high moral lesson” to Jingle and his servant Job Trotter, the nefarious pair constantly escape prosecution, as families like that of country judge Mr. Nupkins do not wish to publicize their own snobbery that has rendered them vulnerable to the upstart:

“What prevents me,” said Mr. Nupkins, with magisterial dignity, as Job was brought in - “what prevents me from detaining these men as rogues and impostors? It is a foolish mercy. What prevents me?”

Defeated by bourgeois hypocrisy, Pickwick assures the devastated Nupkinses, “Your secret is safe with us” and departs, lamenting their gullibility and weakness (283). Social tensions between the paternalistic Pickwick and the undeserving upstart Jingle illustrate Dickens’s intimate understanding of the lower orders as unfairly suppressed, but also underscore his need to define a bourgeois ideology that could decisively outline moral imperatives for gentility and social climbing, preventing selfishness from characterizing the Victorian middle-class.
More than any other contemporary source, the Scottish historian and philosopher Thomas Carlyle strongly influenced Dickens’s perception of upstarts through his invention of new terms to describe the deserving and undeserving upstart. Through the activities and aims of the respective Hero and Quack, Carlyle could contrast true and false qualities visible within the lower-class and bourgeois upstart rivalry in the English novel, such as nobility and selfishness, sincerity and falsehoods, vision and trickery. While philosophical and religious, these two types were also social, their struggle representing the bourgeois insistence on moving Great Britain forward to a positive future built on strong morality and clear-sightedness. Despite condemning corrupt rulers like the Bourbon dynasty and Napoleon Bonaparte as designedly deceiving and constraining the French populace with their false visions of social reality, Carlyle also argued throughout his works that Oliver Cromwell’s similar overthrow of Charles I of England was different, evidence of a great misunderstood soul. In some senses, Carlyle conveniently sides with the victors of history rather than the losers, but his insistence on exposing those using power and influence to maintain a corrupt and unfair social system displays bourgeois irritation with historical figures who selfishly attempted to seize power at the cost of the middling and lower orders. Written from the superior moral perspective of a British citizen mere years after the contentious passage of the Reform Bill helmed by Earl Grey enabled moderate middle-class enfranchisement, Carlyle’s famous *The French Revolution: A History* (1837) considers the French aristocracy who refused to succor the poor to be at fault for the revolution, not the legislative bourgeoisie who could “make us an age of gold” with its “powers verified” (Vol. 1, 144-145). Promoting a pseudo-democratic view of Great Men as drawn from the middle and
upper classes of society, Carlyle introduces the man of letters as a new hero for society, a man like himself who guards against false ideas of social reality by producing a truthful narrative of the true state of affairs, a highly agreeable and influential valorization to other middle-class literary “gentlemen” like Dickens.

Witnessed in *The French Revolution*, a central tenet of Carlyle’s social ideology was the condemnation of tyranny, or Quackery, defined in context as a system or ideology built on lies out of selfishness. Grippingly told in the present tense, the narrative argues that revolution begins not with the masses, but with the individual, who wants and desires more in a society denying all aid and advancement and responds to hopelessness with violence and anarchy: “In such a practical France, let the theory of Perfectibility say what it will, discontents cannot be wanting: your promised Reformation is so indispensable; yet it comes not; who will begin it – with himself? Discontent with what is around us, still more with what is above us, goes on increasing; seeking ever new vents” (Carlyle, *The French*, 51). Eventually, the pressure becomes too great and society explodes into turmoil, fueled by a press furor and the ambitions of “each organized Class” of the “States-General,” who all are “arising with hopes” (106). Providing the most signal intervention into English interpretations of the French Revolution since Burke, Carlyle sees the event’s unfortunate violence as setting in motion the end of an era characterized by Quackery. He exclaims, “This day, sentence of death is pronounced on Shams; judgment of resuscitation, were it but far off, is pronounced on Realities. This day it is declared aloud, as with a Doom-trumpet, that a Lie is unbelievable. Believe that, stand by that, if more there be not; and let what thing or things soever will follow it follow” (123). According to this notion of a false social reality being promoted at the expense of the masses, Louis XIV and the French aristocracy and,
eventually, Napoleon Bonaparte, each lied regarding what state of affairs should be accepted as actual truth. With the miser Ebenezer Scrooge’s slow awakening to the social imperative of lower-class philanthropy at the sight of the children Ignorance and Want crouching under the feet of the Ghost of Christmas Present in *A Christmas Carol* (1843), Dickens specifically refers to Carlyle’s imagery of “the living Chaos of Ignorance and Hunger weltering uncared for” at the feet of the French nobility (44). Continuing his ideological interest in Carlyle’s philosophies, Dickens also seems to have become interested, especially as a writer of fiction, in Carlyle’s developing notion of a nineteenth-century culture war ongoing to destroy or support a new false social reality based on selfish and ambitious Quackery.

With Quackery a retardation of cultural progress, Heroism is its remedial opposite in *Heroes and Hero-Worship* (1841), a work which presents the Hero as exposing cultural lies and falsehoods with near-religious authority and leading society forwards to a better understanding of reality. According to Simon Williams, “Carlyle conceives of the hero as having a tangible impact upon everyday life. Modern civilization, according to Carlyle, has obliterated one of the essential virtues of humanity, an innate nobility that leads every individual to search for something beyond their own ease and happiness” (18). He concludes, “Carlyle’s hero is essentially the Victorian self-made man writ huge” (18). Daringly, this philosopher claims a privileged cultural place for bourgeois writers like himself, who are deliberately rousing the populace from gross materialism, hopelessness, and anarchy in a society lacking communal purpose. “The Hero as *Man of Letters*” is, according to Carlyle, “altogether a product of these new ages; and so long as the wondrous art of *Writing*, or of Ready-writing which we call *Printing*, subsists, he may be expected to continue, as one of the main forms of Heroism for all future ages. He is, in various
respects, a very singular phenomenon” (On Heroes 249). This upstart hero wields incredible power over culture through print, as Carlyle states: “He, such as he may be, is the soul of all. What he teaches, the whole world will do and make” (251). Characterized by sincerity and inspiration, the experiences of Carlyle’s Hero are imbrued with prophetic meaning which he communicates: “His life, as we said before, is a piece of the everlasting heart of Nature herself: all men’s life is, – but the weak many know not the fact, and are untrue to it, in most times; the strong few are strong, heroic, perennial, because it cannot be hidden from them. The Man of Letters, like every Hero, is there to proclaim this in such sort as he can” (252). Interpreted according to Carlyle’s notion of the Hero as “Man of Letters,” David Copperfield’s varied adventures and encounters are those of a cultural prophet. His opening sentence as narrator, “Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show” is doubly charged in view of the cultural authority of the writer as Hero (Dickens, David, 1). Achieving this distinction in the novel largely depends upon ousting his opposite, Uriah Heep, a rival also influenced by Carlyle.

Besides concocting a history of the emerging heroic category of the bourgeois man of letters, On Heroes and Hero-Worship also provides historical assessment of the most famous anti-hero in nineteenth-century events, with Carlyle condemning failed Great Men who turn out to be deceiving and undeserving quacks, usually due to their illicit and contradictory desire to not only supplant, but also ape the true leaders of feudal society, hereditary aristocrats. Ending his discussion of the heroic with what are “jarring” and “odd examples of the hero as king” to critics like Marylu Hill and Paul E. Kerry who do not connect this passage to the upstart peril, Carlyle turns to Cromwell and Napoleon’s false promises of heroism (Hill and Kerry 95). In particular,
he stresses that, though sincere, the Corsican led European society into a false faith, which in
essence was Quackery, or unreality, motivated by selfishness. Approving of Napoleon’s “hatred
of anarchy,” Carlyle laments that his personal desires destroyed his democratic credibility:

But at this point, I think, the fatal charlatan-element got the upper hand. He apostatized
from his old faith in Facts, took to believing in Semblances; strove to connect himself
with Austrian Dynasties, Popedoms, with the old false Feudalities which he once saw
clearly to be false; – considered that he would found “his Dynasty” and so forth; that the
enormous French Revolution meant only that! The man was “given up to strong delusion,
that he should believe a lie;” a fearful but most sure thing. He did not know true from
false now when he looked at them, – the fearfulest penalty a man pays for yielding to
untruth of heart. Self and false ambition had now become his god: self-deception once
yielded to, all other deceptions follow naturally more and more. (On Heroes, 388-389)

Napoleon duped men in his “falsehood,” claims Carlyle, and fatally departed from truth,
evidence of the universality of greed: “Alas, in all of us this charlatan-element exists; and might
be developed, were the temptation strong enough. ‘Lead us not into temptation’! But it is fatal, I
say, that it be developed” (390). What Thackeray evidently took from this 1837 assessment of
Napoleon was the emperor’s tendency towards snobbery in seeking to become the aristocracy,
the fatal mistake of the upstart in trusting his natural enemies, as discussed in Chapter 4. Reading
the same passages and Carlyle’s future elaborations on the theme of the heroic in society,
Dickens instead became intrigued by the pseudo-religious power of the Hero in discerning social
Reality and Truth, an activity performed in opposition to the deliberate falsehood of Quacks,
who selfishly dupe others into believing a spurious version of both for their own benefit.

The notion of a cultural war between Heroes and Quacks for the hearts and minds of
unperceptive and greedy Victorian Dupes intensifies in Carlyle’s Past and Present (1843), which
contends that those deceived by the Quack have the moral potential to become one, a
condemnation of snobbery. Concern that capitalist activities and economic downturns were
leading to the moral cheapening of Great Britain led to a renewed emphasis on the socially recuperative power of the hero as antidote to materialistic greed. According to Carlyle, the Hero could return the country to a correct path of virtue and industry and stave off the threat of revolt posed by Chartism and lower-class riots and occasioned by the Quack. Falsely appearing to be a gentleman and a productive member of society, the Quack threatens unbelief in the hero, fomenting hopeless cynicism, as Carlyle states,

> For if there be now no Hero [...] what hope is there for the seed of Adam here below? We are the doomed everlasting prey of the Quack; who, now in this guise, now in that, is to filch us, to pluck and eat us, by such modes as are convenient for him. For the modes and guises I care little. The Quack once inevitable, let him come swiftly, let him pluck and eat me; – swiftly, that I may at least have done with him; for in his Quack-world I can have no wish to linger. Though he slay me, yet will I not trust in him. (128)

Not only is the quack a “valet and varlet,” lower-class and vulgar, but his rapacious desires and false appearances, “now in this guise, now in that,” are cannibalistic, nihilistic, and even religiously threatening like a false Messiah in relation to the newly evolving middle-class concept of a self-made gentleman. Marylu Hill and Paul E. Kerry insist that Carlyle “seeks for his rulers – to be endowed by heaven, if not by blood, and be recognized by the community needing a leader,” proving their qualities of kingship by their capacity to create order through their familiarity with industry and “hard work” (98-99). According to Carlyle, until Dupes are saved by the truth and nobility of the clear-seeing Hero, the bourgeois of the industrial age, the Quack remains eternally present, exploiting a British public blinded by want and greed.

**Exposing the Quack**

For Dickens, Carlyle’s dichotomy of Hero and Quack moved his comprehension of the upstart peril from the social comedy of the sketches and baffled stalemate of *Pickwick Papers* towards a comprehensive ideology that made sense of his own past and rise to social prominence
as a heroic “Man of Letters.” Taking Carlyle’s distinction between Hero and Quack and explicitly transferring it to the English novel’s upstart rivalry, Dickens could communicate the difference between deserving and undeserving upstarts through the literary medium of a narrator, David Copperfield, who deserves his rise to the station of gentleman after performing the same social function of revelatory truth-telling. Speaking of Carlyle’s resentment against the Regency and Georgian dandy type, James Eli Adams argues, “As the ideal of the gentleman grows increasingly latitudinarian, at least in theory, it also gives new urgency to the seemingly banal challenge of distinguishing between sincerity and performance. If the status of a gentleman is not inherited but is instead realized through behavior, how does one distinguish the ‘true’ gentleman from the aspirant who is merely ‘acting’ the part?” (Adams 221-22). Until he is certain that he is the hero, David himself does not realize that he has what Carlyle would proclaim a divine sense of discernment regarding Heep’s intentions, though he is fatally blind to the nefarious intentions of social superiors like Steerforth. Ultimately, David’s unsubstantiated instinct that Uriah is villainous, coupled with his steady advancement through industrious labor rather than theft, establishes him as a deserving upstart and the prophesied Carlylean Hero.

Mutually obsessed with each other from the beginning of David’s remedial education as an honored guest at Mr. Wickfield’s home, Uriah and David sense each other’s class rivalry and appear entirely unable to co-exist. Feeling watched by Wickfield’s law clerk, as the narrator recalls, “I made several attempts to get out of their way…but they always attracted me back again; and whenever I looked towards those two red suns, I was sure to find them, either just rising or just setting” (Dickens, David, 158). Attributing the impetus for his uncontrollable interest to Uriah’s mesmerism allows David to ignore the unpleasant recognition that he, like the
clerk, exists in social limbo, unaware of the direction in which he, like those eyes, is moving. According to Jeremy Tambling, the effect of Uriah’s distasteful humility, “as with the abject itself, is to make impossible a separation between the subject and the object” (8). Even a handshake with the law clerk is a moment of invasion: “I rubbed mine afterwards, to warm it, and to rub his off” (Dickens, David, 160). Despite David’s best efforts, Uriah’s face haunts him, causing him to be distrustful: “Leaned out of window, and seeing one of the faces on the beam-ends looking at me sideways, I fancied it was Uriah Heep got up there somehow, and shut him out in a hurry” (160). Already wary, David first discerns the fawningly humble law clerk’s ambition during a brief conversation, having surprised him at the task of studying books of law. This former workhouse inmate’s continuing desire for something better in life than his current lower middle-class station anticipates the mid-Victorian economic movement advocating self-improvement, as delineated in Self Help (1859) by Samuel Smiles but lacks what Anne Baltz Rodrick calls its expectation of “active participation in civic society” (39). Gail Turley Hurston has observed that “Uriah’s ambitions deflect the reader from seeing David’s own need to rise in the world,” but they also demand an explanation of why his ambitions are considered illicit by the narrator besides the obvious fact of their rivalry (113). Aided by his similarly subservient mother, Uriah takes advantage of his helpless alcoholic partner, Mr. Wickfield, soon achieving partnership in the firm, as David struggles in his legal clerkship with Mr. Spenlow, seemingly the loser in their instinctive contest.

For Uriah to succeed threatens David’s opinion of his own merits and potential to realize his goal of becoming a gentleman, corresponding with the appalled reactions of previous deserving upstarts in the English novel, such as Elinor Dashwood, to the machinations of the
undeserving upstart. Invited to David’s meagre lodgings and breaking the news of his partnership at Wickfield & Heep, Uriah revels in their changed circumstances, confiding, “to see you waiting upon me is what I never could have expected! […] You have heard something, I des-say, of a change in my expectations, Master Copperfield, I should say, Mister Copperfield?” Observing Uriah’s social triumph over him, David’s opinion consolidates into negativity: “I decided in my own mind that I disliked him intensely” (Dickens, David, 266). Adding insult to injury, the lower-class upstart credits David with first inspiring his ambition:

“To think that you should be the first to kindle the sparks of ambition in my umble breast, and that you’ve not forgot it! Oh! – Would you excuse me asking for a cup more coffee?”

Something in the emphasis he laid upon the kindling of those sparks, and something in the glance he directed to me as he said it, had made me start as if I had seen him illuminated by a blaze of light. Recalled by his request […] I did the honors […] with an unsteadiness of hand, a sudden sense of being no match for him. (267)

Compelled to serve this social inferior, David physically crumbles, recognizing in Uriah’s unseemly request for “more,” the menacing fact of his inexhaustible and more successful desires. During this encounter, Uriah has been attempting to thrust his “long skeleton fingers into the still longer fingers of a great Guy Fawkes pair of gloves,” a reference to the attempted blowing up of Parliament and the English royal family in 1605 by a Roman Catholic dissident (265). Adding insult to injury, Uriah declares his plan of marrying Agnes Wickfield, David’s revered friend and ideal of womanhood, a typical boon for a partner (Payne 17-18). Eliminating Uriah Heep, the threat of lower-class usurpation and systemic destabilization, now symbolically becomes a matter of national as well as personal urgency, if only in prophetic imagery, with a sleepless David almost maniacally fantasizing about skewering him with a poker as the lawyer sleeps comfortably before the fire.
Loathsome as are David’s descriptions of Uriah’s damp, insinuating, and roaming physicality, the lawyer’s groping and writhing hands are tentacles of moral repulsiveness that threaten to envelope the Hero before he has realized the purpose of his special insight into the Quack’s nefarious intentions towards society. Uriah resembles the Quack as denounced by Carlyle in *Chartism* (1840) as a demonic nightmare of “Falsehood Incarnate”: “is there a hag, or spectre of the Pit, so baleful, hideous as your accredited quack, were he never so close-shaven, mild-spoken, plausible to himself and others? Quack-ridden: in that one word lies all misery whatsoever” (43). Linked unwillingly with Uriah, David becomes “Quack-ridden,” musing, “He seemed to swell and grow before my eyes: the room seemed full of the echoes of his voice; and the strange feeling […] that all this had occurred before, at some indefinite time, and that I knew what he was going to say next, took possession of me” (Dickens, *David*, 267-268). The eternal struggle between Quack and Hero has caused them to recognize each other as mortal and inevitable enemies, with David forced to rise from his bed and gaze at the upstart, as “I was attracted to him in very repulsion” (270). According to Carlyle, the Quack does achieve unmerited success, for a season, because of foolish Dupes: “Shiftiness, quirk, attorney-cunning is a kind of thing that fancies itself, and is often fancied to be talent; but it is luckily mistaken in that. Succeed truly it does, what is called succeeding; and even must in general succeed, if the dispensers of success be of due stupidity” (*Chartism* 279). Frantic to divorce himself from Uriah as he tries to corrupt his morality, David even strikes his rival in the face on one occasion, though this futile attempt at separation merely brings them, as Mary Poovey has observed, into more “contaminating” proximity (*Uneven* 117). Aware that he and David cannot part from each other on any terms, Uriah uses this unworthy action to shame the hero:
“Copperfield,” he said at length, in a breathless voice, “have you taken leave of your senses?”
“I have taken leave of you,” said I, wresting my hand away. “You dog, I’ll know no more of you.”
“Won’t you?” said he, constrained by the pain of his cheek to put his hand there. “Perhaps you won’t be able to help it.” (Dickens, David, 439)

Matching the cunning and violence of the undeserving upstart is an attempt that always has failed for the deserving bourgeois upstart in literature, because it is not a fitting ideological response. Instead, it threatens to transform the rivalry into an equal partnership of villains.

Before David can become a popular Victorian writer guiding his eager readership, he must instead develop his own contrary moral ethic that offers a firm contrast to the deviousness he feels to be apparent in Uriah’s character. Hard labor, not in the factory of his youth, but in conducting journalism, raises his confidence and gives him valuable working experience in the world, key qualities of Carlyle’s Hero. According to Martin Danahay, Dickens “shared a deep commitment to what is usually termed the Victorian ‘Gospel of Work’” and idealized “a host of work-related ideals such as self-discipline, seriousness and self-sacrifice” (197). Once David begins to succeed, first at mastering shorthand and then at writing, the same trajectory followed by Dickens himself, he explains this rise as motivated by a sense of responsibility, fueling his efforts with “patient and continuous energy” (Dickens, David, 429). Reflecting that others less fortunate have worked just as hard and failed, David credits his sincerity as an additional factor: “Some happy talent, and some fortunate opportunity, may form the two sides of the ladder on which some men mount, but the rounds of that ladder must be made of stuff to stand wear and tear; and there is no substitute for thorough-going, ardent, and sincere earnestness” (429). Slow but steady, the permanent nature of David’s success becomes apparent when Uriah is revealed to be a fraud with a sham career, the result of his blackmail and financial defrauding of Mr
Wickfield and even David’s aunt. Patriotically insisting “what I have done, I did, in despite of mercenary and selfish objects, For England, home and Beauty,” Uriah’s honest law clerk Wilkins Micawber reveals, “That Mr. W. has been for years deluded and plundered, in every conceivable manner, to the pecuniary aggrandisement of the avaricious, false, and grasping – HEEP” (535-536). Having seen past Uriah’s feigned humility, David proves himself to be the sincere bourgeois gentleman and Carlylean Hero who will help rescue the British public with accurate social sight and evidence of his own success through honest labor.

Heroically denouncing the Quack establishes David’s superior worth and relieves him of all doubt that he is not an undeserving upstart but destined to be a gentleman. Cornered, Uriah reveals the secret of David’s past, declaring, “I don’t make myself out a gentleman (though I never was in the streets either, as you were, according to Micawber)” (530-531). Accusing David, Uriah warns, “Now, take care. You’ll make nothing of this. We understand each other, you and me. There’s no love between us. You were always a puppy with a proud stomach, from your first coming here: and you envy me my rise, do you?” He declares, “Copperfield, I have always hated you. You’ve always been an upstart, and you’ve always been against me” (538). David Morse marvels at the oddness of this statement, remarking, “One of the strangest disclosures in David Copperfield is when Uriah Heep accuses David of being an ‘upstart.’ We do not expect to hear the hero spoken of in such a way even if he is a man who has risen in the world, and, unlike Heep, by perfectly legitimate methods. Yet once the connection is made the parallels become irresistible” (161). Indeed, to Uriah, who does not understand the moral distinction between them, and to the reader ignorant of the Carlylean metaphor, David is, in

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3 Quote from “The Death of Nelson” (1811) by John Braham, a song commemorating Admiral Horatio Nelson’s death in the Battle of Trafalgar (1805) during the Napoleonic Wars.
some ways, a hypocrite as an arrived gentleman himself; as a man who has achieved success through legitimate means, he is a bourgeois Hero. In response to being called an “upstart,” David shares some of his growing social wisdom with the defeated vampiric Quack: “‘As I think I told you once before,’ said I, ‘it is you who have been, in your greed and cunning, against all the world. It may be profitable to you to reflect, in future, that there never were greed and cunning in the world yet, that did not do too much, and over-reach themselves. It is as certain as death’” (538). Here, David echoes Carlyle, who warns English society in Past and Present against trusting in the Quack’s “sham-success, for a day and days; rising ever higher, - towards its Tarpeian Rock,” alluding to the execution site of the Roman Republic for traitors. Such feigned triumph ranges “the whole Universe against thee,” Carlyle says: “Judgment for an evil thing is many times delayed some day or two, some century or two, but it is sure as life, it is sure as death!” (Past and Present 12). Heroically defending the dupes of society against the Quack, David warns Uriah against continuing as society’s enemy.

Fairly, Dickens allows Uriah to have the last word, a sign of the novelist’s impending shift in future novels like Great Expectations (1861) towards considering the merits of lower-class rise within a deeply flawed system intent on denying them moderate social mobility. Vindictively, Uriah retorts upon David, “Or as certain as they used to teach at school (the same school where I picked up so much umbleness) from nine o’clock to eleven, that labor was a curse; and from eleven o’clock to one, that it was a blessing and a cheerfulness, and a dignity, and I don’t know what all, eh?” [...] “You preach, about as consistent as they did” (Dickens, David, 538). If the failure of greedy ambition is “as certain as death,” as David claims, so is the plodding regularity of work that goes nowhere, a striking counterargument. Eventually locked up
in a model prison for bank fraud, as was Jingle in *Pickwick Papers*, Uriah convinces touring spectators that David has cruelly persecuted him, imitating Christ crucified in an “impious act” (607). As far as symbolism goes, Uriah has indeed been stymied by David’s opposition and cannot or will not comprehend the moral difference between their respective methods of rising, a distinction elusive for critics. When Reed wonders “That the arch-scoundrel of the book should thus usurp the role of the supreme model of morality,” he admits, “Uriah’s charges […] contain a small grain of truth” (202). David silently watches those around him fall prey to the machinations of this anti-Christ, as do Carlyle’s heroes when unable to awaken the credulous masses: “Gaping multitudes listen; unlistening multitudes see not but that it is all right, and in the order of Nature. Earnest men, one of a million, shut their lips; suppressing thoughts, which there are no words to utter” (Carlyle, *Chartism*, 44-45). Well does David know that it is useless to argue that “knaves were just the subjects to make that sort of profession in such a place; that they knew its market-value as least as well as we did” (Dickens, *David*, 608-609). No longer personally concerned by the undeserving upstart’s persistent skullduggery, David does appear to pause for an instant and marvel at Victorian belief in the repentance of upstarts willing to commit crime for ambition, incurables described as imprisoned “foxes, disparaging whole vineyards of inaccessible grapes” (604). However, since the Hero now knows his worth to society, he can leave behind the imprisoned Quack without private misgivings, soon establishing a home where his wife Agnes and children thrive, maintained by the rewards of his middle-class industry.

**Conclusion**

With Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield* (1850), the character and social Heroism of the deserving upstart has consolidated, denoting a bourgeoisie whose industry, social empathy,
and gentility illustrates the new Victorian definition of gentility as tied to virtue and industry rather than heredity, or even wealth. A contrast begun by Austen in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) to recuperate the bourgeoisie from the charge of upstart ambitions has by mid-century become a means of justifying the new permanent position of an identifiable middle-class, as this study argues. Though Austen, Le Fanu, Gore, Thackeray, and Dickens all acknowledge the contemporaneous existence of undeserving upstarts in their upstart rivalries, as has been seen in previous chapters, they insist that the deserving upstart offers the promise of greater, more socially and morally beneficial gains for English society than does the solitary, self-seeking individualism of the selfish upstart. Virtue, civic empathy, and socioeconomic disinterestedness are qualities demonstrated by the deserving upstart from first to last, but industry has become increasingly emphasized as Britain consolidates its global power. Industry joins virtue and education as qualities uniquely claimed by the bourgeoisie for itself in contrast to aristocratic negligence and luxury and the physical and intellectual poverty of a greedy and discontented lower class. Importantly, lower-class upstarts must learn to take pattern from the bourgeoisie, who have rebuilt and now support the country’s social structure from within rather than tearing it down wholesale as Edmund Burke claimed the French had done, in order to achieve greedy and illicit profits from others’ labor. As an industrious gentleman of letters, Dickens’s David Copperfield has established decisively that the educated and civic-minded middle-class are contented with their ideological position above the poor and below the aristocracy and moderate economic success. However, the deserving upstart’s rivalry with the Quack Uriah Heep does act as a warning that the poor must be educated and treated humanely, given better wages and living conditions, if Great Britain is to eradicate want and the specter of revolution in its society.
APPENDIX A

NOTABLE TREATMENTS OF UPSTARTS IN THE

NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH NOVEL

157
1800


1810s


Edgeworth, Maria. *Ormond*. R. Hunter, 1817.


1820s


**1830s**


Gore, Catherine. *Mothers and Daughters; A Tale of the Year 1830*. Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1831.


Gore, Catherine. *The Hamiltons, or the New Æra*. Sanders and Otley, 1834.


**1840s**


Thackeray, William Makepeace. *Vanity Fair*. Bradbury & Evans, 1848.


**1850s**


Gore, Catherine. *Mammon; or, the Hardships of an Heiress*. Bunce & Brother, 1855.


1860s


1870s


**1880s**


**1890s**


Couvrer, Jessie Catherine (as Tasma.) *A Fiery Ordeal*. Richard Bentley and Son, 1897.

**1900s**

APPENDIX B

DISCUSSION OF UPSTARTS IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY LITERATURE
Short Stories


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Plays


**Articles**


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**Other Genres**


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Wahrman, Dror. *Imagining the Middle Class*. Cambridge University Press, 1995.


VITA

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