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THE CAUSTIC PEN IS MIGHTIEST: A TRADITION OF FEMALE SATIRE IN THE
NOVELS OF JANE AUSTEN, IVY COMPTON-BURNETT, AND MURIEL SPARK

A Thesis

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the Faculty of Arts and Humanities

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Jaclyn A. Reed

June 2013

Advisor: Dr. Jan Gorak

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Abstract

Female satirists have long been treated by critics as anomalies within an androcentric genre because of the reticence to acknowledge women's right to express aggression through their writing. In *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *A House and Its Head* (1935), and *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963), Jane Austen (1775-1817), Ivy Compton-Burnett (1884-1969), and Muriel Spark (1918-2006) all combine elements of realism and satire within the vehicle of the domestic novel to target institutions of their patriarchal societies, including marriage and family dynamics, as well as the evolving conceptions of domesticity and femininity, with a subtle feminism. These female satirists illuminate the problems they have with society more through presentation than judgment in their satire, which places them on the fringes of a society they wish to educate, distinguishing their satire from that written by male satirists who are judging from a privileged height above the society they are attempting to correct. All three women create heroines and secondary female characters who find ways to survive, and occasionally thrive, within the confines of a polite society that has a streak of savagery running just beneath its polished surface.

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Chapter One: Female Satire

Over the centuries, women have wielded their pens in as many varied ways as men have, and while critics have long recognized the aggression that men have expressed through satire, they have been much more reluctant to grant women the same validation. Women writers who have wielded a caustic pen have been treated as anomalies in what has long been viewed by critics as an androcentric genre. Even when women satirists such as Jane Austen (1775-1817), Ivy Compton-Burnett (1884-1969), and Muriel Spark (1918-2006) have been included in criticisms of satire as a genre, it has been as the odd girl out. They have been individually placed alongside their male counterparts and critiqued against genre standards which have been established based on the art of satire as it is practiced by men. This is not completely faulty, but it overlooks elements of their writing which are born out of a female perspective and acquired through uniquely female experiences and social conventions. These elements may be dismissed as unimportant until they are considered as commonalities which connect each woman's writing to that of other women within the genre. In comparing the satirical novels of Austen, Compton-Burnett, and Spark to each other, it is evident that there are styles and tropes that are shared by these women which distinguish their writing as a subgenre within the male-dominated sphere of satire. This subgenre of female satire features domestic realism, family politics, and explorations of femininity. It is marked by a savagery lurking beneath

the façade of polite society, and a subtle feminism operating within the patriarchal structure to improve women's economic situations rather than attempting to overthrow the structure as a whole. Their improving rather than destructive satire targets the patriarchal institutions that dominate society, such as marriage and family, as well as society's evolving conceptions of domesticity and femininity, while stressing survival by whatever means necessary within this male-run system.

Female Satire as a Tradition

There is a distinct and uniquely female tradition of satire in the literary canon that has been overlooked because it does not fit in with either the androcentric perception of satire by scholars and critics or the early feminist critics' desire to promote more strident feminist voices. Christine Künzel addresses this in her essay on Gisela Elsner's omission from the satirical canon:

Even though gender theories have been informing literary scholarship since the development of feminist literary criticism in the 1970s, the theory of satire (so far) seems to have been largely untouched by them, and companions to (German-language) literature even now mention (almost) exclusively male writers, without discussing in any shape or form why this choice has been made. (par. 1)

Künzel postulates that this oversight of women satirists is grounded in the taboo against women expressing aggression in literature and that "the position of the female writer, already rendered precarious by its deviation from the norm, is exacerbated by her position as *satirist* and as *woman*" (par. 5, emphasis in original). Though Künzel focuses her studies on women satirists in the German literary canon, the observations she makes are equally applicable to the English canon, as is shown by Paul Simpson who notes that there is a "serious issue to do with gender representation in satirical writing" because "it

is indeed true that that tradition of a canonical satire is overwhelmingly male-dominated” (56).

Simpson goes a step further than Künzel when he expounds upon Felicity Nussbaum’s observations that “the target of much satire is *female as a sex*” and that there is:

...a deeply misogynistic practice in canonical satirical writing where, while males become targets through their individuality, women feature only by dint of their gender. Few if any of the distinctions that are made for men are afforded to women and this results in the female becoming “a metaphor for all that is threatening and offensive to society.” (qtd. in Simpson 56)

This observation highlights one of the features of female satire that distinguishes it from the rest of the genre in that it counters this tendency. Women satirists like Austen, Compton-Burnett, and Spark fill their novels with a wide variety of female characters, emphasizing their differences as well as their femininity, without lumping men into their own gendered category representing only the evils of patriarchy. In this way, they satirize specific types of people—the social climber, the English rose, the tyrant—both male and female, without satirizing either gender as a whole.

In most criticism of satirical writers from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, women are treated as anomalies within the genre, individually compared with male satirists but never juxtaposed with other women. Their prose is frequently labeled masculine, and they are “branded...as unfeminine, as ‘witches with the evil eye’..., as ‘wily devils’... or ‘bitches’” (Künzel par. 8). In establishing female satire as its own tradition within the larger genre, these nineteenth- and twentieth-century women will be redefined as equal participants who have appropriated satire and reformed it in their own uniquely feminine way.

Instead of being viewed as equal participants, nineteenth- and twentieth-century women satirists have largely been pigeon-holed by critics who only focus on religion or morality, and whether or not these domestic novels present satisfactory lessons to their readers. Jennifer L. Randisi criticizes Patricia Stubbs for searching for moral truths within Spark's novels, yet she in turn limits herself to analyzing Spark's satire through a religious lens, using a quote by Spark that "her conversion to Catholicism gave her 'something to work on as a satirist'" as her justification to argue that "Spark's satiric vision is contingent upon her theology; the position of the perceiver (the novelist) relative to the object perceived (society) is Catholicism once removed" (Randisi 132). Categorizing satire by women as religious or moral has lead critics to ignore the criticisms that are aimed at patriarchal institutions like marriage and family.

While there are critics, such as Mary M. Curtis, who have discussed the acceptability of a lack of apparent morality because of its role in the satire, they have not taken it to the next step and looked at the satirical butts which have nothing at all to do with ethics or morals. Through analyzing the satire of domesticity and femininity in all three novels, it becomes evident that these female satirists are targeting deeper aspects of society than surface ethics and morals. They are using their caustic words to reveal the inherent savagery that operates beneath the polished façade of polite society, whether it is 1813, 1935, or 1963.

Female Satire and the Domestic Novel

Domestic novels have been treated as being distinct from satire, and yet, satire has been a large part of these novels since Austen. It is the use of satire within the form of domestic fiction that often sets female satire apart from its male counterpart. The domestic novel is the ideal vehicle for female satire because its focus is the depiction of everyday people interacting in the public spaces of society. Austen and Compton-Burnett have both had their novels categorized as domestic fiction by scholars who chose not to look at their satire specifically. However, expanding the scope of the domestic novel to include Spark's works makes it evident that the two genres are not mutually exclusive. A novel that depicts family conditions in the mode of verisimilitude with marriage and prosperity presented as the most appropriate ending is the basis of the domestic fiction genre. The main difference in the scope of these three novels is that while Austen and Compton-Burnett focus on a literal family unit, Spark turns her satirical eye to a disparate group of women who are brought together by wartime scarcity into a figurative family unit. Though many critics restrict the domestic novel to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Spark's novels, as well as those by other mid-twentieth century authors like Compton-Burnett and Barbara Pym, fit the criteria for domestic novels since they are mainly concerned with the daily lives and manners of a restricted segment of a larger society and often deal with marriage in some form. Phyllis Lassner makes a similar assessment when she analyzes how domestic novels written by women not only survived the war, but were transformed by it, arguing that, "By filtering their experience and understanding of World War II through the conventions of domestic novels, they

questioned the political theology of war and its relation to domestic ideology” (89). The satire that had been gentle and conservative in these novels before the wars became stronger and more progressive as women stepped out of the passive and subordinate roles they had previously performed. In the same way that the domestic novel came through the war with some adaptations, the use of female satire within the domestic novel changed over the interwar and postwar years and the harsh satire and bitter wit that is employed by these women writers distinguishes their novels from the less aggressive examples of the genre that preceded them and leads to an increased overlap with the masculine-dominated genre of satire, while not completely obliterating their ties with what is viewed as more feminine subject matter.

The domestic novel has been utilized as the vehicle for female satire in a way that makes it distinct from satirical works written by men. Family life and marriage appear as satirical butts in novels beginning with Jane Austen as she attempted a gentle education of her society on the difficulties faced by women, both in and out of marriage, through a balance of optimistic irony and harsh wit. In the twentieth century, this torch was picked up by Ivy Compton-Burnett, whose critical gaze settled upon family dynamics and the tyrants who manipulate them, be they male or female, as she wielded caustic words and dark humor as weapons against them. Spark, who was familiar with the works of both women, took female satire to yet another level with her cynical view of humanity and her amoral satiric tragedies while still maintaining the guise of the domestic novel. Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Compton-Burnett’s *A House and Its Head* (1935), and

Spark's *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963) are all examples of this combination of the genres of domestic fiction and satire.

Overt Humor and Covert Politics of Female Satire

It is the melding of the domestic and the satiric within these female satirists' novels that brings them closer to the aggression expressed by male satirists and yet establishes their writing as being from a uniquely female perspective. While male satirists establish themselves as superior, "defining, controlling, dealing out the analyses that hurt, dishing out the critical medicine," to the society which they critique, female satirists wield their caustic pen from a distance that is on the fringe rather than from a "privileged height" (Cunningham 430). They know that if they make their accusations too blatant then they risk being further marginalized by the patriarchal society which they are critiquing. They disguise their barbs so that the objects of their satire will find them more agreeable and it is this temperance of their aggression that allows the barbs to penetrate deeper into society than a more obvious attack might.

From their position on the fringe, these female satirists favor amoral presentations of society's foibles rather than the moral judgments that male satirists issue from high above those they are judging. In part, these presentations are achieved through each woman's use of third person narration, which maintains a distance between their narrator and their characters, allowing for critique and analysis of their actions by the reader without an overt moral judgment being foisted upon them by the author. This distance encourages the reader to be more critical of the characters' actions and motives because

the reader is kept outside of their heads but is still privy to a selection of their thoughts through the use of free indirect discourse or thoughts expressed as dialogue. In this way, the writers leave it up to the reader to realize that there is potentially something wrong or immoral with a society that forces women to marry where they do not choose, or restricts their choices so severely that they are forced into finding new ways in which to survive within patriarchy's boundaries. These presentations ultimately emphasize the polite savagery that is an undercurrent of the societies in which these women live as well as the political subtlety with which they are slyly influencing their readers without attempting to topple the status quo completely.

Polite Savagery

In her analysis of Compton-Burnett's comedy, Curtis points to the "dichotomy between the surface formality and the underlying anarchy" as a major element of her "savage" comedy (216). What Curtis calls anarchy is directly related to the savagery that Spark highlights throughout *The Girls of Slender Means*. All three women evince an interest in unveiling the barbarity that lurks just beneath the polished surface of polite society. This interest in the polite savagery of women is directly linked to the survival of women within the confines of patriarchal society. Wendy Anne Lee observes this in her essay on D.W. Harding's vision of Austen as a "confident social strategist," saying "the novelist's tough-minded survivalism furnished a practical model for how to live now, rather than a daydream of how gentlepeople had lived before" (1000, 996). In all three novels, women are forced to be resourceful in order to survive within society's strictures:

Jane and Elizabeth Bennet find, and secure, men who can both love and support them; Nancy Edgeworth escapes from her father's tyranny through a happy marriage, while her sister Sibyl resorts to blackmail when she finds that her marriage of convenience is not a way out of her father's house; and Selina Redwood and Jane Wright consistently put their own well-being and success before others, be it Selina rescuing a stolen dress rather than a trapped girl or Jane insisting that her work requires more heat and food than others'. Those who succeed do not go beyond the established boundaries, nor do they attempt to overthrow society completely. These survivalists also do not necessarily concern themselves with morality or ethics, especially in the novels of Compton-Burnett and Spark. Curtis observes of Compton-Burnett that she "is concerned with what people are, ultimately, like, and what she sees is not complimentary to human nature. Her characters are either exploiters or exploited, and the exploiters usually get away with it" (221). Lee similarly notes that "...Austen's fiction accepts the social necessity of living with one's adversaries" (1004). This shared cynical view of society ties into the realism that is inextricable from their satire. As female satirists, they portray society as they experience it, flaws and all, with only the thinnest veneer of candy-coating to make it easier for their readers to swallow. They employ a similar approach to their incorporation of political sentiments into their novels which makes their feminism elusive, yet present.

Political Subtlety

Harding attributes part of Austen's success to the fact that "her books are, as she meant them to be, read and enjoyed by precisely the sort of people whom she disliked"

(6). This is not wholly accurate as Austen seems to have truly enjoyed writing for the amusement of her family and friends; however, it is further explained when he describes the way in which Austen works a political comment into a novel as "...it slips through their minds without creating a disturbance. It gets said, but with the minimum risk of setting people's backs up" (Harding 8). Harding's argument that Austen voiced a "regulated hatred" strategically throughout her satire so that it was discreet enough to be acceptable by a society that would not completely share her opinions supports the concept of a subtle feminism that is employed by Compton-Burnett and Spark as well (5). All three of these female satirists surreptitiously rebuke the social limitations which have been placed upon women. These gentle rebukes are aimed at the same institutions of patriarchy which they satirize, with the goal of revealing the barbarous underside of polite society. Such canniness shows that their interests lie in illuminating the struggles faced by women and providing them with routes to happiness that can be achieved within the bounds of acceptable society. They are not radical revolutionaries suggesting a complete overhaul. Their feminism is one that aims more at economic equality. They point out the unfairness of a system in which a woman's main means of support is marriage. The ambiguity of this subtle feminism has resulted in its being largely overlooked by feminist critics in favor of more overtly radical women writers. Yet, this subtlety makes it more palatable to the patriarchal societies that these female satirists wished to correct, which could lead to it affecting a greater influence than more overt sentiments that would put the reader immediately on the defensive.

Chapter Two: Jane Austen (1775-1817)

In one of her letters, Austen describes her writing efforts as “...the little bit (two Inches wide) on which I work with so fine a Brush, as produces little effect after much labour” (LeFaye 323). Austen kept her focus intentionally narrow so that she could capture the small details that made her novels feel real to her readers while still addressing larger themes such as marriage, education, and family dynamics. She seamlessly wove this realism together with biting satire within the format of a domestic novel to create social commentary that manages to be both caustic and optimistic as it targets the marriage market, feminine education, primogeniture, and family tensions. Like Spark, she acquired her sense of humor from her family, whom Paula Byrne describes as “all broad-minded and clearly loved black humour” (66). These techniques would be adopted and adapted by other women writers, such as Compton-Burnett and Spark, who came after her.

Pride and Prejudice

As one of Austen’s most popular novels, *Pride and Prejudice* has been enjoyed and appreciated as a romance since its publication in 1813, but closer readings reveal that there is much more than a love story going on beneath its surface. Austen uses her ironic narrator and satiric caricatures in order to comment on marriage, family dynamics, and

patriarchal society. In doing so, she began a new subgenre of female satire which is distinct from that which was practiced by her male predecessors. Her satire also reveals her opinions on politics and the economic situation of women during this time in a way that is understated, yet still espouses a subtle feminism that was more about exposing the inequalities of women's positions and finding ways to improve their lots within the existing patriarchal structures rather than advocating for a new system entirely.

Domesticity and Femininity

Pride and Prejudice, as well as Austen's other novels, has been previously categorized as a domestic novel, but few critics have analyzed the satirical aspects alongside the domestic elements to see how the two work together to create something different from domestic novels which do not incorporate satire. Directing her satire at fashion's excesses, gaps in feminine education, the tradition of primogeniture, and the marriage market distinguishes her fiction from both non-satirical domestic novels and satire written by men which tends to satirize women as a whole, rather than individually.

Austen doesn't spend time giving detailed descriptions of her characters' every outfit, yet she still conveys the important role that fashion played in the lives of these women and men in many ways. The narrator informs her reader that "The first part of Mrs. Gardiner's business on her arrival, was to distribute her presents and describe the newest fashions" as she would know of changes in London of which the Bennets would not yet have heard. Austen conveys similar knowledge to her friend Martha Lloyd when

she visits London and learns about changes in fashion, such as the switch to dresses with long sleeves (Le Faye 273; no. 106). Elizabeth and her sisters, especially Lydia and Kitty, spend much time discussing fashion, of both men and women. The first observation that Austen gives her reader of Bingley is that the girls observe he is wearing a blue coat when he returns their father's visit. As Spark will later on, Austen draws direct links between femininity and fashion. When she presents men who are overly interested in fashion in her other novels, she often satirizes them as being more feminine than their less fashion-obsessed counterparts. Austen's satire of fashion excesses shows that there is an extreme interest in fashion that can become detrimental for both women and men. This is exhibited by Lydia when she meets Jane and Elizabeth after their trips to London and Kent, respectively. She generously informs her sisters that she and Kitty will treat them to lunch at the inn in Meryton, but that Jane and Elizabeth must lend them the money to do so because they have spent theirs in the shop before their sisters' arrival. Her description of her purchase reveals this to be even more ridiculous:

“Look here, I have bought this bonnet. I do not think it is very pretty; but I thought I might as well buy it as not. I shall pull it to pieces as soon as I get home, and see if I can make it up any better.”

And when her sisters abused it as ugly, she added, with perfect unconcern, “Oh! but there were two or three much uglier in the shop; and when I have bought some prettier-coloured satin to trim it with fresh, I think it will be very tolerable.”
(Austen 242; vol. II, ch. 16)

Austen's letters reveal that she and Cassandra also took interest in discussing fashion and re-trimming bonnets and dresses, but they did it for a practical purpose—to re-trim something that was no longer in fashion or that needed to be refreshed. In Lydia's case,

she has bought something that she does not ever intend to wear as it is and that will cost her even more money before she does wear it. Austen's satire of fashion here targets Lydia's excessive frivolity, not women as participants in practical fashion.

Another aspect of femininity which Austen parries with her satirical sword is the description of women as "accomplished" as part of the fashionable feminine education of her society. She attacks the popular finishing schools which taught girls manners, music, art, and feminine pursuits, such as embroidery, but did not extend to much actual academic learning beyond reading and some languages, as well as the aspect of domesticity limited itself to referring to women as accomplished for simply displaying skills that were considered necessary to attract a husband but would not necessarily make her into a suitable wife. This is the kind of school which Caroline Bingley likely attended herself and she is a prime example in the novel of the savagery which underlies the superficial politeness of society with her constant digs at Elizabeth and Jane even as she gushes about wanting them as friends. This is shown best in the discussion while Elizabeth and Jane are at Netherfield of what constitutes "an accomplished woman" in which Bingley says that "It is amazing to me...how young ladies can have patience to be so very accomplished, as they all are" (Austen 42; vol. I, ch. 8). This sparks a debate between the others in which Caroline attempts to distinguish herself as more accomplished than Elizabeth by insisting:

"...no one can be really esteemed accomplished, who does not greatly surpass what is usually met with. A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of

walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half deserved.” (Austen 43; vol. I, ch. 8)

She is countered by Darcy’s comment that “she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading” which is obviously intended as a compliment to Elizabeth who has been reading while Caroline plays cards (Austen 43; vol. I, ch. 8). This comment reveals that Darcy values female intelligence, and shows that Austen believes that substance should outweigh the fashionable affectations and *je ne sais quoi* air upon which Caroline places her emphasis. These types of accomplishments are an example of the polish that is applied to cover up the underlying ruthlessness that exists between women in a society where landing a suitable husband is the most important accomplishment that any of them can achieve. Austen has Darcy condemn such artifice, observing ironically to Caroline, who does indeed use such tricks, that “...there is a meanness in all arts which ladies sometimes condescend to employ for captivation. Whatever bears affinity to cunning is despicable” (44; vol. 1, ch. 8). She targets her satire at this idea in order to illustrate for her readers that she believes that marriage should be based upon feelings in addition to security and money and that women should concern themselves with more than simply settling for such a dull domestic existence.

Satire and Dark Humor

Austen juxtaposes realism of social details next to satire of social behavior in order to both emphasize the ridiculous performances which she observes around her and

subtly suggest that there is something wrong with her society. Writing of what she knows without resorting to literal biography grounds her satire in a reality that makes it believable for the reader, thus lending it greater impact. Austen establishes *Pride and Prejudice* as satire from the first, memorable line, “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (3; vol. I, ch. 1). With this one sentence, she establishes her themes of marriage and financial security and her intention to mock these ideas, for it is not the men in her novel, or in her society, who are in *need* of wives, though they are not adverse to having them. Mrs. Bennet makes it very clear beginning in the first chapter that her mission in life is to see her daughters married, preferably to rich men, while Mr. Bennet signals to the reader in his questioning of her statement “You must know that I am thinking of his marrying one of them” that while that may be *her* intention, it is not likely to be Bingley’s (Austen 4; vol. I, ch. 1). In this way, Austen uses his sarcastic remarks to remind her readers that it is actually a woman who “must be in want” of a “single man in possession of a good fortune” (3; vol. I, ch. 1). She also plays with the absurdity of the marriage market by populating her novels with men such as Mr. Collins who do actually want to find wives, though rarely for the monetary and security reasons which the women in her novels have for seeking out advantageous marriages, as well as men such as Darcy and Bingley who, though not actively seeking wives, are not completely adverse to marriage.

Another important element of Austen’s satire is her use of caricature to call attention to extreme behavior which she views as absurd. Mrs. Bennet is an example of

the extreme matchmaking mother who does a better job of frightening off potential husbands than actually getting her daughters married. Mr. Collins is a toady who has mastered the art of flattery, at least where his social betters are concerned. Mr. Bennet describes him as possessing “a mixture of servility and self-importance” which he looks forward to ridiculing with his second eldest daughter (Austen 71; vol. I, ch. 13). Lady Catherine is the perfect counterpart for Mr. Collins as she lives for the subservience which he is happy provide.

Austen’s humor is not as dark as Compton-Burnett’s or Spark’s, but it has moments in which it becomes very harsh, especially with the frequent sarcastic comments made by Mr. Bennet, which Austen uses in turn to satirize Mr. Bennet as a figurehead with no real authority. For example, he says to Kitty after Lydia’s elopement:

“No, Kitty, I have at last learnt to be cautious, and you will feel the effects of it. No officer is ever to enter my house again, nor even to pass through the village. Balls will be absolutely prohibited, unless you stand up with one of your sisters. And you are never to stir out of doors, till you can prove, that you have spent ten minutes of every day in a rational manner. ... If you are a good girl for the next ten years, I will take you to a review at the end of them.” (Austen 330-1; vol. III, ch. 6)

Though Kitty takes her father’s threats seriously, the reader knows that they are completely empty and cannot possibly be enforced. At times Austen’s irony harshens into a darker humor. The witty banter that Mr. Bennet exchanges with the women in his family contrasts with the severe sarcasm of the ironic tone frequently employed by the narrator, such as when she describes Kitty at the end of the novel, saying:

In society so superior to what she had generally known, her improvement was great. She was not of so ungovernable a temper as Lydia, and, removed from the

influence of Lydia's example, she became, by proper attention and management, less irritable, less ignorant, and less insipid. (Austen 428; vol. III, ch. 19)

This harsher narrator also depicts Mrs. Bennet as "a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper" in the first chapter, thus establishing a harsh, and occasionally dark, tone that will resurface throughout the rest of the novel (Austen 5; vol. I, ch. 1). This sarcastic tone and severity of criticism will be adapted by Compton-Burnett and Spark into an even darker humor in their interwar and postwar novels.

As Female Satire

D.W. Harding says of Austen's satire that "She has none of the underlying didactic intention ordinarily attributed to the satirist. Her object is not missionary; it is the more desperate one of merely finding some mode of existence for her critical attitudes" (11). When considered as part of a larger tradition, Austen's satire can be seen as both a way for her to convey criticism of her society as Harding argues and as way to suggest subtle improvements to that society without becoming overtly didactic. This is part of what distinguishes the female satirist from the male. Austen is not critiquing from a position of superiority to her society, but rather from its margin, as a single woman who enjoys the support of her brothers, otherwise she might have had to marry and give up her writing. She is not so much passing moral judgment upon her peers as she is presenting a performance to them which she expects them as readers to evaluate on their own. She lays out the mostly economic problems which women face because of the limitations

which society has placed upon them and leaves it to her reader to realize that there is perhaps an ethical or moral conundrum in the present system.

In order to accomplish this, Austen maintains a distance between her readers and characters by combining third person narration with free indirect discourse. This allows the reader to know only as much as the narrator chooses to reveal of characters' thoughts, actions, and speech. There is a blatantly satiric quality to the narrator's voice in her early novel *Northanger Abbey* that is more tempered and subtle in *Pride and Prejudice* and her later novels. This indicates that Austen realized she would have to walk a fine line when it came to expressing her views and opinions about patriarchal institutions such as marriage in her novels if she wanted them to be read by a wider audience than her family.

Austen walks this fine line in *Pride and Prejudice* by satirizing the marriage market not only through the unsuccessful marriages which she presents to her reader throughout the novel—especially those of the Bennets and the Wickhams—but also in the comments about marriage which she gives to Mrs. Bennet rather than the narrator. It is Mrs. Bennet who rails against the entail more than any other character:

...it was a subject on which Mrs. Bennet was beyond the reach of reason; and she continued to rail bitterly against the cruelty of settling an estate away from a family of five daughters, in favour of a man whom nobody cared about. (Austen 69; vol. I, ch. 13)

Austen makes an interesting choice in putting such sentiments in the mouth of such a generally ridiculous character. This is emphasized when Mr. Collins, another ridiculous personage, apologizes for benefiting from the entail, which Elizabeth sensibly counters by pointing out that ““We cannot suppose he would help it, if he could”” (Austen 71; vol.

I, ch. 13). There is an ambivalence in her choice of having these particular characters complain as Mrs. Bennet proves to have little intelligent knowledge of entails when she says of Mr. and Mrs. Collins, “Well, if they can be easy with an estate that is not lawfully their own, so much the better. I should be ashamed of having one that was only entailed on me” (Austen 253; vol. II, ch. 17). However, it does allow Austen to express her opinion about the economic disadvantages that society placed upon women while giving those readers who would not appreciate such sentiments an excuse to dismiss them as not intended to be serious. It also shows that a society which so undervalues true education for women will inevitably create silly women like Mrs. Bennet and her youngest daughters through a continued discouragement of their use of reason.

Novel Politics

Although it is anachronistic and misleading to describe Austen as a feminist, her writing, especially her earlier work, makes her interest in politics explicit. Gary Kelly argues that Austen can be considered a feminist, but only if she is viewed as a participant of “Romantic feminism,” which he sees as a reaction against the more radical “Revolutionary feminism” of the late eighteenth century (23). He explains that the feminism during Austen’s time was more interested in encouraging women to assist with rebuilding society in the aftermath of the revolutionary crisis than in advocating for equal rights and observes that Romantic feminists “were more careful to maintain their cover by insisting on the predominance of their *domestic* identity, knowledge, and role” (Kelly

19, 23; emphasis in original). The feminism of Austen's novels is about women finding a way to survive within the existing structures of society despite their economic disadvantages. In a recent biography of Austen, Byrne argues that:

Even in her teens, the young Jane Austen was preoccupied with the hardships faced by women reduced to a state of absolute dependence on relations who often prove to be unkind and unfeeling. Her interest in the plight of impoverished women and the harsh realities of the Georgian marriage market never left her. She once advised her niece Fanny that "Single Women have a dreadful propensity for being poor – which is one very strong argument in favour of Matrimony." (39)

Austen herself was lucky enough to have brothers who were able to support her and her sister so that she was able to reject a marriage proposal that would have been for security rather than love. In her novels, she repeatedly calls her reader's attention to the inequality of economic situations created by primogeniture and poor estate management. The Bennet sisters have such small dowries not simply because their father's estate is entailed, but also because he failed to manage it in a way that would have given him extra funds to save for their futures. The time that Austen takes to explain this circumstance indicates its importance to her:

Had he done his duty in that respect, Lydia need not have been indebted to her uncle, for whatever of honour or credit could now be purchased for her. The satisfaction of prevailing on one of the most worthless young men in Great Britain to be her husband, might then have rested in its proper place. ...

When first Mr. Bennet had married, economy was held to be perfectly useless; for, of course, they were to have a son. This son was to join in cutting off the entail...and the widow and younger children would by that means be provided for. Five daughters successively entered the world, but yet the son was to come...This event had at last been despaired of, but it was then too late to be saving. (340; vol. III, ch. 8)

Their father's lack of foresight makes it imperative that they marry, while at the same time making it difficult for them to marry well in a society that still views marriage largely as a business deal. Austen addresses this issue in a way that is often dismissed as merely romantic, but there is a practical side to her presentations that makes it somewhat ambivalent. While both Jane and Elizabeth marry for love, they also have the good luck, or good sense, to fall in love with rich men, at least one of whom is shown to be a responsible land owner. Elizabeth listens to her aunt when she warns her not to "involve yourself, or endeavor to involve [Wickham] in an affection which the want of fortune would make so very imprudent" (Austen 163; vol. II, ch. 3). This combined with Elizabeth's comment to her sister that she believes she began to fall in love with Darcy upon "first seeing his beautiful grounds at Pemberley" reveals that Elizabeth's heart is actually quite practical (Austen 414; vol. III, ch. 17). Even if the comment is meant sarcastically, it can still reveal a practical side to Elizabeth's affections because it is when she visits his home that she allows herself to be swayed into correcting her first impression of Darcy based upon his housekeeper's high regard for him and his own improved behavior. This is not the case for the other women in the novel who find affection or security but cannot manage both. Charlotte marries without love, but with the security of Mr. Collins' living, and she makes it work well enough, though the other characters, especially Mr. Bennet and Elizabeth, question whether she can ever be happy in the life she has chosen. Austen says of her:

Without thinking highly of either men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women

of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want. (138; vol. 1, ch. 22)

Then there is Lydia, whose marriage is based on love, or perhaps simply lust, with practically no money to support it; she is shown as reduced to begging from her well-off sisters at the end of the novel. These examples illustrate that as much as Austen favored marriages based on love, she had a practical side to her personality which acknowledged that enough money to live on was still a necessary consideration.

Austen's evocations of happy and unhappy marriages in combination with her satire of feminine education opportunities and fashion excesses are evidence of her desire to promote an economic-based feminism which is subtly woven into her novels to avoid alienating the very members of the patriarchal society which she hoped to educate covertly.

Chapter Three: Ivy Compton-Burnett (1884-1969)

Compton-Burnett has been largely ignored by critics and scholars in recent decades. There are many possible reasons for this; one may be that her novels, on their own, have never had a vast popular following among the general reading public. Contemporary reviewers often describe her novels as difficult and complain about her heavy use of dialogue. However, Raymond Mortimer defends her style, writing, "...she is ascetic in her exclusion of everything not directly to her purpose. The characters move on a stage bare of scenery and properties. They breathe, but in a vacuum" (66). Like Austen, she depicts a miniature society using the small details of daily existence. These seemingly trivial details eventually come together to portray larger issues with society as a whole. On their own, her novels might be easily dismissed, but when viewed as a bridge between Regency England and Postwar Britain, analysis of her novels becomes crucial. Reviewers and critics often compare her novels to Austen's even though Austen wrote about her immediate society rather than a past one. Compton-Burnett published the majority of her novels during the interwar and postwar decades, but she set them during the decades around the turn of the twentieth century. In this way, Compton-Burnett is more like Spark, who also likes to write about the recent past. Compton-Burnett explained her reason for this by saying:

"I do not feel that I have any real or organic knowledge of life later than about 1910. I should not write of later times with enough grasp or confidence. I think

this is why many writers tend to write of the past. When an age is ending, you see it as it is.” (qtd. in Sprigge 70-1)

Lisa Colletta places Compton-Burnett’s novels within the context of the interwar and postwar years and points to the trope of human cruelty within them to argue that “Compton-Burnett created darkly funny social satires that cut straight to the heart of many of the tensions defining British social life in the wake of World War I” (59). Despite the Victorian and Edwardian settings, her focus on domestic over historical contexts makes the family tensions and problems which she brings to light feel universal.

A House and Its Head

Published in 1935, this novel is one of Compton-Burnett’s favorites, according to an interview with Michael Millgate in 1962 (42). In his review of *A House and Its Head* shortly after its publication, Mortimer describes Compton-Burnett as “not only an individual of genius, but a pattern of many literary virtues” and says of this novel that it “shows a wider range of character than any of her previous books,” though he admits that her books require slow and careful reading and are unlikely to become generally popular despite their comedy (66). In *A House and Its Head*, Compton-Burnett restricts her gaze to a single family, the Edgeworths, and explores all the tensions and cruelty that arise within this circumscribed domestic setting. She engages with realism through the development of her characters more so than her writing style, which is very sparse, relying more on dialogue than narration to communicate events and characterization to the reader. Colletta says that her writing style “...pointedly uses a precise vocabulary that

is at once plainspoken and sophisticatedly understated to expose greed, hypocrisy, and unjust power relations” (61). The Edgeworths are presented to the reader as neither saints nor sinners, but rather as real, flawed people whom one could meet on the street, much as Spark tends to do in her novels. Compton-Burnett then attacks these realistic characters with a biting satire that ultimately reveals their deepest, darkest secrets. She has been accused of amorality because she does not punish her villains. However, Mary M. Curtis mentions that Compton-Burnett’s characters seek out what is in their best interest, by whatever means necessary, “...grasping at power, money and love at whatever cost to others” (218). This is part of exposing the polite savagery of their society with an emphasis of individual survival within its confines. In weaving together strands of realism and satire within these domestic confines, she has created another example of female satire which continues and expands upon what Austen began with *Pride and Prejudice*.

Domesticity and Femininity

Compton-Burnett restricts her cast to one comfortable, untitled family, the Edgeworths, and their closest neighbors. This limited microcosm allows her to train her satirical eye upon family politics, which can be extrapolated to apply to society as a whole, which she admits to during an interview (Millgate 46). Colletta argues that “Her action takes place under strictly controlled circumstances, but its import reaches well beyond the country-house set” (61). The most frequently recurring controlled

circumstance within the novel is the family gathering for meal time, usually breakfast. The daily breakfast scenes occur repeatedly throughout *A House and Its Head* and are often a place to draw out or reveal building tensions between family members. This simple domestic routine takes on importance because it brings together the entire family and emphasizes the tensions existing between various members on each occasion.

One of the main tensions that arises during these meals is a questioning of place and position within the household, a main trope of the novel as indicated by the title. Duncan, the father, rules as a despot over the rest of the family, bullying and blindly imposing his will. He is upset when his wife, Ellen, does not come down for breakfast, even though she is ill. He treats her illness as an inconvenience and personal attack on himself, disregarding his daughters' assurances that Ellen would not distress him unless it was necessary. The oldest daughter, Nancy, assists her mother with managing the household and tracking the accounts, so in a sense she can be seen as its mistress, both before and after her mother's death, yet her father scolds her when she attempts to discuss any household matters or accounts with him. Duncan says to Nancy:

“And how long has it been your business to talk of an allowance for your mother, or any other affairs of people above you? You need give no thought to any allowance but your own. As long as you need that, you are in no position to. ... And are you the head of the house, or am I?” (Compton-Burnett 15; ch. 1)

Nancy steps into her mother's place after her death in duties only, but never receives acknowledgement of this position from her father. He soon brings home his second wife, Alison, displacing Nancy, but Alison is never truly a contender for head of house, as her predecessor in some ways remains mistress through the presence of her portrait which is

moved to the breakfast room following her death. At first, her portrait is a comfort to Duncan, but his new wife's reluctance to supplant her makes its presence more awkward. She exclaims when asked to sit at the foot of the table:

“Oh! It is the place occupied by my predecessor! Let me hasten to another, where it is not sacrilege to sit. I made sure that one would be sacred and empty, with a halo round it. . . . Her place ought surely to be empty during your lifetime. I was not prepared for this way of treating it.” (Compton-Burnett 123; ch. 8)

She then proceeds to compliment Ellen's painting, until she is informed of its identity, when she says, ““Oh, no wonder I felt drawn towards her! It is natural there should be a bond of sympathy between us” (Compton-Burnett 124; ch. 8). Her unwillingness to step up to the duties of mistress of the manor indicates her weakness. Unlike Ellen, she is unable to cope with Duncan's tyrannical tendencies and she eventually runs away with a man from the neighborhood. Duncan's third wife, Cassandra, who was formerly a governess to his now fully grown daughters, is his one wife who knows what she's in for before marrying him, and she does take on the full duties of mistress and manages to command respect from his children, though never truly from Duncan himself. Duncan's nephew, Grant, is the final contender for head of house as the heir apparent, but rather than attempt to lay claim to the title, Grant mostly appears to be waiting in the wings until when, and if, he is actually called upon to inherit and manage the estate. Duncan is the only character in the novel who has a permanent position within his household; everyone else fills tenuous places from which they can be removed as it pleases Duncan. The reach of his domestic tyranny extends from the masculine estate management duties deep into what is normally seen as the feminine sphere of household organization.

Her treatment of the domestic sphere as a feminine space throughout the novel has possible ties to the “new feminists” of the 1920s who encouraged women to focus on motherhood and marriage and “encouraged women to take pride in their femaleness” (Smith 62). However, she puts a twist on this view when she shows how Duncan begins to infiltrate this feminine domain through his control of the funds the women are allowed to access, and his attempts to make all decisions even as he denies the wish to do so. When his son’s nurse is leaving, Alison suggests that she can take care of her own son, but Duncan denies her the opportunity to be a mother or perform such domestic duties:

“Look after him yourself? Be tied to him, morning, noon and night? Your instinct is good for that, when it has lain fallow for your life. It is a scheme you would make. It will take you a week to tire of it. ... See you engage a nurse, as that chances to be your duty.” (Compton-Burnett 160; ch. 12)

Duncan is also dismissive of this feminine domestic when it gets in the way of his masculine pursuits, issuing condescending comments like:

“Women walking, women talking, women weeping! ... Doing all they can do. I will thank you to let me pass, as I am to catch a train this morning. ... Your chatter may wait, as it is what the day holds for you.” (Compton-Burnett 159; ch. 12)

He acts as if the women in his household have no actual purpose and perform no real functions and attempts to usurp the ones they do attempt to perform. This is exactly the opposite of the truth, as is shown by comments in the very first chapter when Ellen mentions some of the duties she has, such as keeping track of household accounts and purchasing Christmas gifts for the children and the servants. Duncan almost acts as if his house runs itself, though he reserves the right to be upset at the slightest deviance from the daily routine.

He not only refuses to give these women permanent places in his household, he views them as purely ornamental. They are denied any chance of finding fulfillment through the performance of domestic or feminine duties. He is also very disparaging regarding their prospects of marriage:

“Now in a week we shall enter the New Year,” said Duncan... “Have you your resolves ready for it? Nance, can you tell me one of yours?”

“Your hopes seem to center on me, Father, your first-born. I have been resolving to be more independent in the coming months.”

“Sibyl?” said Duncan, passing easily from Nance.

“I have not been resolving anything like it, Father. I have been seeing I shall always be dependent.”

“Well, you will both be dependent, whether or no you want it, and whether or no I do, as far as I can see.” (Compton-Burnett 16-7; ch. 1)

Compton-Burnett enjoys playing with words throughout her novel; here she toys with the meanings of independence and dependence. While Nancy means she wants to be more independent in thought and action, more self-reliant, her father sees dependence and independence in strictly economic terms. Sibyl agrees with him, perhaps in an attempt to placate his temper and yet she goes beyond it in realizing that even if she marries, she will not be independent, but will merely become dependent on her husband rather than her father. In this way, Duncan’s tyranny is similar to the restrictions that society places on both girls. There is no way in their world or their family for a single, or married, woman to achieve true independence. Duncan also attempts to impose his will upon his nephew, Grant, though he is less successful in these attempts as is shown by Grant’s

defensive verbal responses. One such exchange takes place after the children open their Christmas presents:

“What is that book, Grant?”

Grant uttered the title of a scientific work, inimical to the faith of the day.

“Did you remember that I had refused to give it to you?”

“Yes, Uncle. That is why I asked somebody else.”

“Did you say I had forbidden it in the house?”

“No, or I should not have been given it.” (Compton-Burnett 9; ch. 1)

At this point, Duncan gives up on verbal sparring and simply tosses the book into the fire. Nancy responds to this act with a slight revolt of her own, exclaiming: “The scene makes me hysterical, Father. I shall gather up my presents and bear them to safety” (Compton-Burnett 10; ch. 1). Through her examination of one man’s tyranny over his family, Compton-Burnett casts light upon male control over the feminine domestic within the larger society. This use of dialogue also shows that Compton-Burnett is more interested in capturing the realism of the tensions that exist within a closed community and of people’s personalities than in capturing the reality of their speech patterns.

Satire and Dark Humor

Compton-Burnett’s satire is often criticized for being immoral because she does not deal out poetic justice to her characters based on their just deserts. Curtis argues that this choice is amoral rather than immoral and ties it to her comedic technique:

The deliberate refusal to take a high moral tone is itself a significant part of [Compton-Burnett's] vision. ...it is positive in its acceptance of the whole of life, however nasty. It is not concerned with making a fuss about evil but with seeing it clearly and then living with it in all its day-to-day unpleasantness. (221)

This refusal to take a moral stance on her characters' actions is part of Compton-Burnett's technique for maintaining distance between her reader and her characters. It differs from that used by Austen and Spark only because it is more extreme. Colletta describes it as "a rigorously objective perspective" (59). She relies heavily upon dialogue rather than narration and rarely, if ever, allows her reader to know any unspoken thoughts her characters have. Instead, she conveys their thoughts through dialogue that has been described as overly formal and unrealistic.

As Austen does, she incorporates type characters to fill in the neighborhood. Beatrice and Dulcia, two local spinsters, are reminiscent of Austen's Mr. Collins and Mary Bennet and, to a slightly lesser extent, of Spark's spinsters, Greggie and Jarvie. They talk on and on without saying much beyond clichés and social platitudes. Beatrice often stops by on what seem to be purposeless, and occasionally tactless, visits; first after seeing the family at church on Christmas day, she stops by again to "bring you all a message, which you have already received today, the simple message of Christmas" and later, she comes to see how Ellen is feeling and upon finding that she has just passed away, insists on leaving a message for Duncan, which is intentionally destroyed without being read by anyone. While Beatrice takes herself very seriously, Dulcia recognizes herself as a comic figure, even going so far as to exclaim:

“I am a prize ass!” she said in choked tones: “I am a driveling idiot. This will be a joke to tell me against myself! I shall be glad of such a good tale, and by no means averse to being the heroine of it.” (Compton-Burnett 144; ch. 10)

As with Austen and Spark, there are multiple portrayals of women who have been molded into silly creatures of little sense or reason by the limits which society, and Duncan’s tyranny, has placed upon their education.

There is a melodramatic and almost gothic element to Compton-Burnett’s novels in her incorporation of murder, incest, and intrigue into her stories. In *A House and Its Head*, there is an escalation of intrigue beginning with Grant’s seduction of his uncle’s second wife and her pregnancy and son’s birth—which are surrounded by gossip about which man is actually his father—and escalating to her running off with another man from the neighborhood and the new heir’s mysterious death. Through her satiric treatment of these dark and macabre plot devices, Compton-Burnett creates an ambience of dark humor that encourages her reader to pay less attention to these happenings than to the savage traits that are revealed beneath the seemingly unblemished exteriors of her characters. One of her biographers, Elizabeth Sprigge, reports that “Ivy herself did not consider these characters such monsters as her readers. She confessed to a fondness for the people she created, good or bad, and thought the badness exaggerated by the readers” (74). This suggests that Compton-Burnett felt that the darker tone of her satire was reflective of the darkness which is to be found just beneath the placid surface of the world inhabited by herself and her reader.

As Female Satire

As with Spark's satire, Compton-Burnett's aggressive and unsentimental style led many reviewers and critics to categorize it as masculine, which Colletta points out caused many to "...ignore her feminist critique of the male totalitarianism that is the hallmark of the Victorian social and domestic arrangements" (60). This reinforces the assumption put forward by Künzel that aggression in fiction is a gendered characteristic, and that women cannot be both feminine and aggressive at the same time (pars. 5-6).

In *A House and Its Head*, the theme of survival comes in second only to that of power and its corrupting influence. In spite of, or because of, his tyrannical ways, Duncan shows that he cannot survive without a wife as he remarries not once, but twice. There is an element of satire in the seemingly unending stream of women who find they cannot survive living with him; his first wife literally dies, and his second runs off with her lover. As in Austen, the key to survival for the daughters of the family lies in marriage, though they both have a decidedly more difficult time finding husbands than their father has finding wives. In contrast to Austen, Compton-Burnett does not portray anything close to wedded bliss for either one. Nancy's marriage at the end of the book seems like it may afford her at least a partial escape from her father's tyranny by moving her to the vicarage, but Sibyl's marriage to her cousin Grant halfway through the novel is an attempt at escape that is not realized until the end after she has nearly destroyed any chance of happiness coming from it. Sybil's quest for survival nearly destroys both her and her family. She is like Selina in *The Girls of Slender Means* in that her selfish quest

for survival results in the deaths of others. When her half-brother comes between her husband, Grant, and his inheritance of the estate from Duncan, she manipulates his nurse into killing him. When she is exiled from her family upon the discovery of these events, she uses an inheritance of her own from her aunt, who may or may not have been helped to her death by Sybil, to buy her way back into her family's good graces. Duncan's third wife, Cassandra, also displays an uncanny knack for survival; she knows that she stands to lose her place in the household now that her charges are fully grown, so she contrives it so that Duncan decides to marry her and elevates her into the position of mistress of the house. Unlike his second wife, and possibly his first as well, Cassandra is fully aware of all his tyrannical tendencies before she steps into her new role as wife. By focusing on family tensions so closely, Compton-Burnett reveals the savagery that runs beneath the façade of the perfect family portrait which she carefully constructs.

There is a ruthless cruelty that is unveiled by the melodrama of the novel in almost all of the characters. Nancy and Gretchen are perhaps the two with the least savage natures, but they are powerless to change or influence the others around them, in much the same way that Joanna Childe is rendered powerless at the end of Spark's novel. Nancy and Gretchen act with more sense and less silliness than most of the other women in the novel, and it is through their efforts that Sibyl's dark deeds are exposed. Yet, they are never given any real power to affect change in their lives. At one point, Nancy comments on her powerlessness within her family, observing that her father's perspective is the only one that is ever truly tolerated, saying wryly to Dulcia, "Well, no one else's

point of view has had any success” (Compton-Burnett 34; ch. 2). Compton-Burnett uses her satire to pull aside the curtain of polite society and uncover the darker side of humanity, and in doing so she targets male tyranny and the economic powerlessness of women within the limits of the domestic novel, thus creating another link in the tradition of female satire.

Novel Politics

In contrast to Spark, Compton-Burnett does not label herself as a feminist, and she rarely discusses politics of any kind in interviews. Despite this, reviewer David Tylden-Wright says that she:

...is perhaps something of a feminist, is particularly concerned to express the attitude of the women of the family, who recognize and acknowledge their allegiance but at the same time ruefully realize the sacrifice of their own individuality that it involves. (493)

This becomes especially clear during the breakfast scenes of the novel when Nancy and the other women in the family attempt to air their grievances with Duncan with very little success. It is possible that Compton-Burnett’s reticence to associate herself and her writing with the feminist movement could be linked to the fractures that occurred within the movement during the interwar years, as feminists became divided on issues of advocating for equal opportunities and the promotion of marriage and motherhood as being more related to women’s specific needs, and the needs of a society whose growth was decreasing in the aftermath of war (Smith 47-8). Harold L. Smith writes that in the 1920s, “...the very word feminist had strong pejorative connotations. Vera Brittain

acknowledged that feminists were perceived as ‘spectacled, embittered women, disappointed, childless, dowdy, and generally unloved’” (62). With her lifelong interest in fashion, Compton-Burnett may have found such unfashionable associations off-putting. Sprigge discusses her style in her biography, writing:

All her life Ivy had a taste for elegant, delicate pieces [of jewelry], particularly those set with diamonds, and she wore her jewellery [*sic*], usually small earrings inset with diamonds, a brooch and a ring, with equal elegance. (68)

While it is possible that she was apolitical, the many gendered comments which she gives to various characters throughout her novels, such as when Grant says, “I do not think men superior to women, which very few men can say,” belie this conclusion and indicate a subtle feminism (Compton-Burnett 187; ch. 15).

As with Austen and Spark, Compton-Burnett’s novels reveal a deep-seated interest in the relation of economics to people’s characters and actions. In an interview, she says:

“I think that economic forces influence people a great deal, that many things in their lives are bound up with them. Their scale of values, their ambitions and ideas for the future, their attitude to other people and themselves.” (Millgate 43)

This comes through in her portrayals of both women and men, especially in *A House and Its Head*, where money is what drives Grant to marry Sibyl, Sibyl to murder her half-brother, and Duncan to accept Sibyl back into the family fold. Economics are linked directly to power, through both primogeniture and inheritance, and Compton-Burnett repeatedly shows that this power is corrupting, of both women and men. In employing financial disparities to illuminate the struggles faced by the women in her novel, she

shows a subtly feminist interest in the same economic equality for which Spark and Austen advocate, still in a very elusive and understated way.

Chapter Four: Muriel Spark (1918-2006)

In a letter to her sister, Austen said “I do not want People to be very agreeable [*sic*], as it saves me the trouble of liking them a great deal” (Le Faye 29; no. 15). The sentiments which Austen expressed in life, Muriel Spark expressed through her novels as an integral aspect of her satire. Throughout her career, she displayed little interest in creating characters that her reader would like, instead rendering flawed people who make mistakes and often behave without ethics or morals. This is especially true of *The Girls of Slender Means*, in which the two most successful women are also the least virtuous: Selina Redwood, who rescues a dress from a fire rather than help the girls trapped in the burning building, and Jane Wright, who employs deceptive practices to get ahead in the publishing business. Because of her use of satire within the format of the domestic novel, Spark’s *The Girls of Slender Means* belongs to the tradition of female satire.

The Girls of Slender Means

Biographer Martin Stannard mentions in passing that *The Girls of Slender Means* received “an avalanche of rave reviews” when it was published in 1963 (287). He also says of Spark that she “was, or had been, a version of all the women in her novel, even the fat one, even Selina” (Stannard 299). Though Spark’s novel may seem less realistic than Austen’s, she writes about what she knows and what she has lived, in the same way

that Austen does. She experienced first-hand during World War II the harshness of her society and she survived by employing a savage femininity just as both Selina and Jane do in *The Girls of Slender Means*.

Domesticity and Femininity

Traditionally, domestic novels have concerned themselves with social manners and the quotidian existence of a restricted community. As such, it is very much a genre that Spark plays with in this novel as well as others, such as *The Ballad of Peckham Rye* and *The Abbess of Crewe*. As with most of Spark's novels, she limits *The Girls of Slender Means* to a small self-contained community, a sliver of the larger postwar society. Spark trains her critical gaze steadily upon select female residents of the May of Teck Club, which is loosely based upon a club where Spark herself resided during the war, and their male companions as they struggle for survival in postwar London. Spark describes the May of Teck club as existing "...for the Pecuniary Convenience and Social Protection of Ladies of Slender Means below the age of Thirty Years, who are obliged to reside apart from their Families in order to follow an Occupation in London" (*Slender Means* 6; ch. 1). The name of the club references the wife of King George V, Mary of Teck. The choice of Princess May as the club's benefactor could have many meanings, including: a remark upon her interest in the aspirations and living conditions of the working classes; a reference to her social work and philanthropic efforts which were increasingly directed towards women during the first world war; or, more sarcastically, a comment on her

dislike of “disorderly women” with the girls’ obsession with poise (Prochaska). This choice also reflects a conscious decision on Spark’s part to impart strong ties between her club and patriarchy in the form of the royal family, while lending it an ambivalent quality by tying it to a queen who was a supporter of women but not an advocate of the women’s movement itself (Prochaska). Though the lack of domestic achievements by the girls of the club makes the novel seem as if it is an anti-domestic novel, Spark’s concern with a realistic portrayal of domestic minutiae belies this assumption.

As part of her focus on the details of daily life, Spark emphasizes the importance of rationing and its effect and influence on the girls’ lives throughout the novel. This part of her portrayal of the girls emphasizes the changes in domesticity and femininity following the war as a reaction to the shortages of food and fashion during the war years on what Andrea Adolph refers to as the “kitchen front” (69). Throughout the war, women were encouraged to do more with less by both society and the government. Adolph argues that “The role of women was bound to their ability to maintain domestic norms (or what might pass as normal) for the sake of the nation” (73) and that:

From the time food rationing began in early 1940, and throughout a postwar period that saw continued need for that governmental scheme, prescribed femininity included a particular relationship with food: women were to nurture and feed, to do so with thrift and scarcity always in mind, and were encouraged to do without unless it meant that their appearances would suffer. (83)

Throughout the novel, Spark takes care to note the deprivations that the girls are dealing with, from sharing clothes that they cannot afford to purchase individually to the shortage of rations, especially proteins, and a dislike for the food that the club’s kitchen produces

with the limited supplies available. There are multiple discussions amongst the girls about the quality of the food they receive. At one point, Jane complains:

“I’m tired of picking crumbs of meat out of the shepherd’s pie, picking with a fork to get the little bits of meat separated from the little bits of potato. You [Nick] don’t know what it’s like trying to eat enough to live on and at the same time avoid fats and carbohydrates.” (Spark, *Slender Means* 79; ch. 4)

Her complaint illustrates the concept that Adolph notes as common for the period, that men needed, and therefore received, more and better food than women. However, Spark puts a twist on this acceptance because her female characters do not let this disparity go unnoticed even though they cannot change it. This presentation of their whining reveals that there is no heroism in their sacrifice because they do not make it willingly.

Through her presentation of the domestic aspects of the lives of the girls of the May of Teck Club, Spark clearly shows that these women are not terribly domestic. As residents of the club, they are responsible for neither cooking nor cleaning, and all of them are employed in some sort of work as secretaries and the like. It is an interesting contradiction that although these women are not interested in domestic activities, they largely view the club as a waypoint on the road to matrimony, at which time they mostly intend to quit their jobs. This attitude could be perceived as anti-feminist, but as such practices were common among women in the postwar years, it is reasonable to assume that Spark does not necessarily approve of their behavior or attitudes. Instead, it makes sense that she is merely presenting character sketches of such women, not promoting their attitudes towards work and marriage.

Though the girls do not prepare their own meals, there is constant discussion of rations and the bartering system that they have established with them as well as the fattening effects of the meals that are prepared for them. Food rations, other than eggs, margarine and other proteins, are the least valuable, while clothing coupons and beauty supplies like face cream are highly valued by the girls.

In addition to food, there is a strong emphasis on fashion and appearance in this novel which closely reflects Adolph's observations of their importance in postwar culture. She notes that:

An attractive appearance, as well as an attractive attitude, was defined by some areas of women's culture as part of the wartime effort...and that when that time would come, one's appearance would play an important part in Home Front reconstruction. (Adolph 80)

When it comes to appearance in Spark's novel, there are two sets of girls within the club: those who can fit in the designer dress that Anne received from a "fabulously rich aunt, after one wearing," and those who, like Jane, are too large to wear it (*Slender Means* 38; ch. 3). The Schiaparelli dress that is shared among the girls on the top floor of the club nearly becomes a character in and of itself. The girls talk about where it has been in London almost as if it is another resident: "You can't wear it to the Milroy. It's been twice to the Milroy...it's been to Quaglino's. Selina wore it to Quags, it's getting known all over London" (Spark, *Slender Means* 39; ch. 3). Another instance in which the dress seems to take on more significant qualities is during the penultimate chapter, when Selina risks her life to venture back into the burning building in order to rescue it and Anne later "was complaining that Selina had gone off with her only ball dress" instead of worrying

over what had become of Selina herself (Spark, *Slender Means* 169; ch. 9). The choice of Elsa Schiaparelli as the designer of this dress dating from before the war ties in with Spark's other war time details as Schiaparelli's fashions were in high demand before and immediately following the war and known for their eccentric prints and "shocking" colors, especially pink ("Schiaparelli, Elsa"). She might also have appealed to Spark because her last show was in 1954 and so she was relegated to the postwar past which Spark is recreating and not part of her immediate present ("Schiaparelli, Elsa"). The clamor of the girls over this dress with its outdated design but in demand name is another glimpse of the undercurrent of barbarity that runs throughout the novel.

Hope Howell Hodgkins says of Spark's seemingly trivial domestic details, "To focus on the trivial is to focus on the real conditions of our lives and, perhaps, to acknowledge our own smallness" (533). The inclusion of such domestic details throughout the novel brings a hint of realism to Spark's satire and caricatures. It also establishes a somberness in the lives of her characters that adds dark overtones to her humor and wit as she ridicules the girls of slender means and the society that created and shaped them as well as the postwar conceptions of domesticity and femininity.

Satire and Dark Humor

Much like the tiny domestic details she uses to paint a portrait of postwar London, Spark's satire is drawn with a fine-tipped pen. It is pointed and direct from the very first sentence. In much the same way as Austen does with *Pride and Prejudice*, Spark

establishes her novel as satiric with her opening sentence: “Long ago in 1945 all the nice people in England were poor, allowing for exceptions” (*Slender Means* 3; ch. 1). Writing in the early 1960s, 1945 is not truly as “long ago” as Spark implies but rather is within memory for most of her readers. She reinforces this idea throughout the book with her emphasis on explaining how things were back then, as if she is writing about the previous century rather than her own generation. As Austen does, she makes an absolute generalization about the society inhabited by her characters, which she will proceed to undermine and contradict throughout the novel, such as when she states that “...few people alive at the time were more delightful, more ingenious, more movingly lovely, and, as it would happen, more savage, than the girls of slender means” (Spark, *Slender Means* 6; ch. 1).

Spark’s employment of third person narration maintains a distance between her unnamed narrator and her ensemble of characters, which allows for critique and analysis of their actions. This distance transfers to the reader as well, making it easier to criticize the characters’ actions because the reader remains largely unaware of their thoughts and motivations. The presence of these elements establishes this novel as belonging to the genre of satire.

While scholars have recognized Spark’s use of satire and her status as a self-proclaimed satirist, most critics have tangled her religion and satire into such a large knot that they are difficult to separate. Both Jennifer L. Randisi and Ian Gregson have argued that Spark’s satire is completely rooted in her religious conversion to Catholicism.

Gregson argues that Spark's Catholicism obtrudes into her writing in such a way that it is not merely an aspect of her background as with other Catholic writers whose novels deal with secular concepts but that her "texts are repeatedly marked by spiritual concerns" (101). While the religious aspects of Spark's writing are undeniable, there are depths to her satire that extend beyond the limits of these religious-centric critiques. Spark herself barely even discusses her conversion in her autobiography, giving it less than a page and writing only that "The simple explanation [of her conversion] is that I felt the Roman Catholic faith corresponded to what I had always felt and known and believed; there was no blinding revelation in my case" (*Curriculum Vitae* 202). This suggests that while religion was one influence on her writing, it was not the only influence, to which the entire chapters allotted to her childhood and other life experiences attest.

Despite the firmly held belief by critics and scholars that Spark's satire is grounded solely in her conversion to Catholicism, *The Girls of Slender Means* evinces that her satire is much more closely entwined with survival and savagery. There is also bleakness buried within Spark's satire that gives the wit a tenebrous tone. It is evident that she does not take an optimistic view of her society, not even of other women. Perhaps one reason that she has been ignored by feminist critics for so long is that although she does not give many positive portrayals of men, neither does she celebrate women. Gregson argues that "Spark is the least feminist of women writers and presents her women characters as the equal of men in their compulsiveness" (107). While there is an equality in Spark's treatment of both women and men, it is more evident that she has

found neither gender to be above pettiness or immorality than that she is against women's rights. Her women are products of a patriarchal society, but they still manage to find ways to survive within that society and her satire highlights the flaws in their characters that society has cultivated within them at the same time that it is drawing attention to the constraints that limit them. In fact, there is a definite subtle feminism running throughout the satire that is occluded by her dark humor.

As Female Satire

The initial reviewers of Spark's novels were the first to describe her writing style in gendered terms. Marigold Johnson is one example of this trend when she says that Spark's satirical talent "has something to do with a quick and in many ways unfeminine intelligence (her logic is ruthless)," which implies that satire, being ruthless, is a masculine domain (657). The fact that Spark is far from being the only woman to employ such tactics in her writing plainly contradicts this idea. Moreover, for Spark, as well as the other female satirists, fiction is one of the few avenues available in which she can safely express her anger at the restrictions which she is encountering in her life. In aiming her satirical barbs at aspects of society that have been ignored by male satirists, she illustrates that there is a difference in the attitudes, interests, and politics of the female satirist.

One major trope that runs through many of Spark's satires is the question of how women can find ways to survive and, occasionally, thrive in what Spark essentially views

as a man's world. This is not to say that she presents her reader with an optimistic outlook. On the contrary, Spark maintains across many novels that the only way for a woman to survive is to stoop down to the barbaric level of men rather than attempt to rise above them. This is why Selina and Jane are the ultimate survivors of life in *The Girls of Slender Means*. Meanwhile Nicholas converts to Catholicism after losing the support of the girls at the May of Teck Club, but he finds that even religious support is not enough to maintain his existence. Ultimately, Nicholas only survives in the memories of the girls which they share with each other upon learning of his death in Haiti.

The juxtaposition in many of her novels of portrayals of strong, independent women next to typical English roses is only one example of how Spark uses satire against her own sex to critique the patriarchy of her postwar society in subtle ways. She sets up both Jane and Selina as strong, yet savage in different ways, while Joanna Childe is the nice girl with "light shiny hair, blue eyes, and deep-pink cheeks" (*Slender Means* 9; ch. 1). Jane is portrayed as perpetually working. She constantly calls attention to her "brain-work" and her need of food and heat, like a man, in order to complete it. This establishes that certain kinds of work require more sustenance, so Jane believes that her work requires more food than that of the other girls in the house. It also gives her a justification for her gastronomical wants by aligning them with her perceived needs. This satirizes the common concept of postwar society that men needed better food than women because their "brain-work" was more strenuous than a woman's housework, but also establishes that Jane, like Selina, values her own survival over that of the other girls. Selina is

obsessed with appearances, especially poise. She takes a course that instructs her in “the maintenance of poise in the working woman” (*Slender Means* 57; ch. 3) which gives her two sentences which become not only Selina’s mantra, but a mantra for all the girls in the club and through that, also become a mantra running through the novel itself and a possible satirical comment on the club’s namesake:

Poise is perfect balance, an equanimity of body and mind, complete composure whatever the social scene. Elegant dress, immaculate grooming, and perfect deportment all contribute to the attainment of self-confidence. (*Slender Means* 57; ch. 3)

The repetition of the mantra throughout the novel increases its comedy and it takes on an air of irony when Selina takes it to the extreme during the novel’s climax as she remains so composed during the fire that she is able to rescue the Schiaparelli dress as well as herself. Thus, Selina and her superficial poise survive, while Joanna with her country innocence and mind gorged on classic poetry succumbs to a fiery death when she completely loses her composure and is unable to make it up the ladder to escape. There is perhaps also some irony in the fact that Joanna is one of the few girls in the club who does not stop to listen to Selina’s two sentences each and every day. While it may appear as if Selina’s only strength is her fashionable appearance, this is another aspect of Spark’s subtle feminism. Selina treats her looks as a commodity and trades them for what she needs to survive. This includes everything from getting better food from her lovers to convincing Nick to give her twenty of his clothing coupons to bagging a husband almost immediately after the fire in order to assure her own economic security. Selina’s use of her looks and fashion to survive in this way may seem wrong, but it is the power that is

available to her in this man's world and Spark does not condemn her for seizing it. Spark is a strong advocate for women attaining economic equality without giving up fashion, an opinion which has not made her popular with many feminists, and yet, it does not, as some would have it, actually make her anti-feminist.

Spark's feminist leanings are most strongly apparent in her attacks upon the patriarchal institution of marriage. This makes sense based upon her personal experience of a failed marriage. Yet another way in which the girls of the club can be split into two categories is to separate the girls who will eventually marry from "those who had decided on a spinster's life, and those who would one day do so but had not yet discerned the fact for themselves" (Spark, *Slender Means* 31; ch. 3). Though men are frequently discussed by the girls, they are rarely named and described for the reader, with Nicholas being the main exception to this rule. Spark gives her reader examples of many different types of relationships at various stages in 1945: Anne is engaged; Selina has multiple affairs, including one with Nicholas and at least one with a married man; Joanna has dedicated herself to one love which came to naught; Pauline has an imaginary relationship with a famous actor; Tilly is married to Jane's employer; and Jane has purely intellectual friendships with Nicholas and Rudi. Most of the women are married, with the exception of Jane, when Spark flashes forward to them in the future, but in both the time periods, though these relationships provide the girls with varying levels of satisfaction, none are portrayed as extremely happy. These portrayals of marriage illustrate the sentiments of Charlotte in *Pride and Prejudice* when she declares that, "Happiness in marriage is

entirely a matter of chance” (Austen 25; vol. I, ch. 6). Despite the fact that women in Spark’s generation had more options than those available in Austen’s time, there was still a strong push during the postwar years for women to retreat from the workforce and focus on being housewives above all. Spark’s satire of this patriarchal institution is clear in this novel as each girl’s relationship status is one of the key traits about which her reader is informed.

Spark’s use of wit to ridicule feminine traits, masculine weakness, and the patriarchal institution of marriage within the confines of the domestic novel constitutes a type of satire that is distinct from that written by men, but has ties to other women satirists who have preceded her, including Austen and Compton-Burnett, and it is therefore an example of the subgenre of female satire.

Novel Politics

Spark’s wit and humor are a blatant aspect of her writing, and according to her autobiography, *Curriculum Vitae*, they were learned and inherited from her mother and father:

We often laughed at others in our house, and I picked up the craft of being polite while people were present and laughing later if there was anything to laugh about, or criticizing later if there was anything to deplore. (23)

Later, Spark writes of her grandmother, “I remembered above all her sardonic, humorous and robust remarks when privately discussing certain of her neighbors with my mother” (*Curriculum Vitae* 96). These descriptions of her family’s attitudes towards humor

illustrate the origins of the satire in her fiction and reveal that it is a learned behavior, grounded firmly in her personality.

Like her fellow female satirists, Spark wielded her caustic pen against a patriarchal world because it was a more quiet way to espouse and put forward feminist ideas that might have been difficult for her readers to accept if she had voiced them outright as some more radical feminist writers of her time did. Rather, she illuminates the difficulties that women faced when they weren't given the same options that men received. Spark experienced this first-hand when she was appointed editor of the Poetry Society, and "realized that I had been elected to the job on the assumption that I could be manipulated, whereas I took up the position that if you are in the driver's seat, you drive" (*Curriculum Vitae* 169). The entire time that she was working for the society, she encountered resistance from both men and women who disliked having a young woman in charge. As the editor of the *Poetry Review* in post-war London, she was working in a man's world and her presence and ideas were not always appreciated; she would soon be forced out of that position and replaced by a man (Stannard 97). After her experience of such harsh backlash to a strong woman acting independently, it makes sense for her to employ an elusive and understated method of feminism in her writing.

Unlike her female satire predecessors, Spark self-identifies as feminist, saying "I was brought up as an independent woman. . . . I'm in favour of women's liberation from the economic viewpoint, but I wouldn't want men's and women's roles reversed," (qtd. in Stannard 434). In his biography of Spark, Stannard explains that her brand of feminism

was more economic than political and did not fit in with that of the 1960s, which promoted motherhood as the most vital task (Lewis 24); “her 1950s feminism was closer to that of the 1990s. ... It is the feminism of intellectual and economic partnership in which women are free to indulge in all the conventional manifestations of ‘femininity,’” (Stannard 118). In her autobiography, Spark mentions the women in her family who provided her with strong female role models, as well as the teacher, Miss Christina Kay, who would later inspire the character of Miss Jean Brodie. Her mother dissuaded Spark from participating in housework because “She had a theory that if you didn’t know how to do it you wouldn’t have to do it,” and her grandmother, Adelaide Uezzell, owned and operated her own shop in Watford while Spark was growing up and told her stories about marching with Emmeline Pankhurst and the other suffragettes (*Curriculum Vitae* 94, 83, 28). Spark even refers to herself and her classmates at school in Edinburgh as “incipient feminists” (*Curriculum Vitae* 66).

These words and experiences plainly contradict critics such as Gregson who have insisted that she is not a feminist at all. These critics have been aided by the lack of interest that most feminist critics have shown in Spark’s writing. While this has occurred for multiple reasons, Hodgkins suggests one that is particularly relevant when discussing *The Girls of Slender Means*:

Fashion becomes associated, as the rate of change increases, with stereotypical female fickleness and shallowness—hence the hand-wringing from early feminist leaders who sought to liberate women from shallow displays of style... fashion and women each damage the other’s good name. (530)

As discussed previously, Spark's focus on fashion has links to the domestic fiction genre as well as to Spark's own feminine ideals. In contrast to these critics, Stannard says of Spark that "No woman could have defended female independence more fiercely" (41) and Hodgkins compares Spark and Barbara Pym to the Angry Young Men of the 1950s, saying "...these women writers too, writing after the war and about its effects, developed a leveling aesthetic, the ostensibly shallow surface of a deep structure of protest" (526). While Hodgkins recognizes the latent politics of Spark's writing, she does not identify satire as Spark's specific means of delivering it to her readers.

Ultimately, Spark's writing and life experiences indicate that she wielded satire as a weapon in a patriarchal world because it allowed her to espouse and put forth subtly feminist ideas in a more quiet way. Utilizing satire, she advocated for equality of the sexes not by asking for it explicitly, but by illuminating the difficulties that women faced and the silly behaviors they adopted when they didn't receive the same options as their male counterparts. This subtle feminism is elusive and understated, but it is still present throughout *The Girls of Slender Means* and many of Spark's other works.

Chapter Five: Conclusions about Female Satire

Satirical Parallels

Lisa Colletta says of Compton-Burnett that "...her novels reveal the disruptive forces seething under the smooth surface of a deceptively calm and well-ordered society" (61). These sentiments seem to be equally applicable to both Austen and Spark. They are evident even in the more optimistic novels of Austen as well as the ambivalent world that Spark portrays. Unlike Austen, Compton-Burnett and Spark do not concern themselves with providing happy endings for their characters, or even with giving them the endings they deserve, good or bad. Instead, it is often the bad who prosper and the good who suffer which further divulges the savagery that is aggressively writhing just beneath the placid surface of a supposedly civilized society.

Their satirical swords engage with marriage, femininity, domesticity, and gender strengths and weaknesses in ways that male satirists do not and, in doing so, they are participating in a new tradition of satire that is distinctly female in nature. Austen delivers her satire mainly through the narrator's voice and character portrayal. Compton-Burnett leaps to the other end of the spectrum and injects it directly into the characters' dialogue. Spark returns to the middle and employs both techniques in her stories. Both Compton-Burnett and Spark attempt to paint with the same fine brush on a small bit of ivory as

Austen did, each adapting the technique to suit her own voice, but maintaining the unique combination of satire and realism which distinguishes them from male satirists.

Biographical Parallels

There are parallels between these three women which extend beyond their fiction. Each one had a close female friend with whom she lived for a large portion of her life. Byrne notes that “Jane Austen liked women. She had several cherished female friends and was devoted to those she esteemed” (100). The highest esteemed was her sister Cassandra, who chose not to marry after the death of her fiancé Tom Fowle and lived with Austen until her death. Compton-Burnett also lived with her sisters for a time, but for most of her life, she chose to reside with friend Margaret Jourdain. Spark was the only one of the three to attempt marriage, but she quickly found it did not suit her. Though she had many male friends throughout her life, one of her most lasting friendships was with Penelope Jardine who started out as her secretary in 1968 and remained a close friend and travel companion until her death. The aversion to marriage that is evidenced in their lives is subtly communicated through their novels as well.

These women did not write their satire in a vacuum. Austen was familiar with much of the popular fiction and satire of the eighteenth century, and she found a unique way to adapt it to her own purposes. Compton-Burnett, in turn, was familiar with Austen’s writing and she admitted that “...I have read Jane Austen so much, and with such enjoyment and admiration, that I may have absorbed things from her

unconsciously...I think that there is possibly some likeness between our minds” (qtd. in Sprigge 111-2). As the final link in the chain, Spark read and enjoyed the works of both her predecessors. Stannard notes that after she finished a biography about Emily Brontë, publisher Peter Owen asked Spark to edit a collection of Austen’s letters, although it, along with a biography of Anne Brontë, was never finished (160). Spark herself mentions her enjoyment of Compton-Burnett’s book *Elders and Betters* in her autobiography, saying “I had already formed a great admiration [for her]” and that she “resembled the Greek dramatists in her stark themes, and that basically her art was surrealistic” (*Curriculum Vitae* 145, 146).

All three women were also fairly well-educated for their respective time periods. Austen was briefly sent away to school with her sister Cassandra and she had more access to books and other reading materials than most women at the time. Compton-Burnett studied at home and at Holloway College; Spark was educated at James Gillespie’s Girls’ School in Edinburgh. Despite the fact that Compton-Burnett and Spark were writing more than a century after Austen, their options for support beyond marriage were not much better than hers had been, and it is this parallel that leads to the subtle feminism that they each find a way to express through their criticism of the marriage market and matrimony as a major component of the patriarchal society which restricted them.

Conclusion

Spanning two centuries, Jane Austen, Ivy Compton-Burnett, and Muriel Spark have imbued their novels with an economic-based feminism that is subtle and covert compared to other more radical female authors and works to unveil the polite savagery beneath the polished façade of patriarchal society. Their satirical swords engage with patriarchal systems such as marriage and family, as well as the changing concepts of domesticity and femininity, in ways that male satirists do not and, in doing so, they have created a new tradition of satire that is distinctly female in nature and might have subtly influenced their respective societies in addition to various British women's political movements.

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