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## "Her Gift Was Compelled": Gender and the Failure of the "Gift" in Cecilia

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

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**"Her Gift Was Compelled":**

Gender and the Failure of the "Gift" in *Cecilia*

Throughout the first half of Frances Burney's *Cecilia; or Memoirs of an Heiress* (1782), the heroine engages in what she believes are disinterested acts of generosity. Orphaned, single, and heiress to a large estate, Cecilia adopts a sense of fiscal and moral agency as she awaits her twenty-first birthday. Although legally under the authority of three guardians, she considers her money hers to spend and regards herself as "an agent of Charity, and already in idea anticipated the rewards of a good and faithful delegate."<sup>1</sup> Cecilia's scheme for happiness through philanthropy arises from her almost immediate dissatisfaction with her life in London and in the Harrel household. Unable to find, in the world of fashion, the human intimacy that she had cherished when in the care of an "aged and maternal counsellor" (6), she commits herself to acts of charity, convinced that they promise social and moral authority. As Kristina Straub points out, Cecilia views giving as a way to "enable herself to act and initiate rather than being acted upon";<sup>2</sup> she truly believes she will succeed in making **[End Page 107]** "worthy use of the affluence, freedom and power" she possesses (55). At the same time, Cecilia considers her fortune "a *debt* contracted with the poor, and her independence, as a tie upon her liberality to pay it with interest" (55; emphasis added); or, as Catherine Gallagher states, she believes that "she owes whatever she owns."<sup>3</sup>

The novel, however, works to undermine her belief in unalloyed generosity; she is both impractical and mistaken in her assumptions about self and socioeconomic obligation. Confusing benevolence with "DUTY," combined with her "fervent desire to ACT RIGHT" (55), Cecilia formulates a plan to give, and to give generously—a plan that, from its inception, never enacts the disinterestedness she covets. Rather, this plan entangles her in an ethical dilemma of financial obligation, threatening both her fortune and identity. Cecilia's intended acts of generosity are revealed to be instances of coercion as she quickly finds herself giving her money to the most unlikely recipients, such as her guardian Harrel, and the most unworthy of causes. In actuality, her acts of gift giving and charity are compelled acts in response to a paternal debt—a debt that, by its very nature, can never be repaid and always is experienced as an imposition.

\* \* \*

The intersections among gift economy, paternal authority, and patriarchal structures inform Cecilia's understanding of the "gift" and its social implications. The problems within the novel provoked by an economy of gift exchange have both historical and theoretical dimensions, and, in this article, I examine how the dilemmas that confound Cecilia locate Burney's novel within eighteenth-century debates about women's roles in philanthropic giving and expose the problems posed by the mutual implications of gifts and obligation. The gift—particularly the heroine's "gift" to the Harrels, her acts of "charity," and the love exchange between Cecilia and Mortimer—sutures over her complicity in a patrilineal and repressive economic system. The novel's representation of the complexities of gift exchange exposes the "impossibility" of the gift and presents interested and exploitative exchange as disinterested generosity and voluntary charity. My reading of *Cecilia*, in this respect, draws on debates about the nature of gift **[End Page 108]** exchange to contest arguments that the heroine acts in accordance with eighteenth-century conceptions of social responsibility. Critics such as Terry Castle and Gallagher read Cecilia's capitulation to a patriarchal economy as informed, socially aware, and voluntary.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Catherine Keohane argues that Cecilia's giving empowers the heroine, suggesting that the novel offers the possibility of female agency through charitable participation in the public sphere. Keohane states that the novel's focus on charitable giving signifies Cecilia's "authority to distribute money while single" and her "belief that she has a right to choose what to...



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