

OPEN LECTURE

The Trouble with Heiresses: Inherited Wealth and Catastrophe in Romantic-Era Fiction

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Tuesday, June 11, 2019 at 11.00-12.30

Venue: Kasernen, Langelandsgade 135

1584, lokale 212

Women who inherit wealth and their abasement form a prominent part of the literary imaginary of the English novel in the Romantic period. The founding text of this micro-genre is Frances Burney's *Cecilia; or The Memoirs of an Heiress* (1782), in which a principled and intelligent young woman who wants to improve the world is forced to endure a long series of disasters that eventually leads to complete abjection – financial loss, madness and disinheritance – before a happy ending of sorts is patched together. In Burney's next novel, *Camilla* (1796), both the heroine and her sister are crushed (the latter, literally) by being elevated to heiress status. At the same time, the feminist philosopher Mary Wollstonecraft was composing a novel about a heroine with an East India fortune who is subjected to domestic abuse, legal persecution, imprisonment and a divorce trial, haemorrhaging money all the while (*The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria*, 1798). In Jane Austen's more understated dramas, though the stakes may not be as high, heiresses always lose, with the partial exception of the heroine of *Emma* (1816), who must nevertheless suffer humiliation and the threat of emotional bankruptcy. In this talk, I will argue that we should not look to novels for a documentary portrayal of the experience of moneyed women. All three authors had personal knowledge of many instances of heiresses maintaining secure control of their fortunes, marrying to advantage and operating effectively as players in the social establishment. Instead, we need to think of these narratives as thought experiments in the realm of economic ideas, subtle critiques of the ideology of possessive individualism and capitalist accumulation. I will suggest the relevance of Julia Kristeva on abjection, and Georges Bataille on non-productive expenditure and sacrifice.

Emma Clery is a Professor of English at the University of Southampton. Her research interests include women's writing in the long eighteenth century, gothic fiction and literary engagement with economic debate. Emma's most recent research offers a reappraisal of the political connections and economic interests of the Austen family. Her publications include *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven: Poetry, Protest and Economic Crisis* (Cambridge University Press, 2017) and *Jane Austen: The Banker's Sister* (Biteback, 2017).