

'A Peculiar Gift of Providence':**The Power-Imbalance Caused by Gift-Giving in *Millenium Hall***

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The power imbalance caused by gift-giving has been discussed in general terms by Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Derrida, and Luce Irigaray, and by other critics such as Julie McGonegal, Dorice William Elliot, and Eve Tavor Bennet with specific reference to Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall*. I contend that gift-giving in *Millenium Hall* is an expression of power only insofar as it cannot be reciprocated. The man/woman, woman/woman, and God/ humanity gift-giving relationships in *Millenium Hall* display different types of power-imbalances, which have commonalities as well as variances. *Millenium Hall* aims to show that the power-imbalance in the utopic community of women displays the most preferable type of gift-giving, and, as a consequence, the most preferable type of subservience.

The gift-giving men in the inset narratives of *Millenium Hall* hold power over women by giving material gifts that cannot be reciprocated. The institution of gift-giving "generate[s] the obligation of an extorted counter-gift," (McGonegal 295) but charity demands—by its very definition—giving to those who cannot give back. This is the basis for the argument that "the gift that is imposed and cannot be reciprocated becomes a lasting obligation...a form of gentle, invisible violence (McGonegal 293). Hintman, for example, literally assumes a patriarchal position of authority over Louisa through his charity; he adopts her. Hintman continues his charity by giving Louisa books, an allowance, and other material gifts. Louisa is in no position to reciprocate the gifts of Hintman, and as such "[h]er obligations to him [a]re the frequent subjects of her discourse with Miss Melvyn" (Scott 91). The obligation of Louisa's counter-gift—because one is necessary as per the ideology of gift-giving—is that "in time she will provide a symbolic return on his investment" (McGonegal 295).

The return that Louisa is anticipated to make on Hintman's "long expectation and boundless expense" (Scott 101), is Louisa's "extraordinary charms which were ripening for his possession" (101), and more specifically, her "sexuality" (Elliot 537). As Louisa has no other way to "reciprocate [Hintman]'s gifts with symbolic capital," she herself becomes the capital (McGonegal 295). The symbolic system of money in a capitalist patriarchy excludes women as participants in that economy except through being the symbolic capital themselves; however, "if the women acquire 'commodity' value, if they offer themselves up to male enumeration, then they lose their symbolic value" (McGonegal 295). In this way, a woman's sexuality is a *pharmakon*¹: its value is only valuable when it does not enter into economic use. In other words, the

¹ Jaques Derrida, from "Plato's Pharmacy." Defined loosely as "the drug; the medicine and/or poison." (1701). The best translation in terms of connotation might be "drug" because it denotes and connotes both medicine and poison. But the spilt definition better fits the idea that a *pharmakon* is a double-entity.

getting of the virgin depletes her of her virginity, the thing that made her worth getting. The impossibility of participating in the capitalist game leads the women to removing themselves from it. The Hall forms as a place in which sexuality can be removed from the economic symbolic equation and replaced with philanthropy. But in removing themselves from the game, the women recreate it sans money/sexuality as symbolic capital. There is no symbolic capital, but the act of giving itself which is the capital. By removing the male-oriented objects of desire, what Derrida terms the *objet petite a*, which in this case is money and sexual favours, the women of the Hall can focus on attaining their own desires, i.e.: fellowship, spiritual enlightenment, knowledge, and other non-sexual, non-material goods. Any homoerotic tendencies found in the Hall aside, trade for sexual favour in the Hall is never explicitly denoted in the text.

The Hall itself is a gift. The entire thing is built upon the foundation of gift-giving. The founders come to be relieved of their oppressive situations through “peculiar gift[s] of Providence” (Scott 84)—the death of the men in their lives—thereby bequeathing the funds with which the Hall is found(ed), already “sufficiently furnished, and in such good order, that they settled in it without trouble” (Scott 159). The actual maintenance of the Hall also functions on the premise of the women “continually endeavoring to serve each other” (112). The women contend that “this reciprocal communication of benefits should be universal” (112). To Sarah Scott, the corollary of kindness is utopia. But is it? The two principle founders of the Hall—Miss Mancel and Miss Melvyn—live by the principle of living completely and wholly in reciprocation to each other even before the founding of the Hall, and explain that “by owing [one] owes not, and is at once indebted and discharged” (94).

That is, the women of the Hall engage in a permanent cycle of owing that becomes its own form of currency: a symbolic indebtedness that runs so deep that everyone forgets they are in debt. In a capitalist economy the increase of a deficit to the point of no return leads to inflation. Money has no value if it has no value. Depending on whether this debt-cycle system functions as a microcosm or whether it functions as a macrocosm, the result can be one of two bifurcating opposites: modern Cuban-style socialism (microcosm), or modern American-style Too-Big-To-Fail capitalism (macrocosm). Because the novel depicts the Hall as a hermetically sealed self-sufficient society, it works. But, notably, the community of Bath Easton² went bankrupt.

The philanthropic gift-giving amongst the women of the Hall is supposed to be universal and, therefore, gratis. However, the founding women of the Hall, much like the men in the inset narratives, use gift-giving to exert full and complete ideological power:

“By little presents they [the founders] shew their approbation of those who behave well, always proportioning their gifts to

² Bath Easton was the real-life attempt at a Millenium-Hall-like community inhabited by Sarah Scott along with other Bluestocking women (537 Elliot).

the merits of the person; which are therefore looked upon as the most honorable testimony of their conduct, and are treasured up as valuable marks of distinction. This encouragement has great influence and makes them vie with each other in endeavours to excel in sobriety, cleanliness, meekness and industry" (Scott 168).

This gift-giving economy is capitalism without the arbitrary symbol of money. Even though the Hall is not profit-oriented, the women also manage to succeed in a capitalist venture: the carpet manufacture; they are "at a loss what to do with the profits" (Scott 247). The fantasy carries a certain Tarantino-esque flavour.

The gift-giving of the men more directly asserts power than the gift-giving of the women, though the two are very similar, and, in fact, supplementary in a Derridean sense (Derrida 1712): charity presupposes a receiver. To be powerful, the givers need to give. And to qualify as givers, there need to be receivers who receive. Perhaps the best example of the Derridean supplementary relationship of the Hall as a whole can be described by looking, once again, at its founders. Hintman gives an allowance to Louisa, which she uses "to treat her friend with masters for music and drawing, and such other things as she knew she had an inclination to learn" (Scott 92). The reciprocal relationship that Miss Mancel and Miss Melvyn share comes at the expense of resigning power to Hintman, the benefactor. Without Hintman's charity, Louisa's charity can't exist. But without Louisa, Hintman would not be a benefactor. Thereby, the beneficiary anachronizes the benefactor and assumes its power: Hintman treats Louisa "with the humility of a dependant, rather than the authority of a benefactor" (Scott 94).

Another example of this phenomenon is the relationship between the first Lady Melvyn and Sir Charles. Lady Melvyn does Sir Charles the daily favor of making him believe that he is intelligent: "she contrived to make all her actions appear the result of his choice, and whatever he did by her instigation, seemed even to him to have been his own thought" (Scott 84). The relationship is actually perfectly supplementary as "[Lady Melvyn] resolved to *supply* the apparent deficiencies in her husband's understanding, by a most respectful *deference* to his opinions, thus conferring distinction on him" (Scott 84; my emphasis). It is Lady Melvyn's "very movement through which [she] absents [her]self and becomes invisible, thus requiring that [her] place be supplied along with difference" (Derrida 1712) that she supplies Sir Charles with power. She is the giver and subject of power by supplying it and consenting to it.

The last and perhaps least obvious example of the supplemental relationship is the relationship between the Hall and the outer sphere of the world. The Hall's carpet manufacture requires buyers. The buyers are not, and could not be, principally the residents of the Hall, but must be members of the country adjacent simply for the pragmatic reason that the Hall is a small space that can house only so many rugs. The Hall needs its carpet manufacture to supply its

funds for its charity work. The Hall cannot pragmatically depend on inheritances from dead husbands and/or fathers to sustain it over the long term. Moreover, by virtue of needing to be taken in by the Hall, the women it takes in are usually destitute and cannot contribute to the Hall's communal fund as its founders had. Thus, by needing the carpet manufacture, the Hall needs the outside world; however, the Hall solves many of the outside world's social problems (Bannet 31-2). It gives back to the world. It takes in women that would otherwise be the world's problem, and the world owes the Hall for that. But there is no way for the world to reciprocate the gift that the Hall gives the world: their money is no good in the Hall because it bounces back into the world through works of charity. So in an ideological sense, but not a material sense, the Hall is independent of the outer sphere of the world.

The women are imitating the system from which they come. They imitate the ideologies of capitalism, the institution of marriage, education, religion, and the notion of the family. But by eliminating men, they have, thereby eliminated the possibility of symbolic value on sexuality. The Hall's removal and seclusion from the larger outer world is in itself also a sort of *pharmakon*. It is a prison, as the women cannot leave without becoming sexualized, yet it is also a safe-house for the same reason. Not unlike the "asylum" within the Hall for the "poor creatures who suffer from some natural deficiency or redundancy" (Scott 72), the Hall itself is an enclosure, a sanctuary (Elliot 549).

Millenium Hall, as a result of being a ruled-over safe-place, is not entirely dissimilar to the ideal aristocratic community in Plato's *Republic* in which the Philosopher Kings—to whom the founding women are similar as being the watchful eyes over the education of the inhabitants (Scott 197)—rule over and care over (with all the connotations that come with the word over) the citizens to whom the women refer as being like knights who go into battle (Scott 163), not unlike the Platonic guardians. The gift-giving that the founding women engage in, as we have already established, gives them power—they are the community's rulers. But they are better rulers than the men, whose rule is not unlike the oligarchical community in *Republic*, whose members "have a fanatical respect for gold and silver" which "they can extravagantly spend...on their wives and anyone else they choose" (Plato 283). Furthermore, members of the oligarchical community "[surround] their homes with walls, for all the world as if their houses were private dens" (Plato 283), not unlike the nameless former inhabitant of the mansion who "fortified every door and window with bars of iron" (Scott 220) and died clutching "a great chest which contained his money, as if he had been desirous to take possession even in death" (Scott 221). In *Republic*, it is the oligarchy that degenerates out of the aristocracy, but in *Millenium Hall*, it is the aristocracy of women that arises out of the oligarchy.

The power-imbalance amongst men and women and within the community of women is mirrored by the "peculiar gifts [from] Providence" to the women (Scott 84) in the impossibility of reciprocity. The impossibility of reciprocity is at once freeing and trapping: it demands indebtedness, and also frees the women from

indebtedness. God is a giver; the ultimate giver. The gift that God gives the women is the perfect expression of perfect power: God literally takes power by taking the lives of the men that exert power over the women through their gifts and affections. But the gifts that God gives can never be reciprocated, and therefore God is ultimately powerful. Naturally, therefore, the women worship God with a vehemence that even converts the coxcomb, Lamont (Scott 248).

Although the replacement of one ruling father with another ruling Father does not seem advantageous it eliminates the debasement of the women as objects of symbolic worth in relevance to their sexuality. The *pharmakon* of the Hall as a safe-house/prison, an "asylum" frees the women more perfectly than the outside world ever could. By resigning freedom, the women gain it more completely than capitalism could ever allow, by its very definition as *laissez-faire*³. The benefactor/beneficiary relationship between God and women, like the same dynamic between men and women, is also supplemental. God needs subjects to be God, and again the receiver anachronizes the giver. This is why the men must die for the women to be free of debt. The only difference between the man/woman relationship and the God/humanity relationship is that the women concede to God's power because they have no other option. To not do so would be death.

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³ "Let them be free to do"