Mocking the Silver-Fork School:
Thackeray in the Vanity Fair of Snobs*

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During his journeys to England in 1833 and 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville, French politician and historian, was “singularly struck” by the extent to which “the aristocratic principle affected manners among English commoners” (70). He also notes that the English aristocracy was dissimilar to that in France where its presence had incited revolutions; the English aristocracy received a higher degree of respect. It is in this climate, indeed, for this reason, that Silver-Fork novels lay readily at hand on the drawing room table of many a middle-class home.

The Silver-Fork novels, by apparently detailing minutely various aspects of aristocratic life, became the most popular sub-genre in the 1820s and early 1830s, with the Regency spirit still at the full. The Silver-Fork novels, however, had increasingly become an anachronism: tied to the aristocracy whose power would ultimately be eroding, it celebrated a way of life which was passing and could

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never return. Although Silver-Fork novels continued to be published until the 
1850s, their popularity began to wane in the late 1830s.

This paper argues that the decline of the Silver-Fork fiction resulted from 
consolidation of a middle-class ideology and the consequent change in attitude 
toward the aristocracy. In light of increasing stress on hard work, thrift, 
responsibility, and seriousness, an aristocratic life of idleness, excess, and greed 
provoked anger and contempt, and novels glorifying aristocratic life were seen 
only to encourage snobbery, toadyism, and frivolity. Another major argument in 
this paper is that, embodying the growing intolerance of the middle class for the 
Silver-Fork novels, Thackeray, among other Victorian writers, contributed much in 
correcting the false, even hazardous, view of reality implied in this popular form 
of fiction. This paper, reviewing how Thackeray criticized, mocked, and parodied 
both the aristocracy and the Silver-Fork school mainly in *The Book of Snobs* and 
*Vanity Fair*, examines his struggles to marshall middle-class ideology against the 
Silver-Fork perspective.

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Although England was moving away from a feudal state to a fully 
industrialized society, the English aristocracy continued to rule the country 
politically, economically, and socially. The Reform Bill of 1832 was an attempt to 
correct the over-representation of the landed interest in Parliament and to 
ameliorate the abuses of controlled elections, but the Bill did not seriously 
challenge the authority of the landed aristocracy. Hereditary rights, the foundation 
upon which the aristocracy was built and maintained its power, continued 
essentially unchanged, and family members of that class controlled both the Upper 
and Lower Houses throughout much of the nineteenth century.