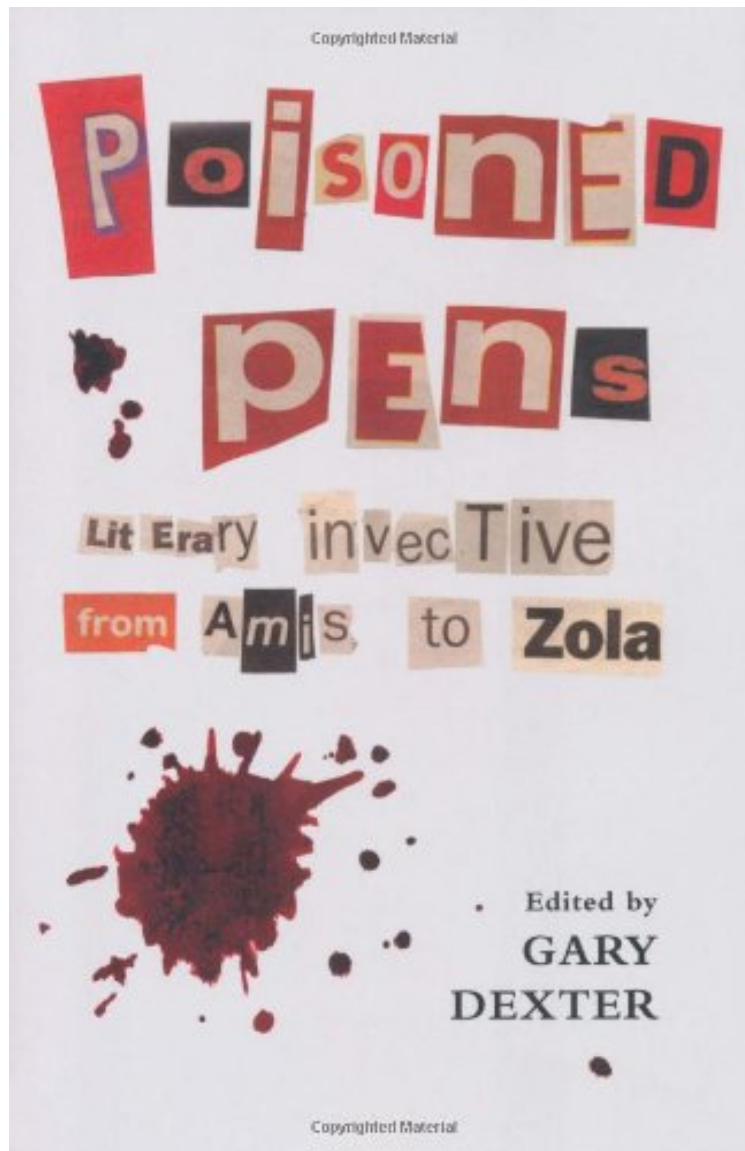


(Free) Poisoned Pens: Literary Invective from Amis to Zola

## Poisoned Pens: Literary Invective from Amis to Zola

Gary Dexter

ePub | \*DOC | audiobook | ebooks | Download PDF



DOWNLOAD



+

READ ONLINE

#2108399 in Books 2009-09-22Original language:EnglishPDF # 1 .86 x 5.54 x 7.94l, .91 #File Name: 0711229295240 pages | File size: 47.Mb

**Gary Dexter : Poisoned Pens: Literary Invective from Amis to Zola** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Poisoned Pens: Literary Invective from Amis to Zola:

3 of 4 people found the following review helpful. less fun then you would expectBy Steve RogersIt seemed a good idea when I purchased it and the authors are appropriately bitchy when reviewing each other but somehow the whole is less then the sum of its parts and it becomes a bit boring after a while. It is on my bedside table and occasionally I read a page or two before sleep but on the whole I would not recommend this book unless you are really into this type

of thing.<sup>3</sup> of 9 people found the following review helpful. Not what I expected  
By Dr RoseI purchased two of these books for Christmas presents based on prepublication reviews, thinking my more literate friends would enjoy it as described. Big mistake! When I glanced through a few chapters prior to wrapping the first volume, I found the content more suited to a fusty English teacher in an obscure Northeastern boarding school lacking Internet access. If does not want to take these virgin copies back, does anyone out there have such a friend - or teacher to whom you wish to suck up - who can take them off my hands? That said, I apologize to the author for what must have been an enormous work of scholarship, and applaud the publisher for supporting him.<sup>0</sup> of 0 people found the following review helpful. Can't seem to decide what it wants to be  
By C. D. VarnEnjoyable and clearly organized, but not exactly exhaustive. The Hemingway-Faulkner and the Orwell-Huxley dust-ups being among the excluded exchanges. Part the issue with the book is that it can't decide if its fun read about writer's cat-fights or a serious book and documented book about writer's disagreements. The baby is split between the two and it is thus somewhat frustrating.

Mark Twain once said of Jane Austen, "Every time I read *Pride and Prejudice* I want to dig her up and hit her over the skull with her own shin-bone." And then there's George Bernard Shaw on the Bard: "With the single exception of Homer, there is no eminent writer, not even Sir Walter Scott, whom I can despise so entirely as I despise Shakespeare." Twain and Shaw were both known for their coruscating wit, but they were far from the exception in terms of charity toward their peers. Literary one-upmanship is the subject of this hilariously evil book. Those who delight in literary malice can enjoy Cocteau's damnation of Victor Hugo, and Edith Sitwell's denunciation of D. H. Lawrence. Drawn from the popular "Writers on Writers" column in the *The Guardian*, *Poisoned Pens* captures those moments when major authors' talents are turned toward the petulant, abusive, mocking, and downright mean.

"*Poisoned Pens*" is a delightfully malicious compilation of literary invective across the centuries, registering the less than kind views of one author for another. We always knew that the profession of writing was as cut-throat as any other. Now we can see little authorial daggers doing their malicious work. The effects is oddly pleasurable. Feelings of envy, anger, condescension, contempt and irritation are universal, of course, but writers have a way of expressing such feelings with unusual style and, at times, with astonishing accuracy—when they are not being merely rude, petty and childish. George Meredith, a novelist who prided himself on his prose refinement, knocked his contemporary Charles Dickens for being the "incarnation of cockneydom." Virginia Woolf felt that the poet T.S. Eliot was too religious: "He seems to me to be petrifying into a priest." Her complaint about Katherine Mansfield was less elegant. One might wish, she wrote in a letter, "that one's first impression of K.M. was not that she stinks like a—well, civet cat that had taken to street walking." A monstrous snob, Vladimir Nabokov criticized Fyodor Dostoevsky for his "lack of taste." H. Rider Haggard, the author of "*King Solomon's Mines*," denounced Anthony Trollope (whom he met in South Africa) for being "obstinate as a pig" and filled with "peculiar ideas." More Henry Miller, famous for such louche classics as "*Tropic of Cancer*," mocked George Orwell for his high-mindedness. Aristotle attacked Euripides (for being too modern). Ben Jonson sniped at Shakespeare (for plagiarism). Alexander Pope skewered Colley Cibber (for excruciatingly bad poetry); Cibber, for his part, called Pope a "dwarf" and ridiculed his translations of Homer. The milk of human kindness does not seem to be an innate writerly trait, and charity is scant. One wonders what role similarity plays. Woolf, who employed interior monologue in "*Mrs. Dalloway*" and other novels, bitterly dismissed James Joyce, famous for his pages of stream-of-consciousness. "I dislike Ulysses more more," she said. "That is I think it more and more unimportant; and don't even trouble conscientiously to make out its meanings." William Faulkner, who clearly borrowed from Mark Twain the idea of giving the "tall tale" a literary spin, called Twain "a hack writer who would not have been considered fourth rate in Europe, who tricked out a few of the old proven 'sure fire' literary skeletons with sufficient local color to intrigue the superficial and the lazy." Not that Twain himself was kind. "Every time I read '*Pride and Prejudice*,' I want to dig her up and hit her over the skull with her own shin-bone," he wrote of Jane Austen. Some put-downs have a lapidary quality. "I am reading Proust for the first time," Evelyn Waugh wrote in a letter. "Very poor stuff. I think he was mentally defective." Clive James said of contemporary romance-novelist Judith Krantz: "To be a really lousy writer takes energy," adding: "As a work of art [her novel "*Princess Daisy*"] has the same status as a long conversation between two not very bright drunks." Authorial contempt is democratic and need not depend on category differences. Women writers, for instance, easily dislike each other. Ayn Rand lost no time running down Isabel Paterson, a libertarian like herself: "I enjoyed talking to her, but thought nothing of her writing." Edith Sitwell said of Virginia Woolf: "I consider her 'a beautiful little knitter.'" Mary McCarthy famously excoriated Lillian Hellman, who she considered "tremendously overrated, a bad writer, and dishonest writer." (Hellman filed a lawsuit that ended only with her death.) "His work is evil," Anatole France wrote of his countryman Emile Zola. "He is one of those unhappy beings of whom one can say that it would be better had he not been born." Noël Coward dismissed Oscar Wilde as a "tiresome, affected sod." Wilde in turn lambasted Henry James for writing fiction "as if it were a painful duty." The canonized masters can be as every bit as catty as anyone else, but perhaps that is not such a bad thing. In his introduction to "*Poisoned Pens*," Gary Dexter notes, truthfully, that the splenetic is a truer barometer of thought than the gushy or the kind. "What is negative is, if nothing else, generally

sincere," he writes. "Good reports of fellow writers can easily be flattery or log-rolling: just think of the ways book-reviewers operate. It is only in the negative and the scabrous that we can be sure of a writer's true feelings." Spite makes for better show business, too. Edmund Gosse once observed of the 18th-century critic John Dennis that his "acute, learned and sympathetic treatises" were long forgotten, though he was indeed known for not perceiving the genius of Pope. Likewise, Gosse said, no one paid any heed to the "grace and discrimination" of the critic Francis Jeffrey, who would go down in history as the ill-tempered man who attacked the Romantic poets, including Wordsworth. Jeffrey's shrewd judgments "weigh like a feather" beside "one tasteless sneer at Charles Lamb." The insults taxonomized in "Poisoned Pens" take the form of lengthy denunciations, one-line waspish barbs and sheer bitchery. Entire paragraphs of truly memorable spite, such as Mark Twain on James Fenimore Cooper or D.H. Lawrence on Aldous Huxley—or harangues like E.M. Foster's lengthy evisceration of Sir Walter Scott—are far more effective than mere angry quips and brief nastiness. One can't help recalling, in this context, the only serious line delivered in the movie comedy "Animal House." The English professor (Donald Sutherland) makes a sour—and stupid—remark to his class that it is not only boring but indeed pointless to study the poetry of John Milton. Still, hatred alone is what lasts, Mr. Dexter suggests. Reasonlessness in the matter of assault is not to be avoided—it positively helps. Many venomous attacks are thus ad hominem, in the physical sense. Bertrand Russell mocked Alfred Lord Tennyson for having "an almost theatrically pink complexion and two red spots on his cheeks." Charles Baudelaire called George Sand "stupid, heavy and garrulous." Algernon Swinburne's cruel description of Ralph Waldo Emerson: "A foul mouth is so ill matched with a white beard." Thomas Carlyle thought that Samuel Coleridge lacked will ("he has no resolution") but chose to focus on his homeliness: "Figure a fat flabby incurvated personage, at once short, rotund and relaxed, with a watery mouth, a snuffy nose, a pair of strange brown timid yet earnest looking eyes, a high tapering brow, and a great bush of grey hair—you will have some faint idea of Coleridge." Samuel Butler was no less cruel: "Yes it was good of God to let Carlyle and Mrs. Carlyle marry one another and so make only two people miserable instead of four." In our own time, Martin Amis, after a literary dinner in London, recounted how Salman Rushdie failed to respond to one of his points: "No answer; only the extreme hooded-eye treatment." He looked, Mr. Amis wrote, "like a falcon staring through a Venetian blind." For sheer schadenfreude "Poisoned Pens" is a book that one can pick up and put down anywhere. There are some notable gaps in the collection. We see nothing of H.L. Mencken. (The focus is mainly British.) Neither is mention made of Baron Corvo, one of literature's most contumacious practitioners, a man who lived to dish and to vilify. Nor are we treated to anything from the late Truman Capote—"That's not writing," so went his famous remark on Jack Kerouac, "that's typing"—who could have taken up a whole chapter by himself. The nastiness is amazing. Do buy copies of "Poisoned Pens" for your curmudgeonly friends. It is a perfect Christmas book for those seeking to stem the glut of good will.—Wall Street Journal

Writers attacking other writers makes for a quite entertaining book--we seem to have an insatiable appetite for spleen and venom, at least at a distance. Many of the attacks are longer than quotation-length and are thoughtful as well as rancorous, but the short quotations are certainly fun. Cyril Connolly on George Orwell: "He would not blow his nose without moralizing on conditions in the handkerchief industry." Samuel Butler on Thomas Carlyle: "Yes it was very good of God to let Carlyle and Mrs. Carlyle marry one another and so make only two people miserable instead of four." And the book is a steal at \$16.95 hardcover and 240 pages. #8212Shelf Awareness