

## Introduction

I was strongly advised against calling this book “Nobody’s Story” because the title, it was feared, would suggest exactly the sort of study this is not: one lamenting the unjust absence of women from the eighteenth-century literary canon. Let it be known at the outset, therefore, that the “nobodies” of my title are not ignored, silenced, erased, or anonymous women. Instead, they are literal nobodies: authorial personae, printed books, scandalous allegories, intellectual property rights, literary reputations, incomes, debts, and fictional characters. They are the exchangeable tokens of modern authorship that allowed increasing numbers of women writers to thrive as the eighteenth century wore on.

Nobody was not on my mind when I began this study. Noticing that the appearance of what was called “female authorship” in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries coincided with the appearance of a literary marketplace, I set out to show that many women writers emphasized their femininity to gain financial advantage and that, in the process, they invented and popularized numerous ingenious similarities between their gender and their occupation. Far from disavowing remunerative authorship as unfeminine, they relentlessly embraced and feminized it. And, far from creating only minor and forgettable variations on an essentially masculine figure, they delineated crucial features of “the author” for the period in general by emphasizing their trials and triumphs in the marketplace. This book, in short, began by describing the reciprocal shaping of the terms “woman,” “author,” and “marketplace.”

At the outset, my objective was to show the extreme plasticity of these terms as well as their interrelations. I was inspired by studies in the history of sexuality, which point to the mid-eighteenth century as a watershed of European discourse on the topics of sexuality and gender, a time when the very meaning of “woman”

underwent a drastic revision.<sup>1</sup> I was also deeply impressed by recent accounts of eighteenth-century economic changes that stress the revolution in credit and the proliferation of both debt and “paper” property.<sup>2</sup> A few historians even suggest that these concurrent shifts in the organization and meaning of both gender differences and marketplace transactions were connected.<sup>3</sup> A small group of new economic literary critics, moreover, had been exploring the relations between literary and economic exchange,<sup>4</sup> while feminist theorists had renewed interest in the topic of the exchange of women.<sup>5</sup> Stimulated by these historiographical and theoretical developments, I wanted to know how women writers integrated the changing concept of woman into their authorial personae, how they connected it to the discourse of marketplace exchange, and how prevalent notions of authorship were altered in the process.

Consequently, I chose five writers to represent five different stages of authorship in the marketplace: Aphra Behn (1640–1689), Delarivier Manley (1663–1724), Charlotte Lennox (1729–1804), Frances Burney (1752–1840), and Maria Edgeworth (1768?–1849).

1. The most thorough account of this revision is Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1990).

2. Three books on this topic have especially influenced me: J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985); John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688–1783* (New York: Knopf, 1989); and Peter de Bolla, *The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics and the Subject* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

3. Pocock and de Bolla, for example, explore the uses of gender in economic discourse.

4. Examples of this new economic criticism include Marc Shell, *The Economy of Literature* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978), and *Money, Language, and Thought: Literary and Philosophical Economies from the Medieval to the Modern Era* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1982); Kurt Heinzelman, *The Economics of the Imagination* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1980); Jean-Joseph Goux, *Freud, Marx: Économie et symbolique* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1973), and *Les iconoclastes* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1978), parts of which have been recently combined, translated, and published as *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud*, trans. Jennifer Curtiss Gage (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990); Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1987); and Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986).

5. See especially Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex,” in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975); and Luce Irigaray, “Commodities among Themselves,” in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985).

These five writers are commonly acknowledged to have been widely read, and all were formally innovative. Their popularity and influence give their careers representative status. Initially, I noticed that the “feminine” aspects of their authorial personae only intensified contradictions implicit in authorship generally. Hence, although this book concentrates on women as representatives of the condition of the author in the eighteenth century, it does not claim that they belonged to a separate tradition. Rather, it takes them to be special in their extreme typicality and describes the metamorphoses of authorship as seen through the magnifying glass of women’s careers.

As I watched these metamorphoses take shape, I noticed recurrently that women, authorship, and marketplace exchange had—literally—*nothing* in common.<sup>6</sup> In Aphra Behn’s play *The Lucky Chance*, for example, the early modern concept of female “nothingness,” which refers to both women’s presumed genital lack and their secondary ontological status in relation to men, overlaps with the conceptual disembodiment that all commodities achieve at the moment of exchange, when their essence appears to be an abstract value. This nothingness, placed at the center of both femaleness and commodity exchange, the playwright further linked to her own elusive and disembodied persona. These layered nothings, which I first encountered in Behn’s works, seemed even more insistently present in Delarivier Manley’s scandalous court chronicles, where political writing, especially in its gossipy female form, is likened to deficit spending.

In Manley’s works, though, the nothingness also seemed to contain at least the potential for a new and more positive form: the form of the fictional Nobody, a proper name explicitly without a physical referent in the real world. While analyzing the differences between the scandalous court chronicles of the 1710s and the novels of the mid-eighteenth century, I found myself tracing the appearance of a fourth concept in addition to the three—woman, author, and marketplace—that I had set out to track. I was following the emergence into public consciousness of a new category of dis-

6. For an excellent discussion of the importance of the concept of nothing to the development of money, representation, and subjectivity, see Brian Rotman, *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987). My debt to this study would be difficult to overestimate.

course: fiction. Like most literary critics, I had hitherto taken fiction for granted as a constant feature of the textual landscape, but when I began to look closely at the recognized early eighteenth-century discursive options, I noticed that it was barely visible. As far as the reading public and most writers were concerned, narrative came in two forms: referential truth telling and lying. In cultures where the concept of fiction is firmly in place, however, it constitutes an easily recognizable alternative. To be sure, the absence of the category did not necessarily indicate the absence of the thing. Literary historians have quite rightly pointed to numerous pre-eighteenth-century writings that can now be called fictional: romances, fables, some allegories, fairy stories, dramas, narrative poems—in short, all forms of literature that were not taken to be the literal truth but that apparently had no particular intention to deceive. Before the mid-eighteenth century, though, there was no consensus that all those genres shared a common trait; instead they were classified according to their implied purposes (moral fables, for example), their forms (e.g. epic), or their provenance (e.g. oriental tales). That discursive category we now call fiction was a “wild space,” unmapped and unarticulated.<sup>7</sup>

Nobody was the pivot point around which a massive reorientation of textual referentiality took place, and the location of this pivot was the mid-eighteenth-century novel. Far from being the descendant of older overtly fictional forms, the novel was the first to articulate the idea of fiction for the culture as a whole. I realized that what Ian Watt called “formal realism” was not a way of trying

7. My argument does not deny that there were occasional quite sophisticated discussions of fiction (under different names) prior to the mid-eighteenth century. Aristotle is, of course, the locus classicus; Sir Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesy* is another obvious case in point. Most Renaissance writers, however, followed Aristotle in linking the fictional to the heroic, and none of them succeeded in creating a cultural consensus on the nature and legitimacy of fiction. By the early eighteenth century, when Joseph Addison published his essay on the pleasures of the imagination in the *Spectator* (see esp. numbers 416–21), he could rely on a cultured understanding of the difference between a fiction and a lie, and he did not need to engage in an explicit defense. However, his division of poetic subjects into the sublime, the beautiful, and the marvelous, as well as his penchant for drawing examples from Homer and Virgil, points to an underlying assumption that fiction is justified when it represents heroic idealizations. Fiction as an independent category of discourse, disjoined from any particular content, was not yet fully realized even in Addison's treatise. It is a generalized understanding of the status of fiction that concerns me here.

to hide or disguise fictionality; realism was, rather, understood to be fiction's formal sign.<sup>8</sup> Eighteenth-century readers identified with the characters in novels *because* of the characters' fictiveness and not in spite of it. Moreover, these readers had to be taught how to read fiction, and as they learned this skill (it did not come naturally), new emotional dispositions were created.

Nobody was crucial to the development of the literary marketplace as well. My analysis of the careers of Charlotte Lennox and Frances Burney links new concepts of literary property, a new attribution of innocence to authors (especially female authors), and the circulation of fictional entities through the culture. In analyzing the transition from Behn's and Manley's authorial personae, who were often disguised, disreputable scandalmongers, to Lennox's and Burney's, who were genuine, proper purveyors of original tales, I noticed that the later authors stressed their renunciation of personal satire and slander. That is, the explicit fictionality of their works initially recommended them as wholesome goods. But the novel soon came under attack as an unruly medium; readers, it was increasingly noted as the century wore on, could not be counted on to disengage themselves from Nobody. Consequently, each generation of writers felt called upon to reform the genre by encouraging an affective pulsation between identification with fictional characters and withdrawal from them, between emotional

8. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1957). In the 1980s many new accounts of the "rise of the novel" were published, but few of them challenged Watt's category of "formal realism," and none suggested that realism was an indicator of fiction. The recent studies that have been most influential are Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987); Lennard J. Davis, *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1983), and *Resisting Novels: Ideology and Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987); Terry Castle, *Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnavalesque in Eighteenth-Century English Culture and Fiction* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1986); Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1987); John Bender, *Imagining the Penitentiary: Fiction and the Architecture of Mind in Eighteenth-Century England* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987); J. Paul Hunter, *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (New York: Norton, 1990). Davis and McKeon notice that the novel marks a new stage of explicit fictionality in narrative, but Davis is too censorious of this development to analyze it fully, and McKeon, whose focus is the epistemology rather than either the ontology or the affective force of the novel, allows his insights to remain scattered. I am indebted to all these studies, but I remain convinced that the novel can be seen in historical perspective only when the powerful novelty of its fictionality is recognized.

investment and divestment. The constant need, created by fiction itself, to revise the genre into an ever more efficient exercise in self-control further stimulated the market and inspired numerous women writers to come to the novel's rescue. The works of Frances Burney and Maria Edgeworth exemplify alternative modes of formal rectification. Both writers claimed to remedy the mistakes of earlier fiction, to encourage new forms of identification that would annul the consequences of past overidentification.



The terms "woman," "author," "marketplace," and "fiction," sharing connotations of nothingness and disembodiment, reciprocally defined each other in the literature analyzed here. To say that they defined each other is to renounce at the outset any single cause for the changes they underwent. For example, although this book describes the economic conditions of authors, it does not use the economy as a stable explanatory "base" on which their careers can be firmly situated. Indeed, as my title implies, the literary marketplace, described here in several of its eighteenth-century phases, is often the setting for what might be called the authors' vanishing acts. It is a place where the writers appear mainly through their frequently quite spectacular displacements and disappearances in literary and economic exchanges. Hence the marketplace is not so much the *cause* of the phenomenon of female authorship as its point of departure.

To concentrate on the elusiveness of these authors, instead of bemoaning it and searching for their positive identities, is to practice a different sort of literary history. But it is not to abandon the tasks of historical analysis altogether, for the vanishing acts themselves are discoverable only as historical occurrences. I describe the disappearances by offering plausible and multifaceted accounts of their exigencies and mechanisms; in turn, these accounts create images of the departed in the act of dematerializing. To be sure, the images are not entirely of my own manufacture: they are partly, I believe, the conscious artifices of the women whose works form the core of this study. And they, of course, were not creating *ex nihilo* but were molding the material already designated "female author" to their own economic and literary ends. Centuries of literary history and criticism have also made these apparitions

visible and, at least in the case of Frances Burney and Maria Edgeworth, have given them such a semblance of substance that they hardly seem spectral at all. In contrast, the elusiveness of the authorial personae of Aphra Behn, Delarivier Manley, and Charlotte Lennox is partly determined by their having almost vanished from literary history in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

It would be perverse of me to claim that Edgeworth should seem as remote and ultimately unavailable as Behn. Edgeworth, after all, left a voluminous correspondence, the reminiscences of dozens of friends and acquaintances, estate ledgers, memoirs, and so forth, whereas Behn left scarcely any information about herself. It would surely be outlandish to complain that we know too much about Maria Edgeworth's life to be able to view her, properly, as a rhetorical effect. I am claiming, however, that the Edgeworth we can construct from the historical record seems to have been convinced that the creature she called her "author-self" was an entity distinct from her individual personal identity. This book examines the writers' "author-selves," not as pretenses or mystifications, but as the partly disembodied entities required by the specific exchanges that constituted their careers.

The author-selves, therefore, are also partial Nobodies, but their nobodiness differs from that of fictional characters. There is understood to be no particular, embodied, referent in the material world for the proper name of a fictional character; but the names of these author-selves refer to entities that are neither identical to the writers nor wholly distinct from them. They are rhetorical constructions, but constructions that playfully point to their role in keeping the physical writers alive. I argue, further, that the authorial Nobodies of Aphra Behn and Delarivier Manley anticipated many of the characteristics of explicit, fictional Nobodies. Fictional characters developed partly out of the artful employment of female authorial personae in the works of early modern writers. I also argue that once fiction became explicit and Nobody's characteristics could be fully developed, new possibilities of disembodiment appeared for the author as well.



Some of these possibilities resemble those that have already been described by critics working on the connections between literature

and the history of sexuality, especially Nancy Armstrong and Jane Spencer.<sup>9</sup> These critics stress that the new cultural power of women, beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, was part of the consolidation of middle-class hegemony. Although women writers gained acceptance and prestige, becoming the spokeswomen for cultural change, these critics argue that they did so only by constructing a discourse that “reformed” women by locking them into a disciplinary domestic sphere. Armstrong and Spencer identify a discursive break prior to the 1740s: on the “before” side is the aristocratic model of woman, political, embodied, superficial, and amoral; on the “after” side is the middle-class model, domestic, disembodied, equipped with a deep interiority and an ethical subjectivity.

This study, however, argues that different as the completed authorial personae of the pre- and post-1740 authors may be, their components are surprisingly similar. The “nothingness” of Aphra Behn’s author-whore has a great deal in common with the “Nobody” of the moralistic novelists. Authors on both sides of the mid-century revolution in sensibility, in quite dissimilar social and economic conditions and across a range of discourses, portrayed themselves as dispossessed, in debt, and on the brink of disembodiment. How can we explain the continuities, as well as the historical ruptures, in the rhetoric of female authorship?

First, the recurrent features of these authorial profiles might easily be seen as manifestations of the persistent imbalance of power, especially economic power, between the sexes. Indeed, some people might simply attribute these features to the persistence of patriarchy. For example, all the women in this study combine their rhetoric of authorship with one of dispossession. The combination takes different forms and answers to different exigencies in each career, but the presentation of authorship as the effect of the writer’s inability to *own* the text remains constant and is explicitly linked to the author’s gender.

My concentration on gender in this study attests to the weight I give the persistence of patriarchal assumptions. But even if that persistence, which ensured the secondary status of women and their economic powerlessness, explains the writers’ experience of

9. See Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*; and Spencer, *The Rise of the Woman Novelist: From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).



dispossession, it does not explain the cultural desire to have that experience articulated. Indeed, it cannot account for the appearance of female authorship in the first place. Nor can the remnants of patriarchy be used to explain the universality of the theme of dispossession in the rhetoric of authorship generally; male authors also frequently stressed that their work and their authorial personae could circulate only because they had sold them. In comic, pathetic, heroic, and even tragic forms, authors of both sexes called attention to their existence in and through their commodification and their inseparability from it. The rhetoric of female authorship differs, in this regard, from that of authorship in general by exaggerating and sexualizing the common theme.

The very commonness of the theme, though, might lead one to conclude that its recurrence is due to the continuities of capitalist commodification. This study will partly justify such a conclusion, but in a form so heavily qualified and transposed that the adjective "capitalist" might seem unrecognizable. First, we must take into account the ways in which the economics of eighteenth-century authorship depart from capitalist models. Despite the (slow) growth of the market, for example, authors were dependent on patronage until the end of the century, although the forms of patronage continually changed. Most authors, moreover, neither alienated their labor by writing, for a fixed wage, whatever the bookseller ordered nor played the role of the independent producer, going to market with a secure possession; that is, the classic models of industrial and artisanal production do not apply.

Moreover, if we look closely at these authors' rhetoric of alienation, we see that it contradicts the classic Marxist formulation of the capitalist appropriation of surplus value. Instead of assuming the labor theory of value on which the Marxist understanding rests, their rhetoric stresses that value is an effect of exchange, not production. As authors, they imply, they themselves are effects of exchange. They do not present their texts as places where they have stored themselves, nor do they portray their authorship as an originary activity of creation. Hence the rhetoric of "dispossession" in their texts is sometimes ecstatic (as in Aphra Behn's preface to *Oroonoko*) and often comic. Even when their tone is more mournful, in the second half of the century, they seem fascinated by the paradox that the copyright, their former "property," was no prop-

erty at all but a mere ghostly possibility. They seem to revel in the mystery of having sold something (the right to publish a work) that was only technically theirs (since they did not have the means of publication).

Indeed, these authors commonly figured their labor as the accumulation of credit rather than the production of property. And this idea, especially in the last half of the century, led to another difficulty: if one lived on credit, then one was in debt. The consequences of this reasoning are most fully explored in the last two chapters of the book, which discuss the careers of Frances Burney and Maria Edgeworth. Both authors stressed the superfluity of their fictional representations and indicated that the more credit they gained by writing them, the more they owed their public. They both, moreover, linked this escalating sense of the author-self's indebtedness to the pressure of a seemingly unpayable daughterly obligation to their fathers. In this layering of literary, patriarchal, and economic exigencies, the idea of debt began to dominate their authorial representations.

The predominance of debt in the rhetoric of authorship, a predominance that increased in women's texts as the century went on, reminds us that England in the eighteenth century was a society living on debt, and not on the production of consumer commodities. It should also remind us, though, that texts are odd commodities, because they compound the paradoxes of the commodity form. In the rich description Marx gives of that form in the first chapter of *Capital*, he notes that a commodity is normally composed of a material substance and what appears to be an abstract, immaterial value (an exchange value). In that form of mystification he calls "commodity fetishism," the origin of the exchange value in human labor is forgotten, and that value comes to seem the dominant "essence" of the thing in the marketplace. Both the potential use value of the thing and the human relations of production and exchange are then obscured by the dominance of the exchange value. *Capital* is an attempt to demystify the commodity, to unveil the origin of the exchange value in labor, to explain how that origin is warped by the appropriation of surplus value in production, and hence to demonstrate that the abstract, immaterial essence of the commodity is really a material social relationship after all. Marx, although his answer to the question of how commodities are as-

signed abstract values in the marketplace differs from that developed by the classical political economists, certainly follows their lead in concentrating on labor and thereby stressing the ultimate materiality of exchange value.

One need not agree with Marx's solution to the puzzle of commodities, one need not even think of commodities as a problem that requires a solution, to be struck by the power of his description of the form, especially the commodity's wavering between materiality and ideality. As long as it is in the marketplace—that is, as long as it is a commodity—the item's materiality is constantly on the brink of disappearing, being replaced and represented by a mere notation of value, such as money. That is, in the marketplace as Marx and the political economists tended to conceive of it, the commodity had to have a material form, but that was not what really mattered about it at the moment of exchange.

With the exception of Maria Edgeworth, the authors studied in this book neither adhered to nor anticipated the political economists' or Karl Marx's productivist explanations of how commodities become fungible; nevertheless, the process of disembodiment in the marketplace is a recurrent theme in their work and an important element in their construction of authorship. Their treatment of it often shows the overlap between the wavering immaterial materiality of commodities in general and that of texts. Like the commodity, the text must take a material form, yet the text's "materiality," even more than the commodity's, is only tenuously connected to its value, either its exchange value *qua* text (an entity different from a book, which is only an instance of a text) or its more elusive "literary" value. If we can speak of the "use value" of a text, moreover, we certainly cannot equate that with the paper, print, binding, and so forth, that make up the books. The text, in other words, multiplies the loci of the split between matter and value, and at each locus materiality slips away or is translated into ideas and yet persists.

The recurrence of dematerialization and rematerialization, like that of dispossession and debt, might be attributed, then, to something that seems more abstract than either patriarchy or the marketplace: textuality itself. Some might say that the texts in this study, simply because they are texts, frequently canvass the ways materiality ceases to matter but is nevertheless indispensable. Texts

are not only strange commodities but also strange entities that can never be neatly divided between matter and idea. The textual "signifier," the sound or graphic form conventionally attached to a particular idea to create a word, cannot be naively regarded as matter. Rather, it is what spoils the distinction between things and ideas, the material and the ideational.

Several of the women authors in this study repeatedly identify not only their texts but also their authorship with the vacillating materiality of the signifier. They make this identification more frequently, emphatically, and affirmatively than do their male counterparts. Hence, they seem to offer some empirical grounds for those deconstructive-feminist theories that, by privileging the signifier, explore the similarities between textuality and femininity.<sup>10</sup> I have drawn extensively on these ideas and have simultaneously emphasized their historical contingency.

That the most popular women writers in this period openly link their authorship to the flickering ontological effect of signification suggests that the linking is a strategy for capitalizing on their femaleness. The overlapping of femininity and the signifier, like many other ways of coupling women and writing, proved profitable. I invite the reader to enjoy these constructions, savor their ironies, analyze their mechanisms, and discern their complex exigencies; I do not recommend *believing* in them as universal truths. "Caveat emptor" is the motto of this study.

10. The many influential books of feminist deconstructionists include Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1987); Mary Jacobus, *Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1986); and Peggy Kamuf, *Signature Pieces: On the Institution of Authorship* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988).