NOBODY'S STORY

THE VANISHING ACTS
OF WOMEN WRITERS IN THE MARKETPLACE,
1670–1820

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I would also like to thank the British Library, the Cambridge University Library, and the Houghton Library at Harvard University for their hospitality.


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. 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. A few historians even suggest that these concurrent shifts in the organization and meaning of both gender differences and marketplace transactions were connected. A small group of new economic literary critics, moreover, had been exploring the relations between literary and economic exchange, while feminist theorists had renewed interest in the topic of the exchange of women. 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).


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


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. 

Nobody was the pivot point around which a massive reorienta-
tion 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
to hide or disguise fictionality; realism was, rather, understood to
be fiction’s formal sign. 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 market-
place 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 fic-
tional characters and withdrawal from them, between emotional

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 Defense of Poesy is
tote in linking the fictional to the heroic, and none of them succeeded in creating a
century, when Joseph Addison published his essay on the pleasures of the imagina-
tion in the Spectator (see esp. numbers 416–21), he could rely on a cultured
understanding of the difference between fiction and a lie, and he did not need to
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
category of discourse, disjoined from any particular context, was not yet fully
of fiction that concerns me here.

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
Press, 1983), and Resisting Novels: Ideology and Fiction (New York: Methuen, 1987);
Terry Castle, Masquerade and Civilization: The Caricature 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 Architec-
ture 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. These critics stress that the new cultural power of women,
beginning in the mid-eighteenth century, was part of the consoli-
dation 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 discipli-
nary 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 "No-
bodv" 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 disem-
bodiment. 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 persis-
tence 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
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 pro-
ducer, 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-

9. See Armstrong, Desire and Domestic Fiction; and Spencer, The Rise of the Woman
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 superficiality 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'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. 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 feminality. 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.


Musing in 1821 on the vagaries of literary fashion, Walter Scott tells a story about his great aunt, who at the age of eighty wanted to reread a work of Aphra Behn's that she remembered finding delightful in her youth.

One day she asked me, when we happened to be alone together, whether I had ever seen Mrs. Behn's novels—I confessed the charge.—Whether I could get her a sight of them?—I said, with some hesitation, I believed I could; but that I did not think she would like either the manners, or the language, which approached too near that of Charles II's time to be quite proper reading.

But the "good old lady" insisted.

So I sent Mrs. Aphra Behn, curiously sealed up, with "private and confidential" on the packet, to my gay old grand-aunt. The next time I saw her afterwards, she gave me back Aphra, properly wrapped up, with nearly these words: "Take back your bonny Mrs. Behn; and, if you will take my advice, put her in the fire, for I found it impossible to get through the very first novel. But is it not," she said, "a very odd thing that I, an old woman of eighty and upwards, sitting alone, feel myself ashamed to read a book which, sixty years ago, I have heard read aloud for the amusement of large circles, consisting of the first and most creditable society in London?"

Behn's book occasions the old woman's astonishment at her younger self and the society that bred her; her question reverberates with the shock of personal and cultural discontinuity, suddenly perceived. We can easily imagine her fragile sense of identity as