



Rounce, Adam (2015) Authorship in the eighteenth century. Oxford Handbooks Online .

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Authorship in the Eighteenth Century

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Abstract:

This essay looks at different questions facing authorship in the eighteenth century, from the widespread use of anonymity, and its consequences; the perception of an over-abundance of authors, and the related fear of a massive cultural decline; the ways in which an authorial canon could have been more arbitrary and less comprehensive than a modern day equivalent; the manner in which poetic representations of authorship sought to compete with, and pre-empt other criticisms and versions of the self; the extensive use of self-reflexivity in fiction, intended to guide and misguide the reader; and the consequences of the growing interest in authorship as a reflection of personality and celebrity.

Keywords:

Authorship; fiction; poetry; satire; biography; literary history; anonymity; Jonathan Swift; Samuel Johnson; Alexander Pope.

1. Authorship, Anonymity and Abundance

E. M. Forster's short essay of 1925, 'Anonymity: An Enquiry', has an apparent aside, the suggestion that 'In the past neither writers nor readers attached the high importance to personality that they do to-day'.¹ It is a point of the first importance in

understanding what authorship meant (and more significantly, did not mean) in the eighteenth century, and though the specifics of Forster's claim need to be clarified (in that the interest in personality was certainly present, but had to be mediated), this essay suggests some of the many ways in which eighteenth-century authorship functioned in a manner very different from what a reader in the 1920s, let alone the early twenty-first century, would expect.

The first such difference is Forster's subject, anonymity. A modern readership is accustomed to a biographical side to authorship, and builds a relationship around works accordingly. Even the exceptions, such as Thomas Pynchon or J. D. Salinger, prove the rule, in that their very silence leads to a readership which sees the author as the more iconic for not explaining their work. In such ways does personality fill modern artistic life, even in its absence.

By contrast, in the eighteenth century it was commonplace for non-dramatic works of literature, periodicals and journals, and much non-fiction to be published anonymously or pseudonymously. Pseudonyms included such cover-alls as 'By a Lady of Fashion', or 'By a Gentleman of Learning', clearly non-referential acronyms ('By X. Y. Z. '), and classically inspired character indices such as 'Veritas' or (notoriously) 'Junius'; many works claimed to be autobiographical, despite their obvious fiction.

The motives behind anonymity varied: with a far less developed process of rights around freedom of speech and publication, the vast numbers of 'Secret Histories', thinly-veiled *roman-a-clef* based around contemporary political intrigue and scandal, could not be printed with an author's name. Similarly, acknowledging authorship in the huge pamphlet literature of polemic would also be taboo, given that printers could be (and were) prosecuted and jailed for even publishing them.

Michael Mckeon has argued that anonymity also brought other advantages than avoiding censorship or the risk of libel; authors could develop and adopt different identities, and different levels of intimacy, when they did not need to worry about being known.² Anonymity should not be seen as an entirely passive process, but more of a choice, which authors could exploit. After all, it was often the case that the work's real authorship was known everywhere, or that anonymous publication was a way of attracting an audience through playing upon its mysterious origins. Perhaps the most famous example is *Gulliver's Travels*, which Swift introduced into the world in 1726 through a convoluted game which resembled a more modern clandestine meeting of spies: the publisher Benjamin Motte was given a sample in someone else's handwriting, from one 'Richard Sympson', and on accepting the work, had the rest delivered in equally cloak-and-dagger fashion, dropped at his house at night from a coach. As John Mullan remarks, the manner of the elaborate game may have been unusual, but the intention was not: 'Swift's use of anonymity to excite speculation about authorship, and about the author's designs, turns out to be typical rather than peculiar.'³

There are, then, different types of authorship behind the missing name or the alias. For every generic 'By a Patriot' or 'By A. B. C.' who were never identified, there were writers tacitly known to be the author of a work. Another related factor which now seems as remote as the siege of Troy was the problem of decorum, which was also gender specific. It was impolite for those of a certain standing to attempt to make a living from literature, so what was needed was a degree of nonchalance: a gentleman-poet could be allowed his vanity-published whimsies, yet for a lady to do so publicly would have been inappropriate and vulgar. The history of women's writing in the period is full of cases where an author's putting her name to her work would

have been impossible. One of the most significant is that of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, whose extraordinary career included a number of writings which could not be published until after her death in 1762 (most notably her *Turkish Embassy Letters*, which appeared in a pirated edition in 1763). Montagu's biographer has described how secrecy surrounds 'almost the entire story of her life as a writer – now secretly wrangling herself into print, now actively self-censoring'.⁴

Montagu put her name to no poem in her lifetime, but she did not need to, as others helpfully filled it in. She appeared anonymously in collections in 1720, and in 1747 *Six Town Eclogues* announced that they were 'by the Rt. Hon Lady M. W. M', not perhaps the most ambiguous of disguises, which would also be used in her contributions to the first volume of Robert Dodsley's hugely influential *Collection of Poems* the year after. Therefore despite it being unacceptable for an aristocratic woman to publish, her poems were, as Mullan declares, 'Hidden behind their anonymity, yet not hidden at all – her authorship never declared, but guessed at by knowing readers.'⁵

The complexities of Montagu's secret authorship are sometimes startling. *Verses Address'd to the Imitator of Horace* (1733), probably her most famous poem, a reproof to Alexander Pope, her former friend and now implacable enemy, was almost certainly written by her and Lord Hervey (and produced Pope's notorious destruction of Hervey's character, as 'Sporus' in the *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*). Yet the reader is only informed that it is written by that familiar sobriquet, 'A Lady', and as Grundy admits, 'no evidence now survives to prove a link with Montagu, despite long-lived rumours of a manuscript in which she asserted authorship.'⁶ The entire poem requires authorship to fulfil its meaning, beyond merely being a diatribe against Pope; yet its attribution can never be confirmed.

The mask of anonymity is often easy to see through, given authors where so much is known about their lives and writings as to make at least conditional attributions of their writings relatively straightforward. It becomes more of a problem with vast numbers of writers where another salient factor of authorship in the century is considered. This is fecundity. The eighteenth century was a great period for the boom of authorship as a commercial business, gradually replacing the older model of patronage and subscription, where you needed to solicit advance sales or financial reward in order to publish.⁷ The result is the vast increase of writers and published works, and authorship is no longer sanctioned (by divine inspiration or by a Maecenas wanting to encourage the arts) but instead becomes something akin to a career or trade.

Samuel Johnson embodies this shift, in many ways, as his rise to becoming the foremost British literary figure of his era was built upon paid journalism, and the often basic living it supplied. Until the award of a pension in 1762, Johnson experienced twenty-five years of the caprices of the literary world, and knew well how the attractions of authorship did not always translate into food on the table. He was thus well-placed, in 1753, to describe in an essay the present as the '*The Age of Authors*', in that 'perhaps, there never was a time, in which men of all degrees of ability, of every kind of education, of every profession and employment, were posting with ardour so general to the press.' The consequences of this are obvious: 'at all times more have been willing than have been able to write'. The desire for success, alas, is often greater than the talent to achieve it, Johnson warns, and hopes that aspirants 'would fix their thoughts upon some salutary considerations, which might repress their ardour for that reputation which not one of many thousands is fated to obtain'.⁸

Such warnings are found, but also rejected five years later in James Ralph's *The Case of Authors by Profession* (1758), a defence of the professional writer, which admonishes the literary establishment for putting them at the mercy of an intractable market: Ralph's disillusionment about authorship is considerable, and his notion of a typical author's fate gloomy: 'in Hope to be consider'd accordingly, they write, are flatter'd by their Friends; publish and are undone—Undone good and bad alike—These with Contempt, Those with Neglect, which is all the Difference between them.' Ralph ignores the Johnsonian advice to beware entering a world where the odds are stacked against you. He has heard it all before:

But then alas! We *are* Writers; consequently incapable of taking up any other Trade; and consequently, instead of Examples, can only bequeath our Advices and Warnings to others.⁹

It has been claimed of Ralph that 'the very act of publishing such a vigorous defense indicated the beginning of a more independent position for the professional writer'.¹⁰ But his stance is perhaps more ambivalent than this suggests: Ralph seems to claim that authors are diligent artisans who deserve a living, yet also following their only possible vocation, meaning presumably that they are writers by nature, more than choice, and thus all presumably deserve a reward.

Ralph is defensive (perhaps fearing the old accusation of creativity not being a proper job in itself), and also because he cannot follow the logic of his own argument to its conclusion. So many authors have been warned, yet still write for a market that they know cannot sustain them, and thus want some mechanism that evaluates their work. Even an arbitrary market supplies this, judging their writing and (in most cases) finding it wanting. Johnson would perhaps have suggested that a

carpenter who kept making tables that they could not sell should perhaps question their choice of career.¹¹ He was sympathetic to suffering, but also resolutely unsentimental about the value of his labour: it was worth what someone would pay for it; beyond this, he seems to have viewed the mystification of authorship as a bourgeois luxury.

This can be seen in the way Johnson regarded his own canon. The modern scholarly idea of authorship is complete, comprehensive in its view of the value of authorial materials: drafts, fragments, unattributed pieces and collaborations are all seen as useful and even necessary for a greater understanding of the author. Against this all-inclusive model, Johnson's attitude towards his own works was cavalier in the extreme. O M Brack, considering the problems of the canon of such a prolific writer in so many different fields, points up the difficulties:

Johnson's friends thought that he would not be able to remember all of his writings, even if he wanted a complete edition. In any case, did he wish every journalistic scrap he had written to be collected, or only those works by which he wished to be remembered? To what extent Johnson wished one or another of his works to be known is difficult to say: his name appears on the title page of only seven surviving works. Anonymous works, nevertheless, began to be attributed to him as early as 1741; hundreds of works have been attributed to him since.¹²

The leading problem of authorship, in this instance, is that the author refuses to determine the extent of their works, and has little interest in doing so. It seems entirely likely that Johnson thought that having sold a work of journalism, it was no

longer his to authorise; moreover, given the ephemeral status of much writing, it hardly mattered who claimed ownership of it.

This is something of a reproof to modern interest in authorial property, and battles for copyright as the key signifier of authorship in the eighteenth century. For Mark Rose, 'the representation of the author as a creator who is entitled to profit from his intellectual labour came into being through a blending of literary and legal discourses in the context of the contest over perpetual copyright.'¹³ What Johnson's example shows is that this desire to be recognised as an author, and to profit from it, co-exists with an awareness that much work in the burgeoning world of print and literary journalism was neither attributed nor especially intended to be handed down to posterity; the sparsity of works with Johnson's name on the title-page in his lifetime indicate his pragmatism, after all, if authorship did not find an audience, then what matter how the author is expressed or represented? Even his enormous literary personality was subject to the whims and needs of the market. Equally, his acknowledgment of those few works, from *The Vanity of Human Wishes* onwards, may suggest their significance to his view of himself as an author, leading to a putative Johnsonian canon of gradations of importance, and very different to the contemporary desire to capture every word and work.

2. Poetry and the Authorial Self

Johnson's prescient warning of there being too many contemporary authors to possibly sustain a readership is in part a result of his awareness of the workings of Grub-Street, and the chaotic world of hack authorship, where making a living often came at the expense of literary respectability, and where the quality of work was often an irrelevance. In the 1730s, Johnson had known Richard Savage (1697-8-

1743), doomed bohemian poet and (in his own mind at least) a frustrated nobleman, cheated out of his rightful inheritance. Savage was immortalised in Johnson's *Life of Savage* (1744) a notably rare example of the biography of an unsuccessful man and author. His intimacy with the Grub-Street world of gossip and scandal is best seen in his prose pamphlet of 1729, *An Author to be Lett*, in which the narrator (the wonderfully named Iscariot Hackney) boasts about the many ways in which he has conned and inveigled his way in his career as Grub-Street author. As the title proclaims, Hackney is shamelessly for sale, to anyone:

I have tried all Means (but what Fools call honest ones) for a Livelihood. I offer'd my Service for a secret Spy to the State; but had not Credit enough even for that. When it was indeed very low with me, I printed Proposals for a Subscription to my works, received Money, and gave Receipts without any intention of delivering the Book.¹⁴

The trick of taking money from subscribers, then never finishing the book, was a familiar one in Grub-Street: Samuel Boyse, a contemporary of Savage, did this repeatedly, infamously pawned all his clothes and had to write covered only with a blanket, and even pretended to be dead in order to raise funds (a stunt which quickly lost its novelty).¹⁵

Such extreme representations of authorship were a reflection of the glut of contemporary writing in the expanded commercial marketplace, and the ways in which this was perceived as a threat to the standards and values of literary culture. This threat was of long-standing: Swift's deeply unreliable narrator in *A Tale of a Tub* (1704) celebrates (and thus parodies) the mass production of mediocre writing by Swift's enemies, eagerly published by cynical booksellers with their eyes only on

profit. The most systematic attack on degraded modern culture would be Pope's the *Dunciad* (1728) developed from a mock-epic denunciation of literary life, into the Variorum edition (1729), with mock-commentary that sought to increase the level of ridicule and contempt (carried over into its later additions and revisions in the 1740s). Pedantic editors and hopelessly prolix and bellicose poets competed with unscrupulous booksellers to triumph in stupidity and venality, in a magnificently horrible cultural apocalypse.

Pope, as author, presents himself as standing above such corruptions. Bad art is infectious, like the values it represents (greed, lack of taste and judgment, a misguided sense of self-importance), but Pope is somehow able to look down upon such follies. It has become a modern critical commonplace to remark that Pope is more implicated in the world of the dunces than he admits: *The Dunciad* is energised by his surreal descriptions of their awfulness; he too, as a Catholic denied public office, wrote for money (and made a fortune from his translation of Homer).¹⁶ Furthermore, evaluative criticism (like elite culture) is no longer looked on favourably: many early critics bemoaned Pope's wasting his time paying attention to such inconsequential writers as the dunces; modern criticism admonishes him for not realising that he is no better than them. It is an odd reversal, and one that ignores the ways in which Pope articulates his distance from the objects of his satire and the marketplace.

He does this largely through presenting a version of the self. To a post-Romantic readership, expressions of the authorial self (in Rousseau, Wordsworth, and beyond) often relate to emotional revelation and a search for authenticity – the meaning of experience investigated through the act of writing. Pope would view this as childish in its simplicity, and plays a less ingenuous game, where the self is

deceitful, cannot be fully expressed, and will anyway be wilfully misunderstood by those enemies who have spent Pope's entire literary career traducing, belittling and travestying him and his work. The alternative is to present himself as a sort of idealised author, an exaggeration which will nonetheless even out some of the equally hyperbolic slanders and libels directed towards him.

This idea, of checks and balances regulating the sort of authorial image that is projected to posterity, is common to the later poetry of Pope and Swift. In the former, it results in an elevated scorn, a grandiose, self-righteous fury. In the *Epistle to Arbuthnot*, a poem assembled from passages and portraits written over many years, the concluding self-portrait is defined by its distance from the sketches of pettiness and self-interest that have preceded it: Pope is not complacent, vain and jealous like Addison, or contemptibly two-faced and maliciously contradictory, like Lord Hervey. Instead he is

Not Fortune's Worshipper, nor Fashion's Fool,
Not Lucre's Madman, nor Ambition's Tool,
Not proud, nor servile, be one Poet's praise
That, if he pleas'd, he pleas'd by manly ways;
That Flatt'ry, even to Kings, he held a shame,
And thought a Lye in Verse or Prose the same¹⁷

It is an almost inhumanly high-minded portrait of moral rectitude, somewhat at odds with the jocularly of the poem's opening (where Pope dismisses and mocks his enemies with a tone of comic exasperation), and to many readers seems not a little in love with itself. Yet this raises the question of whether such pride would be better

hidden behind false modesty. Pope's great achievement in the way he represents his authorial persona is to anticipate objections (to his vanity, *amour propre*, and self-importance) and use them as a reflection on the culture which he is dissecting – it is the world of dullness that makes him realise his own worth, and it is the defamatory attacks upon him that require him to retaliate with such a version of himself, given that objectivity is out of the question.

Sometimes he overplays his hand. The two dialogues which make up the *Epilogue to the Satires* are inhabited by a version of Pope so possessed with the apocalyptic ruin of his country as to distort the nature of the complaint and his involvement. The first concludes by bemoaning that

All, all look up with reverential Awe,
On Crimes that scape, or triumph o'er the Law:
While Truth, Worth, Wisdom, daily they decry—
'Nothing is sacred now but Villainy.'

Yet may this Verse (if such a Verse remain)
Show there was one who held it in disdain.

(*Poems*, p.694)

The final thought is a wonderfully subdued coda, in a much lower key to the preceding conflagration. It presents the author as a lone figure of probity, bravely willing to stand up in the face of this universal collapse of all values, but on reflection both the solitary rebellion and the collapse are exaggerated, in placing Pope's authority against the whole decaying kingdom.

This hyperbole makes for magnificent poetry, but the vision of the author is seen through the distorting mirror of wish-fulfilment. In the second dialogue, the Pope as author again raises the stakes to the highest point, when asked by the interlocutor:

F. You're strangely proud.

P. So proud, I am no Slave:

So impudent, I own myself no Knave:

So odd, my Country's Ruin makes me grave.

Yes, I am proud; I must be proud to see

Men not afraid of God, afraid of me

(*Poems*, p.701)

The rousing result nearly over balances, as Pope's love of argument and self-defined role as moral arbiter veers into a sort of narcissism. One of the most self-reflexive of all authors, endlessly attuned to the different ways in which he could portray himself in his work, and add to its nuances in so doing; here, even with his usual refinement of effects (such as the rare triplet, to hammer home the anger) the self-portrait becomes carried far away from Pope's usual charm, nonchalant wit, and controlling sense of distance. The result is an outburst dangerously close to the vanity delineated so coruscatingly in his enemies.

In his poetry, Swift's persona works in a different register: he almost always writes in octosyllabics, and works through inventive rhymes and a looser sense of construction than the more exact and precise heroic couplet, with its necessity for parallels and antithesis. The tetrameter line allows Swift the impression of a casual

voice, and he is also (self-consciously, of course) casual about his poetic role, which is often presented as marginal, and a sideshow.

The most famous example of such mock self-depreciation is his *Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift, D. S. P. D.*, finally published in 1739 in an authorised text in Dublin, after being gutted in an English edition. Parts of it had started in *The Life and Genuine Character of Dr Swift*, a poem which it appears, somewhat bizarrely, Swift published himself clandestinely, in order to garner publicity for the subsequent *Verses* as a superior version of his mock-obituary.¹⁸ The poem is of course far more than that: the relatively simple irony is of an author pretending to present his own posthumous life, whilst the reader knows it is written by the author. Within this structure (the extended opening belief in *schadenfreude* as a ruling passion, and the prevalence of human irrationality), Swift is eager to show how modern culture treats real authorship, though in a much less highly-charged manner than Pope. A year passes after his imagined death, and

Where's now this Fav'rite of *Apollo*?
Departed; *and his Works must follow*.
Must undergo the common Fate;
His Kind of Wit is out of Date.

The genius of the poem lies in its quietly positing fashion as an inexorable arbiter, whilst making quietly clear its utter inadequacy (a reflection of the superficiality of the audience). There is no choice in the matter, and the dunces triumph with a whimper.

Authorship in this context is thus a temporary state, a condition of luck or the demi-monde and not a consequence of any rarefied talent. When the bookseller

Bernard Lintot is asked for Swift's works, and guffaws at the naiveté of the question, it is the very impersonality of authorship in this literary production line that is most striking:

“To fancy they cou'd live a Year!
I find you're but a Stranger here.
The Dean was famous in his Time;
And had a Kind of Knack at Rhyme:
His way of Writing now is past;
The Town hath got a better Taste”¹⁹

The subdued manner in which the whole authorial presence of Swift has disappeared (naturally enough, as far as Lintot is concerned) is masterful, and almost disturbing in its painting a world in which only trends, and not value, are relevant. It is saved by the self-reflexive in-jokes – the alliterative ‘kind of Knack’ which its deliberately mimetically awkward sound, the ways in which Lintot is genuinely amazed that anyone would care for a book not absolutely modern – and by the jauntiness of the poetry, which prevent a wider cultural melancholy from dominating.

The *Verses* are still contentious for the degree to which Swift has his self-reflexive cake and eats it too, in the last third of the poem, where for an hundred and fifty lines, Swift imagines ‘One quite indiff'rent in the Cause’, drawing his ‘Character impartial’. The debate over how literally to take this section has never really ceased: it has been seen as deliberately and obviously ironic, as sincere and homiletic, as literal in its vanity, and (probably the most commonly held position today) as a

counterpoint to the earlier less flattering voices in the poem.²⁰ For Swift creates this 'impartial' figure, and puts praise like the following into his mouth:

“Perhaps I may allow, the Dean
Had too much Satyr in his Vein;
And seem'd determin'd not to starve it,
Because no Age could more deserve it;
Yet, Malice never was his Aim;
He lash'd the Vice but spar'd the Name.
No Individual could resent,
Where Thousands equally were meant.”

(*Poems*, p.571)

Swift's excesses are balanced by the necessity of the times, and further qualified by his moderation, and sense of satirical justice: he did not pick on individuals, did not mean to hurt for the sake of it, and attacked types when attacking people.

You do not need to be Socrates to be able to pull most of these odd claims apart, and to question the speaker's gullibility: as well as lashing vices, the poem repeatedly names Swift's enemies, and his many other victims would have found little consolation in being informed that they were a metonym for thousands of others, who were equally foolish, venal, or the like. This odd, idealised version of Swift that the speaker presents is disturbing because it cannot be easily reconciled with the idea of the author as being immune to such flattery, let alone constructing an elaborate fictional artifice in order to receive it.

To be backhandedly garlanded with such praises suggests an egotism and vanity out of keeping with most impressions of Swift's mordant character. The poem

suggests that on one level he wanted to celebrate and be celebrated for his authorship and other achievements, yet also wanted this immodesty to stay hidden. Authorship is a kind of act, where Swift surrounds himself with self-mockery and the potential for hubris, whilst making clear by the end that his authority will have the final word, under the conceit of the poem's eulogy being just one competing version of him. After all, the poem suggests, isn't any expression of personality itself a mask and an act, whether by the author or the man? It has the Swiftian concern with stripping bare the difference between the literary and the literal.

How seriously to take such a virtuoso performance is the problem. After post-modernity, and decades of celebrating authorial playfulness in far less coherent works, Swift's prescience tends to appeal to a modern audience; moreover, it is not easy to take the poem in a gravely enquiring spirit. As Claude Rawson puts it, 'the lines are framed in a context of mild but distinct self-mockery, as though Swift wanted you to think he was not taking himself quite so seriously.'²¹ On the other hand, the poem's indulgence in its authorial playfulness can still leave a rather dubious impression.

Both Pope and Swift viewed authorship as malleable, and created specifically heightened versions of their authorial images for posterity. In his repeated manipulation of authorship and its self-consciousness in his writing, Swift anticipated and massively influenced the next two generations, most particularly in prose, where a certain strain is unimaginable without him.

3. The Novel and the self-reflexive Author

With regard to prose fiction, it is worth reiterating the earlier point about anonymity being the accepted norm. As James Raven evinces, 'it is clear that the overwhelming

majority of the English novels of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were published without attribution of authorship'.²² This was not necessarily to do with politics, or pornography, being rather an accepted convention, and a necessity only in some cases. Of course, in a more didactic age, fiction, uneasily separated from the more licentious romances, might not have always been acknowledged by its authors.

As the century progressed there was a demarcation, with novelists either striving to remove as much evidence of authorship from their pages as possible, or indulging in the sort of self-conscious awareness of their own presence behind the text so beloved of Swift. It will be recalled that Addison and Steele, when taking philosophy into clubs and coffee houses, left Mr Spectator himself curiously negated of many of the traits of authorship; if his personality intrudes into the work, it is an accident, given that he is always trying not to be noticed: 'Thus I live in the World, rather as a Spectator of Mankind, than as one of the Species' he proclaims in the very first number. Even more intriguingly, there is a reason why he is so reticent about his biography: 'I have given the Reader just so much of my History and Character, as to let him see I am not altogether unqualified for the Business I have undertaken.'²³ Authorship is utilitarian, and he will reveal enough to show his competence and skill. This was, of course, more honoured in the breach than the observance, as *The Spectator* depended upon the small, whimsical but telling pointers of Mr Spectator in creating the intimacy with which Sir Roger de Coverley, Andrew Freeport and the rest were received. He was an authorial surrogate who could not absent himself from the text.

Samuel Richardson is a similar example of an author who supposedly strove to hide in the background, through his artifice of being the 'Editor' of the letters that

he published as novels, rather than their author. In Richardson's case, though, he would also simultaneously mug for the camera, metaphorically, through his prefatory remarks, and the indices, appendices, and apparatuses that he added to his works, often over years, to make sure the ultimately improving message was clear for all to see.

Despite the achievement of *Clarissa*, where the very existential uncertainty of characters is brought to life with extraordinarily vivid life and drama, Richardson was the most unlikely advertisement for authorial negative capability; in his 'Preface' to *Pamela* (1741) he stresses in peculiarly passive-aggressive fashion, that the '*following Letters*' all '*have their Foundation in Truth and Nature*'. It is an ambiguous statement, implying that they are true; or that they are based around something true and natural; or that they are fictional, but do their best to approximate. There is another reason to celebrate: '*an Editor may reasonably be supposed to judge with an Impartiality which is rarely to be met with in an Author towards his own Works.*'²⁴ This is humbug, and a fiction, of course, as even the reader of 1741 knew the role of 'Editor' is a conceit, but it may also be wondered whether Richardson thought it objectively true on any terms, or maybe was even indulging in one of his rare jokes, amongst the display of false modesty. Ultimately though, he found a winning idea, in that the faux-authenticity of his epistolary narratives is to some degree based upon the supposed removal of authorial intrusion or narration, and this fake-impartiality became the imprimatur of his authorship.

The opposite of Richardson's mock-editor, with its careful maintenance of the pretence of fiction, is the type of prose narrative where the author cannot stop intruding – supposedly by accident, or incidentally, to offer some digression, or in some other way that draws attention to both the artifice of fiction as a supposed

representation of experience, and the conceit of the author as impartial observer, rather than creator. The intrusive author reaches one peak of sophistication in Fielding, and perhaps teeters into decadence with Sterne; the tradition depends upon Swift, and particularly *A Tale of a Tub*, with its series of fake and yet actual dedications and prefaces, amongst them the supposed 'Bookseller to the Reader', who knows very little indeed: '*As to the Author, I can give no manner of satisfaction*', we are told, to the extent that '*whether the Work received his last Hand, or, whether he intended to fill up the defective Places, is like to remain a secret.*' So this work of gaps and fragments, a dual narrative combining an allegory of the Reformation with digressions on religious extremism, the deficiencies of modern authors, and madness, is apparently virtually anonymous, except that it is possessed by the most invasive of authors: 'I profess to *your Highness*, in the Integrity of my Heart, that what I am going to say is literally true this Minute I am writing', he tells 'Prince Posterity' in one of the dedications, a statement of his own instability, a mockery of the unity of meaning in any communication, and a hint and taunt that there is always more to his tale than meets the eye, just as he challenges the reader to discover what is behind the ellipses and asterisks that litter the text at some of its most important points.²⁵

In *Tom Jones*, Fielding takes this sort of contrived intimate relationship between author and reader and exploits its false familiarity, adopting the very Swiftian technique of appearing to offer a choice, whilst leading the reader by the nose. The central paradox of representing reality through the always deferred effects of fiction is burlesqued, and all the carpentry of the narrative revealed through the image of the author as a supposed benevolent dictator, as he himself declares:

[...] for as I am, in reality, the Founder of a new Province of Writing, so I am at liberty to make what Laws I please therein. And these Laws, my Readers, whom I consider as my Subjects, are bound to believe in and to obey; with which that they may readily and cheerfully comply, I do hereby assure them that I shall principally regard their Ease and Advantage in all such Institutions: for I do not, like a *jure divino* Tyrant, imagine that they are my Slaves, or my Commodity. I am, indeed, set over them for their own Good only, and was created for their use, and not they for mine.²⁶

Fielding's irony relies on specious, superficially acceptable eloquence which quickly and deliberately unravels: the reader here is successively compelled to obey an arbitrary ruler, whilst simultaneously a free subject, told that their every wish will be considered by the author created for their benefit, whilst having no control over the course the narrative will take. This mocking conflict between paternalism and free will allows the author to layer his irony: the relation between author and reader is neither wholly untrue (the author does act for the reader's ultimate benefit) or true (the reader's choice is an illusion); the author is a tyrant, in that he is bound to be obeyed. Fielding's narrator, after all, is the first to point up any disobedience, as in the well-known example of why the saintly Allworthy cannot see the faults of the egregious tutor Thwackum:

the Reader is greatly mistaken, if he conceives that *Thwackum* appeared to *Mr. Allworthy* in the same Light as he doth to him in this History; and he is as much deceived, if he imagines that the most intimate Acquaintance which he himself could have had with that Divine, would have informed him of those

Things which we, from our Inspiration, are enabled to open and discover. Of Readers who, from such conceits as these, condemn the Wisdom or Penetration of *Mr. Allworthy*, I shall not scruple to say, that they make a very bad and ungrateful Use of that Knowledge which we have communicated to them. (p.135)

The reader is metaphorically cuffed around the head for an interpretation that the author has put there; the author presents the narrative as intricate, delicate, and ultimately only fully intelligible to himself. Readers are placed in the invidious position of their interpretation always being insufficient and inadequate, as only the omniscient author-figure knows all. This guarantees inference and innuendo, as the only thing clear is that there is always more than the reader can understand.

These authorial asides allow Fielding's narrator to break down the apparently formal contract between writer and reader, and then ironically re-impose it all the more strongly (as the reader knows its contrivance, and is forced to play along). In some respects a false friend, the author here is also an allegory of the practice of reading (marked by distraction, misinterpretation, and fatigue) anticipating and correcting the reader's responses.

The image of the author as janus-faced, alternate despot and jester (the latter term being especially pertinent) reaches its apogee with Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, the very title of which, with its *Life and Opinions*, undercuts its claim to authority, and anticipates the subjective whimsy which forms the content and attitude of the narrative. Shandyism as a mode of thought, with its relation to sensibility, requires the author to be transparent and even celebratory about their inefficacy, solipsism, and artifice. The result is (oddly for a novel so often depicted in

generalisations as wholly original and *sui generis*) a kind of decadence, the end of the line from Swift and Fielding. The narrative ironies are familiar, but taken a stage further, such as the 'Author's Preface' arriving in the middle of the third volume, where 'it must speak for itself', the one thing Sterne's narrative, controlled by its supposedly chaotic author, is compulsively doing, and can never be allowed to do.²⁷

Sterne's Tristram as author-figure follows Fielding: rather than breaking into the narrative, he never leaves it, taunting and encouraging the reader. He shares their boredom and winks at their discomfort:

The corporal was just then setting in with the story of his brother Tom and the Jew's widow: the story went on—and on—it had episodes in it—it came back, and went on—and on again; there was no end of it—the reader found it very long— (p.583)

It is this mockery of his own narrative, the author's repeated nudging reminders and hints that the endless stories being commenced will never reach closure, that gives Sterne's author-figure his sometimes irritating distinction. The author is a ceaseless entertainer, always self-consciously aware of the fickle attention span of the reader, which he appears to share. Walter Shandy's supremely dull and unfinishable key-to-all-mythologies of child education is a bitter pill for the reader which Tristram tries to sugar:

Doctor Slop being called out to look at a cataplasm he had ordered, it gave my father an opportunity of going on with another chapter in the *Tristram-paedia*.—Come! cheer up, my lads; I'll shew you land—for when we have tugged through that chapter, the book shall not be opened again this twelve-month.—Huzza—! (p.393)

The conceit of the readers as sailors desperate for relief works as part of the faux-relinquishing of authority by Tristram, and he is complicit in the way they read.

The necessary frivolity of Shandyism as a creed covers over the substance it is always evading: tragedy, suffering and bereavement are best dealt with by a retreat into comedy, and its embrace of the absurd. The author, ultimately, looms so large as to blot such considerations out, for the most part: Sterne's novel has so often been celebrated as a harbinger of modernity's obsessions with self-referentiality that the wider meaning behind Shandyism, beyond its being an authorial pose, has been obscured or ignored.

4. The Triumph of Biography

The repeated identification in his lifetime of Sterne with Yorick as sentimental jester and man of feeling, encouraged by the author, points to the importance of biography as a means of identification with literature. Interpretation often began from such premises (necessarily so with authors like Pope and Swift presenting different shades of autobiography through their poetry). What changes by the end of the eighteenth century is that a larger readership made the relationship between biography and authorship all the stronger.

The leading example, of course, is the most famous biography in English: from its first appearance in 1791, Boswell's *Life of Johnson* so memorably delineated its subject as to (regrettably) obviate generations of readers from looking closely at his writings, beyond a few specimens. Boswell's Samuel Johnson became a more representative idea of the author than his own authorship.

At the same time, one of the most biographically vexed of all literary works finally entered the public imagination: Shakespeare's *Sonnets* were the object of disdain for most of the eighteenth century, and not reprinted alongside his plays. When Edmond Malone reprinted them in 1780, part of his rehabilitation included a description of their obvious homo-erotic content. His sometime friend, enemy and editorial rival George Steevens differed as to the value of the *Sonnets*, notoriously remarking in 1793 (when excluding them from his latest edition) that 'the strongest act of Parliament that could be framed, would fail to compel readers into their service', and claiming that if Shakespeare had only written these poems, he would be as little remembered as his contemporary, sonneteer Thomas Watson.²⁸ What Steevens failed to realise was that the biographical subtext of the *Sonnets* would ensure their popularity, adding the attraction of a sort of hidden key to the work and life of Britain's greatest author, to their poetic merits.

In 1797 the lawyer George Chalmers wrote a lengthy defence of the supposed authenticity of the Shakespearean forgeries of William Henry Ireland, and also described how the *Sonnets* are not in fact addressed to a man, but instead to Queen Elizabeth. As Samuel Schoenbaum wryly noted, 'Absurd as that position is, Chalmers has initiated a significant and ominous trend in offering the first autobiographical reading of the *Sonnets*.'²⁹ The hundreds of fruitless inquiries into the identities of the characters of the *Sonnets* which have followed in the last two centuries support Schoenbaum's trepidation: the idea of authorship, in terms of the relationship between the author and their writing, was shifting. For some readers, biographical mythology became a substitute for literature, and the genius of authorship regarded as a concomitant of fame or notoriety, rather than the other way round. The expectations on the author in 1800, with regard to the representation of

their personality in and beyond their work, were, for better and worse, subtly but significantly different to those of the often anonymous figures at the beginning of the century.

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- ³ John Mullan, *Anonymity: a Secret History of English Literature* (London: Faber & Faber 2007), p.20. On *Gulliver's Travels*, see pp.10-20.
- ⁴ Isobel Grundy, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: Comet of the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.xix.
- ⁵ Mullan, *Anonymity*, p.53.
- ⁶ Grundy, *Lady Mary*, p.338. For a discussion of the uses of the alias, see Margaret Ezell, "'By a Lady': The Mask of the Feminine in Restoration, Early Eighteenth-Century Print Culture", in *The Faces of Anonymity* ed. Robert Griffin (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), pp.63-79.
- ⁷ See Brean Hammond, *Professional Imaginative Writing in England, 1670-1740: "Hackney for Bread"* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp.5-6.
- ⁸ *Adventurer* 115, in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, Vol.2, The Idler and Adventurer* ed. W. J. Bate, J. M. Bullitt, L. F. Powell (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), pp.457, 459.
- ⁹ James Ralph, *The Case of Authors by Profession* (London, 1758), p.71. pp.64-5.
- ¹⁰ Robert W. Kenny, 'Ralph's Case of Authors: Its Influence on Goldsmith and Isaac D'Israeli,' *PMLA*, 52 (1937), 104-113; p.109.
- ¹¹ In 1763, with Boswell chary of discussing the flaws of David Mallet's play *Elvira*, Johnson told him that 'You may abuse a tragedy, though you cannot write one. You may scold a carpenter who has made you a bad table, though you cannot make a table. It is not your trade to make tables.' James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, rev. L. F. Powell, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934-50), vol. 1, p. 473.
- ¹² O M Brack jnr, 'The Works of Samuel Johnson and the Canon', in *Samuel Johnson after Three Hundred Years*, ed. Greg Clingham and Philip Smallwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp.246-61; p.250.
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- ¹⁴ Richard Savage, *An Author to be Lett* (London, 1729), p.9.
- ¹⁵ For Boyse, see Adam Rounce, *Fame and Failure* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp.12-14.
- ¹⁶ For such attitudes, see the Introduction to *More Solid Learning: Essays on Pope's Dunciad*, ed. Claudia M. Thomas and Catherine Ingrassia, (London: Associated University Press, 2000), pp.13-31.
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