

Women and Property  
in the Eighteenth-Century  
English Novel



APRIL LONDON

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## Introduction

What's *Property*? dear Swift! you see it alter  
From you to me, from me to Peter Walter,  
Or, in a mortgage, prove a Lawyer's share,  
Or, in a jointure, vanish from the Heir,  
Or in pure Equity (the Case not clear)  
The Chanc'ry takes your rents for twenty year:  
At best, it falls to some ungracious Son  
Who cries, my father's damn'd, and all's my own.  
Shades, that to Bacon could retreat afford,  
Become the portion of a booby Lord;  
And Hemsley once proud Buckingham's delight,  
Slides to a Scriv'ner or a City Knight,  
Let Lands and Houses have what Lords they will,  
Let Us be fix'd, and our own Masters still.

(Pope, *Imitations of Horace*: Sat. II. ii. 167–80)<sup>1</sup>

Pope's enlargement on the terms of his key question – “what's *Property*? dear Swift!” – enlists the discourse of humanism in order to argue for the kinds of virtue possible in a corruptible world. A key part of his strategy in defining virtue involves distinguishing the multiple meanings attaching to property. Considered in its public role as the means by which material value passes from one generation to the next, property “alter[s]” in a process whose degeneration follows a line from father to “ungracious Son,” the “booby Lord” who betrays his father's delight. But Pope's lines also distinguish the mobility of real property from a capacity for self-possession that is both “fix'd” and sustained by the companionship of the like-minded. This is not the self-possession of the bourgeois subject – “Scriv'ner” or “City Knight” – with his characteristic acquisitiveness and malleable personality. It is instead a form of identity that reasserts the standard of behavior implicit in the political paradigm of classical republicanism, now threatened in these “*South-sea*

days" (line 133). In the complex metalepsis of the final line, Swift and Pope will be "Lords" over the only unsullied variant of "Lands and Houses" that remains to such virtuous individuals: they will be "Masters" of a self that has assumed the "fix'd" characteristics of real property. In short, Pope's reanimation of the Horatian ideal envisions the "middle state" (line 61) as the exclusive preserve of an exemplary masculine virtue that flourishes in the "blessings Temperance can bring" (line 66).

In this brief excerpt, we see eighteenth-century understandings of property played out in a number of different registers: identity, virtue, economics, and the real property of "Lands and Houses." As a figure signifying these complex terms and interactions, property has been interrogated by political theorists, historians of ideas, literary critics, and economists.<sup>2</sup> What is missing from many of these narratives – as it is (at least explicitly) from Pope's – is the presence of women. This book is about the ways in which the signal importance of property to the eighteenth century is both affirmed and complicated when women are included in the account.<sup>3</sup> My particular interest is the form that contemporaries most often saw as feminocentric, the novel. Representations of women in fiction provided a vehicle for the debate concerning the relationship of property (the ownership of things) to propriety (the possession of one's own person). That debate as conducted within the novel had significant implications for the disciplinary terms of such discourses as philosophical history, aesthetics, and political theory.

In developing this claim, I draw on a vocabulary of literary and political tropes that the eighteenth century itself inherited and then adapted. The intersecting languages of genre – pastoral and georgic – and of political theory – civic humanism and bourgeois individualism – are key to the emergent form of the novel. They provided structures for confronting and containing change and for exploring and delimiting the possibilities of self-making. And in their confirmation of the profound connectedness and mutually informing influence of contemporary discourses, these tropes also attest to the appeal of more inclusive interpretative frameworks for literary criticism.

Representations of women in the eighteenth century are central to the ways in which the culture mediated conflicting interpretations of how identity is made, expressed, refined, and also, when necessary, repressed. The pivotal role they play in the novel follows from the fact that women have existence in fiction both as particularized characters and as points of reference for a range of concerns attaching to the



relation of identity to property. Such alignments of women and property in part reflect contemporary legal definitions which virtually equate the two and so establish women's susceptibility to male definition. But they also, and more intricately, speak to the ways in which eighteenth-century novels textualize male anxiety about social and economic change. In examining these altered relations of property to person as they are formally rendered in fiction through the intersections of gender, genre, and political paradigm, I consider a range of texts, some canonic, others less familiar. In an effort to suggest, as nearly as possible, the widening scope of contemporary understandings of property as these are realized in novel settings, I include in Parts II and III colonial narratives, utopian fictions, and depictions of imagined communities. And in order to test the argument that representations of women are indeed central to the period's conceptualizing of property, regardless of authorial gender, I discuss both male- and female-authored fiction. Before offering a more detailed account of the book, however, I want to consider briefly the ways in which the paradigms of political philosophy and of genre to which I referred earlier inform my reading of eighteenth-century fiction.

#### POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY AND ITS ANALOGIES

Contemporary anxieties about change, identity, and social role were often expressed in terms that conflated gender and property. The oppositions that emerged from this unease can be summarized by turning again to Pope's *Imitations of Horace*. The constancy of the self-possession which will allow Pope and Swift to be their "own Masters still," the passage suggests, was once preserved by an elite order (unquestionably masculine) whose authority derived from the inheritance of real property. The bourgeois subject – "Scriv'ner" or "City Knight" – is, conversely, depicted through reference to qualities that align him with women and the marketplace: he profits from the conversion of real to imagined property that can be made through the chicanery of lawyers to "vanish from the Heir"; he is interested, speculative, unfixed.

Historians have developed the complex of notions to which Pope and his contemporaries refer by privileging one or the other of two contrastive structures: classical republicanism and Lockean liberalism. Joyce Appleby and Isaac Kramnick are among those who, in arguing the primacy of the latter position, assert that the bourgeois individualism of the eighteenth-century middle class is rooted in a seventeenth-century

political discourse centered on private rights and competition.<sup>4</sup> Opposition to this model comes primarily from J. G. A. Pocock. He maintains that antipathy to the commercial, oligarchic, and imperial administration that emerged after 1688 revived a civic humanist discourse in which virtue appears the prerogative of a landed class whose disinterestedness is secured by their possession of property.<sup>5</sup> In literary studies, most notably in the work of John Barrell, these terms have contributed significantly to our understanding of early Augustan modes.<sup>6</sup> But in relation to eighteenth-century novels, which worry relentlessly about the mobility of both persons and property, the explanatory force of civic humanism is somewhat diminished. Extrapolating from Appleby or Kramnick a model that posited an invariable progressivism would be no less partial: contemporary fiction after all observes with discomfort and not equanimity the loss of the familiar. But however limited republican and liberal models appear in isolation, if we do not insist on seeing them as singular and exclusive, they have much to tell us about the characteristic concerns of eighteenth-century fiction. For, in fact, novelistic representations of property are mutually, if unequally, informed by the paradigms of both bourgeois individualism and civic humanism. Together with the generic structures of pastoral and georgic, they afford contexts for fiction's rendering of identity: Lockean liberalism for the charting of the processes of self-making which stand at the center of many novelistic plots, civic humanism for the resolution or displacement of disruptiveness through the novel's closing emphasis on the value of real property.

#### GENRE: PASTORAL, GEORGIC, NOVEL

Large numbers of eighteenth-century novels shape their plots in accordance with the generic assumptions provided by two classical antecedents, pastoral and georgic, that again define selfhood in relation to property. The currency pastoral and georgic retain in eighteenth-century literature has much to do with the work that genre itself does in providing a matrix for problem-solving, a way of rendering intelligibility through characteristic and historically specific structures.<sup>7</sup> The novelists' incorporation of georgic and pastoral conventions within their fictions attests to their desire to participate in the continuity of a classical tradition whose subject was the individual's relation to leisure and labor. But for those engaged in the writing of novels, intelligibility also demanded that existing discursive practices should be attentive to the

unprecedented, the range of experiences believed to have been formerly unrepresented.

Classical literature served these two intersecting needs, providing models (as the long history of their adjustment to particular cultural contexts affirms) that were both powerful and flexible. In the seventeenth century, georgic and pastoral had both undergone significant transformations of meaning, transformations that would further their ideological usefulness as points of reference within the novel. The preference for georgic over pastoral that is so marked a feature of Augustan poetry (one that effectively reversed the relative status of each in the previous century) depended on economic and political affiliations that came to define the opposition between the two modes.<sup>8</sup> James Thomson's 1748 *Castle of Indolence* emblemizes the distinction in its contrast of "that soul-enfeebling wizard, Indolence" and the "Knight of Arts and Industry" whose vigor resists his antagonist's "luxury" and "torpid sluggishness" in order to bring to "new-created men" the joys of labor.<sup>9</sup> Pastoral sloth is here defeated by georgic industriousness in ways that confirm the adaptability of the Virgilian original to the problems associated with the new economic order. Georgic enables a purposive construction of the uncertainties inherent in a world increasingly imagined in transactional terms. As John Chalker writes, "[o]n the one hand [georgic] promotes awareness of the instability of civilized values, and on the other the ethic of work, and of the need to build patiently by mastering the fundamental resources of life."<sup>10</sup>

For those who wished to affirm the values to which georgic gave expression – the civilizing capacity of labor, the vindication of empire, an ideal of progress – the mode continued to provide an admirable vehicle. But those same qualities appeared to many as ciphers of degeneration, as a leveling of necessary distinction, a dangerous engagement with colonial otherness, a wilful abandonment of the civic humanist ideal of disinterestedness. Hence georgic and pastoral are transformed in the eighteenth-century novel from contrastive modes to combative ones that are both mutually informing and antagonistic. This shift signals not only the loss of their straightforward denotative function as the first two terms in the Virgilian triad (pastoral, georgic, and epic), but also the destabilizing of the distinct scope of their representational spheres (respectively leisure, work, and martial heroism). Because their meanings emerge from such defined positional contexts, pastoral and georgic in contemporary novels always implicitly invoke the competing mode. For those writing within the georgic mode, pastoral thus comes to

stand for an effeminate, pleasure-seeking aristocracy; conversely, for those who align themselves with pastoral, georgic signals the undifferentiated embrace of change and male acquisitiveness, qualities associated with a new middling class.

#### GENRE, GENDER, AND THE NOVEL

When eighteenth-century novelists draw on the conventions of pastoral and georgic, their appropriations of poetic genres are informed by correlative assumptions about social identity. Central to these conjectures are questions of gender. Within mid-century culture, as numbers of critics have detailed from a wide range of perspectives, the place of women was highly contested.<sup>11</sup> Among the most persuasive of the accounts of the critical role played by gender in discourse formation is that of Nancy Armstrong.<sup>12</sup> Her argument about the novel's encoding of social processes accepts as fundamental the gendering of subjectivity as female. Reading back from the paradigms of nineteenth-century fiction (ones that she accepts as normative), she focuses on Samuel Richardson and on conduct literature to detail the origins of the "domestic woman." But the representations of women's dual relations to property that underpin much eighteenth-century fiction complicate this teleology. Women's embodiment of customary and more modern understandings of property derives from two sources: on the one hand, the extrinsic signification women carry in their legal status as the property of father and husband and, on the other, the intrinsic meaning they potentially exercise as possessors of their own persons. Through its plots and generic adaptations, the novel negotiates these conflicting perspectives in ways that ultimately pertain to both genders. Representations of women and property enable exploration, in other words, of the grounds of both male and female subjectivity and its realization in social practices. Lacking the programmatic impulses of the political treatise (or its domestic equivalent, the conduct book), the novel allows for the suspension of argumentative rigor in favor of a flexibility that proved immensely attractive to growing numbers of readers.<sup>13</sup> Its hero is consequently not the classically modeled humanist of Pope's poem, but the emergent liberal male subject whose historical development from Lockean paradigms has been charted by Joyce Appleby.<sup>14</sup> In the novel's construction and critique of this hero – often by way of feminocentric plots – a revelation of female difference is also made possible.

Modern criticism perceives the "hero" of eighteenth-century fiction

through the double lens of the residual and emergent cultures and sees that over the course of the period identity was increasingly imagined as self-generated, rather than hierarchically determined. But contemporaries made no such discrete differentiation, nor did they, in the main, respond with equanimity or disinterest to the changes they witnessed. One gauge of such complexities can be found in the novel's uneasy attempt to assimilate the impulse toward "horizontal" solidarity or definition by class to the customary "vertical" hierarchies. In a recent attempt to historicize patriarchy, Michael McKeon argues that its modern incarnation depends on the contemporaneous emergence of the "language and assumptions of 'class'" with a system of gender difference.<sup>15</sup> The defeat of earlier forms of patriarchalism that this entailed had consequences to which the culture responded with varying degrees of intensity and acceptance, variations that followed closely the ways in which the new liberal subject of Appleby and Kramnick's model was constituted. The definition of that subject, enabled by the "revolutionary and antihierarchical principle of equality in difference" (315) and by the "structural separation of the genders" (300) was never intended, McKeon emphasizes, to extend either to women or to unpropertied men. Nevertheless, I will argue, the critical role played by women in eighteenth-century fiction depends on their witnessing to the processes of "horizontal solidarity" that enabled differentiation of class and gender and that contributed to the consolidation of a specifically modern patriarchy.

Plot is crucial to this process. Its characteristic structures suggest how women at once represent the possibilities of self-making through horizontal affiliations and are denied the rewards of coherent selfhood. Eighteenth-century novels consistently locate female characters within plots that allow them to exercise reformatory agency (both individual and social) by drawing on their properties of industriousness and by realizing selfhood through active relationship with the things of this world. That agency is then relocated within male characters by way of endings that assert the primacy of real property and hence women's subordination to the men who control it. This double structure (sustained through a distinction of self-possession from actual property) by which change is both enabled and contained engages the political and the poetic ways of constructing identity that I have already outlined. On the one hand, novels employ a Lockean understanding of selfhood as a process of active making, a process most often generically expressed in the terms provided by georgic. On the other, they deflect the dangerous

potential of this self-making by focusing at the novel's end on a civic humanist reading of real property as the guarantor and inescapable condition of selfhood. Novels that resist mutability tend, conversely, to exchange georgic for pastoral conventions, adapted to episodic plots that favor regression over advance. But whether georgic or pastoral is chosen as the appropriate mode for expressing the achievement or loss of identity, at novel's end land ownership appears the correlative of virtue. Since the characteristic fates of eighteenth-century heroines – marriage or death – render them women without property, they are finally made subject to the terms of a discourse that returns the exclusive authority to confer meaning to male characters.

In the properties ascribed to women and in the plots that enact these for the reader, eighteenth-century audiences saw the possibilities of self-making realized in ways that significantly amended customary notions of the individual subject. But the novelty of the amendments was tempered by the associations carried by the key terms invoked: the refiguring of community, the civilizing capacity of labor, the engagement of individuals within a new economic order, the articulation (and domestication) of an imperial mode. Virgilian georgic, in short, enabled the novel's assimilation of historically specific problems to an existing framework sympathetic to change but anchored in precedent. And pastoral in turn allowed for the expression of a powerful counterposition antipathetic to change and to the characteristic features of possessive individualism.

The range of responses to the question that georgic posed to the eighteenth century – “And various Arts in order did succeed / (What cannot endless Labour urg'd by need?)” – shapes the inquiry I pursue in the following chapters.<sup>16</sup> The terms of labor, need and invention invoked in Dryden's translation are diversely textualized through the novel's representations of woman as property and as a figure for property relations. The reference to “various Arts,” however, underscores the need to consider the novel within the larger context of two further questions: how do reading and writing – the work that is done in the making of meaning – relate to the Lockean claim to possession that comes when one “mixes one's labour” with the things of this world? And how does the use of pastoral and georgic work to inscribe (or resist) progress within a continuous literary tradition?

In taking up these questions, I organize my inquiry on grounds that are both contrastive and roughly chronological: the paradigms of georgic

and pastoral are first established through analysis of two mid-century exemplars, Richardson and Mackenzie respectively, then extended through explorations of the Virgilian imperial theme (both domestic and foreign), and finally tested in the conflict between radical and conservative writing in the crucial decade of the 1790s. The value of such inclusive structures consists in their capacity to register continuities (and disruptions) in the depiction of women's relation to property across the period; the potential danger of schematization will, I hope, be offset by attention to particular texts and close readings. Part I considers Samuel Richardson's investigations of identity through the experiences of a female protagonist, a model that will be elaborated and extended (or resisted and delimited) in many later eighteenth-century novels. The conclusions to his novels involve a double displacement of female energy that also becomes paradigmatic for later fiction. These displacements begin with the shift of attention from the heroine to the altered representations of property that accompany the hero's moral reformation and are completed by the real reader's compact with those characters within the novel who adhere to hierarchical forms of male definition. In the concluding sections of Richardson's novels, the communities of readers regulated by male figures are directed toward documentary evidence – Pamela's "vellum-book of white paper," Clarissa's "Will," and *Sir Charles Grandison's* collaboratively written and read letters. These documentary inheritances substitute for the presence of the women whose experiences have occupied the novel proper.

In substantiating the interpretative authority of masculine modes of writing and reading, these concluding episodes with their summary "texts" appear to accord with the account of the "rise of the novel" offered by critics from Ian Watt to Nancy Armstrong. But in the novels considered under the rubric of pastoral in Part II the progressivism implicit in this model, along with the authority it grants masculine modes, is challenged. In the work of Henry Mackenzie, Laurence Sterne, and Thomas Cogan, pastoral stands for the integrity of a past order whose separation from the corruptions of history and of women has in each novel a spatial equivalent: the farm Harley establishes for old Edwards, uncle Toby's bowling green, the more generalized motif of retirement that takes the hero from city to country in Cogan's satire of sentimentalism.

Colonial narratives of the period, in contrast, problematize the fundamental assumptions of pastoral and georgic by invoking a sense of the "otherness" of place in the presumed *absence* of history. Scottish

Enlightenment historiography had made current a reading of property relations that tied possession to the advance of civility. In Edward Bancroft's *Charles Wentworth* and the anonymous *The Female American*, the protagonists' responses to the women encountered in the colonies test such conceptualizations. The positive connotations of the hero's georgic enterprise in *Charles Wentworth* are massively qualified by his confrontations with women identified with the extremes of slavery and communal ownership. *The Female American* constructs a matrilineal plot that undermines hierarchical property relations as part of its celebration of women's power. Both colonial narratives envision an existing, dehistoricized pastoral order invigorated by georgic industriousness. But the protagonists' gender finally proves significant to the resolutions of the two novels: in *Charles Wentworth*, agrarian capitalism and a renewed domestic economy reinscribe hierarchical relations with the hero's return to England; *The Female American* similarly ends with the achievement of domestic order, but it is one that substantiates, rather than subordinating, female authority in the "new world."

Part III turns to a number of texts that examine the problem of community within England. These novels again counterpoint pastoral and georgic, identifying each genre with a range of assumptions about gender, discourse, and politics. In the novels of Sarah Scott and Clara Reeve, pastoralism is associated with the received conventions of a male discourse that trivializes women's achievements by codifying them as aesthetic. The community of women that both novels underwrite at once resists and reproduces these associations by suggesting that women's labor should be valued because it contributes to the maintenance of existing social hierarchies. As a result, these novels finally endorse, rather than controvert, the status quo. "Confederacy" narratives, on the other hand, which I consider in the second section of this part (chapter 8), focus on women's function as a cipher of cultural alienation and disorder. This function is linked to their capacities as story-tellers, fabricators of narratives that testify to the rewards of self-making. Here we see most clearly the challenge to masculine modes of reading and writing posed by distinctively female forms of labor – ways of making both ideas and things – that retain a continued and vigorous presence in eighteenth-century narrative.

Part IV focuses on the more narrowly political meaning attached to plot in the closing decade of the century and on the correlative attention to questions of audience. From mid-century, pastoral had been stigmatized by its opponents for its perceived relation to the luxury and



effeminacy associated with the culture of sensibility. But in the radical writing of the 1790s, pastoral comes to be figured in terms nearly opposite to those that had prevailed earlier. For these writers, it stands not for a past culture of inherited privilege, but for a future golden age. With the radical appropriation of pastoral, conservative writers similarly re-define their generic allegiances. They respond to the radical novelists' arguments for political change with satires that expose the "fictive" status of their opponents' political and literary plots. But as parodies of radicalism, anti-Jacobin novels remain subject to the limitations of polemic. The concluding chapter 12 focuses on the work of a conservative author, Jane West, whose challenge to radicalism is integrated within a politics of reading that goes beyond derivative satire. In her novels, georgic self-making becomes the vehicle for the articulation of a fully realized middle-class consciousness. In granting to fiction a reformatory agency for strengthening the individual's commitment to a national identity, West's novels bring together the issues of gender, genre, and plot in ways that anticipate the controlling terms of the historical novel.

The Epilogue briefly considers the transformations of georgic and pastoral within the new genre's defining fiction, Walter Scott's *Waverley*. As the two modes are adapted by the historical novel from signifiers of identity to markers of temporality, their relation to the spheres of gender and of labor becomes atrophied. The concurrent emergence of the historical novel and virtual disappearance of georgic and pastoral as distinct modes raises interesting questions about the place of women and their capacity for self-making as represented within early nineteenth-century fiction. To consider patriarchal formulations in the romantic novel from the vantage of eighteenth-century understandings of women and property is to see how revolution and resistance to it worked to circumscribe the plotting of female identity. What happens to Rose Bradwardine and Flora MacIvor at the moment when Edward Waverley's "romance" so famously ends and the "real history" of his life begins?