

The Rise of the Woman Novelist

From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen



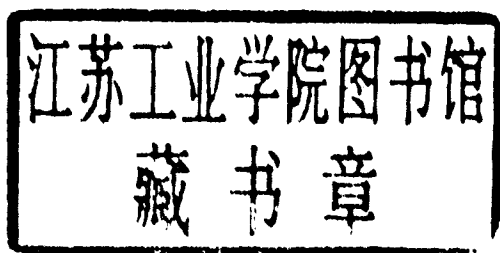
Jane Spencer

JANE SPENCER



The Rise of the Woman Novelist

From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen



Basil Blackwell

©Jane Spencer, 1986

First published 1986

Basil Blackwell Ltd
108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JF, UK

Basil Blackwell Inc.
432 Park Avenue South, Suite 1503
New York, NY 10016, USA

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purposes of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

BRITISH LIBRARY CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Spencer, Jane

The rise of the woman novelist : from Aphra Behn to Jane Austen.

1. English literature—Early modern, 1500–1700—History and criticism
2. English literature—18th century—History and criticism
3. English literature—19th century—History and criticism
4. English literature—Women authors—History and criticism

I. Title

823'.009'9287 PR438.W65

ISBN 0-631-13915-X

ISBN 0-631-13916-8 Pbk

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Spencer, Jane.

The rise of the woman novelist.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. English fiction—Women authors—History and criticism.
 2. English fiction—18th century—History and criticism.
 3. Women in literature.
 4. Feminism and literature.
- I. Title.

PR113.S6 1986 823'.009'9287 86-4242

ISBN 0-631-13915-X

ISBN 0-631-13916-8 (pbk.)

Typeset by Photographics, Honiton, Devon
Printed in Great Britain by Page Bros (Norwich), Ltd

Acknowledgements



I am especially grateful to Marilyn Butler for the help she has given me both as supervisor of my D.Phil. thesis and as reader of my work since.

Much of the book was written while I held a Junior Research Fellowship at Trinity College, Oxford, and I am grateful for the opportunity this gave me for research and writing.

Some material in Chapter 2 is taken from my article 'Creating the Woman Writer: The Autobiographical Works of Jane Barker', which appeared in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 2, no. 2 (Fall, 1983). I would like to thank the editor for permission to use it here. I am obliged to the Curators of the Bodleian Library for permission to quote from a manuscript letter by Charlotte Smith, and to the President and Fellows of Magdalen College, Oxford, for permission to quote from the manuscript book of Jane Barker's poetry in Magdalen College Library.

I should like to thank Dennis Burden, Ian Campbell, Sarah Carpenter, Margaret Doody, Terry Eagleton, Elaine Hobby, Sandra Kemp and Ruth Perry for the help they have given by reading and commenting on my drafts at various stages; I am very grateful to Sandy Maxwell for lending me her copy of *The Victim of Prejudice*; and many thanks go to Jacquie Rawes for checking references, to Jackie McRae for proof reading, and to Hugh Glover for all his help, especially his valiant work with scissors and paste despite a broken arm.

Jane Spencer
Edinburgh, 1986

Introduction



Eighteenth-century England witnessed two remarkable and interconnected literary events: the emergence of the novel and the establishment of the professional woman writer. The first of these has been extensively documented and debated, while the second has been largely ignored. Yet the rise of the novel cannot be understood fully without considering how its conventions were shaped by the contributions of a large number of women, their writing deeply marked by the ‘femininity’ insistently demanded of them by the culture to which they belonged. This book is, to some extent, an attempt to provide that consideration. In the first part, I try to describe and account for the (conditional) acceptance of the woman novelist by the eighteenth-century critical establishment. In the second part, I trace the development of certain themes in women’s novels, themes which they treated in a way significantly different from their male counterparts and which entitle us to refer to ‘women’s traditions’ in the novel. These traditions, however, far from being isolated from a main tradition, were important agents in its formation.

It is not only an attempt to understand the rise of the novel that lies behind this book. My primary concern arises from the fact that women’s role in the novel’s rise has been underestimated. Eighteenth-century periodical reviewers, who tended to have a low opinion of the novel, emphasized and even exaggerated its connection with women writers, but modern critics, whose respect for the form is so much greater, usually concentrate on the five male ‘greats’—Defoe, Richardson, Fielding, Smollett, and Sterne. As the novel has gained critical prestige women’s part in it has been as far as possible edited out of the historical account, in a familiar move to belittle and suppress women’s achievements.¹ My intention is to recall some of these achievements, and thus contribute to the feminist project of uncovering women’s history.

If women’s writing is important to the history of the novel, the novel is no less important to the history of women’s search for a public

voice. In the eighteenth century it was an important medium for the articulation of women's concerns, and its rise was centrally bound up with the growth of a female literary voice acceptable within patriarchal society. For despite the continuing tendency to disparage or forget them, women writers do have a voice in our society, and have had, publicly, since the period under discussion. It is crucially important for feminists to look at the implications for women of the development of that voice.

Any study which treats of women writers as a separate group needs to explain the reasoning behind such a procedure. The writers considered in this study entered a realm of discourse that had long been dominated by men; their work imitated, or counteracted, or (a point often overlooked) influenced the work of their male contemporaries, and it might be argued that they would be better studied alongside those men, whose work is mentioned only briefly here. Feminist critics have countered such arguments by reference to the 'specificity' of women's writing, that is, the claim that women's writing is significantly different from men's because of the authors' gender. We need to be careful here. I do not claim that in any respect, thematic or stylistic, women's writing is *essentially* different from men's: indeed the most crucial insight afforded by feminism is in my opinion the deconstruction of the opposition masculine-feminine as essential categories. But if women writers exhibit no essential 'femininity', they are still working within a patriarchal society that defines and judges them according to its notions of what femininity is. They may internalize their society's standards of femininity and reflect this in their writing. Or they may write in opposition to those standards. In short, women writers are in a special *position* because of society's attitude to their sex; and their work is likely to be affected by their *response* to that position (even when the response is an attempt to ignore a situation which might be debilitating if acknowledged). Women having been oppressed *as* women, it is not only reasonable but necessary to consider women as forming a group with significant interests in common.

The first part of my study then, charts the establishment of a certain position for women writers in the eighteenth century, a 'respectable' position granted them in return for the display of a number of positively valued 'feminine' characteristics. The discussion, therefore, focuses on changes in the ideology of womanhood from the late seventeenth to the late eighteenth centuries; on the reactions of the male cultural establishment to women writers and their work; and on women's own conception of themselves as writers within this ideological climate. The second part (chapters 4-6) focuses on women's novels as responses to the position outlined in the first; each chapter considering one kind of possible response, and suggesting its effect on women's novels throughout the century. I have called the responses protest, conformity, and escape;

but I hope it will be clear that I do not consider these as mutually exclusive strategies informing three entirely separate traditions. Rather they indicate tendencies each of which influences a particular development within the novel, while remaining mingled in any one writer's work with the other responses.

By focusing on women's response to women's position I am obviously centrally concerned with the problem of whether, and to what extent, eighteenth-century women's writing is to be read as feminist writing. It is a complicated question. Of course no woman of the time thought of herself as 'feminist', as the word was not in use then; but woman's nature and proper role were subjects of serious debate, and many women took up positions which we might usefully describe as feminist. As Hilda L. Smith demonstrates in her excellent study *Reason's Disciples: Seventeenth-Century Feminists* (1982) some women writers of the seventeenth century identified women as an oppressed group (rather than a naturally inferior sex), and with that crucial argument laid the foundations for modern feminist theory. A feminist discourse, then, was possible, and was recognized (though not by that name) as part of the intellectual debate in the period under discussion. There was a problem, though, then as now, in defining the relation of the woman writer *as* a woman to this discourse. Because of the very low opinion of women's intellectual capacities generally held in the male cultural tradition, a woman writer seemed, by the very act of writing, to be challenging received notions of womanhood; and to this extent all early women writers, whatever their own opinions on women's position, were engaged willy-nilly in feminist discourse. As I shall show, however, the gradual acceptance of the woman writer which took place during the eighteenth century considerably weakened this early link between women's writing and feminism. Once writing was no longer considered necessarily unfeminine, the woman writer was no longer necessarily offering a challenge to male domination. I have, therefore, used both 'feminist' and 'anti-feminist' to describe tendencies in eighteenth-century women's writing, depending on whether their work seems to me to argue against or in favour of male control and domination over women. I do not by this mean to label certain writers as 'feminists' or 'anti-feminists' in simplistic fashion: many women, writing in conscious support of current doctrines of female inferiority, left by implication a feminist message, while others, genuinely concerned to improve women's position, made suggestions which we would now judge as anti-feminist in tendency.

The relationship between the rise of the woman writer and the progress of the women's movement is a problematic one. Feminist critics concerned about the dearth of women in the critical canon of great writers have been rightly concerned with remembering forgotten women writers

and explaining why their achievement has not seemed 'great' to established criticism, as well as with re-evaluating the better-known women writers in the light of their position as women. They have shown how women writers have needed to overcome tremendous odds in order to write.² In a work like Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, women's writing appears as an immensely difficult achievement in patriarchal society, and must therefore be celebrated, when successful, as a feminist gain. Hence their concern to 'uncover' feminist intention in the most apparently conformist texts. They may well be right to do so in many instances; but the underlying assumption that women's writing *must* have a feminist meaning, must in all cases be a gain for feminism, needs to be questioned. If my analysis of the eighteenth-century acceptance of the woman writer is correct, the relation between women's writing and patriarchal society is not simply one of opposition. Women's writing has not been totally suppressed, but on the contrary has (in certain forms) been encouraged; and it is capable of being appropriated for male domination.

Nancy Armstrong has pointed out that feminist analyses of the obstacles to female creativity in patriarchal society may leave women's actual achievements unexplained.³ To explain why women were sometimes successful and highly acclaimed writers not only in the nineteenth century but for over 100 years before that, we could postulate that the oppressive ideology excluding women from writing has been neither consistent nor entirely successful. In the eighteenth century we can detect the presence of a view of writing that links it to the feminine role rather than opposing the two. This, as I will show, encouraged the expansion of women's professional writing. But at the same time as encouraging women to write, this feminization of literature defined literature as a special category supposedly outside the political arena, with an influence on the world as indirect as women's was supposed to be. Women's new status as authors did not necessarily mean new powers for women in general. *The Rise of the Woman Novelist*, then, is centrally concerned with the paradox that women writers may well be rising at a time when women's condition in general is deteriorating. My view of women's novels in the eighteenth century is in one sense positive: I am claiming that they occupy a much more important place in the development of the novel than is usually believed, and that they contributed a great deal to women's entry into public discourse. But I am wary of viewing that success as a simple gain: the terms on which women writers were accepted worked in some ways to suppress feminist opposition. Women's writing is not the same thing as women's rights.

NOTES

1. There are exceptions to this, and I am greatly indebted to those critics who have considered the work of the early women novelists. R. A. Day, *Told in Letters: Epistolary Fiction Before Richardson* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966) and John J. Richetti, *Popular Fiction Before Richardson: Narrative Patterns 1700-39* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969) include discussions of some women novelists, though neither focuses on the importance of the author's gender. Margaret Doody in *A Natural Passion: A Study of the Novels of Samuel Richardson* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974) offers a welcome consideration of the early women novelists. Two important works which, though not centrally concerned with women writers, illuminate the connection between the early novel and the eighteenth-century ideology of femininity are Ruth Perry, *Women, Letters and the Novel* (New York: AMS Press, 1980), which describes the early letter-novel as offering women readers romantic fantasy to compensate for women's narrowed sphere, and Nancy K. Miller, *The Heroine's Text: Readings in the French and English Novel 1722-1782* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), which concentrates on male writers who adopt a 'feminine' voice. Both works have influenced my own view of the position of the eighteenth-century woman writer.
2. Ellen Moers' *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (New York, 1976; rpt London: Women's Press, 1980), Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977; rpt London: Virago Press, 1978), and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) are important works of feminist re-appraisal of women writers. Showalter's work is especially noteworthy for its concentration on lesser-known figures.
3. See Nancy Armstrong, 'The Rise of Feminine Authority in the Novel', *Novel* 15, no. 2 (Winter, 1982), pp. 127-45.

Contents



Acknowledgements	vii
Introduction	viii
PART 1 THE WOMAN NOVELIST AS HEROINE	
1 Wit's Mild Empire: The Rise of Women's Writing	3
Women Novelists and the Literary Market	6
The New Ideology of Femininity	11
Writers as Heroines: Foundations for Women's Literary Authority in the Seventeenth Century	22
2 Three Self-Portraits	41
Aphra Behn	42
Delariviere Manley	53
Jane Barker	62
3 The Terms of Acceptance	75
'True Female Merit'	75
Natural, Moral and Modest: Elizabeth Rowe	81
Moralizing the Novel: Penelope Aubin	86
Richardson and Fielding: Two Traditions in the Novel	88
Masculine Approval and Sarah Fielding	91
The Diffident Success: Fanny Burney	95
'Near the Throne'	98
PART 2 HEROINES BY WOMEN NOVELISTS	
4 Seduced Heroines: The Tradition of Protest	107
Introduction: Traditions in Women's Novels	107
Feminism and the Novel: The Seduction Theme	108
Delariviere Manley's <i>Story of Charlot</i> (1709)	113
Eliza Haywood's <i>The British Recluse</i> (1722)	116

The New Moral Novel: Sarah Fielding's <i>The Countess of Dellwyn</i> (1759)	118
Fatal Sensibility: Elizabeth Griffith's <i>History of Lady Barton</i> (1771)	122
Radicalism and the Novel of Seduction	127
Elizabeth Inchbald's <i>Nature and Art</i> (1796)	130
Mary Hays's <i>The Victim of Prejudice</i> (1799)	130
Mary Wollstonecraft's <i>Maria: or The Wrongs of Woman</i> (1798)	132
5 Reformed Heroines: The Didactic Tradition	140
Introduction: The Central Women's Tradition	140
The Beginnings: Catharine Trotter's <i>Olinda's Adventures</i> (1693)	144
The Lover-Mentor: Mary Davys's <i>The Reform'd Coquet</i> (1724)	145
Reform by Self-Discovery: Eliza Haywood's <i>The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless</i> (1751)	147
The Shy Coquette: Fanny Burney's <i>Evelina</i> (1778)	153
Criticisms of the Lover-Mentor	157
The Smothered Heroine: Fanny Burney's <i>Camilla</i> (1796)	163
Jane Austen and the Tradition of The Reformed Heroine	167
6 Romance Heroines: The Tradition of Escape	181
Introduction: A Fantasy of Female Power	181
A Satire on Fantasy: Charlotte Lennox's <i>The Female Quixote</i> (1752)	187
The Gothic Novel	192
Rewriting History: Sophia Lee's <i>The Recess</i> (1785)	195
Romance and Escape: Ann Radcliffe's <i>The Romance of the Forest</i> (1791)	201
The Continuing Appeal of Romance	207
Index	213

PART I

The Woman Novelist as Heroine



I

Wit's Mild Empire: The Rise of Women's Writing



In the late eighteenth century, many English writers were fond of congratulating their time for being an Age of Progress. 'Never did so many valuable improvements take place, never were so many prejudices abolished, in so short a time', glowed one man as he reviewed a volume of poetry written by a woman. Mrs Savage's *Poems on various Subjects and Occasions* had made him ponder on one of the more remarkable changes for the better he had witnessed: the proliferation of women writers. 'Instead of the single Sappho of antiquity, we can muster many names of equal, and some of superior value, in our little island, who, far from confining their abilities to the narrow limits of lyric poetry, stand foremost in various species of writing, both in prose and verse'.¹ *The New Lady's Magazine* took a similar line in an article entitled 'Female Literature', which rejoiced in the impossibility of forgetting 'a Cockburn, a Rowe, a Montagu, a Carter, a Chapone, a More, and a Barbauld ... a Seward and a Williams ... a Burney'.² Its optimistic tone may ring ironically in our ears today, when our society's tendency to amnesia about women's achievements has all but obliterated many of these names. They were illustrious in their time, though. Catharine Trotter Cockburn was known as a playwright and later for her philosophical writings; Elizabeth Singer Rowe for religious verse and prose; Elizabeth Montagu as the central figure in the literary and intellectual group known as the bluestockings; Elizabeth Carter as an intellectual, the author of a translation of the Stoic Epictetus; Hester Mulso Chapone for her didactic prose; Hannah More for plays and poetry; Anna Laetitia Barbauld for essays; Anna Seward and Helen Maria Williams for poetry.

Only Fanny Burney, of all these, had risen to fame as a novelist.³ This bias in the list suggests the relatively low status of the novel rather than any dearth of women novelists. In fact it was the novel which more than any other literary form attracted large numbers of women into the

male-dominated world of publishing. The market for novels, like the market for newspapers, magazines, tracts and pamphlets, expanded enormously during the century. From reviewing perhaps three or four novels a month in its early years, the *Monthly Review* (begun in 1749) soon found itself inundated with ten or a dozen, and the reviewers foresaw that their early plan of describing every book published would not be feasible much longer. 'The most we can do,' explained one writer in 1759, 'with respect to those numerous novels, that issue continually from the press, is to give rather a character than an account of each. To do even this, however, we find no easy task; since we might say of them, as Pope, with less justice, says of the *ladies*, "Most novels have no character at all."⁴ It is interesting to note that while gallantly repudiating Pope's low opinion of women, the reviewer implies that ladies and novels belong together. This was a common belief. Critics (mostly male) presented themselves as upholders of cultural standards, bewailing the popularity of such a low (and, they believed, female) amusement as fiction. 'So long as our British Ladies continue to encourage our hackney Scriblers, by reading every Romance that appears, we need not wonder that the Press should swarm with such poor insignificant productions', they sighed.⁵ The debasement of literature in the marketplace was made even worse when women were successful sellers, and 'this branch of the literary *trade*', sniffed one reviewer (meaning novel-writing), 'appears, now, to be almost entirely engrossed by the Ladies'.⁶

It is hard to tell how far he was right. We do not know how many of the anonymous novels were by women nor how many writers adopted a pseudonym, or the designation 'lady' or 'gentleman' from the opposite sex. Women novelists were there in increasing numbers, though, and if they wrote, as one literary historian has estimated, between two-thirds and three-quarters of epistolary novels between 1760 and 1790, that was more than enough to give a general impression that they were taking over, whether this was felt as a threat or a cause for celebration.⁷ It was also enough to give a basis for the growth of a strong women's tradition in the novel by the end of the century. Moreover, some of the women novelists did a good deal to raise the genre in critical esteem. By the time Sir Walter Scott wrote his appreciative memoir of the novelist Charlotte Smith, he could reflect on 'the number of highly-talented women, who have, within our time of novel-reading, distinguished themselves advantageously in this department of literature'. Jane Austen, Fanny Burney, Maria Edgeworth, Ann Radcliffe and several more were on his list, and, he added 'it would be impossible to match against these names the same number of masculine competitors, arising within the same space of time'.⁸ From being a frivolous and disreputable genre the novel had gained a certain amount of prestige. Women writers had had a similar rise in status, beginning somewhat earlier. The woman novelist

in the early years of the nineteenth century benefited from a rise in public esteem for both her gender and her genre.

The rise of the woman writer, like the rise of the novel, encountered plenty of opposition. We have seen how reviewers tended to scorn fiction: but this is nothing to the abuse men sometimes gave to women writers. The popular novelist Eliza Haywood figured in the *Dunciad* as a 'Juno of majestic size,/With cow-like udders, and with ox-like eyes', her sexual favours offered as a prize in a urinating contest held between the booksellers Edmund Curll and William Chetwood. She was depicted with 'Two babes of love close clinging to her waste', and she and the playwright Susanna Centlivre were described as 'slip-shod Muses' with unkempt hair.⁹ In one version Haywood appeared with 'Pearls on her neck, and roses in her hair,/And her fore-buttocks on the navel bare'.¹⁰ Pope, of course, made equally virulent attacks on many male writers, but for his attack on Haywood he could draw on an existing stereotype of the woman writer, according to which she was unclean, untidy, disgustingly sexual and a whore.

Haywood encountered this kind of attack because she was a full member of the public world of hacks and scribblers, writing many scandalous pieces herself. Women who could afford to write without entering that world were understandably nervous about publishing their work.

Did I my lines intend for public view,
How many censures would their faults pursue!

mused the poet Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea. Certain that the main censure would be that they were 'by a woman writ', she suggested an explanation for men's hostility to women's writing:

Alas! a woman that attempts the pen,
Such an intruder on the rights of men,
Such a presumptuous creature is esteemed,
The fault can by no virtue be redeemed.¹¹

Another woman writer, Margaret Cavendish (the Marchioness, and later the Duchess, of Newcastle) had suggested the same thing in 1653. Men, she argued, opposed women's writing 'because they think thereby, *Women* inroach too much upon their *Prerogatives*; for they hold *Books* as their *Crowne*, and the *Sword* their *Scepter*, by which they rule, and governe'.¹² With male dominance supposedly justified by man's greater powers of reason, evidence of women's intellectual capacities was obviously going to inspire fears, or hopes (depending on point of view) of a female rebellion.

The most extreme male reaction, then as now, was to deny women's ability to write at all. Theories excluding women from writing could be erected in the face of evidence of a growing number of women writers. Here is Chagrin the Critick in 1702, claiming that a woman writer is a contradiction in terms: 'I hate these Petticoat-Authors; 'tis false Grammar, there's no Feminine for the *Latin* word, 'tis entirely of the Masculine Gender, and the Language won't bear such a thing as a She-Author.' Chagrin, however, an imaginary character in the anonymous *Comparison Between the Two Stages*, is exposed as a pedantic Latinist living in the past, and his imaginary companions correct him by citing examples of real women living and writing plays in eighteenth-century England—Delariviere Manley, Mary Pix, and Catharine Trotter.¹³

The spirit of Chagrin the Critick is not entirely dead in the twentieth century. It haunted Virginia Woolf, who embodied it in Charles Tansley with his refrain 'women can't paint, women can't write', and exorcized it by the very writing of *To The Lighthouse*. It still haunts some women today; but it has been permanently weakened, as Woolf herself gratefully acknowledged, by the events of the eighteenth century.¹⁴ Eighteenth-century women belied Chagrin's words in huge numbers, and they rose so much in public esteem that as we have seen, to some commentators their existence seemed almost the occasion for national celebration. Why were there so many more women writers, why did attitudes towards them change, and how did women gain their prominent position among novelists? These are questions which, as Scott remarked in his study of Charlotte Smith, could lead us far.

WOMEN NOVELISTS AND THE LITERARY MARKET

The expansion of the reading public to include the urban middle classes—tradesmen, shopkeepers, clerks, and their families—and also, to some extent, servants, has long been seen as the underlying social condition of the novel's rise.¹⁵ Upper- and middle-class women with time on their hands probably formed a significant proportion of novel readers. Some of them also became novelists. Some formal education for women, however inadequate, was beginning to spread, causing some fears that class hierarchy was being threatened. By 1759, 'every description of tradesmen sent their children to be instructed, not in the useful attainments necessary for humble life, but the arts of coquetry and self-consequence, in short, those of a *young lady*,' complained one writer.¹⁶ From such a background, according to the critics, came the typical, frivolous novel-reader. Perhaps some of the novelists did too. As a new form, apparently easy to write and not guarded by classical tradition,