

ALSO IN THE SERIES

*From Mastery to Analysis: Theories of Gender  
in Psychoanalytic Feminism*  
by Patricia Elliot

*The Unspeaking Mother: Forbidden Discourse in Jean Rhys and H.D.*  
by Deborah Kelly Kloepfer

*Women and Romance: The Consolations of Gender in the English Novel*  
by Laurie Langbauer

*Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture*  
by Françoise Lionnet

*Woman and Modernity: The (Life)Styles of Lou Andreas-Salomé*  
by Biddy Martin

*Reading Gertrude Stein: Body, Text, Genosis*  
by Lisa Ruddick

# Narrative Transvestism

*Rhetoric and Gender  
in the Eighteenth-Century  
English Novel*

Madeleine Kahn

*Cornell University Press*

ITHACA AND LONDON

## Contents

Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction	1
1. Transvestism and Narrative Structures in Eighteenth-Century England	13
2. Defoe and <i>Roxana</i> : The Reader as Author	57
3. Richardson and <i>Clarissa</i> : The Author as Reader	103
Conclusion	151
Selected Bibliography	161
Index	171

## Introduction

The conventional history of the English novel begins with Defoe or Richardson in the early years of the eighteenth century and traces the genre through Fielding, with a sidelong glance at Sterne and Smollett, to Jane Austen.<sup>1</sup> Literary critics have relied on this version of the origin and development of the novel to generalize about the political position of these "fathers" of the English novel, about an unbroken line of novelistic tradition, and about the celebration of domestic stability and happiness that seemed to be built into both the literary tradition and the structure of the novel itself. The most compelling version of this argument is, of course, Ian Watt's *Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding*,<sup>2</sup> since its publication in 1957 literary critics have positioned their arguments about the English novel in relation to Watt's. Those emendations and challenges to Watt's argument are finally beginning to change the way the

<sup>1</sup>I am explicitly concerned here with the origins of the English novel. The history of the novel in France or Spain presents certain obvious complications to this simple narrative. Bakhtin and other critics of comparative literature talk about the novel as a form that has been evolving since classical times. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981). I discuss Bakhtin's idea of heteroglossia at greater length when I elaborate my notion of narrative transvestism.

<sup>2</sup>Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957).

English novel and its origins are treated both in works of criticism and in the classroom. They certainly inform this book, which was prompted by the fundamental question of much recent critical theory from deconstruction to feminist theory: What's been left out, and what was to be gained from leaving it out?

What has been left out of most criticism of individual English novels as well as of the history of the novel is any interpretation of the explosive fact that many of what we continue to cite as the first canonical novels (*Moll Flanders*, *Roxana*, *Pamela*, *Clarissa*, the not-quite-canonical *Fanny Hill*) were written by men in the person of women. I have developed the concept of narrative transvestism to describe this use by a male author of a first-person female narrator, and I use the concept to investigate how the eighteenth-century discourse about gender participates in the development of the narrative consciousness that became the distinguishing characteristic of the modern novel.

Women have also written novels using a first-person male persona, and it might seem appropriate to include such novels here. But the question, what does a woman author have to gain from using a man's voice? turns out not to be symmetrical to, what does a male author have to gain from using a woman's? Women are borrowing the voice of authority; men are seemingly abdicating it. The structure of real-world transvestism that I have used as a model for the structure of narrative transvestism may also be unsuitable for women. Most psychoanalytic descriptions of transvestism—which disagree in many other respects—agree that there is no such thing as a female transvestite. Women may dress as men, but they don't seem to do so as part of a cycle of reaffirming their feminine identity. Thus, while women authors have certainly experimented with the transgression of gender boundaries in fiction, it is the work of another book to see what, if any, aspects of the concept of narrative transvestism provide a useful model for analysis of those texts.

Recent work on the eighteenth-century novel has, of course, raised the issue of gender in a variety of ways, from explorations

of the cultural and literary climate that determined what and how women could write, through discussions of the notion of "women's writing," to investigations of how gender and gender expectations have influenced critical responses to the novel. I am indebted to all these critical approaches, and I have borrowed something from each of them to form my concept of narrative transvestism.

Perhaps the most obvious challenge to the traditional literary canon and the assumptions it allows critics to make about literary interpretation comes from those who are trying to revise the canon itself. Critics including Dale Spender, Janet Todd, and Jane Spencer have questioned the omission of women novelists of the eighteenth century and have worked to restore their novels to print and to critical consciousness. Such critics detail the great success achieved by women writers such as Sarah Fielding, Aphra Behn, Delariviere Manley, Charlotte Lennox, and Fanny Burney while noting that this success was achieved against great odds and against the strong societal censure of "scribbling women," which eventually nudged these popular writers into obscurity. Plenty of women wrote both well and successfully in the eighteenth century, they argue, and the male novelists we now cite as the first were often responding to and learning from contemporary novels by women. The force of patriarchal literary history is such, however, that novels by women were relegated to the margins simply because their authors were by definition marginal. Restoring these works to the canon would allow us to hear the voice of the other side of the literary and cultural dialogue that produced the English novel.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Jane Spencer, *The Rise of the Woman Novelist: From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986); Dale Spender, *Mothers of the Novel: 100 Good Women Writers before Jane Austen* (New York: Pandora, 1986); Janet Todd, *The Sign of Angelica: Women, Writing, and Fiction, 1660-1800* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989). In an effort to be concise I have lumped Todd, Spender, and Spencer together, but of course their arguments are not identical and are considerably more subtle than I have space to delineate here. Briefly, Spender is concerned not so much with investigating why early fiction by women has been suppressed as with redressing the problem. Her book is a detailed catalogue of, as its subtitle states, "100 good women writers before Jane Austen." Todd's book situates the achievements of women writers within

A second recent critical trend comprises the less radical approach of extending and modifying the canon and the conventional view of the origins of the English novel to include the impact of history and politics upon literature as well as literary criticism. Among the most influential books in this category is Michael McKeon's *Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740*, which posits that the novel was developed to negotiate institutional and epistemological uncertainty. McKeon argues that the novel epitomizes generic instability and thus can accommodate a new instability in the conceptual and explanatory paradigms that used to provide an authoritative structure for literature. Work by Nancy Armstrong, Terry Eagleton, John Bender, and others also attempts to persuade us of the importance of a newly conceived social and political context for the literature we are reading. Eagleton, in particular, and the others to a lesser extent stress that in addition to reading literature in a specific context, we also read it with specific social and political assumptions. Although some of these critics, notably Armstrong and Eagleton, consider the impact of gender on writing and reading, their primary interest is the impact of class and politics on the production and interpretation of literature.<sup>4</sup>

the cultural and historical developments of which she argues they were very much a part. Thus, while she details what she considers to be the female themes of "female relation" (2), she stresses the social and moral effects of sexual desire and manipulation's changing evaluation of women writers' responses to changes in society and eighteenth century. Spencer argues most forcefully that eighteenth-century British society was particularly ripe for women novelists, not because the public position of women was improving, but because the novel addressed itself to society's attempts to limit women to the private and domestic sphere. She states that "the novel was exactly suited to bridging the gap between women and the public world" (20) because "women novelists were carving a public niche for themselves by recommending a private, domestic life for their heroines" (20), and because the novel drew on private—and therefore feminine—modes of writing such as "the familiar letter, the diary and the domestic conduct book" (20). Spencer thus posits a kind of dialectic between patriarchal pronouncements about women's authority existing only in the private sphere and the ambiguous public authority of women who published novels about that same private sphere.

<sup>4</sup>Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987). McKeon's emphasis on the ancient roots of the

My third category of challenges to traditional criticism of the novel is, like the first, explicitly feminist and, like the second, eager to find ways to reread the works in the traditional canon. These works bring to bear on the traditional canon an emphasis on changing notions of gender within the texts and within the societies that produced them and those that interpret them. The revelation that neither the definition nor the valuation of gender is fixed allows us to ask new questions about the ways texts both participate in and comment upon the social construction of gender. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's theories about the anxiety of female authorship, and their image of silent women historically "imprisoned in male texts . . . generated solely . . . by male expectations and designs,"<sup>5</sup> have been developed and challenged since their book was published in 1979, but, like Watt's work, theirs is the foundation upon which many later critical insights rest. In particular, Nancy Miller and Terry Castle have explored the semiotics of gender in eighteenth-century texts. Both these critics emphasize the struggle within these texts for control over a woman's story and its meaning.<sup>6</sup>

In proposing an explanation for the fact that so many early eighteenth-century novels purport to be women's autobiogra-

novel, along with his elaboration of a dialectic between history and the novel form, owes a great deal to Bakhtin. See also Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); John Bender, *Imagining the Pentecostal: Fiction and the Architecture of Mind in Eighteenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); and Terry Eagleton's work, especially *The Rape of Clarissa: Writing, Sexuality, and Class Struggle in Samuel Richardson* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982) and *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

<sup>5</sup>Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 12.

<sup>6</sup>Nancy K. Miller, "1's in Drag: The Sex of Recollection," *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation*, 22 (Winter 1981): 47-57, and *The Heroine's Text: Readings in the French and English Novel, 1722-1782* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980); Terry Castle, *Clarissa's Ciphers: Meaning and Disruption in Richardson's "Clarissa"* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), *Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnivalesque in Eighteenth-Century English Culture and Fiction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), and "Matters Not Fit to Be Mentioned: Fielding's *The Female Husband*," *ELH* 49 (Fall 1982): 602-22.

phies but were in fact written by men, I offer a theory of the novel as a form which allowed its authors to exploit the instability of gender categories and which is thus inseparable from its own continual reexamination and redefinition of those categories. The narrative consciousness that we have come to identify with the novel is always an explicitly gendered consciousness, although it is not fixed in either gender. It is not by accident, then, that the novels of Richardson and Defoe are thematically as well as structurally concerned with the creation of a gendered voice and with the transgression of gender boundaries.

Much has been made of the connection between confessional autobiography and the novel and of the new use in the eighteenth century of a first-person narrative for fiction. Critics have until recently, however, overlooked the circumstance that the male author's "autobiography" is voiced by a woman. No doubt they have done so in part because men have always assumed that it is perfectly natural for them to speak *for* women.<sup>7</sup> But authors such as Richardson and Defoe are also speaking *through* women, and they are in the process endowing that female voice with a great deal of power and receiving a different kind of power from it. I use the term "narrative transvestism" to refer to this process whereby a male author gains access to a culturally defined female voice and sensibility but runs no risk of being trapped in the devalued female realm. Through narrative transvestism the male author plays out, in the metaphorical body of the text, the ambiguous possibilities of identity and gender. I argue that this narrative projection of the male self into an imagined female voice and experience was an integral part of the emerging novel's radical and destabilizing investigation of how

an individual creates an identity and, as our society if not our biology requires, a gendered identity.

Other critics have recently turned their attention to male authors' use of female narrators, but as will become clear, I define narrative transvestism and its effects rather differently from the "ventriloquism" or "appropriation" with which most of these critics are concerned.<sup>8</sup> Most of this work on the use of a female narrative persona by a male author has emphasized the hegemony of one gender over another. Eve Sedgwick and Nancy Miller, for example, speak of a homoerotic economy in which the female dummies are used as counters between male ventriloquists. Conversely, James Carson emphasizes the narrative power of the "dummies" and the critique of patriarchy that inheres in the choice of a female persona. It seems clear, however, that both approaches are correct but neither is ultimately true. The dynamic structure of transvestism reveals transvestism's inability to be fixed in either category despite its attempts to reaffirm once and for all the hegemony of the masculine.

I should briefly note that in my terminology sex and gender are two very distinct things, although they are, of course, intimately connected. Sex is a matter of biology (although biology turns out to be indecisive in some cases), and gender is a social and personal construct. Essentially, gender is the code of language, dress, thought, manners, and—often—sexual behavior that society deems acceptable from a person of one sex or the other. Gender, then, is the social overlay upon sex, and another gender (unlike another sex) can be assumed temporarily and then discarded.

"Narrative transvestism" is my conjunction of a literary term and a psychoanalytic one. Together they precisely define a realm

<sup>7</sup>Elaine Showalter discusses the appropriation of feminist criticism by male critics in her article "Critical Cross-Dressing: Male Feminists and the Woman of the Year," *Raritan* 3 (Fall 1983): 130–49. She cites Robert Stoller on the transvestite's desire to create a phallic woman in support of her argument that male critics who don't see that their efforts to "read as a woman" might be problematic are simply erasing the woman from feminist criticism. Her point is well taken, although I am somewhat less sanguine about the power of this phallic woman since s/he must be continually recreated through the transvestite's (even the critical transvestite's) endless revelation and redsignifying of the man beneath the womanly facade.

<sup>8</sup>These critics include Terry Castle, "Matters Not Fit to Be Mentioned"; Nancy K. Miller, "T's in Drag"; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosexual Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); and Elizabeth C. Goldsmith, ed., *Writing the Female Voice: Essays on Epistolary Literature* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989), which includes the essay by James Carson, "Narrative Cross-Dressing and the Critique of Authorship in the Novels of Richardson" (pp. 95–113), to which I refer later in this paragraph.

within which it is possible to talk about the formal demands and constraints of gendered imaginations and gendered voices as eighteenth-century England constructed them. In Chapter 1 I situate a psychoanalytic description of transvestism within eighteenth-century discussions of gender, and I examine the ways in which the structure of narrative transvestism gave early male novelists access to the dangerous but valuable, irrational and seemingly unbounded female realm. In Chapter 2 I elaborate on the part that Defoe's narrative transvestism in *Roxana* plays in complicating that novel's thematic investigation of how one goes about creating an expressive self. Defoe teases his readers by hiding the "true" author of the book beneath the shifting layers of Roxana's confession, his editorial intervention, the unimpeachable truth of historical facts, and the seductive unreliability of fiction. His goal is to entice us into organizing Roxana's character and her narrative when she cannot—and, once enticed, we participate in Defoe's model of the construction of a self. In Chapter 3 I analyze Richardson's personal correspondence to show that he poses as the editor of his own letters just as he does of his fictional characters' letters in *Clarissa*. In the novel he carries this pose further to abdicate authorial control over his characters, only to reassert that authority as a privileged reader of his own works.

This book relies on work that other scholars have done to uncover the period's concepts of proper gender roles and the debate over the stability of those roles as it is shown in theories of male and female language, discussions of sexuality and medical speculation about sex changes, notions about clothing and the semiotics of dress, and domestic conduct books. All this work provides a context for my analysis of narrative transvestism in the novels of Richardson and Defoe. I offer an overview of that context in Chapter 1, but I do not rehearse each step in those historical and social analyses. The notes to that chapter provide direction for anyone who wants to pursue that part of the argument in greater depth. (And in an effort to keep the text uncluttered, I have in general relegated most of my discussion of critical debates to the notes.)

I was steered to these efforts to define the content of gender categories in the period in part by questions I received in response to early talks that I gave on this topic. I was often asked if I thought the narrative "she" created by the early English male novelists was in fact a believable woman and whether or not her "autobiography" could possibly be true to a real woman's experience of the world. Such questions have a noble critical heritage. In *The Rise of the Novel*, for example, Ian Watt takes note of and then dismisses Defoe's use of narrative transvestism in *Moll Flanders*:

Moll Flanders, of course, has many feminine traits; she has a keen eye for fine clothes and clean linen, and shows a witty concern for the creature comforts of her males. Further, the early pages of the book undoubtedly present a young girl with a lifelike clarity, and later there are many touches of a rough cockney humour that is undeniably feminine in tone. But these are relatively external and minor matters, and the essence of her character and actions is, to one reader at least, essentially masculine. This is a personal impression, and would be difficult, if not impossible, to establish: but it is at least certain that Moll accepts none of the disabilities of her sex, and indeed one cannot but feel that Virginia Woolf's admiration for her was largely due to admiration of a heroine who so fully realized one of the ideals of feminism: freedom from any involuntary involvement in the feminine role.<sup>9</sup>

At points in the trajectory of narrative transvestism, which moves from a poorly defined and insecure male editor through a female narrator who is expressive by virtue of her ersatz femininity and back to the newly affirmed power of the male author, Defoe's relationship to his narrator is certainly one of admiring identification. But to assert that this admiration defines the limits of his authorial control over his narrator is to mistake one stage for the entire process.

Watt criticizes Moll for not being a woman, but of course she isn't a woman: she is a male author's narrative device, and her "unfeminine" traits are important not because they destroy the

<sup>9</sup>Watt, *Rise of the Novel*, p. 113. The next citation is from p. 115.

illusion of the female narrator but because they draw attention to it. Similarly failing to distinguish between the author's manipulation of gender as a thematic issue and a structural device, Watt mistakes Moll's ambitions for Defoe's: "Defoe's identification with Moll Flanders was so complete that, despite a few feminine traits, he created a personality that was in essence his own."

One could debate many of Watt's assumptions here, but for the time being I want to point out only that they lead critical inquiry away from the intersection of gender and narrative structure that we find in narrative transvestism. Indeed, they dismiss such concerns by simply stating that Moll was not a real woman and that Defoe's inability to create a real woman was one of the many signs of his incompetence as a novelist.

Although considerable attention is now being paid to narrative devices by which men write through women, much of it still focuses on this issue of whether or not a man can create a believable woman in narrative, or vice versa. What became clear to me, however, as I read about various essentialist definitions of male and female, about operations to turn little boys into little girls and back again, and about historical evidence that human sexuality is not defined by "heterosexual" and "homosexual" but rather exists in each individual on a continuum between the two, is that the content of these categories is not nearly as important as the existence of the categories themselves. That is, male and female—however else they are defined—are always defined as opposites. Thus, the most incisive question we can pose about a male author's use of a female narrative voice is not, did he create a believable woman? but, what did he have to gain from the attempt? What is the point of creating a rather elaborate narrative structure to gain access to a voice on the other side of the structural divide between genders?

The answers to these questions lie, I believe, in the structure of transvestism itself, particularly in the transvestite's refusal to be defined by one gender or the other. Before I elaborate my understanding of the psychology of real-world transvestism and of how it is a useful tool for the analysis of the structure of the

novel, however, I want to make clear what the aims of this book are, and what they are not. I do not intend to explore the sexual biographies of various eighteenth-century English authors but rather to investigate how the eighteenth-century discourse of gender and a new upheaval in the categories of male and female participate in the novel's narrative consciousness. In particular, the double-hinged structure of narrative transvestism, which highlights both the thematics of gender within the novel and the transgression and reaffirmation of those categories of gender in the narrative, points to an authorial awareness that has usually been denied to the early novelists. For example, when Richardson adds narrative transvestism to the epistolary form in *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, he is deliberately engaging his readers in an interplay between the truth or genuineness of the male editorial apparatus and the truth of the female letters themselves that precisely mirrors the transvestite's playfulness with, yet adherence to, rigid gender definitions. I concentrate here on the uses to which Richardson and Defoe put the rhetorical strategy of narrative transvestism and the ways our awareness of that strategy changes our readings of the novels.

Psychoanalytic theory about, and clinical and historical evidence of, transvestism can provide a model for understanding certain rhetorical strategies employed by the early English novelists; they do not provide me with clues to a buried pathology. "Transvestism" as applied to literary structures is not a diagnosis but a metaphor: it furnishes helpful analogies to the structures that govern an essentially literary masquerade, and it directs our attention to the dialectic of display and concealment exhibited by these eighteenth-century texts—to the complex negotiations between self and other that structure both the novelist's art and the reader's response. Similarly, my concern with the categories of male and female in the period is not an attempt to fix their content but rather an examination of what the insistence on such categories might mean, why an author would transgress their boundaries, and what impact that transgression had on the form and thematics of the novel.

I am writing about the eighteenth-century English novel, but



this book is about something that neither ended nor began with the eighteenth century. The instability of gender categories that I detail was not unique to that period, although it was strikingly and constantly articulated then, and the attempt to mediate that instability by creating a risky unstable but nevertheless enabling transvestite self is unique here only in that it produced the narrative structure that formed the basis of the novel. That narrative transvestite self is not in any sense the "true" self of the author; it is rather a provisional writing self, a stance from which the author can play with the instability that might otherwise immobilize him. I rely on Freudian theory and the revisions to that theory provided by the object relations school of psychoanalysis not because Freud somehow discovered a truth about sexuality applicable to people in all times and places but because he gave voice in a memorable way to certain preoccupations and anxieties of men in a patriarchal culture—one whose basic structure despite many changes has persisted since before the eighteenth century to the present. I am concerned with the politics of gender, not of sexuality, and those politics seem to revolve around the same issues in most societies and most periods.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup>See, for example, David Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1990), especially the essay "Why Is Diotima a Woman?", pp. 113–52, and John J. Winkler, *The Constraints of Desire: The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

## I

### Transvestism and Narrative Structures in Eighteenth-Century England

A transvestite is a man who dresses temporarily and periodically as a woman. He is not a transsexual who wants to be a woman and who today can be one, through surgery. Neither is he, generally, a homosexual. He is a heterosexual man who reaffirms his masculinity by dressing as a woman. In that dress, he does not become a woman; he becomes a man who is hiding his penis beneath his skirt. This is, of course, a simplistic formulation; obviously the essence of masculinity is not the penis, nor is it possible to reduce womanliness to a skirt. Similarly, while the transvestite can participate to some extent in the female realm, he never really creates a female body—only the illusion of one. The tools of this illusion are, however, the most obvious and powerful symbols the transvestite has at his disposal in his attempts to negotiate between the socially constructed extremes of gender difference. It is easy to become as preoccupied as the transvestite himself with the temporary success of the elaborate female costume. It is important to remember, however, that the costume is not really complete until it is revealed as a costume; the transvestite cross-dresses to undress. The cross-dressing, no matter how elaborate, is not the goal; rather, it is part of the process of creating a male self.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup>For my description of modern real-world transvestism, I have relied primarily on the work of Peter Ackroyd, Richard F. Docter, Deborah Feinbloom, and Robert