

# THE ORPHAN IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FICTION

The Vicissitudes of the  
Eighteenth-Century Subject

EVA KÖNIG



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The Vicissitudes of the Eighteenth-Century  
Subject

Eva König

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2014 978-1-137-38201-6

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First published 2014 by  
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

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Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN 978-1-349-47984-9      ISBN 978-1-137-38202-3 (eBook)  
DOI 10.1057/9781137382023

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

This thesis was accepted as a doctoral dissertation by the Faculty of Arts of the University of Zurich in the fall semester 2012 on the recommendation of Prof. Dr. Elisabeth Bronfen.

Typeset by MPS Limited, Chennai, India.

*To Adrian, without whom none of this  
would have been possible*

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# 1

## Introduction

Orphans are ubiquitous in novels. Not only do they people the pages of many eighteenth-century novels, they have also been indispensable for the literary imagination of successive generations.<sup>1</sup> However, the plots of eighteenth-century novels are strikingly far-fetched and fairy-tale-like. They create a semblance of a flesh-and-blood orphan on the level of character, yet this orphan figure stands for something beyond itself. My contention is that the orphans in these texts are primarily the means of working out various symbolic contents with which eighteenth-century society is troubled. This metaphorical level signifies an emptiness, a cipher-like quality, at the heart of the idea of 'orphan'. The orphan is thus a trope, always already abstracted from actual reality.

Orphans in the eighteenth-century imagination are radically different from their previous incarnations in ancient mythology. The orphans of ancient myths such as those of Moses or Romulus are foundlings whose fundamental rootlessness allows them to float free of their cultural circumstances, and to become the founding fathers of something radically new, be it a new religion or a new civilization. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud describes the origins of civilization in a similar vein: the expelled sons of the primal horde envy the 'jealous father who keeps all the females to himself' and they decide to kill him in order to succeed to his privileges.<sup>2</sup> For Freud, this murder of the father represents the founding moment of civilization as such. However, it can also be seen as a kind of wilful self-orphaning, a conscious rejection of one's roots. Nothing could be farther from the fictional orphan's experience in the eighteenth century. The worst that can befall a character is the loss of his or her origins, and the work of the text is to find the missing link and heal the trouble in the family that has caused the orphaning before reintegrating the orphan into the family.

Some of our most cherished fairy tales feature orphans. Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty have taught us sympathy for the plight of the victimized orphan child. Fairy-tale orphans share a number of characteristics with their novelistic counterparts, such as the absence of the biological mother,

the persecutions and deprivations the child has to endure, and the happy resolution coupled with social elevation. To justify their usefulness, novels as well as fairy tales promise to perform a socializing function and serve educational needs. Thus, when fairy tales become incorporated into published collections, the nature of their protagonist changes. In particular, 'the shrewd, resourceful heroine of folktales from earlier centuries has been supplanted by a "passive princess" waiting for Prince Charming to rescue her.'<sup>3</sup> This shift matches not only that of the novelistic hero(ine) but also the development of the early novel. These similarities are partly due to the concern of both genres with affairs pertaining to the family and society. Another factor is their need to conform to a broadly bourgeois morality. Aimed at unruly women and children, many cautionary tales harp on 'the evils of pride, disobedience, stubbornness, and curiosity, ... to promote a safe docility while also participating in the cultural project of stabilizing gender roles.'<sup>4</sup> Despite the many similarities, the differences are also telling. Crucially, they differ in the class origins of their protagonists: in novels we find almost no labourer or peasant heroes and heroines, except in disguise. Placed in middle-class circumstances, the orphans of eighteenth-century novels aspire to a more exalted status. A further difference lies in aesthetic choices: the eighteenth-century novel largely dispenses with fantastic elements and magic in favour of verisimilitude and the depiction of quotidian life.

These manifold similarities between fairy tales and novels beg the question regarding the origins of their affinity. In *Before Novels*, Paul Hunter provides a potential answer. He shows that by the early eighteenth century, fairy tales had fallen into disuse or suffered from active suppression by Puritans as well as progressive intellectuals of the Enlightenment. The resulting narrative void was subsequently filled by the novel.<sup>5</sup> As narratives, fairy tales cater to human needs and perform social and cultural 'functions that written literature would need to take on when oral tales were not available'.<sup>6</sup> The newly developing novel was well suited to take on these functions and shape them to its own needs. Consequently, the novel retains various elements of fairy tales in its 'genre memory', thus preserving them in the cultural imagination.

Eighteenth-century fictional orphans also differ from their nineteenth-century counterparts. Our cultural imagination has become dominated by the persecuted orphans created by Dickens and the Brontë sisters. We root for these poor orphans and hope that they can survive their trials and tribulations. In contrast to the Victorian *Bildungsroman*, eighteenth-century fiction rarely deals with the orphan's formative childhood experiences. With the exception of *Moll Flanders* and *Tom Jones*, the orphans usually appear as characters on the threshold of adulthood. Most texts deal with wealthy families, focusing on questions of property transmission and succession to aristocratic titles, as well as on the legitimacy and thus the marriageability of the child.

Also in contrast to Moll Flanders, whose exciting but roguish picaresque adventures come to a respectable end, the majority of eighteenth-century orphans follow a different path. The female orphans are less and less physically mobile as they acquire gentility. Eighteenth-century novels seem to be pervaded by various forms of threat; those who venture outside generally risk the loss of life, limb or virtue. This harassment is calculated to teach women the need to resign physical mobility and turn to the virtuous pleasures of domesticity. Jane Austen's *Persuasion* signals a shift in class orientation that already gestures towards the new orphans of the nineteenth century: its motherless Anne is eager to leave her family and give up her aristocratic status.

During the eighteenth century, English society and culture underwent enormous changes due to various social, legal and economic forces. This period saw the creation of the modern state, the commercialization of agriculture with the resulting displacement of the rural poor, the reorganization of inheritance law, the development of a credit economy and a modern industrial society, the newly evolving ideology of gender difference, as well as a fundamental change in the kinship system, described by Ruth Perry in *Novel Relations*.<sup>7</sup> These changes occasioned a profound reevaluation of people's images of themselves in society. Old certainties about social roles were being eroded, forcing individuals as well as families to work out acceptable and legitimate responses to a bewildering array of changes. The image of the individual caught up in this historical shift perfectly captures the way orphans are portrayed in eighteenth-century fiction. We can see the age-old analogy between the state and the family at work behind the ubiquitous use of this figure.

The orphan mediates between individual aspirations and the existing social order, while also modifying the social order in some ways. The reintegration of the orphan is the way to cure the ills of eighteenth-century society. The nature of such ills depends on the period as well as the outlook of the writer. The eighteenth-century orphan starts out as an outsider, an ambiguous figure who becomes an insider by the end of the story, (seemingly) happily settled. The orphan's essentially comic plot typically ends in marriage. Marriage is an imaginary solution to cover over the problems that cannot really be solved at the time: middle-class claims for power and – the most burning issue – the increasing subjection of women in the domestic ideology developed by the end of the eighteenth century. Thomas Laqueur has argued that during the eighteenth century our modern notions of sex were invented. The ideology of women's inferiority was facilitated by a new need to remap status hierarchy onto sex.<sup>8</sup> From 1600 to 1750 the situation of women in England changed fundamentally. Between the early and the late decades of the eighteenth century, middle-class men moved into wider, more egalitarian positions and partook of more power as political citizens, legal subjects and aspiring economic individuals, while women of all classes

were gradually deprived of their previous rights and spheres of action. In other words, middle-class (male) mobility and ambitions were achieved at the cost of reducing women's autonomy and confining them to matrimony and motherhood.<sup>9</sup>

Novels are a means of inculcating in subjects 'the social and psychological meanings of gender difference'.<sup>10</sup> They depict the deprivation leading to the development of gendered subjectivities, although this is different for men and for women. Thus, Moglen asserts, 'male- and female-authored fictions are structured by divergent fantasies of desire and employ distinct strategies of expression, resistance, and containment.'<sup>11</sup> While I fully share these assumptions, in my view Moglen's exclusive focus on canonical male-authored texts produces a blind spot that can only be remedied by examining novels written by men *and* women. Not until then can we assess the psychic costs of the process of acculturation for both genders – what we might call the vicissitudes of the eighteenth-century subject.

The orphan is a resilient, fertile and oscillating literary figure that culture can put to numerous uses. It is not a humanized figure but 'a system of communication', 'a message', 'a mode of signification' in Roland Barthes's sense. The orphan is a mythologized concept emptied of real experiences, pains and history of its own. Late-eighteenth-century orphans, for instance, tend to be reunited with their families and their misappropriated patrimonies are returned to them – a fate rarely shared by real orphans. That is to say, these orphan figures are 'rewarded' in the cultural imagination for important services done to society. The orphan is not an 'innocent' sign; rather, there is a second order of signification at work that – motivated by a partial analogy – fills the notion of the 'parentless child' with ideological meaning in order to interpellate the reader.<sup>12</sup> How the figure of the orphan is used differs from time to time, country to country, ideology to ideology. Thus, the orphan seems to be a privileged cultural signifier. This manifests itself in the fact that this figure continues to crop up frequently in all phases of the novel's development throughout the English-speaking world. The endless repetition of orphan fictions testifies to the fact that the orphan represents the characteristic anxieties of its age and contributes to the ideological creation of the new bourgeois subject. Class ideology is relational and it advocates 'values' in opposition to the ruling class in order to contest and undermine it, while the dominant class attempts to legitimate its own power position.<sup>13</sup> Such ideological dynamics are revealed in the themes, the character constellations, the twists and turns of the plot and its resolutions that are presented in fictional orphans' stories, variously supporting or subverting the dominant ideology.

I discern a conspicuous connection between the bourgeoisie, the birth of the novel and the orphan figure. All three are on a similar quest. Just as the bourgeoisie contests an older aristocratic culture, the novel as a new literary form must fight for its place in literature by claiming kinship with some

and dissociating itself from other literary ancestors. If mediaeval romance, the genre of the old order, promotes the figure of the knight on a metaphysical quest fighting creatures of fantasy, the bourgeois subject creates its own image of the self-made man in the world of the here and now.<sup>14</sup> Thus, orphan narratives can be seen as the attempts of the bourgeoisie to narrativize its own claims to power. Moreover, the novel, like the bourgeoisie and the orphan, is a protean form. This genre undergoes various transformations in form and subject matter and still retains the characteristics by which we can identify it.

The orphan figure is marshalled to undergird the notion of family, which is being reconceptualized in this period. Foucault claims that the nuclear family is instituted in the eighteenth century as part of a dynamics of power that is shifting from the aristocratic deployment of alliance to the bourgeois deployment of sexuality.<sup>15</sup> Fictional orphans represent this shift by the way in which names and legitimacy figure in their stories. In aristocratic culture, the paternal name signifies aristocratic origins as well as having a title and landed property tied to it. Characters with right to a proper name are also entitled to a share in the family's property. Without proof of legitimate birth, orphans cannot claim family membership and inherit family property, which leads to loss of social status. More generally, in modern patriarchal culture the father's name signifies the person, giving him or her an identity rooted in a family. Without a known family, an orphan cannot be placed within a network of familiar relations and is therefore marginalized. Thus, within the cultural configurations of family (the primary site of orphan fictions), an orphan, without roots and family history, represents a radical break with the notion of family.

This radical break has significant consequences for society as well as for the individual. Society must deal with the threat posed by the rootlessness of the nameless individual. This brings into play what a society places within the realm of the acceptable and what it deems to be abject, which involves a question of normativity. Thus, the orphan, cut loose from family as a site of legitimation but also of socialization, is often represented in literature as a dangerous destabilizing force, or at the very least an ambivalent figure. The nameless individual in turn must also deal with this problem: the Name-of-the-Father represents the social order itself that assigns each individual its place. Therefore, the orphan narrative may centre on the successful quest of the orphan for his or her lost origins in order to be able to occupy his or her assigned place. At this point, the orphan is reabsorbed into the social order. Alternatively, the orphan's identity is irrecoverably lost and must be created anew. Since being inserted into the symbolic order is a kind of symbolic castration, the orphan in fact commits self-castration by aspiring to and attaining a subject position in society. In all cases, what is at stake is a definition of self and subjectivity possible within a given social realm.

The increasingly powerful middle class has a different relation to the proper name. It has no illustrious name to set against the name of the aristocracy, to whose social and political power it aspires in the eighteenth century. Instead, it can only boast newly acquired capital-based wealth and merits. Thus, the metaphysics of the aristocratic name is displaced by the moral values of the middle class. In analogy to the nameless orphan, the middle class can see itself as nameless but meritorious and deserving of a more exalted place in society. This is historically underpinned by the fact that 'rich bourgeois used their capital not to overthrow aristocracy, but to join it',<sup>16</sup> buying landed property and titles ever since the early seventeenth century.

Female orphans loom large in the eighteenth-century imagination, presumably because both their identity and their self-definition are complicated by their relation to patriarchy. The woman's identity cannot be said to reside in her paternal surname, which she exchanges for her husband's. Thus, nominal identity for a woman is unstable. The excessive recurrence of upper-class daughters without fathers points to an anxiety that unconsciously recognizes a woman's essential namelessness by investing the paternal signifier with undue significance. As women are increasingly barred from creating an identity independently of the patriarchal signifier, eighteenth-century novels repeatedly argue that a woman's identity must be created by and in marriage. Yet, a truly nameless female orphan is worthless as an object of exchange because she is without exchange value: paternal recognition of the daughter is crucial for an advantageous marriage. Thus, lacking a father is a serious problem for eighteenth-century heroines, one often presented as an extreme form of orphanhood.<sup>17</sup>

While fatherless children suffer abjection, motherless children can still thrive in eighteenth-century novels. Curiously, the fictional mother's absence is taken for granted. Nevertheless, absent and dead mothers still often get short shrift from writers. Mothers of foundlings are portrayed as sexually incontinent, thus plunging their children into difficulty. Lack of knowledge about the mother raises the spectre of incest. This enmity towards the mother can be read against the grain as indicating the mother's diminishing social power.<sup>18</sup>

The orphan figure can represent various forms of mobility. The orphan is an excellent plot device, as the lack of a fixed place and familial allegiance provides the necessary initial imbalance to be redressed in the plot. Thus the earliest novelistic manifestations of the orphan, such as *Moll Flanders*, can be seen as picaresque heroes in search of a place in society. Social mobility is a related desire in orphans' plots, *Moll Flanders* again providing a well-known example. She achieves respectable gentility despite a very unpropitious start as the daughter of a thief. However, social mobility is inflected through gender: for men it may derive from new professions and individual merit, whereas for women it is only acceptable by way of marrying upwards.

Nonetheless, orphans in eighteenth-century novels generally eschew precisely the notion of the self-made (wo)man inherent in the symbolism of orphanhood. Instead, they are desperate to be proven part of the family. The family they aspire to and rediscover is invariably an aristocratic one, still the locus of power in eighteenth-century society. Gender mobility – that is, becoming an unmarried professional woman and thus escaping paternal/patriarchal authority – is increasingly unacceptable for women in such novels. Instead, female orphans are pressed into service to promote the ideology of virtuous domestic womanhood.<sup>19</sup> All these scenarios created by middle-class writers obliquely indicate their ‘will to power’.

This book argues that the literary orphan participates in the construction of the proper gendered subject in the eighteenth century. The novels analysed in this study fall into three categories that can be placed into a productive analogy with Lacan’s theory of subject formation, especially his notion of three psychic registers, the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic. The rationale for mapping psychoanalytic concepts onto eighteenth-century culture and literature in this fashion lies in the premise that human socio-cultural and sexual activity is generated in the discursive/linguistic order. Novels are products of such socio-cultural activity and they play an important role in articulating the social order and the subject’s position within it. Lacan’s theory of the socio-linguistic genesis of subjectivity allows us to see male and female subjects as socially and historically defined, rather than as universal biological givens. Eighteenth-century novels, as a socio-linguistic signifying practice, are particularly interested in histories of individuals in a liminal position, on the threshold of adulthood, ready to take up their place in society as gendered subjects. ‘To be a subject or “I” at all, the subject must take up a sexualized position, identifying with the attributes socially designated as appropriate for men or women.’<sup>20</sup> This notion has a particular resonance for eighteenth-century fiction, because that is also the age when the sexualized positions of male and female subjects are codified or even calcified, which explains the novel’s dominant interest in the reordering of gender relations. Thus, this process also constitutes the political unconscious of eighteenth-century fiction.

The orphan plots and figures undergo several transformations in the period. The early orphan enjoys independence and mobility, which is gradually restricted after the 1750s when various aspects of social behaviour, such as gender roles or class values, are under intense social scrutiny. Towards the end of the century, the orphaned heroine becomes increasingly self-effacing and learns to conform to the patriarchal prescriptions of female subjectivity. In other words, the trajectory of the orphaned protagonist describes a move from a relatively free agent through a process of taming to a completely confined subject. These three steps resemble the Lacanian transition of the individual from the pre-Imaginary register through the Mirror stage into the Symbolic. The novels under consideration represent the stages of



this process with varied emphasis, yet they fall into a broad chronological pattern. The early-eighteenth-century orphan – figured as a foundling and a bastard – can enjoy a sense of freedom, a fluid identity unparalleled in most of English fiction. At the middle of the century there is a stress on experimentation with identity in the form of female power, but with a clear message that the heroine must give up her fantasies of power and accept her designated place in the symbolic order. Late-century orphaned heroines have fully embraced the Law-of-the-Father. Female autonomy is treated as monstrous and such women are reviled and punished for their unfeminine behaviour.

The literary career of the novel follows an analogous trajectory. Novels provide a mirroring function for readers and, noticeably, the newly developing genre also revels in its own reflection provided by its favourite protagonist. Thus, I think it is possible to map Lacan's concepts of individuation onto the history of the novel's 'individuation'. The novel genre – as the representation of modern subjectivity – goes through the same 'stages' of development as the orphan protagonists depicted therein and its aesthetics develops analogously as well. In the figure of the orphan, the early novel self-consciously dramatizes its search for origins and a place in the Symbolic order (that is, the literary establishment), thus these Lacanian concepts – developed for the individual subject – can shed new light on its process of 'becoming'. As Jameson argues, 'in its emergent strong form, a genre is essentially a socio-symbolic message, ... an ideology in its own right'; thus tracing the development of the novel allows us to apprehend the ideological 'message' of the bourgeoisie.<sup>21</sup>

Although producing the new kind of text was undoubtedly a profitable enterprise, the whole century of novel-writing was pervaded by a sense of unease. Until the middle of the eighteenth century the very status of the genre itself was in question. It was a new class of writing, a species without an official designation and without clear origins.<sup>22</sup> Just like orphans, the novel as a genre had to establish its origins and maintain at least a semblance of virtuous conduct, to find its proper happy ending in the bosom of the literary establishment. Novel-reading suffered from being perceived as dangerous and potentially subversive. Contemporary commentators feared that novels would distract young girls from their duties while putting wrong, immoral or even radical ideas into their heads.<sup>23</sup> One way to make the new genre respectable was to ensure that it always maintained the high moral ground. Although their plots may have presented transgressive fantasies, the resolutions of eighteenth-century novels invariably strove to teach their audience moral lessons. Already in 1722, Daniel Defoe argued that the story of the infamous Moll Flanders could serve as a warning against the dangers depicted in the text. Mid- and late-century women writers perceived themselves as 'teachers' and introduced the notion of the fallible heroine who learnt from her mistakes and reformed her conduct. Eliza Haywood's

heroine, Betsy Thoughtless, had to go through a painful learning process to arrive at her blissful destiny. Didacticism is one of the most successful strategies of legitimation because these novels functioned as dramatized conduct books for women.<sup>24</sup>

Novelists were also in danger of finding themselves conflated with the subject matter or the hero(in)es they depicted. This was particularly true for female novelists, therefore conforming to society's increasingly strict moral expectations became essential for a woman writer's reputation.<sup>25</sup> We could argue that by restricting themselves and the subject matter of their novels, women writers created a cultural imaginary in which the fictional behaviour of individuals described by writers becomes the prescribed behaviour for all women/subjects.

Nancy Armstrong argues that bourgeois morality is 'a way of reading, assessing, and revising both the prevailing categories of identity and whatever cultural apparatus may authorize them'.<sup>26</sup> This 'revision' appears in a paradigmatic shift of the concept of identity in eighteenth-century society documented by Dror Wahrman. He makes the case for a radical shift from an *ancien régime* of identity to a modern one in which prevalent notions of self – which we take for granted today – were created, codified and fixed.<sup>27</sup> These developments can be seen as constituting elements of the political unconscious of eighteenth-century novels. The fictional orphan of the age plays a crucial role in this process.

In what follows, I will outline the traits that distinguish the three groups of orphan texts in my study from each other. The novels in group I can be mapped onto aspects of infantile development before the Mirror stage. Lacan places the pre-imaginary infant's existence in what he calls the Real, the order prior to the formation of the ego. Unaware of its own corporeal boundaries, the infant does not yet possess a continuous, homogenous subjectivity but exists in a unity with its mother, without separation between itself and its environment. The infant experiences plenitude, a state of total satisfaction, as all of its physical and psychical needs are taken care of by its mother. Yet, obviously, this state of plenitude is not eternal and alternates cyclically with states of dissatisfaction, expressed in the infant's inarticulate cry when it is hungry, cold, without shelter and so on. This state of deprivation is closer to the late-Lacanian Real, that unfathomable and unrepresentable state towards which humans inexorably move: death. The infant thus swings between these two states of being: plenitude and deprivation, life and death. This is also the characteristic theme of *Moll Flanders* and *Tom Jones*. Seen through such a psychoanalytic lens, the ambiguous social status of these foundlings/bastards corresponds to the infant's fluid boundaries and unfixed ego. Foundlings are dependent on the care of others; their existence is always precarious since they have no clearly assigned place in society. Thus, these states of plenitude and deprivation are a constant factor in their existence. I would argue that these two foundlings seem to hover

on the edge of becoming subjects, more akin to the subject(-to-be) prior to the constitution of the ego. In the Real, the child's survival depends on need, which must be satisfied with concrete objects.<sup>28</sup> In this light, we can see these foundling orphans, especially *Moll Flanders*, as having needs to satisfy first and foremost. Survival is her primary goal and the focus of narrative plotting, as well as her most frequent justification for her (criminal) deeds. Living in a pre-linguistic world, the infant is not aware of the symbolic laws of society; it has not yet been assigned its place in the symbolic order. Similarly, foundlings' relation to the law can be characterized by their external position to it. They also remain illegitimate even at the closure of the plot, so in a certain sense they are not (fully) integrated into the symbolic order.

These two novels appear at the beginning of the trajectory of the much-debated 'rise of the novel'. Just as the fictional foundlings try to forge an identity for themselves in the world, the novels that contain them must do the same in the literary world. Ellen Pollak points out that 'doubts about legitimacy inform discussions of the genre of the novel, which in its detachment from the domain of tradition was often figured as a bastard form.'<sup>29</sup> As a 'bastard' genre, as yet without a name of its own, the novel fares indifferently in the literary establishment. It enjoys financial success but also faces ostracism due to its subject matter, its lack of recognizable literary form and literary affiliation. The original novel, like the Lacanian Real, 'has no boundaries, borders, divisions, or oppositions; it is a continuum of "raw materials"'.<sup>30</sup> As a new genre, it is not subject to any literary laws: it can make up rules for itself. All in all, the foundlings of these narratives announce the birth of the novelistic orphan in English fiction while also announcing the birth of bourgeois aesthetic self-representation and the birth of the modern subject.

Phase two in the infant's psychic development involves a move from need to demand, which corresponds to its movement out of the Real and into the Imaginary. In the Imaginary, the child forms an intense reciprocal relation with its mother, and gradually realizes that it has an identity independent of her. This recognition is precipitated by a perceived lack that causes the child to find an identificatory image of its own stability so as to fill that lack. It finds this image in its own reflection in the mirror. This mirror image allows the child's ego to be established, as it identifies with the figure perceived in the mirror. Paradoxically, the child's identity/ego is founded on an illusion of corporeal unity and completeness, whereas it still experiences itself as fragmented, not in control of itself. Thus, this phase, the so-called Mirror stage, is dominated by a misrecognition of something else as itself. The Mirror stage is necessarily a transitional phase in the child's development because 'it does not empower the child to act as an agent or subject in a larger linguistic and economic community'.<sup>31</sup> Ultimately, the child must enter the symbolic order in order to assert its subject position.

The incarnation of the orphan corresponding to this phase is the motherless heiress figure that dominates novels at mid-century. The characteristics of the child in the Imaginary perfectly capture the way heiresses are portrayed in mid-century novels. They are shown to be labouring under a misperception of wholeness, omnipotence and autonomy as they pursue their fantasies of power. However, the aspirations of these heroines are presented as irrational, imaginary or even deluded in the eyes of men and society at large. The narrative plotting has the aim of making them relinquish their power and whatever laudable, ridiculous or dangerous project they intended to fulfil with it. These novels position the heiresses in the Imaginary/Mirror stage: they look in the mirror and misrecognize themselves as not bound by the rules of the Symbolic with regard to women. If at the end of the Mirror stage the infant accepts the laws of the symbolic order, orphaned heiresses too are subjected to a process of taming and castration as their desires are shown to be harmful to themselves as well as to the social order. They are compelled to give up their fantasies and take their designated place in society, in this case by being almost literally forced to marry. In this respect these novels depict a period in English history that contributed greatly to the diminishing power of women in society. Heiresses represent a threat due to the fact that at least in theory, these single women enjoyed the same legal status as men, which blurred gender boundaries.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, rich heiresses also derived power from their property, and if their father was dead, this power was not truly checked by a representative of the patriarchal order. This posed several problems for eighteenth-century society that are vividly dramatized in these novels. The conspicuous literary presence of the orphaned heiress, in many famous novels, indicates a serious anxiety in eighteenth-century culture that required a (fictional) fix.

This phase of child development is linked to the sphere of the mother. These novels depict particular psychic traits traditionally associated with the mother and with the Imaginary order: narcissism, self-image and fantasy. Crucially, in all these novels the mother is irrevocably lost. Thus, the desires that drive heiresses may be psychoanalytically interpreted as the search for a lost object. What they 'find' as their object of desire is expected to but never really can fill the void left by the mother's loss. Their notion of power derives consciously from their status in society and unconsciously from their identification with an all-powerful mother, all-powerful because not experienced as castrated. Freud's oedipal trajectory foresees that the daughter must transfer her love for the mother to the father, whose place can be taken in adulthood by another man. The difficulty of this transition is dramatized in novels about orphaned heiresses. For them, marriage is not self-fulfilment but excruciating symbolic castration, a forced entry into the Symbolic, and with it utter disempowerment and loss of all agency. Thus, these novels also provide an insight into the increasing 'castration' to which women in the eighteenth century are subjected as they are taught their new place in the bourgeois capitalist dispensation.

In the field of literary genres, this battle to limit female power is fought between the romance and the novel with regard to subject matter and aesthetic approaches. Romances thrive on imaginative adventures set in fantastic places, whereas novels advocate plots centring around familiar places and people.<sup>33</sup> The plot of Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* demonstrates what it means to abandon the romance (especially its female-authored French variety) and move to the realm of the novel. These two literary realms are shown as antithetical to each other and they form the binary opposition structuring this novel. They also embody two different psychic registers: romances belong to the realm of the Imaginary, whereas the novel belongs to the Symbolic. Thus, in being forced to give up her cherished romances in favour of novels, Arabella must abandon the Imaginary, accept the Law-of-the-Father and enter the Symbolic.

The third phase of infantile development is dominated by the child's experience of the Symbolic order, in other words by symbolic castration. The acceptance of the Name-of-the-Father is necessary if the child is to acquire a symbolic – that is, a social, linguistic and economic – position within the culture. Novels in the third and largest group of texts in this study usually feature orphan protagonists who are already fully 'castrated' with regard to their behaviour and wishes. There is no space for experimentation with gender or identity, as any transgression would be likely to cause the abjection of the orphan. This corresponds to Dror Wahrman's findings with regard to an abrupt fixity of identity categories that appears in Britain around the 1770s.<sup>34</sup> Legitimate but displaced children of aristocratic families dominate the novelistic landscape. Their displacement and dispossession represent a rent in the symbolic fabric that must be repaired in the plot. These orphans desperately crave the sanction of the social order, symbolized by the Name-of-the-Father. This notion is often literalized in plots of unacknowledged orphan daughters searching for the name of their father. The subject, epitomized in these fatherless daughters, is shown to be fully subjected to the rule of the symbolic order. Castration also forcefully separates the child from a close identification with its mother. Correspondingly, these novels dramatize the literal rejection of the mother and the daughter's insistence on her essential difference from the mother as the terms under which the daughter can be readmitted into the father's presence.

Although late eighteenth-century novels argue that the subject must submit to the symbolic order, they also insist on depicting the debilitating effects of this unconditional acceptance. Several novels portray tyrannical fathers as agents of the repressive symbolic law. Subjection to such a father requires the daughter's partial or total erasure of her self, with concomitant hysterical side effects. Gothic novels, for their part, focus on the dark side of the Freudian Family Romance and its consequences for family dynamics. The aggressive impulses inherent in the Family Romance are represented as excessive patriarchal/fraternal usurpation of power.

Not content to portray the malaise that daughters suffer, some women novelists also explore the possibility of a different social order. Charlotte Smith and Ann Radcliffe, in particular, are interested in the possibility of women's resistance to the patriarchal expectations imposed on women. Smith explores the possibility of escaping coercion by feigning submission through femininity as masquerade. Radcliffe in her turn exposes the evils inherent in the father's absolute power and insists that the social ills from which the subject suffers arise precisely from the repudiation of the mother. Part IV of this study focuses on two of her novels that feature the return of a mother previously assumed to be dead. Radcliffe creates a utopian vision of society ordered along more egalitarian lines, which allows the coexistence of mother and children that defies patriarchal prescriptions of family dynamics. In Part V, I analyse Jane Austen's novel strategy to focus attention on the mother. In *Persuasion*, the mother is not repudiated or resuscitated, but rather properly mourned. Yet, this act of personal mourning also occasions a 'political' mourning in the novel with regard to the waning of the landed class as a relevant political force.

Having internalized the moral constraints placed on it, the *fin de siècle* novel is an increasingly respectable and popular genre. It has proved itself useful as an instrument to inculcate the right values in readers. However, women novelists face a predicament: in order to stay within the bounds of the acceptable, they feel compelled to endorse filial obedience. Just how high the cost of such obedience to women can be is revealed in Frances Burney's early career. Divided by her desire to write and her desire to please her father (that is, to conform to the decorous femininity that precludes writing), she famously burned the only manuscript of her actual first novel. What we now know as *Evelina* is a kind of fictional daughter to the burnt first brainchild of the young Burney.<sup>35</sup> The murder of the mother-novel appears symbolically in the genesis of *Evelina*, causing the orphaning of the protagonist, whose mother dies after being cruelly abandoned by her husband. Feminine submissiveness, however, is not the only strategy to elevate the novel. Another can be seen in the work of Charlotte Smith and Ann Radcliffe, who are acclaimed for their extensive use of contemporary aesthetic theories to 'paint' significant verbal landscapes.<sup>36</sup> Having no access to ancient literary models due to their limited female education, they turn to English poetry to forge a connection to the literature of England's past. Using quotations from Milton, Shakespeare and contemporary poets allows them to link their work to a line of English ancestors. Moreover, they include their own poetry ascribed to the imagination of their heroines. As a renowned poet, with a celebrated volume of sonnets to her name, Charlotte Smith can capitalize on her poetic success to promote her prose fiction. In the figure of the eponymous Celestina, she also forges the first female poet of English prose fiction in the same year as Radcliffe features her own heroine endowed with poetic abilities in *The Romance of the Forest*. These

strategies raise their novels to a higher literary status. With such predecessors, Jane Austen can safely assert the supreme literary value of novels, 'in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language'.<sup>37</sup>

Examining eighteenth-century culture and literature through the orphan figure affords new insights into the ways in which the bourgeoisie wrests cultural authority from the landed class. Novels about orphans theorize and dramatize the relations between the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy by investing the orphan's cipher-like nature with the superior qualities derived from recognizable middle-class virtues. These virtues are embodied primarily in female orphans, whose increasing confinement counterpoints the opening-up of the eighteenth-century power structure. In a Foucaultian fashion, the novel responds to and fashions these cultural processes and along with the orphan figure has a significant part to play in the construction of the modern gendered subject. This is what the following study examines in greater detail.

**Note on spelling:** Quotations from the primary texts follow the eighteenth-century spelling adopted in the scholarly editions used. I have refrained from marking each deviation from modern spelling with [sic].

**Part I**

**Bastards and Foundlings  
in Pre-Imaginary Oscillation**



# 2

## Introduction to Part I

Johnson's *Dictionary* says that a bastard is 'a person born of a woman out of wedlock, or not married; so that according to order of law, his father is not known'. In contrast, a foundling is simply 'a child found without any parent or owner', whereas an orphan is defined as 'a child who has lost father or mother, or both'.<sup>1</sup> This seems fairly straightforward. Yet, as Lisa Zunshine shows, foundling and bastard were often used interchangeably, and 'it was widely, though not always correctly, assumed that *all* abandoned children were born outside of marriage'.<sup>2</sup> This observation is borne out by *Moll Flanders* and *Tom Jones*, neither of which makes a clear distinction between bastards and foundlings.

The presentation of novelistic foundlings, however, changes in the course of the eighteenth century. In the first half of the century foundlings are able to remain illegitimate, whereas the protagonists of late-century novels rediscover their legitimate birth. The reason for this is that the notion of illegitimacy has more resonance in the first half of the century due to the political crisis of 1688 and the questions over legitimacy arising from the exile of the Stuart dynasty, along with the institution of the Orange and subsequently the Hanover line. My chosen texts can be read in the light of such questions and seem to work as allegories of kingship and statehood. They also voice anxieties arising from the newly established credit economy and increased social mobility. Once the Jacobite threat is laid to rest, the latter half of the century moves towards other concerns such as the question of nation building.

Zunshine also posits a clear gendering tendency in eighteenth-century texts that allows 'fictional male foundlings – but not their female counterparts – to remain illegitimate'.<sup>3</sup> This development is due, in my view, to the increasing limitations placed on women and to the growing segregation of public and private spheres. The notions of foundling and orphan can feed the idea of freedom and unlimited opportunities for self-fashioning only for men, in particular in the rising need for manpower to build the overseas empire. Women are assigned the role of bearing and rearing children for the nation,

thus their own legitimacy is essential. Also relevant are the identity and legitimacy of the new literary genre that presents these foundlings to their audiences, in particular its 'rise' to respectability.

The sedimented meanings of these three terms illustrate the way in which these novels imagine fictional foundlings, bastards and orphans. The *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology* defines 'foundling' as a 'child found deserted'. I will adopt this sense in my reading of its eighteenth-century fictional embodiments. In *Chambers* 'bastard' denotes an 'illegitimate child', 'borrowed from Old French *bastard* child of a nobleman and a woman other than his wife'. 'Old French *bast* ... would emphasize that the child was born in a barn or of low origin on the mother's side.'<sup>4</sup> The French branch of meanings is instructive: the bastard is the illegitimate child of a nobleman, but has a lower-class mother. These ideas are relevant for fictional orphans. *Moll Flanders* is clearly of low maternal origins, while *Tom Jones* is presumed to be the child of low-born mother Jenny Jones, hence his surname, although he later turns out to be of higher extraction.

According to *Chambers*, the word 'orphan' is 'borrowed from late Latin *orphanus* parentless child, from Greek *orphanós* deprived, orphaned'. Its Indo-European cognates include 'Latin *orbus* deprived or orphaned, ... Sanskrit *árba*-s small, weak, ... Gothic *arbi* inheritance ... Old High German *erbi* (modern German *Erbe*)'. This rich etymology points to all the shades of meaning present in eighteenth-century articulations of orphans. The orphan is most obviously a parentless child, who is (figuratively speaking) weak, small and deprived. The orphan is deprived of its parents and as a result is also deprived because separated from its inheritance; that is to say, disinherited.

Despite all the clarity of Johnson's definitions, then, the three terms overlap considerably, a fact that fictional texts can fruitfully exploit. In these narratives the orphan is a foundling, abandoned by its mother, found on the property of a figure of authority, the representative of the law, without discernible roots in the neighbourhood. These foundlings experience the potentialities of the orphan in its free-floating state, not encumbered with parents, class or family traditions. They can create themselves and thus they embody the self-made (wo)man; that is to say, the middle-class ideal in eighteenth-century society. They also represent various middle-class virtues: *Moll* displays the industriousness of the bourgeoisie (not necessarily absolutely lawful) and *Tom Jones* agrees to follow the middle-class morality in his conduct (in particular his sexual conduct).

*Moll Flanders* is the daughter of a common female criminal and the text wastes no words on her father. Although she might equivocate to evade the issue of her illegitimacy, she is to all intents and purposes a bastard. She might also be considered a foundling: before the age of three she spends some time among gypsies, but she cannot tell how she came to live with them or how she escaped from them. Thus, whatever *Moll* can say about the first

years of her life is uncertain, mostly hearsay. It is therefore even debatable whether Moll is actually related to the woman she recognizes as her mother in Virginia. The matter is ultimately undecidable: Moll is a bastard (if we believe her story of her maternal origins), she is a foundling (if we accept the story of her sojourn with the gypsies) and, until she recognizes her mother in Virginia, she is, to all intents and purposes, an orphan. This confusion of categories is quite possibly willed and is certainly capable of launching and sustaining a varied narrative.

In Fielding's *Tom Jones*, Squire Allworthy finds a baby boy in his bed without any notion of its parentage. Although Allworthy is not the baby's father, and various servants and parishioners will be suspected as the child's parents, ultimately the boy will turn out to be the illegitimate son of Allworthy's own sister and a former protégé of the squire. Thus, Tom is also a foundling, a bastard and an orphan. However, he truly appreciates Allworthy's benevolence and only when he is turned out of Paradise Hall on false charges does he begin to bewail his orphan state and talk of his misfortune in having no family or home. Although he conceives of his new situation as an opportunity to reinvent himself, ultimately he is not fit for middle-class life.

In the early and mid-eighteenth century, cultural anxiety over bastards and foundlings focused on the illegitimate children of lower-class women, who tried to prevent the loss of their jobs and becoming prostitutes by concealing their pregnancy and getting rid of their babies, and who were punished for burdening the parish with fatherless children.<sup>5</sup> This is the case with Moll Flanders, particularly as a mother herself. Twenty years later, Fielding switches the class to the landed gentry: a gentlewoman has an illicit affair with a gentleman but gets away with it. On her deathbed, the 'fallen' mother confesses to her illegitimate offspring and explains its origins. Thus, the guilty party is dead at the conclusion of the narrative, duly removed from ostracism. In this way, the offence is cleansed and society is purged of unchaste women. The offspring of the next generation will be legitimate, as the resolution sees the foundling lawfully married. This class switch may have to do with the fact that political power, and especially the legitimacy of the Hanover dynasty, was still in question in the 1740s. The Jacobite rebellion is the explicit background to Fielding's text, and he may have wanted to create a political allegory out of his foundling narrative.<sup>6</sup>

These novels about foundlings follow a basic narrative pattern of ups and downs, which we can map onto the first phase of Lacan's notions of infant development. The infant's existence before the Mirror stage is grounded in 'organic insufficiency', as 'the subject(-to-be) is vitally dependent on the (m)other for both physical and psychical survival'.<sup>7</sup> When the mother is caring for the infant, the infant experiences plenitude, a state of total satisfaction, which Lacan designates the lack of lack, or the Real: a full belly, warmth, a clean body, shelter and so on. Yet this state is not permanent

and unchanging. Periodically, the infant feels corporeal dissatisfaction due to hunger, cold, lack of shelter and so on. Taking this into account, it can be argued that the infant oscillates between two states of being: plenitude and deprivation, the total satisfaction of elementary needs and the fragmentation of the 'hommelette', wholly dependent on its mother to eliminate states of deprivation.<sup>8</sup> 'Needs are more or less universal or constant in human life' and their satisfaction is a vital condition for the individual's survival.<sup>9</sup> Thus, I would argue that foundlings, especially Moll Flanders, have needs to satisfy first and foremost. Survival is her primary goal as well as her most frequent justification for her (criminal) deeds, and it is also the focus of narrative plotting. Julia Kristeva's notion of the semiotic *chora* illuminates the issue with regard to the mother's role. The semiotic *chora* is the space of the mother's body, which dominates during this phase of development. This ambivalent space is 'the place where the subject is both generated and negated'. The *chora* defines and structures the limits of the child's body and its ego or identity as a subject.<sup>10</sup> This idea of the simultaneous production and annihilation of the subject is another way to account for the twin modes of foundlings' existence: the oscillation between plenitude and deprivation or even death. In sum, the child is born into the order of the Real, without clear boundaries, divisions or oppositions. In Lacan's theory, the ego 'unifies the heterogeneous experiences and disorganized sensations of the (proto-)subject'.<sup>11</sup> I would argue that the foundlings depicted in these novels seem to hover on the edge of becoming subjects, akin to the proto-subject that exists prior to the constitution of the ego.

Such an oscillation between states of satisfaction and deprivation provides the early novel with its primary structuring device. Moll recounts the events of her life as a series of 'Fortunes and Misfortunes'. This micro-narrative level is thus an account of her life as lived between the states of plenitude and lack. The macro level of the text charts a trajectory that ultimately curves upwards after Moll manages to avoid the gallows. Following her repentance, her life acquires a new meaning and a decidedly positive outcome: she becomes a landowner in order to live out the remains of her life in plenitude and satisfaction. The oscillation, which constituted the backbone and sustained the interest of the whole narrative – its picaresque aspect – becomes obsolete in the spiritual autobiography of the repentant sinner, whose story has a happy ending and, since she has nothing more to relate, comes to an end. *Tom Jones* retains the device of narrative oscillation in its story of a foundling who goes through a series of ups and downs. Tom is first found in 'Paradise', specifically called Paradise Hall in the novel. Paradise is the biblical image of the pre-symbolic, pre-lapsarian phase of a baby's development – the Lacanian Real. Subsequently the foundling is compelled to leave his Paradise and must strike out on his own to create a new life and identity. His narrative is a string of fortunes and misfortunes: phases of satisfaction followed by moments of deprivation followed by a new twist of events that steers him