

Female Economy and the Limits of Male Imagination: Women, Money, and Narrative Control in *Pamela*, *Moll Flanders*, and *Roxana*

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Abstract

This paper takes up the question of how female economic agency is represented in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, and *Roxana*. What it cares about most is the link between women, money, and who controls the narrative in the eighteenth-century English novel. The analysis draws on feminist literary criticism, materialist feminism, and narrative theory, and from there the author argues that male-authored fiction of this period gradually gives women more room to act economically, though it never lets that room go unbounded, since narrative limits are placed on it at the same time. *Pamela* is the starting point: the heroine's economic advancement only becomes acceptable because it is tied to virtue and ends in marriage. *Moll Flanders* goes further, as its protagonist moves through the marketplace far more actively, yet her agency is brought under control in the end by confession and repentance. With *Roxana* the situation changes again; the heroine's economic independence is pushed to a more radical point, and the result is a narrative that wobbles and finally stops without any resolution. Taken together, the three novels form a progressive line, and what stands out along it is that the more autonomy female economic subjects gain, the more clearly the limits of patriarchal narrative structures show through. The early English novel can picture a woman who is economically free, but it has trouble holding on to one whose independence no longer depends on a male intermediary.

Keywords

Female Economic Agency; Eighteenth-Century English Novel; Gender and Economy; Narrative Control; Feminist Literary Criticism.

1. Introduction

The development of the English novel in the eighteenth century took place against a backdrop of considerable social and economic change in Britain. As commercial capitalism expanded and urban life became increasingly prominent, established ideas about social status, labor, and individual identity also began to change. Economic success and social mobility consequently became important subjects in fiction, particularly in narratives concerned with making a living, improving one's social position, and negotiating the demands of an emerging commercial society. In this sense, the early English novel was doing more than recording changes that had already taken place. It also offered a literary space in which new forms of individual identity could be imagined and examined.

In eighteenth-century Britain, women remained legally and economically dependent on men: property law restricted them, few professions were open to them, and social expectations revolved around marriage and domestic life. Even so, a number of novels from the period put women with a measure of economic agency at their center. What makes this more striking is that many of these stories were written by men, who took on a female first-person voice to tell

of money troubles, social climbing, and moral compromise. That such narratives appeared so often hints that the female figure served early novelists as a favored ground for working through both the promise and the unease of economic modernity.

This habit of narration raises some difficult questions for critics. Why would male novelists so often picture women as economic actors just when real women had very little economic autonomy? Which forms of participation in economic life could a literary narrative actually tolerate? And, perhaps most pressing, what happens once a woman's economic agency starts to push past the limits of patriarchal order? This study does not ask whether fictional women manage to win wealth or independence. It looks instead at how male-authored narratives conceive of women's relationship to money and economic power, how they regulate it, and where they finally draw the line.

The argument here is that eighteenth-century male novelists widened the range of female economic agency bit by bit, while betraying deep anxiety about what that widening might mean. Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, and *Roxana* are best read not as parallel portraits of women but as stages in an experiment, one that tests how much female autonomy male-authored fiction was able to bear. In *Pamela*, economic advancement is acceptable only when it passes through moral virtue and is sanctioned by marriage, so that a woman's value is turned into domestic stability. *Moll Flanders* takes a step further and imagines a woman who works the marketplace herself, using marriage, sexuality, and deception to survive; her agency, though, is kept in check by confession and repentance. *Roxana* then presents a woman who comes close to real economic independence because she refuses marital dependence altogether, and it is right at this point that the narrative starts to lose its coherence, giving way to anxiety, instability, and a conclusion left unresolved.

In terms of method, the study places the novels within the socio-economic changes of eighteenth-century Britain and draws on feminist literary criticism to examine how gendered power works through narrative form. A new historicist perspective helps situate the rise of female-centered economic narratives within commercial modernity, while feminist approaches show how those narratives build up female agency and limit it at once. With both frameworks in hand, economic activity can be read as more than plot material, since it is one of the main ways fiction negotiates gender, power, and social order.

In the end, the paper contends that the economically active woman who keeps turning up in early English fiction points to a paradox at the center of the novel's formation. Female protagonists are given a voice and freedom of movement because they offer a space in which modern subjectivity can be imagined; but the nearer they get to real independence, the more urgently narrative structures step in to discipline or destabilize them. The path traced through *Pamela*, *Moll Flanders*, and *Roxana* thus marks the point where male-authored imagination reaches its limit, namely the difficulty of holding up a vision of female economic freedom that no longer depends upon patriarchal mediation.

2. Theoretical Framework: Gender, Economy, and Narrative Power

Making sense of how female economic agency relates to narrative control in eighteenth-century fiction calls for an interdisciplinary approach, one that ties literary form to the new structures of property, exchange, and social regulation taking shape at the time. This study draws on feminist literary criticism, feminist materialist theory, and narrative theory in order to see how novels open the way for women's participation in economic life and, in the same breath, hold it in check.

Nancy Armstrong's influential account of the rise of the modern novel provides a crucial starting point for understanding the relationship between gender and property in eighteenth-century fiction. Armstrong's methods and materials are very different from Wat's, and her

theory ascribes a far greater importance to “the history of female subjectivity” (225) and a far greater power to the written word. As she puts it, “Watt sees the novel as a ‘mirror’ of class conflict rather than a struggle in its own right to seize hold of certain strategically powerful signs, symbols, and practices” (Armstrong 268).

Armstrong argues that the novel played a central role in producing a new form of subjectivity centered on domestic morality, emotional interiority, and self-regulation. In this process, the figure of the woman became essential to the ideological organization of modern social order. Rather than openly opposing patriarchal authority, early novels often reshaped the meaning of power by shifting its operation to the private sphere. Within this sphere, moral virtue and the ability to manage domestic affairs became important grounds on which social legitimacy was established. Pamela offers a telling example of this development. Richardson’s novel marks a decisive departure from both the conduct tradition and “the common sort of novels and romances” (Armstrong 118-19), while also bringing the novel and the conduct-book into a close, almost complete union (Armstrong 109).

From this angle, female subjectivity is not just something that literary representation mirrors; it is also built up through expectations that leave women’s conduct open to judgment and regulation. A female character may show her agency through personal choices, emotional reactions, or decisions about money, yet such actions win acceptance more easily when they fit with moral discipline and the upkeep of domestic order. Economic agency, put differently, does not automatically bring women lasting independence. How they spend money, take part in labor, and control property stays tied to the household, which continues to act as a basic unit of social organization.

This approach offers a handy starting point for reading eighteenth-century heroines whose lives are shaped by the need to secure their own economic survival. These women may take an active part in financial decisions, but their actions are not always allowed to grow into independent economic activity. The narrative, instead, often steers their pursuits toward marriage, moral reform, or a return to familial structures. The novel can thus recognize women’s capacity to act in the economic sphere and, at the same time, pull that capacity back inside the bounds of existing social expectations. So economic agency is not simply suppressed but reshaped into a form the prevailing order can live with, and female participation in economic life is permitted only to the extent that it yields a morally regulated subject rather than an economically autonomous individual.

Armstrong’s framework explains how novels domesticate female agency, whereas feminist materialist criticism sheds light on the economic logic lying beneath women’s social position. Building on materialist feminist theory, this approach treats gender relations as embedded in systems of exchange shaped by property, labor, and emerging capitalist relations. Jennifer Wicke, defines MatFem as follows:

“a feminism that insists on examining the material conditions under which social arrangements, including those of gender hierarchy, develop ... materialist feminism avoids seeing this [gender hierarchy] as the effect of a singular ... patriarchy and instead gauges the web of social and psychic relations that make up a material, historical moment; ... materialist feminism argues that material conditions of all sorts play a vital role in the social production of gender and assays the different ways in which women collaborate and participate in these productions ... there are areas of material interest in the fact that women can bear children.... Materialist feminism ... is less likely than social constructionism to be embarrassed by the occasional material importance of sex differences.” (751)

MatFem was also associated with the work of some French feminists, particularly Christine Delphy. Materialism, she argued, is the only theory of history that views oppression as the most fundamental reality (Delphy 82). This is why women and other oppressed groups need a

materialist approach to understand their own conditions: “to start from oppression defines a materialist approach ... oppression is a materialist concept” (87). For Delphy, the family constitutes a domestic mode of production that can be examined separately from other forms of production. It is also where patriarchal exploitation takes place and where the material foundations of women’s oppression can be found. From this perspective, marriage is not simply a personal or emotional bond. Delphy regards it as a labour contract through which men gain the right to appropriate women’s domestic labour or exercise control over their wages and other market earnings. The unequal distribution of labour and economic resources within marriage leads her to characterize this relationship as one that, in practical terms, resembles slavery (Delphy 15).

Within this system, marriage, sexuality, and reputation take on a value that can be measured. A woman’s body, her virtue, and her standing in society work as a kind of symbolic capital, something to be bargained over, guarded, or turned into economic security. Her access to wealth, as a result, tends to run through other people: financial mobility comes by way of fathers, guardians, husbands, or lovers, not through legally recognized ownership or any real autonomy over her own labor.

Even when narratives seem to give women room to move, their economic participation stays structurally constrained. Courtship, seduction, and strategic marriage all operate as economic transactions inside a wider market logic, and the heroine chooses from a narrow set of options in a system that turns intimacy into exchange value. More often than not, what looks like a personal or romantic decision has economic necessity underneath it.

The novel does more than represent economic and gender relations; it is itself a disciplinary form that regulates social behavior. The shape of a narrative plays a decisive part in settling which kinds of female agency get validated and which have to be corrected or contained. Storytelling, seen this way, is not neutral, since it works as a channel through which cultural norms are internalized and reinforced.

Eighteenth-century novels frequently turn to confession, moral reflection, and retrospective narration to steer how readers interpret female experience in ethical terms. Through these techniques, economic transgression is converted into moral lessons. Once a female character pursues economic independence beyond acceptable limits, the narrative often steps in with repentance, suffering, instability, or an ambiguous closure. Such endings do more than finish the plot; they restore ideological equilibrium by reasserting normative gender expectations.

Narrative voice matters especially in this process. Female first-person narration, which was widely used, creates an illusion of autonomy and self-expression, but the authority it grants is often framed by moral structures that push the narrator toward self-surveillance. The heroine ends up as both the subject and the instrument of discipline, narrating her own regulation through confession or justification. Narrative form, in this way, eases the tension between widening economic possibilities and lingering patriarchal anxiety.

Put side by side, these theoretical perspectives show that eighteenth-century fiction does more than depict women moving through economic modernity: it actively builds the limits within which female agency can be imagined. Property discourse shapes the governable female subject, exchange logic places women inside economic circulation, and narrative structure finally regulates the acceptable boundaries of autonomy. This framework is the base for the analysis of *Pamela*, *Moll Flanders*, and *Roxana* that follows, where the growth of female economic agency comes with ever more visible mechanisms of narrative control.

3. *Pamela*: Economic Virtue and the Domestication of Female Value

In Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*, a woman is allowed to rise economically only so long as that rise is fully brought inside patriarchal order. The novel does not show economic agency as

something a woman does on her own; it builds a model of regulated advancement instead, one in which material security is earned through moral compliance. *Pamela's* success, for all its appearance, stands for a carefully managed kind of economic participation that fits the bourgeois values then emerging, and not for female autonomy.

Richardson was particularly interested in providing a proper model for "feminine" behavior, and he wrote in the tradition of numerous conduct books and works of advice for women that sought to establish a specific configuration of features "as the only appropriate object for men at all levels of society to want for a wife" (Armstrong 96). As Kathleen M. Davies has demonstrated, conduct books were overwhelmingly preoccupied with justifying women's inferior status in the marital relationship, going so far as to use women's subordination under the law as "a further proof of their natural disabilities" (63). These conduct books proliferated rapidly beginning in the last two decades of the seventeenth century, and they held out a new promise to women that behavior could, on its own, act as a qualifier of superior social status, making them:

"desirable to men of a superior rank and in fact more desirable than women who had only their own rank and fortune to recommend them. The curriculum aimed at producing a woman whose value resided chiefly in her femaleness rather than in traditional signs of status, a woman who possessed psychological depth rather than a physically attractive surface, one who, in other words, excelled in the qualities that differentiated her from the male." (Armstrong 19-20)

At the heart of the novel is a shift in the way value is understood. Pamela has neither property nor inheritance, and she holds no recognized social rank, yet her virtue gives her a form of value that can be exchanged within the social order depicted in the novel. More specifically, her chastity functions as a kind of moral currency. When Pamela resists Mr. B.'s advances, she presents her refusal as more than a matter of personal choice; she treats it as a way of protecting her moral worth from being "bought". Her rejection of gifts, clothing, and financial offers intended to win her submission appears, at first, to be a refusal of economic exchange. Yet Pamela's resistance does not place her entirely outside the existing economic system. Rather, it allows her virtue to acquire a value that is represented as superior to material wealth, turning moral integrity into a form of economic capital within the narrative.

Pamela, like other novels of its kind, played a significant role in promoting women's passivity in relation to property rights. As Armstrong argues, fiction is "both the document and the agent of cultural history" (23). This perspective helps explain how literary narratives could both reflect existing social expectations and contribute to their reproduction. Staves also points to the possible influence of such narratives on women's attitudes toward property and marriage settlements, observing that "such propaganda had an effect and that even among those upper-class women who were allowed and who allowed themselves to participate in discussions of their marriage settlements some were reluctant to ask for or even to accept pin money" (160). Taken together, these arguments suggest that literary representations of feminine virtue could reinforce social expectations that limited women's claims to economic independence.

The novel's ending does settle the tension between female mobility and social stability, but only by pulling Pamela's economic aspirations firmly inside the limits of domestic life. Her climb in status leaves the existing hierarchy standing; if anything, it lends that hierarchy legitimacy, because upward mobility is shown as something virtue and marriage can deliver. What Pamela's experience suggests is that a woman may better her social and material position so long as the advancement stays in line with established moral expectations. Female agency is not entirely denied, then, yet whether it counts as legitimate depends on whether it props up the moral order of the household, which the novel presents as a central foundation of modern social organization.

Pamela can fairly be called a “safe model” of how male authors imagined female economic life. Women are not necessarily shut out from wealth, social recognition, or a rise in status, but getting at any of these is bound up with obedience, chastity, and a place within patriarchal family structures. Economic desire never leaves the narrative; it is simply steered toward kinds of advancement that society is willing to accept as morally legitimate. So Pamela’s success is more than a story of individual achievement, and it also exposes a narrative pattern in which female economic mobility becomes acceptable once it is contained within the domestic sphere.

4. Moll Flanders: Economic Survival and Conditional Female Agency

The novel Pamela sets out a model in which a woman’s economic mobility is kept safely within domestic virtue. Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* steps onto shakier ground, where female agency emerges inside an expanding market society. Moll gets no reward for moral purity; she gets by through calculation, adaptability, and strategic self-fashioning. That makes the novel a second stage in how the male imagination pictured women’s economic participation. Women are allowed to act economically, but only on terms that, by way of repentance, end up reaffirming moral authority.

Unlike Pamela, Moll starts out with no stable social protection. She is born in prison, with no family and no legitimate social identity, so survival itself has to be handled as an economic problem. For her, social relations are transactions. Marriage, affection, and sexuality are weighed again and again by the financial security they offer rather than by emotional attachment, and she admits openly that her early romantic decisions followed economic reasoning, recalling how she learned to size up possible husbands by income and prospects instead of character.

Marriage in *Moll Flanders* no longer carries the moral stability it had in *Pamela*. It is not the culmination of virtue here but one strategy among many in a wider economic marketplace. Moll goes through several marriages, often hiding information or manipulating appearances to gain financially. One striking case is when she poses as richer than she really is, aware that capital which is merely perceived can still produce real opportunity. Identity becomes something to be negotiated, shaped by circulation and exchange rather than by a fixed moral essence.

Moll Flanders’ inner conflicts grew more and more obvious after she married the banker friend, “but I, prompt by that worst of Devils, Poverty, returned to the vice Practice, and make the advantage of what they call a handsome face, be the relief to my necessities, and beauty be a pimp to vice” (Daniel 188). It is evident that what Moll did was not exactly a matter of her own choice. What she intended was to escape poverty. In that period, money had the power to decide almost everything, including marriage, status, and even people’s fate, women’s fate above all (Liu & Ma, 178).

Moll shows how female subjectivity was transformed under early capitalism. Her body, sexuality, and social identity serve as resources put to strategic use inside systems of exchange. Pamela’s value rises through refusal, whereas Moll takes an active part in circulation: courtship is an investment, relocation an economic speculation, and even emotional attachment a risk to be calculated.

The narrative, however, grants this economic rationality legitimacy with one hand and takes it back with the other. Moll’s intelligence and adaptability are undeniable, and she shows a sharp awareness of social structures, yet the text keeps framing her success as moral deviation. It was not her own fatal propensity that strengthened Moll’s behavior but the continuous pressure of socio-economic necessity: “Give me not poverty least I Steal” (Daniel 191). Poverty caused many problems for people, women like Moll in particular. The tension points to a central contradiction. The qualities that make Moll’s survival possible -- calculation, mobility,

opportunism -- are exactly the ones capitalist modernity encourages, but when a woman embodies them they turn into signs of moral failure.

Repentance is the crucial requirement. Moll's eventual arrest and imprisonment cut off her economic mobility and force the narrative to reorganize itself. In prison, reflection takes the place of action, and economic reasoning gives way to a kind of spiritual accounting. Her confession recasts her earlier success as sin, so that entrepreneurial adaptability is converted into evidence of moral corruption. Only after Moll acknowledges guilt and submits to moral transformation does the novel's conclusion restore legitimacy.

This ending, as narrative, does regulatory work. Women are not entirely shut out of the marketplace, but their participation has to come with self-condemnation. Economic agency is thus conditional: women may act, calculate, and even prosper, provided they recognize the moral danger of independence and symbolically return to social order.

Where virtue comes before reward in *Pamela*, Moll Flanders lets economic experimentation happen first and imposes moral correction afterward. The novel concedes that women already take part in commercial modernity, yet it cannot fully legitimize their autonomy. Defoe works out a compromise between realism and ideology instead, in which female agency is presented as historically necessary but ethically suspect.

At this second stage, the male narrative imagination lets women enter the market, but only if they acknowledge guilt and reaffirm the very values that limit their freedom. Economic agency becomes possible without ever becoming fully legitimate, and that tension reaches its most unstable form in *Roxana*, where the mechanisms of narrative control begin to falter.

5. Roxana: Female Autonomy and the Crisis of Male Imagination

The novels *Pamela* and *Moll Flanders* have each had their turn: the first domesticates female economic value, the second allows only conditional participation in market society. Daniel Defoe's *Roxana*, by contrast, marks a decisive break in how male authors imagined female agency. Here a woman's economic independence is no longer mediated by marriage, repentance, or moral reintegration. Roxana reaches a degree of financial autonomy that no earlier eighteenth-century heroine had, and that very autonomy sets off the narrative instability. Faced with a woman who no longer needs patriarchal structures to survive, the novel shows where male narrative authority runs out.

Her husband abandons her, leaving her to support several children with no money, and she soon comes to see marriage as exposure rather than protection. Pamela looks for preservation inside domestic order, and Moll keeps returning to marriage as an economic strategy. Roxana reaches a very different conclusion: marriage hands control of property away from women instead of guaranteeing stability.

That realization drives her most significant decision, which is to refuse remarriage even when the offers are socially advantageous. Roxana insists again and again that legal marriage would mean giving up control over wealth she has painstakingly built. When proposals promising respectability come, she weighs them in the language of financial risk, arguing that a husband would gain legal authority over her fortune. Under eighteenth-century English law, coverture effectively folded a married woman's property into her husband's identity, so her refusal amounts to a profound rejection of patriarchal economic logic. She picks social ambiguity over legal dependency and puts ownership ahead of respectability. She says as much herself:

"I need say no more; this is enough to convince any-body that I did not think him my Husband, and that I had cast off all Principle, and all Modesty, and had effectually stifled my Conscience... Had I look'd upon myself as a Wife, you cannot suppose I would have been willing to have let my Husband lye with my Maid, much less, before my Face, for I stood-by all the while; but as I thought myself a Whore, I cannot say but that it was

something design'd in my Thoughts, that my Maid should be a Whore too, and should not reproach me with it." (Defoe 46-47)

It is this consciousness above all that makes *Roxana* dangerous within the ideological framework of the eighteenth-century novel. She doubts whether the institutions built to regulate female behavior are worth wanting in the first place. For her, marriage is a threat, a device that could undo her autonomy, and not a resolution. Because she will not be taken back into patriarchal domesticity, the narrative structures that once settled female mobility lose their grip.

The novel's reaction to this autonomy is increasingly anxious. Episodes break into fragments, coincidences pile up, and the plot comes to turn on the fear of exposure, above all through the return of her daughter Susan, whose knowledge could reveal Roxana's past. External economic struggle gives way to an inward dread, and the instability of the plot mirrors the ideological difficulty of sustaining a fully autonomous female subject. G. A. Starr believes that Defoe regards Roxana as a damned soul and that the novel sets judgment and sympathy against each other more sharply than his other fiction does (165). James Sutherland contends that Defoe approves of Moll more than of Roxana, since Moll acts on impulse while Roxana is cold and calculating (213). A more important difference is that Moll, despite her difficulties, stays a participant in marriage, whereas Roxana turns it down. Moll urges women to be careful about whom they marry, yet she always speaks in favor of marriage itself:

"Tis nothing but lack of Courage, the fear of not being Marry'd at all, and of that frightful State of Life, call'd an old Maid; of which I have a Story to tell by itself: This I say, is the Woman's Snare; but would the Ladies once get above that Fear and manage rightly, they would more certainly avoid it by standing their Ground, in a Case so absolutely Necessary to their Felicity, than by exposing themselves as they do; and if they did not Marry so soon as they may do otherwise, they would make themselves amends by Marrying safer; she is always Married too soon who gets a bad Husband, and she is never Married too late who gets a good one: In a word, there is no Woman, Deformity, or lost Reputation excepted, but if she manages well, may be Marry'd safely one time or other; but if she precipitates herself, is ten Thousand to one but she is undone." (Defoe 121 - 22)

At this point narrative control starts to falter. Pamela closes on harmonious domestic integration and Moll Flanders restores order through repentance, but Roxana will not give a clear moral closure. The ending is famously ambiguous. Roxana hints at misfortune and possible punishment without giving any detailed account of a downfall or a redemption, and the narrative voice turns evasive, suggesting catastrophe while never fully representing it. The text cannot fit Roxana back into acceptable social structures, so it ends up destabilizing its own conclusion.

Roxana, then, stands as the crisis point in male-authored representations of female economic agency. The novel imagines a woman who manages to separate wealth from domestic submission, sexuality from marriage, and identity from patriarchal oversight. Once that autonomy is won, though, narrative coherence breaks down. The text reveals an imaginative boundary: male authors could depict women struggling to survive economically or enjoying conditional mobility, but a genuinely independent woman goes beyond what early novelistic form could stabilize.

At this third stage, female autonomy no longer needs male economic protection, and so it cannot be comfortably absorbed into existing ideological structures. Marriage turns into a risk instead of a reward, dependence into a danger instead of a virtue, and economic freedom produces narrative anxiety where resolution used to be. The unstable ending of *Roxana* finally exposes the historical limits of male imagination itself: the early English novel can conceive of female freedom, but it cannot narratively sustain it.

6. Conclusion: The Expanding Boundary of Female Economy

Pamela, *Moll Flanders*, and *Roxana* have been read here as one continuous exploration of female economic agency in the early English novel. Taken as a group, the three texts are less isolated portraits of women than the trace of a developing historical logic, through which male-authored fiction worked out how gender, economy, and social order should relate in eighteenth-century Britain. As commercial modernity opened up more room for individual mobility, the novel became a key place for imagining the economic role of women and, at the same time, for keeping it regulated.

Across the three novels, female economic participation grows step by step, and narrative control becomes more visible as it does. In *Pamela*, economic value is moralized and domesticated: a woman's advancement is acceptable only once virtue has been turned into marriage and taken up into patriarchal family structures, so that economic reward confirms social stability instead of challenging it. *Moll Flanders* sends women into the marketplace more directly, where they calculate, move about, and adapt strategically, but the agency stays conditional, because the narrative demands repentance before moral coherence can be restored. By the time of *Roxana*, female economic independence has reached its most radical form. Her refusal of marriage and her deliberate management of wealth cut female survival loose from patriarchal protection, and the crisis this produces is one the narrative struggles to resolve. How unstable the ending is shows the limits of the ideological and narrative frameworks then available.

Seen in sequence, the novels move from permission to tolerance and finally to imaginative impasse. The stronger a woman's economic autonomy grows, the more insistently narrative structures try to discipline it, reinterpret it, or throw it off balance. Early fiction lets women acquire wealth only under particular narrative conditions: first through obedience, then through repentance, and last, when independence can no longer be contained in moral terms, through ambiguity and unresolved anxiety.

What these texts finally show is that the real question is not whether women can hold economic agency, but whether patriarchal narrative structures can bear what such agency implies. The path from reward to repentance to narrative instability marks the spot where male imagination runs into its own boundary. In picturing women as economic subjects, the early novel discovers the possibility of female freedom and, in the same breath, struggles against it.

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