**Accounting for Authorial Labor in Women’s Self-Published Texts of the**

**Long Eighteenth Century**

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One antidote to literary studies’ obsession with imaginative, masculine, Romantic ideals of authorship labor has been to shift attention to the creative-adjacent labors and text work writ large to restore to printed objects the realities of the human activity required for their existence—including the labor of women. Book history’s corrective to literary studies shows that printing and publishing required many hands doing muddled albeit distinct tasks. Feminist scholarship such as that of Lisa Maruca, Kate Ozment, Helen Smith, and others is a useful corrective to the “lone artisan” nostalgia promulgated by anachronistic intentionalists like William Morris, as well as the hangover from Fordist mode of production and its distinct division of labor.[[1]](#endnote-1) Given literary history’s dismissal of women writers, *professionalism* has been the vehicle through which women’s writings have progressed, emphasizing the ways these texts were intentional, strategic, and programmatic, rather than accidental, circumstantial, or lucky.[[2]](#endnote-2) The discourse of professionalism traffics in the skill, intent, self-fashioning, and strategy of its authors and editors.

This paper unites and expands these important lessons from recent scholarship in women in book history *and* on the professionalization of the woman author. To better conceptualize the trade by drawing to the fore the hidden, erased, deemphasized, and misunderstood roles of those involved in production, this essay returns to the body of the author *not* to reattribute texts or create a new canon, although recovery work is paramount. Instead, this paper avoids the cult of the author-function created in concert with celebrity and instead uses the examples of relatively unknown authors to account for their labors in excess of composition. First, I’ll talk about the silent work captured in the word “publication,” and propose the term *author-facilitated* *publication* to account for the physical, mental, and emotional hustle required for an author to see their work in print. Then, I’ll use the example of Scottish author Jean Marishall (active 1765-1789)’s *A Series of Letters* (1788-89), which include detailed accounts of her attempts to publish to highlight her author-facilitated publishing activities, which required significant agency and industry to shepherd her work into print.

**Author-Facilitated Publication**

The term “publishing” holds many different definitions—legally, literarily, and bibliographically, across the eighteenth century. Keith Maslen notes that the print publication process requires “at least three distinct agents: first the capitalist or undertaker who finances the venture and makes vital decisions, such as the number of copies to be printed; next the productive craftsmen, especially the printer; and lastly the commercial tradesmen who handle wholesale and retail distribution.”[[3]](#endnote-3) Recent scholarship in book history by John Feather and J. A. Downie have highlighted the underestimated role of the author, too, in the financial arrangements of publication.[[4]](#endnote-4) The line between “co-publisher” and “self-publisher,” then, is tenuous—if meaningful at all.

Authorial involvement is not limited to an author’s outlay of money. Table 1 compares the actions of the respective agents across the different publication strategies available to authors in the late eighteenth-century. (Note: in this table, “publisher” in the late eighteenth-century usage refers to the entity traditionally responsible for finance, wholesale, and possibly retail).[[5]](#endnote-5) If an author did not sell her copyright, it is likely that she participated in one or more publishing activity. This table shows each situation in which the author, as expressed in bold type, *may* have performed extra-compositional labor, such as providing paper, distributing their printed book, or selling their book. Any publication scheme that requires authorial labor or involvement The publications schemes that qualify as author-facilitated publication, or AFP, are marked in light grey, below.

Table 1: Agents in Late Eighteenth-Century Publication Schemes [[6]](#endnote-6)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | **Action** | | | | | | | |
| **Publication Scheme** |  | **Provides Initial Capital** | **Provides Paper** | **Oversees Printing** | **Printing[[7]](#endnote-7)** | **Distributes Product** | **Sells Product** | **Receives Profits** | **Covers Expenses if costs not met** |
| **Limited Copyright** | Publisher | Publisher | Publisher | Printer | Publisher/  bookseller | Publisher/ bookseller | Publisher (**Author** receives one-time money for selling copyright) | Publisher |
| **On Commission; “author’s own risk”[[8]](#endnote-8)** | Publisher | Publisher | Publisher | Printer | Publisher/ bookseller | Publisher/ bookseller/ **Author** | % of wholesale price to publisher (usually 10%), and Author | Publisher/ **Author** |
| **Profit-Sharing[[9]](#endnote-9)** | Publisher | Publisher | Publisher | Printer | Publisher/ bookseller | Publisher/ bookseller/ **Author** | Author and publisher | Publisher |
| **Subscription** | Subscribers; **Author** must solicit | Publisher | Publisher | Printer | **Author**/ publisher/ bookseller | **Author** (subscriptions); sometimes booksellers | Author | **Author** |
| **Self-Publishing; “on account of the author”**[[10]](#endnote-10) | **Author** | **Author** | **Author** | Printer | **Author** and printer | Primarily **Author** and Printer; may make arrangements with bookseller | Author | **Author** |

As with texts printed for the author, the author of texts published “on commission” is responsible for paying the costs of paper and printing. Subscription publication—wherein the cost of publication is fronted through “copies” sold before printing—requires legwork, including leveraging one’s social networks (and often those of friends and family), and soliciting the goodwill of strangers and social superiors.

In the absence of sufficient terminology to describe accurately and account for the author’s role beyond composition, author-facilitated publication emerges as a critical term to group together the various activities that counted as “publishing.” Given the inclusive definition of author-facilitated publication, there are countless examples of novels, histories, biographies, poetry, essays, treatises, and more that could be drawn upon to evidence their authors’ labors, including a host of famous literary examples: Frances Burney published her *Camilla* by subscription, Jane Austen published most of her novels on commission, and Alexander Pope self-financed the various ventures of his *Dunciad*. These names and examples are regularly paraded in discussions of self-publishing and publishing “for the author” of the eighteenth century. But too often, when these canonical names are deployed supposedly to salvage or recontextualize our understandings of self-publishing of the period, the argument does not aid an understanding of the authorial labor involved in the publication process, but perpetuates the relieved sigh that the lowness of that text’s origins has not marred the author’s reception; the success of the author or text persists “against the odds” of it being self-published. Further, overcoming the slights of the ignorance and avaricious print trade become part of the author’s narrative of genius. To demonstrate the potentiality of the renewed focus on authorial labor in the book trade, I have selected a woman writer who is relatively unknown, but who was experienced all the same in publishing texts: the Scottish novelist and dramatist, Jean Marishall.

**Jean Marishall**

Little is known of Marishall apart from her publications, which span 1765-1789 and include two novels, a comedy, and a series of published letters.[[11]](#endnote-11) Marishall’s most memorable publication is likely her two-volume *A Series of Letters* (1788-89), valuable for its “detailed accounts of her protracted and painful dealings, as a writer, with publishers and theatre managers who were sceptical of her market worth.”[[12]](#endnote-12) It is in this text that Marishall shares candid and frank accounts of her negotiations and financial transactions, affording a glimpse of what could be the manifold and exhausting labors of author-facilitated publication.

Through the text of *A Series of Letters,* we learn that Marishall sold the manuscript of her first novel, *The History of Miss Clarinda Cathcart, and Miss Fanny Renton* (1766), to John and Francis Noble for five guineas. Although this was “traditionally” published in that Marishall sold the copyright for her novel to the Nobles, Marishall also arranged to purchase copies of her own book at wholesale price, taking on part of the distribution. She explains, “I was to have as many copies of it as I choosed at the under price at which they are sold to brothers in trade… I resolved to own myself the author of *Clarinda,* in expectation of my friends purchasing copies from me, on which I was to have a small profit.”[[13]](#endnote-13) This was evidently worth the extra time and labor, for Marishall notes that she “made a few guineas of it” thusly, on top of the Nobles’ initial payment.[[14]](#endnote-14) Here, in purchasing copies wholesale to sell by her own means, Marishall is acting as her own bookseller, albeit post-publication. But Marishall’s succinct account of her stint as wholesale bookseller elides questions of logistics, material requirements, and sweaty facts: without premises devoted to her commercial activity or paid employees to assist, Marishall would have had to write and deliver countless letters, arrange visits with friends and acquaintances, and, importantly, lug copies of her two-volume novel between her residence, the lodgings of friends, and the Nobles’ shops. By referring to this process as, neatly, “friends purchasing copies from me,” Marishall simplifies the significant managing and coordination required of her as “pop-up” bookseller.

Furthermore, in selling copies to her friends, Marishall’s authorial labor reorganizes her relationships closest to home, her family and peers. *The History of Miss Clarinda Cathcart, and Miss Fanny Renton* was published anonymously, but for the preface signed “J. M.” Acting as her own bookseller, Marishall indicates that she must first “own myself the author” to her friends and her family, putting herself at risk of censure.[[15]](#endnote-15) Indeed, her mother is shocked at the idea of a lady novel writer, although the family quickly assures the mother that Marishall has many, many progenitors. Secondly, the books proffered to friends and family in such an exchange are not presentation copies gifted as tokens of friendship; here friendship and kinship are leveraged to complete a commercial transaction. Marketing her books, even in this “informal” or even “domestic economy,” would have likely exacted an obligation or tax untold upon her relationships. Additionally, in becoming her own cottage bookseller, Marishall must identify likely customers among her acquaintance and divulge her authorship to them. Marishall’s anonymous authorship—whether initially intended to obfuscate her authorship, or a byline adopted for its own marketable potential—once dropped, recasts the set of relationships between author, text, and readers. As Marishall becomes her own distributor, her acquaintance are now interpellated as potential purchasers.

Outside of her own home, Marishall works to curry favor with and win over patrons, including those social superiors to whom she dedicates her works, and those who would support her via subscription to her second novel, *The History of Alicia Montague* (1767). Marishall describes wearisome negotiation of social morés with her social superiors, giving the lie to the assumption that women possess innate and natural sociability. Marishall’s experiences are particularly instructive of the exhausting emotional labor required to return the favor extended to her by her “pretended patrons.”[[16]](#endnote-16) Marishall recounts the embarrassment of once visiting and waiting upon a particularly notable subscriber, feeling unable to “divest myself of a certain timid foolish appearance in the presence of those on whom I on any degree depended.”[[17]](#endnote-17) Marishall also relates sheepishly receiving ten guineas from Queen Charlotte, to whom she dedicated her first novel, and which was explicitly advertised in the London newspapers as “dedicated to the Queen.”[[18]](#endnote-18) Further, Marishall is bewildered at somehow slighting the Duchess of Northumberland, to whom she dedicated her comedy, *Sir Harry Gaylove; Or, Comedy in Embryo, in Five Acts,* in the course of seemingly pro forma social courtesies.[[19]](#endnote-19)

Even apart from the ennobled names, Marishall’s subscription list to *The History of Alicia Montague* was populated with some difficulty. Marishall devotes significant real estate within her text to emphasize the trouble of locating and persuading would-be subscribers:

[The profits] would have been sufficient to have made me go on, had it not been the great difficulty which I understood there had been in procuring subscriptions. My zealous friends were confined to a few; and they, I had reason to believe, were exceedingly disappointed to find that not one in twenty were disposed to throw away a crown on what they could get a reading of when published for a few pence. Many were the witticisms and sarcasms thrown out on the occasion; few of which, comparatively speaking, reached my ears. However, I then imagined there was sufficient to damp my courage from attempting again to write by subscription.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Marishall here relates her experience as subscription-hunter-by-proxy, relying on volunteers who could circulate in public, male-gendered spaces to which Marishall herself would not have had access. The “few pence” alternative, referenced by those disinclined to subscribe, is likely a wry allusion to a circulating library; for a fraction of the subscription fee to purchase Marishall’s book, the propositioned purchaser scoffs, he could visit a circulating library and read *The History of Alicia Montague* and any number of other novels. Marishall also notes that soliciting subscribers was as difficult as finding and managing the volunteer labor required for locating subscribers, noting that “for one volunteer, I have had twenty pressed, or at least overpersuaded, into my service.”[[21]](#endnote-21) The ridicule received from averse subscribers and the stress of managing her volunteer workforce was exigent enough to discourage Marishall “from attempting again to write by subscription.” In the end, *Alicia Montague* was eminently more profitable than her first publishing venture and, “after defraying every expence,” Marishall writes, “I cleared about a hundred guineas.”[[22]](#endnote-22) Yet, importantly, Marishall sets the financial value of her labor expended: in this case, she deems the one hundred guineas’ profit insufficient compensation for the authorial labor required to publish by subscription.[[23]](#endnote-23)

The example of Jean Marishall allows for generative questions that arise when reading for authorial work in author-facilitated publications. From Marishall’s *Letters* extend any number of questions that are far more productive than merely condemning, for example, Marishall’s comedyas a mere “poor and amateurish piece, written like her novels under the influence of Richardson.”[[24]](#endnote-24) The texts of Marishall reveal fascinating evidence of coterie connections with intellectual luminaries; the legwork of petitioning would-be volunteers, subscribers, and purchasers; and the anxieties of duty and obligation in the late era of literary patronage. In the case of Marishall, author-facilitated publishing manifests in imploring friends and acquaintances for introductions, favors, and errands, and writing to publishers, traipsing to printers and publishers, and hauling books. The plentiful details that Marishall provides help illustrate the kinds of activities that she and other women would have undertaken to see their texts through publication.

**Conclusion**

While keeping the various categories of publication separate enables us to understand the intricacies of publishing schemes available to authors during the eighteenth century, temporarily collapsing their differences and collectivizing these processes as author-facilitated publication enables us to attend to the commonalities between the various publication schemes, namely, the author’s necessary expenditure of capital and labor, each in its broadest sense. Author-facilitated publication provides a means of understanding and valuing women’s publications by attending to, and reading for, evidence of authorial work and disrupting our prejudgments about literary worth, authorial intention, and the perceived “success” of a publication, ultimately refocusing our attention on the text and entailments of the book trade.

1. Lisa Maruca, *The Work of Print: Authorship and the English Text Trade*s, *1660-1760* (Seattle: U Washington P, 2007); Helen Smith, *“Grossly Material Things”: Women and Book Production in Early Modern England* (Oxford: OUP, 2012); Kate Ozment, “Women’s Labor in the Mid-Eighteenth-Century English Literary Economy,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 85, no. 1 (2021). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Betty Schellenberg, *The Professionalization of Women Writers in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005); Michelle Levy, “Do women have a book history?” *Studies in Romanticism, 53* (2014): 297–317. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Keith Maslen, “Printing for the Author: From the Bowyer Printing Ledgers, 1710-1775,” *The Library* 5th ser., 27, no. 4 (1972): 302. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. J. A. Downie, “Printing for the Author in the Long Eighteenth Century,” *British Literature and Print Culture*. Ed. Sandro Jung (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2013): 58-77; John Feather, “Business Models in the Eighteenth-Century London Book Trade,” *Publishing History* 78, 55-83. As Feather notes, “there are many examples where the author has become the *de facto* co-publisher of the work by being required to pay for a part of the process or by some other risk-sharing (and hence profit-sharing) mechanism” (74). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Definitions taken from Kate Ozment’s useful table, “Late Eighteenth-Century Associations” from her essay, “What Does it Mean to *Publish*? A Messy Accounting of Anne Dodd,” *The* *Women's Print History Project*, 5 August 2022, <https://womensprinthistoryproject.com/blog/post/111>. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. This table informed by James Raven, The Business of Books: Booksellers and the English Book Trade. Yale UP, 2007; Phillip Gaskell, *A New Introduction to Bibliography*; William St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), especially his chapter “Literary Production in the Romantic Period”; Feather’s “Business Models in the Eighteenth-Century London Book Trade.” [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Printers could, of course, print their own compositions and is noted as a possible activity of the author in Table 1. Table 2 and the discussion of AFP, however, presumes that the average author would not have the necessary training or guild status to operate a press. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Longman in 1816: “The Publisher gets the W[or]k Printed at the trade price, purchases the Paper at the best market, superintends the general interests of the W[or]k & takes upon himself the risk of Bad Debts for which he charges a commission of 10 per cent on the Sales,” qtd. In Jan Fergus, *Jane Austen: A Literary Life* (London: Longman, 1992), 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. On Longman’s terms in 1812, this means the House would “be at the entire expence of publishing the work, & divide the clear profits with the author” (18 Nov. 1812, I/97/377). Qtd. In Jan Fergus and Janice Farrar Thaddeus, “Women, Publishers, and Money, 1790-1820,” *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 17 (1988): 194. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. In his *Provincial Book Trade,* Feather notes that the products of “vanity publishing” were “sold by the printer and the author, often having been printed at the author’s expense” (110). Printing ‘upon The Author’s Account,’ in the case of publisher Robert Dodsley, authors must “meet the costs of printing, paper and advertising” (“Business Models” 70). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. David Oakleaf, “Marishall, Jean (fl. 1765–1788), novelist and playwright,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Sep. 2004), Accessed 14 Oct. 2021. https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-18140. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. “Jean Marishall,” eds. Susan Brown, Patricia Clements, and Isobel Grundy, *Orlando: Women's Writing in the British Isles from the Beginnings to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press Online, 2006). <http://orlando.cambridge.org/>. 08 October 2021. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Jean Marishall, *A Series of Letters,* vol, II Edinburgh: Charles Elliot, 1789), 169. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Marishall, 203. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. See *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* (London), Oct. 26, 1765, and *Lloyd’s Evening Post* (London), Oct. 26, 1765. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Marishall, 184-85; 202. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Marishall, 193. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Marishall, 199. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Marishall, 191. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Marishall would, however, publish her 1772 play, *Sir Harry Gaylove, or Comedy in Embryo. In Five Acts,* by subscription. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Elizabeth Lee, “Marshall or Marishall, Jane (fl 1765),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. ; Accessed 14 Oct. 2021. <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/odnb/9780192683120.001.0001/odnb-9780192683120-e-18140>. Published 1893. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)