Speaking Objects:
The Circulation of Stories in Eighteenth-Century Prose Fiction

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Published in 1709, Charles Gildon’s *The Golden Spy* initiated the popularity of a narrative device—the speaking object—that influenced British fiction well into the nineteenth century. While inanimate storytellers can be traced back to Pythagoras (who described the oral capacities of rocks and trees), their double figuration as authors and commodities in the eighteenth century expresses an acute fascination with the conditions of storytelling in an age of mechanical reproduction. The eighteenth-century speaking object is almost always a product of manufacture rather than a part of nature, and its satiric vision of the world arises from its particular experience of human commerce. In Gildon’s work, for instance, a handful of quarrelsome gold coins from various countries narrate the story, boasting not only of their national origins but also of their special authorial perspective. “I have had such various transmigrations thro’ the World,” the French sovereign remarks, “and may justly say, that I know the Transactions in all the Climates of Europe, and Ages of the World” (13). This wide-ranging knowledge of human transactions stems from the coin’s status as an artifact; its mobility and anonymity as a manufactured unit of exchange endow it with the authority to tell tales. The object’s authority is complicated, however, by the extemporaneous nature of its experience. Object narratives are invariably picaresque; shifts in plot, subject, and locale emphasize the indiscriminate changes of ownership that dictate the object’s market value. The objects seek a unified national identity but they are subject to a variety of dislocations that not only disrupt their storytelling but also complicate the meaning of citizenship.

While *The Golden Spy* is unusual in that several speaking objects tell the story, most such works similarly align authorship, commodification, and national acculturation. This essay argues that the appearance of speaking objects in eighteenth-century fiction is linked to authorial concerns about the circulation of books in the public sphere. Further, it uses

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object narratives to examine the constitution of that sphere. Inanimate narrators repeatedly express fears that printed words invest writers with a professional identity only at the expense of authorial erasure. The speaking object figures the author’s position in a print culture in explicit (though not always systematic) ways, echoing Gildon’s claim that the author is both rewarded and threatened by the opportunities of print. Object narratives both reflect and address domestic and global pressures that constantly shifted the function of authorship, that altered the defining attributes of the writer with each alteration in the public existence of books.

Unlike Aesop’s *Fables* or Apuleius’s *Golden Ass*, nearly all eighteenth-century object tales are framed, usually in a preface, by an additional story that describes the convoluted process leading to their publication. They are, in other words, specifically linked to the circulation of the author’s work in a modern print economy. In the preface to *The Golden Spy*, entitled “Epistle Nuncupatory to the Author of A Tale of a Tub,” Gildon prepares the reader for the object tale by imagining his manuscript’s conversion into printed form and its gradual detachment from the history of its author. Rather than speak as a writer, Gildon poses as a bookseller who has received an anonymous manuscript. He rejects conventional explanations of how “the Author sent the following Sheets to visit the World,” detailing instead his vexing search for a suitable patron, necessitated by “[his] Author having sent [him the] Copy without inscribing it to any living Creature” (v). That the narrative itself is unattributed (*The Golden Spy* appeared anonymously) also contributes to the indeterminacy of textual authority, which editorial interventions must offset. Gildon thus portrays the bookseller as interested more in the material than in the intellectual consequences of authorship. The preface’s situating of the professional writer within an unstable print economy intensifies the separation of author and text. In describing the effects of circulation on a manuscript that is itself about the “miraculous” circulation of a linguistic object (a speaking coin), Gildon’s bookseller uses the epistolary method (iii), addressing his letter to Jonathan Swift, whose *Tale of a Tub* refers obsessively to the published writer’s alienated identity. As Swift’s “modern” author complains, “Books, like Men their Authors, have no more than one Way of coming into the World, but there are ten Thousand to go out of it, and return no more” (15, 36). Just as Swift ponders the uncertainty of a work’s passage from author to printer and reader, Gildon speculates on the dangers of marketing one’s writing. Gildon, too, looks for a “return” but recognizes how easily his words spiral out of control once introduced into the public sphere; before the story even begins, the book has assumed an autonomous role as a commodity.

The fictive bookseller worries in *The Golden Spy* that without a dedication the book will “look so naked and bare, as to fright all the modish Buyers,” though he admits that his “Customers” are satisfied by “a plausible Title Page (the Bookseller’s Art) and a good Gilt Back” (vi). Here Gildon, playing on the resonance of his name (the word *gilden* was a common variant of *golden*, *gilded*, or *gilt*), subtly names himself as author through his titular subject (the *golden spy*) and the text’s material support (its gilded spine). But he regards authorship and book as entities that are compromised once the text enters the literary marketplace. As the bookseller notes, the “Catalogue” of his customers includes a variety of incompetent consumers from public and private domains such as “White’s Chocolate House, Tom’s and Will’s Coffee House, and the Temple... the Court, the Great Men’s Studies, and the Ladies’ Closets” (vi–vii). The author’s work, moreover, is subject as much to the degrading tactics of other scribblers as it is to the vagaries of its readership. Like Swift, Gildon’s editorial persona knows that all manner of “Dulness” is enriched by false “Intimacy” with writers of distinction, and he sympathizes with Swift’s plight, in which lesser works are “easily pass’d on the Town for [Swift’s] Productions.” Unlike other writers, this persona has “too much Modesty (tho’ a Bookseller), to palm the following Treatise” (x) as Swift’s work (managing, of course, to borrow Swift’s currency simply by speculating on the possibility). Using monetary language, he distinguishes between genuine and counterfeit productions yet acknowledges how easily a consumer society blurs them, how easily the writer’s activity becomes “but a Trade” and the writer’s words become “Light and Gaudy” (xii–xiii).
What alarms Gildon is the slippage between author and word, or authority and possession, that increases with the text’s progress through various stages from reproduction to distribution. Through this process, the document loses much of its value as an original creation at the same time that it reaches a wider readership. This alienation of authorship is exacerbated in The Golden Spy by the peculiar narrative process by which the coins convey the story to a human interlocutor, who “writes” the book but does not “author” it. Gildon’s book depicts the loss of individual storytelling power through images of continual exchange, the foremost being the canting coin, a linguistic object that, like a book, is subject to repeated handling. The force of this repetition would have been especially pronounced at a time when legal right, originality, and literary ownership were remarkably fluid and yet ideologically compelling concepts (especially after the 1709 Copyright Act, which confused as much as it clarified issues of literary property). The Golden Spy dramatizes the complex, often unpredictable transmutation of text from manuscript (the author’s provenance) to book (the concern of publisher and printer) to literary commodity (a status dictated by exchanges between bookseller and reader). Gildon’s narrative variously equates authors, editors, distributors, and readers through acts of expenditure. The duplication and transfer of texts entailed in these acts erode the referential belief system, predicated on the evidential aura of an authentic manuscript, by which a fiction frames its empirical status. The bookseller, conceding that as a market agent he is “speaking for another,” concludes the preface to The Golden Spy by declaring that he will let the author “shift for himself” (xiv, xv). Indeed, the bookseller’s act of speaking for the absent author highlights the author’s absorption into a print market. Gildon’s preface establishes a correlation between the modern author’s subservience to the bookselling industry and the fluctuating status of the book as a producer of signs and an object of consumption.

Gildon’s concern with the economic, legal, and social disposition of texts in a fluid public sphere is not unique. The representation of books and papers that pass promiscuously among various readers and handlers in such disparate works of fiction as Aphra Behn’s Love-Letters between a Nobleman and His Sister, Samuel Richardson’s Clarissa, Henry Mackenzie’s Man of Feeling, and Maria Edgeworth’s Castle Rackrent indicates that eighteenth-century writers frequently associated the circulation of texts with the desirable yet troubling consequences of public exposure. Gildon’s work and the object narratives it inspired, however, are particularly engrossed in the textual objectification that their inanimate narrators manifest. Articulating the author’s complex relation to print culture, these stories literalize the disjunction between writer and written matter that was intensified by eighteenth-century bookselling practices.

A remarkably persistent feature in eighteenth-century fiction, the narrating object appears in a surprising number of satires published between 1709 and 1824, manifesting a particular cultural obsession with stories as things. Gildon’s work seems to have initiated the vogue, and later writers show an often uncomfortable awareness of the similarities between their work and his. Moreover, Gildon’s endorsement of A Tale of a Tub suggests that Swift’s conflation of story, object, and author in his title provided a conceptual foundation for later narratives. While Swift does not develop this trope, A Tale of a Tub alludes repeatedly to the modern author’s transformation into an idioskropic object, the result, according to Swift, of society’s saturation by print. Swift’s modern writer, having noted that his is a “blessed Age” for “the mutual Felicity of Booksellers and Authors, whom [he] may safely affirm to be at this Day the two only satisfied Parties in England” (182), admits that this mutually indulgent arrangement is reflected in the writer’s ultimate self-absorption: “I am now trying an Experiment very frequent among Modern Authors; which is, to write upon Nothing; When the Subject is utterly exhausted, to let the Pen still move on; by some called, the Ghost of Wit, delighting to walk after the Death of its Body” (208).

Such alienation, where things become narrators, is echoed in the titles of object tales: for example, The Genuine and Most Surprising Adventures of a Very Unfortunate Goose-Quill; Travels of Mons. le Poste-Chaise: Written by Himself; The Adventures of a Pin, Supposed to Be Related by Himself; Her-
self, or Itself; and The Adventure of a Kite. Other speaking objects include a settee, a sofa, a bedstead, a pulpit, a reading desk, a mirror, an old shoe, a smock, a waistcoat, a wig, a watch, a ring, an umbrella, a gold-headed cane, a sedan, a pincushion, a thimble, a top, a pen, an old pocket Bible, and a stagecoach. Often of substantial length, object narratives delineate the alarming way in which possessions inscribe the private experiences of their owners and then circulate those experiences for public consumption. In 1781 the Critical Review observed that “[t]his mode . . . is grown so fashionable, that few months pass which do not bring one of them under our inspection” (“Novels” 477–78). By 1788 object narratives were so numerous that writers rationalized adding more. The narrator of The Adventures of a Watch argues that “bank notes, guineas, nay even Birmingham halfpence, though of very roguish appearance, give the history of their lives. . . . [A] watch is surely as intelligent as any of the above. . . . Besides, ’tis no vulgar watch, but a watch of fashion! a gold Repeater, elegantly chased! Listen to it attentively!” (3). Such narratives not only reflect self-consciously on Gildon’s work but also often attempt to increase narrative authority by enhancing the object’s value.

Like A Tale of a Tub, Clarissa, or Laurence Sterne’s Tristram Shandy, these stories reproduce the endless circulation of text in modern print culture. One repeated structural feature is the mediated transmission of the narrative. Initially spoken to a recent owner of the object, the narrative is transcribed by an interlocutor; the resulting manuscript passes to a family member or an acquaintance, who in turn sells the work to an interested buyer; the buyer then publishes the story, sometimes to aid the family member. The Adventures of a Cork-screw provides a particularly detailed example: an “incorporeal substance” (3) that inhabits a bottle opener relates its story to a man who then dies. The man’s wife sells the manuscript (for the cost of burying her husband) to an editor, who publishes the text as a means of assisting her. Object narratives, in other words, signal the unprofitability of writing to the original writer, though their transmission is often meant to redress inequities. They circulate by means of self-interested and frequently exploitative social transactions that tend to efface the original author.

Eighteenth-century bookselling is thus postulated as a social and economic system that erodes the status of authors precisely as it requires a greater supply of them to meet increasing demand for printed literature.

Literary criticism of object narratives has focused almost exclusively on their limited generic, moral, or commercial function, often connecting them to British imperialism. Aileen Douglas, asserting that the vogue for “it-narration” was initiated by Charles Johnstone’s Chrysal; or, The Adventures of a Guinea (1760), argues that these tales seek to “repair” the damaging consequences of trade on human nature by linking such commerce to the positive effects of empire (81; see also Meeker; Olshin; Tompkins 49). But object tales, which are more extensive than Douglas allows, raise even broader economic, social, and political issues, situating commodities in a complex signifying field that challenges international distinctions and complicates both nationhood and the public sphere. The most satiric, such as Tobias Smollett’s History and Adventures of an Atom or Helenus Scott’s Adventures of a Rupee, not only disparage imperial economy but also blur exotic and British locales. Indeed, object narratives typically display a capricious mobility of animate and inanimate forms that disrupts any coherent sense of social order. Often abandoning historical specificity in depicting the incessant movement of things across space and time, they disclose a notable degree of generality. Most were published between 1770 and 1800, and despite the social ferment of this period, they tend to reject the distinct political allegory of earlier narratives such as Gildon’s, Johnstone’s, Smollett’s, and Scott’s. Indeed, the later resistance to political particularism is a significant, if an evasive, response to historical events in the century’s closing decades. Relying on conventional features of the form, writers instead turned a fascinated eye toward the disquieting fluency of objects in everyday life.

As items of clothing, jewelry, furniture, transportation, currency, and so on, narrating objects invariably evoke physicality, grounding their narratives in the experiences of vulnerable human bodies. The speaking object’s effectiveness as a narrator derives from its proximity to human beings, but as these objects frequently proclaim, human subjects rarely
deserve their attention. A black coat complains, “When I contemplate the . . . vile schemes I have been obliged to countenance in those whose sole merit and reputation arose from my close attachment to them, my very threads blush at the indignity” (Philips 4). Though widening the public sphere to incorporate (in all senses of the word) personal, communal, national, and global relations, such narratives uncover a disorganized and venal world. Either passing through the hands of human subjects or serving to transport, protect, and furnish them, the objects ostensibly mediate social and material experience. But their mediating function is always impeded by the economic conditions that generate them.

That the capacity to enhance the physical well-being of human subjects, which makes these commodities ideal narrators, also incites the owners of the objects to trade them for profit suggests a collusion between professional literary discourse and the acquisitiveness fostered by a market economy. In The Adventures of a Cork-screw the speaking object tries to merge its narrative function with its role as a commodity. Thus it frequently defers stories at strategic moments of readerly concern: “in order to give my reader some necessary respite to draw a cork or so himself, I shall not introduce his lordship’s life till the next chapter” (13). But the stories themselves deny such happy affinity between object and user. Whenever the corkscrew’s owners need to complete a social transaction, they suddenly feel the corkscrew in their pockets and, reminded of its economic value, exchange it rather than use it. Coupling the act of narration with the object’s continual displacement, the corkscrew’s adventures reveal in a particularly distressing way what Marx calls the “definite social relation between men” that governs all commodities (165).

A chief aim of object tales is, of course, simply to generate interest through the startling proposition of an inanimate narrator. But they also focus reflexively on the object’s narrative motivation. Punning on novel writing and defending the decision to enter a saturated print market, a gold watch argues that “[t]o handle a feeling subject properly, requires some consideration; for though numbers may speak feelingly, yet to write so is rather novel, notwithstanding there are a number of novel writ-
ers” (Adventures of a Watch 5). More pointedly, the narrator of The Memoirs and Interesting Adventures of an Embroidered Waistcoat, whose story is “as wonderful and as replete with Matter as most Part of our late Novels” (2: 6), extolls its narrative to the interlocutor in terms of publishing and profit: “I doubt not but some of the Magazines will sufficiently reward you for a Detail of my Story” (1: 5). The intimacy and authenticity that fiction pretends to provide for the reader and that would ideally distinguish the printed book from other wares are bracketed by the power of commodities to create demand. Of course, the illusion that a book has a more personal effect on its purchaser than other commodities do is poignantly refuted by the fantastic nature of these stories and by the improbability of the storytellers. By speaking through seemingly disinterested objects, the authors veil the profit motive that in ordinary circumstances might compromise their narrative’s objectivity.

The troubling effect of this public exchange is implied by the narrating object’s painful awareness that its consciousness is imprisoned. The corkscrew emphasizes this condition by repeating the language of entrapment used by its interlocutor, who dies after “a long confinement” for debt (Adventures of a Cork-screw iv). The only valuable legacy left by the dead man, once particularly “fond of scribbling,” is “a large parcel of paper entirely spoiled, being scribbled all over” (viii)—that is, the manuscript published by the anonymous editor. The original storyteller, the corkscrew, is a spirit similarly punished by being “confined in” a “steel imprisonment,” where it is “doomed” to languish until it “should fall into the hands of some mortal, whose misfortunes were not brought on himself by his folly” (5, 4). The corkscrew’s only comfort is to “relate” the “histories” of those “persons . . . in whose hands [it has] been” (5), and its bequest is the same as its interlocutor’s. Both the imprisoned scribbler (the conventional designation for a Grub Street writer) and the inspured object share the defining experience of desperately relating a story from within a “steel imprisonment.” Each hopes to escape confinement through narrative production and to find freedom of circulation through the public circulation of a story. The narrator of The Adventures of a Cork-screw thus exploits the magical transferabil-
ity of commodities while recognizing the limits of economic exchange.

Parallels between writer and speaking object are even more pronounced in *The History and Adventures of a Lady’s Slippers and Shoes*, whose title page makes speaking objects the counterparts of the modern scribblers who burden an already crowded public sphere:

> So common now are Authors grown,  
> That ev’ry Scribler in the Town,  
> Thinks he can give delight.  
> If writers then are got so vain,  
> To think they pleasure when they pain.  
> No wonder Slippers write.  
> Anon.

Continuing this premise, the work ascribes even the “Preface, Introduction, Dedication, or Advertisement” to the slippers (“we beg leave to subscribe ourselves, Your most devoted SLIPPERS” [iv]). The slippers not only parody the overloading of texts with prefatory material, as Swift does, they specifically liken themselves to “many great Authors” (iii). In other works, such self-consciousness about “authorship” is reinforced when, in imitation of literary convention, the speaking object uses its pedigree to authenticate itself as the narrator and to justify the printed text it engenders, thus allying itself with the human authors it otherwise disdains. As the narrator of *The Adventures of a Cork-screw* observes, “[W]hen an author issues his performance into the world; every one is desirous to know his name, his character, and the motives which urges him to trouble the world with such a quantity of paper” (ii). Similarly, when a hackney coach notices a customer admiring its unusually fine appearance, it feels compelled to clarify its special pedigree:

> Before I introduce any of the characters I mean to exhibit to my reader, I must beg leave to introduce my

**ORIGIN.**  
I was made by a distinguished Coachmaker of Great Queen-Street, Lincoln’s-Inn-Fields, for Mr. M——, a very worthy merchant in Thread-needle-Street.  
(D. Kilner 4)

The coach speaks directly to its reader and, like the slippers, stresses its origins typographically, using offset capital letters that accentuate its relation to the printed page. The history of manufacture confers authorial pedigree, as the coach accepts its necessary entrance into a crass commercial world and underscores its superior and inimitable condition.

The appropriation of human behavior by narrative objects for the purpose of dramatizing the plight of the author is probably best exemplified in Smollett’s *The History and Adventures of an Atom*. Here the narrator actually merges with human bodies, transmigrating through various persons, animals, and bodies of base matter until it lodges in the pineal gland of the interlocutor, who then writes from dictation as its “editor.” After a series of mishaps, a “publisher” acquires the manuscript, carefully validates the narrative, and decides to “present in print” (3) what the “editor” has transcribed from the atom. The story’s progress exemplifies the mobility of objects, narration, and consciousness in object narratives in general:

[F]ate determined I should exist in the empire of Japan, where I underwent a great number of vicissitudes, till, at length, I was enclosed in a grain of rice, eaten by a Dutch mariner at Pando, and, becoming a particle of his body, brought to the Cape of Good Hope. There I was discharged in a scorbatic dysentery, taken up in a heap of soil to manure a garden, raised to vegetation in a salal, devoured by an English supercargo, assimilated to a certain organ of his body, which, at his return to London, being diseased in consequence of impure contact, I was again separated, with a considerable portion of putrefied flesh, thrown upon a dunghill, gobbled up, and digested by a duck, of which duck your father, Ephraim Peacock, having eaten plentifully at a feast of the cordwainers, I was mixed with his circulating juices, and finally fixed in the principal part of that animacule, which, in process of time, expanded itself into thee, Nathaniel Peacock.

(7)

The narrative impulse is literally embodied and naturalized, “assimilated” into animal, vegetable, and mineral domains by its metempsychosah passage through starches, diseases, soils, bodily discharges, leafy plants, aquatic birds, and human anatomies. Its thorough occupation of the world indicates a universal signifying power; it not only becomes an object but also multiplies its objective state by a fantastic circulation through a variety of
all known physical elements. Divided among many, it nonetheless preserves its indivisible nature. Moreover, the atom’s experience encompasses Pacific and Atlantic crossings, blurring of racial types, rapid transitions in national languages, and indiscriminate passage between countries; it surpasses, in other words, all boundaries of human containment, yet is one of the most contained things on earth. Given the complex, and by Smollett’s time conventional, frame in which the “writer” recounts the acquisition of the story and the “editor” justifies ownership, it is clear that the atom’s tortuous route is merely a prelude to its intricate verbalization. The printed form of the story is an extension of the narrative’s strange progress through the world. The circulation of the narrative, foregrounded by the elaborate editorial frame, parallels that of the atom. The atom’s absorption into such human agents in global and domestic trade as a mariner, a supercargo, and a cordwainer before lodging in an “editor” emphasizes parallels between writing and commodity culture that objects in other stories embody more directly. Comparing the diffusion of printed texts to the movement of money, ships, goods, vital fluids, and matter, “unauthorized” narratives highlight writerly concerns about the unpredictable circulation of books in the public domain.

One explanation, then, for the popularity of these works in the eighteenth century is that they reproduced transformations in the marketing of printed literature. They assumed that Britain prospered by promoting a continual circulation of goods through highly developed networks of distribution, such as a national postal system, extensive highways and canals, provincial printing houses, circulating libraries, coffeehouses, charitable societies, a national bank, and modern international systems of credit and stocks. Indeed, some object narratives specifically align their narrators with these systems of dissemination: “Adventures of a Quire of Paper” (printing houses, stationers, and coffeehouses), The Adventures of a Hackney Coach (D. Kilner; turnpikes), and various currency stories such as The Adventures of a Bank-note (Bridges; systems of national banking and credit). If the establishment of an effective public sphere, in which each citizen participates in ceaseless exchange, is advanced through practical local, national, and international means such as coffeehouses, turnpikes, and banks, it is also facilitated through the encouragement of a public-mindedness that urges readers to regard literature both as an economic instrument and as an aesthetic, moral, or informational resource. Jürgen Habermas has argued that the development of the public sphere in England in the eighteenth century was “rooted in the world of letters” (85), particularly in the journal and novel reading promoted by libraries, book clubs, and reading circles, which replaced institutions such as coffeehouses and salons (51). As a result of this shared reading, Habermas contends, “the public sphere appeared as one and indivisible” in the “self-understanding of public opinion” (56). This would seem to be the ideal condition for speaking objects to encounter in circulating through the world.

But as in A Tale of a Tub, the public sphere described by objectified narrators is often disrupted by an indiscriminate print industry. As the preface to The Adventures of a Black Coat scornfully, and somewhat paradoxically, proclaims, “In this age of Magazines and Chronicles, the Cacoethes Scribendi hath infected the town so much, that almost every shop, or workroom, harbours an author . . . When such gentlemen assume the pen, I hope it will not be deeming vanity, if I decline standing as candidate for literary fame” (Philips ix–x). Equally reluctant authors, the anonymous writer and the inanimate narrator regard themselves as suspended between the compromising aspects and demonstrable benefits of the publishing world. They deny the value of print culture even as they deliberately enter into it. Indeed, the author of The Adventures of a Black Coat admits that the anonymity and modesty of the speaking object as a narrative trope deliberately elides original authorship: “All I shall say of the following petit performance is, that I have endeavoured to make the Author less conspicuous than the moral” (Philips viii). The disjunction between object narrator and author seems, on the one hand, to enhance claims about the autonomy and disinterestedness of the literary work and to free the writer from accountability; on the other hand, it dramatizes the mechanical and alienated nature of modern writing and highlights the problems of literary property and of the writer’s status in an overpopulated print culture.
The narrating object serves several corrective functions, from reversing the relation between subject and object to exposing the contradictions between private and public behavior. But these effects ironically only intensify existing social discord. According to the *Critical Review*, object narratives constituted a fashionable repository for “all the farrago of public transactions, private characters, old and new stories” thrown together by “writers of the inferior class” to provide “a little temporary amusement to an idle reader” (“Novels” 478). Underscoring the connection between “public transactions” and “private characters,” the *Review* recognizes, though it does not choose to commend, the creation of a heterogeneous public sphere and the consequent effects of indiscriminately distributed printed matter on a national audience. The *Review’s* criticisms, however, are already highlighted in the stories themselves. Often of irreducible form (as with Smollett’s *Athenian*), speaking objects offer only fragmentary portrayals of human subjects—partial histories—that produce neither a unified plot nor a coherent social sphere. The hybridity of object narratives reinforces this discord: a single tale may incorporate satire, allegory, anatomy, picaresque, scandal chronicle, roman à clef or secret history, news, propaganda, autobiography, moral tale, sentimental romance, Aesopian fable, spy novel, travelogue, and imaginary voyage. If these texts are among the cultural technologies of eighteenth-century Britain that enabled individuals to reconcile personal and civic experience through rhetorical incorporation of the public sphere (as their educative function as satires or children’s cautionary tales might suggest), they also recognize and retain notable traces of disjunction. The circulation of speaking objects in this respect becomes a measure of the dispersion rather than the consolidation of persons and things; the objects’ polyglot nature, the rapid shifts in their locale, and the transfigurations in their physical status belie the unifying force of commodities while accentuating the dismantling effects of human commerce.⁶

The changes in subject that these stories exhibit are often dramatized through the commodity form of the narrating object. In “Adventures of a Quire of Paper,” originally printed in the *London Magazine*, the narrator not only embodies the fabric on which magazines, newspapers, and novels are produced; it also conveys the essential poverty of textual embodiment, portraying its destined conversion into a printed book as a terrifying unalterable condition. Initially a thistle, it is transformed into flax, woven into a large piece of cambric, and then converted into various articles of clothing that eventually become the tatters a ragpicker sells to a papermaker, who transforms them into “the sort of paper you have in your hands” (449). The paper “in your hands” doubles as the sheets of text the reader of the *London Magazine* holds and the leaves of a printed sermon that the interlocutor picks up during an idle hour in a “publick coffee-room,” a sermon whose pages in a dream become the speaking quire of paper (355). The narrating object thus is tied specifically to two of the period’s crucial forms of printed material—periodicals and sermons—and is associated with one of the most crucial sites of public reading: the coffeehouse. But the quire of paper’s feelings about joining these other forms of public print are not entirely positive. The narrator, which is transformed into a number of texts, fears that the permanence of book form will “hand [it] down in [its] present nature to the latest posterity, and cut [it] off for ever from being united to [its] other widely scattered and wretched parts, in [its] original form” (451). Lamenting the fragmented identity, scattered body, and partial consciousness that writing for a “publick” market produces, it seems aware that its existential status has been reduced to the brief, disposable magazine form in which it appears. In this story, the circulation and transformation of the commodity as printed text become a process of debasement and devaluation.

It is not surprising, given the emphasis on circulation in these narratives, that the dominant speaking objects are pieces of money. Such figures underline the interconnectedness of economy, language, and possession. The monetary range of this subgroup is broad; there are stories told by banknotes and bank tokens, rupees, guineas, sovereigns, shillings, and pennies.⁷ A few are short narratives, often from magazines or newspapers—the stories of a half-guinea and halfpenny are appropriately presented in shorter form than those of a whole guinea or shilling. Like the quire of paper, the
modest denominations adjust their narrative expectations to fit less exalted textual forms. In contrast, the most popular such work, Johnstone’s four-volume Chrysal; or, The Adventures of a Guinea, produced a sequel in 1764 and by 1800 had reached twenty editions. Almost as long as Fielding’s Tom Jones, it follows the peregrinations of its numismatic hero in four continents, through more than twenty countries, and among over fifty people.

Whether short or long, money tales consistently equate currency and writing. An explicit example of this alignment, The Adventures of a Bank-note accentuates the object’s authorial sovereignty to validate its story. Explaining its “unaccountable” ability as “a writer,” the banknote distinguishes its talents from mere transcription:

The inquisitive world may perhaps be curious enough to enquire, why I alone, amongst so many thousands of bank-notes, came to be possessed of such uncommon talents, as not only to recollect the particular passages of my life, but be likewise able to dictate to a secretary, or more properly speaking, to inspire knowledge into a machine, whose utmost qualification before was (like most of the quorum) just to be able to write his name, and read it when he had done.

(Bridges 1: 3)

No other note, it later adds, is capable of “making a single remark, much less of arranging those remarks in so masterly a manner as [it] do[es]” (1: 166). Being the offspring of a Grub Street scribbler accounts for its penmanship, since, according to the note, “[t]he person that deposits cash for a bank-note may properly be called its father” (1: 5). Its subsequent orphaning occurs when its “father,” unable to publish, changes the note to rent cheaper quarters. The note’s suspicion of print thus arises from losing a father through the printing establishment’s unreliability. Indeed, the narrator regularly attacks the publishing industry: “my bookseller rather hurries me, or more properly speaking, hurries the person I inspire with my knowledge, and whose head and hand are now fully employed in penning these adventures of mine. . . . [I]t is no unusual thing for booksellers to hurry poor devils of authors” (1: 164–65). Central to its judgment of publishing is a fear that its words must undergo a sequence of uncontrollable transmissions, not unlike those of currency, before reaching their targeted audience.

Money tales, then, are particularly emblematic of eighteenth-century literary attitudes about publishing: they fuse linguistic and material exchange. The focus of this subspecies of object narrative on the commodity nature of money parallels the textual commodification of the literary forms in which the narratives appear. As agents of social contact that pass through various hands, speaking coins mediate between different physical bodies, but only as symbolic objects that indirectly enable the purchase of creature comforts (unlike other narrating objects, such as pens or sofas, whose use value is more directly embodied). As Marc Shell notes in The Economy of Literature, “Coins are themselves both artful reproductions and active participants in the sum total of the relations of production” (86). The same, he argues, may be said of the printed word: “The study of economic and verbal symbolization, and of the relationship between them, begins at the mint” (63). This relation between money and print is intensified in The Adventures of a Bank-note, where the note not only speaks directly as author but also compares its right to invent words with Samuel Johnson’s: “The author thinks he has as great a title to coin words as the great Doctor anybody; and whether he takes his degree or not, he declares he will do it whenever he pleases” (2: 42).

The pun on coining reinforces the analogy the “author” is drawing between monetary and verbal exchange. Moreover, as the banknote constantly points out, deciphering the text on itself is essential to using it best or properly judging its value. For example, a “bookish” tavern owner is able to bilk an illiterate couple of the note by pretending it is one of his lost account receipts (2: 147). The banknote’s approximation of human language thus connects the individual to a treacherous body politic, grounding public experience in a dense, empirical realm of social, economic, and political transactions that stem from a compulsive need for change.

A similar relation inheres in the polyglot nature of currency tales. Repeatedly, the movement of the objects occurs in a specifically international setting. These narratives, such as Johnstone’s Chrysal or Scott’s Adventures of a Rupee, mix “oriental” background and English history to produce a cosmo-
politan perspective. In *The Golden Spy*, the "editor" transcribes a heated debate among coins of various nationalities about the merits of the countries in which they have been minted. In a parody of the conversation in coffeehouses, playhouses, pleasure grounds, and musical venues—locales Habermas celebrates as sites of transformation in the eighteenth-century English public sphere—the interlocutor finds that he is "oblig’d to interpose [his] Authority for the Preservation of the Peace" (Gildon 39). This internationalism both widens the boundaries of the cultural realm and indicates that sites of public discourse in Britain were substantially disrupted by national bias, competing languages, and imported ideologies. One consequence of expanding the means of circulation was that the public sphere became increasingly heterogeneous just as it seemed to be providing new possibilities for consensus. Although object narratives often privilege British citizenship, they also emphasize the international components of national definitions of the state. Furthermore, the authorial interposition of Gildon’s interlocutor divulges a yearning for a powerful central authority that the notion of the public seemed to displace or disguise.

This global perspective, coupled with the transformability of currency in a world market, changes the relation of writer and book in object narratives. The narratives are, among other things, parables of textual and authorial objectification; the storyteller is not only transformed into inanimate form but also compelled by a system of ownership to describe the experience of others, usually at the expense of internal or personal reflection. One frustration for speaking objects is that, despite their narrative capacity, they are not adequate subjects themselves. Unlike *The Life and Strange Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (Defoe) or *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless* (Haywood), the titles of object narratives, which typically cite adventures, histories, and memoirs, refer not to the title character’s "life" but to its accounts of others. The narrating objects have little agency and very little experience of their own; rather, they are repeatedly constituted as having a peculiar or magical capacity to both "intuit" (a word used frequently in object narratives) and recall the entire experience of those who possess them. Their movement through the public sphere depends on their debased users, for whom they rarely express admiration.

The speaking object, in other words, gains access to subjectivity only through the impoverished subjectivities of others, gradually unfolding a vision of the national state in which identity itself is fungible. The objects are acutely aware of this double bind, owning that their powers of insight, though astounding, rely on the structures of usage and distribution by which they circulate. The banknote, for example, is often unable to supply an "account" of an episode or to complete a given "narrative" because it has been "delivered" into the hands of a new owner (Bridges 1: 79; see also 1: 90, 2: 38, 2: 74, 2: 123, 2: 164–67). In an innovative twist, the corkscrew links such sudden transfers to textual structure: "as I have entered into a new service, it would not be consistent to introduce my new governor, otherwise than at the beginning of a new chapter" (Adventures of a Cork-screw 34). These sequences of displacements are aligned with the isolating effects of circulation: the power to tell stories is compromised by the subjection of the storyteller to systems of social, economic, and material exchange that delimit its identity. The word *circulation* is, in fact, repeatedly invoked by the objects to articulate their almost helpless physical, rhetorical, and mental transit through the world. The circumstances of the objects suggest that the authors of object narratives envisioned the cultural sphere as a hazardous field for human representation. Authorial voice is effectively prostituted by being detached from the body, circulated, exchanged, and depersonalized. To some degree, the narratives do prevent the author from being drawn into the kind of public vortex that necessarily envelops the text. It is, after all, the author’s surrogate that experiences the full effect of exploitation in the marketplace. But the protection the surrogate provides is nonetheless a sign of the author’s vulnerability. Object narratives explicitly displace and disembodify the human agent, simultaneously freeing the author of liability and exposing his or her limited cultural power.

Because of this complex negotiation of the marketplace, moreover, it is of crucial importance that the objects in these narratives be used constantly; this circumstance supplies one of the more salacious implications of such works as those produced by
sofas, settees, and bedsteads. But the pervasively amorous content of these stories also suggests that the writers themselves aligned writing and publishing with promiscuity (in "The History and Adventures of a Bedstead," politics literally makes strange bedfellows [Mayo 508]). Money tales too are particularly sexualized. In Gildon’s Golden Spy, for instance, receiving stories becomes a carnal, nearly autoerotic experience, as if the power of the narrator or story worked on the human interlocutor in terms of arousal, seduction, and intercourse. Every evening Gildon’s editorial persona hurries home to repeat a ritual of narrative exchange: first, he locks the door to his “Chamber,” dresses in his “Night-Gown,” and picks up his “Bedfellows”—four garrulous coins from England, France, Italy, and Spain. He then gets beneath the sheets, fondles the coins, and holds them close to his ear one at a time as they entertain him with their “tales” (34). He is particularly “transported” by the French coin: “I took him up in my Hand, gave him a thousand kisses, and hugging him close in my Bosom, full of Pleasure as great as if I had got the beautiful Celia in my Arms—Go on, (said I) my Charmer, go on, and bless me with a Conversation, which sure no Man ever enjoy’d before!” (6). Here, in a typical synthesis, the desires for sex, money, and knowledge (all marked as different forms of circulation) coalesce. Eroticizing the act of exchange at all levels, the object tale publicizes its own bodily, economic, and intellectual transformability in the details of the stories it tells about others.

Yet speaking objects invariably disdain the concrete forms they enter and deplore the physical crudeness of the human bodies they serve or imitate, stressing the corruptible nature of somatic and linguistic being. Orality itself is compromised by its physical source, but the narrative voice nonetheless recognizes the need to assume palpable form in order to yield anecdotal “history,” however frustrating the limits of human language. As the rupee complains in moments of intensely felt experience, “[T]he mode that mortals have adopted of expressing ideas by words now fails me entirely” (Scott 91). Chrysal describes the problem even more specifically, yoking the hazards of language to print culture: “Whenever I comply with the ludicrous taste that prevails at present, and couch a double meaning, in a plain word, my manner of speaking will explain my sense to you, just as well as the use of different characters does in print” (Johnstone 2: 4). Objecting to the practice of italicizing, Chrysal accuses printers of “assuming the liberty of giving any word, phrase, or sentiment, which he does not understand himself or thinks the reader may not understand, just as he does,” a typographical emphasis that will “disfigure the appearance, and perplex the sense.” “I have thought it proper to say this,” it adds, “to prevent the loss of my labours, in the mistake or perversion of my words” (2: 4–5). The bookseller’s italics only confirm what Chrysal suspects about human discourse: “the signification of words, in the language of men, [is] so unsettled, that it is scarce possible to convey a determinate sense” (2: 1–2). Using italics for emphasis, the canting coin indicates exactly where the contest between the author and the bookselling establishment occurs: at the convergence of intellectual and commercial property.

Chrysal’s petulance about the vagaries of printed text derives from its convictions about the transparency of language. Like most speaking objects, Johnstone’s narrator boasts transcendent powers of communication that eliminate temporal, physical, and vocal distinctions: “I can see your thoughts; and will answer every doubt which may arise in your mind at the wonders of my relation, without the interruption of your inquiries, as awful silence is the essence of my converse” (1: 4). As it goes on to explain, “[B]esides that intuitive knowledge common to all spirits, we of superior orders, who animate this universal monarch GOLP, have also a power of entering into the hearts of the immediate possessors of our bodies” (1: 6). Inanimate narrators, in fact, are often emanations or spirits enclosed in objects; they can converse as capably outside as they can within the material forms they inhabit, and they “speak” silently, anticipating in a sense the full exploitation of free indirect discourse later in the century. They do not hear (having no suitable organs for such a task) but “intuit” the details of their owners’ lives; not all even talk (though some of the coins at least have symbolic ears and mouths). The remove from orality serves to clarify the distinction presumed to exist between speech and writing and, further, between handwritten and printed texts.\textsuperscript{11}
The printed text, following spoken, handwritten, and typeset forms, is therefore quadruply removed from the nonverbal sphere of ideal mental speech. For object narrators, the public sphere is characterized not by a semblance of unity, but by systems of metonymic displacement. If, as Benedict Anderson, Pierre Bourdieu, and Jürgen Habermas contend, the public sphere is foremost a discursive field, many eighteenth-century texts that helped shape it as such reflect an awareness of the supposed consensual effect of language (see Anderson 56–83; Bourdieu 112–41; Habermas 12–54). By attaching the idea of narration to physical objects, which in circulation lose their prime function and identity, object narratives refute optimistic assessments of print as a mechanism for promoting public order or as a sign of the nation’s concerted will.

That the authors of these works needed to disguise and protect themselves by speaking in another voice and, moreover, by attributing their words to a seemingly neutral object, often one able to move “invisibly” through the world, suggests that writing alienated the author from the work. In money tales particularly, the object chosen to emulate the writer effectively aligns authorial activities with the omnipresent circulation of currency, so that the object’s extraordinary symbolic force becomes a measure of its dematerializing power. As Marx notes, “Since every commodity disappears when it becomes money it is impossible to tell from the money itself how it got into the hands of its possessor, or what article has been changed into it. *Non olet* [‘It does not smell’]” (205). The metaphoric lack of smell in money is a sign that its circulation eliminates all marks of exchange. Similarly, though the object story evokes the material world and the arduous transfer of manuscripts, it dramatizes the invisible conditions of authorship in published fiction. As the speaking object reveals, print culture demands the ostensible erasure of the conventional author; it demands that there be no body there.

The successful marketing of eighteenth-century prose fiction resulted, in part, from the mobilization of different mechanisms for distributing published work. As several scholars have shown, these mechanisms constituted forms of cultural technology that enabled productive social exchange. According to Habermas, for example, the periodicals, printed plays, and books available in coffeehouses, shops, theaters, circulating libraries, and taverns produced models of critical reasoning that allowed “the sphere of private people to come together as a public” and to experience a “process of self-clarification” by “focusing on the genuine experiences of their novel private”ness” (27, 29). Extrapolating from Habermas, Tony Bennett traces the process of culture, “through which artistic and intellectual practices come to be inscribed into the process of government,” to the eighteenth century: “It is only with the Enlightenment and its aftermath that artistic and intellectual practices come to be thought of as instruments capable of being utilized, in a positive and productive manner, to improve specific mental or behavioral attributes of the general population” (27, 28).

Many object narratives, as I have noted, feature highways, international shipping routes, global banking, newspapers, and modern printing practices as their means of social exchange. Their narrative efficacy is directly associated with their capacity to use both private and public systems of circulation, as they repeatedly accentuate their access to discoursive networks such as those in coffeehouses, booksellers’ shops, circulating libraries, and taverns. By invoking these venues, however, object narratives exhibit a fissured rather than a unified cultural field, revealing breaches not only in the structures governing private and public behavior but in national identity as well. Circulating libraries, for example, not only served to disseminate texts but also became subjects of concern in the very narratives that profited from such public exposure. These “publick places” were a recognized component of a controversial process of national acculturation. For every writer who claimed, as John Bell did in 1770, that they were “justly esteemed as . . . the greatest Conveniences to this Kingdom” (Varma 36), a host of others complained, as Edward Margin did in 1808, that there was not “a corner of the Empire, where the English language [was] understood that ha[d] not suffered from the effects of this institution” (Varma 41).

Such means of cultural dissemination, then, produced dissension as much as they unified public endeavor. As I have shown, that divisiveness is often
inscribed in the very literary texts that contributed to the transformation of the public sphere. In object tales, literary success depends—for author, publisher, and audience alike—on the atomizing circulation of stories in a public form that many of the stories themselves eschew. Mastering narrative techniques consequently becomes a destabilizing, alienating, or falsifying experience. As remarked by the canting coin in *The Birmingham Counterfeit; or, Invisible Spectator*—a forged gilded shilling that can “pass current for a guinea” (46)—“We live in a world, where the generality of human actions, like a great deal of our present current coin, is *counterfeit*” (1). Running on both the temporal and dynamic aspects of the words *current* and *currency*, the narrator uses its own currency to trace the interrelated but nonetheless disruptive nature of social, economic, and textual circulation.

In object narratives, the act of storytelling is indissolubly linked to the movement of commodities and capital; these narratives convey, in other words, an implicit theory of culture in which literary dissemination and economic exchange appear homologous. As principal narrators that represent authorship, speaking objects symbolize the promiscuous movement of text, the commodification of stories, the international entanglements in the book trade, and the loss of narrative identity and authority that stem from circulation in the social sphere. Far from mediating between private and public spheres or synthesizing national and cosmopolitan values, they are often undone by such categories. The picaresque form of object tales is commensurate with this narrative effect—the abrupt shifts in subject, the fragmentary diegesis, and the multitude of characters signal the storyteller’s subordination to extrinsic forces and manifest the continual exchange (literary as well as financial) that gives currency to object narratives’ accounts of human behavior. On the one hand, the narratives extol the power of the author to infiltrate, observe, and reveal social customs; on the other, they offer the impression that the author is merely a possession, a medium, or specie, reduced to the status of the artifact whose production is the writer’s compulsory activity in a world where print commerce dictates the value of words.

### Notes

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1. Because such objects are manufactured, the stories they relate differ from those told by animals or vegetation, such as *The Vocal Forest* (Howel), *The History of Pompey the Little* (Coventry), and *History of a French Louse*, which derive from Aesop, Ovid, and Apuleius and which do not equate nonhuman narration with textual circulation. Animal or vegetable narrators tend to serve as substitutes for human actors, whereas manufactured narrators become the vehicles for judging human society, often through the transferral of authorial capacities. While the animals are parodies of human figures or types, the commodities are satiric observers of them.

2. Eighteenth-century developments in the British book trade are effectively summarized in Feather, *History* 67–105 and *Provincial Book Trade* 44–68; Plumb 266–73. Changes included the enactment of copyright laws and the taxation of printed matter; the emergence of wholesale marketing, copy-owning congers, trade sales, circulating libraries, and large-scale printing firms; increased production by provincial presses; the institution of serial publication and advertising lists in magazines and books; and accelerated growth of newspapers. On increased publication of fiction, see Raven 19–60. As Raven notes, despite the demand for popular fiction, the writer’s life was still mostly a matter of obscure toil, paucity remuneration, and exploitation by the bookselling establishment (58–59).

3. On the confusion over eighteenth-century copyright, see Feather, *History* 73–83; Foxon 39–60; Kaplan 6–25; Patterson 180–96; Plant 98–121; Rose; Woodmansee 425–48. These scholars generally agree that changes in copyright were not principally about recognizing authorial rights. As Patterson observes, “The most significant point about the statutory copyright is that it was almost certainly a codification of the stationer’s copyright” (146).

4. D. F. McKenzie notes that the rise of trade publishing led, in practical terms, to “the dissociation of author, printer and bookseller from one another, and all of them from their market, turning books into mere commodities” (29).

5. Many narratives featuring such objects were published in periodicals: for example, “Adventures of a Gold Ring,” “Adventures of a Mirror,” “Adventures of a Pen,” “Adventures of a Sophia,” “Adventures of a Stage Coach,” “The History and Adventures of a Bedstead,” “The History of an Old Pocket Bible, Supposed to Be Written by Itself,” and “Memoirs of a Wig: Presented in Two Letters Signed ‘Pereke, Jun.’” (all catalogued alphabetically in Mayo 442–553). Other narratives featuring such objects include *The Settee; or, Chevalier Commodo’s Transformation; The Sofa (Crebillon); Tell-Tale Sophias: A Dialogue between the Pulpit and Reading Desk (Perronet); The Secret History of an Old Shoe; Frailties of Fashion; or The Adventures of an Irish Smock; The Memoirs and Interesting Adventures of an Embroidered Waistcoat; The Adventures of a Watch; The Memoirs of an Umbrella (Rodwell); Phantoms; or, The Adventures of a Gold-Headed Cane (Johnson); The Sedan; The Adventures of a
Pincushion (M. Kilner); The Silver Thimble; The Adventures of a Whipping-Top; The Memoirs of a Pig-Top (Kilner).

Perhaps the most threatening aspect of this system was the possibility that authors were merely products of market forces. Feather argues that the demand for new books increased the demand for writers and observes that “literary” authors were affected by the evolution and growth of the book trade: many acknowledged the financial rewards for writing (History 102).

On distribution in the period, see Feather, Provincial Book Trade 44–68; Habermas 14–18, 57–67, 73–79; Laugero; Plumb 327–28; Raven 219–33; Trotter 18–45.

Habermas attributes consciousness of the “disorganization of civil society” to the nineteenth century (119). But many eighteenth-century object narratives indicate that such awareness existed when the public sphere ostensibly emerged. Bourdieu’s elaborate analysis of the cultural field, in which different public activities (from the literary and artistic to the economic and political) occupy different fields of production, offers perhaps a more flexible model, one that can accommodate public dissension. However, Bourdieu’s focus of the nineteenth century limits each field to “a separate social universe having its own laws of functioning independent of those of politics and the economy” (162), a model that is inapplicable for eighteenth-century British culture. Object narratives, which integrate various professional discourses, from law and politics to medicine and aesthetics, ignore disciplinary boundaries. Thus, while Habermas may generalize the eighteenth-century public sphere in overly unified terms, Bourdieu’s analysis would, for the eighteenth-century field of cultural production, be too restrictive.

Stories that appeared in magazine form include “The Adventures of a Bad Shilling,” “The Adventures of a Half Guinea,” “The Adventures of a Half Penny,” “The Adventures of a Shilling,” and “The Adventures of a Three-Shilling Bank Token” (all catalogued alphabetically in Mayo 442–43). Others include The Adventures of a Silver Penny; The Adventures of a Silver Threepence; Argentum; or Adventures of a Shilling; Aureas; or, The Life and Opinions of a Sovereign; The Birmingham Counterfeit; or, Invisible Spectator; The Adventures of a Bank-note (Bridges); Chrysal; or, The Adventures of a Guinea (Johnstone); and The Adventures of a Raper (Scott).

On how coffeehouses, playhouses, pleasure grounds, and musical venues contributed to the establishment of the eighteenth-century public sphere, see Habermas 32–43.

The insistence in these stories on the value of pleasure may stem from the privilege orality was granted. On oral authority in the seventeenth century, see Elsky 209–23. On oral authority in the eighteenth century, see Kernan 12–16, 71–102. Hudson discusses the interchange between spoken and written language in eighteenth-century literature. On the interplay between handwriting and print in the seventeenth century, see Goldberg 136–37. See also Love 288–310, on the continuing value print culture placed on scribal production in the eighteenth century.

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