

Character Matters: Enlightenment Materialism and the Novel

Dissertation Abstract

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At the close of his controversial *L'homme machine* (1747), La Mettrie facetiously compares the Christian argument for humanity's supernatural, rather than natural, origins to that of a fictional watch who refuses to believe that the watchmaker is his creator. Those people that insist that they are more than just material beings, born of the natural world, La Mettrie reasons, "are like a watch saying (a storyteller would make it an important character in a frivolous work): 'What! Was I made by that stupid workman, I who can divide up time, who can indicate so precisely the sun's course, who can tell out loud the hours that I indicate! No, that is impossible.'" This irreverent passage captures the troubling implications of the materialist science that, despite its directly refuting the Christian doctrine of the soul, gained a degree of credibility during the Enlightenment. More importantly for the literature of the period, this passage also describes the surprising effect that these ideas had on literary characterization. The notion that thought resided in the body, not the soul, profoundly changed how the human person was represented, and as La Mettrie notes, many a "frivolous work" experimented with new methods of representing the human in the wake of such materialist thinking.

"Character Matters: Enlightenment Materialism and the Novel," a study of eighteenth-century British fictional and nonfictional prose that ranges from the canonical to the popular, contends that La Mettrie's equation of materialist ideas and literary characterization was no accident. My project intervenes in two histories, the history of the cultural significance of materialist science and philosophy, particularly as it relates to the human mind, and the understanding of character in literary history. I contend that controversial materialist ideas in science and philosophy such as those of Hobbes, Spinoza, Hartley, and Priestley are directly related to the "post-humanist" methods of characterization employed in a number of discourses during the eighteenth century. These texts question the primary assumptions of humanism, portraying persons as material, mechanized, automated rather than autonomous, and, in the most extreme examples, ontologically the same as the rest of the material universe. Such representations made the stakes of materialist thinking shockingly clear. While some authors found hope in a thoroughly material, fully explicable human mind, seeing in it a clear path toward moral improvement or even a proto-feminist rectification of gender inequality, other responses to materialist representations of persons were not so sanguine. These portrayed the ways in which materialism held the potential to dismiss the ethical and even the metaphysical by dehumanizing persons altogether. Though a basic assumption of contemporary science is that matter is the only reality, the implications of materialist thinking are still controversial today, played out in debates concerning physicalism in philosophy, the ramifications of the mapping of the human genome, and legal questions of agency and responsibility regarding the mentally ill. In "Character Matters," I demonstrate that the cultural effect of these ideas was first felt in the new ways that human beings came to be represented in eighteenth-century literature.

I. David Hartley: Assembling the Matter of Humanity; Transcending the 'Matter' of Matter. My opening chapter asserts that David Hartley's philosophical work, *Observations on Man* (1749), singularly represents the impact of materialist science on characterization. In employing Newtonian physics to explain the mind mechanically, he suggests that it is our brain, not our soul, that does our thinking. This has three remarkable implications for the character of "Man" that he represents in his philosophical text, effects which can also be seen in works of fiction in the period: humans are not ontologically different from the rest of creation; all thought is mechanical, only explainable via the new associational model of thought; and free will in the broadest sense is impossible, all human motivation being determined by necessity. Though at times Hartley claims in his writings to wish to transcend the

question of materialism, in the *Observations* he creates a character that serves my argument as an exemplary model of the effect of materialism upon characterization.

II. *Res Ipsa Loquitur* (The Thing Speaks for Itself): Object Narratives and The Question of Sentient Matter. I first demonstrate the effects of materialist ideas on literary character by examining the curious sub-genre of the object narrative, popular tales which have been the focus of recent critical attention in which material objects are the protagonists. This chapter turns away from recent arguments that consider these tales in terms of commodity fetishism and contends that authors that chose to use objects as narrators were in part responding to materialist arguments that seemed to attribute sentience to matter. My work alone emphasizes the “origin tales” of the objects which specifically invoke materialist scientific and philosophical concepts to explain their existence. While playful, these popular tales display the ethical barrenness of a purely material world without hope of a transcendent metaphysical realm, and rather than extending personhood to things, they instead reduce all persons and things to commodifiable objects.

III. ‘I am positive I have a soul’: The Errors of Association and the Impossibility of a Material Mind. In my third chapter I argue that in the idiosyncratic characterization of Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1760-1767) we can find an argument against and satire of the associationalist psychology that is a necessary result of the belief that the brain and the mind are one. Sterne declared, in his later *Sentimental Journey* (1768), “I am positive I have a soul; nor can all the books with which the materialists have pester’d the world ever convince me of the contrary.” I contend that this is his *cogito ergo sum*, and as a result he was prepared to deny materialism, particularly the idea of thinking matter, at any cost. By using Locke’s negative conception of association from the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) to create characters as foolish as Uncle Toby and Tristram, as opposed to more recent, sophisticated models of association like Hartley’s, Sterne attempts to lampoon and dismiss these ideas, and especially the notion of thinking matter.

IV. Materialism and Feminism in Mary Hays’s *Memoirs of Emma Courtney*. While Sterne was anxious to deny materialism, others found important reasons to embrace this idea. The contention of my fourth chapter is that in order to read Mary Hays’s feminist novel, the *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), and understand what makes her thinking distinct from her more famous contemporaries, William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, we must take into account her belief in a scientifically-grounded materialism. Mary Hays was heavily influenced by David Hartley’s Newton-inspired physiological theory of psychology and the materialist science of Joseph Priestley. By making the character of Emma explicitly guided by a belief in materialism, Hays employs this idea to both explain women’s subjection to men and to narratively construct a uniquely passive, yet progressive, form of feminism based on the immutable laws of science.

V. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*: A Romantic Object Narrative. My dissertation concludes with an examination of literature’s most famous and enduring example of thinking matter. I contend that Shelley’s achievement lies not in creating the “first” work of science fiction, but in shaping the terms upon which questions of materialism would affect our understanding of the human since the eighteenth century. I argue that the character of the creature is steeped in materialist and vitalist ideas gathered from such controversial thinkers as Sir William Lawrence, at times the Shelley’s family physician, and that recognizing this allows us to see the clear lineage of the monster from Enlightenment materialist science. In the flawed Adam-figure that is the creature, we as readers see connections to the other characters of the eighteenth century that were shaped by materialist ideas and are shown how the modern, Western world has come to understand the threat of materialism differently since the close of that period.