

## The Pasts and Futures of Authorship

### A Review of *Authorship: Commercializing of Literature and the Phantasm of the Authorial Subject* by Aldona Kobus

Author: Aldona Kobus

Title: *Autorstwo. Urynkowanie literatury i fantazmat podmiotu autorskiego*

Publisher: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu  
Mikołaja Kopernika w Toruniu

Release Date: 2021

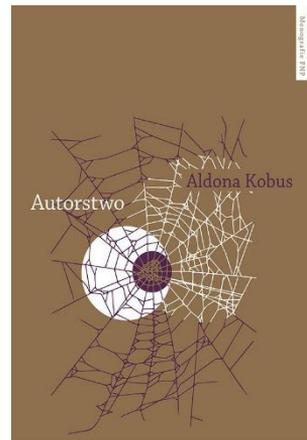
Number of Pages: 412

**Dawid Smyk**

Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń  
dawids266@gmail.com

**Paulina Szczepaniak**

Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń  
szczepaniakpaulina98@gmail.com



Received 21 December 2021; accepted 21 December 2021; published 30 December 2021.

#### Abstract

*Autorstwo. Urynkowanie literatury i fantazmat podmiotu autorskiego* (*Authorship: Commercializing of Literature and the Phantasm of the Authorial Subject*) by Aldona Kobus, published in 2021 by Nicolaus Copernicus University Press, presents a complex framework for addressing various theories on authorship. Starting from outlining the historical background of the development of the notions of authorship and moving to their redefinitions in feminist critique, the book finishes with an appeal to acknowledge the importance of collective authorship and underlines the role of fandom studies. The book offers an overview of the main perspectives on authorship and can be described as a pioneering study on the subject in Polish cultural and literary studies.

**Keywords:** authorship; literature; publishing market; feminism; collective authorship; history of authorship

*Autorstwo. Urynkowanie literatury i fantazmat podmiotu autorskiego (Authorship: Commercializing of Literature and the Phantasm of the Authorial Subject)* was published in 2021 by Nicolaus Copernicus University Press as part of the series Monographs of the Foundation for Polish Science, which was started in 1994 – the foundation organizes a contest in which selected works are published. The series contains studies from various fields, including philosophy, political science, cultural and literary studies, sociology, and many others. The book is based on a doctoral dissertation and appears in the Ethnology and Cultural Studies section. It presents the reader with a history of authorship, from the strengthening of the authorial figure as a consequence of the development of liberalism and market economy to contemporary practices of collective authorship.

Throughout literary history, the perception of authorship has undergone several major shifts. A significant one took place in the first part of the twentieth century and it can be described as a departure from the “biographical positivism that had dominated the critical appreciation of literature in the nineteenth century” (Stougaard-Nielsen, 2019, p. 270). Another important change was brought by Roland Barthes’s famous 1967 essay “The Death of the Author,” in which he postulated a redefinition of the author’s role in the reception of a text. Also noted should be the influence of postcolonial and feminist literary criticism which pointed to the problem with the literary canon being predominantly “Western, white and male” (Stougaard-Nielsen, 2019, p. 281).

In her work, Kobus touches upon many of these aspects and more, enriching the text with her insight into fandom studies. The book is composed of an Introduction, four chapters with subsections and Conclusions. Each chapter focuses on a different subject, but some themes recur, such as patriarchal hegemony within the discourses on female authorship, collective authorship and psychoanalytical approach to the work of an author. The work is an impressive achievement, providing a dense, synthetic overview of the most significant critical theories on the idea of authorship and its ideologies. It also presents an original and fiercely inquisitive assessment of the value, functions, limitations, implications, and areas for future developments of these ideas, so that authorship could evolve into a less abstract and more inclusive category.

The first chapter, “The Romantic Lie and the Truth of the Market. The Birth of the Phantasm of Authorship,” is a comprehensive historiographic account of the social, political and intellectual processes which led to the constitution of the Romantic model of an author. This phantasm of a single genius solely responsible for the creation of a text remains, according to Kobus, the dominant discourse on authorship. Beginning with a concise outline of two of the earliest known models of the author in Western culture, the craftsman and the bard, Kobus convincingly presents the origins of modern notions of authorship and writing as inherently individualistic, as opposed to the collective and dependent nature of compiling and publishing written works that was dominant so far, especially in the Middle Ages. She also points to the very etymology of the Latin word *auctor*, its connection to the notion of authority – not excluding divine authority as both a source of inspiration and a validation of the work’s value – and its ultimate meaning of “one who creates.”

In further subchapters, Kobus expands on the development of the institutional foundations in the Early Modern period, leading to the invention of established legal measures providing writers with more autonomy and ways of protecting their interests amidst the breakdown of

printing monopolies, and the transition to capitalist market economies. The idea of authorship reinforced in the 18<sup>th</sup> century is directly connected to the philosophy of liberalism and its emphasis on private property as a foundational aspect of a democratic society – authorship as ownership of a text. Kobus forms her arguments on the basis of historical research of established scholars such as Martha Woodmansee, Carla Hesse and Mark Rose, juxtaposing the development of copyright law in England, starting with the 1710 *Statute of Anne*, with the realities of absolutist France, its preventive censorship and the political liability of authors for the content of their works, for example the way they contributed to the perceived moral betterment of society.

The next few subchapters discuss the ideas which contributed to the later establishment of the Romantic theory of authorship, such as originality. Kobus presents Edward Young's concept of creativity, which he saw as a unique quality of a writer making their work particularly valuable and a proof of the author's ability to transgress established conventions. She notes a connection between this aesthetic category and the authorial figure's entanglements in the new economic system – Young's metaphor of an original work as a "new metal to the mint" (Young, 1759, p. 15), an object of social exchange and possibly a source of income. The subject of professional writing was further discussed by writer George Eliot who, as Kobus shows, argued for authorship as an ability to convert texts into exchangeable goods, a productive social activity first and foremost, while at the same time depreciating women's writing as inherently derivative and less valuable because of its strive for popularity and marketability – this marginalization of women authors is a subject that Kobus shows a vivid interest in and which she extensively discusses in the second chapter.

The last three subsections of Chapter One focus on the founding, the contradictions and the early subversions of the theory described here as the Romantic phantasm of authorship. Kobus cogently traces the roots of these ideas in the writers' need for autonomy and financial independence alternative to the previous modes of patronage, and their later turn to weighty idealism elevating the author's identity to a transcendent entity above all social and historical conditioning, creating completely original works supposedly rooted in the author's exceptional qualities. The scholar cites and discusses critically the concepts presented by some of the most revered literary figures of the era, from Wordsworth to P.B. Shelley to Byron, identifying the shortcomings and internal contradictions within their fetishizing convictions on literary genius. She focuses on aspects of classical Romantic writing such as it being a function of class privilege, its refusal to acknowledge how the creative process is dependent on many external factors outside of the author's subjectivity (Harold Bloom's concept of anxiety of influence) and its attempt to separate from public reception and, further, critical scrutiny (Lucy Newlyn's concept of anxiety of reception).

Although the material presented is expansive and shows both the diversity and the contradictory nature of the intellectual climate of English Romanticism, these sizable subchapters are not completely free from redundancies. Kobus is skillful in reformulating the poets' grandiose theories in numerous, often pleasantly derisive ways, but at certain points the reader might still be under the impression that the same general conclusion is being conveyed in marginally different wording. The inclusion of extensive passages from poetry, left untranslated in this Polish language publication, might also pose a problem for a potential reader. Despite these

minor setbacks, the chapter concludes on a strong note with an unconventional analysis of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* which Kobus sees as a story demonstrating the absurdity of what the (male) Romantic project of authorship becomes when it is implemented in practice – the monster as a patchwork of existing elements and influences, rather than the expression of the author's uniqueness. The focus on Mary Shelley's seminal work ensures a smooth transition to the themes of the following chapter.

In the second chapter, entitled "Excluded from Authorship. Womanhood in the Discourse of Authorship," Kobus writes about the mechanisms of exclusion used in order to suppress women's willingness to write. She mentions stereotypes concerning women who write and describes in detail two cases of women authors: Harriet Taylor Mill and Virginia Woolf. The feminist aspects are presented alongside with the mythology of men's writing: the author describes how women try to regain their voice in the face of patriarchal constraints in the literary tradition and finishes the chapter with a summary of Joanna Russ's *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (1983), in which Kobus presents the strategies of Western literary institutions used to silence women authors.

The first subchapter begins with an overview of feminist literary criticism. The scholar enumerates such issues as the representation of women in literature (both the presence of women authors on the publishing market, and the economic aspect of what it means to be a woman writer, and the construction of femininity through literary works), the presence of women in the literary canon and *écriture féminine* as a way of fighting against the phallogocentrism of language. Later on, Kobus proceeds to the discussion on masculinity as "the norm" of a writer and the fact that the Western literary canon is built on the dominance of the masculine model of writing.

The subchapter is a concise introduction to the discussion on women's position in literature: Kobus presents the most important aims of feminist literary theories on the basis of Hélène Cixous's classic feminist essay "The Laugh of the Medusa" (first published in 1975) and writes about the concept of hegemonic femininity, the model of femininity that is presented as dominant and desirable in a given culture at a certain point of history. Kobus moves swiftly from one theory to another and mentions important feminist figures, such as Luce Irigaray, Elaine Showalter, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, amongst many others. These numerous references to feminist critique prove its significance in redefining the discourse on authorship, as it was the feminist critics who recognized the problems with the notion of the author which led to its further deconstruction.

The next subchapter takes its name from a quote by Harriet Taylor Mill, who is the main figure analyzed in this section. The whole subchapter is focused on the discussion of the fact that women's writing and role in the creative process have been silenced and overlooked throughout the ages. Kobus presents the history of Harriet Taylor Mill and John Stuart Mill and their creative cooperation, with the emphasis on Harriet Taylor Mill's part in writing Stuart Mill's most significant works, including *On Liberty* and *Principles of Political Economy*. She points to the fact that although Stuart Mill himself mentioned Harriet Taylor Mill as the co-author of his works, she was still ignored by publishers as a woman's name on the cover would weaken the authority of the philosopher.

The story of Harriet Taylor Mill functions as a transition to the next subchapter: Kobus depicts the approach of Taylor Mill as one of the tools against the institutional silencing of women authors and moves on to describing the strategies they used. Kobus enumerates the problems faced by women authors of that time, the biggest of which was equating the author's literary persona with their private lives and opinions, which led to strategies such as explaining one's reason for writing as the need to educate women on how to be better housewives or, as in the case of Elizabeth Carter, separating oneself from other, not lady-like enough writers "without 'modest grace'" (Todd, 1989, p. 127). In these two subchapters, the scholar skillfully presents the history of women's struggle for the right to be authors. These two subchapters are also notable for containing a large amount of footnotes which provide interesting information concerning, for example, the laws on the freedom of speech, or presented terminology.

One of the most interesting aspects of the second chapter is the previously mentioned concept of *hegemonic femininity*: in one of the footnotes, Kobus describes why she decided to opt for this term on the basis of Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony. It is an interesting choice which proves very useful when conducting the analysis of women writers' approaches to the patriarchal literary tradition. The book shows extensive knowledge in the field of feminist theory, presenting the reader not only with a discussion of issues concerning female authorship, but also the most important works in the field itself.

Subchapter Four concerns women's writing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Kobus mentions the common fear of not being feminine enough as well as the lack of previous models of women writers caused by their cultural erasure as some of the most important factors influencing the women authors of that time. Referring to Gilbert and Gubar and their work *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Kobus describes the idea of the martyrology of women's writing, pointing to motifs such as isolation, mental illness and runaways as representative of women's exclusion from cultural production. The scholar identifies the most important phenomena in the field of women's writing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and leads the reader through the writers' individual stories, linking them to the wider cultural context of that time.

In the following subchapters, Kobus connects the subsequent silencing of women writers to the creation of the mythology centered around the male author. In Subchapter Five, which may be one of the most interesting and persuasive passages in the book, Kobus presents Virginia Woolf's statements on women's position in the creation of literary tradition – following Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, she writes about women's unequal status, caused by their unpaid work at home and lack of space of their own. When juxtaposing Woolf's model of androgynous authorship with Elaine Showalter's critique of Woolf's approach to feminism, Kobus demonstrates both sides of the argument, leaving the space for readers' reflection and presenting them with Toril Moi's critique of both theories.

The subchapter about the mythology of men's writing contains insights into Harold Bloom's conceptualization of writing which constitutes an interesting follow-up to the discussion about Woolf's view of authorship. Kobus describes Bloom's theory as the ultimate wish of the patriarchy and points to an interesting distinction between men and women's writing: she describes men's writing on the basis of Bloom's anxiety of influence and women's writing with

reference to Gilbert and Gubar's anxiety of authorship. This distinction is followed by a summary of Joanna Russ's *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, which seems to be an approachable ending to a comprehensive, challenging chapter on women's writing.

Chapter Three, "The Post-Romantic Discourse of Authorship," is a collection of the most important theoretical frameworks concerning authorship which emerged in the 20th century. In the opening subchapter, Kobus reintroduces the intellectual formations of postmodernism and feminism as potential subversions of the Romantic phantasm of authorship – the former questioning the abstract, transcendent authority of the author, and the latter contextualizing the figure as embodied and concrete. She also points to the discursive transition from a focus on the intersubjective aspects of authorship (e.g. the text as an object of market exchange) to the intertextual ones in which the text's external influences and relationships to other texts are of interest, which in turn strongly connects to the questioning of the authorial figure's authority as a privileged voice in interpretation. This naturally leads to a discussion on well-established theories such as that of "the Death of the Author" by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault's "Death of Man."

The subchapter on intertextuality focuses on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and contains an interesting transition to the work of Julia Kristeva on intertextuality as a social practice, while the subsequent subchapter presents the reader with the most important assumptions proposed by Barthes; at this point, it would be important to state that the editorial decision to embolden the most important problems presented in the subchapters makes it easier to follow the challenging theories described by Kobus. Similar impressions occur when reading the subchapter on the author function, in which Kobus describes Foucault's theory of authorship as a social function.

In contrast, the following subchapter may appear as both one of the most dense sections of the book and possibly the least consistent one. It presents feminist revisions of the notion of Death of the Author, studies on film auteurism and the "embodied subject," but also briefly discussed are the notions of separating the art from the artist in the context of Hollywood and the #Me-Too movement, cancel culture, a short story from 1903 and a graphic novel from 2015. Overall, it is an often inspiring exploration of a multitude of different texts and theories, in which the scholar moves between scrutinizing psychoanalytic theories of film and outspoken commentaries on popular culture.

The subject of auteur theory as a dated, elitist and masculinist relict of 20<sup>th</sup>-century film criticism and film studies, understandably, does not interest Kobus in any significant manner. Nevertheless, her statement that supposedly all auteur cinema "remains a closed boys' club" (2021, p. 281) may be seen as potentially undermining the work of female directors who were undoubtedly established as auteur figures and extensively analyzed in film studies – Agnès Varda, Chantal Akerman, or Věra Chytilová, to name a few, in addition to Liliana Cavani's work, discussed in the cited work by Kaja Silverman. One could also name a number of papers and monographs dedicated to the distinctiveness of the "female gaze" in film (see e.g. Radkiewicz, 2010; Slobodian, 2012; Paszkiewicz, 2019) that could contribute to developing a less partial perspective on the role of the strong authorial figure of the director in films outside of Hollywood genre cinema, which Kobus seems to focus on in her criticism.

After briefly discussing the theories on film auteurism from such figures as Andrew Sarris and arguments already made against them by critics such as Pauline Kael, Kobus presents the theories from Kaja Silverman's book *The Acoustic Mirror* (1988), summarizing her discussions on the previously described work of Barthes, notions of libidinal economy, and the authorial presence in the text as inherently embodied and therefore gendered, historical and ideological. This leads to a further discussion on how the category of authorship may still be useful, especially when analyzing works of authors from marginalized groups (such as sexual and ethnic minorities), since the authorial figure functions as an embodied representation of the social context from which the text originates. Kobus also notes the perceived importance of Barthes's and Foucault's own nonhegemonic identities as queer men in their contribution to subverting time-worn discourses on authorship. The chapter concludes with brief discussions on Henry James's "The Birthplace" and Chuck Palahniuk and Cameron Stewart's *Fight Club 2*, which Kobus sees as examples of Foucault's "author function" and Barthes's "Death of the Author," respectively.

Kobus begins Chapter Four, titled "Collective Authorship. From the Culture of Contribution to Co-Authorship," by outlining the strengths and limitations of selected works (mostly from the field of sociology of literature) concerning individual and collective authorship. She refers to Linda Brodkey's discussion of the "scene of writing" as the isolated, privileged moment of the act of writing, separated from all factors and contexts that contributed to that moment, to smoothly work towards ideas of collective, intersubjective and intertextual authorship, as the dominant model of cultural production. Kobus extensively describes Jack Stillinger's studies on "multiple authorship," such as his insight into the seven contributors to John Stuart Mill's autobiography, but also criticizes Stillinger's argument as limiting collective authorship only to a sum of individual authorship(s). Other scholars who have written on the subject, such as Andrew Bennett and Stephen B. Dobranski, are also considered, but what appears to be especially stimulating for the author is Jonathan Gray's (2013) essay "When is the Author?", which frames authorship as a continuous, open process of production of meanings to which readers contribute to in their practices of reception – to illustrate that point, Kobus transitions to a discussion of an often disregarded field of writing.

Subchapter Three is strongly tied to the scholar's previous work and one of her main areas of research – fanfiction. On the one hand, Kobus presents the reader with an interesting guide to the language used by fanfiction writers, explaining terms such as AU, flangst and OTP; on the other, the section definitely differs from the previous one concerned with the theory of authorship. Kobus moves from a dense, difficult theory to a discussion about the pop cultural significance of fanfiction and presents readers with a plenitude of new terms and vocabulary, although the fact that the scope of the work is so broad may make it more difficult to follow the arguments. In the last subchapter, the Author further discusses the myth of the solitary author and underlines that the publishing market persists with the belief in the Romantic model of a genius author despite the increasingly more common acknowledgment of the role of collective authorship.

The book concludes with a statement about the need for further research concerning the relationship between power relations in the society and their impact on cultural production. This constitutes an impressive closing to *Authorship* and opens the field for other researchers interested in the subject.

In conclusion, *Authorship* is a vastly interesting work, serving as an expansive source of knowledge concerning the broad range of issues connected to authorship. Kobus skillfully presents the reader with a variety of literary theories and historical facts. The book encourages the reader to become acquainted with the scholar's other publications, such as the one on fandom and fanfiction (*Fandom. Fan models of reception*, 2018), wherein she expands on some of the subjects discussed in this monograph. *Authorship* is a book that deserves wider attention and appreciation within Polish academia as it is a pioneering work on the subject.

### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Professor Katarzyna Więckowska, Professor Edyta Lorek-Jezińska and Nelly Strehlau, Ph.D., for their help and invaluable contribution to the definitive form of this review.

### References

- Bloom, H. (2002). *Lęk przed wpływem. Teoria poezji* (A. Bielik-Robson, M. Szuster, Trans.). Kraków: Universitas.
- Barthes, R. (1977). The death of the author (S. Heath, Trans.). *Image-Music-Text* (pp. 142-148). London: Fontana Press.
- Cixous, H. (1993). Śmiech Meduzy (A. Nasilkowska, Trans.). *Teksty Drugie* 4-6 (22-24), 147-166.
- Gray, J. (2013). When is the author? In J. Gray and D. Johnson (Eds.), *A Companion to media authorship* (pp. 88-111). Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Kobus, A. (2018). *Fandom. Fanowskie modele odbioru*. Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika.
- Kobus, A. (2021). *Autorstwo. Urynkowanie literatury i fantazmat podmiotu autorskiego*. Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika.
- Newlyn, L. (2000). *Reading, writing, and Romanticism: The anxiety of reception*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Paszkiewicz, K. (2019). *Genre, authorship and contemporary women filmmakers*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Radkiewicz, M. (2010). „Władczynie spojrzenia.” *Teoria filmu a praktyka reżyserek i artystek*. Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art.
- Silverman, K. (1988). *The acoustic mirror: The female voice in psychoanalysis and cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

- Slobodian, J. (2012). Analyzing the woman *Auteur*. The female/feminist gazes of Isabel Coixet and Lucrecia Martel. *The Comparatist* 36, 160–77. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26237301>.
- Stougaard-Nielsen, J. (2019). The author in literary theory and theories of literature. In I. Berensmeyer, G. Buelens, and M. Demoor (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of literary authorship* (pp. 270-287). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Todd, J. (1989). *The sign of Angelica: Women, writing and fiction, 1660–1800*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Young, E. (1759). *Conjectures on original composition*. Retrieved on November 28, 2021, from <https://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/content/conjectures-original-composition-1759>.

**Dawid Smyk** is an MA graduate in English Studies at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń. His main field of interest is film studies, including such topics as representation of minorities, vulgar auteurism and “slow cinema.”

**Paulina Szczepaniak** is an MA student of English Studies at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń. Her research interests include feminist theories and gender studies.