

**Ana C. Vogrinčič**

## **A Novel between Gossip and a Court Testimony**

### **The Peculiar Case of Benjamin Victor's *Widow of the Wood* (1755)**

This paper analyses a curious pseudo-documentary narrative entitled *The Widow of the Wood*, published anonymously in 1755 by a largely forgotten writer and theatre person, Benjamin Victor. It recounts real events that took place in Staffordshire in 1752 and could be best described as a cunning widow's amorous trickery. In the article I explore the subtle ways in which what is in fact a documentation of a court trial and a gossip chronicle is turned into a novel, and I try to track down the techniques of 'novelisation' as used in eighteenth century English literature, endeavouring to articulate how one discourse has been translated into another. The paper concludes by linking the case to the thematic and discursive role of gossip in eighteenth century English society and literature, namely novels.

#### **Introduction**

Today the booklet entitled *The Widow of the Wood* by theatre manager and minor writer of odes, plays and theatre history Benjamin Victor is entirely forgotten, as is more or less the author himself; but when it was published anonymously in 1755, it stirred a reaction so outrageous that its edition was almost completely seized. Knowing it was in itself an account of a real scandal, this is not entirely surprising.

The story recounts real events that took place in Staffordshire in 1752, when a new-coming resident, a young widow Ann Whitby, seduced into marriage a wealthy neighbour, William Wolesley, only to soon run away with another lover, John Robins and then accuse the groom of forcing her into a wedding. The conflict caused a long lasting law suit, bringing no benefits to either of the parties.

The offended husband, William Wolesley, was Victor's close and long-time friend – in fact Victor was the one who drew up the articles for his marriage to an alleged widow. His guilt over playing a part in this affair was perhaps the reason behind his rather curious gesture: namely, two years after the event and after the court trial was temporarily discharged, Victor wrote an account of this very same

marriage-fraud, clearly written in his friend's defence and as an attack on the deceitful wife. The names in the book were only partly concealed with the usual dash between the first and the last letter. But given the fact that Victor was described by his contemporaries as an extreme egotist,<sup>1</sup> and considering that in the book not even his friend Wolesley is depicted in a very favourable light, I believe Victor's engagement should be seen as a cunning exploitation of a juicy story, turning it into a saleable print narrative, rather than as an extraordinary proof of his friendly sentiments. In fact Wolesley's portrait is at times so dubious that there must have even been some grumbling on his side as well. What Sir William Wolesley himself made of the whole affair remains unknown, but the friendship with Victor seems to have remained intact, and Victor later even married his daughter. As for Ann Whitby, the role of a trickster stuck with her till the end of her life, as even in the obituary in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1782 she is— thirty years later – still referred to as the “Widow of the Wood.”<sup>2</sup> This should suffice for the gossipy background.

However, what is just as curious is the way Victor composed his narrative: using the official court documentation on the one hand, while on the other poeticising the formal discourse and embedding it into a supposedly neutral account of the events, thus producing a hybrid text of a very different sort.

### Text and Paratext

Even the reader previously acquainted with the peculiar background history of this tiny book must have been a little puzzled after finishing reading it, never mind the unsuspecting reader. Judging from the title, the duodecimo format and the number of pages (208),<sup>3</sup> (s)he probably expected some kind of a prose fiction narrative, presumably in the tradition of a history or memoir – especially since the character of a widow was quite a common figure in fiction at the time.

On the other hand it goes without saying that the title page oddly leaves us in the dark. Not only there is no author signature, we do not even get any kind of subtitle explaining what sort of text we are about to read - something which was in fact

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1. Quoted in P. H. Highfill, *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers and Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660–1800* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973–1993), p. 157.

2. *Gentleman's Magazine* LII (London: D. Henry, July 1782), p. 358.

3. I will be throughout referring to 1755 Corbett's London edition. All parenthesised references are to this edition. The text is available on *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online* <<http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/ECCO>>.

very common in the period when title pages often provided short summaries.<sup>4</sup> If then the first impression leads one to believe (s)he is about to read a fictitious narrative, a novel maybe, the scarcity of labels hints at its curious genre status.

Proceeding to the contents page, things become clearer. We learn, first, that the majority of the text is composed of the affidavits – “written statements, confirmed by oath, for use as evidence in court”;<sup>5</sup> and secondly, that this is in fact some kind of *roman à clef*, since only the first and the last letter of the characters’ names are given, with a dash in the middle, which obviously suggests this is a true account, referring to real people. If the first observation inclines one to think (s)he is about to read some kind of summarized testimony, the other implies that the author is obviously taking sides in the matter and not just providing a neutral trial report.

The publishing history of the book, notably the fact that that the majority of the London editions were seized by the offended party, makes it clear that at least some circles knew the book was written by a certain Benjamin Victor and that it recounted real events, eventually causing a law-suit. Today’s reader can verify this by looking up the case in *The English Reports* (ER) – a compilation of court proceedings from 1220 to 1865 – and, if willing, reading through a detailed twenty-page-long document.<sup>6</sup>

The author himself, however, dismisses all doubts about the fictitiousness of the story at the beginning, stating in the very first sentence that the following sheets contain the “unaccountable Facts,” supported by “the Affidavits of several Persons of undoubted Credit . . . which the reader will here find properly inserted.”<sup>7</sup> According to the contents page, it is clear that the only part of the text one can refer to as to autonomous authorial narrative (the one in fact written by Benjamin Victor himself

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4. Janine Barchas, *Graphic Design, Print Culture and the Eighteenth Century Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Even if we bear in mind that, as pointed out by Hunter and Gennette, short novel-titles became more frequent by the middle of the century, the complete absence of the titular paratext is still striking (J. P. Hunter, *Before Novels. The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* [New York, London: W. W. Norton, 1999] and Gerard Gennette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997]). Among the five documented editions of the *Widow of the Wood*, only the pirated Dublin one provides a subtitle “Being an authentic narrative of the late very remarkable transaction in Staffordshire” (see Eighteenth-Century Collection Online – ECCO).

5. Judy Pearsall and Bill Trumble, *Oxford English Reference Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 21.

6. In *The English Reports* CLXI (Edinburgh, London: W. Green & Son Limited; Stevens & Sons Limited, 1917) 391–411.

7. Trials as well as related documents were publicly accessible and it was thus indeed possible for the author to get access to the affidavits, the more so as Victor was himself one of the deponents.

and not merely transcribed) is what remains after setting aside all the judicial documents, which leaves the reader with only a tiny untitled part of the book, notably the fifty-two-page long beginning, the conclusion (202–208) and some linking paragraphs in between.

The author at work comes most to the forefront when setting the frame and designating the generic status of the text:

If the following Narrative<sup>8</sup> had been sent forth into the World without those Advantages to prove the Veracity of the Facts, I am certain it would not only be received as a Romance, but by the judicious Part of its Readers, despised for its Absurdities; for even the many fictitious Stories that have lately been published (from the very fertile Brains of our present Set of Novel Writers) have all, at least, this Merit, that their INCIDENTS are within the Pale of *Probability*. (2)

The paragraph is full of implications. On the one hand claiming that all he is about to recount what really happened, the author is nevertheless quick to align his work with the fictitious by emphasizing the outrageousness and incredulity of the narrated events, which would be – considering the later trend towards depicting the more probable – very likely disapproved of even in a romance. He thus distinguishes his truthful account from novels and romances; but in this denial he in fact cunningly capitalizes on its appeal of the improbable – the very essential characteristic of a romance. When read against the title, the above quotation indeed puts the reader on the right track, but nevertheless leaves a feeling of playful tension between different genre conventions.

## Reception

The *Monthly's* review of the *Widow of the Wood* seems to be 'spot on'.<sup>9</sup> After effectively summarizing the book as "reciting the scandalous conduct of a lady, who had a wickedness to marry a *third* husband, the *second* still living; both marriages falling within the space of one month," it points at its distinctive particularity: "that whereas many romances have imposed upon the public by title-pages contrived with design to pass them for true history; we have here a true history, with the title of a novel, which has led many into the mistaken supposition of its being a work of imagination" (392).<sup>10</sup>

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8. Narrative is the only word the author ever uses when referring to the *Widow of the Wood*.

9. *Monthly Review* XII (London: R. Griffiths, April 1755).

10. In 1755 the *Monthly Review* was certainly the most relevant literary magazine of the period; the rival *Critical* beginning publication only a year after Victor's curious account

In fact none of the contemporary remarks on the *Widow of the Wood* refer to it unambiguously as a fictional piece, let alone specifically as the novel. A comparably long, two column, review in the *Gentleman's Magazine*<sup>11</sup> does not even ascribe it a generic label; it merely summarizes the trial in detail – so much so that it almost seems as though we are reading about the events themselves and not about the written representation of them. If I add that, as is evident from the minutes in the *English Reports*, the judge, upon interrogating Benjamin Victor, referred to his book as to a pamphlet, this only confirms its being perceived as non-fiction.<sup>12</sup>

The picture is blurred once one becomes attentive to how the *Widow of the Wood* was categorized in contemporary magazines. While the *Gentleman's Magazine* places it under “Miscellany,” the *London Magazine*<sup>13</sup> (which does not provide a review, but only announces publications of new books) groups it under “Entertainment and Poetry.” Given the fact that neither the *Gentleman's* nor the *London Magazine* in their sections on newly published books include the category that would apply to fiction exclusively, their classification of Victor's text is not so meaningful in itself, but at least it gives a sense of its apparently disputable nature.<sup>14</sup> Articles in the *Monthly Review* were organized according to the importance of the reviewed publications, rather than thematically; but if the *Widow of the Wood* was in the April 1755 issue, as we have seen, described as “not being a work of imagination,” the *Monthly's General Index*, issued in 1786, eventually lists it under “Novels and Romances”!<sup>15</sup>

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came out. The note on the *Widow of the Wood*, above cited in full, appeared in a “special section of short notices for the slighter works” (Derek Roper, *Reviewing Before the Edinburgh 1788–1802* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1978), p. 20.

11. *Gentleman's Magazine* XXV (London: D. Henry, April 1755), p. 191.

12. “Do you know of a pamphlet called the Widow in the Wood [note the mistake in the proposition, ‘in’]; did not you write or cause it to be wrote, and by whose order?” (ER 1917, 400). The idea of Victor ordering the text to be written does not seem plausible and there are no other references (that I am aware of) supporting this interpretation.

13. *London Magazine* XXIII (April 1755), p. 191.

14. Considering they both include both sections, “Entertainment” (sometimes “Entertainment and Poetry”) and “Miscellany,” though each places the *Widow* in the other group, suggests they interpreted it differently. It is not clear what the criteria for categorisation are, although there seems to be in both periodicals a stronger inclination towards non-fiction in the “Miscellany” and towards fiction in the “Entertainment” section.

15. *A General Index to the Monthly Review*, vol. I (London: R. Griffiths, 1786), p. 515. This is even more surprising, considering that the *Index* included the “Addenda, consisting of books, which, on reading the proofs, appeared likely to be looked for in other classes than those to which they were assigned,” thus creating the impression of paying special attention to the problem of classification. The *Widow of the Wood*, however, is not included in this

Later mentions do not make the situation any clearer. While the nineteenth-century ones generally refer to the book as to “a scandalous gossip” or “a story from a current scandal,”<sup>16</sup> clearly regarding it as non-fiction, J. Raven in his bibliographical survey *British Fiction 1750–1770*,<sup>17</sup> rather than classifying it under any of the other of his categories (i.e. collection of tales or short stories, epistolary novel or miscellaneous work), defines it as a (narrative) novel.<sup>18</sup> But on the other hand the obvious omission of the *Widow of the Wood* from A. Forster’s *Index to Book Reviews in England 1749–1774* clearly indicates that she does not take it to be a work of fiction: “As the Index could not cover all works reviewed, the decision was made to include works in English only in the categories of poetry, fiction and drama.”<sup>19</sup>

### In quest of the novelistic

All this induces me to think in more detail about what it is that might have caused and still causes confusion in anchoring the generic status of the *Widow of the Wood*. Since it at first sight appears rather as a non-fictional trial report, the question is which characteristics within a limited manoeuvring space of the authorial text could be treated as potentially novelistic.

The *Widow of the Wood* in fact consists of the author’s supposedly neutral and ‘correct’ account of the whole intriguing affair, beginning with how the two main protagonists - the widow A–n Wh–y and the widower W–m W–y - met and how they got married, and ends with a sudden appearance of the widow’s second husband, which causes general bewilderment, raises accusations and results in a trial. What follows is a series of affidavits, supported by some other material evidence,

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supplement. We may speculate that later in the century the term novel, gaining relevance and solidity, perhaps started more frequently to also include the not-so-evidently novelistic fiction, together with some of the ephemeral hybrid species – a tendency which, if anything, seemed only to intensify with time and could have to do with some sort of retrospective generalization, aiming to impose more order on things.

16. See an entry on Benjamin Victor in Highfill, p. 157; and *The Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature* (1966), p. 35. The uses of gossip in a novelistic narrative (in terms of content and form) makes for a proper study subject in itself, but in this essay I am primarily trying to position the work in relation to the established genres.

17. James Raven, *British Fiction, 1750–1770: A Chronological Check-list of Prose Fiction Printed in Britain and Ireland* (Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 1987), p. 120.

18. Raven’s decision is curious, especially as his definition of a miscellaneous work includes imaginative biographies and accounts of causes-célèbres and thus appears more applicable to Victor’s text (1987), p. 51.

19. Antonia Forster, *Index to Book Reviews in England 1749–1774* (London: British Library, 1996), p. 21.

which provides the reader with the two opposing versions of the story: one by the widow and her 'gang,' and the other by the widower and his supporters. Three of the nine affidavits – by the widow, her second husband and by the widower – are fully transcribed, which means that the reader has to plough through three accounts of the same story. But if the first two affidavits at least offer a new interpretation of events, the one by the widower entirely corresponds with the author's understanding of what happened. What is more, it soon becomes evident that the author's narrative is in fact based on the widower's as well as on his own (Victor's!) testimony, something that the reader painfully realizes as (s)he is faced with whole paragraphs and dialogical episodes repeated verbatim. Other (fortunately reduced) affidavits also retell the story, although each from a slightly different perspective. After summarizing the court's decision<sup>20</sup> the author concludes with a moralizing recapitulation in favour of the widower.

The reader may have a vague idea of the author's endeavour to compose at once a juicy story and a persuasive account of a scandalous court trial, supported by empirical evidence to boost the slander of the widow, and with a moral interpretation of the case in the end. But practically, however, the text soon falls apart and the reader quickly becomes lost amidst the fragmented judicial documentation and annoyed by the tedious repetitiveness of one and the same story, which leaves even the moral message unclear in the end.<sup>21</sup> What nevertheless does promise an interesting 'investigation' is the way in which the author enriches and embellishes the narrative.

There are two dimensions which appear to offer some kind of a way in. The first could be described as a quest for Jakobson's poetic function of language, the dominant and determining function of literature.<sup>22</sup> What I have in mind is the formal, stylistic level, the implications of how things are told, expressed and described, including the address to the reader, the use of language and the role of the narrator.

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20. The trial is much too complicated to go into detail, but suffice it to say that it started in 1752 with the widow (after having run away with the second husband) suing the widower for allegedly forcing her into marriage. The case was discharged with costs in 1754 and this is where the novel concludes, although the trial continued with the widower's lawsuit against the widow for adultery and fraud, and was not fully closed until 1759 when it was dismissed without charges (ER, 391–410).

21. It seems Victor realized this himself when, towards the end, he somewhat ambivalently offers the reader some guidance: "Before I take leave of my amazed Readers, I doubt not but they will expect me to help them to a Clue, by which they may get out of this Labyrinth" (202).

22. Roman Jakobson, *On Language* (Cambridge Massachusetts; London: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 76.

The second relates to a broader, referential or thematic frame that exceeds a mere summary of events and thus represents a surplus value, edging the text closer to the realm of the novelistic. By tackling these elements I will try to discern whether they correspond to any kind of novelistic tradition. The literariness of Victor's writing can be most effectively observed in the background of the condensed and wearisome affidavits, which, as said, take up the majority of the book.<sup>23</sup>

On the level of form and style, the authorial text differs in at least three ways. First, in the use of elements, such as the abundance of italics, capital letters and exclamation marks in the middle of the sentence, which reveal the author's judgement, but also express irony and create a dramatic effect, as for example, on page 11, when the narrator summarizes the objections of the widower's friend to the latter's intention to marry the widow, if only because of the age difference.

Second, in borrowing classical, literary references in order to demonstrate erudition, and form the image of respectability. For example: comparing the widower to a "happy JASON" (3); and the widow to "that *Iago*" (204), or incorporating verses by Horace (44) and citing Nicholas Rowe (36).

And third, in including such wise sayings and common-sense proverbs as: "There is not Truth more obvious than *That* in common Life; if a *Servant* gets into a *criminal Secret*, from that Moment his Deportment alters, her assumes an unmanly Freedom" (195). All that variegate, softens and emotionalizes the otherwise tedious enumeration of events.

But the author's opinion is also articulated more explicitly by providing occasional insights into characters' states of mind, which are in fact Victor's own biased speculations, presented as the only possible and thus accurate way of seeing things.<sup>24</sup> The moralizing dimension strengthens towards the end, after the affidavits are presented. The scheming widow expectedly comes out as the least likeable character; a reader can observe the loosening of the author's restraint in the way he refers to her: from a "sprightly," "artful" and "enterprising Lady" in the first part (8, 36, 50), to "what a Machiaval in Petticoats!", "Female Libeller" and "base Traducer" in the end: (193, 194).

Considering that the text was at least to an extent written in the defence of Victor's deceived friend – the widower – it is surprising to note that he too is depicted

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23. Albeit these documents are indeed merely transcribed, it needs to be acknowledged that the author nevertheless had to critically engage with them simply to select and arrange them. After having difficulties reading through the *English Report*, one begins quickly to cherish Victor's reduction of the actual number of witnesses (from 16 to 9) as well as his shortenings of the affidavits, which makes the whole affair a bit more comprehensible. For an example of an inserted affidavit see pages 174–176.

24. See page 34.

in a rather dubious light, being throughout presented as passive, meek and hen-pecked,<sup>25</sup> which probably contributed to a theory that, as stated by the ODB (see the entry BV),<sup>26</sup> it was the members of Wolseley's family who bought and destroyed all the copies of the book they could get hold of. As it turns out, the theory proves this to be misleading: in the *Bibliotheca Staffordiensis* it is clearly stated that this was a ploy carried out by Ann Whitby's fourth husband, the one she married even after marrying the lover she ran away with.<sup>27</sup> Fortunately, some of the copies survived and – at least until recently – some could still be purchased (which is mostly due to the fact that the book was [after London] also published in Dublin and Glasgow).

This ambivalent characterisation certainly weakens the pamphletic nature of the *Widow of the Wood* and again brings it closer to the novelistic.

Another point that explicitly distinguishes the authorial text from the rest is the author's address to the reader. Those acquainted with the real events and with Benjamin Victor as the proper author of the narrative might have amused themselves by observing how he at once functions as an omniscient narrator, but is also depicted as one of the side characters in the story, which means that Benjamin Victor, the first person singular author-narrator, is occasionally talking about *B-n V-r*, the widower's friend and the author of one among the many other affidavits. The direct author's address to the reader often functions as a device for switching back and forth between a linear narrative to affidavits. On the one hand this creates an air of confidential alliance as the reader is seduced into taking over the author-narrator's interpretation of the story; on the other it functions as an aid, enabling the reader to manoeuvre among the numerous testimonies, each giving a slightly different perspective of what has happened.<sup>28</sup>

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25. "[Mr V-r] found Sir W-m in a CONDITION not very much like that of an IMPATIENT Lover – for he was FAST ASLEEP IN HIS BED!" (20); "Sir W-m, it seems, observed it was very uncustomary for a Bride and Bride-groom to separate on the Wedding-night – But since it was her Will, he must submit" (39).

26. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (ODB on-line); s.v. Benjamin Victor, <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/>>.

27. See the exact quote: "The heroine was named Ann Northay; who m. (1) John Whitby, Esq., of Great Haywood; (2) Sir William Wolesley; Bart. of Wolseley Bridge, (3) John Robins, Esq., M. P. for Stafford (who died in 1754); (4) Mr. Hargrave, attorney – father of the Editor of the State Trials – who bought up and destroyed all the copies he could obtain" (*Bibliotheca Britannica; or A General Index to British and Foreign Literature*, ed. Robert Watt, vol. 4 [1842], p. 479).

28. Cf. "my Readers need not now be informed which Party deserve the real Name of *Conspirators!*" (202). Or: "For the Sake of my Reader, I shall take the Liberty to omit in the Affidavits of these two worthy Persons, such Passages as correspond with, and corroborate

Even though the narrative is narrowly focused on just conveying the story and thus almost devoid of digressions, the way it is handled, the choice of sequence, together with the wise sayings and moral comments, inevitably touch upon some of the common topics that one would come across in the novels of the time, such as: town vs. country, the (mis)uses of marriage, the relationship of masters and servants, friendship, religion, economics of class and family, morality, and most notably, the widow stereotype. Even though these motifs seem to appear almost incidentally, and the author does not seriously engage any of them, they nevertheless present some kind of a link with the literature of the time, which can help us orient within the novelistic tradition. Perused through the lens of the micro-topics, Victor's text seems to convey, albeit feebly, a rather conservative ideology: the widow pretending to love the country, but actually preferring the city; warnings about the over-confidential relationship with servants; corrupted vicars and the dangers of deceptive outward appearance. But throughout, the focus is undoubtedly on the widow and her intrigue, enhancing the negative stereotype generally describing widows as tough and unfeminine, as predatory social climbers, well equipped to survive, scheming, gossipy, vain, complacent, and vulgar. However, even though we are allowed a comparably better sense of her personality – characterizations of others rather being embedded in the plot – we are far from any kind of psychological insight. If anything, what is much more apparent is her physical, bodily presence; but far from figuring as an example of a delicate female sensibility, she appears in the unappealing light of perverted sensuality, occasionally even bordering on the vulgar and repulsive – especially in the recurring descriptions of her fits of hysterics, nausea and, notably, the episode(s) of her “violently vomiting through the window.”<sup>29</sup> With all this in mind, I will try to locate the text in relation to contemporary types of prose fiction.

### Generic implications

By skimming through the book and judging by the intensive use of heightening devices one might quickly conclude that we are dealing with a sentimental work. In truth, this is probably the only link with the conventions of sentimental fiction and has no other effect on the nature of the narrative. The *Widow of the Wood* is almost devoid of emotion. It is true that she sheds tears, but this is all presented as part of

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the Facts in the foregoing copious Affidavit of Sir *W-m W-y*, which Law requires; and only insert the following material Abstracts” (151).

29. In the testimonies (see ER, 395–396) the vomiting episode indeed figures as an important alibi, but the fact that Victor chose to include this one over many others he omits certainly says something about how he wanted the reader to perceive the heroine.

her machinations and outward appearance, and is not meant to – and indeed does not – incite sympathy. Other protagonists function as mere figureheads. Even the courtship and the flirting phase are portrayed as feeble, pallid and lukewarm, and one has no sense of mutual affection. No one stands out as an exemplary model; the most sympathetically depicted is a ‘worthy clergyman,’ who, by the end, becomes a focus of the moral message. Bribed to make a false entry of the widow’s marriage to the second husband, he is afterwards haunted by guilt, confesses and repents, but dies soon after. Victor presents him as a victim of the whole affair and holds him out as a warning, although this, on the whole, makes for a weak case. If J. Todd claims that “a sentimental work moralizes, more than it analyses,”<sup>30</sup> here the opposite seems to be the case.<sup>31</sup>

Returning to the above quoted beginning paragraph, after having read the book we find Victor’s claim even more misleading. If we take what he is saying word for word – namely, that without knowing this to be true we would read the *Widow of the Wood* as a romance – the parallel seems to exceed the common ground of improbability, as though playing on the affinity with style as well. Everyone who has read the piece, however, would know that very little in it resembles a romance – not even on the level of plot, let alone style. But on the other hand, Victor here seems to reveal more than he intended. Despite distancing his work from fiction in general, and even somewhat contemptuously picking on ‘the very fertile brains of our present set of novel writers,’ it is possible to read this as a proof of his own literary aspirations, or as a reflection of a need for some sort of a literary label. Victor’s exaggerated comparison to a romance appears rather like a cunning marketing gesture, leaving the possibilities open for a reader to decide what kind of a text (s)he has stumbled upon. Yet it feels safe to say that Victor himself clearly did not want his *Widow* to be dismissed as non-fiction.

The analogy with the romance nevertheless has some weight. Even though the style is much too sober and down to earth, the plot-scheming, the enhanced presence of the body and the shallow characters resemble certain features of the novels of amatory intrigue.<sup>32</sup> But considering the alleged purpose of the text and the effect it caused, it seems more appropriate to affiliate it with a *roman à clef*, or – if we recall that it was often referred to as a scandalous narrative – with yet another re-

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30. Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 4.

31. As for the sentimental in nature, it has to be clarified that the word ‘wood’ appears only as a name of the estate, and this is the most we have in terms of landscape, ‘the wood’ loosing all the mystery it evokes in the title.

32. Ros Ballaster, *Seductive Forms: Women’s Amatory Fiction from 1684 to 1740* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992).

lated genre: *cronique scandaleuse*.<sup>33</sup> However, our case is not that simple. *Romans à clef* were nevertheless novels, and above all, their authors made an effort to fictionalize the story, at least to some extent. The mere fact that in Victor's account the names are not pseudonimized, but actually only concealed, already partly disqualifies the text even from labelling it a *roman à clef*. But what is much more relevant and what one observes again and again is that there seems to be no fictional dimension in the *Widow of the Wood*; as shown, the literariness of the text pertains to the form, the language and the style. *Widow of the Wood* is in fact a novelized court trial, albeit – it has to be admitted – not very successfully novelized. This acknowledges the author's obvious endeavour to translate the story in an attractive comprehensible way by using embellished language, but places the trial (i.e. the judicial discourse) at the forefront.

## Conclusion

What Victor did was chronicle the scandal in order for the mischievous gossip to spread efficiently. At the time when gossip magazines were not yet that popular – the trend seriously took off in the last third of the century with the *Town and Country Magazine* and its famous *tête à tête* section – this was indeed a medium well chosen for the task.

It might be worth noting that this was Victor's only attempt of that sort; all his other work is either undoubtedly non-fictional (e.g. his *History of the Theatre*) or written by order (e.g. flattering royal odes). Even his theatre pieces can be considered as adaptations rather than creative writings in themselves. I even dare to suggest that Benjamin Victor was better in remaking and packaging than in the imaginative creation of his own making. In fact, are we not, in the case of the *Widow of the Wood*, also dealing with some kind of adaptation? Translation of a certain discourse into another? Juridical into literary? Indeed, what I can point to at the end of our quest for common ground with the contemporary novelistic tradition to a large extent boils down to the merely literary, poetical dimension, with little to show for the novelistic, apart from the fact that what is considered literary inevitably reflects, borrows from and is influenced by contemporary fiction. But all the elements of the eighteenth century prose fiction tradition I have traced in this case suffice to justify the *Widow of the Wood* as not merely literalized, but indeed a novelized court trial.

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33. The two are often referred to in pairs, because *romans à clef* indeed frequently recounted scandalous events; while on the other hand *cronique scandaleuses* were often written with concealed or fictitious names in the manner of *romans à clef*.

The way Victor concludes the story is symptomatic of and seems to support the above label. When the author, after 138 pages of affidavits, resurfaces with some kind of a moral recapitulation of what has passed – what would make for a proper and meaningful conclusion, perhaps even a worthwhile novel – the book in fact finishes with an as-though-hastily-added *N.B.*, updating the reader with the latest information regarding the witnesses involved, as though not allowing her/him to forget that the text is throughout relying on the judicial record – which is in fact the main hero of the book.

The *Widow of the Wood* is certainly not a pleasurable read, but it does make for a fascinating case study in the context of the history of publishing as well as in the way it composes and (re)employs its narrative. Last but not least, it makes one reflect on how novel and gossip are closely connected, thematically and discursively, even when there is no such tabloid story in the background. Gossip provides a similar combination of information and speculation to a novel; it unites particularities with the common truths of life and, by making private information public, creates an illusory bond of intimacy. If one considers that the relationship between the private and the public is one of the important topics of eighteenth-century studies, Victor's curious booklet obviously reveals the spirit of the period. As such, it is certainly worth the effort of reading.