


Writing for Money, or The Distresses of a Hired Writer

In the following pages I look at literary representations of the literary market in the eighteenth century, focusing on conflicting ideas about writing for money. In many works relations between monetary interest, political dependence and artistic form enact the dilemmas of a commercialised society in the specific domain of literature. With the growth of the print market and the definition of literary property, the image of the professional author was opposed both to the commercial author and to the gentleman author. The economic independence that came with the privatisation of the imagination and with the commodification of writing was seen as an advantage of the new commercial society.

1. writing for money

One of the striking elements for anyone attempting to relate conditions of literary production and representations of literary activity is the contradiction between the increasing commercialisation of the activity, on the one hand, and the denial of its economic nature, on the other. This contradiction is a structural function of the ideology that represents the early stages in the development of a marketplace for theatre and for publishing. Money and writing became directly linked by virtue of the development of literary commerce as a specialised trade. Yet the acceptance of this particular association between the act of writing and the act of earning money occurred rather late into the process and it has always remained ambiguous. The denial of the economic nature of the activity came to be one of the defining elements of literary art. Even the redefinition of copyright as literary property, based on the personality and originality of the author,

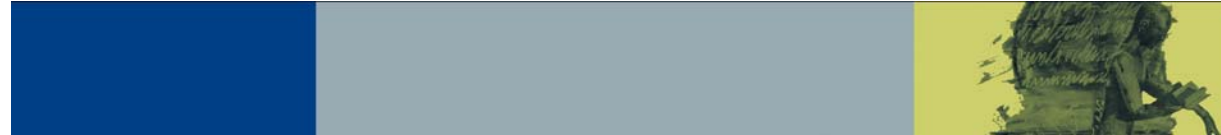


helped to conceal the economic nature of the commerce of the imagination. In Bourdieu's terminology, the denegation of the economic nature of the activity has remained a structural element in the organisation of the literary field.

The stereotypes of Grub-Street, drawn in their essential features between 1700 and 1730, persisted well into the late eighteenth century. This negative image of the commerce of literature performed an important ideological role in the long transition between two modes of production. Diagnosis of what was perceived as a new literary and cultural order became the main object of the satirical program undertaken by the scriblerian authors in pamphlets, newspapers, novels, poems, and plays. In the collective action of the scriblerians during this period of transition one can observe the intimate relationship between political process and literary commerce that resulted from the expansion of the public sphere. Many of the images created or redefined at the time will continue to resurface later in the century, for instance in texts by Samuel Johnson, Oliver Goldsmith, and Richard Sheridan, authors whose public identity was more openly attached to the market for writing.

The situation of the author as an economic agent was portrayed by Oliver Goldsmith in "The Distresses of an [sic] Hired Writer", an article first published in April 1761 in *The British Magazine* (see Appendix). This text compiles a series of clichés about writers as hired labourers and also about the effect of the commerce of letters upon literary artefacts. It shows the persistence of the negative image of commercial production that was minutely drawn in 1720s. Many of Goldsmith's complaints were already anachronistic by that time. In effect, the same Goldsmith had written in 1760-1761 a series of articles defending professionalisation and payment for authors, stressing the literary advantages of specialisation, and arguing for the value of public patronage¹.

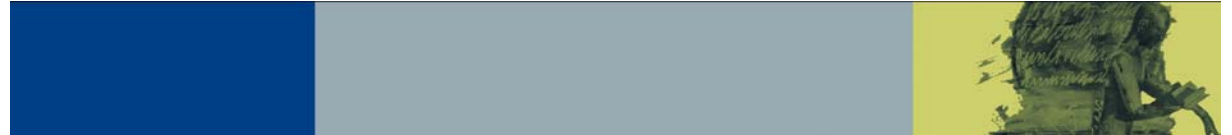
¹ Goldsmith discussed conditions of authorship in at least eight essays of the series "The Chinese Letters", published in the biweekly *Public Ledger* (1760 and 1761). He wrote again on those issues in essays that



“The Distresses of an Hired Writer” restates a number of topics that had been used to describe literary work since the last quarter of the seventeenth century. For Goldsmith, authors’ distresses were the consequence of the transformation of writing into a mechanical trade with the ensuing changes in labour relations, rhythm of production, and in the nature and quality of literary forms. The wage relation linking publisher and author, strengthened by a marketplace that has to be constantly fed with new commodities, had replaced private and royal patronage. Such a transformation of the social relations of production had inevitable stylistic and generic consequences. Thus the place for poetry had been taken by politics and criticism, an allusion to the increasing importance of the periodical press for all writers. This inner logic of economic expansion led authors to sell even their own critical judgement, whenever they felt obliged to promote a book in order to serve the publisher they were dependent upon. Corruption of taste was but one symptom of the general venality that came with the commercialisation of society and politics.

Monetary relations also disturbed social hierarchies. The publisher runs literary production and has a say in the writing process, despite his lower social origin and, very often, his rudimentary education. Even the class of authors itself seems to comprise entirely different social strata. Goldsmith opposes the *poet*, that is, classical authorial identity, to the *author*, that is, the new authorial identity established by the commerce of letters. Being subsumed by the general process of creation of value in the capitalist economy, literary art was no longer a prerogative of *gentlemen*, neither in the case of publishers, nor in the case of authors. Therefore the opposition between the cultural capital of the author and the commercial and financial capital of the publisher was further complicated by

appeared in *Lloyd's Evening Post* (1762) and in *British Chronicle* (1762). Cf. OLIVER GOLDSMITH, *The Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, Edited by Arthur Friedman, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966, vol. II, pp. 88, 124-134, 215-216, 236-238, 310-311, 341-345, 344-345, 375-377.




the acknowledgement of the material poverty of new authors, that is, by the change in their social origins.

The reform that Goldsmith envisions would lead to the restoration of what he refers to as the “golden age of the Republic of Letters”, personified in the authors of Queen Anne’s reign. Yet the authors he has chosen as touchstones of those golden days (Pope, Swift, Addison, Steele, Rowe, Congreve, and Prior) had been in fact prime movers in the transition from the Republic to the Market of Letters, while at the same time they were assembling the icon of the Grub-street author. Commodification of wit and the consequent devaluation of the labour force of authors compromise the re-ennoblement of the authorial role put forward by Goldsmith. The economic facts that generate authorship, that is, the commercialisation of printed texts with authors’ names, have turned the image of the independent author into a mere rhetorical device of the waged author. From now on his or her social identity is dependent upon this particular association between commerce and literature. In this new historical situation, authorship increasingly becomes an effect of the publication and circulation of printed discourses.

2. three images: gentleman versus hack versus professional

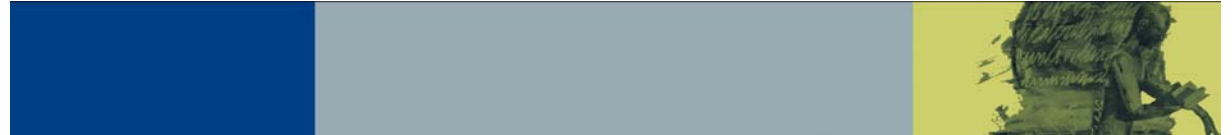
As a strategy for organising the myriad positive and negative figurations of authorship I suggest three images, which have refracted the various changes in the mode of literary production: the gentleman or liberal author, the commercial author, and the professional author. The first is related to production under private and royal patronage or by aristocratic authors; the second, to a waged or mercenary production for the market; and the third, to a new kind of independence that resulted from the legitimisation of monetary reward for writing. The history of these figurations illuminates a number of changes in the ideology of literary production that accompanied the simultaneous expansion of



the market for books, for the periodical press, and for the theatre during the eighteenth century.

These three constellations of images have a hybrid and overlapping nature and they tend to recur in different contexts. Elements that mark the independence of the author, for instance, vary from text to text and they are defined and redefined many times. Even if it were possible to trace the transformation of gentleman or lady author into the professional author, long persistence of negative images, such as those of mercenary or hack author, makes it inaccurate to conceive them as a mere substitution of one image by another. For instance, the expression *gentleman author* already carries a double meaning: it may refer those aristocrats who were authors, but also those who became gentlemen, by means of their recognition in the Court and among aristocrats. The development of writing as an economic activity changed the social origin of authors and also the sphere of public recognition, which in turn severed the traditional link between authorship and aristocratic circles.

A more accurate description of the three figurations should represent them as structuring elements in the literary field. They are activated according to specific sets of relations in a given economic moment and in a specific generic context. Legitimation of authorship as a professional activity does not imply the disappearance of the images of liberal author or commercial author, because they all continue to circumscribe one another. Instead, these images should be conceived as mixed figurations, which partially intersect, and whose definition was always carried out in a process of struggle and opposition. Thus the definition of the liberal author that occurred in the early decades of the eighteenth century was sharpened in opposition to the new type of commercial author, as we can see in Shaftesbury's *Advice to an Author* (1710). On the other hand, when they are partially overcome by the professional author in the second




half of the century, a number of features of the previous opposition remain in the new situation.

In the long run, the economic organisation that generated the material conditions for this kind of labour implied ideological transformations that legitimised authorship as a way of life. The rhetoric of the professional writer was developed in many genres (theatre, poetry, novel, essay). In its early stages, it was defined negatively in satires written during the last quarter of the seventeenth century and in the campaigns of the Scriblerus Club authors until the 1740s. In its later stages, it was redefined positively in the struggle between professional authors and professional critics, during the second half of the eighteenth century. Professionalisation had practical consequences for men and women authors, influenced literary genres, and changed concepts of literary activity and literary property.

3. *gentleman author*


An early sign of the ideological effects of literary modernisation is to be found in the opposition between professional playwrights and gentlemen amateurs. Brean S. Hammond and Paulina Kewes have pointed out this conflict in several plays written in the last decades of the 17th century, particularly in the prefaces that allude to writing practices within theatre companies. Aristocrats who had authored plays often refused to take the benefit of the third night and the copy money for publication of the manuscript. For the aristocrat, and for most authors of independent means, authorship should not be paid. Writing for money was stigmatised as a sign of literary decay because it made writers and literary forms liable to the passions and interests that drove the market. This stigma came from a complex series of associations, linking writing for money with poverty, with monetary profit, with party interest, and with the passions of the public.



Playwrights and journalists were the two first groups of professional authors whose identity as commercial authors was established in this way.

Attacks directed at Dryden by his competitors in the theatre market and in sphere of Court recognition show the emergence of the ideology that opposed the commerce of writing in Restoration society. They also reframe neo-classical practices of imitation in the context of plagiarism, as Paulina Kewes has demonstrated. Parodic use of genres and classical allusions to refer to contemporary changes in the social relations of poetical production and in literary genres is one of the literary features of this transition from patronage to the marketplace. Although they retained an allegorical structure, which could be read through an elaborate system of inter-textual allusions, satires and mock-epic poems developed notational strategies for the present and the domestic, becoming part of the process that Hammond has conceptualised as the novelization of culture. Such satires were often based upon the distance between classical *topoi* for depicting poetical activity and the social reality of contemporary practice.

One of the satires of John Oldham, written in 1679, reminds the reader of the economic nature of writing in Restoration England. Oldham contrasts an image of poetical production in the Elizabethan court with the present situation: production has risen and it is increasingly commercial; the nature of fame and reputation has changed; the social function of poetry has changed. The relationship between writing and time, and between writing and knowledge have been strongly disturbed: reading has become not just a daily activity but an act of consumption, with the effect that written texts have lost their aura of permanent and precious knowledge. The fact that printed texts were ever more abundant and more ephemeral was perceived as a threat to the hierarchy of cultural forms. The printed materiality of the newspaper, in its condition of

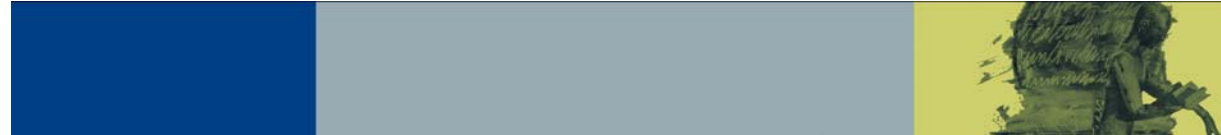


written commodity for immediate use, seemed to contaminate all other forms including poetry:

How many Poems writ in ancient time,
Which thy Fore-fathers had in great esteem,
Which in the crowded Shops bore any rate,
And sold like News Books, and Affairs of State,
Have grown contemptible, and slighted since,
As Pordage, Fleckno, or the British Prince?
Quarles, Chapman, Heywood, Withers had Applause,
And *Wild*, and *Ogilby* in former days;
But now are damn'd to wrapping Drugs, and Wares,
And curs'd by all their broken Stationers:
And so may'st thou perchance pass up and down,
And please a while th'admiring Court, and Town,
Who after shalt in *Duck-lane* Shops be thrown,
To mould with *Silvester*, and *Shirley* there,
And truck for Pots of Ale next *Stourbridge-Fair*.
Then who'l not laugh to see th'immortal Name
To vile *Mundungus* made a Martyr Flame?
And all thy deathless Monuments of Wit,
Wipe Porters Tails, or mount in Paper-kite? (Oldham: 169-170)

To such ephemeral popularity that resulted from the commercial logic of production, Oldham added a number of other issues that were redefining the socio-literary system: the inter-mediation of critics as an intrinsic part of public recognition; the interested patronage of aristocrats who turned authors into mercenaries for their political causes; and the precarious situation of many authors, who were obliged to beg in order to survive. Now, the narrator claimed, it was this economic condition of authors that determined the literary form of their productions:

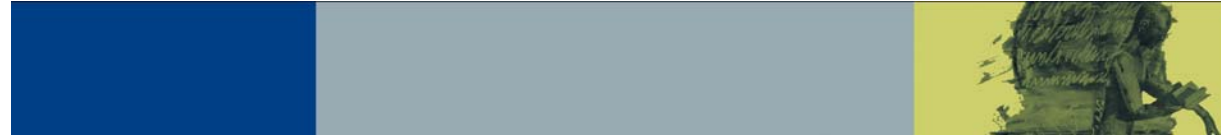
And what can we expect that's brave and great,
From a poor needy Wretch, that writes to eat?
Who the success of the next Play must wait
For Lodging, Food, and Cloaths, and whose chief care
Is how to spunge for the next Meal, and where? (Oldham: 175)



A Satyr on the Modern Translators (1685), by Matthew Prior (1664-1721), was occasioned by a recently published anthology of epistles and poems by Ovid (published in 1684 and 1685, with translations by Dryden and others). Again, this satire re-enacts the opposition between those who write for food and those who are free from necessity. For Prior, as for Oldham, the pecuniary motif is reflected in the literary quality of the work, an association of ideas that will structure the ideology opposed to professionalisation for a long time. Producing for the market clashes with traditional aesthetic criteria because authors no longer follow the rules of the art. Opportunities offered by theatre production for dramatic innovation, or by the book market for hybrid genres and new forms, are presented as signs of corruption of the literary order:

Since the united cunning of the Stage,
Has balk'd the hireling Drudges of the Age:
Since *Betterton* of late so thrifty's grown,
Revives old Plays, or wisely acts his own:
Thum'd *Rider* with a Catalogue of Rhimes,
Makes the compleatest Poet of our Times:
Those who with nine months toil had spoil'd a Play,
In hopes of Eating at a full third Day,
Justly despairing longer to sustain
A craving Stomach from an empty Brain,
Have left Stage-practice, chang'd their old Vocations,
Atoning for bad Plays, with worse Translations,
And like old *Sternhold*, with laborious spite,
Burlesque what nobler Muses better write:
Thus while they for their Causes only seem
To change the Channel, they corrupt the Stream. (Prior: 163-164)

Resistance to ongoing changes can also be seen in the denunciation of stylistic and generic changes that were pictured as the effect of commerce upon form and style. Books and plays failed to conform to codified genres because the marketplace was encouraging different forms and styles. Writing was being led by the urge to cater for the passions of the audience and by the financial interest of the writer. That is precisely the representation of theatre production that we




get in the play *The Rehearsal* (1672), written by George Villiers (Duke of Buckingham; 1628-87) and other aristocrats, and acted at Drury Lane on 7th December 1671. The character of the author, Bayes, was a satirical portrayal of John Dryden, who was by then the major playwright of the period. This early caricature of theatrical production anticipates many elements used several decades later by Henry Fielding in *The Author's Farce* (1730). A theatrical marketplace logic ascertains itself: the novelty of the play as one of the secrets for commercial success; the use of a repertoire of clichés in plot and staging; and, above all, a series of rules for producing new plays out of other people's texts, either by recycling old plays or translating foreign plays while concealing one's sources.

Increase in theatrical production and development of the periodical press changed the social perception of writing practices and made visible the economic nature of authorship in the first decades of the eighteenth century. The opposition between liberal author and hack or mercenary writer gained new force, and it continued to structure images of literary production until the middle of the eighteenth century.

4. commercial author

As book and newspaper production increased in the 1720s and 1730s, a new image of the commercial author began to take shape. This was the commercial author whose writing was determined by one or several of these factors: the cash flow of the trade; his own pecuniary interest; party interest and political dependence; and the passions of the buying public. This image, stereotyped in the Grub-street author, was defined as the absolute opposite of the independent author, that is, the author who did not need to write to make a living. The ideological difficulty of reconciling money and writing is one of the sources of the cultural resistance to the professionalisation of letters in general. Moreover,



the commerce of literature modified not only genres but their hierarchy, foremost in the popularity of newspapers, in hybrid forms of drama, and in the narrative fiction called novel.

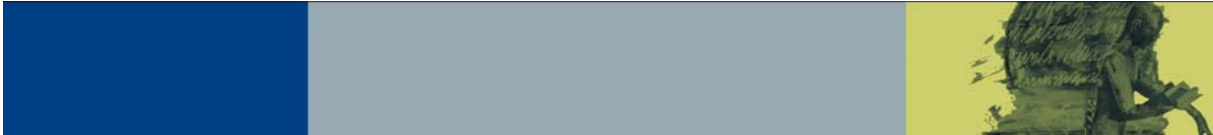
Waged author and mercenary author were two of the faces of commercial authorship. I will give you just two of the many possible outlines of these faces. The first one illustrates the intersection of politics and commerce, which is a distinctive feature of a modern genre, the newspaper. *Verres and His Scribblers; A Satire in Three Cantos*, by an anonymous author, was published in 1732, and was aimed at Robert Walpole. The writer attacks what was then a common practice of the Whig government: concealed payment to journalists and editors for supporting government interests in their articles and newspapers. Political propaganda was portrayed as one of the evils of writing for money, which turned authors into mercenaries:

Each Week a Squadron from the Press appears,
A Rout of short-liv'd, Mushroom Pamphleteers,
Odd Journals, Ballads, Visions, Speeches, Ghosts,
P—e, W—s, Evening, Daily, Flying Posts.
While on his Side, their Patron smiles to see
The Strength and Numbers of his *Infantry*;
Alike they plead his Cause, alike prevail:
The best cou'd never write, the worst can rail.” (*Verres*: 4; Introduction, ll. 55-62)

Compiler, Linguist, Critick, Commentator,
Historian, Bard, *Collector*, and Translator;
The Politician was the Placeman's Boast,
He wisely made his Head protect his Post.

So spiders spin the very Dirt they eat,
And sagely build their houses of their Meat.

Behind, a lawless, flying Squadron croud,
Bold, valorous, undisciplin'd and loud.
Prepar'd for glorious Jobs, a ready Tribe,
Who at a Pinch, swear, publish, write, transcribe;

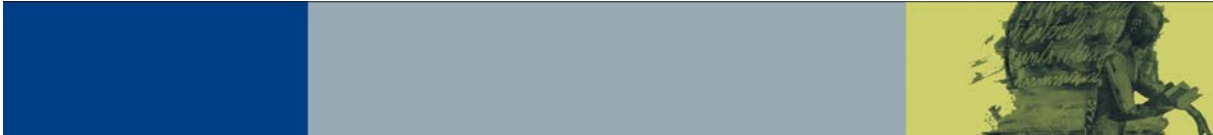


Who meritorious well-time Service boast
Corrupt an Hawker, bribe a *Daily Post*,
Suborn a Witness, fill a dull *Courant*,
And the dull News with duller Stuff supplant;
These to be read postpone the daily Lye,
Th' officious Aid de Camps of Policy. (*Verres*: 46-47; Canto III, ll. 96-111)

The waged author found himself in a similar situation since he had to serve the interests of his publisher and write whatever could be sold immediately. Surplus of authors' labour force in London in the 1720s provides the background for another famous caricature of the commercial author: *An Author to be Let*, written by Richard Savage and published in 1729. *An Author to be Let* is almost a prose supplement to Alexander Pope's wild caricature of the decay of the Republic of Letters in *The Dunciad* (1st ed. 1728, 1729, 1742). Many of the same topics are examined here, specially the relations between authors and publishers. Savage writes a short first person biographical narrative of the life of Iscariot Hackney, a waged author who has to pay his debts by working for a profit-making publisher. Always ready to offer his pen for hire, the hack writer is the figure that Pope and the scriblerians (Arbuthnot, Gay, Swift) had turned into the symbol of the new cultural order:

He [Curll] arrested me for Several Months Board, brought me back to my Garret, and made me drudge on in my old dirty Work. 'Twas in his Service that I wrote Obscenity and Profaneness, under the names of *Pope* and *Swift*. Sometimes I was Mr. *Joseph Gay*, and at others *Theory Burnet*, or *Addison*. I abridg'd Histories and Travels, translated from the *French* what they never wrote, and was expert at finding out new Titles for old Books. When a notorious Thief was hanged, I was the *Plutarch* to preserve his memory; and when a great Man died, mine were his Remains, and mine the Account of his last Will and Testament. Had Mr. *Oldmixon* and Mr. *Curll* agreed, my Assistance had probably been invited into Father *Bohour's* Logick, and the critical History of *England*. (Savage: 4)

In short, I am a perfect Town Author: I hate all Mankind, yet am occasionally a mighty Patriot. I am very poor, and owe my Poverty to my

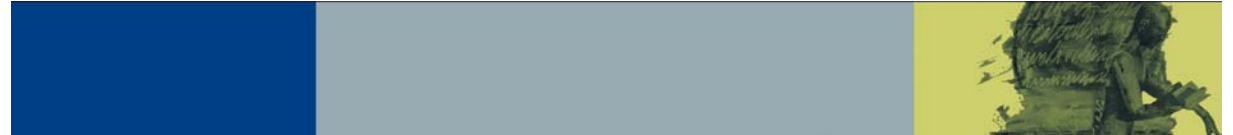


Merit; that is, to my Writings: I am as proud as I am poor; yet, what is seemingly a Contradiction, never stick at a mean Action, when the Welfare of the Republick of Letters, or, in other Words, my own Interest is concerned. My Pen, like the Sword of a *Swiss*, or the Pleading of a *Lawyer*, is generally employed for *Pay*. [...]

Now, Gentlemen, if you like me for a Correspondent, my Price is the Price of a *Journalist*, a Crown; and, in the Stile of a Love-Bargain, half Wet, half Dry. (Savage: 11-12)

Mercenary hack or prostitute scribbler, the author for hire came to be stereotyped in the journalist. With the birth of modern journalism, writing had begun to generate a regular income. In newspapers and periodicals the economic nature of the new circumstances of literary production was extremely visible, since discourse could be rapidly measured and valued, establishing the printed page a new unit of value. At the same time, development of political affiliations in newspapers strengthened the ideological nature of the press in a political order centred on Parliament and political parties. Political interest and monetary interest were powerfully linked in this negative image of the journalist. Increase in newspaper production was precisely one of the key elements of a commercialised public sphere. By the very nature of their activity, journalists were often obliged to sell what they wrote in both senses of the word: they had to alienate their manuscripts and their belief in what they wrote.


Moreover, party politics seemed to undermine even the patronage system by closely linking state patronage to political services. The gift exchange system that was institutionalised in book dedications, state pensions and appointments for sinecures, for instance, was often portrayed as another symptom of literary decay. Replacement of royal patronage by party patronage meant that the whole patronage system seemed to be infected by the increasingly economic nature of the political order. Because of its very important function in maintaining and



extending the public sphere, writing could be seen as an essential tool for the development of politics in the commercial nation. Thomas Gordon (d. 1750) is aware of this political dimension of writing in his anonymously published satire *A Dedication to a Great Man concerning Dedications* (1718). In this pamphlet attack on Robert Walpole dedications are pictured as signs of political corruption.

Anxiety caused by the proliferation of all sorts of texts, with the alleged decline in literary standards, had triggered the Scriblerus Club in 1714. One of the problems that the scriblerian ideology had to address was the legitimisation of writing for a new kind of audience, who was different from the aristocratic elite and who had not benefited from a classical education. That was one of the reasons why the Scriblerians mocked the fast and mechanical production for the market, since poetic value was identified with the long elaboration of texts that survived the passage of time through continued readings. Whereas in the latter case added value was derived from previous capital that had accumulated through a long literary tradition, in the former case, it depended mainly upon continuous production of new property according to the inner logic of the trade. Yet, as audience became more and more important, modes of social recognition and rules of literary art were inevitably changed for all the producers. The border between plagiarism and imitation, in the classical sense of the word, was shifting, with a corresponding increase in the value of originality in literary composition. Desire to establish one's place within a literary lineage and follow a recognised model, a central tenet of neo-classical poetics, was now challenged by the reinforced notions of plagiarism and mere imitation.

Jonathan Swift was another key player in the construction of the figure of the Grub-street author. Material poverty was invariably associated with artistic poverty and lack of talent, which made writers resort to plagiarism, a charge that crops up in his satirical description of the new literary age in "The Progress of

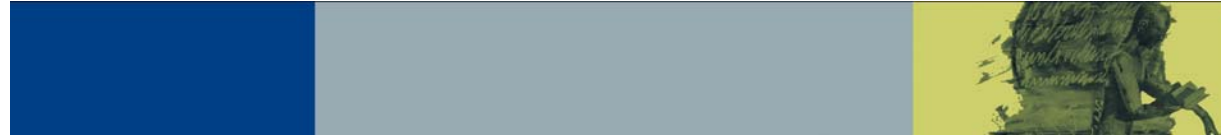


Poetry” (c. 1719) and in “Advice to the Grub Street Verse-Writers” (1726). Despite their poetical poverty, versifiers could hide their lack of talent by selling as their own lines of other poets, scribbled in the margins by those who were spared on paper, like Pope. Plagiarism always found a matching accomplice in the pirate bookseller, who was eager to capitalise his editions by stealing somebody else’s credit:

When Pope has filled the margin round,
Why, then recall your loan;
Sell them to Curll for fifty pound,
And swear they are your own. (Swift: 319)

Literary reputation and monetary reward are now inextricably linked as a direct result of the establishment of a market for writing, which generated remuneration, however precarious, for authors to whom little or no literary merit was acknowledged. Once reputation can translate into money, it is possible to transfer credit from valuable authors and valuable titles to new commodities. Expectations of readers, manifest in their behaviour as consumers, can be manipulated to increase the value of literary stock. Authors and publishers learn to exploit this symbolic process, which signals the transformation of writing into capital. Thus an artificial rise in the value of new editions can be brought about by means of plagiarism, piracy, and forgery.

On the other hand, the commercial value of genres and forms diverges from established hierarchies within dominant literary doctrines. New forms replace old forms and authors’ and works’ positions fluctuate accordingly. Literary value and commercial value become less stable and less predictable as a consequence of economic changes that altered the circulation of literary commodities and literary capital. As happens in the wider domain of economic production, expansion of literary consumption generates an exchange value that interferes with traditional use value. In this way the socio-literary system is re-




structured according to the work relations and contractual practices of the capitalist mode of production.

5. *professional author*

Transformation of discourse into property evolved from the combined effects of printing technology and the expansion of the book market. The fact that authors could now see themselves as owners of something they could sell was the main economical and legal change that favoured professionalisation. Clarification of literary property during the eighteenth century was therefore an essential condition for the long-term development of a literary market. In its early forms copyright had emerged in the sixteenth century as a commercial regulation of the right to publish within the booksellers of the Stationers' Company. It was only in the eighteenth century that copyright began to be redefined as property of the author. Gradual recognition of the author's right to own the copy contributed to make the pecuniary interest ideologically acceptable and, consequently, helped to form a new figure of the writer as professional.

In this new image, independent professional authors were emancipating themselves both from aristocratic patronage and from subordination to publishers. Samuel Johnson's famous "Letter to the Right Honourable The Earl of Chesterfield" (February 7, 1755) marks the new type of freedom of the professional author. In 1747, Johnson had expected the Earl of Chesterfield to be interested in sponsoring his dictionary and he presented him "The Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language, addressed to the Right Honourable Philip Dormer, Earl of Chesterfield, one of his Majesty's principal Secretaries of State" (1747), but the Earl declined his patronage, and the writing of the dictionary was funded by a group of publishers as an entirely commercial venture. In 1755, when the dictionary was about to appear, two articles by the Earl were published in the *World*, recommending Johnson's dictionary. Lest there was some



misunderstanding in the minds of readers, Johnson wrote to the Earl to remind him that the dictionary had had no patron:


Is not a Patron, my Lord, one who looks with unconcern on a man struggling for life in the water, and, when he has reached the ground, encumbers him with help? The notice which you have been pleased to take of my labours, had it been early, had been kind; but it has been delayed till I am indifferent, and cannot enjoy it; till I am solitary, and cannot impart it; till I am known, and do not want it. I hope it is no very cynical asperity, not to confess obligations where no benefit has been received, or to be unwilling that the Public should consider me as owing that to a Patron, which Providence has enabled me to do for myself. (Johnson: 104)

One of the first vindications of the writer as an economic agent was James Ralph's *The Case of Authors by Profession*, published in 1758. After acknowledging the historical opposition between money and writing, Ralph proposes to demonstrate the technical nature of writing, arguing that writing has its proper tools and practices in much the same way as other trades and professions. Contrary to widespread notions, he claims the legitimacy of the pecuniary motif, which is not accidental but rather a necessary condition for writers by profession. Money does not demerit the work. On the contrary, writers should be entitled to the wealth derived from their works:

[...] instead of censuring an Author for taking Money for his Works, we ought to esteme [sic] Those most who get most Money by them: And then Pope, and Voltaire after his Example, would deserve to be considered more, for what they made of their Works, than for the Works themselves. (Ralph: 6)

— And The writer who serves himself and the Public together, has as good a Right to the Product in Money of his Abilities, as the Landholder to his Rent, or the Money-Jobber to his Interest. (Ralph: 8)

Ralph recognises wider changes that accompany the subsuming of writing into the economy: the flourishing of commerce and the multiplication of monetary transactions; or the generalisation of venality in society, which engulfs public and private spheres. After contrasting the contemporary professional with



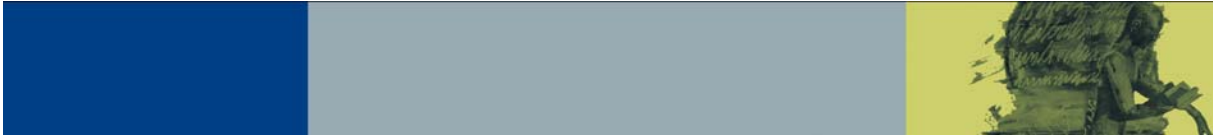
the amateur of the past, Ralph argues that the professional writer now has the opportunity of being the best. Regular practice, as opposed to occasional writing, affords mastery in the several genres of writing, a mastery that could not be attained otherwise. He is also aware of the economic subordination that exists in the various branches of the trade, a consequence of increased specialisation and division of labour. As waged workers, authors are part of the manufacture of texts and they seem to be deprived of all autonomy:

Thus, there is no Difference between the Writer in his Garret, and the Slave in the Mines; but that the former has his Situation in the Air, and the latter in the Bowels of the Earth: Both have their Tasks assigned them alike: Both must drudge and starve; and neither can hope for Deliverance. The Compiler must compile; the Composer must compose on; sick or well; in Spirit or out; whether furnish'd with Matter or not; till, by the joint Pressure of Labour, Penury, and Sorrow, he has worn out his Parts, his Constitution, and all the little Stock of Reputation he had acquir'd among the Trade; Who were All, perhaps, that ever heard of his Name. (Ralph: 22)

That is why he argues for a law that effectively protects the property of authors over their creations, and prevents plagiarism and piracy. He also asks for an increased autonomy from the intermediaries of the trade and demands that writers' remuneration reflect the social usefulness and the real economic circuits fed by their texts. Ultimately writers are prejudiced by the ideology that prevents them from seeing the economic nature of their activity. Literary commodities appeared as such an essential domain of production and consumption for the sociability of capitalist society that he is even able to imagine an authors' strike. If authors realised how important their trade had become in the new commercialised society, they would act accordingly, defend their right to a fair pay for their labour, and combine for their collective interest:

Of all Mankind, shall you be the last to find out the Force and Benefit of Combinations?

Combine! And perhaps you would neither Patrons nor Establishments!



Combine, and you might out-combine the very Booksellers themselves! (Ralph: 67)

We of the present Day, indeed, having nothing but Phantoms before our Eyes; are only the Dupes of our own Delusions——But then alas! We are Writers; consequently incapable of taking up any other Trade; and consequently, instead of Examples, can only bequeath our Advices and Warnings to others. [...]

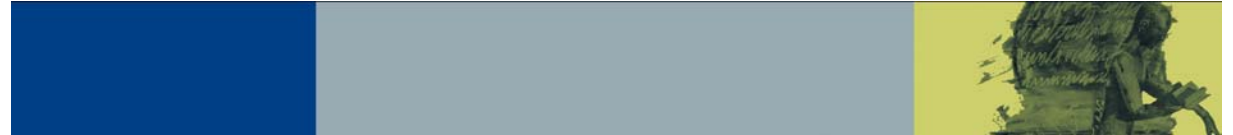
Were only the Journals, Chronicles, Magazines, and other periodical, as well as occasional, Productions, (which, at present, contribute so much to the Amusement and Chit-Chat of the Day,) to be discontinued all at once, how doubly loaded with all the Horrors of Vacancy would every Hour limp off? And how little would the common Run of Society be worth? (Ralph: 72-73)

Tensions and contradictions within authorial images and self-images are very clearly seen in Oliver Goldsmith's *An Enquiry into the Present State of Polite Learning* (1759) and also in his essays in the *Public Ledger* (1760-61). In the new situation the link between patronage and art has been broken and has given way to the marketplace. Publishers are the new patrons and writing has entered capitalist economy:

The author, when unpatronized by the Great, has naturally recourse to the bookseller. There cannot be, perhaps, imagined a combination more prejudicial to taste than this. It is the interest of the one to allow as little for writing, and of the other to write as much as possible; accordingly tedious compilations, and periodical magazines, are the result of their joint endeavours. In these circumstances, the author bids adieu to fame, and writes for bread, and for that only. [...]

Thus the man, who under the protection of the Great, might have done honour to human nature, when only patronized by the bookseller, becomes a thing little superior to the fellow who works at the press. (Goldsmith 1966: I, 316)

Despite the many traces of the scriblerian derogatory image of commerce, Goldsmith attempted to redefine the author within the professionalisation of society that was taking place in the eighteenth century. Being intimately acquainted with the distresses of the hired writer, Goldsmith knew that lack of



merit or literary excellence was not a necessary outcome of the pecuniary motif. It was the traditional attachment between talent and recognition, in the aristocratic public sphere, which prevented writing from being accepted as an economic activity in the bourgeois public sphere:

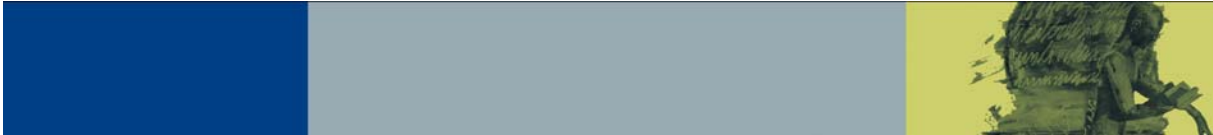
The author who draws his quill merely to take a purse, no more deserves success than he who presents a pistol.

When the link between patronage and learning was entire, then all who deserved fame were in a capacity of attaining it. [...] But this link no seems entirely broken. Since the days of a certain prime minister of inglorious memory, the learned have been kept pretty much at distance. A jockey, or a laced player supplies the place of the scholar, poet or the man of virtue. [...]

The poet's poverty is a standing topic of contempt. His writing for bread is an unpardonable offence. Perhaps, of all mankind, an author, in these times, is used most hardly. We keep him poor, and yet revile his poverty. Like angry parents, who correct their children till they cry, and then correct them for crying, we reproach him for living by his wit, and yet allow him no other means to live. (Goldsmith 1966: I, 310-311, 314)

But this monetary stigma was vanishing, since literary merit could now get its fair income. With the growth of the market and the protection of copyright, specialised labour of authors was rewarded by those who bought their works. This large and polite community of authors, readers, and spectators, who were linked by the theatre and publishing markets, was becoming a new source of independence for the author. Commercial success or commercial failure could now be represented as a new standard of public recognition and literary merit, thus turning the negative image of the hack writer into the positive image of the professional author:

A man of letters at present, whose works are valuable, is perfectly sensible of their value. Every polite member of the community by buying what he writes, contributes to reward him. The ridicule therefore of living in a garret, might have been wit in the last age, but continues such no longer, because no longer true. A writer of real merit now may easily be rich if his heart be set only on fortune: and as for those who have no merit, it is but fit that such should remain in merited obscurity. He may now



refuse an invitation to dinner, without fearing to incur his patron's displeasure, or to starve by remaining at home. He may now venture to appear in company with just such cloaths as other men generally wear, and talk even to princes, with all the conscious superiority of wisdom. Though he cannot boast of fortune here, yet he can bravely assert the dignity of independence. (Goldsmith 1966: II, 344-345)

Goldsmith acknowledged the persistence of bad reputation that came with the economic motif, but he argued for professionalisation considering that the best writers of the time are to be found among those that write to be fed. In a professionalised society, specialisation can be alleged as guarantee for superior literary quality:

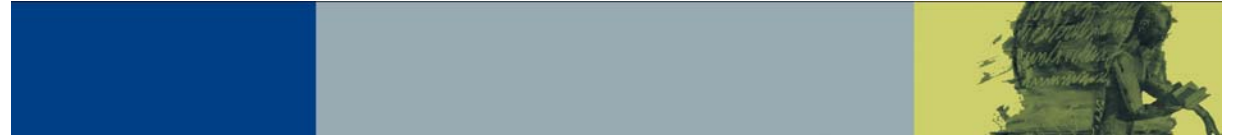
For my own part, were I to buy an hat, I would not have it from a stocking-maker but an hatter; were I to buy shoes, I should not go to the taylor for that purpose. It is just so with regard to wit; did I for my life desire to be well served, I would apply only to those who made it their trade, and lived by it. (Goldsmith 1966: II, 377)

APPENDIX

The Distresses of an Hired Writer (1761)

GENTLEMEN,

I need not inform persons of your sagacity and penetration, that there are grievances and vexations which, though considerable in themselves, never meet with compassion from the bulk of mankind, because common experience does not suggest an idea of them. Such are the crosses and disappointments which an author is liable to, merely as an author; for such accidents, as wanting a dinner, being conveyed to that haunt of the Muses the Fleet, dancing attendance, being kicked or pulled by the nose in a public coffee-house, &c. are not peculiar to gentlemen that write, and therefore I need not here enlarge upon them. I shall confine myself to those which none but authors are obnoxious to; most of which are, in my opinion, owing to that fatal revolution whereby writing is converted

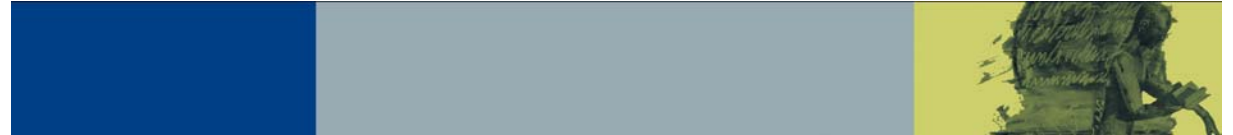


to a mechanic trade; and booksellers, instead of the great, become the patrons and paymasters of men of genius. To pass by the tendency of this connexion between authors and tradesmen to bring literature into contempt, can any thing more cramp and depress true genius, than to write under the direction of one whose learning does not extend beyond the multiplication-table and the London Evening-post? Here I must, however, make an exception in favour of such booksellers and printers who have distinguished themselves by their literary talents: these I honour, and shall always look upon as gentlemen, though they have the misfortune of keeping shop. Some such I have known, of so truly poetical a genius, that they sufficiently refute the maxim of Cicero;

Nihil ingenuum potest habere officina.

The mention of poetry awakens all my grief afresh. You must understand, gentlemen, that I was born a poet: this, I think, I may say without vanity; yet, when I commenced author, I received the same answer from every bookseller to whom I offered my service in the poetical way. “Poetry does not sell, Sir,” was the tune with them all. I was therefore obliged to check my poetical fire, and bring myself down to politicks and criticism. The former of these subjects was always my aversion; the latter, indeed, in some measure suited my taste; for every poet is a critick of consequence: and yet, in the discharge of my critical function, I have been exposed to many mortifications. I have seen my Remarks attacked in public, and in private, without daring to justify my own judgement. I have often been obliged to say what I knew to be false, in order to promote the sale of a book in which my publisher was concerned; and sometimes to recant what I was convinced was true, for fear some rival critick should retaliate. Thus did I, at the age of twenty five, meet with the same disgrace which the great Galileo underwent at fourscore, when he was compelled by the Inquisition to retract his opinion concerning the earth’s motion.

Another grievance, of which, like Mons. Bayle, I must say, *animus meninisse horret*, is that practice of booksellers, who, among other invasions of



the prerogative of us authors, assume a right to dub a book with a title of their own invention. Would you think it, gentlemen, I have wrote, God knows how many, choice performances, to which a puppy of a publisher has prefixed such titles and mottoes, that I have been quite ashamed, upon seeing them in print. This is not all: these fellows sometimes carry their insolence so far, as to presume to alter words and expressions in what a gentleman has taken the utmost care to polish and bring to perfection. This is an abuse altogether insupportable; and this, with the rest, has often tempted me to bid adieu to the painful preheminance of instructing mankind: but still I write on, having a secret impulse which tells me, that I was born to bring about a reformation in the Republic of Letters, and to introduce into this my native country that universal taste spoken of by Mons. de Voltaire; whom, by the bye, I resemble in every respect, except being possessed of an ample fortune: but this circumstance I look upon as a trifle, since the true poet is (to use the words of an eminent poet) supremely blest in his Muse, and, like the true adept, enjoys all things, without having any thing.

You cannot but be sensible, gentlemen, that a reformation in literature was never more necessary than at the present juncture, when wit is sold by the yard, and a journeyman-author paid like a journeyman-taylor. I shall do my best to promote any measure that may contribute to bring this about, and restore a golden age in the learned world, not inferior to the brilliant reign of queen Anne, which was rendered illustrious by the never-to-be too much admired Pope, Swift, Addison, Rowe, Congreve, Steel, Prior, *cum multis aliis*.

Gentlemen, I have the honour of subscribing myself your most obedient humble servant and reader,

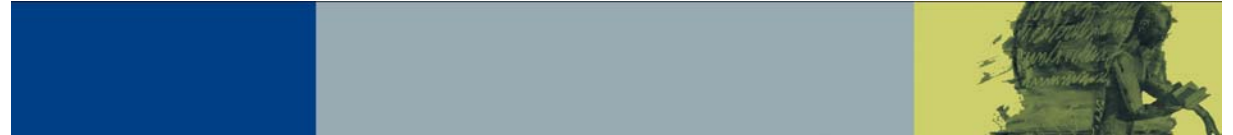
Vinegar-yard,

April 14, 1761 JOHN TRIPLET



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