5 Print Culture in the Long Eighteenth Century

Live theatre shows no sign of disappearing; on the contrary, in an age where many people spend a lot of time in front of various screens, it continues to be a highly attractive alternative to other forms of entertainment. As we have seen in the previous chapter, this is precisely because of its promise of immediacy. But drama has always (at least from the sixteenth century onwards) also been a literary genre, geared towards representation, towards reading as well as performance. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there was a market for plays beyond the theatre, in print. Many play-texts were published as quartos, and some even made it into collected works of their authors in the prestigious folio format. Books like *Mr William Shakespeare’s Comedies, Histories and Tragedies* (1623) gave a cultural authority and canonical status to drama that had previously been conferred on a few poets only, most notably Chaucer. (After Caxton had published *The Canterbury Tales* – see ch. 3 – William Thynne’s edition of *The Workes of Geffray Chaucer* first appeared in print in 1532.) These were expensive books, intended to preserve the plays as ‘works’ to be read, but also – in Shakespeare’s case – probably to secure ownership of these profitable plays for the King’s Men (Marino 2013). Heminges and Condell, the editors of the First Folio, addressed their commercial interests head-on in the preface “To the great Variety of Readers” with the words: “Well! It is now publique, & you wil stand for your priuiledges wee know: to read, and censure. Do so, but buy it first” (Taylor et al. 2017, lxxvi). We have already heard their contemporary William Prynne complain about the luxury treatment of such scurrilous literature, perceived as irreligious and sinful, in the book trade, where plays now competed with Bibles (see ch. 4).

The Rise of the Book Market

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, literature increasingly became a marketable commodity from which printers and authors could make – at least in theory – a handsome profit. Initially, the economics of literature were still dominated by the concept of patronage. By dedicating their work to a patron – male or female, usually from the nobility or gentry – authors could hope to gain not only a financial reward, but also the more lasting and valuable currency of protection and prestige. It could also mean access to an elite audience, to a well-stocked library, and possibly other kinds of jobs such as secretarial work or some official post somewhere. The literary world of Elizabethan England was still
firmly based on this model rather than a modern commercial understanding of literature as a business. It was grounded in personal relationships of exchange between writers and patrons as part of an early modern gift economy (Fumerton 1991, Scott 2006, Heal 2014). A writer’s choice of subject matter or genre usually reflected the taste of the patron, rather than aiming for commercial success and/or the writer’s self-expression. The exception to this is drama (see ch. 4), where plays needed to be commercially viable, otherwise theatre companies would not pay dramatists to write them. In this case, the audience in the playhouse takes the place of the patron and is often addressed directly in prologues and epilogues asking for a show of support, for applause, as in the epilogues to Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Tempest*.

As the modern system of royalties did not yet exist, any profits from print publication would accrue to the printer rather than the authors, who sold their work for a flat fee. In April 1667, John Milton (1608–1674) sold the copyright to his epic poem *Paradise Lost* to the printer Samuel Simmons for a mere £10 – five down and another five after 1,300 copies had been sold. Based on purchasing power, this would roughly mean £1,500 in today’s money.32 This contract, preserved in the British Library, is said to be “the earliest known example of a contract between an English author and their publisher” (Tuppen 2017).

### The Subscription Model

In the seventeenth century, yet another way of financing literary authorship was invented: the subscription model. In one of the first well-known cases, the publisher Jacob Tonson (1655–1736) got together with the poet John Dryden (1631–1700) for a project of translating the works of the Roman poet Virgil (published 1694–1697). Translators had been paid by publishers before, especially in the profitable field of popular romances from France and Spain, containing heroic or vagabond adventures. Now, Tonson secured a number of signatories and financial backers for the translation of a classical author’s works, enabling Dryden to complete this project. Subsequently, the poet Alexander Pope (1688–1744) came to a similar agreement with Bernard Lintot (1675–1736) to publish a translation of the *Iliad* by subscription. Subscribers agreed in advance to buy one or more copies of the book, sometimes in a more prestigious format, and they usually paid half the book’s retail price in

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32 The historical worth of money is notoriously difficult to calculate; I have used the purchasing power calculator on measuringworth.com.
advance. Their names would then be printed in a list of subscribers included in the book, displaying their patronage. With the move away from single patrons, something like ‘crowdfunding’ is born.

Even though Dryden and Tonson fell out at some point, Dryden made a lot of money out of this transaction; estimates range around £ 1,000 from Tonson and the subscribers and another £ 400 or £ 500 for his three dedications to individual patrons. Altogether, that is more than £ 220,000 in today’s money. For Pope and the six-volume Iliad project started in 1713, expectations were even higher – at least four times higher – than for Dryden, but there were difficulties in securing a large enough number of patrons, so that Pope’s profits were not as generous as he expected.

The Anglo-Irish essayist and satirist Jonathan Swift (1667–1745) made fun of this “modern way of subscription” (2008, 66) in his Tale of a Tub (written 1697, published 1704): books, “the children of the brain”, could now have “a multiplicity of godfathers” (2008, 33). In a later addition to this text, Swift satirically announces “A Project, for the universal benefit of Mankind” which should “produce a handsom Revenue to the Author”, namely “to print by Subscription in 96. large volumes in folio, an exact Description of Terra Australis incognita” (2008, 146), to be “bought at the publick Charge [. . .] for every Parish Church in the three Kingdoms” (147). In the eighteenth century, subscriptions not only helped to fund authors and publishers but could also serve to signal one’s political allegiance, as some literary projects and persons attracted strong Whig or Tory support (Lesser 2019, 198–199).

In the early eighteenth century, the publisher began to replace the patron as the author’s commissioner. This was a gradual transition; the market did not immediately supersede earlier economies of writing and publishing. The eighteenth century is often depicted as the age of the professionalisation of authorship; but this is not a simple story (from dependence on patronage to being free agents in a market). There were always authors who did not get paid for having their works printed, and there was also a continuing practice of authors paying for their works to be printed. For many poets, this was still the case in the early nineteenth century (Byron, Keats, Shelley). Only very few writers like Dryden and Pope made a lot of money from having their work published (Downie 2014). Towards the end of the eighteenth century, there was “a range of authorial models or identities on offer, whether professional or amateur, individual or sociable, original or imitative, proprietary or anonymous” (Schellenberg 2019, 143). Authorship had become a complicated business.
Samuel Johnson and the Age of Authors

Probably the most famous anecdote about the change from patronage to professionalism concerns Samuel Johnson (1709–1784), also known as 'Dr Johnson', the most famous man of letters in eighteenth-century Britain. Johnson was a prolific writer and critic who had an interest, among other things, in literary biography. His *Lives of the Poets* (1779–1781) is a fine example of this. It is also an illustration of the changes brought to the book market through profitable reprints of earlier works that had gone out of copyright, because Johnson wrote these biographies as prefaces for a series of such reprints, beginning in 1779. Many of Johnson’s sayings were made famous in the biography that his Scottish follower and friend James Boswell (1740–1795) wrote about him, the massive *Life of Johnson* (1791). Johnson’s most lasting claim to fame, however, is that he compiled the first *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755). Naturally, he needed patrons for a project of this magnitude, so he asked the Earl of Chesterfield for some financial support. Chesterfield, however, made Johnson wait so long that he finally gave up; but then, when the work was a success, the earl apparently claimed he had supported it. Johnson’s response is recorded in an angry letter to his would-be patron (7 February 1755):

Seven years, My lord have now past since I waited in your outward Rooms or was repulsed from your Door, during which time I have been pushing on my work through difficulties of which it is useless to complain, and have brought it at last to the verge of Publication without one Act of assistance, one word of encouragement, or one smile of favour. Such treatment I did not expect, for I never had a Patron before.

(Johnson 2020, 509)

Johnson’s letter to Chesterfield continues with a Dictionary-style definition: “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 ground encumbers him with help” (509–510). In his *Dictionary*, Johnson defines a “patron” as “commonly a wretch who supports with insolence, and is paid with flattery” (1755). The *Dictionary*, comprising more than 2,300 folio pages and defining some 40,000 words, made Johnson famous, and he went on to become the most celebrated author in Britain; but he started out poor. “I was miserably poor”, he later told Boswell, “and I thought to fight my way by my literature and my wit” (Boswell 1992, 39). Johnson wrote many essays and numerous poems, a classical tragedy (*Irene*, 1749), a philosophical novel (*Rasselas*, 1759), an account of his journey through Scotland (1775), more than forty sermons acting as a ghost-writer for several priests, and 52 critical biographies of British authors.
But few writers had or could afford to have the chutzpah of Samuel Johnson or the gentlemanly detachment of Alexander Pope. For any single one of these successful individuals, there were hundreds of struggling writers competing for attention and reputation, or merely trying to survive. The eighteenth century was “the age of authors” (Johnson 2014 [1753], 210) not just because authors were becoming more independent from patrons and publishers, but also because there were now so many authors that it was a cliché to complain about this overcrowding of the public sphere with printed matter, and to apologise for adding yet another text to the multitude that was already out there:

The present age, if we consider chiefly the state of our own country, may be stiled with great propriety THE AGE OF AUTHORS; for, perhaps, there never was a time, in which men of all degrees of ability, of every kind of education, of every profession and employment, were posting with ardour so general to the press. The province of writing was formerly left to those, who by study, or appearance of study, were supposed to have gained knowledge unattainable by the busy part of mankind; but in these enlightened days, every man is qualified to instruct every other man, and he that beats the anvil, or guides the plough, not contented with supplying corporal necessities, amuses himself in the hours of leisure with providing intellectual pleasures for his countrymen.

(Johnson 2014, 210)

In the same essay in The Adventurer of 1753, Johnson goes on to lambast “this universal eagerness of writing” (210) as an “epidemical conspiracy for the destruction of paper” (211), of which his own essay is of course a part. The “cure” he suggests is that authors should be properly qualified and refrain from writing unless they have “the power of imparting to mankind something necessary to be known” (211).

The Battle of the Books

To this multitude, one needs to add another conflict: a controversy about the relative merits of ‘ancient and modern learning’, which was imported to England from Paris by Sir William Temple in the late seventeenth century. This led Jonathan Swift to write The Battle of the Books (A Full and True Account of the BATTEL Fought last FRIDAY, Between the Antient and the Modern BOOKS in St JAMES’S LIBRARY), written by 1697 and published in 1704. In this satire, the ‘battle of the books’, ancient against modern authors, is imagined as an actual battle taking place in the royal library, which at that time was housed in St James’s Palace and directed by Temple’s nemesis, the classical scholar Richard Bentley. Swift literalises the metaphor of the book as a vessel that preserves its writer’s spirit, as this was (for example) memorably phrased by Milton in Areopagitica (1644): “Books
are not absolutely dead things, but doe contain a potencie of life in them to be as active as that soule was whose progeny they are; nay they do preserve as in a violl the purest efficacie and extraction of that living intellect that bred them" (1953, 492). Swift concurs: "In these books", he writes, "is wonderfully instilled and preserved the spirit of each warrior, while he is alive; and after his death his soul transmigrates there to inform them. [. . .] So, we may say, a restless spirit haunts over every book till dust or worms have seized upon it" (2008, 107). Now the 'armies' of the ancients and the moderns are starting to fight each other, triggered by a comment made by Aesop, the ancient fabulist, that the ancients are like honeybees and the moderns like spiders, the ancients producing "sweetness and light" as opposed to the "dirt and poison" of the moderns. In the ensuing battle, described in mock-heroic fashion modelled on Homer's Iliad, one encounter is between Virgil and his modern translator, "the renowned Dryden". Virgil is "in shining armour, completely fitted to his body", whereas Dryden's "helmet was nine times too large for the head [. . .] and the voice [. . .] sound[ed] weak, and remote" (118–119). Clearly Swift was not a fan of Dryden. The text imitates a manuscript from which several passages are missing, indicated by typical Latin phrases that philologists used: hic pauca desunt, ingens hiatus hic in manuscripto, etc., and the end of the battle is also missing, leaving the question of superiority of the ancients or the moderns undecided. By treating this (alleged) manuscript like an ancient text that he pretends to edit, Swift enacts the quarrel between the ancients and moderns in a media setting of print.

In this satire, Swift defended his patron, William Temple, who held that ancient learning was superior to modern innovations, against Bentley, the philologist who had demonstrated that some of the ancient writings admired by Temple were in fact later forgeries. But he also ridiculed the entire debate about priority and superiority in the field of literature by personifying authors as epic heroes and warriors on a battlefield. His Battle of the Books also shows that writing and publishing at the turn of the eighteenth century could be regarded as a sort of battlefield in which all kinds of writers and critics were fighting for supremacy.

Publication had become easier because, in 1695, the Licensing Act expired so that there was no effective censorship anymore (for plays, licensing was reintroduced in 1737). Printing presses, which had been limited to London, Oxford, Cambridge, and York, could now be installed anywhere in the country. All this led not only to an increase in book production but also in newspapers and magazines that offered new outlets for aspiring writers. In practice, censorship had never been very effective. For the Jacobean period, Cyndia Clegg has calculated that fewer than one percent of all books published in England were affected by restrictive measures (2001, 19) – though press regulation grew stricter in the run-up to the English Civil War in the mid-seventeenth century. The
Presbyterian William Prynne was harshly punished as a ‘seditious libeller’ in the 1630s, having his ears cut off and his cheek branded ‘S. L.’ (Lesser 2019, 166) – though not because he had railed against the fact that some plays were better printed than Bibles (see ch. 4), but because he was thought to have maligned Queen Henrietta in his critique of women actors.

In the eighteenth century, attempts to control publications shifted from pre-publication censorship to the libel laws – laws against blasphemy, insults, and sedition. Obscenity became another punishable offence. The first person to be punished for this, in 1727, was the publisher Edmund Curll (c. 1675–1747), convicted of “disturbing the King’s peace” and “corrupting the morals of the king’s subjects” because he had printed a book called Venus in the Cloister or the Nun in her Smock, the translation of a French work of erotic fiction (Feather 1988, 89; see also Travis 2000).33 Thus, even though books no longer needed to be licensed before publication, authors still had to be careful or risk the consequences. When Daniel Defoe (1660–1731), the author of Robinson Crusoe (1719), was fined, imprisoned, and pilloried in 1703, suffering public abuse, this was on account of a satirical pamphlet (The Shortest Way with the Dissenters) and a sentence under the new libel legislation. However, for most of the eighteenth century, the press enjoyed greater freedom in Britain than in any other major European country (Feather 1988, 90).

From the early eighteenth century onwards, publishers were also better protected by the law. In 1710, the Copyright Act was passed, also known as the Statute of Anne.34 This Act followed a successful petition by the publishers, and it cemented their rights in their copies, which were now protected for a period of twenty-one years (for existing copies) and fourteen years for new ones, with the possibility of extending them for another fourteen years after that. Lobbying for legal protection, the same Daniel Defoe compared piracy with adultery and burglary, arguing that “the printing of other Mens Copies” was “every jot as unjust as lying with their Wives, and breaking-up their Houses” (Defoe 1704, 21, qtd. in Lesser 2019, 200). Yet the law’s actual name was “An Act for

33 The Obscene Publications Act of 1857, intended to suppress pornography, also led to prosecutions against English translations of Zola in 1888 and Radclyffe Hall’s (1880–1943) lesbian novel The Well of Loneliness in 1928 (Feather 2006, 129). The law was changed in 1959 to allow “a defence on the grounds of literary merit” (205). Its first test came when Penguin published D. H. Lawrence’s (1885–1930) Lady Chatterley’s Lover in 1960, which ended in their acquittal (see also Lesser 2019, 401–403).

34 If its date is sometimes given as 1709, this is because the new year in the Julian calendar began on 25 March. According to the new style (introduced in Britain in 1752), the Act was passed in the spring of 1710.
the Encouragement of Learning”, and it effectively implied the concept of a public domain, by limiting a right that had previously been considered permanent, although it did not change publishing and bookselling practices immediately. In many cases, publishers bypassed the law by adhering to an idea of ‘honorary’ copyright and using their connections within the trade to defend what they considered their property against cheaper editions (Lesser 2019, 232). In crucial parts, the law was rather vague, and subsequent trials against book piracy within the British Isles sometimes favoured the copyright holders and sometimes the alleged pirates. This ended in 1774, when the House of Lords decided in favour of a Scottish printer, Alexander Donaldson, who had made a successful business of cheap reprints of English texts that were legally out of copyright. The London printers harassed him with lawsuits, especially when he sold these reprints in his London shop for almost half the usual price, advertising his business as “The Only Shop for CHEAP BOOKS” (qtd. in Lesser 2019, 220). When he reprinted James Thomson’s (1700–1748) quartet of poems The Seasons (1730) in Edinburgh in 1772 – one of the steadiest sellers in eighteenth-century poetry – Donaldson was sued by the poem’s English copyright owner, Thomas Becket. In this case, Donaldson v. Becket, the Lords finally ruled that copyright did not exist in perpetuity beyond the limits stated in the law.

Subsequently, the length of copyright was extended in 1814 to twenty-eight years or the life of the author if that was longer, and extended yet again in 1842 to the author’s life plus seven years, and again in 1911 to life plus fifty years, and again in 1988 to life plus seventy years. But effectively, the law acknowledged the existence of a public domain in which texts would ultimately be unrestricted by copyright. This was “a significant turning point in the history of the book in Britain” (Lesser 2019, 221). Even though book prices did not immediately fall, this meant that older texts could be made much more widely available, and it allowed publishers to collect literature into anthologies and reprint series, making it “possible to comprehend, say, ‘British Theatre’ or ‘the English poets’ as a whole” unlike ever before (ibid.).

Even though the idea of copyright as arising not from publication but from the author’s act of creation was only recognised by the law in 1911, authors also profited from the increasing recognition of ‘literary property’ in earlier centuries. They could negotiate profitable terms with their publishers, who operated at no small financial risk. Henry Fielding (1707–1754), for example, sold the copyright to his novel Tom Jones (1749) for the proud sum of £ 600 (about six times the annual income of an average lower-middle-class family) – nearly £ 100,000 in today’s money – and went on to earn £ 800 for Amelia two years later (Hammond and Regan 2006, 229). Authors and texts, novelists and poets
began to compete for the attention of their readers in a more and more volatile literary marketplace.

**Newspapers and Coffeehouses**

This emerging marketplace also witnesses the invention of newspapers. The first “coranto” or newsbook in English was a single-sheet publication printed in Amsterdam in 1620; the first English weekly of home news appeared in November 1641, shortly followed by various other publications, mostly eight pages, sometimes illustrated with woodcuts. Newspapers boomed during the English Civil War: fourteen different papers were on sale in England in 1645, mostly pamphlets from both sides of the political divide (Frank 1961). The first regular newspaper was the *Parliamentary Intelligencer*, founded in 1659, which prudently changed its name in 1660 to the *Kingdom’s Intelligencer* and came to be the official government newspaper, followed in 1665 by the *Oxford Gazette*, which later continued as the *London Gazette* (Feather 1988, 53–54). The “first successful daily newspaper” (Feather 2006, 58) was the *Daily Courant*, from 1702 onwards, which was soon “selling 800 copies a day” (58) and reaching as many as twenty readers with a single copy (Lesser 2019, 179). The mail coaches would carry periodicals to the countryside three days a week, connecting the provinces with the metropolis and providing a welcome diversion. Sometimes dangerously so – at least one East Anglian farmer is said to have fallen off his horse while reading “the Northampton newspaper” (qtd. in Lesser 2019, 180).

Beginning in the mid-seventeenth century, coffeehouses came into fashion in London as well as Paris. These were places where people from different ranks and backgrounds could come together as strangers, discuss freely, and exchange information. They developed an art of civilised conversation and served as “prime information centers” (Sennett 2002, 81). Newspapers picked up or initiated coffeehouse debates and distributed new ideas. Coffeehouses and periodicals entered a constellation from which a mediated public sphere emerged. Periodicals and books could be borrowed and read in coffeehouses, which would usually charge a membership fee that was much lower than that of a circulating library (but one would be obliged to pay extra for coffee and other beverages). Periodicals and coffeehouses broke down traditional barriers to communication (such as rank and status) and, for a while, had an integrating social function. Notions of civility, cultivation, education, and taste provided a common ground for (almost) everybody, most of all the rising bourgeoisie. Such notions were promoted, for instance, in the periodicals edited by Joseph
Addison (1672–1719) and Richard Steele (1672–1729) at the beginning of the eighteenth century: *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*.

Essay periodicals share many features of the early English novel: fictional editor personae, invented situations, multiple perspectives, and a plurality of voices. The most important of these are Daniel Defoe’s *The Review* (1704–1713), Richard Steele’s *The Tatler* (1709–1711), Richard Steele’s and Joseph Addison’s *The Spectator* (1711–1712); *The Guardian* (from 1713); and later those journals mainly authored by Samuel Johnson: *The Rambler* (1750–1752) and *The Idler* (1758–1760), the latter “published as a series of essays in a newspaper, *The Universal Chronicle*” (Feather 2006, 58). The *Tatler* was published three times a week, the *Spectator* even more frequently, each lasting for about two years and selling as many as 4,000 copies a day, a success rate that was not replicated by its later imitators. Johnson’s *Rambler* was published twice a week and sold about 500 copies (Feather 2006, 58). Steele’s and Addison’s *Spectator* was “one of the most spectacular bestsellers of the early eighteenth century” (Feather 2006, 58); it was re-issued in book form (in four volumes) between 1711 and 1713 and frequently reprinted.

Periodicals also developed into an outlet for literary criticism (*Monthly Review*, from 1749; *Critical Review*, from 1756) as well as for shorter fictional texts, thus turning into an aid to the formation of a recognisably modern system of literature. Within a growing overabundance of print, these journals allowed readers access to even more literature that they could at least know about if not read in its entirety, and they saw themselves as a kind of “literary police” (*Critical Review*, January 1766, 61, qtd. in Lesser 2019, 209) with a gatekeeping function – inviting readers to spend their time and money wisely and not waste them on unworthy products of the print market. Periodicals and ‘part books’, which were delivered to provincial areas by post, allowed early forms of serial publication already in the 1730s.

The coffeehouse/newspaper constellation linked direct, face-to-face interaction with distant print communication. The thirst for information made many new readers familiar with the printed word. By the end of the eighteenth century, the public sphere was almost exclusively based on print media, and print was widely available for a largely literate population. An ever-increasing number of readers had access to books and periodicals. For the first time in European history, reading and writing attained the status of the central cultural medium: the medium in which a large part and the most important part of social communication was being conducted. For the novel, one of the most fascinating cultural objects to emerge from this constellation, the ubiquity of print was an ideal incubator (see ch. 6 below).
Grub Street

If the eighteenth century was the first age of the professional author, it was also the age of the literary hack: a writer who did it for the money, offering his services “for bread”; a writer whose talents were for sale. “Hackney for bread” became a phrase (Hammond 1997). The literary market, grown along with an increase in literacy and disposable income, created demand for writers to produce copy for the printing presses. Along with original content, booksellers supplied reprints of older texts, classical or religious material, but there was also demand for writers who could translate, compile, or abridge texts that already existed. These content providers or ‘hacks’ were derided by authors like Pope or Fielding, but not all of these “drudges of the pen, the manufacturers of literature, who have set up for authors” (Johnson 2020 [1751], 351; The Rambler no. 145) were ‘slaves’ to the booksellers; some of them enjoyed a good reputation, were respectably middle-class, and worked with leading publishers; these include Thomas Birch (1705–1766), Oliver Goldsmith (1728–1774), Charlotte Lennox (c. 1730–1804), Tobias Smollett (1721–1771), and others, some of whom are still remembered as original authors of new works but who also dabbled in many literary projects, editions, and compilations on the side. They usually worked on commission and were paid by the sheet (the printed output of their writing) by a publisher who then owned the copyright (Feather 1988, 104).

In 1758, the Grub Street hack James Ralph (1705–1762) published his pamphlet The Case of Authors by Profession or Trade, Stated, in which he demanded fair payment for writers within the structures of the book trade. Writers were to be treated just like other professionals; he contrasted these against the “Volunteer, or Gentleman-Writer” who did not need to earn money from writing. The ‘gentlemen-writers’ created false expectations with the public that authors were not like other tradespeople and did not need remuneration for their labour. With this pamphlet, Ralph began a debate about literature as a profession which would be picked up again in the early nineteenth century in the “dignity of literature” controversy (Salmon 2013). Literature became a form of work, of labour: “the work of writing” (Siskin 1998). This was offensive to the amateurs, to gentlemen like Alexander Pope, who looked down upon ‘jobbing’ writers. In his mock-epic poem The Dunciad (1728), Pope vividly and viciously lampooned the reign of ‘Dulness’, and in the Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot (1735) he railed against the inept hacks of “Grub Street” (2006, 340, ll. 109–114):

One dedicates in high heroic prose,
And ridicules beyond a hundred foes:
One from all Grub Street will my fame defend,
And more abusive, calls himself my friend.  
This prints my Letters, that expects a bribe,  
And others roar aloud, ‘Subscribe, subscribe.’

Grub Street was an actual London street that quickly became the name for a new condition of text production: hard graft, and often precarious living, in the literary equivalent of a sweatshop. Johnson himself, in his Dictionary, defines Grub Street as “Originally the name of a street in Moorfields in London, much inhabited by writers of small histories, dictionaries, and temporary poems; whence any mean production is called grubstreet” (1755).

‘Grub Street’ writers and printers were busy experimenting with new forms under new conditions of production and reception. In his satire A Tale of a Tub, Swift’s author persona refers to himself as an “adopted [. . .] member of that illustrious fraternity”, “the Grub Street brotherhood” (2008, 29), writers of low repute whose “productions” were “designed for the pleasure and delight of mortal man” – not, in other words, destined for immortality and eternal fame – and whose “post in the commonwealth of wit and learning” was assured (29). In a letter to his publisher, Benjamin Tooke, Swift referred to the Tale of a Tub as “so perfect a Grubstreet piece, it will be forgotten in a week” (29 June 1710; 2008, 200).

Fig. 7: The Brain-sucker, or the Miseries of Authorship (1787), etching attrib. to Thomas Rowlandson.  
Source: Royal Collection, London.
Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the image of the hack as an impoverished writer exploited by evil booksellers had become a firmly established literary trope (see Böker 1987, Berensmeyer 2014, Berensmeyer et al. 2015). In one satire from 1787, “The Brain-Sucker: Or, the Distress of Authorship”, starvation and madness await the young genius who leaves his rural home for London and ends up trapped in a garret where he must do literary slave work for a ruthless publisher (fig. 7) – until the young writer’s father comes to the rescue. This satire may be directed at the bookseller as a capitalist exploiter of talent, but also at the idea of uneducated country boys lighting out for the literary territory. It refers to poetry as a “disorder”, an infection (Oswald 1787, 22), a “dreadful distemper” (47); the poet is described as displaying “the strongest symptoms of insanity” (15). As an authorship satire, “The Brain-Sucker” takes part in the polemic about writing as a profession. In an implicit contrast to the cultural ideal of the autonomous gentleman author, it presents the world of literary labour as dangerous, contaminated, and contaminating, and it shows poetic inspiration as a disease. Because “The Brain-Sucker” is narrated from a socially inferior position, in a letter by the young writer’s father, Farmer Homely, it could be taken as arguing for a more moderate view on authorial professionalism, as claiming, in other words, that it is better to be a freelance professional than a poor enslaved genius and a puppet of cruel market forces. Most notably, “The Brain-Sucker” is a satire in prose rather than verse; this seems fitting for its unpretentious narrator, but it also places this text outside of the much-discussed genre of English verse satire from Dryden to Pope and Swift. Its manner is more directly urban and realistic in an almost (proto-)Dickensian way, fusing the material reality of the “distress of authorship” with imaginary and conceptual resources such as the inflated idea of the Romantic genius.

In this chapter, we have mostly been looking at the material conditions of literary life in the eighteenth century. The idea that the biography of an author could make for interesting reading, or yield a coherent story worth telling, is itself symptomatic of this new-found interest in the literary life. Early in his career, Samuel Johnson set a trend by publishing, anonymously, An Account of the Life of Mr Richard Savage, Son of the Earl Rivers (1744), possibly the first full-length literary biography in English. Savage (c. 1697–1743) had died the previous year in a debtors’ prison in Bristol after a scandalous and eventful life on the edge of destitution, even though he claimed to be the illegitimate son of an earl. Johnson, himself an ambitious young hack at the time, saw the commercial and artistic potential of writing down the story of Savage, whom he had known personally and whose friend he had been. In writing this biography of a writer, Johnson was interested in the conditions of literary production and how they affected a work’s final form. He shaped Savage’s rather chaotic life into a
A tragic story that combines sensationalism with moral instruction. His narrative is often defensive about Savage, but also critical of his folly and his moral failings. This was the crucial departure: Johnson did not produce a one-sided account but a nuanced portrait of his subject, a truly modern biography. It may also have contributed to the formation of the realist novel (Johnson 2016).

**Gray’s Elegy**

In the eighteenth century, the ‘lives of the poets’ became amenable to being turned into literature; but there was also a clear awareness that fame would not be available to everyone – most authors, like most people, would be forgotten. A focus on transience and mortality is notable in eighteenth-century poetry of the so-called ‘graveyard’ school (Thomas Parnell, Edward Young, Robert Blair, and others). One poem stands out: Thomas Gray’s (1716–1771) *Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard*, perhaps begun 1746–1747, completed in 1750, printed as a seven-page pamphlet in 1751. Gray’s “Elegy” achieved immediate fame and ran through eight editions in only two years – showing how poetry, in eighteenth-century print culture, could be a popular literary genre, rivalling the novel. The poem marks a shift from neoclassical lucidity towards the obscure and the sublime around mid-century. Like Ann Finch’s (1661–1720) “Nocturnal Rêverie” from 1713 (Fairer and Gerrard 2015, 33–35), its speaker describes the ‘solemnity’ of a night scene: “Now fades the glimmering Landscape on the Sight / And all the Air a solemn Stillness holds” (ll. 5–6). But here the speaker’s solitude and his individuality are emphasised much more strongly. The speaker is not in unison with nature but separate from it.

The speaker, visiting a village graveyard, reflects on the obscure destinies of the villagers who lie buried there, “to dumb Forgetfulness a Prey” (l. 85), and begins to imagine what their lives may have been like. He then, in an ironic turn of self-scrutiny and self-reflection, addresses himself (ll. 93–100):

For thee, who mindful of th’ unhonour’d Dead,  
Dost in these Lines their artless Tale relate;  
If chance, by lonely Contemplation led,  
Some hidden [later ed.: kindred] Spirit shall inquire thy Fate,

Haply [= perhaps] some hoary-headed Swain may say,  
‘Oft have we seen him at the Peep of Dawn  
‘Brushing with hasty Steps the Dews away  
‘To meet the Sun upon the upland Lawn.
The poet has changed roles: he imagines himself dead and imagines an old villager remembering him. It is the villager, an illiterate rustic, who is given direct speech here. The way in which he remembers the poet as a somewhat quirky stranger and outsider figure is perhaps intended as a form of self-reflecting irony by the poet himself. It is uncertain how seriously Gray took his own writing: he engaged in many other activities apart from poetry, from antiquarian studies to botany; although people saw him as a potential new Milton, he turned his back on a poetic career when he was forty years old and declined the offer of the poet laureateship in 1756. But this poem certainly prefigures the idea we have of the typical ‘romantic’ poet:

‘Hard by yon Wood, now frowning [later ed.: smiling] as in Scorn,
Mutt’ring his wayward Fancies he wou’d rove,
Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn,
Or craz’d with Care, or cross’d in hopeless Love.
(ll. 105–108)

The villager then goes on to recall how one day the poet was gone, and how he witnessed the poet’s funeral. He then directly turns to address the speaker: “‘Approach and read (for thou canst read) the Lay, / ‘Grav’d on the Stone beneath yon aged Thorn.’” In the next three stanzas, which bring the poem to a close, we are given “The EPITAPH” – the speaker, and we as readers, are reading the inscription on the poet’s headstone. It is detached from the rest of the text by a heading and is printed in italics. It describes the poet as “A Youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown”, prone to melancholy but blessed with a heightened sensibility. The headstone also directly addresses its reader:

No farther seek his Merits to disclose,
Or draw his Frailties from their dread Abode,
(There they alike in trembling Hope repose)
The Bosom of his Father and his God.\(^{35}\)
(ll. 125–128)

Apart from serving as a trigger for melancholy reflection and self-reflection, the graveyard in the poem opens a space for a cascade of situations of reading and writing, from reading the inscriptions on other peoples’ headstones to composing one’s own imaginary epitaph. On one level, its theme is the poet’s achievement of “moral choice and resolution” in the face of likely future obscurity (Weinbrot

\(^{35}\) Qted. from the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library copy of the first edition (1751), available online at http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15409/15409-h/15409-h.htm, where one can also consult a facsimile of the Eton College manuscript. Fairer and Gerrard (2015, 419–423) print a 1753 version of the text with a few minor authorial corrections and revisions.
1978). But the poem also reflects the more complex media situation of literary writing in the eighteenth century by evoking its multiple dimensions: public writing, primary orality (the illiterate villager speaking), secondary orality (the poet’s interior speech and poetic composition which follows oral patterns of memory), poetic literacy/intertextuality (levels of intertextual allusions to older poetry, which turn the text into “an ample page / Rich with the spoils of time” [ll. 49–50]), and finally print, the medium in which Gray’s poem was published.

One could read this poem as a reflection not only on fashionable melancholy subjects and as a prefiguration of Romanticism, but also as a reflection on cultural memory and on different media of tradition and remembrance, including poetry itself and its communicative function in eighteenth-century print culture. Poetry as a literate and literary form of memory can record the speech patterns of the illiterate villager, whose memory is based on oral tradition; it is equally capable of including an inscription sculpted on a gravestone. The poem

Fig. 8: A Country Churchyard. Verse from Gray’s Elegy, 1790. Aquatint on paper by Marie C. Prestel after Thomas Gainsborough. Source: Paul Mellon Collection, Yale Center for British Art.
stages itself as a meeting-place of several media of memory. It demonstrates that eighteenth-century poetry had become ‘multi-medial’ in a context of a generalised print culture (see also fig. 8; Berensmeyer 2009).

Gray’s “Elegy” displays and reflects upon its condition of having been written rather than composed, and having been written in an unusual location: a rural graveyard. In its printed form, it embodies a series of cultural discontinuities: between an older form of poetry that was usually distributed in manuscript or in limited print-runs for a select audience, a form that was still to a great extent oral and aural (as well as tactile), and a modern form of textuality printed and distributed widely for an unknown and diverse readership. In this media-historical shift, these two distinct forms of communication (intimate, close, and familiar on the one hand; uncertain, cast adrift, and distant on the other) place a new kind of tension and stress on the elegy, one of the most highly charged traditional lyric forms (Mulholland 2008). To produce an elegy in this media-historical context is risky, but Gray’s may be one of the most successful attempts to bring together, in a cohesive if not fully coherent form, the tensions and discontinuities of eighteenth-century culture and media.

As Michele Sharp argues, Gray’s “Elegy” replaces the elegiac trope of “transmission of voice” with “a transmission of texts” (2002, 6). It translates specific acts of mourning into a more general dynamics of cultural remembrance from a distance, thereby confirming the potential of poetry as a form of literary expression in the age of the novel. Unlike Milton’s “Lycidas” (1637), Gray’s “Elegy” has no immediate occasion such as mourning the death of a friend. Its act of commemoration is directed towards the numerous unremembered villagers, “rude Forefathers of the Hamlet” (l. 16), who are buried in the churchyard. By removing the poet from the centre of urban modernity (London) to a rural graveyard, the poem invokes and projects its own alternative vision of community. Paradoxically, this creation of an alternative audience is only possible by means of print: the handwritten text must leave the graveyard and, by means of the printing press, return from the country to the city to achieve its goal of becoming culturally performative. If eighteenth-century poetry wished to compete with the novel, it needed to adapt to the new conditions of literary production and consumption.