"The Brain-Sucker: Or, the Distress of Authorship": A Late Eighteenth-Century Satire of Grub Street

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Abstract: Originally printed in the first issue of *The British Mercury* in 1787, "The Brain-Sucker: Or, the Distress of Authorship" is a piece of satirical short fiction that has so far received only little attention in discussions of eighteenth-century print culture and practices of authorship. Probably written by the Scottish radical John Oswald (c. 1760-1793), "The Brain-Sucker" is told in the form of a letter by a farmer who tells an absent friend about his unfortunate son Dick, whose brain has become infected by poetry. This "disorder" leads Dick to London, where he falls prey to a ruthless publisher, known as "the Brain-sucker", who keeps him like a slave in a Grub Street garret. The farmer then travels to London to save his son from the clutches of the Brain-Sucker. We present the text, for the first time, in a critical edition, collated from the three surviving copies, with textual and explanatory notes. In the accompanying essay, we discuss the text's context of origin in late eighteenth-century Grub Street and the cultural implications of its satirical presentation of authorship.

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The text that is presented here, for the first time, in a critical annotated edition merits more attention than it has so far received. As a late eighteenth-century satire of Grub Street, it satirically represents a crucial stage in the development of authorship from the gentleman poet to the professional author. "The Brain-Sucker: Or, the Distress of Authorship" was originally printed anonymously on May 12, 1787, in the first issue of *The British Mercury,* a short-lived magazine that combined radical political essays with satire, miscellaneous literary oddments, and caricatures by Gillray and Rowlandson. Circumstantial evidence points to John Oswald (c. 1760-1793) as its author, a Scottish radical who lost his life fighting with the French Revolutionary Army. In this introductory essay, we situate "The Brain-Sucker" in its historical contexts, especially

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late eighteenth-century debates and practices of authorship. This contextualisation serves to elucidate some of the semantic shades of the text of "The Brain-Sucker" but also to mark its relevance for the history of authorship in the late eighteenth century and beyond.

"The Brain-Sucker" unfolds a typified story of a Grub Street hack. It is told in the form of a letter by a farmer, appropriately named Homely, to an "absent friend", in which he relates the story of his unfortunate son Dick. Dick's brain becomes "infected" by reading and composing poetry – a "disorder" (22) which leads him from his native Yorkshire to London, to abandon clean rural values for the temptations of city life, and ultimately to become the victim of a ruthless publisher, known as "the Brain-sucker", who keeps him like a slave in a Grub Street garret. Realizing where he has trekked off to, the father makes it his business to discover Dick's location and save him from the malevolent Brain-sucker's clutches.

As signaled by its subtitle "The Distress of Authorship," "The Brain-Sucker" intervenes in debates about authorship and print culture in the late eighteenth century. As is well known, these debates centred on the desirability (or otherwise) of authorial professionalism as opposed to the traditional ideal of the gentleman author, who was careful to erase traces of commercial intent in his publications – witness Thomas Gray's denial of ever having meant to see his "Elegy in a Country Church-yard" (1751) appear in print. The elite ideal of the autonomous author or the original genius, as celebrated, for instance, in Edward Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759), contrasted sharply with the social, economic, and literary position of the Grub Street hack: poor, exploited, and selling his writings for survival and subsistence (see Woodmansee; Hepburn; Hammond).

The genre in which "The Brain-Sucker" explores these problems of print culture and the professional author's growing pains is satire. One of the familiar eighteenth-century satirical tropes is the presentation of the literary sphere as degraded and contaminated by metaphorical infections and illnesses. "The Brain-Sucker" is no exception, as it presents poetic inspiration as a pathological or at least pathogenic condition – but it also presents the poor hack's economic and physical suffering with a degree of sympathy that is notably lacking in elite verse satires such as *The Dunciad.* It satirizes both the idea of poetic authorship as the result of inspiration without formal education[3] *and* the working conditions of professional hacks: two kinds of authorial heteronomy.[4] However, written in prose and narrated from a socially inferior position, it also indirectly argues for a more professional, more autonomous view of authorship without taking this view to the extreme of original genius.

In what follows, we trace some central aspects of late eighteenth-century authorship and print culture in their relation to "The Brain-Sucker." We are focusing on

[3] When, more than ten years after its initial publication, an abbreviated (and shamelessly pirated) version of the story was printed in *The Historical, Biographical, Literary, and Scientific Magazine*, edited by Robert Bisset (vol. 1, London 1799, 196-200), it was introduced as "exemplifying the effects of superficial learning" (v).

[4] Cf. Berensmeyer/Buelens/Demoor for a brief systematic and historical overview of authorship concepts.

the publication venue of the *British Mercury*; the likely author John Oswald, Grub Street as a real and metaphorical space; the dominant figures of the author of the time (the genius and the hack) and their distress and illness; and the genre of serio-comical satire. From these contexts, "The Brain-Sucker" emerges as a key satirical document of eighteenth-century debates on and experiences of authorship.

The Publication Venue: *The British Mercury* and the Fleeting Wings of Satire

The publication venue of "The Brain-Sucker" was the *British Mercury*, a short-lived journal edited by John Oswald, who was also most likely the author of "The Brain-Sucker." The first issue of the *British Mercury* was published on May 12, 1787. While there were earlier magazines named "British Mercury" in Britain (*British Mercury*: 4 Oct. 1710 – 5 Jan. 1715; *British Mercury and Evening Advertiser* 16 Nov. 1780 – 16 Dec. 1780), the name is most likely modelled on the *Mercure de France,* whose roots lie in the seventeenth century.[5] Very few people were involved in its production. Oswald was its editor, and its printer was James Ridgway. The search for individual contributors is made difficult by the publication practices of the day: every article was published either anonymously (the author being sometimes referred to as "our correspondent") or under a pseudonym such as "Peter Pindar, Esq." Hence, it is quite likely that not only all of the editing but also all of the original writing was John Oswald's. However, there is the possibility of other contributors. David V. Erdman names William Thomson, Oswald's former editor and most probably the real-life model for the brain-sucker (35, 50), as one (though fairly unlikely) contributor; even William Godwin, who had contributed to Thomson's *Political Herald*, might have been involved with the periodical in some capacity, though this is speculative (Erdman 43).

James Ridgway, the printer with whom Oswald teamed up for the journal, had a truly Grub Street professional history, which included pornography and blackmail (Crawford, ch. 2). Ridgway and Oswald managed to get two of the finest contemporary caricaturists on board. The engravings by James Gillray and Thomas Rowlandson must have been an excellent selling point. A duodecimo volume containing all four issues (from May 12 to June 23, 1787), the so-called New Edition of 1788, was printed both by Ridgway and L. MacDonald of No. 454, Strand.

Oswald outlined the editorial policies in an advertisement that also precedes the republished issues of the journal in 1788. Using an anonymous editorial "we", Oswald marks "the novelty of our plan" and "the merits of execution" that stand out against "the multitude of magazines and other periodical papers that issue daily from the press." Oswald distances himself from puffing, "vulgar flippancy" and "pedantry of stile" to such an extent that his own aims can only be inferred *ex negativo*: "few [magazines] are calculated to gratify the correct taste of rational instruction or elegant amusement" (3). The Latin motto Oswald cites fits this picture: "ODI PROFANUM VULGUS & ARCEO, is the motto

[5] Another *British Mercury* with the same year of publication was published in Hamburg by I. W. von Archenholtz: *The British mercury, or Annals of history, politics, manners, literature, arts, etc. of the British Empire.* Yet there seems to be no connection between the two and the factual date of publication of the latter is given by ECCO as 1791.

inscribed on the portal of this temple, which we dedicate to Mercury and the Muses" (4). The Horatian phrase of contempt for the vulgar rabble is an excellent example of the infusion of the texts with classical allusions, one of the major strategies that Oswald keeps using throughout the *Mercury*.

Like many other periodicals, the *British Mercury* combined serious and comic texts with cultural and political matters of the day. The very first piece it ran was an essay by Oswald on "The Present State of the World; or, a Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin and Progress of Commerce, Literature, and Politics, and their Connection and Influence on Each Other." While inaugurating the new journal, this piece also continued a series of essays that Oswald had begun while still working for William Thomson's *Political Herald and Review* (Erdman 50). Oswald's essay is much in line with the advertisement, yet there is also critical irony in sentences which at first glance seem to wholly embrace the currents of the time: "The present is the most thoughtful, the most refined, the most circumspect, and political age, that the world has ever known, and the most liberal and enlarged in its views and designs" (1: 9). What distinguishes the present age from all others is, in fact, "an ardent pursuit of commerce": "princes and kings appear in the characters of carriers, shop-keepers, and ship-masters" (1: 14).

In contrast to the more light-hearted satire of "The Brain-Sucker", some of the other satirical pieces in *The British Mercury* are quite drastic. One example of this appears in the essay "Of the Serpent that tempted Eve." Its 'correspondent', presumably Oswald, first identifies the serpent with the Canaanitish god Baal-Peor (often also transcribed as Belphegor) and analyses the god's name as consisting of the word for lord and "the latter having the same meaning with Priapus, Penis, or Pego" (105). He goes on to ask the question: "who ever heard that Priapus, at any time, made his appearance in a shape so flexible and loose, or what temptation could Baal-Peor offer to a lady in a form so feeble, nerveless, and flacid [sic], as that of a serpent?" (106). As Erdman illuminates (52-56), the immediate context of this was the contemporary interest in Priapus cults incited by the so-called Society of Dilettanti, to which Sir William Hamilton and Richard Payne Knight belonged. Yet its satirizing of the Biblical serpent is also directed more generally at religion. Thus, the essay also offers an occasion for including an explicit illustration of "Moses erecting the Brazen Serpent", the obscene part of which has been cut out of one of the surviving copies. Whether the poor writer's name Dick can be related to this priapic context seems doubtful, though Dick's 'homely' sexuality is misdirected by his poetic inspiration until he gives up the Muses for "his lovely Nancy" (48) at the end.

After *The British Mercury* folded, both Oswald and Ridgway emerged as committed British radicals in the 1790s. While Oswald went on to fight in France, Ridgway was sent to Newgate Prison for four years in 1793 because he had published Paine's *Rights of Man* and other radical texts (Crawford 2011; cf. Manogue). Before the end of Oswald's own journal, however, *The British Mercury* had served him to develop his skills both as a political and a literary writer.

The Author John Oswald: Political Writer, Poet, Revolutionary

As editor of *The British Mercury*, John Oswald is the most likely author of the anonymously published "Brain-Sucker." The writer of the only book-length study of Oswald, David V. Erdman, assigns the text to Oswald without any discussion of this attribution. Erdman argues, however, that Oswald's former editor William Thompson bears a strong resemblance to the brain-sucker (35) and that the contrast between farmer Homely and his son Dick is similar to Oswald's relation to his own father (62). We have not uncovered any evidence that disproves the attribution of the text to Oswald, but would caution that, while highly likely, his authorship has not been established beyond all possible doubt. This is also partly the result of the little that is known about this phase of Oswald's life. Yet, as will become apparent from the following sketch of Oswald's life, he was more than equipped to be the writer of the tale of "The Brain-Sucker."

Although the life of John Oswald is unusual even by standards of the revolutionary eighteenth century, biographical work on him is relatively scarce. Oswald's entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Henderson) is a summary of the already-mentioned sole monograph on him (Erdman) and one late-nineteenth-century French article (Lichtenberger). As a soldier, atheist, vegetarian,[6] socialist and Jacobin, John Oswald saw a lot of conflict in his life. A Scot, he was born in Edinburgh c. 1760 to a goldsmith father, who ran a coffee house, and was also trained to be a goldsmith (Erdman 12). He joined the famous Black Watch, the Royal Highland Regiment (Second Battalion), and immediately became a lieutenant, having probably bought his rank after either marrying up or coming into a legacy (Erdman 15). As is evident in many of his writings, Oswald had travelled far. After being stationed in Kent, he served in India. Having quit the army, Oswald travelled through Turkey on his way back to England. Oswald's atheism comes out quite clearly in the very last piece in the British Mercury, "The Priests of Apollo: A Fragment from the Original Hebrew" (137-138). The piece satirizes "Holy Humbug" (138) and views gods as the invention of hypocritical and bigoted priests: "For the Gods – to be sure, 'tis an excellent jest – / By the Priest they were made – they were made for / the Priest" (137). By May 1790 Oswald had moved to Paris, where he met British expatriates in favour of the revolution but also major French revolutionaries such as Danton. He became a member of the Club des Jacobines and helped to form the British Club, which had been initiated to foster the revolution and also aimed to bring the revolution to Britain. He made friends with well-known British radicals such as Tom Paine, John Horne Tooke, and James Mackintosh. On 25 September 1792, he was made an honorary French citizen. As a commander in the Revolutionary Army, Oswald died in the War in the Vendée on September 14, 1793.

Oswald's career in letters began when he started writing for Grub Street periodicals in 1783 or 1784. Many of his articles were based on his military travels. For instance, his "Account of the Natives of Joanna, an Island in the African Seas", published

[6] His 1791 treatise *The Cry of Nature, or An Appeal To Mercy and Justice On Behalf of the Persecuted Animals* has been republished by Edwin Mellen Press (2001).

in the *British Mercury*, was based on his military voyage to India in 1781. The most important stage of his career before he embarked on the *Mercury* was his involvement with the *Political Herald and Review* (1785–6), which was printed by the Scot William Thomson and which could count among its contributors William Godwin. Besides *The Cry of Nature* (1791), Oswald published several political pamphlets: a *Review of the Constitution of Great Britain* (1784), the satirical *Ranae Comicae Evangelizantes, Or The Comic Frogs Turned Methodist* (1786) and *The Alarming Progress of French Politics* (1787). He also wrote poetry under the pseudonym Sylvester Otway (*Euphrosyne: An Ode to Beauty*, 1788) and, around 1790, worked as a parliamentary reporter for the *London Gazetteer*.

Oswald's contemporary reception was diverse. In 1788, he gained a fourteen-line entry in Marshall's admittedly exhaustive *Catalogue of Five Hundred Celebrated Authors of Great Britain, Now Living*. Erdman (289) points out that in his posthumously published drama *The Borderers* (wr. 1795-1797; publ. 1842) Wordsworth, at a very late stage, named the villain Oswald. Oswald's *Constitution for the Universal Commonwealth* (1793) was recommended to Edmund Burke and, in March 1793, Burke accused Oswald in the House of Commons of spreading democracy (Erdman 153). What comes out clearly in his own writings and is also apparent from their reception is that Grub Street had certainly taught Oswald how to write texts with an impact.

The Setting: Grub Street, Real and Imagined

The young poet Dick Homely's predicament takes place in the very heart of Grub Street, the centre of hack writing in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century London. The figurative impact of Grub Street exceeds its actual importance as a place of business, as "Grub street" continues to be used "allusively for the tribe of mean and needy authors, or literary hacks" (*OED*). Probably the most famous description of this area is by Dr. Johnson, who had started his own literary career there (Greene 81): "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" (*Dictionary* 948). Its essence can be summed up in the term 'hack writing', originally 'hackney writing': based on the meaning of a horse kept for hire, 'hackney' denotes a common drudge, a woman for hire, and ultimately a low writer for hire (*OED*; see Hammond). The analogy of hack writing and prostitution can be seen in this oft-quoted apologetic passage from Ned Ward's 1698 *A Trip to Jamaica*: "The condition of an Author, is much like that of a Strumpet … and if the Reason be requir'd, Why we betake our selves to so Scandalous a Profession as Whoring or Pamphleteering, the same excusive Answer will serve us both", namely economic need as a result of bad fortune (qtd. in Troyer 3). In the street, these writers – immortalized by Hogarth's caricature "The Distrest Poet" (c. 1736) – met not only with printers of revolutionary pamphlets and pornography but also with prostitutes from the bawdy houses and possibly also with members of the local farting club (Clarke 3). Paid by the line, the hack writers'

work consisted mainly of "indexing, proofing, compiling dictionaries, translating and writing poems to order for special occasions" (Uglow 1).

As the place of production for the periodicals whose voices were bought to further political causes, Grub Street constitutes the epitome of writing for money and signifies a major step in the development of authorship from patronage to professional writing. Even though some critics have expressed doubt about the actual importance of Grub Street as a "colony of impoverished writers" (Clarke 4), the metaphor has proved tenacious. As Rogers explains (350-52), the "myth of Grub Street" has served very different interests: conceived as "a concrete image of folly and depravity" by the Augustan poets and used as "a carefully particularised *comic* metaphor", it became serviceable in Romanticism "in arguments about the deplorable state of letters in the eighteenth century", only to become a cipher for bohemian "semi-genteel poverty" at the end of the nineteenth century. The common image of writers living in the garrets of Grub Street remains the polar opposite of the ivory tower (Treglown/Bennett), and the garret's verticality is inversely related to its low social esteem. The Grub Street hack has become a synonym for the exploitation of creative energies in the modern division of labour, a literary victim of the commercial revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But, at the time, the stereotype of the Grub Street hack was also employed by gentleman authors to discredit the very idea of talented lower-class professionals writing for money. Satires were regularly directed against those authors who threatened to inundate the literary marketplace with popular reading matter (Böker 151). Dick Homely, the farmer's son turned poet in "The Brain-Sucker", is clearly an instance of the class dimensions of this discourse, even if he has no higher-class competitor in the story.

The Distress of Eighteenth-Century Authorship

The conditions of authorship which Oswald navigated and satirized by depicting the relationship between Dick Homely and the Brain-sucker were manifold and, in many ways, distressing for authors. Even though copyright had been formally established in Britain since the 1710 Statute of Anne, authors had to sell their intellectual property to a publisher if they wanted to enter the world of print. In the eighteenth century, it was particularly difficult for new authors to make a living solely by writing, considering the excess of would-be authors.[7] The publisher then made decisions about the edition, copies, and printing arrangements. Once printed, the books were then shipped to the booksellers, the mediators between authors and the public (Darnton 1982).

In this context, the development of authorial exceptionalism oscillated between "victimization and heroism" (Gallagher 155). As Catherine Gallagher argues, "dispossession" marked the rhetoric of authorship in the eighteenth century. Rhetorical strategies could thus also be employed to influence society's view on the profession or

[7] Although, in theory, copyright returned to the author after fourteen years, this was not really practiced until after the case of *Donaldson v. Becket* in 1774, and it was quite rare that a book would remain popular long enough to be resold. On the history of copyright, see Rose; Woodmansee 1994; St Clair.

on the individual. These answered to a newly emerging discrepancy between the exaltation of authorship in theory and its debasement in practice. Gallagher's work focuses on the similarities between women's state of "dispossession," their inability to own property, and the author's struggle for intellectual/literary ownership: certain characteristics of the ideal woman concept were borrowed to typify the author's exceptionalism, such as "disinterestedness and high-mindedness" (148), and also the (sometimes exaggerated and satirized) lamentation of poverty that simultaneously highlighted authors' independence from patrons and society, stressing the freedom gained through poverty. Further, the authors' state of victimization is also seen to have parallels with women, but this rhetoric paradoxically lends authors a stronger, higher status (155).

It was at this moment that the hack, in many ways a synonym of a patronless writer, despised for a supposed willingness to sacrifice aesthetic or political ideals and to stoop to write in a variety of genres, became professionalized: "The rhetoric of dispossession and dignity relied on the rather new idea that authors had some legally recognized vendable property that served as the basis of their livelihood" (Gallagher 155). At the same time, notions of originality, invention, self-reliance, genius, and so forth, which were expressed to compensate for authors' non-proprietary status, infused the discourses contributing to the justification of the profession (155-59). And yet, in practice, authors relied on forms of patronage and literary connections despite the genius discourse promoting autonomous authorship.

In "The Brain-Sucker", we encounter the genius discourse only in a debased, pathological form. Here, the origins of authorship are disease and madness, fostered by reading. The implication that reading rots one's brain is present throughout "The Brain-Sucker," given its many references to parasites and maggots. Disease, rot, insects and the like are employed as metaphors for (useless or impractical) knowledge, reading and writing poetry. They are also connected to London and, more specifically, Grub Street and its (real and imagined) garrets. As Rogers explains, "[w]riters constantly saw disease as coming to silent life in unobserved crannies, the hidden ulcers of the city. The trope could be applied to the spread of both the Plague and the Fire" (136, see also 143).

Some examples of Dick's characterization even illustrate mental illness or insanity caused by a love of reading; he is initially described as displaying "the strongest symptoms of insanity" (15), which include a dualistic personality and mood swings ranging from anger to melancholy: "Sometimes he looked up, with a contumacious countenance, towards heaven, shaking, with impious audacity, his clenched fist; at other times his arms were folded on his breast, his eyes fixed melancholy on the ground, and the tears trickled down his cheek" (15). He also begins to exercise his creativity in poetically renaming everyday objects. From Farmer Homely's point of view, these are useless activities, even harmful, as opposed to the practical, honest activity of farming. Dick's illness and insanity grow as he lives increasingly in his fantasies, occasionally staying out all night. It is revealed that the seeds of this "distemper" (21) have in fact been planted by a fellow farmer's son, George: "This youth, who had been educated at Cambridge, communicated to my son all the learned *maggots* with which his own brain

was *infected*. At his departure he left with my son a few books, which served to nourish and increase the *disorder*" (21-22, italics added). Homely resorts to burning these books, instigating Dick's rash decision to run off to London. This equation of reading and writing poetry with disease or rot recalls the debates that raged during the period on the uses (for example, the didactic value) and the dangers of fiction.

Unlike Pope's derogatory view of talentless hacks, "The Brain-Sucker" is quite sympathetic towards the starving writer, the bookseller's slave. The representation of the evil bookseller resembles the rhetoric of eighteenth-century champions of authors' rights. For instance, James Ralph's manifesto for authorial liberty, *The Case for Authors* (1758), describes the author's economic oppression and victimization at the hands of the booksellers, "Masters of all the Avenues to every Market":

> 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. (60)

Similarly, Oswald's slave-driving Brain-sucker displays the bookseller's worst characteristics, such as lacking a conscience while actively manipulating his victim, the poor scribbling hack. This is visualized in the caricature print, "Designed & Etched for the British Mercury", that accompanies the text (not signed by Rowlandson, but most likely attributable to him; cf. Erdman 35), entitled "The Brain-Sucker, or the Miseries of Authorship" and dated "May 9, 1787" (cp. this later reproduction http://cdn.theatlantic.com/assets/media/img/mt/2015/03/brain_sucker/lead_large.jpg?GE2DGMBRGQ2TEMBWFYYA). It depicts the filthy and gloomy garret, whose size resembles a prison cell, insinuating that the author is being held captive by the bookseller. The print depicts a scene that is not in the story, where we never meet the bookseller in person. Rowlandson shows their opposition, contrasting the author's emaciation with the bookseller's portliness. The writer appears to be scribbling away, entirely focused on the task at hand, yet a disgruntled look marks his features, perhaps hinting at his understanding that his work will never be complete, as one can imagine that the impossible-to-please bookseller is spouting off directions for the author's next project.

The story does not give us a direct confrontation between these business partners. Everything we learn about the Brain-sucker comes from Dick's revelation, which occurs after Homely has already released him from his garret prison. Considering the limited point of view, this might give the reader a skewed perspective on the relationships between authors and publishers in the eighteenth century. The satire

reduces the (actually quite complex) commercial and personal networks of eighteenth-century print culture to a conflict between two highly unequal parties: writer and bookseller-publisher. The terrible physical and mental state in which Homely first finds his son provides a strong illustration of the torture that Dick has endured; only later do we learn about the worsening conditions under which Dick has had to work for the Brain-sucker.

Dick's enslavement has clearly traumatized him, as is demonstrated not only by the emaciated condition in which his father finds him, but also by his nightmare, which is described in the manner of a Gothic novel. At this point, a contemporary level of political reference emerges when we learn that one of Dick's tasks was to write "an Apology for Mr. Hastings" (45), the governor-general of Bengal whose impeachment proceedings were the talk of the town in 1787. In his nightmare, this crime condemns Dick to eternal damnation; however, the dream suggests that Grub Street is a worse punishment than all the tortures of hell. After the trajectory of the poetic imagination has taken him from lyric paganism all the way to Gothic despair, Dick is cured and returns home to his rural roots.

Questions of Genre: A Serio-Comic Caricature and the Powers of Satire

Much of the satirical humour in "The Brain-Sucker" derives from literary allusions that are misunderstood by Homely, taken literally or given a sexual connotation. For instance, in Dick's letter from London to his parents, he confesses that his whole life is now devoted to the nine muses, but the farmer takes this to mean that his son has become a polygamist (23).[8] In his letter, Dick masks his reality as a slave to the Brain-sucker behind devotion to the muses or literature, but Homely goes to rescue him because he misunderstands the allusions and wants to save him from London's seedy, corruptive influence.

Questions of reading and understanding underpin the text's critique of "pathologies in the system of literature" (Gumbrecht 1992, ch. 10) of its time. A satire on literary production and its material conditions, "The Brain-Sucker" displays a high awareness of questions of genre. This is most obvious in the references to various literary forms that Dick is forced to produce: "odes, epigrams, satire, panegyric, composing the nosegay of flattery or pointing the bidden abuse" (26). In this respect, the subtitle is particularly telling: "The Brain-Sucker" is introduced as a "Serio-Comic Caricature", a term that does not seem to have been used elsewhere. Nevertheless, its elements are common in the eighteenth century. "Serio-comic" is a term similar to the tragi-comic and might hence be viewed in terms of drama. An instance of this can be found in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in an article translated from the French on "Serious Comedy": "The Serio-comic or Mixt Drama exhibits human passions, virtues and vices, which are incompatible both with Tragedy and Comedy" (*Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Chronicle*, vol. XX, London 1750, 32). Yet throughout the eighteenth century

[8] Erdman links this to Henry Redhead Yorke's not necessarily false statement that Oswald had two wives in Paris (Erdman 9, 63).

the term is used in pamphlet titles of poems, dramas, operas, "apologies" and "pantomimes." George Keate's *The Distressed Poet: A Serio-Comic Poem* is dated May 1787 in the preface, the same month in which the two installments of the "Brain-Sucker" came out. If one took the cue from the other, the publication dates make it more likely that Keate took his from Oswald rather than the other way around. Since the combination of serious and comical upends certain genre boundaries understood as classical, the adjective makes clear that while characters and action in the "Brain-Sucker" are comical, they have serious implications, which are most likely to lie in the empirical situation of Grub Street hacks. The term 'caricature' tips the balance into comical exaggeration. The choice of 'caricature' is also interesting since it is obviously used mainly for pictorial (cum verbal) and not for strictly verbal representations. In fact, Erdman's short interpretation of the text views it more in terms of Rowlandson's caricature than vice versa (62).

What is absent from Oswald's self-description is the generic label of satire under which the text could be classed most readily. Prose satire had not enjoyed the same esteem as verse satire by writers such as Dryden and Pope. Yet, as Engell stresses, after the death of Pope "English satiric poetry shifts away from *formal* verse satire" and develops into "new, mixed satire" (233). The same type of mixture also applies to prose satire, the development of which is closely linked to that of the novel (cf. Paulson 1967). The letter form obviously points to the epistolary novel and to the satirical use of fictional letters in works like Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* (1721) or Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782). In terms of the classical opposition between Horatian and Juvenalian satire, "The Brain-Sucker" is more Horatian. It lacks the typical element of the "*saeva indignatio* (the curse, the invective) of the Juvenalian satirist" (Paulson 2007, 319). In fact, "The Brain-Sucker" might perhaps most suitably be called a satirical caricature. There is a fundamental sophisticated paradox of the portrait caricature, as Paulson points out, which can be readily transferred to the satirical caricature: "while it deflates, it also inflates", since it "can only ridicule its subject by acknowledging and even reinforcing his celebrity" (Paulson 310). Ridiculing not so much the brain-sucking publisher as the writer Dick, the satirical caricature literally deflates a writer, yet paradoxically also inflates the distressed poet.

Satires like "The Brain-Sucker" perpetuated the stereotype of the Grub Street hack at the same time as they contributed to reconceptualizing literary authorship by emphasizing the economic reality of professional writers who were dependent on bookseller-publishers. The myth of the hack, as presented in "The Brain-Sucker", functioned to further shape authorship into an unattainable ideal. Yet the text also questions this myth by presenting the "distress of authorship" in a more personal and sympathetic manner, far removed from the established satirical mode of Pope or Swift. If the function of satire is to attack a social evil, "The Brain-Sucker" has two targets: the economic distress of Grub Street and the ideological inflation of authorship that would culminate in the idea of the Romantic genius.

This double target of "The Brain-Sucker: Or, The Distress of Authorship" makes the text particularly relevant for debates in and on eighteenth-century authorship. We

hope that eighteenth-century specialists will be interested in the serio-comic treatment of late eighteenth-century print culture that "The Brain-Sucker" offers, some representative links of which we have discussed in this introductory essay. At the same time, the annotations to our edition also make this rarely-discussed text accessible to scholars and students interested in the history of authorship and authorship studies in general.

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