Introduction: Between Geniuses and Brain-Suckers. Problematic Professionalism in Eighteenth-Century Authorship

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In this special topic issue, *Authorship* takes a look at one of the crucial periods of change in the conception as well as the conditions of authorship: the British eighteenth century. Embedded though it was in broader geographical and more *longue durée* developments in the technologies, economics, and sociologies of authorship, in Britain the long eighteenth century wrought changes in the perception of authors and of the ways in which they plied their trade that, in scope and impact, were not unlike the shifts in markets and technologies which we are experiencing again in our own century.

Indeed, Britain in the long eighteenth century saw the consolidation of the idea that being an author *could* be a trade. Increased literacy in the general population – initially driven by socio-political, religious, and trade considerations – soon created a growing market for reading material. To supply this market and exploit its economic potential, booksellers and authors had to come up not only with more writing that could be consumed but also with new kinds of writing that could expand their market further. These new genres of writing (like periodicals or novels) in turn opened opportunities for authors to specialize and professionalize as well as for booksellers and printers to develop new business models (such as publication in parts or the circulating library), and these innovations in their turn became vehicles to mobilize previously untapped readerships (e.g. female, juvenile, and working-class readers).

The eighteenth century, then, offered authors new opportunities to write, be read, and be paid in ways and on a scale that had not been possible in the centuries before. Yet the new regimes of writing, selling, and reading also posed new challenges for those authors who aimed to make a living of their craft. In the previous two centuries, the economic model of authorship had largely been based on the patronage system where writing was dedicated to those in places of (more) power in hopes of some social or financial largesse from a patron's hand; that model persisted well into the eighteenth century and continued to serve its purpose, but it could not be the basis for a

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professionalized form of authorship, as Samuel Johnson observed in his famous letter to Philip Dormer Stanhope, Earl of Chesterfield. For those who would not or could not write for patronage, the one-time, outright sale of copyright in their texts to a bookseller was another way to be remunerated for their work and reach a broader audience through print, but payments were generally small so that an author who hoped to rely even partially on her or his writing for an income had to focus on quantity and popularity of their writing; few writers in the sixteenth and the first half of the seventeenth century were able to be authors in this commercial sense.

The importance of the Statute of Anne 1709/10 – its full title, *An Act for the Encouragement of Learning, by vesting the Copies of Printed Books in the Authors or purchasers of such Copies, during the Times therein mentioned* – must therefore not be underestimated. The Statute assigned the copyright in a text to its author, who could then assign it to another by selling it for an initial 14-year term, at the end of which copyright would revert to the author (if he or she were still alive) ready to be sold for another 14-year term. Authors thus gained considerable leverage in negotiating the value and terms of copyright transfers in their texts (though the practice of selling copyright outright remained in place throughout the century for all but the most popular or powerful authors), and they stood to gain doubly if their texts sold well and remained popular (and they alive) long enough to warrant booksellers' interest in purchasing the copyright for a second term. At least in theory, both authors and readers also stood to benefit from the Statute's further provision that texts would enter the public domain at the end of the second term, at the latest, and thus be available for reprinting by anyone with a mind to do so. This would have made huge numbers of relatively recent texts available to broad sectors of the public who might not have had access to the same texts and authors while being printed under copyright protection: then as now, booksellers invested in printing a text by having bought the copyright were intent to squeeze as much profit out of that investment as possible and kept prices as high as their markets allowed. With the exception of texts printed for huge readerships (like the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer, or some of the more popular school texts, for example), a text generally only became cheaply and widely available in large-scale reprints once it had fallen out of copyright. In practice, cartels of established booksellers claimed a sort of perpetual copyright in the most valuable texts in their print catalogues and kept them out of broader circulation in reprints; the House of Lords' ruling against perpetual copyright in 1774 opened a short window of opportunity for those desiring to reprint popular texts from recent decades, but by 1808 that window had been closed again by a series of laws passed (with heavy lobbying by the booksellers) to reinforce copyright restrictions.

In such an intensely competitive environment, most authors continued to struggle to make ends meet by relying on their writing alone. And yet, more and more writers desired and tried to become authors whose work would appear in print and be consumed by Britain's ever-increasing numbers of readers. *The Brain-Sucker* (1787), with which this special topic issue opens in a splendid critical edition by Ingo Berensmeyer, Gero Guttzeit, and Alise Jameson, shines a satirical light on those who

desired to be authors as well as on the booksellers who were ready to profit from their exertions. In mocking authorial ambitions as a disease and the booksellers' craft as a parasitical exploitation of textual labourers, however, *The Brain-Sucker* also makes the serious point that the literary life is in reality a cut-throat business for all its participants.

In her reading of the anonymous and understudied novel, *The Adventures of an Author* (1767), Heather Ladd then finds that authorial figures such as the exploited hack author and her or his counterpart, the rapacious and parasitical bookseller, are most profitably to be seen as so many markers used by eighteenth-century commentators to try and map out the terrain of professional authorship. In the novel's comic approach to these figures and their stereotypical (inter)actions, Ladd finds above all an expression of mid-century difficulties to conceive of and define professional authorship: the inherent complexities and multiplicities of a newly-rising professional group within a marketplace that continued to be in serious flux, she argues, made it difficult for contemporary commentators to see the figure of the professional author as anything other than chaotic, unstable, and uncontainable.

Next, Jodi Wyett uncovers for us how the female quixote, a figure also perceived as unstable and uncontainable, could actually serve to consolidate as well as divide. On her reading of *The Female Quixote* (1752), Charlotte Lennox deploys Arabella's quixotic character to stake a claim for women's literary professionalism and critical acuity. As a figure that can signal women's authority as writers as well as their intellectual and aesthetic capacities as discerning readers, the figure of the female quixote marks women's assertions of themselves as critical, integral agents within the literary marketplace.

William Hutton, who began his working career as a child labourer in a mill and eventually became a wealthy bookseller, paper merchant, and owner of a circulating library, could serve as a paradigmatic figure for the century's ecologies of printed texts, expanding readerships, and innovations in marketing. He also, as Susan Whyman reveals, followed the son's dream in *The Brain-Sucker* of becoming an author. While Hutton managed to avoid the trials of Grub Street, he did run afoul of the literary establishment for his opinionated and impolite style. The same qualities, however, gained him a considerable readership amongst those readers more entertained by irreverent perspectives on established norms and institutions as well as by his blending of popular genres: memoir, history, travel writing, and others. In Hutton, Whyman thus identifies a disruptive authorial figure who nevertheless also exemplifies some of the crucial developments in forms of authorship and the marketplace across the eighteenth century.

In a curious way, the same could be said for authors like Robert Southey. As Megan Richardson explains, Southey's early, politically radical dramatic poem, *Wat Tyler* (1794), returned to haunt him in the form of an unauthorized reprint in 1817, when he had become a part of the social and political establishment himself. When he sought to invoke the period's copyright regime on his behalf in order to halt the reprinting of the poem and protect his name, however, the presiding judge Lord Eldon refused to grant

an injunction against the piracies on grounds that the courts should not grant support and protection to "mischievous" books; other judges and courts followed suit in similar cases. As a consequence, vast quantities of seditious, blasphemous, and obscene reading materials became available to audiences who would have been beyond their reach had the copyright regimes been invoked against their cheap, unauthorized reprinting. As a consequence, Richardson argues, the legal establishment had to reconsider its approach to the relationship between radical texts and their legal protection under copyright regimes, while authors like Southey sought to protect their names and sources of income by directing their personal opinions inwards.

Maybe it is not such a big surprise, then, that a majority of authors throughout the long eighteenth century chose to remain anonymous. As Mark Vareschi points out, a number of writers early in the century in fact advocated in favour of anonymous publication in order to avoid censorship and ensure an open, critical reading of (political) texts. In such a view, Vareschi explains, the assignment of an authorial name to a text potentially disrupts the text's efficacy. Vareschi then uses that perspective to investigate our own desires to assign names to texts, especially when this occurs in the context of canon formation and the delimitation of a well-known author like Daniel Defoe. Here, too, Vareschi finds, the joining of name and text runs the risk of foreclosing critical reading and tends towards the subsumption of the text under the author's *oeuvre* or biography, especially in cases of established authors and particularly when dealing with ephemeral texts that do not fit into high-status literary genres such as the novel.