

Writer by Trade: James Ralph's Claims to Authorship

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Abstract: To the enterprising journalists of early eighteenth-century Great Britain, the refined status of “author” remained elusive. Journalism itself was a nascent occupation formed in the processes of cultural legitimization, commercialization, and politicization of authorship. In London, James Ralph, an American expatriate and political writer, emerged as a spokesman for journalism. In his *Case of Authors by Profession or Trade*, a short treatise published in 1758, Ralph argued that “professional” authors included journalists and other non-patroned writers. They deserved respect as an occupational group, and a special role in society. Ralph equated and extended the privileged notions of authorship and the role of the author — essentially, respectability and some limited independence from political and financial pressures — to his fellow journalists. His *Case* is worth revisiting because it shows how literary culture was being challenged in his era, extended and subverted as it was by his fellow journalists and their more transitory creations.

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Writers of all social classes in early eighteenth-century London wrote about who they were, what they did, and why they did what they did. Such thoughts are a rich resource for clues about the interplay of authorship and markets, and between creativity and necessity. This study focuses on James Ralph (c. 1700-1762), an American-born expatriate political journalist who wrote what may be the first reflection on journalistic writing as a vocation in his 1758 *Case of Authors by Profession or Trade, Stated*. Ralph's *Case* lays out an impassioned, paradoxical plea for respect for “professional” writers during this early era, including an artful appeal made on behalf of those who wrote for the political press as journalists.¹ That appeal claims a coherent identity for what Ralph called “writers for hire.” This was in reaction to a dominant literary culture that valued writers funded by elite patrons and who wrote for a more elite audience. But writing as they did for a broader audience, journalists subverted that culture, as represented by Alexander Pope and the Scriblerians of the Scriblerus Club, and bypassed cultural elites. In the process, they gradually forged a new identity for themselves as writers driven by profit.²

Ralph's brief treatise is not simply a long series of complaints and anxieties spewed forth at the end of a bitter author's mixed career. While it contains some

¹ Other early journalists and writers (and the term can be used relatively loosely, in this era) of a reflective cast include Edward Cave of the *Gentleman's Magazine* and Richard Russel of *The Grub Street Journal*; this study draws on a longer study that includes these two figures.

² As one of my reviewers has pointed out, Pope indeed digressed from his fellow Scriblerians when it came to acceptable ways to make money from one's literary output. Pope should not be posited as a stand-in for all of the very complex and fluid “patronage” system prevalent in the early part of the long eighteenth century.

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pointed complaints about how writers were forced to make their livings, it is more than that: an argument for the authority and respect that should be afforded to writers who wrote for a living, and not just those who subsisted on patronage. David Shields argues that patronage of some form was vital for most authors during the eighteenth century, due to the uncertainties of a still-developing popular market, and with a public sphere very much in flux. Truly independent authorship — or full-time journalism, for that matter — was quite rare in the transatlantic world, and for all but the already wealthy, writing was a precarious way of keeping one's body and soul united (Shields, 434-76). Ralph was aware of these challenges. He was not saying journalists should be “professional,” per se, for both journalism and “professionalism” were concepts that were only developed, as we know them, much later in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Neither was he the first to write about the nature of journalism, reflecting on his own time in the journalistic fray a generation after the active careers of Defoe, Addison and Steele.³ But he was equating and extending the privileged notions of authorship, in the face of critics such as Pope — calling, essentially, for respectability and some limited independence, as it was then understood — and claiming this status for his fellow journalists (a category of self-supporting writer that encompassed not only those who wrote for hire for political forces, but also those who wrote on any current affair, or even, more broadly, on cultural issues). His *Case* is an early indication of a self-aware vocational identity for non-patroned journalists-as-authors, not just hired hacks. His statements, and their implications, are worth considering as an important contribution to the history of authorship in the commercialized literary world of eighteenth-century London.

Jürgen Habermas names Daniel Defoe and Defoe's work for publications such as *Mist's Journal* in the late 1710s as making good the claim that Defoe was the “first great English journalist” (59). Defoe's *Review* (which ran from 1704 to 1713) “moved English journalism in new directions” and influenced Addison and Steele with its original voice (Backscheider, DNB). This is not to say that “journalists” of this era were restricted to one domain, namely politics. The word's widespread usage among writers from the period was associated with the idea of an irregularly contracted author who worked for a weekly journal, as distinguished from a newspaper. These tended to be published twice or three times weekly or even daily, and included commentary on matters cultural as well as political. By the 1730s, the umbrella notion of “journalist” had been extended specifically to those who wrote for a newspaper. A competing term, “periodicalist,” was less common, and less used by writers for political publications.⁴ The continuity of

³ A comparative study of these journalists to Ralph would yield highly interesting insights, but for the sake of space I cannot elaborate more on Addison and Steele, in particular. Far more qualified scholars, such as Bertrand Goldgar, have spoken eloquently as to their role in British literary culture and influence on the journalism of the eighteenth century.

⁴ There is still some debate about how tightly or broadly this term can, or even should, be applied. However, for the purposes of this essay, “journalist” will be used in as close a sense as possible to how it was probably intended by Ralph and his contemporaries – as a reference to the more culturally marginalized writers for periodicals. For more on the use of “periodicalist,” see Manushag N. Powell, “Eliza Haywood, Periodicalist(?),” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, Vol. 14: 4 (fall 2014), 163-86.

usage over the century seems to favor “journalist” as the catch-all description for writers who specialized in periodicals.

On the cultural legitimization, commercialization and politicization of authorship

Along with actors and poets, journalists remained on the outermost “fringes of professional status” (Corfield 28).⁵ Early journalists were part of a group of occupations that can be “seen as ‘professional’ without being organized into professions, and without controlling access to their own special field” (184). They belong to a group whose legitimacy was in question. Writing contained some elements of professional behavior: a group, loosely bounded, providing a particular service — in this case, information-collection and political commentary. Yet it was without some of the core requirements for a profession in the eighteenth century — limited entry, accepted standards of practice, and especially self-policing control over who and who could not operate in the profession — that the more-established professions either had or were beginning to develop. This belief is reflected in Lord Camden’s 1774 speech before the House of Lords, in which he denounced the intellectual rights of lowly “scribblers for bread” who produced “perishable Trash” (Campbell 297). Camden claimed that writing, as a field, was too nebulous an occupation to be accorded professional status, due to its individualistic nature. This, combined with a lack of training, and a swarm of aspirants, meant for an unstable occupational marketplace (Corfield 185, Hammond 24). Writers with a myriad of backgrounds and skill levels vied for work, with little to distinguish one writer from the next in terms of qualifications or training.

Both Geoffrey Holmes and Penelope Corfield touch on the concept of a cultural legitimization of occupations. While “few members of the established professions would have dreamed of conceding to newspaper editors ... to newsletter writers or to journeymen pamphleteers who wrote for their bread a status remotely comparable with their own,” that does not mean that writers could not only succeed, but sometimes thrive, albeit sporadically (Holmes 31-4). Early in the century, the newsletter writer John Dyer charged £4 for access to his annual domestic subscriptions, and £5 for subscribing from abroad (Holmes 34). The editor of the Whig newspaper, *The Postman*, John de Fonvive, estimated that he made more than £600 a year during the reign of Queen Anne (Holmes 33). Pay was more steady and lucrative in the political press, especially by the 1730s. The attorney-turned-political journalist William Arnall (d. 1736), for example, pocketed a £400 per-year pension, writing on behalf of Walpole (Holmes 33). Despite outliers such as these, Corfield is correct in pointing out that besides a handful of versatile, leading writers, most belonged to a “sizable rank-and-file of relatively impoverished ‘Grub Street’ hacks” (185). These “hacks” wore several occupational hats, and worked by turns as poets, farmers, teachers and ministers as they wrote for publishers, politicians, patrons and eventually for themselves.

⁵ Note that concepts of “professionalism” and “professional” are not theorized here in the same ways that sociologists such as Andrew Abbott have constructed, but rather as cultural historians such as Burton J. Bledstein have explored.

Despite their often poor financial position, some writers believed that their ability to influence society compensated for their comparative poverty. Edward Cave, one of the first and most successful publishers of a magazine during this period, wrote of the “artillery of the press” of which even the “most gentle exercise is cruel; its tender mercies severe; and in its most favourable (sic) treatment leaving the person it attacks, as the storm does the ship-wrecked wretch, naked, stripp’d, shivering on the comfort[l]ess beach, and only not drown’d.”⁶ Though this may be self-aggrandizing praise, the political powers of the day were willing to invest extensively in stables of writers: Walpole invested more than £50,000 in his press apparatus during the height of his political career (Corfield 290).

The debate over the increasing politicization and commercialization of writing during this period was fueled by concerns over whether writing literature-on-demand, especially for the periodical press, could be justified as a means of making of one’s living. Some feared that the commercialization of literature in the 1730s was destroying Britain’s literary culture: John Brewer identifies a “body of arbiters of taste, morality and policy” who defined and defended literature in the early eighteenth century, frustrated at how “in every field of cultural endeavor culture was for sale” (Brewer, “The most polite age and the most vicious,” 344-6). Traditionally, powerful patrons had funded literature and the individual writers who had produced it, providing the basis for their material support, as with Edward Young and his *Universal Passion*, underwritten by the Duke of Wharton for £2,000 (Holmes 52).

Writers, from which journalists as a group were self-selected, had most often worked for patrons, and not for the press — not for patrons *and* themselves. That was changing. Authors interacted with audiences and created and performed personas (Powell, *Performing Authorship*, 14). Idealized identities engaged with a lingering desire for anonymity. “Real” personalities mixed with the constructed, “part of the pleasure,” perhaps, Iona Italia points out, of reading periodicals (16). They were also a survival strategy, protecting writers and allowed them to maintain their own credibility (Italia 17). To break from this, and to sign one’s own articles, was thus a kind of statement, of particular ownership and an invitation to criticism. Ralph was not alone in revealing in, and indeed, reveling in his more “true” identity. But he was early and bold in doing so, and speaks to us from a critical juncture, a middle point between patronage and self-sustainment.

Reactions to a (slowly) changing literary culture

Periodical essays were an alternative to the old system of patronage, sold by “the new capitalists of cultural enterprise,” independent bookseller-publishers, who hired writers, authors and aspiring journalists to produce popular literature, with varying degrees of sophistication, for a mass readership and for a profit (Brewer, “The

⁶ *Gentleman’s Magazine*, Vol. 15, January 1744, 43-44; see also the *Old England Journal*, from 19 January 1744; it is, admittedly, a bit unclear as to whether or not the writer is talking about the power of the opposition press, per se, or the power of the press in the employ of the ministry, but the context suggests the former.

Consumption of Culture,” 346). Blending elements of high and low culture, periodical publications were marketed by entrepreneurs who knew that their “public” was slowly becoming “defined as those who possess and consume” (Brewer 348-9). Throughout the eighteenth century, this breakdown in the traditional process of funding the arts led to what Samuel Taylor Coleridge described as the era in which, “Literature fell off from the Professions,” and then “the Press fell off from Literature:” when the established professions lost their grip on publishing, and when the periodical press began to write not for a select few, but for the more middling sort, and for profit (*Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, I). There was concern that literature, indeed, that writing itself, was being degraded and rendered disturbingly accessible. Successful writers and poets such as Alexander Pope and his peers, including Jonathan Swift, feared an eroded cultural standard: “The expansion of the public audience was reprobated as the greedy seduction of the vulgar and the ignorant into the belief that they, like their social superiors, could be men and women of taste,” as Brewer notes, adding, “in the writings of Pope and Swift ... we can detect a disgust that is close to desire” (349-50). They did not always agree, and they definitely diverged on occasion, but they shared a similar milieu and outlook (Griffin, “Swift and Pope,” 3, 15-16).

Pope’s low view of the “hack” writers, including Ralph, who inhabited the area around Grub Street in London’s Cripplegate Parish has lingered, with “Grub Street” being a derisive synonym for low-brow periodical publications (“grub” coming from the name of the refuse ditch that wound its way beside the street; Clarke 3). Pope’s *Dunciad* (first published in 1728) is a farcical attack on the “dull” writers of Grub Street, who form the corps of “dunces” dispatched by the Goddess of Dullness to ruin England’s sense of literary taste. Pope saw himself as a defender of the classics, a gentleman-writer operating from the rarified center of high cultural life. He was a vigilant protector of the sophisticated in an era when “everything that appeared in print” was still regarded as a form of literature.⁷

Pope’s *Dunciad* was a defense against a “wrong standard of values,” popularized and promoted by those without patrons — literary and journalistic free agents (xlv-xlvii). Ralph defended his fellow Grub-street writers in *Sawney, an Heroic Poem Occasion’d by the Dunciad*, also published in 1728 (Okie, DNB). Pope responded, pulverizing Ralph’s poetical aspirations, and continued to hound him and other writers in the *Grub Street Journal*, a satirical newspaper inspired by Pope and edited by Richard Russel.⁸ Pope’s sense of cultural superiority came across to contemporaries as elitist, “too easily contemptuous of the author who writes for his bread, and too ready to assume that for that very reason he must write badly” (Sutherland, introduction to *The Dunciad*, xlvi). To be fair to Pope, he wanted to commend good writers and condemn

⁷ As Sutherland explains in his introduction to *The Dunciad*, xlii-xliii, xlv-xlvii.

⁸ See Richard Russel (1685–1756), *Memoirs of the Society of Grub-Street*. vols. 1-2, (London: Printed for J. Wilford, 1737). It is quite likely that the satirical Journal was inspired and probably funded by Pope, at least for its first year or so.

the truly bad.⁹ The “Scriblerian” writers — Pope, Swift and their peers — thus attacked “career-professional writers” even as they valorized the “independent amateur of letters” (Hammond 2-3, 11).¹⁰ The “legitimization of authorship as a means of making a living” was opposed by a concerted Scriblerian resistance to the democratization of culture (Hammond 6, 11-12).

Newspapers were indeed the most visible literary products of the era, with a demand for more such products that fueled a self-sustaining need for more writers to produce them (Hammond 249). And yet if “authorship could only develop as a profession when it became respectable for individuals to live off their wits,” and if “opposition to this was deeply entrenched,” the fight for such recognition would involve the extent of its commercialization, or how much it could become a service to be sold, and still be acceptable within the indefinite bounds of popular taste (Hammond 23-4). This recognition was exemplified in the debates over literature-as-intellectual property following the Copyright Act of 1710, and the corresponding “desire to legitimize the professional author-function,” as expressed by full-time scribblers as Ralph (Hammond 33-7, 39-40). To avoid a Pope-centric view, however, it is important to examine what the lower-level producers of periodical literature, such as Ralph, had to say about the commercialization of their craft — the concept of “selling culture” in the periodicals.

The politicization of writing was spurred by the dynamic political environment of the 1730s. An especially formative time for journalism, this era saw the opposition press facing a well-paid collection of ministerial writers, including William Arnall, who helmed the London-based *Daily Gazetteer* in a daily battle for public opinion. While the concept of the “public sphere” was still uncertain, pro- and anti- government forces were willing to spend quite a bit of treasure to secure the services of writers (Blanning). By the 1730s, there were six daily London newspapers and 551 coffeehouses in which they were read and argued over evidence of an emerging press culture and a broadening forum for public debate (Blanning 156; Brewer, “Party Ideology and Popular Politics,” 148). Richard Squibbs has called this an “urban enlightenment” (14-18).

As part of the burgeoning public arena, newspapers and the shadowy men who wrote for them had become vital “instruments in the arsenal of party politics” (182). As Simon Targett says, “for Walpole’s leading essayists, politics was to be understood primarily within the context of the practical” (313-4, 299). Where the “practical” involved stoking the partisan flames of a newly emancipated press, members of the “Corps of Political Hussars” who shoveled literary coal into the fire were looked down upon for supposed mercenary motives (Harris 110-2). This does not mean, however, that these writers could not articulate why they wrote for one side or another, or that they did not see such flexibility as part of their identity, which they framed as being part of a unique profession — an identity very much in flux, but defended avidly by James Ralph.

⁹ Russel, *Memoirs of the Society of Grub-Street*, xxxiii; see also Russel’s “Note upon Ver. 132 of Book II.” from *The Dunciad*.

¹⁰ These “scribblers” taking their name from the famous literary club of the same name.

During the century, there were many writers like Ralph who publicly detested or bemoan their lot in life. These included Bonnell Thornton, Samuel Johnson (on behalf of his friend, Richard Savage, a well-known but still-celebrated example of a literary “failure”) and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu.¹¹ In that bitterness and bemoaning, Ralph was not special. Women as well as men were involved in the ups and down of the fluid, early literary marketplace (McDowell 5-6). But what does make Ralph special is his perspective on the intense commercialization of the old patronage system. While many political writers attached themselves to political patrons as a matter of course, fewer made such a spectacular leapfrogging success of it over a career. An extremely networked life was common for political writers, as Dustin Griffin has pointed out (“Authorship in the Long Eighteenth Century,” 59). They did not do their work alone, though they held the solitary struggle up as an ideal.

James Ralph’s life and *Case*

Ralph was a prolific political journalist who wrote for the *Daily Courant*, *Universal Spectator*, and *The Champion*, among other, mostly anti-ministerial, publications. Prior to journalism, Ralph had attempted a career as a poet, a career that included that ill-thought counter-attack on *The Dunciad* in his *Sawney*.¹² This essentially ended Ralph’s hopes of pursuing poetry, but it also launched him on a second career as a parliamentary reporter. Ralph defended the quality of his work in continuing counter-attacks in the *Weekly Register*, but toward the end of his career, in 1758, his anonymously published *Case of Authors by Profession* would make a more thorough stand for the “dunces” derided by Pope a generation earlier.¹³ Ralph’s “Writer by Trade is forever obliged to write on; and thereby obtains that Mastery in Matter, Method, Stile and Manner, which is hardly to be obtained any other Way” (8-9). The *Case* draws much of its heft from Ralph’s experiences. It reflects on the state of periodical writing at one of its earliest retrospective moments, especially on its status following the turbulent Walpole era, when the “Heat of Opposition” ran to its hottest point in a generation (Ralph 38-9). It is unique precisely because of Ralph’s many shifting allegiances and chameleon-like ability to survive by the weight (not necessarily the brilliance) of his pen.

There is a dearth of biographical information on figures such as James Ralph, as Pat Rogers has noted (“Grub Street,” 207). Much of what we know comes from his erstwhile protégé and friend, Benjamin Franklin, in the latter’s *Autobiography* (71-6, 77-98). Ralph had the temerity to tussle with Pope, and was one of the writers Pope held

¹¹ For this insight, and the reminder that Ralph was hardly alone, I wish to thank my reviewers, as well as the wonderful study of success and “failure” by Adam Rounce (*Fame and Failure*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

¹² See the *Sawney: An Heroic Poem. Occasion'd by the Dunciad. Together with a Critique on that Poem Address'd to Mr. T---d, Mr. M---r, Mr. Eu---n, &c.* (London: Printed by J. Roberts, 1728). Cambridge University Library.

¹³ See James Ralph. *The Case of Authors by Profession or Trade, Stated. With Regard to Booksellers, the Stage, and the Public. No matter by whom.* (London: R. Griffiths, printer, 1758. Cambridge University Library), 6-7.

responsible for the degeneration of literature in the 1730s. Pope alluded to Ralph in an extensive footnote in *The Dunciad* as a “low writer,” someone who “was wholly illiterate, and knew no Language not even French ... he ended at last in the common Sink of all such writers, a Political News-paper ... and receiv’d a small pittance for pay (Pope, xlvii-xlviii; 159, 165). This “low writer” was born in the American colonies, in Philadelphia, sometime around the end of the seventeenth century, but little is known of his early life before he befriended the printer Benjamin Franklin and joined Franklin’s literary circle, working as a clerk but also dabbling in poetry (Okie, DNB, and Franklin 72-6). After a family dispute of unknown causes, Ralph went into permanent, self-imposed exile in England, arriving in London in 1724. Attempts to find work as an editor, copyist and actor all proved fruitless before he toiled briefly as village teacher outside of London. A falling out with Franklin followed (with the latter also having made it to the capital) over the affections of a shared mistress (Franklin 77-98). Ralph returned to the serious pursuit of his poetry, publishing two works in 1727-8 before unwisely clashing with Pope.

His career as a poet at an end, Ralph found a second fortunate friendship, this time with Henry Fielding that eventually led to work as Fielding’s assistant and collaborator, even if on his own Ralph did not find lasting fame as a playwright (Rogers, “Fielding”). It was instead through his political journalism that he earned his bread, writing for a variety of anti-Walpole publications beginning in the early 1730s, editing the *Old England, or, The Constitutional Journal* and, later, *The Remembrancer*. His work with Fielding led him to co-edit *The Champion* starting in 1739, where he took the editorial lead in critiquing the ministry for its prosecution of the “War of Jenkins’ Ear” and other alleged missteps. Later in his career, Ralph penned original histories of the royal family and Parliament that looked beyond traditionally London-based, political biases (Okie, DNB). In the early 1740s, he found another patron in the form of George Bubb Dodington (c. 1690-1762), an eccentric politician and former member of Walpole’s administration, who collaborated with Ralph on *The Use and Abuse of Parliaments*, a retrospective critique of Walpole’s years in office (Hanham, DNB). For his trouble, Ralph received a pension of £200 per year from the treasury, and later some £300 annually from the ministry of Henry Pelham (Okie, DNB). The last decade or so of Ralph’s life was marked by a flexibility of vocation, as he turned deftly from patron-funded historical writing to working on a new opposition journal, *The Protestor*, as well as on his short book on the writing trade (Okie, DNB). Ralph was versatile — he knew how to seek patronage when required, especially when pressed by professional or personal setbacks.

A Case for respect

His *Case of Authors* makes a compelling plea for “our Writers,” having long labored as one (Hillhouse 70-4). With some caveats, Ralph survived through his political journalism, and it was in this reflective guise that he composed, at the end of his career, a treatise defending writing for a living. Ralph’s use of “author” and “writer” are synonymous. The basic structure of the *Case* includes an initial discussion first of

writing and then of what constitutes authorship, including the difference between the “Voluntier-Writer” (sic) and the “Writer by Trade,” as well as the perceived misfortunes of those caught between patronage and a semi-self-sufficient, itinerant existence. To that end, he discourses about the “three Provinces” of a writer, which included miscellaneous work for the “Booksellers,” “the Stage” and “for a Faction the Name of the Community” (19). He then concludes with an essay on the importance of recognizing authors as productive members of society, their role in society as a force for moral good, and an admonishment to his fellow writers to remember their responsibilities and how they should self-regulate their membership (72-6). One should note at the outset that Ralph is not always a reliable historical narrator. He is focused on his own experiences.

But Ralph was speaking to a shift in the way “authorship” was conceived in early eighteenth-century Britain. He outlined what he saw as a declining sense of virtue in writing-for-hire, corrupted by a partisan atmosphere that drove authors past the point of acceptable moral compromise. In the days of Addison and Steele, “the Link of Patronage which held the Great and the Learned together, was then in full Force,” he wrote, but even in such times, the individual circumstances and whims of patrons “did not commence Writers in virtue,” at least not always, and while some advanced on what Ralph calls the “Result of Merit,” others did so purely from the “Gift of Fortune” (Ralph 72). Despite this, “the next Race of Writers” could still “justify themselves for taking to the Pen and the Press, on a Principle of Discretion,” and write for the good of the nation (72). These were times, he says, “when the Talents of a good Writer were esteemed a sufficient Qualification for almost any Employment whatsoever, and when Room was left or made for their Admission” (32). But the frenzied move to subsidize writers for and against the government in the 1720s and 1730s had broken down this system of patronized merit, Ralph claims. This was the felt perception by Ralph and his peers. Ralph believed that his brother journalists should think of themselves as having responsibilities as well as rights that came with their singular position in society.¹⁴

“The Patronage and Protection of the Great” had become a “Practice Altogether unfair,” artificially propping up writers who would otherwise not survive in a system based on “the Reward of Merit only,” a situation forcing a skilled writer “to take Refuge even in Grub street, and indent himself to be a Garrettier forever” (28). Here Ralph was speaking of his time as a writer-for-hire, in the turbulent Walpole period. In this fractured marketplace, with its eclectic mix of patronage and opportunity, an obscure writer’s odds of obtaining success and stability had been precarious.

Despite his own intermittent good fortune regarding political patronage, Ralph, operating “without Doors,” or outside the realms of influence and power for most of his journalistic career, spoke semi-autobiographically when he wrote about the author who was forced to rely on “his Confederates in a superior Station,” and their “Assurances given him, that in the Division of the promised Land, a Lot shall be reserv’d for him” (28). These were not guarantees of future work (31). Provided these “occasional

¹⁴ For this thought, I wish to thank Matthew Grenby and Helen Stark for their helpful feedback with an earlier version of this manuscript.

Connections” continued to fund his editorial efforts in “collecting the Materials of Opposition,” and also provided that he succeeded in “working up the whole Mass [as of the people] to a Head,” the writer would find that “Hope sweetens all his Labours, all his Difficulties, all his Discouragements, and he at last enjoys the Dream, of growing serviceable to himself and his Country together” (31). But more often than not, when “the Country is brought to groan for a Change,” and the “strongest Faction takes Advantage of the Cry, to displace the Weaker,” and power then shifted, the fortunes of even the savviest mercenary writer would slip too, as “All-sufficient Patriots become insignificant Ministers,” and “the Pen is no longer of any Use — And he that held it, is left, in the Language of Shakespeare, ‘Like an unregarded Bulrush on the Stream to rot itself with Motion’” (31).

Ralph bemoaned his colleagues as “incapable of taking up any other Trade” (72).¹⁵ Indeed, “were Authors to consider Times as other Manufacturers do, they would act ... reasonably ... But then they would not be Authors,” as the “Pride and Pleasure in their first Sallies not only serve[s] them instead of Profit, but render[s] them as deaf to all other Considerations (71). He cites as an example Thomas Gordon (d. 1750), author of the *Independent Whig*, who wrote, along with John Trenchard (c.1668-1723), *Cato’s Letters* (Stephen, DNB). Ralph says that Gordon had the “Character of a writing Politician,” after Walpole patronized him, and he was thus “a Writer by Accident, not by Profession,” as he had been made safe “against any Reverse of Fortune, by the Gratitude and Generosity of former Friends.” (Ralph 37-8).

Addressing the issue of who would engage in such a desperate line of work, Ralph began by critiquing the self-funded, “Voluntier-Writers of our Times” as “Holiday-Writers indeed,” as they could “write just enough to show They can read; and, having so done, throw away the Pen,” not having to depend on its skilled wielding for their survival (8). Yet he does not say that powerful people should refrain from writing for the public. Even “the great Walpole himself ... did not disdain to make his Approaches to Power by Writing as well as Speaking,” along with “many, many dignified Names, in all Capacities, of Persons now living, who have either obtained those Dignities, or added signal Emoluments to them, by the Exercise of the Pen” (37-8). A word of warning, however, in regards to Ralph’s Whiggish digressions. His long fight against his Tory betters was not merely an aesthetic clash, but a political one, as well. Ralph faded in and out of what was even then a fluid definition of “journalist” in the hopes of achieving higher things, from his perspective. In his fight for political fortune and influence, he stepped on toes not just because he sought a different way to fund his work, but also because the arts were funded in intensely political manner. The two could not be divorced but only distinguished.

Ralph maintained the distinction between aesthetics and politics as his argument continued. Indeed, he needed a less-nuanced approach if his essay was to maintain its momentum. For example, he then insisted that well-to-do amateurs who wrote not out

¹⁵ Note that in both the facsimile and original text found in the Cambridge University Library, 73-6 have been incorrectly numbered as ‘65-8.’

of necessity, “are amphibious Things; half Squire, half Author, who, from a strong Presumption of Parts, despise the Ignorants above them, and as vain a Presumption of Patrimony, despise the Indigenes below them” (13). This was a kind of internal class system among the literati, in which writers would compare themselves by how they made their living. Some proceeded “to look down on a poor Pen-and-ink Laborer, with the same Eye of Disdain that they look down on their own poor Curates” (13). Pride was not the exclusive domain of the wealthy gentlemen-writer, however. The plucky “Writer by Trade might insconce [sic] himself behind his Betters, and plead their Authority for doing That out of Necessity, which they do wantonly, out of the Rage of adding Luxury to Luxury, and Vanity to Vanity,” something that has become “the only Ambition of us all, from the first Grandee down to the lowest Mechanic” (12). Ralph’s argument for the status of writers thus admitted that sometimes writers could be their own worst enemies. All ambition aside, however, Ralph defended the journalist writing for survival:

As the Case stands, he is laugh’d at if poor; if, to avoid that Curse, he endeavors to turn his Wit to Profit, he is branded as a Mercenary ... If again he should have the good Luck to find a lucrative Market for his Works, Pirates supplant him: His Property may be worth taking, though not worth defending: *Magazines, Chronicles, &c.* may retale him. Coffee-Houses subscribe for him. — Circulating Libraries subsist by lending him. So that he may be read every where, rewarded no where (58).

Ralph is referring to the common practice of copying material without permission, and reprinting it freely. Even “fiddlers, Singers, Dancers, Tumblers, Players, Mimics, Quacks, Hacks, Hawkers and Pedlars (sic)” were expected to be paid based on their performances (58). Instead, writers were far less proportionally rewarded, as Ralph extols:

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, Penary, 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 (22).

There was no glamour in this drudgery. But Ralph qualified the work of authors and writers — no matter their audience — in legitimizing language. When distinguishing the “Voluntier, or Gentleman-writer,” from the “Writer by Profession,” Ralph acknowledged that a certain pride motivates both, but insisted that “a Man who writes to live may set as high a Value on Character, as he that writes to make one” (7-8). In Ralph’s opinion,

self-sustaining writers earned a certain amount of autonomy. This came with a price, of course: financial uncertainty.

Writers had “as good a Right to the Product in Money” as the landowner who collects his rent (8). Ralph did not think that “our Authors are less worthy of Distinction, because they are no longer honour’d with it” (39). Granted, he admitted, they tended to “mistake their Talents, and over-rate their Performances,” and are “no more qualified to be Judges in their own Cause than other People” (25, 54). Just as there are “Haberdashers of small Wares in all Professions,” there was such a thing as a “petty Author” (56). But even “as the Claims and Merits of Authors have been thus overborne on [the] one hand, and the Credit and Value of Authorship sunk on the other, the Value of such other Professions, as have little or no Title to Credit at all, have been forc’d up as much above their natural Level” (40-1). Writers should be judged and rewarded by the quality of their original work. Ralph fretted, however, that such work would be lost in the noise of a free-wheeling marketplace. There were limits to how much competition was healthy.

One of his other recurring themes is the unappreciated nature of writing work, which he again emphasizes by comparing to that of other occupations. “Cooks, Taylors, Jewellers, Pimps, Flatterers ... are always in request,” because their work immediately concerned the body and its needs, and “Lawyers, Physicians, and Divines” were on call “when they are wanted,” as their professions involve the practical needs of the soul. In contrast, “Authors, or Dealers in Helps to improve and delight the Understanding” were not considered vital (46). Ralph argued that they should, in fact, be ranked by their abilities and merit and allowed to compete for success, like any other self-supporting worker. Quoting Montesquieu, Ralph insisted that, “Those who are excellent in any Profession will set their own Price on their Skill” (41).

He was not arguing that anyone be allowed to write for the public, and instead makes the case for a more limited field. If too many were to ply the writing trade, more often than not, “the most trifling Talents will rise in their Demands, accordingly: and so all Proportion between Wants and Means will be at an End,” and then “the more noble meet with little or no Consideration at all” (41). In his closing appeal, Ralph urged a reduction in the number of authors, as a means of better preserving the restricted opportunities available. As it stands, there was a “Glut of Writing,” which, if not addressed immediately, would lead to a “Dearth” of such opportunities as long-lasting as a Biblical famine (73). But despite this dark forecast, he noted that there was an intrinsic need for news in society, and thus a demand for writers to produce that information. Since “Knowledge is the Light of the World,” and “Authors have been the Dispensers of it,” he urges his fellow “Men of Letters” to combine their interests, and speak up on behalf of their right to work for pay, free from the stigma associated with it by others (73-5). They should organize and demand to be respected. In the context of the London bookseller combinations which dominated the literary market in his era, his remarks make more sense. If the contractors of creative work could organize themselves, he asks, why not writers? He goes on to say that in the “Republic of Letters,” full-time, vocational writers had to distinguish themselves from “Freebooters and

Bravoes,” and should not stoop to becoming “imploy’d like Cocks in a Battle-Royal. — Or, at least, like so many Sea-Boys order’d to lash one another round the Mast, for the Entertainment of the Quarter-Deck” (75).¹⁶ They should instead unite so that they would “need neither Patrons nor Establishments,” and “out-combine the very Booksellers themselves!” (75). Ralph was vague on how this is to be accomplished, but that was not the issue. What mattered more to him was that writers, including journalists, should think of themselves as having responsibilities as well as rights and respect.

Quoting Lord Shaftesbury, Ralph declared that “Authors at large ... are in a Manner profess’d Masters of Understanding to the Age” (61). If such authors exercised “the Knowledge, Prudence, Probity, and Spirit requisite *to so high a Calling*,” (his italics) they honored the nation (61). Paying authors of that kind of caliber and character with praise alone was inadequate, and to proceed to actively “decrying and undervaluing them, for descending to do as *other Folks* do, is as coarse as tis cruel” (61). Indeed, “instead of reproaching Authors, therefore, for living by their Labours, we ought to reproach ourselves for allowing them no other Means to live” (60-1). Good writers should be given a living wage, and not demeaned, because many are trying to serve society, Ralph reiterated.

In a “Commonwealth ... sick of many Grievs, all preying on its Vitals, and surrounded with many Dangers all imminent,” the press and its writers offered to combine the reasonable elements of society into a common call for better government (69). Those “who want nothing but Knowledge of, and Confidence in, one another, to render the Community capable of advising for itself,” could find in the periodicals of their day, “by the Means of the Press,” a meeting ground on a humble “Sheet of Paper” (69-70). In this way, writers had an especially important role to play protecting the weaker from the stronger in society. It was Ralph’s fervent hope that “the Press hitherto, thro’ Necessity, a Prostitute, might be render’d a Vestal, and might be imploy’d like one, to keep the sacred Fire of Patriotism from Extinction” (68). This metaphor sought to redeem the notion of a “prostituted press,” with mercenaries writing for anyone, for any reason, and ultimately for money. Writing to make a living while adhering to principles was possible, and if respected and supported, the result would be an ideal literary marketplace where newspapers and their writers would serve a central role as guardians, not of good taste, but of the commonwealth. Producing that “Sheet of Paper” were Ralph’s “writers by trade.”

Conclusion

In his *Case*, Ralph raised several key concerns: Journalists could be authors (in the more culturally legitimized sense) too, and should be treated as such. They should be judged on the quality of their work, and not on their social status and standing (at least not as much as before). It should be up to “the public” (as formative and contested as that notion remained) to decide whether an author was worth supporting, or not. Ralph is a

¹⁶ The quarterdeck being where a ship’s officers were usually assembled while underway or in battle.

bit paradoxical here, since he ends on a despairing note, and advocates for a collective, “Republic of letters.” This, after he has argued for the necessity of supporting independent writers. And he is, of course, himself a patroned writer, prone to complaint during periods of misfortune. Yet, in the midst of his tendency toward self-pity, he was advocating, at one level, for a kind of intellectual utopia, a meritocracy for writers that ignored the deep connections between the arts and the political realm. With his call to move away from patrons, perhaps this disconnect was inevitable.

It is worth dwelling on this tension, or paradox, of a man determined to be recognized and paid for his writing merits (and speaking for others, or along with others, in similar predicaments), while also expecting a kind of revised, egalitarian patronage system. Without even realizing it, Ralph’s have-it-both-ways approach is a natural extension of the transitory moment he occupied, in the middle of the century. After the development of political journals but long before the likes of Sir Walter Scott, Ralph was living through the uncertainties of a transforming literary culture. In this, Adam Rounce identifies Ralph as “more notable for his pessimism ... a Jeremiah” (Rounce 19). With his long complaints about the financial status of himself and fellow authors, Ralph is not exactly a Pollyanna. But as others have pointed out, the uncertain transition to a more self-sustaining literary marketplace was long, slow and painful (Griffin, “Authorship in the Long Eighteenth Century,” 172). Publics were shifting, and the nature of periodicals themselves changing. Class, gender, political orientation—all these factors and more complicated the fate of any aspiring writer (Powell, *Performing Authorship*, 37-8).

As Bertrand Goldgar has observed, Ralph is simultaneously “strange and cynical” in his proposals (268-9). He exhibited the turns of fortune that beset writers during his time period, having written both independently and also having received patronage, both for and against the administration. He is conflicted, as a result, and unsure himself, of the mechanics of how, exactly, the free market and creativity could coincide. After all, the marketplace for books in the 1730s, 1740s and 1750s (especially by authors exercising early forms of copyright) was far from stable and funding for newspaper writers even less so. Despite this shifting marketplace, Ralph was claiming that authorship, while commercialized, did not have to be compromised. Ralph’s example shows that “authorship” as a concept was complex, on both sides of the Atlantic, in this period. Embedded in competing economies and meaning many things to different parts of a pre-industrial society, the role of the author led those who wrote for their living to pursue varied paths to subsistence (Jackson 9-51). Again, Ralph was hardly alone in this quest. But he remains perhaps the preeminent case study of how an author from his era wrestled with how the uneven literary market could sustain journalists. No other journalist spoke as forcefully or as explicitly about periodical-writers (i.e. journalists) as legitimate authors. Ralph *was* contradictory. He seems to marinate in what it means to fail as an aspiring author. Yet he was somewhat successful, as “failures” go. In the end, he did more than survive through a clever combination of both patronage and self-sustaining writing, and he did so more than many of his peers.

Rounce is correct to point out that Ralph highlights the “systematic” ways authors could come to ruin by the standards of the time (19). But reviewing what Ralph thought of the merits of his contemporaries’ work, even as they struggled to find their occupational niche in society, helps to extend our understanding of the process by which periodical literature became commercialized in the early eighteenth century. According to Ralph, writing, political or otherwise, was not quite yet supported by the various publics and audiences who consumed and responded to it. Neither was it as patroned as it was before. It was in flux. He speaks in the midst of this, during one of the initial cultural-historical eras in which independent men (and women) of letters could impact their larger literary world. In this regard, he is worth revisiting.

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