

"To his Pen he owes all his Subsistence": Authorship, Commerce and Virtue in Colman and Foote

Dr Bridget Orr

**Associate Professor, Department of English,
Vanderbilt University**

While the satiric critique of the inept and mercenary authorship of hacks and dunces by poets from Dryden to Pope is one of the best-known aspects of late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century English literary culture, much less scholarly attention has been paid to the satire on authorship which appeared on the Restoration and eighteenth-century London stage. As Elaine McGirr has recently shown, the frequent hostility directed at playwrights including Dryden and Cibber were generated largely by ideological conflict, and tended to demonize authorial self-importance and vanity, rather than financial corruption. The heroic mode associated with the Jacobite and Tory Dryden was one focus of parody but well-known Whigs Colley Cibber and Richard Steele were equally subject to attack by political and aesthetic opponents.

After the definitive defeat of the Jacobite cause in 1746 however, dramatic characterizations of authorship by prominent playwrights such as George Colman the Elder and Samuel Foote began to satirize professional writers because of their imbrication in a mercenary book trade, rather than purveyors of suspect political aims. In a text constructed as a trial of writerly integrity, Foote's eponymous *The Author* (1757) depicts authorship as constantly susceptible to corruption, by patrons eager for puffery and book-sellers hungry for licentious or trifling product. The play is acutely aware of London's role as the publishing hub of empire, as colonials and provincials jostle for publicity, and the printer calculates the West Indian novel market. By establishing a parallel between the author's resistance to corruption and that of his (disguised) father, a noble colonial administrator, the play suggests that when undertaken by genteel men of good education and morals, authorship can be a form of elevated public service, rather than mercenary drudgery. But the protagonist's aim (in which he is successful) is nonetheless to abandon poetry for an estate, whether gained through successful industry or by marriage.

Written a decade later, Colman's *The English Merchant* (1767) uses a redaction of Voltaire's *L'Ecossoise* to attack periodical writers with unrestrained fury. While Voltaire's text responded to dramatic hostility to the *Lumieres*, Colman's play focuses on hacks who resemble contemporary tabloid journalists, aggressively on the hunt for saleable scandal, willing to intercept private communications, regularly inventing and peddling lies and attempting to manipulate legal authority to give credence to their "discoveries" and serve their patrons' private interests. But while the commercialization of writing is excoriated in the text, trade itself is depicted with great respect, as the titular merchant serves (as is frequently the case

in English sentimental comedies) as the benevolent *deus ex machine*, a role which French drama would never allow.

This paper thus reveals the little-known but culturally central role of later Georgian plays in shaping and circulating changing perceptions of authorship in London while also exploring - by means of comparison with Voltaire's *L'Écossaise*) - the rather different assumptions about the relations of literature and commerce prevalent in Paris.