Epilogue

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter discusses the significant positive developments in playwriting in England during the period from 1660 to 1710. In the 1660s the writer of a play had little status or security. His identity was largely unknown and not property compensated. This condition changed starting in the 1690s when authors started to be recognized in play catalogues, the audience began to be critical of plagiarism, and the authors were properly paid for the performance or publication of their work under the renumeration system introduced after the Restoration.

Keywords: playwriting, England, play catalogues, plagiarism, compensation, playwrights

In the 1660s the writer of a play had little status or security. He could hope for one benefit night, for a modest fee from a publisher, perhaps for a gift from a patron. In the playhouse his identity remained largely unknown. If his play was published, he could expect to see his name in print, though only after a gap of a year or so. Since playbills advertised titles but did not attribute them, the identity of the author at the time of performance could be known only by word of mouth. Regular theatre-goers may have learnt the names of authors from playhouse gossip, although even Pepys sometimes got them wrong. There were no daily newspapers to publicize forthcoming premières, nor literary journals to carry reviews.
At a bookseller’s shop, an interested Londoner could pick up a cheap quarto of a play he or she remembered seeing; could browse through or, if rich enough, buy a folio of Shakespeare, Beaumont and Fletcher, or Jonson; could admire and perhaps purchase the grandiose tomes of plays by genteel amateurs. There were few catalogues to guide the buyer’s choices, and they were hard of access. Kirkman’s listings of 1661 and 1671, for instance, were bound up with copies of obscure plays. Not until 1680 did the first bibliographically independent catalogue of plays appear. The early catalogues, arranged alphabetically by title, drew attention to the commodity for sale. The name of the dramatist was not deemed a drawing card by the trade.

With virtually all new plays circulating singly, the public had little awareness of the collected output of individual playwrights. Nor did they have a sense of the native dramatic tradition beyond what they absorbed from the platitudes recycled in prologues and epilogues. Except for Dryden’s *Essay of Dramatick Poesie*, criticism of the drama in the 1660s was incidental. It was largely confined to authorial prefaces to quarto playbooks. These brief programmatic statements help us to reconstruct the outlook of early Restoration playwrights, but at the time their readership is likely to have been limited. Those who sought to make money by writing for the stage were hardly in the public eye. What scant publicity did accrue to playwriting in the early decades of the Restoration is likely to have been generated by the celebrated exertions of genteel amateurs and by the promotion of a professional dramatist, Dryden, to the post of Poet Laureate.
At the outset of the eighteenth century we are in a different world. ‘Never did printed Plays rise to such a Price’, observed one hostile commentator in 1702, ‘and what is more, never were so many Poets prefer’d as in the last ten Years.’¹ What had happened over those ten years was a continuation of what had happened over the previous three decades. Playwrights were now far better off. By the 1690s they had acquired a second benefit, on the sixth night, if the play lasted that long. The move from one to two benefits cannot have been a competitive device, for it occurred when the United Company was in control of the theatrical marketplace. The management must have come to recognize that the supplier of a script which was good enough to last six nights, and which might become a stock piece, deserved a higher reward than one whose play died after three nights. The correlation between the success of a show and its author's remuneration had been intrinsic to the benefit arrangement; now it was becoming ever more pronounced. After 1700, dramatists were granted the proceeds from every third performance throughout at least the first nine nights. In 1719 a proposal for a royalty system was put forward by Charles Gildon, who recommended that ‘the Dramatic Poets...have the 3d and the 6th Day free, without any Charges, half the Profits of the 9th, and the 8th Part of the Profits above the Charges every time [the play] is acted for ever, or rather during their Lives, after which the Academy [Royal] to have the whole’.² Though unheeded, the proposal is notable for its assertion of the author's right to a life-long profit from a successful script.

Payments from publishers had risen too. In 1707 Edmund Smith was reported to have received ‘as much...for his first Tragedy, as Mr. Dryden had for his last’.³ With the reading public growing and sales rising, the market demanded the payment of higher fees to authors. Publishers began to compete aggressively for the right to bring out a new play, and often secured a copy of a play before the start of its run. The Act for the Encouragement of Learning in 1710 formally vested the rights in copies in their authors and thus legitimated the practice of contractual sale that had been in place for decades. It put playwrights in a position to ask for more money for their work.

The improvement in the economic standing of playwrights contributed to the growth in the public status of the profession and to a surge in author-centred publicity. The emergent literary periodicals, the Gentleman's Journal (1692–4), the Muses Mercury (1707–8), the Tatler (1709–11), and the Spectator (1711–12), provided advance information about plays in rehearsal and reported on recent premières and revivals, usually indicating the identity of the author. In 1699 the author's name was given on a playbill for the first time. It was then too that authors' names began to feature in newspaper advertisements for printed plays.
Collected editions of dramatic works of individual authors proliferated. Complete with portraits, dedications, biographical sketches, and critical accounts, these multi-volume sets enhanced the stature of the playwright and the prestige of the drama as literature. Dramatic catalogues, biographical dictionaries, critical essays, and pamphlets had gradually established a sense of achievement and ranking, and had canonized living authors alongside dead classics. The stature of genteel amateurs waned. ‘Whose Name could I so properly prefix to this Performance, as the only Nobleman, now living, a Dramatick Poet?’ asked Giles Jacob when dedicating his Poetical Register of 1719 to George Granville, Lord Lansdowne. Jacob’s patron was not just the only noble playwright alive; he was the last one. By the early eighteenth century, the drama had acquired cultural eminence and respectability. Its present luminaries were professional men of the theatre.

The names of such writers as Dryden, Otway, and Congreve had entered the national pantheon; their work was held to enrich British culture. The hierarchy implicit in critical tracts and collective dramatic biographies was disseminated and popularized by anthologies of quotations and poetry manuals such as Bysshe’s much-reprinted The Art of English Poetry, Gildon’s The Complete Art of Poetry, and the anonymously compiled Thesaurus Dramaticus. The contents of these compendia were invariably promoted as the exemplars of native literary genius. The names of authors whose work was deemed worthy of inclusion were listed at the front of each compilation. The drive to abstract and assemble quintessential passages from individual plays and poems was paralleled by the urge to embody the crowning dramatic achievements of playwrights in collected editions of the best of native drama such as A Collection of the Best English Plays, Chosen out of all the best Authors (1711–12 and [1720]), published by Thomas Johnson of the Hague, A Collection of Plays by Eminent Hands, issued by W. Mears (1719), and The Beauties of the English Stage; or, Select Plays from the Best Dramatick Authors (1739–41) brought out by Robert Walker.

A play was now seen as an artefact worthy of sustained critical analysis rather than as a mere script for performance. It was conceived of as a product of an individual imagination. The escalating debate about the legitimacy of source materials and the ethics of collaboration was, I have argued, an index of and a factor contributing to the individualization of dramatic authorship. The obverse of this process was the cultural elevation of the drama as an art form.
Contemporary writers and critics believed that the author's dominion over the thoughts and words of a play was not alienable by performance or publication. They held that the survival of a dramatic work in the repertory and its availability in print in no way diminished the ethical claim of its maker; rather, it made the author's claim stronger because more public. Any form of playwriting which compromised or subverted the moral authority of the individual creator was seen as suspect. Any encroachment upon the authorial prerogative had to be exposed and stigmatized. The negative perception of collaboration, and the urge to apportion shares in jointly written plays, were manifestations of this stance. Another was the impetus to identify the sources of plays and to castigate illicit appropriators. Plagiarism was seen as an invasion of the original author's right and a violation of his or her literary property. 'As Laws are made for the Security of Property', wrote John Dennis a year after the Copyright Statute had come into effect, 'what pity'tis that there are not some enacted for the Security of a Man's Thoughts and Inventions, which alone are properly his?' Dennis was not concerned with the commercial ramifications of print publication which the Copyright Statute had been designed to regulate; instead he was lobbying for a new Act, one that would protect a literary work from plagiarism, not from piracy.

In the course of the half-century following the Stuart Restoration, both the playwright's position in the marketplace and the dominant conceptions of dramatic authorship changed in fundamental ways. The transition was neither straightforward nor inevitable. If the theatrical duopoly had not been instituted at the Restoration, and if, instead, several acting companies had been allowed to compete, performance rights would probably have remained linked to publication. To protect the script from print would have been the paramount concern. And yet it was the extensive publication of drama that determined the status of playwriting in the later seventeenth century. There occurred a series of shifts which resulted from changing theatrical conditions (competition between the two companies stimulating the demand for new plays, the ascendancy of the United Company being marked by reliance on the stock repertory); from political circumstances (audiences during the Popish Plot and the Exclusion Crisis being especially keen to establish the identity of the author of a topical play); from new printing and publishing practices (the shift from single-volume folio publications to multi-volume octavo ones being connected to new technologies of paper-making); from legal regulations (the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1695 effecting a further curtailment of the gap between performance and publication); and from the particular interests and enthusiasms of a Kirkman or a Langbaine.
These changes were gradual and uneven in pace and depth. There is no date when they can be said to have culminated. If 1710 is a landmark, it is so only in retrospect. The fact that the publication of Rowe's Shakespeare and Congreve's Works, and the coming into effect of the first Copyright Statute, occurred within twelve months of one another does not mean much in itself. Yet by that time the condition of and attitudes toward dramatic authorship had shifted far enough from what they had been half a century earlier to produce a new economic and cultural formation. In concept, albeit not in law, the dramatist of the first decade of the eighteenth century had gained property in and authority over the text of the play.

The gains brought to dramatists by that process were neither complete nor secure. In some respects indeed the years preceding the passage of the Copyright Statute were a high point for playwrights, from which the decades ahead would bring decline. Before around 1710 it was possible to earn a living by writing plays. Afterwards, at least until the 1780s, it became virtually impossible. Fielding managed it in the 1730s, but only until Walpole's Licensing Act of 1737. Bickerstaffe managed it in the 1760s, but his was an exceptional case. Over the eighteenth century a series of developments diminished the literary esteem of the theatre: the new theatrical union of 1708, which effectively stifled competition between acting companies; the conservative managements at Drury Lane from 1708 to Garrick's advent as manager in 1747, and at Lincoln's Inn Fields and Covent Garden under John Rich from 1714 to 1761; the Licensing Act, which reinstated the patent duopoly and severely curtailed the performance of new plays; the rise of the musical in the 1760s; and the enormous size of the playhouses built towards the end of the century. In consequence the literary aspirations of writers went in directions other than drama. The theatre became increasingly commercial, increasingly a vehicle for star actors.
Yet if the relatively prosperous conditions of playwriting in the early eighteenth century faded, the new respect for the drama as a literary form, and for dramatic authorship as an original and solo activity, had come to stay. Whatever the fate of plays on the stage, the stature and popularity of printed drama was assured. Publication, editing, and criticism all rose both in quality and in quantity. That endeavour, and the concerns about authorship and appropriation that informed it, came to be invested mainly in old plays rather than in contemporary ones. In the 1780s and 1790s we find (for example) Elizabeth Inchbald translating continental plays with little regard for those claims for the virtue of creative self-sufficiency that had guided and restricted the appropriative practices of a Dryden or a Shadwell a century earlier. Her adaptations escaped censure because her plays, like most eighteenth-century plays, fell below the level with which critical commentary concerned itself. Esteem and critical attention were now directed towards a single past author: Shakespeare. Not only did the new drama of the eighteenth century seem slight and trivial beside him. He came to dwarf those authors whom late seventeenth-century criticism had ranked alongside or even above him. It is in the deification of Shakespeare in the eighteenth century and beyond that the ideas whose emergence has been described in this book would find their fullest and most lasting expression. Modern scholars have been right to emphasize the elevation of the Bard, but have missed the historical process which made it possible. The decisive stages of that process occurred within the period covered by this study. If there is one era of English history during which dramatic authorship may be said to have achieved cultural respectability, it is the half-century following the Restoration of Charles II in 1660.

Notes:
(1) *Comparison*, sig. A4r.

(2) *The Post-Man Robb’d of his Mail*, 335

(3) *The Muses Mercury: or, The Monthly Miscellany* (May 1707), 123

(4) D. F. McKenzie has made an eloquent case for the professionalism and versatility of Congreve in his ‘The Integrity of William Congreve’, The Clark Lectures for 1997 (Trinity College, Cambridge)

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(6) ‘To the Spectator upon his Paper on the 24th of April’ (1711), in Critical
Works, ii. 27.

(7) see Robert D. Hume, Henry Fielding and the London Theatre, 1728–1737
Professional Imaginative Writing, 61 et passim; Milhous and Hume,
‘Playwrights’ Remuneration’

World, 1–34