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ABSTRACT

The image of a bookseller in eighteenth-century literature

One of the characteristics of the eighteenth-century literature is its high self-consciousness and it is not limited to the commentary on the conventions of writing. The writings of the period reflect various aspects of the emerging book market and frequently thematise the transformations of the field of cultural production brought about by the change of the patronage system. The aim of my paper is to analyse the ambiguous status of booksellers, who fulfilled multiple functions on the book market, as it was represented in literature of the long eighteenth century (e.g. in Henry Fielding's *Author's Farce*, *Joseph Andrews*, Pope's *Dunciad* or Lackington's *Memoirs* and *Confessions*). After the decline of patronage by aristocrats and politicians, they mediated between authors and the reading public, which was bound to lead to conflicts of interest. The original function of the patron, at least in the ideal version, was to liberate the authors from economic concerns and thus support the cause of literature. The collective patronage of the reading public, which was freshly augmented by the newly enriched and the newly literate members, influenced the actions of booksellers, who after all were merchants dealing in a more subtle kind of commodities, and made them encroach on the creative autonomy of authors. Booksellers then, as the writings from the period demonstrate, had to combine the roles of patrons, merchants, readers, and not infrequently of authors, in order to survive on the market, which may explain their equivocal depiction in literature of the period.