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## Gray, the Marketplace, and the Masculine Poet

In 1767, an anonymous pamphlet appeared entitled "The Sale of Authors, a Dialogue, in Imitation of Lucian's Sale of Philosophers." Written by naval official Archibald Campbell, this pamphlet features Apollo and Mercury conducting an auction among booksellers for the premier writers of the day, including James Macpherson, John Wilkes, Charles Churchill, and Thomas Gray. With its magnified sense of poets' powerlessness in the commercialized literary culture of midcentury England, Campbell's text seems a typical attack on the vigorously expanding book trade. Yet while satirizing the transformation of writers into commodities, and over-emphasizing the diminished social stature that accompanies this change, Campbell manages to capture with some accuracy the defining features of Gray's literary career. Most obviously, he calls attention to the poet's reputation for personal effeminacy:

*Apollo.* I see this good company are not a little surprised, that so eminent a poet is wrapt up in a watchman's coat. Pray, Mercury, inform them how it happened. . . .

*Mercury.* You must know, having made many unsuccessful attempts to catch this great poet, I was at last obliged to have recourse to stratagem. Though he has a great deal of poetical fire, nobody indeed more, yet is he extremely afraid of culinary fire, and keeps constantly by him a ladder of ropes to guard against all accidents of that sort. Knowing this, I hired some watchmen to raise the alarm of fire below his windows. Immediately the windows were seen to open, and the Poet descending in his shirt by his ladder. Thus we caught him at last, and one of the watchmen, to prevent his nerves from being totally benumbed by frigorific torpor, lent him his great coat. Here you have him, watchman's coat, ladder of ropes, silver tea tongs and all.<sup>1</sup>

The tale of Gray's capture that Mercury relates was based on an incident that various Cambridge men exaggerated and embellished: undergraduates out for a good time supposedly alarmed the poet (who indeed had a fear of fire) in his rooms at Peterhouse College. In

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some versions of the story, Gray responded to their warnings of fire by appearing at the window in a “delicate white night cap”; in others, he descended by means of his ladder (a rope “soft as the silky cords by which Romeo ascended to his Juliet”) into a tub of water.<sup>2</sup> All versions, however, highlight the poet’s ambiguous sexuality and departure from “typical” male behavior; these tales were considered so damaging to Gray’s reputation that Horace Walpole warned William Mason to omit the event of Gray’s removal from Peterhouse to Pembroke College in his memoirs of the poet’s life.<sup>3</sup> Yet despite the precautions of Gray’s friends, this incident (as Campbell’s fictitious account shows) was seen as illustrative of Gray’s character. England’s greatest lyric poet was ridiculed as a “butterfly” who was too feminine to accept the rigors of life at Cambridge—that training ground where privileged youths learn to exercise their social power.

Gray’s supposed effeminacy, moreover, was not considered a mere quirk of character. According to Campbell, it also affected his choice of poetic form and subject matter: “the *sweetly plaintive* G[ray], the divine Author of *Elegies in a Church-yard*, and a *Cat*” stood accused of producing sentimental, lachrymose verses on trivial subjects. The mention of the “*Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat*,” with its seemingly unimportant subject matter (Samuel Johnson, like Campbell, considered it a “trifle”<sup>4</sup>), appears to rank Gray with poets whose work privileges feeling over breadth and scope of thought, or emotional display over the concept and design exhibited by heroic poets like Homer and Milton. And when Gray does attempt the heroic, as in “*The Bard*,” Campbell charges that his poetry consists solely of commonplace sentiments expressed in inflated rhetoric. Praising the “*Pindarick Powers*” evident in “*The Bard*”’s opening line (“*Ruin seize thee, ruthless king!*”), Mercury invites the booksellers to “observe with what sublimity he has expressed the very vulgar phrase of Devil take ye.” The poet’s function as a moral or intellectual monitor for his culture—a “merciful substitute for the legislature,” in the words of his contemporary, Goldsmith<sup>5</sup>—seems abandoned in favor of emotional or imaginative indulgence, a move that Campbell censures in the epithet (“*sweetly plaintive*”) he repeatedly bestows upon Gray.

Finally, the very form of Campbell’s satire suggests the diminution of poets and their verses to a purely ornamental function. Campbell portrays the market in texts as resulting not only in writers’ sale of copyrights to booksellers, but in the exchange of the authors themselves for a price. After reciting some of his verses, Gray is auctioned off to Robert Dodsley at the bargain rate of half a guinea; Dodsley

defends his bid for Gray's "plaintive poetical powers" by noting the low market value of verse: "Poetry is a mere drug now-a-days. It seldom pays for paper, print, and advertising. That I know both to my cost and sorrow." Although the model for this satire—Lucian's "Philosophies for Sale"—dates back to around 160 A.D., the prospect of authors on the auction block calls to mind the contemporary auctions of luxury goods that provided the English upper classes with an opportunity for both entertainment and conspicuous consumption.<sup>6</sup> Like paintings, sculpture, or china vases, writers and their works exist as objects whose exchange should enrich their sellers and adorn the lives of consumers. (Mercury emphasizes Gray's ornamental function, commending both his "elegant" verses and silver tea tongs.) But poetry, unlike the other items at auctions, confers neither wealth nor prestige. As Dodsley complains in Campbell's satire, poetry is a "mere drug"—a worthless commodity which in some ways resembles the patent medicines that also graced the shelves of booksellers' shops. As items for sale, medicines and poems are commonplace and cheap; as narcotics, they endeavor to promote pleasure and reduce pain for a short time, bestowing no real benefits upon consumers who come to crave the sensations that they induce.<sup>7</sup>

The criticisms that Campbell raises concerning poets and their verse are by no means idiosyncratic. During the eighteenth century, many discussions appeared in print about poets' commercial sale of their work and about the influence of poetry on the tenor of public life. Gray, furthermore, was not an unrepresentative poet, despite the eccentric character that Campbell bestows upon him. Rather, the problem of effeminacy that Campbell ascribes to Gray, including the supposedly trivial and ineffectual nature of his verses, echoes the complaints about contemporary poetry circulating in the literary culture at large. Several explanations have been offered for the increasing marginality of poets and poetry, including the separation of beauty from knowledge in eighteenth-century aesthetics and prose fiction's appropriation of "history" as its subject matter.<sup>8</sup> But the "classic to romantic" shift can also be contextualized in more materialist terms. I argue here that the commercial market in texts (part of the growing trade in commodities) led to a redefinition of the poet's status in English culture, a status expressed in terms of a new concept of masculine conduct. For Augustan writers, participation in the book trade had compromised poets' authority and masculinity, for it rendered them hacks, or literary prostitutes; dependent upon and subjected to the desires of others (particularly booksellers and readers),

commercial writers in no way resembled the self-sufficient, disinterested gentlemen who formed the aristocratic ideal of civic virtue.<sup>9</sup> Later in the century, however, the decline of patronage as a viable means of support for writers and the expansion of the commercial book trade made cultural attitudes toward involvement in the literary market more complicated, particularly through the emergence of different sexual tropes for authors. While the link between writing for pay and prostitution still remained intact (especially among those with some connection to the patronage system), critics and writers, regardless of their class backgrounds or political allegiances, frequently began to associate masculinity and cultural power with commercial success, while characterizing poets' detachment from the market as an infantile, or effeminate, dependence upon others. (Samuel Johnson and Charles Churchill exemplify this trend; although he detested Churchill's politics and disliked his verse, Johnson admired his productivity: "a tree that produces a great many crabs is better than a tree which produces only a few."<sup>10</sup>) The following pages will suggest how Gray's literary career illustrates these cultural tensions, and will investigate his attempts to resist the emerging sexual and economic models of authorship.

## 1

Authors, like maids at fifteen years,  
 Are full of wishes, full of fears.  
 One might by pleasant thoughts be led  
 To lose a trifling maiden-head;  
 But 'tis a terrible vexation  
 To give it up with reputation.

These verses from Robert Lloyd's "To George Colman, Esq."<sup>11</sup> (1762) implicitly compare the act of writing to sexual intercourse, the audience being the male partner in the act and the author being the female. And, predictably, it is the "masculine" audience—the receiver of the "feminine" writer's offerings—who determines the worth of the text, with either praise or disgrace. Like women bestowing sexual favors, writers must also avoid being too forthcoming with their works, since excessive circulation cheapens the goods. Poets such as William Whitehead (who, as laureate, enjoyed royal patronage) and Edward Young (who tried repeatedly to secure a steady patron) joined Lloyd in cautioning against the perils of publication, and offered sound sexual/economic advice about supply and demand. Ac-

ording to Whitehead, a privately circulated manuscript seduces its readers into approval, whereas a text printed and sold only repulses them with its demands for attention:

Seldom publish: manuscripts disarm  
The censor's frown, and boast an added charm,  
Enhance their worth by seeming to retire,  
For what but few can prate of, all admire.<sup>12</sup>

Like reticent, flirtatious belles, the most desirable poems are the ones most difficult to access, and the most favored poets are those who withhold their works from the public view.

The association of prolific "hack" writers with sexually promiscuous females dates back at least to the early eighteenth century (and most notably appears in Pope's *Dunciad*). And for writers in Pope's day, comparisons between authors and women were exclusively satiric: as Catherine Ingrassia has noted, commercial writers' involvement in a fluctuating marketplace feminized them (in the view of conservatives like Pope) by making their identity and value dependent on the changing tastes of consumers.<sup>13</sup> Votaries of Dulness, the booksellers and scribblers of Grub Street appeared so threatening because in deference to the demands of an increasingly popular audience they departed from the norms of elite, classical culture. By midcentury, however, writers had few alternatives to participation in the book trade,<sup>14</sup> and the comparison of all authors, good and bad, to women tends to naturalize their sale of their works: just as women must use their charms strategically to achieve their proper station as wives, so must writers display their talents sparingly to win the approval of the reading public.

But beside the long-standing description of professional authors as prostitutes circulating their wares, there appeared a newer sexual trope used to characterize poets' self-presentation to audiences: that of the masculine producer. Contemporary critics of Gray, for instance, viewed writers' active marketing and promoting of their works as the norm. Reactions to Gray's indifference toward completing his poems and getting them into print ranged from outright disgust to embarrassed apologies, and frequently associated publication and success in the marketplace with masculinity. Samuel Johnson, who took pride in his own professionalism, implicitly censured Gray's aristocratic desire to be viewed "as a private independent gentleman, who read for his amusement"; Johnson likewise deplored the poet's "fantastick foppery" in insisting that he required certain "happy moments" for

composition.<sup>15</sup> Percival Stockdale also criticized the dilettante in Gray, stating that his talents were checked by “an unmanly timidity to appear, in the character of an Authour, before a generous publick.”<sup>16</sup> Even William Mason, Gray’s most devoted partisan, found his reluctance to publish disturbing. Mason described the poet’s aloofness as a “foible” in his character, arising from “a certain degree of pride, which led him, of all other things, to despise the idea of being thought an author professed” (*Memoirs*, 434). In defending Gray, however, Mason carefully noted that Gray’s “effeminacy” was a contemptuous gesture affected “before those whom he did not wish to please” (*Memoirs*, 403) rather than an inherent trait. Yet, whether written in defense or as criticism of Gray, all of these remarks identify masculinity not with aristocratic detachment from the unpredictable trade in commodities (as civic humanists had earlier implied) but with active participation in the marketplace.

For many of Gray’s contemporaries, the social esteem given to male writers depended upon their proper circulation of texts in the literary market. In light of this perspective, Gray’s retreat from the market appeared to indicate his deficiency as a poet—and his effeminacy. Gray himself repeatedly renounced the role of public writer, and did so because he opposed the commodification of literature. Writing to Walpole, he disdainfully compares the bookseller Dodsley’s marketing of his poems to the selling of goods: “I promised to send him an equal weight of poetry or prose: so, since my return hither, I put up about two ounces of stuff” (*Corresp.*, 3:1017–18). In a similar vein, his ironic comment on the rewards of publishing the “Eton Ode”—that he will “relish and enjoy all the conscious pleasure resulting from six pennyworths of glory”—reveals his dislike for evaluating poetry in terms of cash (*Corresp.*, 1:282). Self-promotion of any sort disgusted him as well. Gray refused Dodsley’s offer to print his picture before his scanty volume of poems, claiming it “would be worse than the Pillory” and shunned publication, lest he be known as a mercenary “fetcher and carrier of sing-song” (*Corresp.*, 1:372, 1:343). Only the repeated persuasions of his friends induced Gray to send his work to press, such as when he allowed Walpole to print his best-known poem—the “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”—solely to pre-empt its appearance in the *Magazine of Magazines*.

For Gray, publicly circulating one’s text is a sign of frailty: a falling away from silence, integrity, and self-containment.<sup>17</sup> Poets, in his view, compromise their reputation not just by publishing too much (as Whitehead and Young maintained) but by venturing to publish at

all. Instead of being a “natural” phenomenon like female flirtatiousness or masculine self-assertion, publication, as Gray regards it, actually distorts the poet’s sensibility. What Gray opposes is, in Baudrillard’s words, “the identity that man dons with his own eyes when he can think of himself only as something to produce, transform, or bring about as value”;<sup>18</sup> This “productivist ego” develops because a capitalist political economy not only defines the individual as the possessor of labor power that is sold and exchanged, but “produces the very conception of labor power as the fundamental human potential” (31). By contrast, Gray describes his own mode of composition as an unpredictable process that is unsuited to the regulated operations of a market:

I by no means pretend to inspiration, but yet I affirm, that the faculty in question is by no means voluntary. it is the result (I suppose) of a certain disposition of mind, which does not depend on oneself, & which I have not felt this long time. you that are a witness, how seldom this spirit has moved me in my life, may easily give credit to what I say.<sup>19</sup>

In resisting pressure to define himself as a maker of commodities, Gray lays claim to a type of labor that cannot be represented in commodified form: his talent comes to him as an involuntary state of consciousness whose fluctuations he cannot control and whose products he cannot easily view as items with exchange value.<sup>20</sup> Gray’s reasoning here suggests that characterizations of poets as professionals subordinate the individual poet’s creative powers to an economy that emphasizes the production and circulation of goods. Several of Gray’s poems (particularly those that critics of his day considered his least successful) attempt to imagine forms of literary work that are alternatives to a commercial market in texts, while they take issue with models of the poet as producer. These poems, including the “Sonnet on the Death of Mr Richard West,” “A Long Story,” and the “Ode for Music” all dramatize Gray’s resistance to the concepts of literary labor and literary property, along with the sexual personae for poets, made popular by the book trade. They attempt to reconstruct systems of literary relations prominent in the Renaissance—systems which remove poets from commerce and the gender roles associated with it—while at the same time reflecting on why such an attempt is impossible.

## 2

Written in August 1742—two months after the death of West—

Gray's "Sonnet" first appeared in print in Mason's edition of Gray's works (1775), and achieved some notoriety when Wordsworth criticized its use of poetic diction in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. The "Sonnet" has not lacked defenders against Wordsworth's charges that it favors a "family language" of literary devices common to poets over the "very language of men" who read the verses.<sup>21</sup> Yet Wordsworth's criticism of this poem, despite its disapproving tone, points out a crucial feature of the "Sonnet"'s structure, rhetoric, and subject matter. The exclusive "family language" used in the poem distances Gray from contemporary readers more than Wordsworth realized, for it encourages private, even eroticized literary exchanges over public, commercial ones.

While West remains the object of Gray's sorrow in the "Sonnet," his death also signified the breakup of a nurturing literary community for Gray. West and Gray, together with Horace Walpole and Thomas Ashton, came together in the "Quadruple Alliance" during their days at Eton. Adopting various pseudonyms, this select group (West, Walpole, and Gray especially) corresponded regularly to share news and gossip; as William Epstein maintains, their elite "intelligence community," with its emphasis on the covert relaying of information, suggests the selective disclosure and "secret understanding" of undercover agents.<sup>22</sup> Yet in their exchange of literary manuscripts, they resembled the coterie of aristocratic male writers prominent in the Renaissance and Restoration rather than modern spies.<sup>23</sup> What West, Walpole, and Gray created was a set of literary and affective relationships fostered and cemented by their circulation of texts. Whether West or Walpole were sexually involved with Gray is unclear, but their intimacy certainly rested on their sharing in the creation of each other's work. And the assistance that Gray, Walpole, and West gave to each other's compositions is figured in sexual terms. In thanking Walpole for his careful printing of the "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," Gray describes the event with a trope that implies a breach of chastity, as if he had produced a bastard child: "You have indeed conducted with great decency my little *misfortune*: you have taken a paternal care of it, and expressed much more kindness than could have been expected from so near a relation. But we are all frail; and I hope to do as much for you another time" (*Corresp.*, 1:342–43). In another passage, Gray inquires about his own "godsons and daughters" borne by Walpole, who "can slip away, like a pregnant beauty . . . into the country, be brought to bed perhaps of twins, and whisk to town again the week after with a face as if nothing had

happened" (*Corresp.*, 1:257). Descriptions of the poet as a childbearing woman and of the poet's friend (who helps edit or publish the text) as a paternal guardian appear repeatedly in Gray's letters to Walpole, and suggest a familial dimension to their involvement in each other's work. In these metaphors, Walpole and Gray assume both masculine and feminine identities interchangeably as they give life to and protect a set of poems, which, like children, are evidence of their union.<sup>24</sup> To Gray, it seems, literary production requires not intercourse with an audience of readers (with writers perceived as either belles enticing a male readership or men proving their virility through engagement in the market) but relations with sympathetic friends.

The degree of literary collaboration and emotional intimacy was even greater between West and Gray. Gray constantly revised West's poems, and the very theme of Gray's "Sonnet"—the contrast between the speaker's inner desolation and the rebirth of nature in springtime—reworks the theme of West's "Ad Amicos," whose own origins lay in an elegy by Tibullus and a letter from Pope to Steele printed in *The Guardian* (Lonsdale, 65). According to Peter Manning, "these and other literary echoes place Gray's lament within the exchanges of a circle of men of letters. . . . The reader who recognizes the allusions is urbanely complimented, drawn into the band of initiates."<sup>25</sup> Yet the original audience for the "Sonnet" was even smaller than the readers who would appreciate Gray's "intimate gesture" of inclusion: although the poem was published after his death, during Gray's lifetime it remained concealed from all eyes in his *Commonplace Book*. For his memorial to West, Gray was reluctant to set up the boundary assumed by publication, and distinguish his work from that of his friend: when Gray first considered publishing his own poems, the volume was to have included works by West as well, and only the small size of their "Joynt-Stock" impeded the project (*Corresp.*, 3:1200). The intercourse between Gray and West takes place within what Hélène Cixous terms the realm of the gift: the poets' inclination to continue the "circuit of an exchange"<sup>26</sup> with each other is opposed to the patriarchal economy, which favors the strict demarcation of property boundaries—boundaries essential to the commercial market in print. The structure and content of Gray's sonnet show not only his rejection of the proprietary view of his work that the market encouraged, but also his cultivation of the more fluid gender identity that accompanied the private circulation of texts.

Gray's choice of the sonnet for his poem—a form neglected

throughout most of the eighteenth century—seemed to determine that it would not be circulated for sale. If, as Paul Oppenheimer suggests, the sonnet “marks a turning point in the history of the lyric—away from the poem as pure public performance [addressed to others]” and towards introspection, then Gray’s using the sonnet signals his resistance to the very public nature of literary culture in his day.<sup>27</sup> The only other lament for his friend that Gray wrote appears in Book II of “De Principiis Cogitandi,” a “Metaphysic” poem dedicated to West: written in Latin (much to Walpole’s dismay) and circulated only among Gray’s friends, the verses, like the sonnet, remained inaccessible to contemporary readers. In choosing uncommon and esoteric forms of expression, Gray attempted to protect his exchanges with West from appropriation by the consumer market.

But although the “Sonnet” and “De Principiis Cogitandi” were fashioned deliberately in unpopular styles, what distinguishes the former is its erotic component. As Lonsdale observes, Gray knew the work of Petrarch, and his “Sonnet” imitates Petrarchan verses in form (the rhyme scheme and stanza breaks) and content (an imitation of Sonnet 310, describing the contrast between the return of spring and the poet’s desolation over Laura’s death).<sup>28</sup> Gray adopts the persona of a lover in brooding over the renewed life and awakened sexuality of the natural world: amid the teeming “cheerful fields” and the birds’ “amorous descant,” the poet remains isolated and sterile in his grief: “I fruitless mourn to him that cannot hear,/ And weep the more because I weep in vain” (13–14).<sup>29</sup> But the usual forms and devices of the Petrarchan sonnet are employed to express an unconventional affection in Gray’s poem: the object of Gray’s grief and longing is male, and Gray as a speaker assumes both masculine and feminine attributes. The “Sonnet”’s homoerotic strain is emphasized by Gray’s adaptation of yet another literary form: while describing his frustrated desire for West (“My lonely anguish melts no heart but mine;/ And in my breast the imperfect joys expire” [7–8]), Gray echoes the complaints of both male and female subjects in “imperfect enjoyment” poems—a Restoration subgenre of verse describing the subjects’ disappointment over the male’s too hasty ejaculation.<sup>30</sup> Finally, the poem ends with this blurring of traditional gender distinctions, for in the sonnet’s closing couplet, Gray’s “fruitless” mourning signifies his barrenness, his inability to conceive ideas or poetry without his union with West.

While readers have noted Gray’s “striking” use of poetic conventions to eulogize West,<sup>31</sup> the homoerotic resonances of Gray’s poem

extend beyond the mere change in the gender of the love object. For Gray, writing is a function of relationships between men (his "Sonnet" circles back on itself, beginning and ending with the words "in vain" since West cannot respond to it), and these relationships allow writers like Gray, Walpole, and West to assume both male and female roles. Moreover, his adopting a literary form that seemed archaic—a form associated with the exchanges of manuscripts among social and intellectual elites that preceded commercial print culture—reveals Gray's nostalgia for a model of authorship that depends upon and solidifies affectional, sometimes erotic ties. Yet this model of interdependence became increasingly devalued as "effeminate" by the reading audiences of Gray's age, and their suspicion of it informs their reception of two poems concerning patronage—"A Long Story" and the "Ode for Music."

## 3

One of Gray's complaints against writing for pay centers on the alienation of author from audience that commercial print encourages. By midcentury, the market in letters had begun to challenge the control that classically educated readers and writers had exercised over literary culture; a mass audience was beginning to replace the genteel patrons who had been the source of support for writers in previous years. As Gray laments to Walpole, "When you first commenced an author, you exposed yourself to pit, box and gallery. Any coxcomb in the world may come in and hiss, if he pleases; aye, and (what is almost as bad) clap too, and you cannot hinder him" (*Corresp.*, 3:1009). Gray's remarks were hardly exaggerated, for contemporary reading audiences included not only the usual educated men, but also the newly literate, such as petty merchants, middle-class women, and laborers of both sexes; the pit, box, and gallery of this audience could all influence the direction of literary culture through their purchase of texts.<sup>32</sup> A revival of patronage, to Gray, seemed one way of reinstating aristocratic authority over literary production and high aesthetic standards for writers. Writing to Count Francesco Algarotti, Chamberlain to Frederick the Great of Prussia, Gray optimistically envisages a kind of renaissance emerging from the court's regulation of culture: "I see with great satisfaction your efforts to reunite the congenial arts of Poetry, Musick, & the Dance, which with the assistance of Painting & Architecture, regulated by Taste, & supported by magnificence & power, might form the noblest scene, and bestow the

sublimest pleasure, that the imagination can conceive" (*Corresp.*, 2:810).

Despite his endorsement of aristocrats' curatorship of the arts, Gray's experiences with the politics of patronage—detailed in "A Long Story" and "Ode for Music"—display how participation in this kind of literary economy results in a loss of authority for poets. By the time Gray wrote, cultural prestige was beginning to follow from writers' successful competition in a free literary marketplace instead of competition for the favors of patrons. Johnson, for instance, argues that the decline in patronage bolsters writers' integrity: "If learning cannot support a man, if he must sit with his hands across till somebody feeds him, it is as to him a bad thing. . . . While a man is in equilibrio, he throws truth among the multitude, and lets them take it as they please; in patronage, he must say what pleases his patron, and it is an equal chance whether that be truth or falsehood" (Boswell, *Journal*, 197). The public trade in ideas that Johnson describes, and the independence that this trade presumably granted to writers, had so influenced writers' representations of themselves that Gray's "A Long Story" and "Ode for Music" reveal his embarrassment over being the object of patronage. And part of this embarrassment was sexual. Johnson's remarks indicate how, in the era of commercial print, writers were increasingly expected to act without relationship—that is, support themselves by trading their commodities without waiting "till somebody feeds [them]," like infants, women above the trading classes, and the idle rich. (Even some opponents of the book trade adopted this vocabulary regarding writers: while calling for the return of patronage, Oliver Goldsmith's "Enquiry into the Present State of Polite Learning in Europe" describes the author as a "child of the public" whose simplicity and sensibility render him unable to provide adequately for himself [315].) As Lewis Hyde observes, in modern cultures, the autonomy that Johnson favored is a "mark of the masculine gender": "boys can become men, and men become more manly, by entering the marketplace."<sup>33</sup> Gray's characterization of the poet as the hen-pecked, infantile plaything of aristocratic women in "A Long Story" and his own ambivalence toward myths of unity between intellectuals and the state in "Ode for Music" display how commercial print culture discredited residual modes of literary production along with the forms of authorial self-presentation that accompanied them.

"A Long Story" bears the distinction of being, in Mason's words, the "least popular of all [Gray's] productions" (*Memoirs*, 227). Written

in 1750, the poem was published only once with Gray's approval, in *Designs by Mr R. Bentley, for Six Poems by Mr T. Gray* (1753); upon Gray's request, Dodsley omitted it from the 1767 edition of his poems, and Mason included it in his *Memoirs* rather than in his collection of Gray's verse (1775). Part of the public's dislike for the poem arises from the private nature of the events it narrates. "A Long Story" owed its genesis to a particular instance of aristocratic condescension: residing near Gray at Stoke Poges, Lady Cobham sent her niece, Henrietta Speed, and her companion, Lady Schaub, to relay her compliments on the "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard." Gray, who was absent at the time, returned their visit and wrote "A Long Story" to commemorate the event.

Yet while these verses originated in circumstances recalling the days of patron-client relations, they call into question received wisdom about the benefits of such relations. In the poem it immediately becomes clear that the implied audience—the aristocratic ladies and gentlemen assembled to hear the tale—and not the speaker controls the poem's discourse. After four stanzas of details about the manor house and its history, a voice interrupts the narrator, chastising him for his loquacity; responding to the commanding tone of the interrupter, the speaker adopts a plainer, more direct narrative style: "A house there is (and that's enough)" (21). The poet's subordination appears even more plainly in the following stanzas. Lady Schaub and Henrietta Speed are described as a "brace of warriors" and "Amazon"(s) commissioned by Lady Cobham to "rid the manor of such vermin" (52) as the poet Gray; Gray, by contrast, takes the form of a "wicked imp" whose diminutive size enables him to escape the clutches of the masculine warrior-women ("Under a tea-cup he might lie,/ Or creased, like dogs-ears, in a folio" [67–68]). His safety, however, lasts only a short time. Unable to resist the spell of the ladies' calling card, the poet finds himself whisked to the manor house where the wealth and status of the peeress and her entourage (which includes the ghosts of her female ancestors) so awe the poet that "his rhetoric forsook him" (117); his power of persuasion is ineffectual before the majesty of class prerogative. He can only defend his verse-making to the polite circle by disclaiming his talent and subordinating his authority to theirs:

'He once or twice had penned a sonnet;  
'Yet hoped that he might save his bacon:  
'Numbers would give their oaths upon it,

'He ne'er was for a conjurer taken.'

(125–28)

Despite the advice of the “ghostly prudes” who were her forbears, Lady Cobham possesses sufficient noblesse oblige to forgive the poet and invite him to dinner. Aristocratic conduct has changed since the time of “fierce Queen Mary”: the social power of upperclass women in Gray’s day reveals itself through civility instead of severity, and condescension replaces corporal punishment in keeping the poet, like other social inferiors, in line.

“A Long Story” suggests that the poet’s role as a dependent of the aristocracy is outmoded to the point of parody. The Amazons’ attempt to lure Gray to the manor house—and into a conventional patron-client relationship with high-born, “cultured” women interested in the arts—trivializes his work and renders him a pitiable victim of female aggression. Gray’s playful tone in “A Long Story” does not obscure the point of his satire: patronage by wealthy women (who were an increasing part of the midcentury reading public) emasculates the poet, quelling the force of his speech and rendering him a harmless form of entertainment for leisure-hour consumption.

The public’s general disapproval of “A Long Story” demonstrates how far patronage had fallen into disrepute. Gray’s readers resented the poem’s topicality: Gray himself notes that the “Verses . . . were wrote to divert that particular Family, & succeeded accordingly, but, being shew’d about in Town, are not liked there at all” (*Corresp.*, 1:335). Composed on a private occasion, the poem seemed remote and even incomprehensible to those who had no part in the exchange of pleasantries between the poet and Lady Cobham. And it must have seemed incongruous for the writer of the “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”—a work criticizing the arrogance of the rich—to record in verse the hospitality of aristocrats. The “Elegy”’s reputation, which first aroused Lady Cobham’s interest in Gray, suggests that poets were no longer dependent on the patronage of elite circles for their living. Gray’s ironic treatment of relations between poets and patrons not only exposes how these relations render poets the object of feminine amusement rather than masculine respect; with its extensive satiric evocation of Renaissance personages and customs, “A Long Story” implies that these customs (including private support of authors) are hopelessly anachronistic. In removing “A Long Story” from subsequent editions of his work, Gray implicitly acknowledged that cultural power had shifted from titled coterie of readers to a mass audience served by the book trade.

The production and reception of Gray's "Ode for Music" show this shift in cultural power even more explicitly. Written in 1769 to celebrate the installation of the Duke of Grafton as the chancellor of Cambridge University, the Ode exemplifies the relation between patron and client: Grafton the year before had secured Gray's appointment as Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, and the Ode served as Gray's expression of thanks. Like the "Sonnet" and "A Long Story," the Ode recalls and recreates modes of literary production that flourished in the Renaissance, long before the commercial press had superseded patronage. But whereas Gray's Petrarchan lament for West and "A Long Story" both posit a break with the past (whether through mourning for previous times or satirizing them), the "Ode for Music" suggests a continuity.

The vision the poem offers is one of mutual support between state power and English culture, a relationship that Grafton is called upon to cultivate. Gray celebrates Cambridge as the place where patronage by England's ruling class helps create a national culture (in the person of a "bard divine" like Milton and a "sainted sage" like Newton); bards and sages, in turn, help buttress the British empire by providing examples of genius that will forever illustrate England's cultural superiority ("There sit the sainted sage, the bard divine,/ The few whom genius gave to shine/ Through every unborn age and undiscovered clime" [15–17]). Ambivalence towards the waste of talent in a stratified society—a sentiment infused throughout the "Elegy"—finds no expression in the "Ode for Music." Explicitly revising the "Elegy"'s much-noted flower and gem stanza (53–56), Gray predicts that Grafton's bounty will descry "[t]he flower unheeded" and "raise from the earth the latent gem," enabling gifted but obscure scholars and poets to serve the church and state (71–76). The poem ends with a voice from the tomb (that of Margaret, mother of Henry VII) assuring Grafton that George III's prudent political course will prove a model for Grafton's term as chancellor.

After the performance of the "Ode for Music" at Grafton's installation, critics descended upon Gray, declaring him a "venal Muse" for prostituting his talent in praise of the rich (*Corresp.*, 3:1070–71). To Gray's contemporaries, the prospect of bards and sages flourishing under Grafton's management of Cambridge seemed ludicrous and out of date. A parody of the Epitaph from Gray's "Elegy" that appeared in the *London Chronicle* indicates the source of critics' discomfort over Gray's Ode: in contrast to the "Elegy"'s much-admired portrayal of the "authentic" poet (who secludes himself from the avenues

of official power), Gray's actions seem a throwback to the degrading cultural practices of former times:

Here rests his head upon the lap of earth,  
 One nor to fortune nor to fame unknown;  
 Fair science frown'd not on his humble birth,  
 And smooth-tongued flatt'ry mark'd him for her own.  
 (*Corresp.*, 3:1071 n.5)

Gray himself felt reduced to servitude in composing the Ode: after accepting Grafton's patronage the year before, he thought himself "bound in gratitude" to perform the "task of writing those verses" although he realized that because of its subject matter, the poem was "by nature doom'd to live but a single day" (*Corresp.*, 3:1070).<sup>34</sup>

Public response to the "Ode for Music" suggests how the alternatives to commercial print had diminished by Gray's time. Although Gray maintained that circulation of texts on the literary market reduced them to the level of mere commodities, avoiding the market appeared impossible, or even morally suspect. His evocation of Renaissance forms of literary production in "Sonnet on the Death of Richard West," "A Long Story," and "Ode for Music" results not in these forms' successful revival, but in a sense of irrevocable loss, parody, or cynicism: West's death brings an end to the shared creation of poems among gentlemen; the aristocrats' admiration of the poet in "A Long Story" transforms him into a feminized ladies' companion; and paying his debt of gratitude to the Duke of Grafton gives him the character of a venal hanger-on. Gray's experience suggests that for midcentury poets, the past offered no sites of resistance against the book trade and against the association of masculinity with participation in this trade. While commodified print seems to have provided authors with more diverse audiences and readers with more varied texts, it also worked to discredit other modes of circulating literature, particularly those founded upon social relationships like patronage. As Gray's career shows, opposition to commercial practices carried with it the stigma of effeminacy, and this combination of capitalist and patriarchal discourse effectively undermined the authority of a poet's protests against the marketplace.

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## Notes

1. Archibald Campbell, "The Sale of Authors, a Dialogue, in Imitation of Lucian's Sale of Philosophers," in the *Correspondence of Thomas Gray*, ed. Pagent Toynbee and Leonard Whibley, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), 3:1217–18. I would like to thank Tom Bonnell and Robert Mayer for their comments on drafts of this essay.
2. These descriptions of Gray are given in a letter of the Rev. John Sharpe, Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge to the Rev. John Denne (12 March 1756). See John Nichols, *Illustrations of the Literary History of the Eighteenth Century*, 8 vols. (1831; reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1966), 6:805.
3. "To William Mason," 17 April 1774, *Horace Walpole's Correspondence with William Mason*, ed. W. S. Lewis, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 1:152.
4. Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, 3 vols. (1905; reprint, New York: Octagon, 1967), 3:434. Suvir Kaul provides a fascinating reevaluation of Gray's Ode in "Why Selima Drowns: Thomas Gray and the Domestication of the Imperial Ideal," *PMLA* 105 (1990): 223–32.
5. Oliver Goldsmith, "An Enquiry into the Present State of Polite Learning in Europe," *Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, ed. Arthur Friedman, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 1:315.
6. Conspicuous consumption is discussed at some length in *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J. H. Plumb (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), and in Barbara Benedict's "The 'Curious Attitude' in Eighteenth-Century Britain: Owning and Observing," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 14 (1990): 59–98.
7. Descriptions of mass-produced texts, especially novels, as drugs offered to an addicted or diseased audience were common among all ranks of eighteenth-century writers. In "The Man with Two Brains: Gothic Novels, Popular Culture, Literary History" (*PMLA* 107 [1992]: 92–104), Bradford K. Mudge notes that such fears about the addictive or contaminating qualities of popular fiction, and the dangerous desires that it arouses in readers, gave shape to nineteenth- and twentieth-century debates over the proper nature of literature and literary study.
8. These accounts include Douglas Lane Patey's "The Eighteenth Century Invents the Canon," *Modern Language Studies* 18 (1988): 17–37, and John Sitter's *Literary Loneliness in Mid-Eighteenth-Century England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).
9. John Barrell, *English Literature in History 1730–80: An Equal, Wide Survey* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983) and J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975). Pocock's *Virtue, Commerce and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) expands on this theme.
10. James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Oxford

University Press, 1980), 296. Johnson's views on the proper sexual/professional conduct for poets are presented later in this essay; Churchill's endorsement of commercial print culture and the independence it offers, and his criticism of Gray's "effeminate" shrinking from such liberty appear in "The Author" (1763). The pervasiveness of the change in sexual personae for writers is also evident in the remarks of Gray's supporters (like William Mason) who felt compelled to apologize for Gray's apparent lack of a sense of masculine professionalism (see William Mason, *The Poems of Mr. Gray, to which are prefixed Memoirs of his Life and Writings* [York, 1775], 434; 404).

11. "To George Colman, Esq. A Familiar Epistle," *Poems* (1762), 154–59.

12. "A Charge to the Poets" (1762), 10. In his second "Epistle to Mr. Pope" (1730), Young insists that the profits of poetry depend upon its scarcity in the current system of supply and demand. To avoid having his muse become "a prostitute on every bulk in town," the poet must refrain from publication:

Nor frequent write, though you can do it well;  
Men may too oft, though not too much excel.  
A few good works gain fame; more sink their price;  
Mankind are fickle, and hate paying twice.

(143–46)

*The Poetical Works of Edward Young*, 2 vols. (London: George Bell, 1896), 2:353.

13. Catherine Ingrassia, "Women Writing/Writing Women: Pope, Dulness, and 'Feminization' in the *Dunciad*," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 14 (1990): 40–58.

14. Paul Korshin makes this point in "Types of Eighteenth-Century Literary Patronage," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 7 (1974): 453–73.

15. Johnson, *Lives*, 3:430–31. Johnson emphasizes the poet's lack of maturity and manliness throughout his "Life of Gray": when censuring the mythology in Gray's "Progress of Poesy," for instance, he remarks that "criticism disdains to chase a schoolboy to his common-places" (3:436). For an analysis of the schoolboy trope and its relation to systems of masculine authority, see Kristina Straub, "Men from Boys: Cibber, Pope, and the Schoolboy," *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 32 (1991): 219–39.

16. Percival Stockdale, *An Inquiry into the Nature, and Genuine Laws of Poetry* (London, 1778), 98.

17. Gray's attack on Joseph Spence's "pretty Book," *Polymetis* (1747), reveals his contempt for writers' attempts to attract a consumer audience and for the self-display that marketing their work entails: "the Heads & Tails of the Dialogues, publish'd separately in 16mo, would make the sweetest Reading in Natiur for young Gentlemen of Family & Fortune, that are learning to dance: I am told, he has put his little Picture before it" (*Corresp.*, 1:265).

18. Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, trans. Mark Poster (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1975), 19–20.

19. *Corresp.*, 2:571. In criticizing Gray's inability to write on demand as "fantastick foppery," Johnson appears to endorse the idea that production for sale is the goal of writers. Two of his most famous maxims—that "no man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money" and that "a man may write at any time, if he sets himself *doggedly* to it"—support this view. See Boswell's

*Life of Johnson* (731), and Boswell, *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 184.

20. Lewis Hyde observes that the “gift labor” that writers feel they perform “requires the kind of emotional or spiritual commitment that precludes its own marketing” (*The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* [New York: Vintage, 1979], 107).

21. William Wordsworth, Preface to the Second Edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, *English Romantic Writers*, ed. David Perkins (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1967), 323. As Roger Lonsdale notes, defenders of the “Sonnet” included Coleridge and Gerard Manley Hopkins (*The Poems of Gray, Collins, and Goldsmith*, ed. Roger Lonsdale [London: Longman, 1969], 64). I am indebted to Lonsdale for much of the bibliographical material about Gray presented here.

22. William H. Epstein, “Assumed Identities: Gray’s Correspondence and the ‘Intelligence Communities’ of Eighteenth-Century Studies,” *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 32 (1991): 279.

23. Richard Helgerson discusses the social status and ambitions of Elizabethan “amateur” poets in *Self-Crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton and the Literary System* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 21–54, while James Winn examines Dryden’s conflicts with the aristocratic poets of Charles II’s court in *John Dryden and His World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 285–329.

24. Wayne Koestenbaum argues that “men who collaborate engage in a metaphorical sexual intercourse, and . . . the text they balance between them is alternately the child of their sexual union, and a shared woman” (*Double Talk: The Erotics of Male Literary Collaboration* [New York: Routledge, 1989], 3). Gray, however, stops short of suggesting that he and Walpole are the seminal source of each other’s verses, implying instead that they act as surrogate fathers for the poems.

25. Peter J. Manning, “Wordsworth and Gray’s Sonnet on the Death of West,” *SEL* 22 (1982): 517.

26. Hélène Cixous, “Castration or Decapitation?,” trans. Annette Kuhn, *Signs* 7 (1981): 48. Koestenbaum elaborates on Cixous’ separation of the erotic from the economic: “A writer turns to a partner not from a practical assessment of advantages, but from a superstitious hope, a longing for replenishment and union that invites baroquely sexual interpretation” (4).

27. Paul Oppenheimer, *The Birth of the Modern Mind: Self, Consciousness, and the Invention of the Sonnet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 184. See also Joel Fineman, *Shakespeare’s Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

28. Lonsdale, 66.

29. All references to Gray’s poems will be to the Lonsdale edition.

30. Richard Quaintance examines the growth of this subgenre in “French Sources of the Restoration ‘Imperfect Enjoyment’ Poem,” *Philological Quarterly* 42 (1963): 190–99.

31. Manning, 515.

32. Lawrence Stone (“Literacy and Education in England 1640–1900,” *Past and Present* 42 [1969]: 69–139) and David Cressy (*Literacy and the Social Order: Reading and Writing in Tudor and Stuart England* [Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press, 1980]) both observe a fairly steady increase in literacy in the early eighteenth century (particularly among the middle and laboring classes), yet this increase seems to have occurred mostly in the population of London and its environs. For an extensive account of the texts available to uneducated readers, see Margaret Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories: Popular Fiction and Its Readership in Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Methuen, 1981).

33. Hyde, 105.

34. Gray shared in his contemporaries' distrust of literature written to attract patrons, such as Richard Bentley's *Patriotism, A Mock-Heroic* (1763): "I hope no body found out, how good some of it is. has he made his market by it?" (*Corresp.*, 2:835).