John Dunton from licensing to copyright, 1695-1710

The period situated between the lapsing of the Licensing Act in 1695 and the passing of the Copyright Act in 1710 was one of intense debate concerning the interrelated issues of licensing, censorship, freedom of the press and copyright. The end of the Stationers’ Company’s privileges led to a rapid increase in the number of printing presses, in London and in the provinces, while booksellers were divided between those who wished to see a return to their dominant position within the Stationers’ Company and those keen to break its monopoly and to develop a freer market in printed materials. John Dunton is an important participant and commentator on these questions, being himself by turn, printer, newspaper editor, bookseller and author. In 1691 Dunton had published his *Religio Bibliopolæ*, setting out his beliefs and principles as a bookseller, and his autobiographical *A Journey round the World*, in which he devoted a chapter to London’s booksellers, but when he came to write his second autobiographical work, *The Life and Errors of John Dunton* in 1705, the number of printers, booksellers, newspapers, and authors had increased greatly, along with all those employed in other related trades such as binding and wood-cutting. *The Life and Errors* is an important source for our knowledge of the London and provincial book trade and contains long lists of booksellers and printers.

Yet, for all Dunton’s enthusiasm for the expansion of the trade and the liberalisation of book printing and selling, as an author he was increasingly concerned about the lack of respect for authors and started to campaign in favour of authors’ copyright. In the dedication to a collection of his works published in 1710, *Athenianism*, Dunton argues strongly in favour of copyright legislation, quoting Daniel Defoe in support of his cause. Himself the victim of unauthorized pirated editions of his work, he saw such copyright as a way of asserting the author’s control over his own work, but he was also acutely aware that authorship was not a simple concept; Dunton’s most celebrated publication was *The Athenian Mercury* which published letters and questions from its readers and employed a team of writers to reply to them. More profoundly still, behind the question of authorship lies that of Dunton’s own identity and the way in which it could both be publicized and transformed through print culture. I propose to examine the multiple facets and contradictions of Dunton’s work which highlights so many of the issues addressed by the conference in an age of expanding press freedom.

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