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The Enlightenment Worker: An Introduction

Peter Walmsley

DENIS DIDEROT and Jean-Baptiste le Rond d'Alembert's *tapisseries*, engraved by Robert Benard after a design by Louis-François Petit-Radel, are figures of rapt concentration (see facing page). Gripping with their knees the chairs they are upholstering, they focus on the delicate task of fixing the fabric to the wood with fine nails. This is no portrait—they do not face the viewer—and yet neither is it merely generic. This *planche* strives to represent real workers engaged in a real task, celebrating their embodied intelligence. The small chaos of horse-hair stuffing in the corner of the illustration evokes the miraculous transformation of the simplest materials into a stylish piece of furniture. Flipping through the many plates in the *Encyclopédie* (1751–72) dedicated to trades and manufactures, one has the growing impression that the artisan is, for Diderot and d'Alembert, the hero of the Enlightenment. With remarkable skill and energy, the artisan pulls gold wire, makes buttons, or presses cheese, working in an atelier that is clean, modern, and light-filled. Surrounded by the specialized tools of the trade, the skilled worker is pictured amidst the beautiful and desired objects he or she produces.

The philosophe campaign to elevate the mechanical arts also found expression in British print culture. Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), and William Hogarth's *Industry and Idleness* (1747) were some of the most popular and widely disseminated fictional narratives in Britain in their day. Each strikingly tells a story of work. Robinson Crusoe sets himself to turning his island's resources into modern consumer goods through Herculean labour. Taking an experimental approach, he tries his hand at most every trade—joiner, basket weaver, potter, baker, even dreaming of becoming a brewer—until he can honestly call himself “a compleat natural Mechanick.”

One of the pleasures of the text is sharing in Crusoe's mastery of his world through his growing dexterity: "I was never more vain of my own Performance, or more joyful for any thing I found out, than for my being able to make a Tobacco-Pipe."¹ The tempting fantasy here is that producer and consumer could be seamlessly conflated in a single bourgeois subject, and that a person could with perseverance recreate European domestic life in the colonial wilderness. Pamela Andrews, to escape the sexual attentions of Mr B., readily embraces a return to home and a working life by gathering the humblest of her clothes and even practising at being a scullery maid to harden her hands. The escape is thwarted, and she never meets a life of hard labour, but the novel clearly connects honest labour with virtue, and turns the reader's attention to the work that Pamela does take up—putting her experiences on paper and, ultimately, managing a family estate. In the opening plate of *Industry and Idleness*, two apprentices sit at their looms, Francis Goodchild working his shuttle, Tom Idle snoozing, a contrast that will be elaborated over twelve plates, as they follow their respective paths to the Lord Mayor's coach and the gallows. In each of these three narratives, the lives of the protagonists are articulated through labour, hardly surprising given that the three authors of these texts all had roots in the world of skilled labour: Defoe, the son of a tallow-chandler, was a member of the Butcher's Company and had tried his hand at a range of ventures, including keeping civet cats for their musk and managing a brickworks; Richardson was apprenticed to a printer at seventeen, eventually becoming one of London's busiest master printers; and Hogarth, a highly successful painter and print designer, began his career as an apprentice to a silver engraver. All three articulate fundamental connections on the individual level among work, personal fulfillment, and moral strength, and on the level of the political they connect work with a new metropolitan social order based on personal liberty, integrity, and industry, rather than birth and title.

On both sides of the channel, the worker came to serve as a sign for a new set of values that offered a systemic challenge to the *ancien régime*. For Diderot and d'Alembert, the representation of the mechanical arts was imbued with ideals of social improvement and transparency, the same values that informed

¹ Daniel Defoe, *The Life and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, ed. J. Donald Crowley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 72, 144.

Encyclopédie articles on religion and law and that earned it such a hostile reception from the Church. Following Francis Bacon and Jean-Baptiste Colbert, they reimagined the artisan as a natural philosopher in his own right, a living repository of sophisticated mechanical knowledge with a deep understanding of the materials of the world. If this interest is informed in part by a Cartesian mechanism, in the connection between the worker's body and his tools as forming a single complex machine, it is also continuous with Diderot's wider promotion of bourgeois values and interest in celebrating private domestic life. In Britain, the image of the skilled worker was similarly politicized. John Locke influentially figures work as primary to people's social identities and subjectivities. In the *Two Treatises* (1689), Locke articulates a connection between labour and property that became a core tenet of the Whig value system between 1700 and 1750. If Tories wrote of work, it was of the agricultural labourer whose tasks followed the ancient cycle of the farming year. This figure of virtue and contentment was handily mediated through the classically sanctioned genres of pastoral and georgic. It was against this rustic figure that Whig writers pitted a new, dynamic urban worker, a skilled artisan who created goods for a metropolitan marketplace that offered him or her endless opportunity for personal advancement. The cultural and political power of this Whig ideal of work finds a register in the ferocity of Tory responses—in, for example, Jonathan Swift's dismissal of William Wood, minter of an issue of Irish copper coins in 1722–24, as a mere "Hardware-man"; or in Jacobite Jane Barker's portraits of treacherous trades-people. As the century progresses, however, the intensity of Whig celebrations of work begins to diminish. The middle classes become more concerned to distance themselves from labour and trade, to define themselves as consumers rather than creators of things, investors rather than makers. With the rise of sentiment, a new affective regime emerges, and new demands are made of the body as a register of a refined sensibility. Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) will theorize the division of labour, laying the ground for Karl Marx's ideas about the alienation of the industrial worker. More immediately, Smith displays a new political consciousness of the toll that labour takes on the body—a theme developed in the literature of the workhouse movement and in later abolitionist tracts. If authors such as Smith still hold by the social and ethical

importance of employment for both men and women, they also articulate a new consciousness of the bodily costs of physical work and the moral and affective poverty of those whose livelihoods depend on the making of things. When Whig ideology about work does resurface, it is in radical thought: in Mary Wollstonecraft's commitments to exercise and civic employments, for example, and even in Marx's delight in Crusoe's island as a place where labour trumps capital.

For much of the eighteenth century, however, the figure of the skilled labourer in France and Britain gained considerable traction in the cultural imaginary and came to anchor a host of self-consciously new national, religious, and class attachments. Labour comes to be seen as centrally authenticating and individuating, a performance of the self on a public stage. Work shifts from an expression of social place, as it was in the early modern period—locating the worker within the closed networks of guild and kinship—to an expression of individual will and talent. At this particular moment, work was reconceived not as specializing, trapping the worker within a trade and class, but universalizing: work is the centrally human activity. In contrast to the aristocratic body of romance, which is vulnerable, erotic, and luxurious, the new narratives of work show a bourgeois body that is energetic and resilient. Physical work in particular becomes the ground for claiming a property in the world: to make the world over in our own images and to demonstrate a mastery of our bodies. It is doubly liberating, the practice by which we exert our power over and free ourselves from the material. This discourse has profound political repercussions, proffering the idea that, like Robinson Crusoe or Pamela, through work we can make ourselves anew: not simply richer or more powerful, but fully civic beings in a new public arena worthy of a new authority. Signally, the protagonists of this narrative move from task to task, finding wider and wider publicity: Crusoe from making pots to governing a colony; Pamela from embroidering a waistcoat to managing an estate; Goodchild from working his loom to leading the metropolis. Labour is imagined as the sign of a new political order and is thus key to understanding the social transformations of this moment.

The last few decades have produced a substantial body of scholarship on the social and economic changes in eighteenth-century

Europe. Historians of class have identified a central shift in the early modern period from a conception of society as composed of three “estates,” each with its own social function, to a range of economically defined “sorts” or “classes” in competition for authority. This reclassification was more pronounced in Protestant than Catholic countries, and even then was at best a long and uneven reaction to increasing social mobility, the emergence of new forms of wealth, and the growing ranks of professionals of all kinds.² Historians of labour provide in-depth studies of food riots and political risings by the poor in the period and trace the diminishing economic authority of guilds. Women’s work, inside and outside the home, has similarly received important attention, providing ample evidence of women’s participation in public trades. In recent years, however, the main preoccupation of cultural historians of eighteenth-century Britain has been the socially transformative role of trade and commerce, focusing on the flow of goods and the development of technologies. This focus is itself largely a response to the ways in which writers of the period, especially Whig writers, articulated the place of the nation in the world, emphasizing Britain’s distinctiveness as a global trading power, one whose burgeoning economy and expanding empire are expressions of a tolerant Protestantism and a culture of political liberty.³ This larger portrait of the nation has, since the 1980s, been bolstered by the thesis that the eighteenth century witnessed a revolution in habits of consumption, as new middle-class material desires and patterns of acquisition emerged, and with them new identities and political agendas.⁴

This theme in social history has proved just as resilient in the literary history of the early eighteenth century, with a proliferation

² Arlette Farge, *Dire et mal dire: l'opinion publique au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992); David Parker, *Class and State in Ancien Régime France* (London: Routledge, 2006); Penelope J. Corfield, “Class by Name and Number in Eighteenth-Century Britain,” in *Language, History, and Class*, ed. Corfield (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 101–30; and Keith Wrightson, “Estates, Degrees, and Sorts: Changing Perceptions of Society in Tudor and Stuart England,” in *Language, History, and Class*, 30–52.

³ Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire from 1750 to the Present Day* (1968; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990); Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

⁴ Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J.H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Europa, 1982); John Brewer and Roy Porter, *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London: Routledge, 1993).

of research in the last fifteen years on the literary impact of the financial revolution. While Sandra Sherman, Laura Brown, Catherine Ingrassia, and Ian Baucom investigate how ideas of public credit and investment became a preoccupation for many writers, Erin Mackie and Beth Kowaleski-Wallace explore the ascent of fashion and consumerism.⁵ The apogee of this critical fascination with Enlightenment consumption is, perhaps, the flurry of recent work on it-narratives, stories narrated by non-human characters, often commodities (a carriage, a shoe, a ring).⁶ All this wealth of “new economic criticism” has established the promise, even the necessity, of conceiving of Enlightenment British literature as the expression of a culture negotiating major socio-economic upheaval. But this work has focused almost exclusively on one side of the nexus of production—on commodities in the market rather than the bodies that made them. By making shopping the defining activity of eighteenth-century life, this scholarly praxis effects its own kind of commodity fetishism, speaking as much to the desires and pleasures of our own neo-liberal moment as to the preoccupations of those confronting early capitalism. The essays in this volume seek in part to redress this imbalance, complementing our understanding of the period’s new credit economy and consumerism with insight into the character and importance of labour at this transformative moment.

Of course, some scholars have produced illuminating work on ideas of labour in Britain in the period. Raymond Williams’s *The Country and the City* remains a foundational history of the evolution of the pastoral in the eighteenth century, with its idealization of English country life “achieved by a simple extraction

⁵ Sandra Sherman, *Finance and Fictionality in the Early Eighteenth Century: Accounting for Defoe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Laura Brown, *Fables of Modernity: Literature and Culture in the English Eighteenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); Catherine Ingrassia, *Authorship, Commerce, and Gender in Early Eighteenth-Century England: A Culture of Paper Credit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Erin Mackie, *Market à la Mode: Fashion, Commodity, and Gender in “The Tatler” and “The Spectator”* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Beth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping and Business in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

⁶ Mark Blackwell, ed., *The Secret Life of Things: Animals, Objects, and It-Narratives in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 2007).

of the existence of labourers”—a process of concealment that John Barrell finds in British landscape painting.⁷ In contrast to these studies of the anti-urban nostalgia of Tory pastoral, some researchers have begun to attend to a competing city-centred articulation of a world of work. This theme has been opened up by Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse in *The Imaginary Puritan*, a study that recognizes the political resonance of the image of the artisan in Restoration literature as part of “an alternative to the reigning political hierarchy.”⁸ They are most concerned with the emergence of the modern author, and how the early Enlightenment celebration of labour was a fiction designed to validate a new literate ruling class, a class eager to exclude those who work with their hands. But other strands of scholarship in the field show that the literate class is far from fully exclusive, and that social relations in this period do not necessarily lend themselves to class-conflict approaches—approaches developed to explicate the kinds of industrial labour relations that emerged a century later. Eighteenth-century labouring-class poets, many of whom write extensively about their experience of work, have proven a particularly rich vein of critical enquiry;⁹ work in this area has made it harder to see labour and literacy, working and writing, as clearly distinct. Likewise, studies focusing on women’s work have brought complexities of their own to this topic. Armstrong herself reads eighteenth-century conduct books as deeply ambivalent about women’s work, and Laura Rosenthal explores the complex connection of sex work with wage labour for women in Richardson’s

⁷ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 32; John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting 1730–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Barrell, “Visualizing the Division of Labour: William Pyne’s *Microcosm*,” in *The Birth of Pandora and the Division of Knowledge* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 89–118.

⁸ Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, *The Imaginary Puritan: Literature, Intellectual Labor, and the Origins of Personal Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 97.

⁹ Donna Landry, *The Muses of Resistance: Laboring-Class Women’s Poetry in Britain, 1739–1796* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); John Goodridge, *Rural Life in Eighteenth-Century English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); William Christmas, *The Lab’ring Muses: Work, Writing, and the Social Order in English Plebeian Poetry 1730–1830* (Cranbury: University of Delaware Press, 2001).

Pamela and in prostitute narratives more generally.¹⁰ Jennie Batchelor's recent study on how women writers viewed themselves in their various roles as intellectual workers and homemakers underscores the ways in which women workers and writers, like labouring-class writers, belie any straightforward account of labour at this moment.¹¹

The authors in this special issue of *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* investigate the social, political, and literary ramifications of economic exchange and labour in the eighteenth century. Some of them reveal the ongoing anxiety about the new money economy that is coming to dominate British society. Constance Lacroix shows how a Tory like Jane Barker is forced to compromise. Predictably enough, in her fictions Barker excoriates investor culture in the figure of the rapacious financier Jack Mechant. But she also effects a rapprochement with the trading life in Mrs Goodwife, the industrious, distressed gentlewoman who, despite her Jacobite ideals, works in the city selling first gruel and then used clothing to support her family. Katherine Binhammer registers British investments in, and suspicions about, global free trade through the contradictions in Frances Brooke's *The History of Emily Montagu* (1769). Brooke seems to endorse the fantasy that British conquest by way of trade and colonial development is benevolent. But the protagonists' plans of clearing an estate in Canada founder—in part because of the colony's weak labour market—and narrative resolution only comes in the form of a return to England and the inheritance of a fortune from the East Indies.

Other essayists in this issue measure the elevation of the skilled urban worker in Enlightenment thought. Chloe Wigston Smith compares it-narratives whose narrators are pieces of clothing and clothiers' trade cards to show how these texts all worked to assert human authority and agency over the material world. If much work on it-narratives and eighteenth-century consumerism has exposed fears of the collapse of the human and the material—

¹⁰ Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Laura Rosenthal, "Pamela's Work," *Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 46, no. 3 (2005): 245–54; Rosenthal, *Infamous Commerce: Prostitution in Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

¹¹ Jennie Batchelor, *Women's Work: Labour, Gender, Authorship, 1750–1830* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010).

that we are becoming the things we own, and that objects take on a life of their own—Wigston Smith's texts assert human autonomy and control, establishing the boundaries between humans and their possessions. In trade cards, the interaction between the tradesman and the customer comes into prominence, emphasizing both the skill and the sociality of the merchant. Christine Jones investigates petitions for patents from porcelain makers to the French crown. Her work underscores the court's central role in promoting the mechanical arts in France and the rapid expansion in the production of luxury items, driven by a growing global trade in fine wares. This intensified market resulted in remarkable new levels of innovation and experimentation, particularly in the production of ceramics, dyes, cloth, glassware, and jewelry, and manufacturers continually sought patents for new materials and new processes. These artisans had considerable prestige and were recognized as working at the forefront of developments in what we would now call materials science.

And yet this prestige failed to permit any trespassing of the relatively rigid class barriers in Enlightenment France. Paul Young charts the career of Charlotte Curé, both a poet and a *maitresse de café*, describing her troubled negotiations to claim a place on the fringes of the republic of letters. Where in Britain working-class poets, or at least those with agrarian backgrounds such as Steven Duck, garnered considerable cultural authority, in France it was harder to make and sustain connections with the literati and the court. Young shows how Mme de Graffigny and Voltaire sought to evade Curé's various solicitations, unwilling to encourage her social ascent. In the end, her noisy embrace of her *limonadière* persona seems anxiously self-deflating, as if in anticipation of the rejection she knew was coming. The uncertain social location of the urban worker is a theme in Craig Ashley Hanson's closing reading of Johan Zoffany's *An Optician with His Attendant* (1772), featured in full colour on the cover of this special issue. Zoffany's instrument maker is a highly skilled artisan whose products are prized luxury items and whose scientific knowledge was recognized as extensive, but who is vulnerable nonetheless to the vagaries of the marketplace. Hanson's compelling case that this is a genre painting rather than (as often has been assumed) a portrait of an actual optician confirms that certain forms of status would continue to elude the artisan. At

the same time, Zoffany's loving and lucid rendering of the workman and his bench—itsself a splendid display of craftsmanship—is not simply a relegation of the artisan to low life, but a claim for the importance of the work of the hands.



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