

Robin Semrád, *British Book Trade at the Turn of the 18th Century and the Career of James Lackington*

BA Thesis
Supervisor's Report

The present BA thesis focuses on the changes of the British book market of the late 18th century, which came along with growing literacy and changing cultural orientation of the nation as well as the overall economic transformation of the country. It is based on a detailed research of this field, resulting in a useful case study of the economic and social conditions that in an important way influenced the development of English literature, and more specifically, the English novel, in the following century. The core of the thesis is a discussion of the role James Lackington, one of the most successful booksellers of the period, played in this process of economic transformation of the book market.

A great part of the first half of the thesis is dedicated to the phenomenon of circulating libraries and their position, which was firmly established in English society during the 18th century, as the principal institution that enabled regular and more or less nationwide distribution of books. Apart from this, attention is also paid to the practices of bookselling in the same period and the relation between selling books and their production. This chapter very usefully reveals the mechanisms which enabled a rapid growth of book distribution and commodification of book culture.

The chapter on Lackington draws not only from modern critical sources that deal with this personality, but depends prevalently on Lackington's own account of his business, as recorded in his *Memoirs* and *Confessions*, thus making the reader acquainted with these authentic sources of information about the ways in which the English book market achieved its dominant position. It is a fascinating personal history, a lucid account of the economic strategies of the time and also, in the presentation of Lackington's Temple of Muses, a revealing reflection on the importance of the spatial disposition of a successful bookshop and the practical conditions of bookselling. In all these aspects Semrád's thesis is a useful and insightful introduction into the commercial background of modern book culture.

I have basically no reservations concerning the method in which the topic was presented. Some assertions, however, should be toned down a little – e.g. the plan to show that “the free market economy provides the best conditions even for the high-brow art” (10) sounds like an overstatement which can hardly apply to all situations. Such economic optimism was perhaps also a product of the time but history has proved that the matter is more complicated.

Conclusion: I recommend the thesis for defence and suggest a preliminary grade of excellent (**v ý b o r n ě**).

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