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The Stationers' Company

Samuel Richardson was a Stationer. For 46 years, he was a member of the Stationers' Company, the trade and craft body that regulated London's book trade. At his admission in 1715, its members numbered perhaps around 800, including a handful of women.[1] By his death in 1761, he was one of its most senior members, having sat on its governing body (the Court of Assistants) for two decades, and serving as Master for 1754–5. He attended his last Court meeting less than two months before he died.[2] Three of his executors were Stationers, and two were Assistants: Francis Gosling had served as Master for 1756–7 and Allington Wilde was elected Master on the day of Richardson's death.[3] Richardson's portrait hangs to this day in the Court Room of Stationers' Hall, barely a third of a mile away from where he spent most of his printing career.[4] The Stationers' Company, then, played an enduring role in Richardson's life, but in order to appreciate its significance, we need to understand exactly what it was.

The origins of the Stationers' Company lie in the early fifteenth century with the city's recognition of a body overseeing the trades of Textwriters (non-legal scribes), Limners (who illustrated and illuminated manuscripts), and those who 'use to bind and sell books'. By 1417, 'Stationers' appears as part of the organisation's title, and from 1441 onwards it was known solely as the company of Stationers.[5] 'Stationer' did not have a particular association with paper-selling: rather it was a generic term that accommodated the entirety of the book trade. In the mid-seventeenth century, Thomas Blount complained the term was 'often confounded with Book-seller, and sometimes with Book-binder' and by the eighteenth century, its modern meaning was dominant.[6] The Company's name, however, remained unchanged, and while Richardson

described himself 'printer' in his will, he would have freely acknowledged himself as a 'Stationer' in relation to the Company itself.[7]

The organisation of trades and crafts into distinct bodies was standard urban practice across medieval and early modern Europe.[8] Such bodies oversaw training, wages, and prices; they provided welfare and sociability; and they often ensured quality standards. They enabled city authorities to reach a large proportion of the citizenry: they were used to circulate proclamations, raise money, even recruit soldiers. Such bodies were frequently integral to urban governance, with city officers drawn directly from their ranks.

By the seventeenth century, London had several dozen companies. The Stationers' Company was a relatively minor company, ranked about 47th in civic processions. Important crafts and trades, such as those relating to cloth and leather, were represented by several companies. Others were grouped together into more heterogeneous bodies—as was the case with the Stationers' Company which included booksellers, bookbinders, printers, and paper-sellers. City custom forbade individuals from retailing in the city without being a member of a company, so being a 'freeman' brought commercial privileges. Membership gave access to loans, protected one's family in the case of sickness or death, enabled the binding and freeing of apprentices within the city, and provided a court of arbitration. It also supplied a hierarchy that, with sufficient personal wealth, connections, and ambition, could see an individual rise from freeman to the privileged rank of 'liveryman', which came with the right to wear the company's colours at corporate and civic events and to vote in city and parliamentary elections, to more senior positions in the company's governing body.

The usual method of becoming a freeman was by apprenticeship. In London it was also possible if one's father was a freeman at one's birth which meant one could become a freeman three years earlier than by apprenticeship (at 21 rather than 24). In addition it allowed an individual to join his (or occasionally her) father's company regardless of the craft or trade being practised. (Richardson, the son of a member of the Joiners' Company, could have exercised this right.)[9] Given the disparity in wealth between the companies, their differing practices regarding the number of apprentices that could be assigned to a master, and the various commercial opportunities available within each company, being able to choose one's father's company over a company more directly related to one's trade could bring distinct advantages. Thus, the Stationers' Company never comprised the entirety of the London book trade (there were, for example, many booksellers who were freemen of other companies) nor were all its members active in the book trade (as in the case of an important dynasty of scientific instrument makers who were all Stationers) but nonetheless it was the largest single grouping of book producers and booksellers in the city.[10]

As Richardson himself would have been well aware, the most important event in the history of the Stationers' Company came during the reign of Mary Tudor. From at least the fifteenth century London companies had been seeking incorporation from the crown in order to establish themselves as legal entities that could enter into contracts, protect their rights at law, and own property. Crucially, incorporation also provided an opportunity to seek powers that extended beyond the city's boundaries and to define the crafts and trades over which a company had jurisdiction: in cases such as the Goldsmiths' and Pewterers' companies, incorporation granted them national rights of

search and confiscation for substandard wares.[11] For the Stationers' Company, while its incorporation in 1557 meant that it could now own a hall in its own name, the act brought with it new rights regarding printing and publishing. No one could print anywhere in England unless either they were a member of the Company or they held a royal privilege, a near-monopolisation of printing that in effect restricted printing to London for almost 140 years. Furthermore, incorporation enabled the Company to establish its own system for managing publishing rights.

Prior to 1557, the only way for English printers or publishers to protect their publications from others reprinting them without permission and selling them more cheaply was to seek a privilege, nearly always from the crown. It was a complex and costly process, and there was no simple way to resolve disputes. For major works, such as bibles or law books, privileges were a worthwhile investment, but for less important or more topical works, a more straightforward and flexible process was needed. Given that incorporation had, in effect, made the Company the primary printing and publishing authority in the country, it was well placed to develop a system for its members that was reliable, easy, and relatively cheap to use, and that provided a straightforward means for handling disagreements. Any member wishing to publish a work visited Stationers' Hall to seek the permission of the Company's senior officers, who would assess whether the work was likely to affect adversely any other member's existing publication. This was purely a commercial decision; the officers had no power to judge a work's contents. This permission granted the publisher the Company's protection over his work; should any other member publish the same work without permission or publish something that threatened his publication rights, the original publisher could appeal to the Company's Court. The

process of approval required only a signature from an officer on the manuscript and the payment of a fee; the formal written 'entrance' of that permission in the 'Register' was not obligatory. By the early seventeenth century, such rights were considered to be perpetual and could be bequeathed or transferred to any other member without limitation.[12]

The Stationers' Register did not stop all 'piracy' but it did provide a ready mechanism for restitution should the 'pirate' in question be a member of the Company, and for over a century it was the London book trade's primary way of protecting individual publishing rights. It also created a new abstract entity, the 'copy', that had commercial value. 'Copies' could be leased, mortgaged, sub-divided, bought, sold, and bequeathed, and it became possible to develop one's career primarily through the acquisition and management of 'copies'. Some of these transactions are noted in the Register itself and others are recorded in the minutes of the Company's Court, but much, if not most, of the activity relating to copies took place outside the Company's records.

The early seventeenth century saw the establishment of a 'joint-stock' company within the Stationers' Company. It consisted of two royal privileges granted in 1603 and 1616 for the sole right to print 'psalters[,] psalms[,] prymers, Almanack[es] & other book[es]' in perpetuity.[13] Members—who had to be Stationers—could purchase shares according to their seniority in the Company, and in return received generous annual dividends. The English Stock, as it was known, transformed the Company: it substantially improved its finances and provided work for printers as well as an important source of welfare. However, the limited number of shares increased social

inequality within the Company itself, and the Company's own strategic priorities shifted as the protection of the English Stock became a primary concern for the officers.

The preceding paragraphs have all focused on the period well before Richardson joined the Stationers' Company. In part, this is because the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries represent the high-water mark for London's companies in terms of their power and efficacy. Although there were exceptions, historians have seen the eighteenth century as a period of decline for companies and similar bodies both in London and elsewhere in Europe. In London's case, a rapidly expanding city which had long outgrown the traditional limits of the city government created commercial opportunities for non-freemen; moreover, as companies struggled to impose their regulatory authority across the capital as a whole, there were fewer advantages to becoming a member of any company. For the Stationers' Company, the lapse of the so-called Printing Act in 1695 overturned its near-monopoly over printing, enabling the establishment of provincial presses. It also, in effect, did away with the system of pre-publication licensing that had been the state's standard model for print regulation for almost two centuries; the government sought other ways (including taxation) to regulate the output of the press, further marginalising the role of the Company.

The authority of the Register, too, was challenged, particularly as Parliament looked at new ways of managing the 'ownership' of printed works. The number of entries being made in the Register dropped precipitously after 1695, and publishers began to explore different ways of protecting their rights. Some returned to the practice of seeking royal grants for specific titles, while others established copy-owning

'congers' or partnerships of booksellers 'who put in Joynt Stocks for the Buying and Printing of Copies, and Trading for their common Advantage'. [14] When a system of statutory protection was proposed in 1710 the Company responded with petitions that stressed the importance of preserving the rights to 'copies', that copy-ownership be underwritten by common law, and that 'copies' be perpetual. The bill was duly revised to downplay the rights of authors and to give greater legal weight to the trade's ownership of copies. The Register was added as the primary mechanism for recording ownership, and the English Stock privileges were left untouched. [15] The resulting statute—the so called 'Copyright Act' of 1710—placed the Company, its procedures, and above all its Register at the centre of a 'new' system of 'literary property' that, in effect, was a continuation of its existing practices. [16] The statute stipulated that existing 'copies' could last only for a further twenty-one years and that the Register should be accessible to outsiders, but neither was honoured in practice. Publishers continued to enter titles in much the same way that they had done in previous years. However, although the 'copy' remained fundamental to the economy of the book trade, the practices developed outside of the Company following the lapsing of the 1695 Act endured. The frequency of entrances in Register dropped away markedly from 1715 and instead 'copies' were increasingly established, managed, and sold outside of the Register.

Its regulatory powers had been curtailed, but in other ways, the Company that Richardson joined was one that his predecessors a hundred years earlier would have easily recognised. Stationers' Hall had been rebuilt after the Great Fire but stood in the same spot just off Ludgate Hill. Apprentices were bound and freed, membership fees were collected every quarter-day, the clerk maintained the Register, and the

Court met regularly. Richardson's stellar career in the Company also followed a trajectory familiar to any Stationer of a century earlier: freeman in 1715, liveryman in 1722, Renter Warden in 1727–8 (responsible for collecting all fees and rents), and Assistant in 1741. He declined the position of Under Warden in 1750, but served as Upper Warden in 1753–4, and as Master the next year.[17] Richardson too benefitted from the English Stock: he purchased a half-yeomanry share (£40) in 1731 and two decades later had progressed to an Assistant's share (£320), receiving a 12.5% dividend every year.[18]

The Company's character, though, had changed. A smaller proportion of the London book trade were members and it was increasingly possible to become a successful member of the trade without being a Stationer. Apprenticeship practices were less effectively applied—in Richardson's own case, for example, he seems to have worked for two years after his apprenticeship was completed before becoming a freeman. Apprentices were increasingly drawn from much closer to London and more came from professional backgrounds.[19] The Company was more homogeneous and more unequal. Richardson's appointment to the Court was part of an attempt to head off a legal challenge from junior members unhappy with election procedures and the allocation of English Stock shares. The Court, presumably looking to limit access to the English Stock shares, was also becoming increasingly hostile to applications for membership from individuals who had not served a full apprenticeship to a Stationer or who did not have a Stationer as a father. [20]

In the year of Richardson's Mastership, a fellow Assistant and former Master, Stephen Theodore Janssen, was elected Lord Mayor of London.[21] Janssen was the

third Stationer to hold this office but the first not to have to 'translate' to a more senior company—a sign of the Stationers' Company's rising status. A generation later, its prominence in the city was so great that, for the next five decades, a Stationer would serve as Lord Mayor on average every five years.[22] The Company's ascendancy contrasted with the decline of many London companies, and the reasons lay primarily with the lucrative opportunities afforded by the English Stock. While the number of freemen admitted each year increased only during the second half of the century, the proportion of apprentices completing their terms was rising from the 1720s indicating that membership itself was becoming more desirable. During Richardson's career, the livery grew only slightly, number 241 by 1761, but forty years later it was approaching 500.[23] The demography too changed. More printers were now binding apprentices but fewer booksellers were joining the Company, for reasons that are not entirely clear.[24] A new elite, though, was emerging from an unexpected direction. The first Stationer to be elected as Lord Mayor, Thomas Davies in 1684, had been a bookseller; John Barber, Lord Mayor in 1732, was a printer. Lord Mayor Janssen, however, was a paper-dealer. Samuel Richardson's career as a Stationer, then, coincided with both a major change in the Company's fortunes thanks to the English Stock and a decisive shift in the overall balance of power in the senior ranks—from those who held the 'copies' to those who provided the paper.

Ian Gadd

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[1] Cyprian Blagden, 'The Stationers' Company in the Eighteenth Century', *Guildhall Miscellany* (1959), 41.

[2] Michael Treadwell and Michael Turner, 'The Stationers' Company: Members of the Court, 1600–1830', unpublished paper, 1998, 56.

[3] The National Archives, PROB 11/867, fols. 215r–219v; Treadwell and Turner, 'Members', 28, 45, 75.

[4] John A. Dussinger, 'Richardson, Samuel (*bap.* 1689, *d.* 1761)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, May 2012. [http://www.oxforddnb.com.bathspa.idm.oclc.org/view/article/23582, accessed 31 March 2016]; Ann Saunders, 'The Stationers' Hall', in *The Stationers' Company: A History of the Later Years 1800–2000*, ed. by Robin Myers (London: The Worshipful Company of Stationers and Newspaper Makers, 2001), p. 172; William M. Sale, *Samuel Richardson: Master Printer* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1950), p. 33.

[5] Peter W. M. Blayney, *The Stationers' Company and the Printers of London, 1501–1557* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) pp.4–19.

[6] *OED*, s.v. 'Stationer', *n.* 1.

[7] The National Archives, PROB 11/867, fol. 215r.

[8] See for example: S.R. Epstein, and Maarten Prak, eds., *Guilds, Innovation and the European Economy, 1400-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Ian Anders Gadd, and Patrick Wallis, eds., *Guilds, Society & Economy in London 1450-1800* (London: Centre for Metropolitan History, 2002).

[9] Dussinger, 'Richardson'.

[10] Ian Anders Gadd, '"Being Like a Field": Corporate Identity in the Stationers' Company 1557-1684' (D.Phil., University of Oxford, 1999).

[11] Ian Anders Gadd and Patrick Wallis, 'Reaching Beyond the City Wall: London Guilds and National Regulation, 1500-1700, in *Guilds, Innovation and the European Economy 1400-1800*, pp. 288-315; John Forbes, 'Search, Immigration and the Goldsmiths' Company: A Study in the Decline of Its Power', in *Guilds, Society and Economy in London, 1450-1800*, pp. 115-25.

[12] Peter W.M. Blayney, 'The Publication of Playbooks', in *A New History of Early English Drama*, ed. by John D. Cox and David Scott Kastan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 389–405; Gadd, 'Corporate Identity', 180-1; remarks made by Blayney at Mapping the British Book Trades Workshop, Oxford May 2014.

[13] Edward Arber, ed., *A Transcript of the Registers of the Company of Stationers 1554-1640 AD*, 5 vols (London & Birmingham, 1875-94), 3.42–4, 679–82.

[14] Shef Rogers, 'The Uses of Royal Licences for Printing in England, 1695-1760: A Bibliography', *The Library,* 7th ser., 1 (2000), 133-92; Norma Hodgson, and Cyprian Blagden, eds., *The Notebook of Thomas Bennet and Henry Clements (1686–1719)* (Oxford: Oxford Bibliographical Society, 1956), pp. 85–6.

[15] John Feather, 'The Book Trade in Politics: The Making of the Copyright Act of 1710', *Publishing History,* 8 (1980), 29–37.

[16] Act for the Encouragement of Learning 1710 [8 Anne, c. 19].

[17] Treadwell and Turner, 'Members', 56, 75; D.F. McKenzie, ed., *Stationers' Company Apprentices 1701-1800* (Oxford: Oxford Bibliographical Society, 1978), no. 8791; Blagden, 'The Stationers' Company in the Eighteenth Century', 43.

[18] Keith Maslen, *Samuel Richardson of London: Printer* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2001), p.7; Cyprian Blagden, *The Stationers' Company: A History 1403-1959* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1960), p. 244.

[19] Blagden, 'The Stationers' Company in the Eighteenth Century', 37-9.

[20] Blagden, 'The Stationers' Company in the Eighteenth Century', 43–48.

[21] Treadwell and Turner, 'Members', 37.

[22] Blagden, *Stationers' Company*, pp. 251–2.

[23] Michael L. Turner, 'Personnel within the London Book Trades: Evidence from the Stationers' Company', in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain: Volume V 1695–1830*, ed. by Michael F. Suarez S.J. and Michael L. Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 320–1.

[24] Turner 'Personnel', 326-7; Blagden The Stationers' Company in the Eighteenth Century', 48; Blagden, *Stationers' Company*, pp. 245–8.