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978-1-107-04222-3 - Fame and Failure 1720–1800: The Unfulfilled Literary Life

Adam Rounce

Excerpt

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Introduction: motion without progress

The official end of Walter Scott's often barely concealed anonymity as a novelist came with his putting his name to the 'Introduction' of the first volume of his *Chronicles of the Canongate* in 1827, where 'The Author of *Waverley*' and its successors finally dropped his mask and admitted what so many of his readers had long known. After admitting no obvious reason for his choice of remaining anonymous (and thus ensuring that speculations on his motives would continue into posterity), Scott announces what seems to be an extenuating factor:

I hope it will not be construed into ingratitude to the public, to whose indulgence I have owed much more than to any merit of my own, if I confess that I am, and have been, more indifferent to success, or to failure, as an author, than may be the case with others, who feel more strongly the passion for literary fame, probably because they are justly conscious of a better title to it.¹

It is easy to see this sort of declaration of modesty as disingenuous, or at least somewhat ironic, given that Scott would have seen many devotees passionate for literary fame who were less than just in their sense of entitlement, in terms of talent alone. And what would justice in such matters mean? The suggestion is of authors who are convinced that literary fame is their inherent right. In distancing himself from such people, Scott seems to mean what he says – success and failure are matters of relative indifference to him, perhaps for the very salient reason that he had experienced both. In his *Journal* two months later, after negative responses to *Chronicles of the Canongate*, he reiterated his feelings:

Reconsidered the probable downfall of my literary reputation. I am so constitutionally indifferent to the censure or praise of the world, that having never abandoned myself to the feelings of self-conceit which my great success was calculated to inspire, I can look with the most unshaken firmness upon the event as far as my own feelings are concerned. If there

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be any great advantage in literary reputation, I have had it, and I certainly do not care for losing it.²

It is not, it would seem, in Scott's nature to be affected by the extremes of success or failure. Of course, the gravity of Scott's situation – he had since 1826 lost his wife, and was undergoing the grim battle with insolvency that would dominate the rest of his life – would have helped him to be above such matters, yet such obliviousness to the prospects of fame or ignominy is rare indeed. Scott's response is complicated, when read against his earlier 'Introduction', where he follows his indifference to success or failure with the recollection that when he

became aware that literary pursuits were likely to engage in future a considerable portion of my time, I felt some alarm that I might acquire those habits of jealousy and fretfulness which have lessened, and even degraded, the character of the children of imagination, and rendered them, by petty squabbles and mutual irritability, the laughing-stock of the people in the world. I resolved, therefore, in this respect to guard my breast . . . and as much as possible to avoid resting my thoughts and wishes upon literary success, lest I should endanger my own peace of mind and tranquillity by literary failure.³

Here, apparent constitutional indifference is replaced by the very acute realisation that the desire for literary success had too often persecuted the mind of the aspirants, caused them to become figures of scorn, and culminated in their failure, which they could in no way tolerate. There is, accordingly, a change in emphasis, with Scott not able to stand back from such follies, by virtue of his equanimity, but having instead to guard himself from involvement in this selfish and destructive cycle. The latent fear that the 'children of imagination' always humiliate and torment themselves leads to the necessity of placing yourself above such a career if you are to be even moderately happy; the alternative is a life of perpetual metaphorical warfare, whether with those critics and readers who do not do your work justice, or with your own sense of expectations and needs. For Scott, it is not possible to dream of success without escaping the consequences of failure – the two concepts are interdependent. Moreover, the 'self-conceit' that demands success can only lead to failure, it is implied, because its own imaginings cannot be easily satisfied.

The inefficacy of apparent literary success, and the forms of vanity and folly often found in failed authorship, are central to the concerns of this book. It offers a survey of literary failure in the last eighty years of the eighteenth century, an all-consuming and even degrading area of culture

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that is nonetheless rarely, if ever referred to specifically: failure tends to elide a narrative, or cut it short, rather than encourage further investigation. Failure is an almost completely unexamined subject; it takes many forms, and can be found as a subtext in almost every example of a writer who succeeded, let alone as the keynote in the lives of those who did not. This book will examine why different writers failed, and for what different reasons, and will therefore try to determine what exactly is meant by literary failure (or, for that matter, success) in the period, and what conclusions can be drawn from it, with regard to such disparate matters as literary value, canon formation, and the social construction and progression of ideas of authorship.

Examining a period specifically through the idea of failure casts a new and illuminating light on some familiar and some obscure byways of the literature of the period. It offers a perspective on literary fame and under-achievement before the emergence of Romanticism, and a different, more modern understanding of authorial individualism – one where failure becomes acceptable or even welcomed as a sign of genius – and offers a description of eighteenth-century authorship in different guises, from the bohemian attractions of the failed life in posterity, to the public celebrity of an otherwise nondescript author, the case of an author not being able to satisfy their own needs with regard to fame, and a long career of self-destructive mediocrity.

In the instances explored in the chapters that follow, literary failure will often seem to be the result of a judgement on character, and its supposed weaknesses, whether these be the egocentricity hinted at by Scott (such as the inherent belief that literary fame is your due), or partiality and excesses that have obscured otherwise intellectually estimable reputations. Examples of failure are sometimes a comment upon the wider morals of a society, or on the inability of writers to integrate themselves within such a social system.

Above all, literary failure in the period covered by this book has its own style. The types of failure examined here thus range from instances where literary productions were roundly criticised or ignored, to ostensible successes that still, in the manner in which they were achieved, produced a level of hostility and ridicule that represents a failure. A style or aesthetic of failure sounds contradictory, but it merely means the unique qualities – whether of vociferous argument, ostentation, or misguided assumptions of grandeur – by which particular failures distinguished themselves. It is a premise of this book that such distinctiveness makes such figures stand out to posterity, and suggest, through their resonant examples, much evidence

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of a literary culture that has never been properly examined: many artists failed and disappeared into total obscurity, yet the figures with which I am concerned showed such individuality of manner as to be remembered, even if often as bywords for eccentricity and hubris, rather than genuine achievement. It would be relatively simple to explore the concept of failure in the literary world of the eighteenth century by looking at the scantily documented non-careers of writers that were almost completely unsuccessful. It seems more worthwhile, profitable, and provocative to examine the idea of literary failure against a wider range of eighteenth-century literary experiences, including those which are not obviously failures in material terms.

It is undoubtedly the case that failure eludes any specific definition to such an extent that any material or critical attempt at one would founder on its inclusions and exceptions. The most failed of all writers would be those who (even in years of such burgeoning publication of all types of writing) failed to leave any evidence of having reached the initial stage of being published, even for a short interval before their pages were reconstituted into the linings for pastries or other less salubrious matter. As Swift put it in his mocking address to 'Prince Posterity' in *A Tale of a Tub*, 'Books, like Men their Authors, have no more than one Way of coming into the World, but there are ten Thousand to go out of it, and return no more.'⁴ Therefore, for the good reason that nothing of such writers has come down to us, they cannot merit as much attention as authors who left behind a more considerable body of work, either in their own writings or in their reception. Equally, it is not hard to find problems at the other end of the scale, in looking at writers who are failures less for material than for more metaphysical reasons. The very considerable achievements of William Cowper, for example, make him one of the most important poets of the second half of the century. Yet, on his own terms, most of his adult life was cursed by his failure to reconcile himself to God's judgement, after a number of serious breakdowns.⁵ The religious intensity of Cowper's perceived failure is not easily separated from his poetry, but neither is it reducible to the more secular desires for fame and recognition that mark all of the subjects of this book, as Cowper was, in important and damaging ways, beyond either.⁶ In the absence of a standard of measurement that is adequately inclusive, it has seemed more effective to explore a range of authors that, in different ways, illustrate the individuality of failure, in terms of the perceptions of their own need for success being unsatisfied, as well as their reception by contemporary and posthumous audiences. Failure in this sense is taken to be a cumulative

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lack of a level of success or recognition in a writer's career, measured in material terms, by the reaction of posterity, or by the author's own sense that they have not received their due. Whilst such levels of success or failure vary (all of the figures covered in this book had some notable works or some recognition), their literary careers gave them neither the material nor intellectual satisfactions that they required.

A large part of the interest of the careers chosen is that they all exhibit, in very individual ways, both the desire for success and fame, and the results of the complications of following that desire, no matter how unlikely or impossible its achievement, in a fashion that suggests both the inevitability of the need for literary fame, and the impossibility of its ever satisfying its aspirants. Another connection between the subjects of this book can be found in their relations to Samuel Johnson, which range from intimate friendship to antagonism. It is no surprise that Johnson, the writer who succeeded in spite of the many possibilities of material failure that surrounded him for so long, recurs in the lives of all these writers, not just because of the variety of his acquaintance and intellectual involvements, but also because of his own mutable status within the world of letters. Johnson's place as the archetypal literary figure by the end of the century was a reproof to other, less successful writers, yet it also showed the uncertainties of a literary world where he had been on a level footing with the subjects of this book for most of his career.

The first chapter deals with the life, works, and reception of Richard Savage, a figure immortalised in Grub Street folklore by the time of his death in 1743. Savage was an extraordinary case, being a figure who demanded that public fame and fortune were his due, mainly because of his claims to be the illegitimate product of a liaison between Earl Rivers and Lady Macclesfield. His literary works are tied in with very public announcements of this supposed birthright – to an almost unique degree for the time, Savage is the subject of his work. He represents an older, aristocratic model of the author as gentleman-amateur, though his personal difficulties and egocentricity made his fate analogous to that of the penurious modern hack. Furthermore, he was the subject of a crucial work of literary biography, his friend Samuel Johnson's *Life of Savage* (1744), an account that is of the first importance in debates on literary failure, the motives and needs of the aspirant author, the grim realities of their lack of success, and the delusions inherent in their search for fame. Savage's other peculiarity was his adoption (often through necessity) of different types of persona in his writing: he is sometimes a high-minded satirist, at others an inspirational bard, a defiant (*soi-disant*) nobleman,

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or a typically cynical Grub Street scribbler. What emerges from a reading of his works and reputation is a tragic narrative of self-delusion: Savage repeatedly conspires in his own downfall, by his deliberate lack of perspective or self-awareness, so that his life becomes a metonym for literary failure even before its squalid end, and he is more celebrated for his bohemianism than for the often perfunctory poems that he thought would win him fame. Indeed, the story of his tortuous career can act as a template for later doomed Romantic figures, and for the ever-prevalent celebrity and notoriety of the starving, penniless artist, destroyed by a malicious fate.

Chapter 2 is concerned with a very different sort of life, albeit one that also ended prematurely. William Dodd was the author of a number of unsuccessful literary works, who gained no little fame and many desirable connections as a clergyman. He became well known for his ostentatious sermons, which gained him many connections to an exclusive world of nobility. Unable financially to sustain his place in such a milieu, Dodd forged a bond on his former pupil, the Earl of Chesterfield, and (after being sentenced to death) became a celebrity – the subject of a huge and ultimately unsuccessful campaign for clemency waged, amongst others, by Samuel Johnson, that touched many levels of society that would otherwise have remained unaware of this meretricious, if charismatic preacher and literary hack. After his execution in 1777, the earlier writings of Dodd, along with his homiletic and ponderous works composed in prison, found very great success, thus reversing the failure of Dodd's literary ambitions, and indicating how Dodd's ultimate and absolute failure had recreated him as the sort of literary personality he had strived to become in his life. A reading of his works alongside the often melodramatic accounts of his time in prison and execution shows how Dodd was refashioned and represented as an important type of the age – a 'man of feeling' – and how the narrative of his life was revised as a sentimental fiction, with Dodd as unfortunate hero. This strange career of posthumous success indicates how the narrow boundaries of literary failure could be moved very easily, given the necessary celebrity, and how an apparently negligible literary achievement could be cast into a very different light, given the obscuring filter of publicity. Failure is not an absolute state but a concept that can shift according to the most unlikely circumstances. Moreover, Dodd's case shows how the understanding of a literary life is transfigured and refashioned utterly, once exposed to wider, more suggestible, and less discriminating media than literary criticism. The posthumous success of Dodd's career was entirely due to publicity,

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revealing the dichotomy of a literary world where genuine literary appreciation was hard to come by, and always overshadowed by notoriety.

The support of Samuel Johnson played no small part in the memorialising of Dodd. He was also central to the subject of Chapter 3, for very different reasons. Although Anna Seward, the ‘Swan of Lichfield’, shared a provincial birthplace with Johnson, she was also considerably provoked by his literary judgements, particularly in the *Lives of the Poets*, and spent a great deal of time and energy trying to undermine what she saw as the pernicious influence of Johnson’s criticism. Seeing Johnson as the reactionary defender of a narrow and obsolete idea of poetry, Seward wrote repeatedly of a type of ‘new poetry’, embodied in the example of Thomas Gray, and much of her own early poetry shows this abiding influence. What Seward never achieved, though, was any widespread acceptance of her own critical views, and the purpose of this chapter is to show, through accounts of her voluminous writings (including a correspondence extensively rewritten for publication), why she was perceived to be an eccentric and provocative character in the literary world, and why her work never found the acclaim that she thought it deserved. Seward left some notable poems, and her critical writings (for all their somewhat rhapsodic nature) won some approbation; on the other hand, her failure to fully achieve her poetic and critical ends is evinced by the melancholy tone of much of her writing, both in prose and verse, which indicates a lack, signalled also by her restless reaching into argument and dispute, which was often deleterious to her reputation. For all her very real success, Seward failed to find the degree of acclaim and approbation she thought commensurate with her talents. Furthermore, she is indicative of a shift in representing a literary life, albeit one that works against her: the increased opportunities to memorialise her career (given the burgeoning interest of publishers in collected editions and correspondence) worked against her, and exaggerated her image as a literary eccentric. Access to more avenues of publication, for Seward, merely meant more exposure for her perceived lack of fulfilment – the opposite impression to that she wished to make.

Chapter 4 is concerned with a writer whose peculiar and verbose desire to recount his literary failure made his long career something of a tragedy for his contemporaries. Percival Stockdale (1736–1811) was born whilst Richard Savage was still alive, and just outlived Anna Seward. His many publications included poems, a play, much literary criticism, accounts of exceedingly trivial personal arguments, sermons, pamphlets against slavery, and voluminous memoirs. What all had in common (though in different degrees) was lack of success. Unlike many authors

who faded into obscurity, Stockdale recorded these defeats and (inevitably) argued that their fate should have been otherwise. He did so with such little proportion as to overshadow even the minor successes, such as his perfectly respectable edition of Edmund Waller (1772) which produced in Stockdale the same somewhat turgid story of a conspiracy against him on the part of the literary establishment as the fate of the more wildly eccentric of his works (such as the self-published *Lectures on the Truly Eminent English Poets* (1807), a reply to what he saw as the calumny of Johnson's *Lives*), which were unread for far more obvious reasons. Consumed with resentment, and unable to admit the vast variations in quality and the problems in terms of tone and temperament of his writings, Stockdale is a fascinating example of an eighteenth-century literary failure, continually revising and justifying his role in terms of how he feels he should be remembered, and even wishing to emulate the miserable (yet memorable) homelessness of Richard Savage, if it might gain him his desired fame. Not the least valuable part of a reading of Stockdale's motley career is that his idea of literary success emerges as an important (and widely held) delusion, whereby the successful writer is removed into a kind of pastoral scene, and is remote from the vicissitudes of normal existence. This fallacy not only explains Stockdale's ceaseless and ineffectual striving; it also gives some indication of what the idea of fame represents to the aspiring author, and why they are so often disappointed with its results, no matter how meagre or apparently substantial. For Stockdale, literary fame needs to be more life-changing than is possible, and his example goes some way to show why literary failure is a necessary concomitant to our understanding of artistic success, as well as a prefiguring of how similar cases would be reinvented by a different, post-Romantic view of artistry, where failure is not hapless or redolent of pity, but a type of achievement in its authenticity. Stockdale's example shows how the eighteenth-century literary world adapted and changed very greatly in a few decades, until his final years saw him almost as a relic from a forgotten past.

The Conclusion compares these analogous and yet disparate careers, the contrast they make with the figure of Johnson (the central example in the century of literary fulfilment against very considerable odds), and looks at how the notion of literary failure at the end of the eighteenth century is transfigured into the more modern idea of the doomed Romantic artist, a shift that can be traced through the reputation of Thomas Chatterton, amongst others. The Romantic identification with the nobility of suffering and the ignorance of the public in the face of genius

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superficially covers the same ground as writers such as Savage and Stockdale, in their clamours to be afforded the respect due to their talents. Yet, in legitimising the struggling artist as a failure who will only be given their due by a kinder posterity, the effect of Romanticism is to make such literary careers as followed by the figures in this book seem mainstream and typical, rather than the exceptional instances of injustice that are the claim of their subjects.

In offering a range of experiences (from a would-be aristocrat to an extravagant and spendthrift clergyman, a provincial poet-critic, and an author obsessed with success in literary London) the book represents the shared experiences and tribulations of eighteenth-century authorship. Furthermore, it does so by taking works rarely if ever examined, let alone read closely, and in doing so describes a composite literary history of the century, looking at different qualities, values, styles, and judgements but from something approaching the bottom up; it gives an innovative reading of the familiar, from an angle that is usually ignored, and contributes to scholarship on writers that are important figures in their own right: all created substantial bodies of work, and became part, directly or otherwise, of significant cultural debates, even when their contributions were not fully recognised. It also, cumulatively, opens up new ways of thinking about a familiar period of literary life and history. Failure is far from being a new species of writing, but its wider significance to eighteenth-century British literary culture has never before been acknowledged, or examined.

The idea of failure

Amongst the millions of words published in English in the years from 1720 to 1800, there are a great many about failure. The remainder of this Introduction will look at some characteristic discussions of ideas of failure in the period from disparate sources, in order to provide a context for the chapters that follow, and to suggest how the subject of failure was, if not often addressed directly, a familiar undercurrent in all forms of literary culture.

Discussions of failure in the eighteenth century often begin (and end) with examinations of those monoliths of satire, *A Tale of a Tub* and *The Dunciad*. In the present study, Grub Street and its products are examined in relation to the works of Pope's friend and confidant, Richard Savage (who imitated Pope and, less consciously, Swift's hack writer), in Chapter 1. Grub Street, and its mythology, also has a latent effect upon much of the matter of this book; the proliferation of print so antithetical to the cultural

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ideals of Pope has consequences for almost every failed author, from Savage insisting on the powers of patronage in a professional age, to Percival Stockdale, who would later be mocked in terms that often deliberately recall Pope's sallies against the dunces.

The background to the emergence of Grub Street is a shift in the understanding of authorship during the early eighteenth century, from something approaching a vocation, usually supported by patronage, to the conflicting status of a commercial trade, which opened the author to all the exigencies that this entailed. Like almost everything, the idea of such a shift in the eighteenth-century British author has been questioned in recent decades: the more aesthetic argument concerns the larger role of the author as artist, which encompasses a change described (perhaps somewhat proto-Romantically) by Martha Woodmansee, who begins with the Renaissance idea of “‘author’ [as] an unstable marriage of two distinct concepts’, being both a ‘craftsman’, a ‘master of a body of rules, or techniques, preserved and handed down in rhetoric and poetics’, and ‘inspired’ by muses, or by God. The change in eighteenth-century theorists is that “They minimized the element of craftsmanship . . . and they internalized the source of that inspiration.”⁷ As Woodmansee goes on to point out, the greater related change of the period is in the material conditions of authorship. The traditional narrative that found (or more often assumed) in the eighteenth century an orderly movement of authorship from patronage to professionalism has been criticised as overly teleological and Whiggish: Dustin Griffin, to support his own thesis on the subject, has suggested that ‘there was no rapid or complete changeover during the century from an aristocratic culture to a commercial culture, no sudden change from a patronage economy to a literary marketplace’.⁸ Instead, there was a gradual, often contradictory movement, in which patronage continued alongside the increasing attempts of professional authors to earn a commercial living.

In an influential work, Brean Hammond has examined how ‘In this period, conflicts between an older, patronage-based model of authorship as the result of prolonged study and immersion in the classics, and a newer model of professionalism gradually being constituted, are at their most dramatic.’ Specifically, this drama is concerned with the struggles of commercial literary authorship to become accepted and viable: ‘Authorship could only develop as a profession when it became respectable for individuals to live off their wits.’⁹ Hence Hammond’s investigation of the ways in which, from the Restoration, the fight to own (and be rewarded for selling) literary property becomes central to the profession of authorship.