

THE CAMBRIDGE
COMPANION TO
EIGHTEENTH-
CENTURY POETRY

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They pierce my Thickers, thro' my Grot they glide,
 By land, by water, they renew the charge,
 They stop the Chariot, and they board the Barge.
 No place is sacred, not the Church is free,
 Ev'n *Sunday* shines no *Sabbath-day* to me:
 Then from the *Mint* walks forth the Man of Ryme,
 Happy! to catch me, just at Dinner-time.

(lines 1-14)

There's a lot here to figure out from an eighteenth-century point of view before we can begin to appreciate the issues that affect us today. Who is the "good John" addressed by the speaker of the poem? Where is this door that shields the private poet from the public figure, and what does the speaker need protection from? Why does the door-answerer need to make up social lies to turn the seekers away? Who are the "they" who seek to intrude, and why are they described as both invasive and insane? What kind of personal situation would justify so exasperated and explosive (if rather exaggerated and comic) an opening set of lines? Why is this personal frustration a public issue?³ The poem is immediate, present-centered, and urgent; the speaker feels besieged because of his poetry and his social position, and the poem quickly goes on to describe authorial rivalries and the prominent place of writing in contemporary London. The poem starts by assuming that readers already know something about — may even have been talking among themselves about — the contemporary world of writing and rivalry, and the poet moves swiftly from description to argument: that most writers these days are dependent, competitive, obsequious, and a public nuisance. To come to grips with the poem even on an elementary topic level, a modern reader needs a quick tutorial in a variety of historical issues and assumptions.

Three kinds of barriers stand between us and the poems that delighted and ignited readers of the eighteenth century. One involves the functions expected of poetry, its place in the social fabric, and the way readers use it in their everyday lives; the second depends on the subject matter of poems, which then was less predictable, less constricted, and more comprehensive than it is in our time; the third results from the formal aspects of poetry — the way poems look on the page and sound to the ear, matters very different when rhyme and meter determine the basis of lineation and the way words show themselves visually.

Poetry in our time is largely an acquired — and certainly a minority — taste, and poets are not now considered public figures, however esteemed they may be as artists or "public intellectuals." But it has not always been so. Poets may never have been as influential or as threatening to the social and political order as Plato feared when he proposed to ban them from his Republic, but there have been times and places in history when poetry was central to

the vitality of a culture — when poets were taken seriously as cultural spokespeople and when they were widely enough read to have a significant impact on public opinion. Poets in these times often mingled with the great and powerful, and sometimes they were consulted on matters of public policy or cultural implication. It would be easy to exaggerate, looking back from the contrasting assumptions in our own time, how influential poets may have actually been — how much practical impact they actually had on the wider public. But their *symbolic* place in society was sufficiently recognized that their poems achieved wide attention; responsible, alert, and public-minded people were expected to read widely in the poetry of the time. Poetry then was not confined to a selected group of themes, tones, and topics and not marginalized as discourse. Rather, it was considered a standard means of public communication, and poems (like political pamphlets, religious and philosophical treatises, and newspapers and periodicals) were often the basis for public discussion.

One such time was the early eighteenth century. Not everyone read poetry of course; not everyone read at all. Just over half of the British population then was literate; more men could read than women, but female literacy was rising fast; and young women, especially those who lived in London and other population centers, were by the end of the century almost as likely to read as their male counterparts. Literacy was still governed heavily by class, but this too was changing, as reading became pragmatically important for growing numbers of people, especially in the rising commercial classes and for those in any class who were dependent on trade. What people read varied widely, but nearly everyone who was capable of extensive reading — that is, all those who could do more than just read a few words under necessity or duress — regularly read at least some poetry as a matter of course. They virtually had to, if they meant to talk knowledgeably about public matters and if they wished their conversation to be taken seriously, because much of the relevant writing about major issues was in verse. Prose might be sufficient for minor moments of history, but larger cultural issues and matters of long-term perspective almost demanded verse. And most of those issues were imbedded in present events so that in effect poetry reviewed the current and the passing on its way to larger questions and judgments.

The fact of wide reading about public issues, in both poetry and prose and across a fairly broad and expanding social spectrum, marked European culture generally in the early eighteenth century. What was then developing was the modern "public sphere" (in which an informed citizenry becomes more widely active in discussing and, ultimately, deciding issues of public concern). The concept of a public sphere and its rise concurrent with European nationalisms and urban culture, as developed by Jurgen Habermas