



# The Rise of Robert Dodsley: Creating the New Age of Print

*Harry M Solomon PhD*

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Robert Dodsley (1703–1764) started life humbly for a man destined to become his century's premier bookseller and publisher. He began as an apprentice weaver and developed into a poet and playwright. He served as protégé, publisher, or patron of Pope, Johnson, Fielding, Richardson, Voltaire, Rousseau, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Edward Young, Joseph and Thomas Warton, Thomas Gray, Horace Walpole, David Garrick, Tobias Smollett, Oliver Goldsmith, Laurence Sterne, Thomas Percy, Edmund Burke, and others. Virtually all significant mid-century English writers had some connection with Dodsley or with Tully's Head, the bookshop Alexander Pope helped the young Dodsley initiate. Tully's Head, in fact, evolved into the center for the "Athenian Nights" memorialized by Dodsley's friend Samuel Johnson.

Harry M. Solomon is the first scholar to integrate recent research by Elizabeth Eisenstein and Alvin Kernin on the impact of print—including print's impact on political activism and canon formation—into the study of an individual bookseller. Dodsley, he notes, presided over a period of transition: as Edmund Moore observed in a 1753 issue of Dodsley's periodical *The World*, the old patronage of learning by "the GREAT" has been superseded by "the new patrons, the BOOKSELLERS." Solomon takes this transformation seriously, treating Dodsley as much more than the stereotypical bookseller unimaginatively reacting to the marketplace.

Formerly controlled by patronage and state censorship, the world of letters had been shaped by an oral, aristocratic, amateur, authoritarian, and court-centered tradition. Solomon shows Dodsley at the center of the change to a new democratic world of letters, a world driven by print technology and market demand. As the bookseller who played a pivotal role in the careers of both Pope and Johnson, Dodsley published the works of the last genius of the old aristocratic order (Pope) and of the first genius of the new age of print (Johnson).

Solomon documents Dodsley's ingenious articulation of his financial interests in newspapers, journals, and book publishing, proving that contrary to the traditional view of booksellers, Dodsley was no insignificant tradesman accidentally associated with genius. Solomon presents Dodsley, in fact, as the most influential English literary force during his lifetime. Chronicling Dodsley's close involvement first with the couplet masterpieces of Pope and Johnson and later with the ambitious odes of Thomas Gray and the Wartons, Solomon argues that Dodsley's enterprises were the impetus for a conscious shift from the Augustan to the Romantic era—a shift that mirrors precisely the development of Dodsley's own plays and poems.

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