

# John Ellis

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John Ellis was born in London, England in 1698. After receiving a basic education, Ellis became an apprentice scrivener within London's Threadneedle banking district. Here, he would hone his writing abilities and eventually settle into the lifelong occupation of money scrivener. As a money scrivener, Ellis spent much of his time writing out and arranging the allocation of deeds and loans to others. In addition to scrivener, he also worked as a literary writer throughout his career. After having learned Latin during his apprenticeship, Ellis occupied himself by translating several texts. In 1739, for example, he anonymously published an English version of *The Surprise: or, The Gentleman Turn'd Apothecary*, from a Latin copy of a French comic story. In 1758, Robert Dodsley published three of Ellis's poems in volume six of his *Collection of Poems in Six Volumes* (1758-1765), one of the most publicly recognized poetry collections of the eighteenth century.

As a result of his prowess in written literature, Ellis was well-respected by many literary professionals and contemporaries. In fact, Dr. William King of Oxford was allegedly so impressed by Ellis's translations of Ovid's *Epistles* that he regarded the work as something that seemed "not [to have been produced by] Ellis, but Ovid himself" (quoted by Reed 4).

Despite his critical acclaim, Ellis struggled both financially and emotionally during his lifetime. Indeed, after entrusting money to at least one individual who went bankrupt, Ellis worried during his final years that he would not have the funds to sustain himself until his passing. Eventually, Ellis's peers took notice of his dire situation and opted to take care of his financial needs until his death in 1791. Ellis's unpublished works, including his manuscript translations of Ovid's *Epistles*, were entrusted to close peers and colleagues within the literary industry. An obituary by Isaac Reed was dedicated to Ellis in the twenty-first volume of *The European Magazine*, which was published in 1792.

"The Cheat's Apology" is one of the three poems that Ellis contributed to Robert Dodsley's *Collection of Poems in Six Volumes*. It is written in anapestic tetrameter with a sestina (six-line) stanzaic structure and features an ABABCC rhyme scheme. The satirical poem was at least once set to music, sung, and performed publicly in Vauxhall, London. During this performance, the poem

allegedly received much applause from the crowd. Throughout the poem, Ellis highlights the corrupt nature of many recognized eighteenth-century occupations, as well as the vices that drive this corruption: most notably, vicious obsessions with money and power. Ellis acknowledges corruption within eighteenth-century state politics, the legal system, the Church of England, and the pharmaceutical industry. As a scrivener who worked in each of these fields, Ellis might have felt inspired to write “The Cheat’s Apology” based on personal experiences with the corrupt tendencies of his own clientele. Ellis concludes the poem by lamenting his own poverty in the occupation of writing. By bringing to light the pervasiveness of corruption within many fundamental eighteenth-century industries, Ellis’s “The Cheat’s Apology” encourages modern readers to analyze tendencies of corruption throughout their own contemporary societal industries — many of which remain starkly similar in the context of the twenty-first century.

### Further Reading

Baines, Paul, et al. “Ellis, John.” *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Eighteenth-Century Writers and Writing: 1660-1789*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, p. 116.

Beal, Peter. “Scriveners’ Company.” *A Dictionary of English Manuscript Terminology 1450–2000*. Oxford UP, 2011.

Latham, Mark. ““The City Has Been Wronged and Abused!”: Institutional Corruption in the Eighteenth Century.” *The Economic History Review*, vol. 68, no. 3, 2015, pp. 1038–61.

### References

Reed, Isaac. “An Account of Mr. John Ellis.” *The European Magazine and London Review*, vol. 21, published by J. Sewell, 1792, pp. 2–5, 126–30.

The Cheat's Apology<sup>21</sup>

*'Tis my vocation, Hal!*                      Shakespeare.<sup>22</sup>

LOOK round the wide world each profession, you'll find,  
     Hath something dishonest, which myst'ry<sup>23</sup> they call;  
 Each knave<sup>24</sup> points<sup>25</sup> another, at home is stark blind,  
     Except but his own, there's a cheat in them all:<sup>26</sup>  
 When tax'd<sup>27</sup> with imposture<sup>28</sup> the charge he'll evade,  
 And like Falstaff<sup>29</sup> pretend he but lives by his trade.

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The hero ambitious (like Philip's great son,  
     Who wept when he found no more mischief to do)<sup>30</sup>  
 Ne'er scruples a neighbouring realm to o'er-run,  
     While slaughters and carnage his sabre imbrue.<sup>31</sup>  
 Of rapine<sup>32</sup> and murder the charge he'll evade,  
 For conquest is glorious, and fighting his trade.

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<sup>21</sup> *A Collection of Poems in 6 Volumes. By Several Hands*, edited by Robert Dodsley, Vol. 6, printed J. Hughs, 1763, pp. 268–70; *Eighteenth-Century Poetry Archive*

<sup>22</sup> *'Tis my vocation, Hal!* from Act I, Scene II of William Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part 1*, in which John Falstaff claims that thievery is his vocation: his occupation and way of life

<sup>23</sup> *Myst'ry* commonly known as "trade secrets"

<sup>24</sup> *Knave* a dishonest and immoral man

<sup>25</sup> *Points* short for "appoints," meaning nominates

<sup>26</sup> *Except but his own, there's a cheat in them all* each man believes that all professions are dishonest except his own

<sup>27</sup> *Tax'd* to be reprov'd or accused of wrongdoing

<sup>28</sup> *Imposture* deception or fraudulence

<sup>29</sup> *Falstaff* a fictional character who appears in several of William Shakespeare's works (see footnote 2 above)

<sup>30</sup> *Phillip's great son* Alexander the Great, son of Phillip II of Macedon, who allegedly wept upon learning there were no more worlds to conquer

<sup>31</sup> *Imbrue* to stain something, usually a weapon or hands, with blood

<sup>32</sup> *Rapine* the act of plundering or pillaging; possible an allusion to Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, in which Chiron and Demetrius disguise themselves as Rapine and Murder respectively

The statesman, who steers by wise Machiavel's rules,<sup>33</sup>  
 Is ne'er to be known by his tongue or his face;  
 They're traps by him us'd to catch credulous fools, 15  
 And breach of his promise he counts no disgrace;  
 But policy calls it, reproach to evade,  
 For flatt'ry's his province, cajoling<sup>34</sup> his trade.

The priest will instruct you this world to despise,  
 With all its vain pomp, for a kingdom on high; 20  
 While earthly preferments<sup>35</sup> are chiefly his prize,  
 And all his pursuits give his doctrine the lie;<sup>36</sup>  
 He'll plead you the gospel, your charge to evade:  
 The lab'rer's entitled<sup>37</sup> to live by his trade.

The lawyer, as oft on the wrong side as right, 25  
 Who tortures for fee the true sense of the laws,  
 While black he by sophistry<sup>38</sup> proves to be white,  
 And falshood and perjury lists in his cause;  
 With steady assurance all crime will evade:  
 His client's his care, and he follows his trade. 30

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<sup>33</sup> *Machiavel's rules* Niccolò Machiavelli, an Italian diplomat and author, best known for his political treatise *The Prince*; his proposed methods for achieving power are through cunning and manipulation

<sup>34</sup> *Cajoling* to persuade or win over through deception, strategized flattery, or other such dishonest methods

<sup>35</sup> *Preferment* a promotion or appointment that brings social/financial advantage

<sup>36</sup> *Give his doctrine the lie* spelled "lye" in copytext 1763 edition; to *give* something *the lie* is to prove its falsity/inaccuracy

<sup>37</sup> *Entitled* misspelled as "entitled" in copytext 1763 edition

<sup>38</sup> *Sophistry* the strategic employment of fallacious language and arguments to deceive listeners

The sons of Machaon,<sup>39</sup> who thirsty for gold  
 The patient past cure visit thrice in a day,  
 Write largely the Pharmacop league<sup>40</sup> to uphold,  
 While poverty's left to diseases a prey;  
 Are held in repute for their glitt'ring parade: 35  
 Their practice is great, and they shine in their trade.

Since then in all stations imposture is found,  
 No one of another can justly complain;  
 The coin he receives will pass current<sup>41</sup> around,  
 And where he is cousen'd<sup>42</sup> he cousens again: 40  
 But I, who for cheats this apology<sup>43</sup> made,  
 Cheat myself by my rhyming, and starve by my trade.

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<sup>39</sup> *Machaon* in Greek mythology, the son of Asclepius (god of medicine); in Homer's *Iliad*, an early recorded practitioner of organized surgical care

<sup>40</sup> *Pharmacop league* the people involved in producing and distributing prescription drugs; derived from the modern Latin word *pharmacopoeia*, which translates to "the art of making drugs"

<sup>41</sup> *Current* like a river's current, a flow (hence coins as "currency"); not meant to denote the present

<sup>42</sup> *Cousen* spelt "cozen" in modern English; to deceive, defraud, or dupe someone

<sup>43</sup> *Apology* justification or self-defense



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