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New reading histories, print culture and the identification of change: the case of eighteenth-century England

Influential studies of ‘print culture’ have been predicated upon ‘communications shifts’ enabled by the invention and deployment of moveable type. Such histories have also been grounded in the notion that media can be primary moulders of society. Nevertheless, it has been clear for some time (and, indeed, anticipated in many of the pioneering studies) that an understanding of the effects of the standardization and mass replication of printed texts also demands fresh analysis of the response of individual readers and the contingency of print reception. Narrow concentration upon changes in printing technology and press production tempts assumptions about unchanging responses to texts. Typographical fixity can all too easily be translated into cultural fixity, with relatively little interest given to the view from below, of the reader receiving, rather than the press sending. More than that, emphasis upon print and ‘the book’ threatens to isolate their study from a broader cultural history in which communication operated at multiple levels and in which the relationship between text and audience was often influenced by other modes of social interaction.

A more ambitious agenda for a cultural history of the press embraces new approaches to understanding the differentials of reception. The crucial insistence of these new studies has been that texts cannot control response; response derives from social circumstances which imbue every text with a certain instability rather than a predictable fixity. As a result, histories of readers and reading

1 I am deeply grateful to Peter Burke, the late Bob Scribner, Keith Wrightson and all those who commented on earlier versions of this paper given at seminars at Clare College, Cambridge, All Souls College, Oxford, and the University of Freiburg.


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have been transformed by research aimed less at identifying numbers and types of readers, or at estimating literacy levels and the several types of text read, than at understanding reading practices, the nature of reading, and the experience of the individual reader. The attention formerly given to the receivers and the received has been transferred to the processes of reception and to an analysis of past reading strategies and competences. 4 Histories of reading produced in the last few years have begun to ask not just who read and what they read, but when people read, where they read, why they read and, above all, how they read. 5 In the words of Michel de Certeau, one of the guiding spirits of this cultural history, many historians had appeared ‘concerned with calculating the correlations between objects read, social groups, and places frequented, more than with analysing the very operation of reading, its modalities and its typology’. 6

In part, what we have been offered has derived from new literary critical configurations of ‘readership’. These have aimed to recover the historical meaning given to and produced by a text, and attempted to locate changes and continuities in the history of textual comprehension. More ambitiously, readings past and present, have been reinterpreted as the accumulation of many unique readings and not simply as aggregates of types of reader. The resulting theoretical mass of any historical readership must therefore comprise the totality of different readings of the same texts. For the cultural historian, this invites the stark retort that such a totality of different readings can never be recovered and that, even if this were possible, a strategy for understanding such an aggregation of past experiences is not obvious.

We are required, instead, first to think carefully about the approach to understanding the experience of receiving a particular type of text, and second, to investigate the sort of evidence upon which this new reception and reading history might draw. In many ways this case-by-case contextualization parallels revisions to the practice of textual criticism and bibliography made during the last twenty years by, among others, D. F. McKenzie and Jerome J. McGann. In their different ways, both challenged existing aims of research by re-examining evidence relating to the physical text, from its composition, typographical presentation and material form, to the social, economic and political circumstances of its publication. Bibliographical revisionism has ranged from the detailed recovery of printers’ working practices and new research on transmission processes, to historicist textual criticism, increasingly reader-orientated and supposing texts to have been without any significant meaning (or without any at all) prior to their public reception. 7

For other critics, different modalities of reception were seen to have depended upon both

4 J. P. Klawe convincingly claims that ‘“Audience” is, in fact, the most unexamined assumption in the armory of cultural history and criticism’: The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790–1832 (Madison, Wisconsin, 1987), 8.


the phenomenology of acts of reading and the culturally constructed means of receiving and understanding the read. In particular, Paul Ricoeur considered how the figuration of a world was appropriated by readers and viewers of texts and pictures, while the construct of 'interpretive communities' became a sine qua non of recent French histories of textual reception. First proposed as a rhetorical, in-the-text presence by Stanley Fish, suggesting a collectivity of reading conventions, interpretive communities have been given a more historical formulation by Roger Chartier, as groups of readers sharing the same style of reading and the same identifiable strategy of interpretation. Robert Hume's call to investigate 'historical reader-response groups' bears striking resemblance to this, and aims, in his words, to be 'a kind of historicization of Stanley Fish'. In turn, there are parallels with the strategy proposed by Hans Robert Jauss and his Konstanz group to understand the 'horizon of expectations' within which a work was created and received.

The decoding of this reading experience, more textual creation than passive reception, embraces study of diverse reading sites, different performative modes (including individual or communal reading aloud), and multiple effects upon auditors and participants. Texts foster unintentional meanings, which are, in effect, codes of perception ordered and enacted by individual readers. Such a reading history or social history of the reader can tell us more about what a text is and what reading means as an historical force. It might suggest how particular readers read a text and become aware of belonging to a greater or particular audience, and one which might transcend such social classifications as profession, gender and religion.

But what sort of evidence is available to us and what can we do with it? In the first place, the pursuit of historical interpretive communities has enhanced and encouraged the study of reading experience drawn from individual testimonies. As the rebalancing of reading history has continued, however, the extension of the 'how' dimension has posed new questions about the authority of such case-studies. A dozen or more editions or interpretations of the testimony of early modern literate artisans offered rich material, but their distinctiveness appears only to highlight issues of representativeness. How can we, in the words of Roger

9 'Interpretive' rather than 'interpretative' has become the accepted term.
11 R. D. Hume, 'Texts within contexts: notes toward a historical method', Philological Quarterly, LXLI (1992), 69–100 (80, 84); H. R. Jauss, Towards an Aesthetic of Reception, trans. T. Bahti (Minneapolis, 1982), 3–45. For studies in intertextuality also denying the autonomy of the text and with signification dependent upon the reading process, see B. Stock, Listening for the Text: On the Uses of the Past (Baltimore and London, 1990), especially 17–18.
12 Notably C. Ginzburg, The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller, trans. A. and J. Tedeschi (London, 1980); V. Jamerey-Duval, Mémoires: Enfance et éducation d'un paysan au XVIIIe siècle, ed. J.-M. Goulemot (Paris, 1981); D. Roche (ed.), Journal de ma vie; Jacques-Louis Ménétre, compagnon vintier au XVIIIe siècle (Paris, 1982). Other studies have been based on glosses and notes made by the readers themselves. Letters sent by Jean Ranson, merchant of La Rochelle, have been used to explore his ways of reading; R. Darnton, Readers respond to Rousseau: the fabrication of romantic sensitivity in The Great Cat Massacre and other Episodes in French Cultural History (London, 1984), 215–56; annotations by Gabriel Harvey in his great 1555 Baile folio edition of Livy have been used to recover the precise methods and circumstances of his read; L. Jardine and A. Grafton, 'Studied for Action': how Gabriel Harvey read his Livy, Past and Present, cxxix (1990), 30–78.
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Chartier, 'organize this indistinguishable plurality of individual acts according to shared regularities'? 13

An answer implicit in recent studies 14 is to downplay the importance of broad uniformities and to focus instead upon the qualitative differences of experience. Exploration of the range of variability of individual experience revises emphasis upon the typicality of those individuals whose record is written and has survived by often singular circumstance and luck. The additional reconstruction of an 'interpretive community' places the isolated individual subject in an expanded context. In such ways, new generation annalistes are, perhaps, rescued from what would surely have been a first generation annaliste charge that new reading histories are too little concerned by the frequency or recurrence of particular modes of reading experience.

Against this, the obvious danger is that cultural history becomes fragmented and apparently unconcerned with change. Recovery of the individuality of reading practice favours synchronic comparison and analysis rather than diachronic explanation and identification of behavioural difference over time. The search for 'shared regularities' was, at the very least, a conceptual building-block to chronological narrative and distinction. It therefore seems timely to revive questions about the focus on the individual acts of reception, strategies for their contextualization, and the feasibility of satisfactorily recovering 'interpretive communities'. Any such re-appraisal is able to draw on various methodological proposals. These include both inter- and extra-textual research strategies, from studies of the intended reader as perceived by the author and of reception theory based on an implicit idea of the reader in the text, 15 to the broader understanding of reading competences, pedagogical methods, the phenomenology of cognitive procedures, letter and textual recognition, and the morphology, typography, orthography and visual presentation of the text. 16 In addition, several projects are currently investigating the representation of reading practice and its consequences, both written and drawn, and created by both readers and their observers. 17

Many of these studies address a critical agenda inescapably and self-evidently ahistorical, but even within literature departments there have been warnings that both more conventional literary history and recent 'historicist' approaches have often been inattentive to the precise

13 Chartier, 'Texts, printing, readings', op. cit., 156.
interaction between text and context. According to Robert Hume the meaning of texts 'is actuated only in readers or audiences' and he has warned, on the one hand, of disappointing interplay between cultural history and reader response theory and, on the other hand, of the limited consideration of audience and reception by many declared literary historians. Even the inclusivist agenda of McGann, most notably reclaiming authorial voice and intention but also engaged in the recovery of a range of historical aspects of textual publication and reception, marginalizes individual reading acts. In response, David Simpson has counselled a return to the basics of historical research to advance historicist textual interpretation. Hume suggests that 'the historicist needs to be committed to the construction of a complex model from contextual (not purely literary) evidence.'

More problematic is that while particular reading histories benefit from the conjunction of as many as possible of these approaches, they also require firm foundations. Historians attempting to recover the diversity of past reading experiences must confront the identification and comparison of reading sites, reading competences and habits, and readers' own recognition of what and why they were reading. Such recovery of individual practices and perceptions demands reflective, careful engagement with available sources and, in order to isolate changing reading processes and attitudes towards them, consideration of the broadest possible range of historical approaches to questions of readership.

II

Attempts at this integrated research for eighteenth-century England, with its remarkable book trades development, confront continuing difficulties over the relationship of recent studies of readers and reading – highly confined as most of them are by time and place – to larger claims about long-term cultural change. Anyone examining print reception in eighteenth-century Britain works in the shadow of a number of general assertions, many based on varieties of 'collective consciousness'. In particular, emphasis upon growing audiences – more books, more readers – tempts accounts of readers and reading to extend generalizations about the emergence of various modernities. Histories of reading and of the book are liable, when cannibalized and subsumed within larger narratives, to contribute to a teleological chronicle of progress, of the march of literacy, enlightenment and democracy. This is even inadvertently supported by those criticizing certain technological determinists for their apparent belief in the superiority of a pristine orality over a more efficient but ultimately degenerative form of communication.

In another variant of a modernity thesis, increased book consumption parallels the alleged

18 Hume, 'Texts within contexts', op. cit., 81.
19 See, for example, McGann, Textual condition, op. cit., 2–5, 10–11, 117–23.
development in England of changes in emotional relationships and moral attitudes. Affective marriage, affective individualism, the companionate marriage and feminine leisure have all been identified as prominent aspects of a society marked by 'the rising tide of individualism' and where 'romantic love and the romantic novel grew together after 1780'. All are situated as progressive forces in which print culture is part nursemaid and part chronicler. As David Cressy has warned of allied research, low literacy rates in the early modern period are not necessarily 'indicators of retardation or deprivation, awaiting rectification by progress'. The past, often romantic, history of reading in eighteenth-century England, however, includes accounts of democratization from the vantage point of later success. Even for Richard Altick, for example, 'the history of the mass reading audience is, in fact, the history of English democracy'. Undue reverence for the numbers learning to read has been derived from abstractions based on the testimony of the self-improved, such as William Cobbett recollecting reading A Tale of a Tub in a Kew Gardens haystack when fourteen, or Thomas Holcroft buying the Spectator when he became a shoemaker. In support, contemporary travellers offered citable sensationalism. Montesquieu noted roof-tilers buying newspapers and reading them in coffee houses. Karl Moritz, exploring England in the 1780s, recalled his humble landlady stealing away to read her Milton.

The influence of print also features prominently in accounts of an overarching development of civil society, in which historians of the eighteenth century debate the definition of public and private. Most influentially, Habermas explored the evolution of a 'public sphere' where practical reason was institutionalized in a discourse of reasoned arguments which overrode status and tradition. Such a public sphere is presented as the prerequisite of a democratic polity, and as founded on refined discourse and greater participation. Propelling this were print, books, journals, literary criticism and a bourgeois world of letters. Resulting summaries, however, tend to chart a linear development of an increasingly active press, enlarging public debate and creating an authentic public opinion, all apparently as new phenomena with little or no similarity to pre-print 'publicness'. Literary criticism itself is said to be born in the print culture of the eighteenth century.

Analysis of actual changes in such communicative practices, in 'public sphere' and 'private life' approaches.

however, is only just beginning, led by new and provocative studies of sociability and politeness.31

Finally, even the few attempts to distinguish modes of reading include bold assertions. Some have pointed to the replacement of communal, vocalized reading practices by silent internalized reading as both a reflection and an agent of change. In Paul Saenger’s evaluation, the triumph of silent reading by the late fifteenth century depended upon the historical development of separated writing and resulted in enhanced privacy and isolation.32 For the following centuries, an influential study of German society by Rolf Engelsing identifies a shift from intensive to extensive modes of reading. His basic argument is that less intensive and more partial and eclectic reading increased as a much broader range of printed materials became available. In the absence of further research, the thesis has been generally applied to various parts of Europe, whatever, indeed, its appropriateness to the original region studied.33

The wide influence of such claims begs further questions about the approaches to understanding readerships and reading. Here, most studies of readership in eighteenth-century England (and, indeed, France and North America) have started with the ‘what’, the history of manuscript and printed materials.34 Most commonly, a readership has been defined by the type of literature read – or believed to have been read. Such a readership might be defined by literary content or more broadly by literary genre or form. It might be limited to a readership for a particular author or defined according to the style of its publication and physical presentation.

The reader prescribed within the text is, of course, populous. Writers and editors constructed many specified or implied readerships in eighteenth-century England. Authors and compilers also tried to address multiple audiences, both explicitly and implicitly. Commercially minded examples include George Adams’s promotion of scientific study for ‘gentlemen, ladies and merchants’ and John Trusler’s more outlandish attempts to describe essential knowledge for every up-and-coming group he could think of. Evidence ranges from title-page ascription to the subtext of innuendo, requiring attention to the circumstances of writing and production, and sensitivity to irony, other rhetorical devices, and knowledge taken for granted by the writer. Some authorial constructions of a readership claimed a group identity, by activity or by composition, while others were no more than assumed aggregates. Nevertheless, given the encouragement of


33 R. Engelsing, Analphabetentum und Lektüre; zur Sozialgeschichte des Lesens in Deutschland zwischen feudaler und industrieller Gesellschaft (Stuttgart, 1973), and his Der Burger als Leser: Lesegeschichte in Deutschland, 1500–1800 (Stuttgart, 1974).

so many theoretical approaches, case-studies for eighteenth-century England are, perhaps, surprisingly few.35

A much stronger tradition is the use of English bibliographical scholarship and investigation of the production and distribution of print to provide general indicators of changing readerships. Numerous histories of the chapbook, broadside, newspaper, part-issue, novel and magazine underpin assumptions about the numbers and types reading.36 In this, the understanding of reading from what was read requires some identification of the contemporary popularity of texts rather than studying those selected by modern canonical or heuristic criteria. Major cataloguing projects and the specialist work of a new generation of historical bibliographers have provided clearer historical profiles. With the progress of the English Short-Title Catalogue (now, in electronic form, subsuming the Eighteenth-Century Short-Title Catalogue), the fog over the timing and dimensions of the upturn in at least domestic and foreign English-language publication is slowly lifting. We can, for example, conclude that the total of about 400 different titles of books published in Britain in the first decade of the sixteenth century compares to over 6000 published during the 1630s, some 22,000 separate titles (of all printed items) during the 1710s and about 60,000 during the 1790s.37

There are, however, many blanks. Although the state of retrospective national bibliography in England contrasts sharply with deficiencies elsewhere in western Europe, many particulars such as analysis of newspaper publication, subscription lists, booksellers' trade sales, and the production and distribution of chapbooks and popular ephemera remain highly problematic. The exact size of most eighteenth-century editions is unknown, even though such recent publications as the massive index to the printing ledgers of William Bowyer and son are making speculation less hazardous.38 Nevertheless, we have to accept that survival rates are beyond calculation and that the size of the great majority of editions can only be guessed at from entries for similar material in the few surviving printing ledgers and business letters. Moreover, the

35 Stock, Listening for the Text, op. cit., 150–2; Calhoun (ed.), Habermas and the Public Sphere, op. cit., part ii, 'Historical publics'.


It is not possible here to list all the recent publications deriving from new bibliographical research, but an early survey of the possibilities derived from ESTC, M. Crump and M. Harris (eds), Searching the Eighteenth Century (London, 1984), is suggestive.

market profile has far greater significance than production figures. Commercial manuscript circulation continued for at least two centuries after Caxton, the second-hand book market was diverse and expansive, and imports, particularly during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, were the mainstay of the scholarly English book market.49

The further problem, fundamental and yet liable to be forgotten, is that an intended readership might be quite different from an actual or unintended readership. An alternative strategy to derive the ‘who’ (was reading) from the ‘what’ (was read) therefore uses evidence of the distribution and acquisition of books and print. Readers and reading multiplied with the development of the carrying trade, provincial retailing and, from the early eighteenth century, book clubs and circulating libraries. Books were acquired by gift and inheritance, direct purchase, as a result of subscription, and by borrowing from a collection, private or commercial. Inventories or the sales catalogues of bookshops and, from the late seventeenth century, book auctions, provide simple guides to reading tastes. The most useful list the quantities of particular titles either sold or remaining in stock.40

Most eighteenth-century records of book sales, however, document wholesale or copyright transactions.41 Only a handful of individual retail or bookshop business ledgers from the pre-nineteenth-century book trade in England have survived. Shop inventories and stock sale records, for example, are a frustratingly haphazard or unfocused indication of the huge transactions in almanacs and chapbooks. In one of many eighteenth-century examples, the 1765 sale of the stock of Charles Hitch included 13,000 chapbooks in twenty-six titles. In addition, there were massive sales of jest-books, ‘golden cabinets’, trial and execution accounts, and homespun tracts. By the late eighteenth century, John Marshall and his successor, John Pitts, were claiming huge turnovers in chapbook and ballad sales. A year after its complete publication in 1792, some 200,000 copies of Paine’s Rights of Man were said to be in circulation, and by 1809 Paine was claiming a sale of 1.5 million for the second part alone. More certainly, the Cheap Repository Tract Society distributed some two million copies of moral tales and ballads between March 1795 and March 1796.42 The second-hand market, just visible from surviving sale catalogues, spanned antiquarian and scholarly rarities, and remainders and cheap popular books. At the end of the eighteenth century, Isaac Watts’s hymn books and works of divinity were the biggest


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item in the catalogue of James Lackington's unprecedentedly large book emporium, with some 10-20,000 copies of each title in stock. 43

The distribution of new, old and imported titles was extended by private libraries, book clubs, subscription schemes, debating societies, religious societies and, by the early nineteenth century, mechanics' institutes. Since at least the 1720s coffee houses had taken multiple copies of the leading newspapers for their customers. In the country towns, many debating societies formed their own book stock. 44 In both cases, it is almost anyone's guess for the most appropriate multiplier required to estimate readerships of newspapers and other shared texts. 45 The number of books and pamphlets read was also increased by private proprietary and subscription libraries and by the popularizing role of the circulating libraries, even though many libraries and clubs were comparatively costly to join. Few in number even by 1760, by 1800 commercial libraries were ten times more numerous than private library societies. 46 A large audience read new literature only when borrowed from circulating libraries. Subscription schemes, successful in other parts of Europe, were particularly popular in England from the late seventeenth century. Most books published by subscription bear printed subscriber lists with the sex, titles and, in many cases, the addresses and even the professions of supporters; but the lists must be treated with caution. There is no control to determine their accuracy, and many subscriptions were launched for specialist works or destitute authors. 47 Like the few business records surviving, the subscription lists also tell us nothing about the motives for buying or borrowing and nothing about how the books were read.

More significant for reading histories are those records of sale or loans which detail specific clients. Prominent among the few surviving borrowing records from the eighteenth century are those of cathedral libraries 48 and the 77 ledgers from the Bristol Library Society, 1773-1857. A study of the earliest five volumes of the Bristol Library considers 13,467 withdrawals of 900

44 There are many recent studies of book clubs and reading societies in North America and continental Europe which await comparison and include B. M. Milstein, Eight Eighteenth Century Reading Societies: A Sociological Contribution to the History of German Literature (Bern and Frankfurt am Main, 1972); and H. Brandes, 'Die 'Literarische Damengesellschaft' in Oldenburg zur Zeit der Franzosischen Revolution' in H. Boning (ed.), Franzosische Revolution und Deutsche Öffentlichkeit (Munich, 1992), 439-51.
45 See, for example, C. Y. Ferdinand, Benjamin Collins and the Provincial Newspaper Trade in the Eighteenth Century (Oxford, 1997), 130-1.
titles between 1773 and 1784. A further search of these records has revealed the borrowings of Southey and Coleridge for five years from 1793. This is exactly the type of record, in this case virtually neglected since Paul Kaufman's examination, that could yield new profiles of professional and scholarly reading of the period. Even so, the Bristol Library volumes are highly individual, as are the surviving borrowing records of the Bodleian from 1647, fellows' library ledgers from various Cambridge colleges, and such small, fragmentary registers as that of Witham parish library in Essex from about 1751. Certain types of library may be comparable, but there is no representative type of library, with or without surviving usage records.

The records of bookshops, usually with more random custom than libraries, are potentially more illuminating. The business ledgers of the Clay family, and in particular of John Clay, bookseller of Daventry, have featured in one debate about the provincial English book trade and its readers. Of individual sales records, further attention has been given to surviving ledgers of the late eighteen-century partnership of Hookham and Carpenter, but such business records are a rarity. Where they do survive, samples are often small. The total number of Clay's Warwick customers was 37 over a recorded period of 19 months between 1770 and 1772. It is also clear that we need to know as much, if not more, about general shopkeepers (many of whom sold reading materials) as we do about booksellers.

Given, then, the quality of purchasing and borrowing records, a more reader-centred strategy is required. 'At-risk readerships' might be constructed according to known characteristics of potential readers. These include the likelihood of purchasing or owning books, but also evidence of familiarity with reading. The constraints of purchasing power were even greater than those of literacy, and calculations of the price of books suggest a powerful limitation to the 'at-risk' audience. Many servants and labourers who might well have boasted modest reading skills were prevented from reading very much – certainly very much new literature – by the meagreness of their purse. The one qualification to this is the development of cheap print organizations, particularly the religious charities. Sources range from records relating to particular collections, such as probate and personal inventories, to specific marks of ownership. For the early eighteenth century, and as part of a wider history, Carole Shammas compares book-owning in three English districts between 1550 and 1721. Lorna Weatherill's comparable study of consumption patterns is based on 3000 wills and inventories drawn from eight parts of England from the mid-decades of 1675–1725. Although a surprisingly large proportion of Weatherill's inventories list 'books', extremely few specify titles. Only 5 per cent of all inventories list Bibles among the possessions. Wills and inventories share with memoirs obvious problems of representativeness and, in almost all cases, scant detail. Many books were probably included under general item headings, and many, perhaps the majority, of the less durable pamphlets and popular literature did not outlast their owners. A further problem with probate

49 P. Kaufman, Borrowings from the Bristol Library 1773–1784: A Unique Record of Reading Vorges (Charlottesville, 1960).


inventories is their virtual disappearance after a change in the law in the early eighteenth century.52

There is also a more fundamental reservation about what we might describe as 'dependency readerships' or readerships dependent upon modes of access to print. We can log proven ownership evidence and map certain distributive circuits and agencies, but those acquiring print (or even manuscripts) need not constitute a 'readership'. In certain instances, individuals and institutions acquired books and written texts for reasons quite unrelated to reading. Books might be unread totems of faith, respectability or solidarity. Histories of 'publication', as the issuing of a text in whatever medium (printed, written or even oral), must allow for a very broad interpretation of intended social functions, even before consideration of unintended functions.53 Although the eighteenth-century commercial take-off in book production resulted not only from an increase in the number of purchasers, but also from greater purchasing by those already buying books, English institutional and country house library demand – with often greater potential for the stacking of unread books – has been consistently overlooked in studies relating readers to book production totals.

Any re-focus on audience has, indeed, to acknowledge that in most existing studies of individual readers in England the notion of readership has been approached conservatively. Questioning of the reader's own comments upon what he or she was doing is often restrained. Reading references in eighteenth-century diaries, letters and essays have most commonly been used to speculate about the circulation of books and a general increase in those reading. The more difficult problem is that all memoirs of individual readers and of their contemporary observers beg particular questions about the subjectivity of the individual record. We have to ask why the memoirs or observations were written and take heed of the special unreliability of anecdotal recall and self-justification. The most obvious control for this is the gathering of multiple case-studies of readers, and the use of the personal account – whether by reader or reader observer – in conjunction with other evidence and approaches. The intention is to identify shared perspectives from the accumulation of diverse confessions of reading. At present, however, no such study exists for the period between Margaret Spufford's early analysis of 141 seventeenth-century spiritual autobiographies and David Vincent's more recent examination of the autobiographies of 142 working-class readers in nineteenth-century Britain.54

By such comparative work the history of reading might be better aligned with the evidence of use left by actual readers, and not just borrowers or owners. The further challenge is, then,

54 M. Spufford; 'First steps in literacy: the reading and writing experience of the humblest seventeenth-century spiritual autobiographers', Social History, iv (1979), 407–35; D. Vincent, Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750–1914 (Cambridge, 1989); and cf. J. Burnett, D. Vincent and D. Mayall (eds), The Autobiography of the Working Class: An Annotated Critical Bibliography [1790–1945], 3 vols (Brighton, 1984–9); and with simpler listings but a different social range in W. Matthews (ed.), British Diaries: An Annotated Bibliography of British Diaries Written between 1442 and 1942 (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1950) and British Autobiographies: An Annotated Bibliography of British Autobiographies Published or Written before 1951 (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1955). A Reading Experience Database (R.E.D.) has also been launched as a pilot project to contribute to later volumes of the Cambridge University Press History of the Book in Britain series.
to translate what we know of the circumstances in which a text was read to an understanding of the processes of reception. Reading as a mental process of appreciation might be highly individualistic, is certainly culturally conditioned, and can also be a reading of more than letters and of what we conventionally think of as a text. Skills are not independent. The ways of reading a picture, a building or even a landscape might be transferred, together with comparable accumulated experience, to engage with the written or printed word. In different situations as well as in simple, direct comparison, different typefaces and page layouts might invite radically different responses to the same words. Above all, the underexplored relationship between the reading of printed and handwritten letters remains crucial. Various suggestions have been made about both bifurcated and overlapping readerships according to the popularity of black-letter, roman type and script in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but there were also many further points of contact, from experiments in mock-script typography to the laborious copying of type forms in manuscript letters and simple book ownership labels.

This quest for different literacies has involved varied attempts at quantification, but many begin with evidence based on writing skills. The derivation of levels of sign literacy from occasional special censuses, wills, marriage registers or other official documents is also highly problematic, either because of the extreme specificity of surviving sources or because the interdependence of the skills of reading and writing cannot be taken for granted. Reading – however characterized – is taken to have been a more common practice than writing. Many who could not write, or did not see why they should sign official papers (especially if their husbands marked), might certainly have had simple reading skills. Nevertheless, it is evidence of writing competence that has generally been the basis for the classification of literacy by profiles of age, gender, social status, wealth, occupation, religion, linguistic group or place of residence.

An outstanding question, therefore, concerns changes to the nature of reading competence and comprehension. Whatever the balance between new opportunities for those of modest means to buy or borrow books, and the apparent static levels of sign-literacy, different types of reading skill are also likely to be related to pedagogical conditions, instructional methods and broader influences on textual access and acquisition. Some of the specific exertions of eighteenth-century charity schools and new tutorial establishments can be glimpsed from rare marginalia in school books, primers and bibles and prayerbooks, and from various contemporary

55 This has been explored most adventurously, perhaps, in H. Blumenberg, Die Lesbarkeit der Welt (Frankfurt am Main, 1981) – on reading the world as a book.


57 See, for example, Spufford, 'First steps in literacy', op. cit. Comparable difficulties for the medieval period, including the 'contradiction' of lay literacy, are explored in M. T. Clanchy, From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307 (London, 1979).


59 These are summarized in Houston, Literacy in Early Modern Europe, op. cit., 130–54.
accounts and representations, including some in the hornbooks and chapbooks themselves. Motivations, religious and secular, have been the focus of much debate. Recently, commerce rather than religion has been elevated among the prime motors to literacy. Certainly, pioneering work on the usage of numbers and the history of 'quantitative thought' is particularly suggestive and awaits further investigation.

III

If we then discard assumptions of simple polarity between literacy and non-literacy (particularly if this means writing-based sign-literacy), we have to rethink our appraisal of reading as an aspect of cultural change in the eighteenth century. We have to consider not how many were reading texts, even a particular text, and not just the contingent circumstances of differences of gender and age, wealth, occupation, and religious and educational background, but how we categorize the different ways in which people were able or chose to read. The cultural and social resources of particular readers are not just grounded in economic circumstances but range across characteristics of aptitude, qualification, attitude and intention. Where possible, investigation needs to include the witnesses' own appreciation of the processes of the creation, transmission and reception of the read. To what extent did those involved at different stages of textual production and reception consider the processes at work and respond to them? How did people think that they were reading, that they ought to read, and that certain consequences would follow from their efforts?

Such considerations invite a new understanding of changing perceptions of readership during the eighteenth century, but they also suggest a reappraisal of existing perspectives. Eighteenth-century realization of contingent circumstances was itself developed as the very material changes to textual production – so beloved of technological determinists – accelerated. In the last hundred years of the dominance of the manual printing press, the sensitivity of readers to categorization of readers and reading increased – and increased in association with developments in the book trades. This change is complex – and much more research needs to be done – but broad features can be suggested.

The first, dual consideration is that the quickening production of texts included a multiplication of duodecimos and other smaller formats across a range of literature together with a multiplication of implicit and explicit strategies for directing readers within their reading locales. With the increased portability of texts the sites for the reading of print – especially for shared and formalized reading occasions – increased and attracted much greater consideration and comment. In turn, this reinforced identifications of intentionalist reading groups (many

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63 What W. J. Gilmore has called in his study of reading 'the relationship between material and cultural dimensions of existence': *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780–1835* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1989), 9.
confirming religious, occupational or single-sex profiles), where reading circles claimed particular books at hand and pursued particular reading practices. Many varieties of printed text were now aimed at these groups. In each of these an author, editor, scribe or compositor attempted, in effect, to impose control over the construal of a particular text, and the forms of reading within new sites and new types of reading groups were in varying degrees policed by new forms of textual emphasis and subtly embedded directions. Certainly, the reading experience derived from the organization or freedom of particular texts was not bounded by textual genre.

Another consequence of increased production (still within the technological limits of the hand printing press) was a much faster turn-round of texts, notably of newspapers and magazines. One result of this was that the time of reading was given greater significance, both in the speed of reading about a local, national or international event or public notice, and in the time of the day at which the text was read. One demonstration of this was the increasing exasperation expressed by library societies at some distance from London when their subscription periodicals arrived months or even only weeks out of date. These same reviews, indeed, were key critical intermediaries offering reading protocols and attempting to regulate reading practices.

Further reaction to new reading experience derived from the loosening of various forms of state and trade guild regulation. Less censorship, greater pirating and independent booksellers' challenges to closed copyrights for classic and popular texts contributed directly to the outpouring of cheap copies of standard works from the press at the end of the eighteenth century. This intensified the fear of reading and the hostile definitions of irresponsible readers, but it also created self-conscious autodidact readers, those reading for improvement and recommending their strategies to others. Both extremes enhanced the appreciation of the power and effectiveness of reading.

There are also two further considerations relating to changes to the materiality of the text. First, there was the shifting relationship between literary uses of a text and the book's totemic employment in social display and religious ritual. The kissing of the Bible, for example, claspd and cushioned or even carried on top of a pole, as a source of authority or talismatic protection, had contrasted with what David Cressy calls the English 'unsentimental, utilitarian attitude toward ordinary books.' Ritualistic use of books was refocused, however, and during the

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66 Wiles, Serial Publication, op. cit.; Cranfield, Development of the Provincial Newspaper, op. cit.
69 The most recent account is given by M. Rose, Authors and Owners: The Invention of Copyright (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1993), 31–129.
70 Cressy, 'Books as totems', op. cit., 93.
eighteenth century non-reading veneration of books was greatly secularized. The establishment of private and public libraries and household collections presented with new potency the idea of books as the massed ranks of knowledge and social status. With this were posed new perceptions of 'reading' as an activity differentiated from simple reverence, even in physiological terms. Examples ranged from the medical effects of excessive or ill-reading, to the correct way to digest information, and the correct way to approach what was now commonly seen as the problematic deluge of print.

Finally, new assumptions were made about the permanence and authority of print. Many historians of the physical book have surely undervalued the instability of its reception – the different response to subtly different printings, editions and bindings, and the broader context of typographical presentation in the first centuries of print. During the eighteenth century the response is even more uneven. For some readers, the blunt, unquestionable authority of the text was enhanced. For others, sensitivity to variant editions was accentuated, with sophisticated appreciation of the mutability of the text. A sense of contingency was recognized and attributed both to material variation of the texts and to different reception circumstances. To the corresponding distinctions and confusions between fiction and reality – pseudo-memos, unreliable foreign newspaper reports, magazine readers' letters, the novel itself – was added the readable intermediary of critical reviewing and essay commentary. Such considerations extend historical interpretations of textuality and the textual community where, in Stock's words, 'text' is what a community takes it to be.

One result of this was that by the late eighteenth century most readers practised self-classification according to the activities and the aims of those engaged in reading. Such contemporary recognition of readerships and reading strategies included that for those seeking practical guidance, those engaged in scholarship or religious devotion, self-improving readerships, readerships interested only in entertainment, or ones (as many working-class autobiographies insist) interested primarily in 'discovery'. The same duality – that is, between the readers created and the readership thinking about its own creation – was repeated across all the features of change suggested above. In considering the time of the day when texts were read, for example, evidence might range widely from textual self-description to analysis of reading sites and recollection. An evening readership or a morning readership is perhaps most obviously associated with newspapers, which first used this distinction in the eighteenth century, but it is also identifiable with particular works of devotion and particular bookish practices. These include readerships defined according to the use to be made of reading and to where the reader might be when reading.

In such ways, differences between public or private reading are both more fundamental and more various than has been appreciated, and in turn, have a direct effect upon particular reading strategies. Certain parts of a book might be read, serial or intermittent reading might follow different routes through a text on different occasions, the number of participating readers and auditors might change according to venue or season, and there might be many variations to the manner in which a book was read aloud or in silence, in company or in solitude.

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71 Consider, for example, 'The book as a force for change', Febvre and Martin, Coming of the Book, op. cit., 248–332. Future pointers were offered, however, as for example, remarks in Eisenstein, Printing Revolution, op. cit., 92–4.

72 Stock, Listening for the Text, op. cit., 146.

73 Suggestive approaches are offered by Cressy, Literacy and the Social Order, op. cit., 1–18, 175–89.

74 Consider, for example, what Gilmore calls the 'literate obsession' of Vermont communities under the siege of winter for five months of every year: Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life, op. cit., 2.
books circulated, places of reading became more sensitive. A reader’s permanent residential or professional location was contrasted with a readership when in the country, on military campaign, at the racecourse, in church, in the sedan chair, on the commode or at the hairdresser’s. The physical placement and reaction of the reader, or what has been called ‘la postureologie de la lecture’, can, when glimpsed from the historical record, offer further clues to the experience of reading.75

Here, reading practice and its evaluation might also be judged from evidence of changes to reading arrangements in eighteenth-century England. Much can be learned about reading space, whether grand privy chamber or lowly parlour, from diary and contemporary commentary, the records of legal deposit, household sale and other commercial descriptions, and the representation of reading in drawings, paintings and prints. How a book was kept or arranged might suggest whether it was viewed as an object of veneration or derision, sedition or authority, for dispersal or retention, as decorative or informative.

From the late seventeenth century the private library was re-equipped and, as family room or entertaining parlour as well as study, became a feature of most gentlemen’s houses by the mid-eighteenth century.76 The reading wheel, of medieval origin, was replaced by a vast assemblage of reading paraphernalia for use and display. The reading chairs, stands, desks, print-racks, ladders, rotating shelving, globes, busts and miscellanea, together with the actual design of library bays, windows, ceilings, wall shelving or space formerly enclosed by book-presses, all suggested ideals in reading practice and purpose.77 Many late eighteenth-century English domestic libraries became parading or literary browsing rooms, with hearths to read by, steps to climb, desks to sit at, spaces in which to pause and discuss. Comparisons can be suggested with the changing spaces in proprietary libraries such as the London Library Society, the new civic private libraries founded in the final third of the eighteenth century, but also with fashionable London, Dublin, and later provincial circulating libraries. Within the secluded, privileged and significantly furnished library, an intended function and meaning was displayed.78

These changing arrangements for reading signalled particular, often political, messages about the use of books during the late eighteenth century. Grand libraries, set up as temples to literary devotion, deepened the tension between reading as enlightenment and reading as a strictly privileged and exclusive activity. Ceiling murals, busts, imposing bookcases and fittings framed the library of an Enlightenment gentleman. For many, it was an archive of knowledge yet also an assertion of the perfectability of Man and a reassuring record of the advance of human achievement. In this Romantic vision of book collecting, the private library was to be an enclosure for reflection, but also one offering determined contrast to the natural state of man, the primitive illiterate beyond the boundaries of the estate.79

This, indeed, is one of many instances of tensions and contradictions visible from the broader social history of readers and reading experiences in eighteenth-century England. Debate about numbers and types of readers has been fundamental to argument about the underpinnings of the early modern book trade in Europe and Britain. Despite many qualifications (most notably over timing, geography and the nature of institutional demand), it is impossible to resist the simple notion of the replacement of relatively narrow religious and aristocratic patronage by mass purchasing by a commercial ‘public’ and the triumph of the market. But what does this tell us about the impact of print as read? As reading strategies became increasingly self-conscious and self-referential, readerships were ‘historically constructed’ in the sense of being recognized by the readers themselves. A corporate sense of an ‘evening readership’ as addressed by a newspaper, for example, might create a real and representational solidarity unlikely to be found among sedan chair readers or ‘we commode readers’. This is obviously true of a readership in one particular language, set apart from or given special recognition within the community, and is an even stronger example of a separate group as conceived by others and by itself. This has been most obviously explored in terms of the citizenry of the Republic of Letters, with its special standards and ideals, but much of this is also indivisible from readers’ own self-conscious construction of reading and notions of the normative reader.

These readers’ perceptions of readerships – and whether they belonged to one or many – might be quite different from those expressed within the text, by those actively engaged in the production or reading of books, or by those observing readership perceptions from without. This is only just beginning to be explored by historians. A recent literary study of Samuel Johnson as reader offers an investigation of how one influential individual recognized the application of different modes of reading and his own conformity to different readerships. But the potential for broader enquiry is obvious. Contemporary commentaries on correct and incorrect ways of approaching books and print supplement and contradict the record left by the individual reader. Many sober writers proffered advice in hornbooks and primers and in the now much-neglected guides to recommended modes of reading aloud. From the 1760s there was a sharp increase in reports criticizing readers for reading in inappropriate places or for reading badly, quickly, insensitively or too much. Other accounts, particularly of communal reading and readings delivered while others worked, are often incidental to wider writings. Distinctions such as these underline the case for a more rigorous investigation of the ‘how’ and ‘why’ in reading history.

IV

New histories of reading, currently as much strategic suggestion as applied research, begin and end with the personal reading experience, grounded in the notion that the text does not exist until given signification by readers. Concepts of full literacy, or of a sharp divide between the literate and the non-literate, are replaced by awareness of different literacies and of different ways of revisiting the same text. ‘Misreadings’ are other ways of reading a text. At issue are the different ways not only of performing reading but of readers believing in their empowerment by reading performance, whether by an individual alone with the text, or by communal activity and ritual. Rediscovery and review, but also selection and elision are the prerogative of the

80 R. DeMaria Jnr, Samuel and the Life of Reading (Baltimore and London, 1997).
reader. And both rereading and relistening might produce different effects upon the same individual according to his or her disposition at the time. Textual results can be advocated but cannot be determined by the producers. In this sense, texts — as every censor knew — can never be neutral and reading must always have positive effect. The authorized reading might be prescribed, but it cannot be guaranteed — nor possibly ever wholly understood.

By the same token, subversion and the subverted reading is not a simple historical phenomenon. What did individuals read for? Were they reading to learn and understand? Were they reading to remember something and then apply this skill? Were they reading to gather information or to take a decision? Were they reading, at least apparently, for simple entertainment? And how did this intersect with contemporary theories of formal reading practice, where the voicing of its text and its silent reading was distinguished, and where, in a further appreciation of the inherent instability of the text, the fear was of misinterpretation and misreading?

Ultimately, such explorations of human consciousness remain in thrall to patchy evidential survival, but the challenge is to attempt a mediation between text and reader which involves the history of comparative reading competences, typographical recognition, changes in the physical form of the text and evidence of variations in the resources of the reader. The history of the construal of meaning by texts must consider how they were confronted and appropriated by the reader. It must attempt the recovery of forgotten gestures and practices, and of textual motivation, enactment and effect. It must try to include problematic definitions of audiences, and consider the shared use of texts and contrasts between the freedom of the reader and the control offered by the textual form.

Attempts to understand the historical individual reader might, above all, check Whiggish accounts of the purpose and effects of reading. Even de Certeau, in writing of reading deterritorializing the reader, emphasized the primacy of the silent, modernized, internalized reader.81 The history of reading is not self-evidently a history of improvement and enlightenment, of progress from lesser to greater literacy, from ignorance and barbarism to democracy, humanitarianism and virtue. Reading is not necessarily liberating and can be an imprisoning experience. We must ask what reading inspired and what it constrained. This demands an open-minded absorption in the evidence. For many past observers literacy was seen to lead to depravity, and social historians have been too ready to laugh and scorn. The ironic voice may intervene and handicap, both highlighting and belittling the failure of people’s past accounts to describe their world.82 Serious attention must be given to the language of those boasting both material and spiritual wealth from the learning of their letters and a love of books. Accounts of being ‘ravished by the word’, as one humble diarist put it, caution against the simple dismissal of the reader’s self-perception.

Study of reading processes might greatly contribute to the historian’s conceptualization of the changing social contingencies of past belief. At the one level, by recovering and offering an interpretation of a range of texts available, we help rescue the history of popular thought and discursive practice from the canon of great texts studied in isolation, review the differences between authorial meaning and intention, magnify the absences and illuminate the unexpected.

81 de Certeau, Practice of Everyday Life, op. cit., 175–6, on silent reading as a modern experience.
At a further level, the study of reading practice improves sensitivities to categorization, language, and assumptions about the privileging of different types of experiential evidence. To read is not to be a passive receptacle of signs, and every reading changes every text. For reading, no more than the construction of particular ideas, is no universal or timeless experience: it is conditioned by historical circumstance in which reading also becomes part of the recovery of the historical identity of a text.

Recent cultural history, in reaction to new forms of historical determinism (especially technological determinism), has continued to break down polarities between the popular and the elite, explore mental structures and undermine falsely oppositional categories such as ‘literate’ and ‘illiterate’. A resulting danger has been the neglect of evaluative cultural change. It is possible, however, to set out to counter teleologies without abandoning a search for change and for the loci of power relations. New histories might reveal the practice of reading as a prime agency for creating social and cultural variation against a history of common forms and patterns of exchange.

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