HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REVIEW

APPROACHES TO THE HISTORY OF READERS AND READING IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN

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ABSTRACT. *The history of reading can link intellectual and cultural developments with social or political change in the eighteenth century. Historians of the book increasingly argue that an understanding of historical reading practices is essential if we are to understand the impact of texts on individuals and on society as a whole: textual evidence alone is inadequate. Recent work on eighteenth-century readers has used sources including book trade records, correspondence, and diaries to reconstruct the reading lives of individuals and of groups of readers. Such sources reveal the great variety of reading material many eighteenth-century readers could access, and the diversity and sophistication of reading practices they often employed, in selecting between a range of available reading strategies. Thus, any one theoretical paradigm is unlikely to capture the full range of eighteenth-century reading experience. Instead, we can trace the evolution of particular reading cultures, including popular and literary reading cultures, the existence of cultures based around particular genres of print, such as newspapers, and reading as a part of social and conversational life. There is now a need for a new synthesis that combines the new evidence of reading practice with textual analysis to explain continuity and change across the century.*

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Images of reading come to mind readily when we consider social, cultural, and political change in the eighteenth century. From middle-class devotees of the *Spectator* to radicals and the *Rights of man*, from women reading novels to labourers reading newspapers, the act of reading seems to be at the centre of developments such as the emergence of polite society, the commercialization of leisure, the development of political radicalism, and the changing role of women. Yet the stereotyped readers these images convey are often simply transpositions of particular positions in eighteenth-century debates and discourses about reading. Reading has been too often taken for granted by historians, and assertions of how and why people in the past read have often been derived from the observations of partisan observers. This is especially unfortunate for the study of the eighteenth century, where the question of the relationship between intellectual developments and social or political change – between the Enlightenment and political turmoil, or between the rise of polite-ness and the changing status of the middling orders – has been much debated. Actual historical readers and reading practices can seem elusive, but an imaginative use of sources to re-evaluate sceptically old stereotypes offers the opportunity to discover new and perhaps surprising information about eighteenth-century readers, and through their experiences, about social and cultural change in the period.

Because the history of reading is relevant to literary and intellectual history, as well as to the history of leisure, gender, and popular culture, it has been the subject of a great variety

of different approaches and methodologies. There has also been a high degree of cross-fertilization between research covering different periods and different countries. As a result, this article, while focused on recent work on readers in the British Isles in the eighteenth century, will seek to place it in the context of broader intellectual developments in the history of reading, considering theoretical approaches that may have been developed with initial application to other countries (most notably France), or other periods.

Many of these approaches derive from the broad multi-disciplinary exercise of the 'History of the Book'. The intellectual roots of this discipline can be found in the concerns of French historians and of English-speaking bibliographers. The practitioners of the *histoire du livre* initially tracked the implications of changing book ownership for the long-run social and intellectual changes that form a principal concern of the *Annales* school. From an initial concern with the trajectory of texts, they found themselves increasingly aware of the need to consider books as material objects, since the physical form that texts take affects their availability to readers and the use the readers make of them. This concern with the material book sat well with the new, more historicist approach to bibliography pioneered in the English-speaking world by D. F. McKenzie. A recent collection of McKenzie's essays, taken in conjunction with his recently reissued *Bibliography and the sociology of texts*, under-scores how influential his approach has been.[1] Mackenzie stressed the need to understand books as manufactured and distributed in a social and economic context, and described the implications of this understanding for how we are to interpret texts and historical responses to them: the need for a historically rooted understanding of what he termed the 'sociology of texts'.

The History of the Book has since developed rapidly. The establishment of Centres for the Book, the publication of a series of multi-volume national Histories of the Book, and the establishment of the Society for the History of Authorship, Readers, and Publishing and its journal, *Book History*, have helped institutionalize the study of books as a multi-disciplinary exercise combining literary scholars, bibliographers, and social and cultural historians.[2] The history of reading forms an integral part of this research agenda. If we are to understand how the processes of production and distribution of books and print could have an impact on politics, society, and culture at large, we need to understand who read books, what books they read, and what effect that reading had on them. Until the 1990s, however, readers and their responses tended to be taken for granted in book history studies, despite calls for a shift of focus in 'book history' from the book to the reader.[3] Readers were the subject of fewer studies than those of authors, printers, and booksellers. In the last ten years, however, a number of studies have sought to put the reader centre-stage. This renewed interest has been influenced by new approaches to the place of reading in the history of communications, and by responses to theoretical characterizations of the activity of reading.

[1] See especially the editorial introduction for McKenzie's influence. D. F. McKenzie, *Making meaning: 'Printers of the mind' and other essays*, ed. Peter D. McDonald and Michael F. Suarez (Amherst, 2002); idem, *Bibliography and the sociology of texts* (2nd edn, Cambridge, 1999).

[2] National book history volumes covering the eighteenth century include Henri-Jean Martin, Roger Chartier, and Jean-Pierre Vivet, eds., *Histoire de l'édition française* (Paris, 1983–6), II: *Le livre triomphant, 1660–1830*; *The history of the book in America* (Cambridge, 2000–), I: H. Amory and David Hall, eds., *The colonial book in the Atlantic world*; and a forthcoming volume in the *Cambridge history of the book in Britain* (Cambridge, 1999–).

[3] Roger Chartier, 'Frenchness in the history of the book: from the history of publishing to the history of reading', *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, 97 (1987), pp. 299–329.

The central place of reading in the evolution of the history of communications has been reinforced by an influential model for understanding the internal logic of book production, and how it interacts with outside influences. Robert Darnton's concept of the 'communications circuit' links authors, printers, booksellers, and readers in a feedback loop: books are sold to readers, whose demand creates a market for more books, and printers and booksellers respond to this demand; albeit each subject to the influence of external factors such as the availability of capital, political control, and the influence of intellectual developments.[4] This approach has the advantage of not pre-judging the relative influence of each of the participants in this process of communication. It cannot be assumed that readers will simply consume what is produced: the frequency of book-trade bankruptcies in the eighteenth century, and the emergence of the remainder bookseller as part of the ecology of the book trade, are testimony to the number of times participants in the book trade failed to predict what readers would and would not buy.

The figure of the reader has also been a central concern of literary-critical theories that seek to characterize the relationship between author, text, and reader. Many reader-response critics have stressed the hegemonic ambitions of the author, and the use of rhetorical devices such as the 'implied reader' contained in the text, who provides a means of shaping the real reader's response to it.[5] This effort to understand the interaction of author and reader has particular resonance for the eighteenth century, given the complex and contested discourses about reading in the period itself, especially those concerning non-elite readers and women that will be discussed later. However, many hstorians have, as we shall also see, expressed serious doubts about the apparently ahistorical nature of some reader-response theory.

From these theoretical concerns, recent case studies have enabled eighteenth-century readers to start to emerge from the realms of statistics and the over-simplified identification of genres with readerships. However, some recent work in the field remains book-centred even when a more reader-centred approach could be more fruitful. *Books and their readers in eighteenth-century England: new essays* takes a division of books into genres as its main organizing principle, repeating the format of the editor's previous collection of similar title, published over twenty years ago.[6] Essays give some useful attention to genres, such as religious literature, that have received less scholarly attention than their popularity in the eighteenth century might suggest they merit, as well as into less studied types of publications, such as biographical dictionaries, and bibles. A common theme is the self-conscious sophistication of writers and publishers in such genres, who adopted complex strategies in writing, printing, and promoting their works to retain both intellectual authority and commercial appeal. Several essays explore the way that communities of readers developed around particular types of literature, showing how the interaction between readers, authors, and publishers could work in practice. For example, Antonia Forster outlines the

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[4] Robert Darnton, 'What is the history of books?', in *The kiss of Lamourette* (London, 1990), pp. 107–35. Cf. Thomas R. Adams and Nicolas Barker, 'A new model for the study of the book', in Nicolas Barker, ed., *A potencie of life* (London, 1993), pp. 5–43.

[5] For the implied reader see Wolfgang Iser, *The act of reading: a theory of aesthetic response* (Baltimore, 1978), esp. pp. 27–38, and the essays in Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crossman, eds., *The reader in the text: essays in audience and interpretation* (Princeton, 1980); for an overview of reader-response criticism and other theories of reading, see the essays collected in Andrew Bennet, ed., *Readers and reading* (London, 1995).

[6] Isabel Rivers, ed., *Books and their readers in eighteenth-century England* (Leicester, 1982), and idem, ed., *Books and their readers in eighteenth-century England: new essays* (London, 2001).

attempts made by the critical review journals to establish common ground with their readers even as they sought to guide their taste (p. 182), and Michael F. Suarez uses poetical miscellanies to document the complex web of textual relationships linking authors, book-sellers, and their readers (ch. 8, 'The production and consumption of the eighteenth-century poetical miscellany').

However, the genre-based arrangement of the essays necessarily gives us little insight into how readers might have read across genre boundaries, or why they chose particular types of books over others. Most of the essays focus on the key figures – authors, book-sellers, and printers – in the production of different types of publication. Readers appear largely indirectly, through their presumed role in constituting 'the market' for particular genres. This market is reconstructed in a sophisticated manner in some essays: for example, Marcus Walsh uses subscription lists and a consideration of the physical format of scholarly editions to demonstrate the increasing stratification of the market for editions of English literary classics ('Literary scholarship and the life of editing', ch. 7). James Raven puts such market developments in the context of the expansion of the eighteenth-century English book trades, a 'revolution in printed output' (p. 2), in his introductory essay. What is lacking for the volume as a whole, however, is an overall sense of what impact this 'revolution' had on the consumers of print.

The experience of reading, a recent collection of essays about Irish readers in the eighteenth century edited by Bernadette Cunningham and Máire Kennedy, adopts a more reader-centred approach, and as a result gives a better sense of the major issues to be confronted in studying eighteenth-century readers.[7] Toby Barnard ('Reading in eighteenth-century Ireland: public and private pleasures', pp. 60–77) considers the place of reading in public and private spheres: as he makes clear, reading could be a public event – as in the case of newspapers displayed in public places – as well as part of the individual's private and family life. Rolf Loeber and Magda Soutkiner-Loeber reconstruct the reading matter available to those low in the social hierarchy, and Máire Kennedy considers women's reading. Thus, we are invited to consider the relationship of reading to the public order, the social hierarchy, and to gender relations: all factors to affect the answers to the three basic questions that Cunningham and Kennedy ask about eighteenth-century readers in their introduction (p. 3): what people read, why they read it, and what factors influenced their response to it.

I

The most basic question historians must confront before answering these questions is that of whether historical reading experience is retrievable at all. The nature of reading itself makes it an often complex experience that is different for each individual reader: 'A bewildering, labyrinthine, common and yet personal process of reconstruction.'[8] Thus, Robert Darnton has argued, 'Although we have some information about the external circumstances of eighteenth-century reading, we can only guess at its effects on the hearts and minds of readers.'[9] Nevertheless, Darnton's work itself demonstrates that given an intelligent use of the material available, and given a degree of empathy and cultural

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[7] Bernadette Cunningham and Máire Kennedy, eds., *The experience of reading: Irish historical perspectives* (Dublin, 1999).   [8] Alberto Manguel, *A history of reading* (London, 1996), p. 39.
[9] Robert Darnton, *The forbidden best-sellers of revolutionary France* (London, 1997), p. 85.

awareness, plausible estimates of the long-term nature and effects of changes in reading practices can be made.[10]

   The question of how reading practices change invites us to consider how far reading is a universal human experience, sharing basic characteristics across different historical periods; and how far particular reading experiences are historically contingent.[11] To stress the former view risks anachronism, or falling into the trap of romanticizing an activity that is so important in the lives of historians and literary scholars themselves. However, to insist on the absolutely different nature of the reading experience in different historical epochs would result in abandoning the useful methodological and theoretical starting-points available from considering work done on other periods, or within other disciplines.

   The second, and related, major methodological question in the history of reading concerns the factors influencing the reader's response to the text. Here, the key question is how the text, the reader's experiences, and external factors interact. Some have characterized the relationship between author and reader in terms of power relations: pointing to the development of rhetorical devices intended to make the text a device for the assertion of power over the reader, such as prefatorial statements about the spirit in which the author expected the book to be read, and depictions of people reading in the text itself, to provide positive or negative models for reading.

   Jacqueline Pearson has explored how ideologies of reading led to depictions of 'good' and 'bad' reading practices that were often gendered.[12] Pearson shows that eighteenth-century commentators created tropes of women's reading that, she argues, helped shape the way that women read. Her study concentrates on women reading fiction. While new genres such as the novel posed problems for pre-existing discourses about appropriate reading, it is not necessarily appropriate to assume a priori that the novel must be the most significant genre for investigating the relationship between reading and gender relations. Pearson's assertion that fiction was 'the form most rigorously censored and policed' (p. 19) seems debatable given the equally ideologically charged discourses she also documents, concerning women's reading of genres such as political and scientific literature. Moreover, while Pearson does use biographical sources to document the reading lives of a number of female authors including Jane Austen and Frances Burney, her argument rests more on literary discourses about reading than on the experiences of individual historical readers. For example, Pearson uses close readings of literary texts to explore how male authors, such as Richardson, Johnson, and Byron, sought to shape their female readers' responses to their work; and how novels by women, including Austen's *Northanger Abbey* and Lennox's *Female Quixote*, responded to the voluminous literature attacking the effects of novels on female readers, with playfully ambiguous satires of misreading. However, such discourses are at one remove from actual historical readers: evidence for the attempts authors made to police their readers cannot tell us how readers themselves responded to such attempts. At stake is the contentious question of how far historical readers, both male and female, allowed the rhetoric of what they read, together with the prevailing cultural discourses surrounding proper means of reading, to influence how they read it.

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[10] For example, ch. 6, 'Readers respond to Rousseau', in Robert Darnton, *The great cat massacre and other episodes in French cultural history* (London, 1984).

[11] This is identified as a central challenge facing the history of reading in James Raven, 'New reading histories, print culture and the identification of change: the case of eighteenth-century England', *Social History*, 23 (1998), pp. 268–87.

[12] Jacqueline Pearson, *Women's reading in Britain, 1750–1835: a dangerous recreation* (Cambridge, 1999).

   The most sustained attacks on the notion that actual historical readers' reactions to any text have been shaped entirely, or even largely, by the text itself have come from historians of popular culture and working-class literacy. Roger Chartier, in the context of early modern popular culture, has stressed how far readers can 'appropriate' their own meanings to texts, meanings that can confound the intentions of authors and which cannot be easily predicted.[13] Janice Radway's studies of twentieth-century romance-reading, and Jonathan Rose's study of nineteenth-century working-class readers, have both shown how misleading simplistic a priori models of the effects of reading can be.[14] 'Reading is not eating', cautions Radway: readers do not automatically internalize what they consume.[15] Rose points to what he terms the 'receptive fallacy' in much reader-response criticism: the notion that we can infer how readers reacted to texts by studying the texts alone.[16]

   Instead, they invite us to consider the evidence for individual readers' experiences. Historical readers have been more often taken for granted than examined in depth because the sources for historical reading experience are scanty and problematic, and even those that are available to us usually tell us more about what people read, and the contexts in which they did so, than about why they read what they did, and what they made of it. Moreover, most sources raise in different contexts the same question: that of the typicality of the reader, or the reading experience that they document. Only a tiny fraction of eighteenth-century readers can be investigated at all; and this fraction is by no means a representative sample. The individual readers whose experiences are best documented are often those who achieved lasting literary celebrity. This is not to say that such readers' experiences cannot shed light on the reading practices available to eighteenth-century readers. Robert DeMaria, in *Samuel Johnson and the life of reading*, has sought to 'describe Johnson's life of reading and in doing so to develop a language for describing other lives of reading'; for example, in delineating the four basic ways of reading ('study', 'perusal', 'mere reading', and 'curious reading') that, DeMaria argues, both Johnson, and other readers, used.[17]

   However, if we are to broaden our understanding of eighteenth-century readers, we need to seek evidence for the experiences of those whose reading experiences were not considered worth commenting on and being documented by their contemporaries. Such evidence is rarely comprehensive in scope or easy to find, but those historians who have sought out the experiences of 'common readers' have been able to provide the kind of direct access to past experience that makes such research so revealing.

   The concern of recent book history with the physical evidence of the material text points to perhaps the most direct source of evidence for a reader's immediate reaction to a text: marginalia and other markings in books. The use of such annotations has been controversial, with critics focusing on the problems that, first, only occasional, and perhaps exceptional, readers annotate books; and that, secondly, any recording of the reading process

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   [13] Roger Chartier, *The culture of print: power and the uses of print in early modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 7–8.
   [14] Janice Radway, *Reading the romance: women, patriarchy and popular literature* (Chapel Hill, 1984); Jonathan Rose, *The intellectual life of the British working classes* (New Haven, 2001).
   [15] Janice Radway, 'Reading is not eating: mass-produced literature and the theoretical, methodological and political consequences of a metaphor', *Book Research Quarterly*, 2 (1986), pp. 7–29.
   [16] Jonathan Rose, 'Rereading the English common reader: a preface to a history of audiences', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 53 (1992), pp. 47–70.
   [17] Robert DeMaria Jr, *Samuel Johnson and the life of reading* (Baltimore, 1997).

is itself a response to or reconstruction of a process that occurs internally and silently. Librarians' hostility to annotation means that annotated books, unless their annotator was especially celebrated, are less likely to have found their way into the major institutional collections; and tracking down annotated books in library catalogues is inevitably a hap-hazard exercise. Even when found, annotators can be hard to identify, and their anno-tations difficult to date. Nevertheless, Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine's pioneering use of students' annotations to reconstruct the processes of Renaissance education demonstrated the way that such markings could show us in detail the uses individual readers made of texts.[18] H. J. Jackson has developed the use of this source further, both by studying a broader range of texts, and by reconstructing, through individual case studies, the con-ventions of annotation. She argues that marginalia are too useful a source to ignore, and demonstrates this by recovering a wealth of insights into the evolution of reading practices, arguing that, to an increasing extent after 1700, readers made notes that were critical, personal, and designed to be shared with others.[19] This points to the importance of reading as a social practice and shared experience. Moreover, Jackson cites examples of the reader 'answering back' to the author, which remind us that readers did not have to be passive consumers of what they read: for example, the anonymous eighteenth-century clergyman who added five hostile comments to a single sentence in a tract by Richard Watson, bishop of Llandaff.[20]

Annotations in individual books, however, cannot convey to us the full breadth of an individual's reading experience. Booksellers' and library records, while they cannot tell us what people made of what they read, at least convey the range of possible reading material that people actually bought or borrowed. Few sets of accounts detailed enough to record individual transactions exist; but the records of the Clays, booksellers of the East Midlands, have been studied in depth by Jan Fergus. Such evidence casts serious doubt on many received ideas about eighteenth-century readerships: Fergus finds that among the Clays's customers in the East Midlands, at least, far more women read magazines than read fiction, a genre more conventionally associated with female readers in contemporary and subsequent commentary. Men, as well as women, borrowed sentimental fiction from the Clays's Warwick circulating library, and provincial servants chose much the same reading material as their employers.[21]

Scope exists for similar detailed analysis of stock and borrowing records from subscrip-tion and community libraries and book clubs. Pioneering work on these sources in the 1960s and 1970s by Paul Kaufman pointed to the importance of interest groups such as

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[18] Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, *From humanism to the humanities: education and the liberal arts in fifteenth and sixteenth century Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 1986).

[19] H. J. Jackson, *Marginalia: readers writing in books* (New Haven, 2001). See also Anthony Grafton, 'Is the history of reading a marginal enterprise? Guillaume Budé and his books', *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 91 (1997), pp. 139–57, for further methodological considerations.

[20] Jackson, *Marginalia*, pp. 31–2.

[21] Jan Fergus, 'Eighteenth-century readers in provincial England: the customers of Samuel Clay's circulating library and bookshop in Warwick, 1770–1772', *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 78 (1984), pp. 155–213; idem, 'Provincial bookselling in eighteenth-century England: the case of John Clay reconsidered', *Studies in Bibliography*, 40 (1987), pp. 147–63; idem, 'Women, class and the growth of magazine readership in the provinces, 1746–1780', *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, 16 (1987), pp. 41–56; idem, 'Provincial servants' reading in the late eighteenth century', in James Raven, Helen Small, and Naomi Tadmor, eds., *The practice and representation of reading in England* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 202–25.

Dissenters in the establishment of libraries and clubs, to the prominence of works of political and social controversy in their catalogues, and to how widespread they were throughout the British Isles, an important reminder that reading was not solely a metropolitan or even an urban activity.[22] Book club records have the potential to illuminate the nexus between civil society and reading, as illustrated by Keith Manley for the town of Sedbergh.[23] He shows how book selection could work as a group activity, intimately tied to the formation of a sociable community in pursuit of mutual intellectual benefit. The lists of subscribers in the front of many eighteenth-century books, far more common than the rare survivals of sales ledgers and borrowing books, are another tempting source to identify the purchasers of books, but need to be with care. Subscription, which involved paying a substantial premium over the sales price of a book, could be viewed as a form of patronage, or even charity, towards the author, rather than expressing a desire to actually read the book.[24]

The major weakness of book trade data and marginalia as a source for ascertaining what people read, however, is that records from one shop, library, or publication cannot tell us about the full range of an individual's reading material. Stephen Colclough's study of a Sheffield apprentice's reading, as recorded in his journal, shows how one reader, through membership of two subscription libraries, use of a circulating library, buying books new and second-hand, and borrowing from his friends, obtained a great variety of texts from different sources.[25] He read newspapers and magazines as well as books, and, inspired by the review periodicals he used to help choose his reading material, he critically reviewed what he read. Colclough argues for the essential complexity of his subject's reading life, both in terms of the variety of what he read and the diversity of his reading practice.

Other studies drawing on diaries, journals, and correspondence have also stressed the sophistication of individual eighteenth-century readers in selecting socially and culturally appropriate reading strategies as part of their daily lives. Naomi Tadmor has used such sources to challenge stereotypes, perpetuated both by social historians and by some feminist literary critics, of reading as a means of filling wealthy womens' leisure time. The diary of Thomas Turner, and the correspondence of the Richardsons, demonstrates instead that reading time for these households was fitted in intermittently around work.[26] Both Tadmor's study, and that of John Brewer, based on Anna Larpent's diary, find that reading was a shared part of household life, with husbands and wives often reading aloud

[22] See Paul Kaufman, *Libraries and their users: collected papers in library history* (London, 1969), and idem, 'Readers and their reading in eighteenth-century Lichfield', *The Library*, 5th ser., 28 (1973), pp. 108–15.

[23] Keith Manley, 'Rural reading in North-West England: the Sedbergh Book Club, 1728–1928', *Book History*, 2 (1999), pp. 78–95. See also John Killen, 'The reading habits of a Georgian gentleman, John Templeton, and the book collectors of the Belfast Society for Promoting Knowledge', in Cunningham and Kennedy, eds., *The experience of reading*, pp. 99–123.

[24] See Hugh Amory, 'Virtual readers: the subscribers to Fielding's *Miscellanies*', *Studies in Bibliography*, 48 (1995), pp. 94–112. Cf. P. J. Wallis, 'Book subscription lists', *The Library*, 5th ser., 19 (1974), pp. 255–86.

[25] Stephen Colclough, 'Procuring books and consuming texts: the reading experience of a Sheffield apprentice, 1798', *Book History*, 3 (2000), pp. 21–44.

[26] Naomi Tadmor, '"In the even my wife read to me": women, reading and household life in the eighteenth century', in Raven, Small, and Tadmor, eds., *The practice and representation of reading*, pp. 162–74.

to each other; and that shared reading, and borrowing and lending books, formed an integral part of readers' social lives.[27]

While much recent research has focused on female readers, as part of the wider historiographical and critical literature about women's reading, additional case studies could undoubtedly be made of the diaries and correspondence of both men and women: for example, Benjamin Rogers, a Bedfordshire rector who noted in his diary as he read them items from the *Northampton Mercury* about appointments, the wedding of the earl of Sunderland, the London bills of mortality, and how to cure rabies.[28] A particularly rich derivative of the diary genre are reading diaries and commonplace books, where eighteenth-century readers recorded what they read or noted significant extracts from their reading. Mary Orlebar, a Bedfordshire poet, kept a reading diary from 1789 to 1820. Once again, the list of works read is strikingly broad-ranging, combining a broad range of literature with much theology.[29] It shows that much of her reading was in books borrowed from female friends, and thus could not be deduced from booksellers' records or library catalogues. It would also be possible to use autobiographies, which have been used by Margaret Spufford to document the experiences of readers in the seventeenth century, and Jonathan Rose to document those of mainly nineteenth- and twentieth-century working-class readers.[30] Both Rose and Spufford show how retrospective biographical sources can provide a sense of how reading individual books fitted into the development of a broader world-view or process of self-education for non-elite readers. County record offices and estate libraries are likely to turn up similarly rich sources for eighteenth-century reading.[31]

The authors of such autobiographical sources are perhaps less likely to record the reading of texts that do not fit into the broader pattern of their life as they perceive it – for example, the reading of newspapers and magazines. Many of the readers whose experiences are best recorded had literary connections or aspirations that might make their experiences of books atypical. It should always be borne in mind that annotating, recording, reflecting, and commenting are all optional extensions to the reading experience. Nevertheless, the fact that some readers chose to document their reading is itself worth noting as evidence for how they saw reading. A common theme behind the case studies cited is a sense of reading as a self-improving activity. Recording reading was a way of facilitating recall, either for entirely practical purposes – as with Benjamin Rogers's rabies cure – or to provide material for conversation – as with Anna Larpent's journal.

The sources for reading history outlined so far each contain evidence that can tell us what particular readers read, and sometimes what it meant to them personally. The evidence that they are based on is necessarily fragmentary and imperfect, but to some extent, the weaknesses in the sources can balance each other out. Sales and borrowing records provide a comprehensiveness that personal documentary sources lack, while these sources

[27] John Brewer, 'Reconstructing the reader: prescriptions, texts and strategies in Anna Larpent's reading', in Raven, Small, and Tadmor, eds., *The practice and representation of reading*, pp. 226–45.
[28] *The diary of Benjamin Rogers, rector of Carlton, 1720–1771*, ed. C. D. Linell (Streatley, 1950).
[29] Northamptonshire Record Office ZB 340/6.
[30] Margaret Spufford, 'First steps in literacy: the reading and writing experiences of the humblest seventeenth-century spiritual autobiographers', *Social History*, 4 (1979), pp. 407–35; Rose, *Intellectual life*.
[31] For more examples see Stephen Colclough, *Reading experience, 1700–1849: an annotated register of sources on the history of reading in the British Isles* (Reading, 2000), and the forthcoming online Reading Experience Database project (http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/RED/).

in turn provide vital information about what reading meant to readers and how they created meaning from and within their reading.

II

The greatest single impression that these studies of historical readers give is of the tremendous diversity of reading practice in the eighteenth century. Individual readers can be shown to have read an enormous range of genres, and, as John Brewer shows, to select different reading strategies for different texts. It does not, however, necesarily follow that generalization about the experience of eighteenth-century readers is impossible. Robert Darnton, in criticizing Roger Chartier's emphasis on the atomized individual reader, points to the importance of the cultural frame of reference in which reading took place.[32] If we allow that the experience of reading could be mediated by the social, political, and ideological context in which the reader is situated, it follows that an understanding of the contexts of reading in the eighteenth century might, while not allowing us to assume that individual readers were compelled to read texts in particular ways, at least give us a sense of what modes of reading and cultural models were available for readers to select.

One theory which aims to explain how the way in which people read might have effected cultural change is the thesis of a 'reading revolution'. Rolf Engelsing first proposed the idea that for most Europeans the eighteenth century saw a shift from 'intensive' reading of a small number of mainly religious works, to 'extensive' reading of a large number of secular works. David Hall, in his study of long-term change in American reading practice, took up the idea of a shift from a culture where people approached the printed word with reverence, reading a few texts intensely and repeatedly, to a world where readers had an expanding choice of new titles and genres, forming a cosmopolitan abundance of print.[33] However, Engelsing's thesis has not been fully accepted by other historians.[34] As we have seen, individual people read in different ways for different purposes at different times in their lives. Any over-arching theoretical categorization of their reading is unlikely adequately to cover the full variety of historical reading practices. Nevertheless, it can be helpful to consider how groups of people may have shared such reading styles or interpretative practices, thus enabling, instead of a universal model for the cultural context of reading, an appreciation of the more fragmented way actual historical reading communities developed: not a monolithic 'print culture' but, in Hall's formulation, a series of 'cultures of print'. Thus, he has argued that while readers have always been influenced by the interpretative strategies offered to them by texts and by the discourses surrounding reading, they have always had a choice of competing strategies.[35]

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[32] Darnton, *Forbidden best-sellers*, pp. 18ff.

[33] David Hall, 'The uses of literacy in New England, 1600–1850', in *Cultures of print: essays in the history of the book* (Amherst, 1996), pp. 36–78.

[34] Rolf Engelsing, *Der Burger als Leser: Lesergeschichte in Deutschland, 1500–1800* (Stuttgart, 1974). Cf. Reinhard Wittman, 'Was there a reading revolution at the end of the eighteenth century?', in Guglielmo Carvallo and Roger Chartier, eds., *A history of reading in the West* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 284–312; and Joost J. Kloek and Wijnhardt W. Mijnhardt, 'The ability to select: the growth of the reading public and the problem of literary socialization in the eighteenth and nineteenth century', in Ann Rigney and Douwe Fokkema, eds., *Cultural participation: trends since the Middle Ages* (Amsterdam, 1993), pp. 51–62.

[35] David Hall, 'Readers and reading in America: historical and critical perspectives', in *Cultures of print*, ch. 6.

We can understand the formation of cultures of print by investigating how different groups of readers constructed their own shared norms of interpretation and shared views on what constituted good reading practice. While individual readers' annotations, reading diaries, and commonplace books tend to provide evidence for readers' autonomy and the unpredictability of their reactions, sources that reveal shared attitudes towards reading allow us to discern the ways in which readers might adopt culturally mediated approaches to reading. Commercial and civil institutions could be especially important in meditating reading experiences. Given the high cost of books in the eighteenth century, circulating and community libraries were vital access points to reading material for many readers. They imposed their own value judgements in the way they promoted themselves, their choice of stock, their implicit and explicit rules of conduct, and even their spatial layout.[36]

Other reading communities can be defined by their association with a particular publication. Literary reviews' attempts to tap into a sense of community with their readers have already been mentioned; it seems likely that the existence of a sense of community among their readers was a factor in the mid-eighteenth-century success of the new genre of the magazine: by soliciting and printing readers' contributions, magazines, like provincial newspapers, drew readers into the authorship of what they read. The rise of newspaper readerships constitutes one of the most potentially significant changes to reading patterns in the eighteenth century. Tax statistics show that eighteenth-century British newspapers sold in large and growing numbers.[37] Provincial newspapers, readily distributed in rural as well as urban areas by the 'newsmen' employed by their printers, probably accounted for a growing proportion of these sales: provincial newspaper advertising revenues overtook London revenues in 1796.[38] As yet, however, there has been little detailed study of newspaper readers themselves.[39]

Newspapers have perhaps fallen victim to both modern and eighteenth-century literary critics' preoccupation with more 'literary' genres such as the novel and poetry. For historians, reconstructing the reading of much less well-documented genres is an important task; for this, an understanding of the cultural processes that led to the emergence of the concept of 'literary' culture itself can help us to understand how particular forms of print were included and excluded. Genres of print cannot simply be mapped to social groups. It is easy to presume that chapbooks, for example, because accessible to a non-elite audience, were read *only* by relatively poor readers. Similarly, it is easy to take contemporary assertions about appropriate reading material for different social groups at face value, rather than as defensive cultural strategies. Lori Humphrey Newcomb, in a study of the cultural trajectory of the romance *Pandosto*, suggests that 'the constant claims for segregation in eighteenth-century practices of consumption do not prove that it was achieved, but that it was increasingly *sought* by the elite'.[40] She argues that novelists such as Samuel Richardson

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[36] James Raven, 'From promotion to proscription: arrangements for reading and eighteenth-century libraries', in Raven, Small, and Tadmor, eds., *The practice and representation of reading*, pp. 175–201; Edward H. Jacobs, 'Buying into classes: the practice of book selection in eighteenth-century Britain', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 33 (1999), pp. 43–64.

[37] Bob Harris, *Politics and the rise of the press: Britain and France, 1620–1800* (London, 1996), p. 12.

[38] A. Aspinall, 'Statistical accounts of the London newspapers in the eighteenth century', *English Historical Review*, 63 (1948), pp. 201–32.

[39] An exception is Ian Maxted, *Newspaper readership in Southwest England: an analysis of the* Flindell's Western Luminary *subscription list of 1815* (Exeter, 1996).

[40] Lori Humphrey Newcomb, *Reading popular romance in early modern England* (New York, 2002), p. 228.

sought to denigrate romances precisely because they were aware of the closeness between the audiences for their own work and the socially heterogeneous audience for romances.

The work of Pierre Bourdieu has provided a theoretical framework that can explain some of this process of differentiation between literary and popular reading cultures in the eighteenth century. Bourdieu compares two differing fields of cultural production: the field of large-scale production, where value is measured in terms of commercial success, and the field of small-scale production, where value is created by favourable critical reception and the judgement of the author's peers.[41] Jonathan Kramnick has applied this concept to the formation of an English literary canon. He sees the reification of the literary past by eighteenth-century critics as a response to their anxiety about the growth of a consumerist reading public. Thus, he argues that the structural tension between the increasing commercialization and scale of book production, and the increasingly specialized interests of the critics, encouraged the stratification of the market for literature.[42] Such arguments provide a means by which we can explain the social divergence of 'cultures of print' by reference not to differentiation in the texts read, but in shifting attitudes to reading practice on the part of particular social, religious, and cultural groups.

Focusing on readers, rather than on the production of reading matter, enables us to question how far the establishment of reading cultures needed print at all. Manuscript was favoured as a means of disseminating certain forms of literature, as well as sensitive political information, well into the eighteenth century. George L. Justice and Nathan Tinker argue that for female authors, in particular, employing networks of manuscript distribution could represent a positive choice over print distribution.[43] To consider the way that manuscript poetry, letters, and journals were read is a way to start on the more ambitious historiographical project advocated by D. F. McKenzie, of expanding the history of reading into the history of all forms of communication, including speech. The role of reading aloud in family life, and talking about books as part of social life, has already been mentioned. Thus, Patricia Howell Michaelson argues, reading was intimately linked to conversation and friendship in eighteenth-century women's lives.[44]

Two historians of early modern reading, Jennifer Andersen and Elizabeth Sauer, have recently called for an approach that bridges the two types of research that have so far characterized the history of reading, namely the narrowly focused case study and the broad long-duration theoretical generalization.[45] There is a need for studies that synthesize the results of existing case studies and the rich variety of theoretical work in the field. Such syntheses will have to confront four issues. The first is that of how far British readers relate to both the wider European reading public, and to narrower English, Scottish, Welsh, and Irish contexts. A criticism that could be levelled at the organization of the various national multi-volume Histories of the Book is that they presuppose the appropriate level for study.

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[41] See Peter D. MacDonald, 'Implicit structures and explicit interactions: Pierre Bourdieu and the history of the book', *The Library*, 6th ser., 19 (1997), pp. 105–21.

[42] Jonathan Brody Kramnick, *Making the English canon: print-capitalism and the cultural past, 1700–1770* (Cambridge, 1998), esp. p. 7.

[43] George L. Justice and Nathan Tinker, eds., *Women's writing and the circulation of ideas: manuscript publication in England, 1550–1800* (Cambridge, 2002).

[44] Patricia Howell Michaelson, *Speaking volumes: women, reading, and speech in the age of Austen* (Stanford, 2002).

[45] Jennifer Andersen and Elizabeth Sauer, eds., *Books and readers in early modern England: material studies* (Philadelphia, 2002), p. 4.

In eighteenth-century Europe, readers were readily able to acquire texts from across borders. Britain both imported and exported a large volume of books in the eighteenth century, and trade between the component parts of the British Isles was considerable, even if its terms were often contested.[46]

This in turn raises the question of how to characterize the geography of reading within Britain, especially how provincial readers reacted to the concentration of book trade activity in the metropolis. It has been argued that provincial readers were essentially in a state of dependence on London for their supplies of reading material, with the provincial book trade simply a means of access to the productions of the metropolis.[47] However, most of the individual readers previously mentioned did not live in London, yet do not seem to have been disadvantaged by this. The annual volumes in the Print Networks series on the provincial book trade suggest the vitality and sophistication of local cultures of print, even in remote areas.[48] Thus, too great an emphasis on cultural power relations might lead us to neglect the fundamental interdependence of readers, writers, and book trade members, all locked into a single communications circuit.

Thirdly, we need a better understanding of continuity and change across the period. On the one hand, evidence points to a gradual increase in British society's saturation in print through the long eighteenth century: more and more newspapers, magazines, and ballads were produced.[49] On the other hand, reading material of all kinds was expensive, inevitably so given the limited capital available to the book trade and the labour-intensive processes of hand-press printing. Books became more expensive over the course of the eighteenth century, and newspapers increased even more sharply in price, as the government imposed steadily higher stamp duties during the Napoleonic Wars. The emergence of new print communities around new genres, such as novels and magazines, new institutions, such as literary societies, and new locations, such as in provincial towns, hints at an overall shift in favour of certain reading practices. It suggests that by the end of the period there was a greater variety of reading material available, and more secular locations for reading. At the same time, the continued strength of critical discourses about female and non-elite reading practices, especially during the ideologically polarized 1790s, points to attempts at greater social and political differentiation of reading practices. To resolve these hints and suggestions into a more confident narrative of change will require more long-duration studies that enable valid comparisons of reading practices and discourses across the century.

Finally, any synthesis needs to balance the autonomy of the individual reader with the power of the discourses seeking to guide readers' responses. Studies to date suggest that many, if not most, readers in the eighteenth century construed reading as a moral activity, but that the question of what practices constituted 'good' reading was strongly contested.

[46] See Giles Barber, 'Book imports and exports in the eighteenth century', in Robin Myers and Michael Harris, eds., *The sale and distribution of books from 1700* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 77–105.

[47] John Feather, *The provincial book trade in eighteenth-century England* (Cambridge, 1985); Peter Borsay, 'The London connection: cultural diffusion and the eighteenth-century provincial town', *London Journal*, 19 (1994), pp. 21–35. Cf. Peter Isaac, 'The English provincial book trade: a Northern mosaic', *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 95 (2001), pp. 410–42.

[48] The most recent volumes in this series are Peter Isaac and Barry McKay, eds., *The moving market: continuity and change in the book trade* (New Castle, DE, 2001); and Barry McKay, John Hinks, and Maureen Bell, eds., *Light on the book trade* (New Castle, DE, 2002).

[49] See, for example, the publication totals derived from the *English short title catalogue* in James Raven, *Judging new wealth: popular publishing and responses to commerce in England, 1750–1800* (Oxford, 1992), p. 32.

To understand how contemporaries saw this question, future work on the history of reading must bridge the gap between the textual concerns of literary theorists, and the functional approach to reading adopted by many social historians.[50] If literary theory can be inclined to ignore the contexts of reading, those who concern themselves only with reading as a social, educational, or leisure activity risk downplaying the impact of the content of the text itself. Future research needs to find ways of more closely integrating these two concerns, which need not be mutually exclusive. If we are to understand why many in the eighteenth century took the activity of reading so seriously, we must under-stand the power of the text in a social and cultural context.

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[50] An argument made for American reading history by David Hall, and for France by Robert Darnton: David Hall, 'Readers and reading in America: historical and critical perspectives', in *Cultures of print*, pp. 169–87; Darnton, *Forbidden best-sellers*, ch. 6.