Chapter Four

# 1. What is method?

One of the uncomfortable questions implicit by computational literary study is a particular kind of scrutiny of methodology: what is it, exactly, that literary study *does*? It it really “research” or “a method” to read a lot of things, think about them, and then tell each other stories about our thoughts? Ted Underwood proposes in *Distant Horizons* that the primary research output in literary study is, at its core, narratives. Effective literary criticism has protagonists-- whether these are texts, cultural forces, or critical camps-- which the critic narrates through some kind of conflict, to reach a final meaning that the reader will find moving. Underwood identifies the narrative drive as a reason that computational literary analysis sometimes finds a frosty reception (computational scholarship often fails to provide satisfactory narratives), but the role of storytelling in literary criticism has stakes beyond computation. Eve Sedgwick’s critique, in “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” is fundamentally a critique of a particular story critics tell, as are more recent debates about critique and postcritique. The “surface reading” of Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best, or the “rich description” of Heather Love, are not really about how a scholar reads or researches a text; they are about the rhetorical moves employed in the subsequent explication of the text, after the research itself has been complete. As such, although debates about critique and postcritique have sometimes been termed “method wars,” in DH circles the debate is barely legible *as* a debate, and certainly not legible as a debate about *method*.

In February 2021, Sheila Liming’s article “Fighting Words” in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* caused a minor stir on Twitter, jokingly referred to as “the method wars” (taking up a term from Rita Felski’s 2015 monograph *The Limit of Critique*). In DH circles, the discussion inspired a patronizing bemusement, as in Quinn Dombrowski’s comment that they are “So very happy that this Methods War seems to be happening mostly outside my TL, and appears not to be some massive DH showdown of TEI vs NLP, pro- vs anti- topic modeling, hack vs yack, or any of the things that I imagine when I think of ‘Methods Wars’.” Underwood replied that “when literary critics say ‘methods’ they actually mean ‘conclusions.’” Underwood’s tweet is, of course, partly inflammatory for rhetorical effect, but the genuine puzzlement among DH scholars about critique reflects a real disciplinary disagreement about what makes for “a method.”

Narratives are not, in themselves, the problem: saying that a piece of scholarship constructs a narrative is another way of saying that it organizes information in a way that creates meaning. This is, in fact, desirable. For example, Eugenia Zuroski’s *A Taste for China* follows and explains figures like “China,” “things Chinese,” “English identity,” and “orientalism.”[[1]](#footnote-0) Some individual characters take on prominent roles in this narrative: [EXAMPLES OF PEOPLE] and, in the fine tradition of eighteenth century “it” narratives, [SPECIFIC PIECES OF CHINA]. But the core narrative is really a story about the characters it calls “English identity” and “orientalism.” [SUMMARIZE BOOK: “offers an account of how literature of the long eighteenth century generated a model of English selfhood dependent on figures of China. It shows how various genres of writing in this period call upon “things Chinese” to define the tasteful English subject of modernity. Chinoiserie is no mere exotic curiosity in this culture, but a potent, multivalent sign of England’s participation in a cosmopolitan world order. By the end of the eighteenth century, not only are English homes filled with it, but so too are English selves.”] The many kinds of texts Zuroski consults have become meaningful because they create a narrative.

Similarly, when Andrew Piper studies generalization as a defining practice in literary study, generalization itself is not the problem. Piper defines generalization as “the rhetorical strategy whereby we move from partial evidence to knowledge claims about some larger group or category” (1). Acquiring knowledge about some broader phenomenon is generally the purpose of gathering evidence in the first place. Where Underwood and Piper begin to distance themselves (and distant reading) from undesirable forms of literary criticism, they object to narratives and generalizations that are inadequate for the evidence at hand.

Underwood’s objection is more narrow. Most literary criticism, he says, frames literary change in terms of of generational or periodized revolutions in taste, obfuscating more gradual and long-term developments: “we have narrated literary history as a sequence of discrete movements and periods because chunks of that size are about as much of the past as a single person could remember and discuss at one time. Apparently, longer arcs of change have been hidden from us by their sheer scale” (*Distant Horizons* ix) “it is worth teasing out the assumptions implied by these succession stories— which are not dominant, after all, in every corner of the university. Many disciplines tell their own stories instead as a cumulative process of expansion. … Literary scholars, by contrast, commonly do assume that critical approaches are locked in dialectical struggle. And this assumption is not arbitrary: the premise has been correct for much of our history. Critical debates amount to struggles over a scarce resource— readerly attention.” (Underwood 1) “our enterprise seems to draw meaning from the pressure of limited attention: recovery projects become notable and important (rather than merely additive) when they argue that new discoveries force us to redefine an established concept like Romanticism” (2)

Piper’s diagnosis of methodological norms in literature is less willing to embrace narrative enjoyment as a valid aim. In *Can We Be Wrong? The Problem of Textual Evidence in a Time of Data*, Piper distant-reads, not literature, but literary criticism, alongside research in history and sociology. He identifies frequent and broad generalization as a distinctive rhetorical feature of literary study, and expresses concern about what he sees as “an inverse relationship between the scale of claims and scope of evidence provided” (71), in which “rhetoric stands in for evidence” and “interestingness becomes true (or the truth is only valued because it is interesting)” (16). “Where literary studies focuses the most on the “modern,” history works with the “century,” and sociology attends to the “year.”” (71) “Generalizations serve as unproven and untested evidentiary shorthands to justify interpretive conclusions that have not been rigorously subject to scrutiny.” (72)

[I actually think there’s something here about how distant reading is developing its own set of methodological norms and priorities which might diverge from literature; rather than merging with/adding to literature (and saving flagging departments with fashionable DH grants) it could distinguish itself ever more strongly from literature (for a much more disappointing Nader effect)]

# 2. The random sample

The preceding chapters have been concerned with textual access and textual selection in part because these practices have direct methodological implications. Digital projects typically describe very explicitly what texts have been sampled, how, and why, though often it is sufficient to defer authority for a sample only one or two degrees. [Riddell et al follow a print bibliography, as does Underwood.] “it would be a lot of work for researchers to construct new samples completely from scratch for every project. So, in practice, digital libraries provide an important resource, allowing researchers to construct different samples by subdividing a larger collection. In pursuing work of this kind, we don’t necessarily have to decide whether libraries are correctly balanced. We can rebalance our samples as needed. But we do have to spend some time thinking about the outer limits of the collection.” (Underwood 178)

Sampling is also core to non-digital literary research, though it is rare that a critic will disclose how or why they have devoted their attention to a particular subset of texts. Indeed, much of Piper’s criticism boils down to a complaint that literary scholars rarely disclose their sampling methods. [Can I make a link to the social pressure not to admit to reading gaps? Eg saying one is “re-reading” something being read for the first time; Pierre Bayard’s *How To Talk About Books You Haven’t Read*] The uncharitable interpretation of Piper’s critique is the implication that literary critics are charlatans, who might take anything they have to hand, and spin an exciting story from those materials. In what follows, I have taken up the charlatan’s method, to test the limits of literary-criticism-as-storytelling.

## 2.1 Methodology

Bibliographic information regarding 51,090 works published in England between 1789 and 1799, inclusive, was supplied by the English Short Title Catalogue. Unique numerical identifiers were assigned to each work utilizing OpenRefine and regular expressions. The following ten random integers were acquired from the Random Integer Set Generator at random.org: 3585, 6427, 11770, 13646, 15284, 15442, 21963, 37041, 44564, 48755. These numbers corresponded to the following ten ETSC entries:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **ESTC citation number** | **Title** | **Date of pub.** | **Name** |
| **T146200** | The vicar of Wakefield : a tale, by Oliver Goldsmith | 1792 | Goldsmith, Oliver |
| **N40981** | The principles of modern reformers exposed | 1792 |  |
| **T161475** | Consolation for the scorbutic, scrofulous, leprous, &c : and worthy also the serious perusal of the medical profession. Being an abstract from a few of those remarkable cures which illustrate Mr. Hayman's 'Treatise, explaining the nature and affinity of scorbutic diseases.' Golden-Square, London, Ist October, 1793 | 1793 | Hayman, John |
| **T219851** | The excellent old ballad of the babes in the wood : or the Norfolk gentleman's last will and testament | 1794 |  |
| **T202021** | Extraordinary appearance of the moon! : Which was perceived to be in a violent rocking motion, for several minutes; after which was seen clearly passing round the orb, immense armies of horse and foot with bloody streamers flying, to the great terror and astonishment of thousand of spectators, who were witnesses of this wonderful alarming omen! to which is added, calculations, judicial and astrological observations, by which the true events signififed thereby are foretold. Susannah Goodall, pupil to the celebrated Don Farnando Furioso. Doctor of divinity, physic, and astrology. Who foretold all the late wonderful events and bloody battles which came to pass at Toulton, Dunkirk, and various parts of France and Flanders | 1794 | Goodall, Susannah |
| **T113901** | Zoonomia : or, the laws of organic life. ... . By Erasmus Darwin, M.D. F.R.S. Author of the Botanic Garden | 1794 | Darwin, Erasmus |
| **T111867** | An account of the prime cost of all cargoes purchased in India, and shipped for Europe, in the year 1793-4; together with the commercial charges at each presidency, not added to the invoice | 1795 | Great Britain, Parliament, House of Commons |
| **N38682** | Rules and regulations of the corps of Light-Horse Volunteers of London and Westminster; carefully extracted from the minutes of the general meetings | 1797 | Great Britain, Army, London and Westminster Light Horse Volunteers |
| **T194212** | A letter to three converted Jews : lately baptized and confirmed in the Church of England. By ... William Jones | 1799 | Jones, William |
| **T82736** | Satirical, humourous, and familiar pieces. Prose | 1799 |  |

Attempts were made to locate digital facsimiles for all ten works. Due to COVID-19, it was deemed infeasible to consult physical copies when digital facsimiles were unavailable; in these cases, digital facsimiles were located for proxies which shared bibliographic and textual features. Five items were read as digital facsimiles of the specific edition described in ESTC; two were read as digital facsimiles of closely related editions; and three could not be located in any edition. For each work, at least two journal articles and at least one monograph were consulted for relevant context. A minimum of sixty-nine texts were consulted.

## 2.2 The ten texts

[This is the sketchiest section, which gives the gist of the primary works]

### 2.2.1 *The Vicar of Wakefield*

A novel by Oliver Goldsmith, first published in 1766. This 1792 edition comes 26 years after its first publication, and 18 years after Goldsmith’s death in 1774. An eighth edition was published in 1787, followed by a “new edition” in 1790 of two volumes in one, followed by a 1792 reprint of the new one-volume edition (Dobson xxv). This reprint appears to be the version I have. 1792 also saw a two-volume edition which called itself the twenty-second edition, probably by counting all the non-London eds (since 8 only counts London) (Dobson xxv).

In comparison to all the other texts, the appeal of the Vicar of Wakefield is obvious: it’s funny on purpose, while also, I remain convinced, being completely in earnest about its moral values. An illustrative joke is the one about making sure to lend something to one’s least pleasant houseguests, so they won’t ever return: it’s a bit wry or cynical as a punchline, but in no way undermines the house’s hospitality, or the idea of hospitality itself as a virtue. I think the humour is there to cheer and engage the reader; it is not a cynical book, and therefore not satirical.

### 2.2.2 *The principles of modern reformers exposed*

A strident and very funny satirical pro-Tom Paine tract, which implies that the king should be abolished…. Why did the Home Office have a copy? It’s from 1792, potentially a very tense year.

It opens incredibly belligerently: “YOU who are of the lowest class of beings who can be called MEN; to you I address myself; to you who are the scum of the earth, and unworthy the notice of gentlemen.” But this is immediately shown to be satire in the second sentence, which describes some of the ‘crimes’ of the ‘Modern Reformers’: “many of you have had the audacity to read books of your own choosing, without being capable of judging which were fit, and which unfit for your perusal”.

The chief ‘objection’ is that working class people of a range of occupations have read Tom Paine. It scoffs at the moral authority of priests and magistrates. The satire suggests an aura of terror and counterrevolutionary action: “You know every Justice of the peace in the country is ready to receive information against You,” with many painful forms of execution listed as ‘appropriate’ punishments for the crime of reading Paine & presuming to have rights. It suggests that the main takeaway from Paine is that all men have rights, and especially the right to know how their taxes are spent.

The paper takes a potentially threatening turn when it imagines the lack of a king. Without the “useful” supporters being paid their salaries, “a king would be no more than a cypher, he would never have his own way in any thing, all the men in power would be for ever contradicting him, and prating about the good of the nation, and the comfort and happiness of the poor, instead of the dignity of the crown; and then what would become of the king? We were as good have no king.——this TOM PAINE tells you that one man has 8000l. another 10,000l. another 6000l. Another 5000l. and so on; but he don’t tell you how useful these men are” — here I find the long dash very interesting and suggestive, as well as the change to ‘incorrect’ language. That dash could be prosecutable treason.

### 2.2.3 *Consolation for the scorbutic*

Full title: *Consolation for the scorbutic, scrofulous, leprous, &c : and worthy also the serious perusal of the medical profession. Being an abstract from a few of those remarkable cures which illustrate Mr. Hayman's 'Treatise, explaining the nature and affinity of scorbutic diseases.'*

This is an 8p. ; 8⁰ extract; ESTC notes that it “contains testimonials and a list of persons treated” and categorizes its “Genre/form” under “Advertisements.” The only physical copy noted is at Niedersachsische Staats und Universitatsbibliothek in Gottingen, Germany. This, it mentions, is “Bound with the 'Gentleman's Magazine', vol. 63, part 2, 1793”

I consulted advertisements for “the Genuine Original Norton’s Maredant’s Antiscorbutic Drops” (which included patient testimonials) and for "Dr. Solander's Sanative English Tea” (which included an abstract from a larger treatise).

Hayman’s full treatise is available in facsimile through ECCO but I have not yet read it.

### 2.2.4 *The excellent old ballad of the babes in the wood*

My random sample suggested a 1794 Liverpool edition 8p. ; 12⁰. This particular version of the ballad has not been digitized, but I located five other copies in ECCO from the 1790s:

STC T192107 CW0117256783 N.p., [1790?] 1 sheet : ill. ; obl.1/2°

STC T222523 CB0126648281 S.n., [1790?] 8p. ; 8° (adds The Chimney Sweeper)

STC T52073 CB0127621441 [s.n.], Printed in the year 1796 8p. ; 12° (adds Johnny Coup)

STC T177930 CB0127895166 [Edinburgh? : s.n.], 1799. 8p. : ill. ; 12° (adds Johnny Coup)

STC T188936 CB0126649552 Edinburgh : Printed by J. Morren, [1800?]. 8p. : ill. ; 12° (adds The Yorkshire Beauty)

Of these, four seem similar in format to the 1794 Liverpool edition, being eight duodecimo pages. All four of these 8p 12⁰ editions include another ballad after Babes. They also all include illustrations on the first page (though only 2 of the 4 have the illustration mentioned in the collocation). I therefore suspect that the 1794 Liverpool edition also includes a second ballad, and an illustration.

6783 and 5166/1441 and 8281 and 9552 are all distinct from each other, with many minor variations in wording throughout and different stanza breaks.

The “told his wife” line is distinctive—

6783: “Then told his wife and all he had,”

8281: “And told his wife, and all he had,”

1441: “He told his wife and all his friends”

5166: “He told his wife and all his friends,”

9552: “He told his wife and children all,”

5166 and 1441 almost appear to be using the identical type (tho with different title & text decoration at the top of the ballad) but looking more closely, the difference in comma on the wife line suggests that 5166 is a new typesetting but it is based on a copy of 1441.

These both add Johnny Coup as a the second ballad but the two Johnnies are NOT identical; different title & decoration, and also 5166 squeezes an extra stanza onto the first page of Johnny (but then DOESN’T repeat the chorus at the end?). The title page illustration also differs — a similar image of a man on an ox (??) but not the same woodblock, 5166 is perhaps a rough mirrored copy of 1441?

The ballad itself tells a story about two children who are murdered in the woods by their greedy uncle, and then he is haunted to death; exactly the kind of Gothic thrills that Wordsworth or Mary Robinson would make a very classy poem about.

### 2.2.5 *Extraordinary appearance of the moon!*

She’s describing a lunar eclipse that occurred 14 Feb, 1794 AD 22:21

It opens with a lot of discussion of London’s vices and God’s goodness, and claims that the destruction of France is proof of God’s punishment for the sins. The eclipse she claims to have predicted (though I can’t turn up the earlier publication). She describes how a newspaper published a report of a strange boy pointing out an omen to a lady, and several ladies described having the same experience on similar bridges. (A kind of semi-ghostly figure familiar from Romantic/Gothic stories.) Goodall says the omen predicts war (a pretty easy prediction since England had just gone back to war with France), and further predicts fighting along the Rhine and in Spain which will kill many people. It ends with a (clumsy) poem version of the prose.

Goodall makes two claims to authority— one based on her own past predictions, and one based on her status as a pupil of the “celebrated” Don Furioso. I can’t find the grounds for either of these, suggesting that Furioso might not have been so “celebrated” — or that we have very poor records of who is “celebrated.”

The ESTC mentions two physical holdings— one in the Bodleian, one in the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society. The Bodleian copy includes it as part of a bound volume of 87 chapbooks, which appears to have been bound by the private bookseller Sotherans in the 19thC. The SANHS database doesn’t show a copy.

### 2.2.6 *Zoonomia*

The first volume is divided into 40 sections, on a range of topics related to the body, the senses, and disease. He classifies bodily and sensory motions as "irritative," "sensitive," "voluntary," and "associate." He presents theories on the production and classes of ideas, and seeks to explain the causes and mechanisms of sleep, reverie, vertigo, and drunkenness. He then discusses anatomy, especially the operation of the circulatory system and various glands. Chapter 29, "The Retrograde Motions of the Absorbent Vessels," is Erasmus Darwin's translation of his late son Charles Darwin's dissertation. These anatomical chapters are followed by four chapters on diseases, which draws on his classification of four types of motion to identify four types of diseases: those of irritation, of sensation, of volition, and of association. Two chapters, "Of the Oxygenation of the Blood in the Lungs and Placenta" and "Of Generation" develop his theories about human reproduction, including observations related to evolution. The final chapter in the first volume is a reprint of a paper by another of Erasmus Darwin's sons, Robert Darwin, about ocular spectra.

The second volume is focused solely on classifying diseases into classes, orders, and genera. The book is divided into four major sections, based on the four classes of disease: diseases of irritation, sensation, volition, and association. This model of disease essentially tries to understand each symptom as being its own illness, seeking to explain the mechanism of the symptom’s operation in order to explain its causes and cures. The drawback of this model is illustrated by, for example, his division of fevers into five classes: irritative fever, inirritative fever, sensitive fever, sensitive irritated fever, and sensitive inirritated fever (Darwin Zoonomia 191). At many points, his treatment suggestions are accompanied by question marks, or include direct questions and suggestions for experiments, indicating the “in progress” nature of even this very polished work. The literary style in general is very different between the two, with the second volume far less digressive and allusive.

### 2.2.7 *Cargoes purchased in India, and shipped for Europe, in the year 1793-4*

“An account of the prime cost of all cargoes purchased in India, and shipped for Europe, in the year 1793-4; together with the commercial charges at each presidency, not added to the invoice”

This single sheet item was, according to the ESTC, “issued as a Parliamentary paper” (“ordered to be printed 17th April 1795”) and exists in three academic libraries. It is also reproduced in facsimile in volume 91 of the 1975 printed resource House of Commons sessional papers of the eighteenth century, edited by Sheila Lambert, though I can’t get this book either. Although this is a very boring document (and at a single sheet is practically “ephemera”), its official governmental role greatly increased its survivorship— not only preserved as an original, but reproduced in a new technology, even if not (yet?) reproduced a second time.

4 April 1794 (the year prior) Henry Dundas gives a speech on the finances of the East India company — in preparation for “a general Arrangement in which the respective Interests of the Public and the Company were to be adjusted” (STC T166699 1). The general idea seems to be to extract more money from them: the financial documents are meant “to shew what annual Surplus might be expected to result from the Whole of the Revenues and Trade, applicable to the Benefit of the Proprietors of India Stock, and of the Public” (STC T166699 1).

17 April 1795 - The House of Commons opened business by hearing the prince of wales’s reply to their congratulations on his marriage. Mr Owen (from the Directors of the East India Company) presents accounts & papers t0 the House of Commons: 23 items, of which the thing I want is no. 22. It was ordered that they lie on the table and that copies be made. No mention of the discussion appears to be made in the recorded debates.

8 May 1795 - Mr Owen presents more accounts & papers

28 May 1795 - House of Commons resolves that on 8 June 1795 a Committee of the whole House will consider the said accounts & papers

8 June 1795 - unrelatedly, Mr. Hobart presents “a Bill for allowing further Time for the Payment of the Drawback on China Ware, imported by the East India Company before the 1st day of April 1795”

Also, deferred “the Bill for allowing, for a Time to be limited, the Importation of Goods from India and China, and other Parts within the Limits of the exclusive Trade of the East India company, in ships not of British-built, nor registered as such”

Then they created a tax on carts, and made a committee “to consider further of Ways and Means for raising the Supply granted to His Majesty.” There is discussion and voting about funding the Prince of Wales’ debts from the duchy of Cornwall — but the vote fails. (The previous session there was a yes vote to increase his income by reducing useless places) Then they talk about lending money to the emperor of Germany, and establishing a jointure for the Princess of Wales…

10 June 1795 - the topic seems to have been dropped? I can’t find the further discussion of it

### 2.2.8 *Rules and regulations of the corps of Light-Horse Volunteers*

The item in my random draw is STC N38682, a 24p. ; 12⁰ edition printed in 1797. It is not in ECCO; copies of the light-hose volunteer rules & regulations that are in ECCO are as follows:

T83862 1795 129p 12⁰

T131622 1797 36p 18°

T130561 1797 273p 24°

T131623 1798 240p 24°

The 36p edition from 1797 makes the Light-Horse Volunteers seem mostly like a social club. Mostly the rules are about paying appropriate fees (there is a blank for the amount to be written in by hand!) and the logistics of horses, training, and uniforms. It’s a surprisingly unpatriotic document— it doesn’t seem to suggest that they have volunteered to do more than drills. “The Horses must be bay, brown, chestnut, or black, and not under fifteen Hands high; Stallions are not admitted, and Mares only allowed till a convenient Opportunity offers of exchanging them.” (7)

The 273p edition gives a very different impression, as it emphasizes practical military discipline. Preface opens addressed to “Gentlemen” indicating the status of who is expected to be present; it concludes again with “Gentlemen” too! Similarly, the instructions in the book frequently refers to things that “all Gentlemen” will be expected to do. “Every Gentleman must learn, if he does not know, how to saddle and bridle his Horse, and strap on his Coat-Case; because he may be in many Situations where a Servant would be an Incumbrance, and where neither Groom nor Ostler are to be had” (6). It then follows with long and detailed explanations of what commands demand what kinds of actions, which would require serious study

### 2.2.9 *A letter to three converted Jews*

The item I want is STC T194212, “A letter to three converted Jews : lately baptized and confirmed in the Church of England. By ... William Jones” printed in 1799. The only physical copy is in Durham, UK as part of the Trinity Cathedral library (ie collected in a religious context)

This is a 24-page “letter” which the ESTC lists as being on the subject of “Trinity,” and has the same contents as T212697 which the ESTC says was “Issued in the same year as another edition, which had the titlepage reset to include the author statement.” T212697 is unsigned, T194212 attributed to William Jones, and both linked in the ESTC to the author “Jones, William, 1726-1800.” Alas, both of these versions are absent from ECCO.

I read two other religious works by Jones instead: “A letter to the Church of England, pointing out some popular errors of bad consequence. By An old Friend and Servant of the Church. Price 1s.” (1798) and “Considerations on the religious worship of the heathens as bearing unanswerable testimony to the principles of Christianity. In a letter to the Rev. W. Vincent, D. D. Head Master of Westminster-School. By the Rev. William Jones, M. A. Rector of Paston, Northamptonshire” (1799)

Both are conservative in sloppy and uncompelling ways, though with the fascinating stance that Greek and Roman religions were *copying* Christianity. The existence of oracles proves that Christian prophets were real— “there never would have been a false oracle, unless there had been a true one” (*Considerations* 13).

“We ought, therefore, to renounce and detest that abominable doctrine, that the power of government is from the people who are governed. We see now immediately how false and contradictory is this principle, that the subject should be the sovereign.” (*A letter to the Church of England* 8)

### 2.2.10 *Satirical, humourous, and familiar pieces*

Prominently advertises Oliver Goldsmith as the author of one of the pieces, which I assume was plagiarized.

Seventeen total pieces.

All six of the works which have some kind of authorship attribution are advertised on the title page. There are three other pieces advertised on the title page which don’t have a specific author mentioned in the text: Parish-Jobbing, Character of a Sot, and The Cards Spiritualized (which does name the soldier supposedly responsible, Richard Middleton, in the body of the piece). This reinforces the idea that the pieces named on the title page are expected to be somewhat familiar to readers.

Everything advertised on the title page is at least a full page long. Everything not advertised is a half-page. (This also means of course that everything with an author is at least a full page long.) Since many of the half-page pieces are inserted to make up space after the end of one of these longer pieces, this suggests that the half-page jokes are somewhat interchangeable filler.

# 3. A story of textual survival

The first story these ten texts can tell is the story of what it is easy to study, and what is hard to study. Oliver Goldsmith’s *Vicar of Wakefield* is readily available in print in scholarly and readerly editions, and digitally as a ebook or even a audiobook, in addition to the ECCO facsimile which I consulted. In contrast, *Consolation for the scorbutic, scrofulous, leprous, &c* survives in a single physical copy in Gottingen, Germany, where it has likely survived by virtue of being “Bound with the 'Gentleman's Magazine', vol. 63, part 2, 1793” (ESTC). Even to locate reasonable proxies for *Consolation for the scorbutic*, I found myself leaving ECCO behind for the Bodleian Library’s partly-digitized John Johnson Collection, which held similar advertisements for patent medicines. What this exploration has revealed is that there are two distinct paths to survival, for a historic text to remain available for study: an institution, or an eccentric collector (whose personal collection is eventually adopted by an institution). Here, by “survival” I mean “the continued existence as a physical object”. Universities, libraries, and archives are the typical institutions we might turn to as preservers of texts, but other institutions have also played a role. The only copy of William Jones’ *A letter to three converted Jews* is held by Durham Cathedral. The only copy of *The principles of modern reformers exposed*, a satirical radical broadsheet, is held at the London National Archives, where it is preserved alongside the correspondence of the Home Office-- tantalizingly suggestive of exactly the government surveillance which the broadsheet itself complains of.

One of the major findings of this research methodology is a reminder that digital records are based on a relentless materiality. The method itself, in some ways, boils down to predicting the location of some barriers to research, and then smashing my face directly against those barriers in order to characterize their location, shape, and solidity. The hunt for the more-neglected titles hit very similar barriers. The Hayward advertisement has only one recorded copy, in Germany; elation when looking up the shelfmark reveals that it is bound with the Gentleman’s Magazine and I can find a HathiTrust scan of that exact volume; growing dread as a detailed examination of the 800-page facsimile makes it clear that the advertisement did not normally appear within the magazine but was bound with it separately by an idiosyncratic German person; resignation as I use Google Translate to compose an apologetic message in German for the Niedersachsische Staats und Universitatsbibliothek, where someone will have to go dig out the book and personally inspect it for the inclusion. Or, for the East India accounts — growing elation as I realise that one of the holding libraries is UCLA, where material conditions are in my favour, since I have a friend studying there; hopes that are dashed by the absolute bar on special collections access during COVID-19.

## 3.1 The eccentric collector

The John Johnson Collection illuminates a path to preservation which is necessary for a work like *Consolation for the scorbutic* to survive two hundred years and remain findable by scholars. John Johnson, as an individual, somewhat eccentrically collected “everything which would ordinarily go into the waste paper basket after use, everything printed which is not actually a book” (Johnson, qtd in “Introduction,” p 9). Here, too, economic conditions are core constituting factors: Johnson concludes that “it is indisputable that this collection could not have been formed economically, or at all, except by attachment to this Printing Business” (qtd in “Introduction, p 12), and he also discusses the importance of not announcing his intentions as a collector, so as to avoid driving up prices through increased demand.

Johnson danced a balancing act in taking a non-library approach while also relying on the university/library value system to preserve what he was building: “Both the Press and the University were mentioned in the solicitation or acknowledgement of any gift, and it was laid down that there was to be no private property in these collections of any kind whatever. Nor were there to be any acts of dealing or sale.” (Johnson qtd “Introduction” p 11) “Thus the property of the University (through its Printing House) in the collections is absolute and has been secured at a very small net cost.” (Johnson qtd “Introduction” p 12)

Johnson actually embraces the happenstance of uneven survivorship rates as a core pre-filtering practice to make historic archives sustainable: “what I may call contemporary collecting is out of the question. War– time A.R.P. ephemera alone would fill room–space many times the whole existing space of the Sanctuary.... Thus we have made the outbreak of war the main terminus ante quem. There will still be supplementary acquisitions filling gaps in the past, and I hope that the future may be tempted to add out of the unconscious selection of the present, just as we in the present have added out of the unconscious selection of the past. This unconscious selection must always be the foundation of any collection which is both manageable and typical.” (Johnson qtd “Introduction” 12)

## 3.2 Most things haven’t survived

One of my takeaways is actually how incredibly, hugely incomplete the ESTC must really be. [Synthesize secondary readings on poor survivorship for ballads, advertisements, jestbooks, etc]

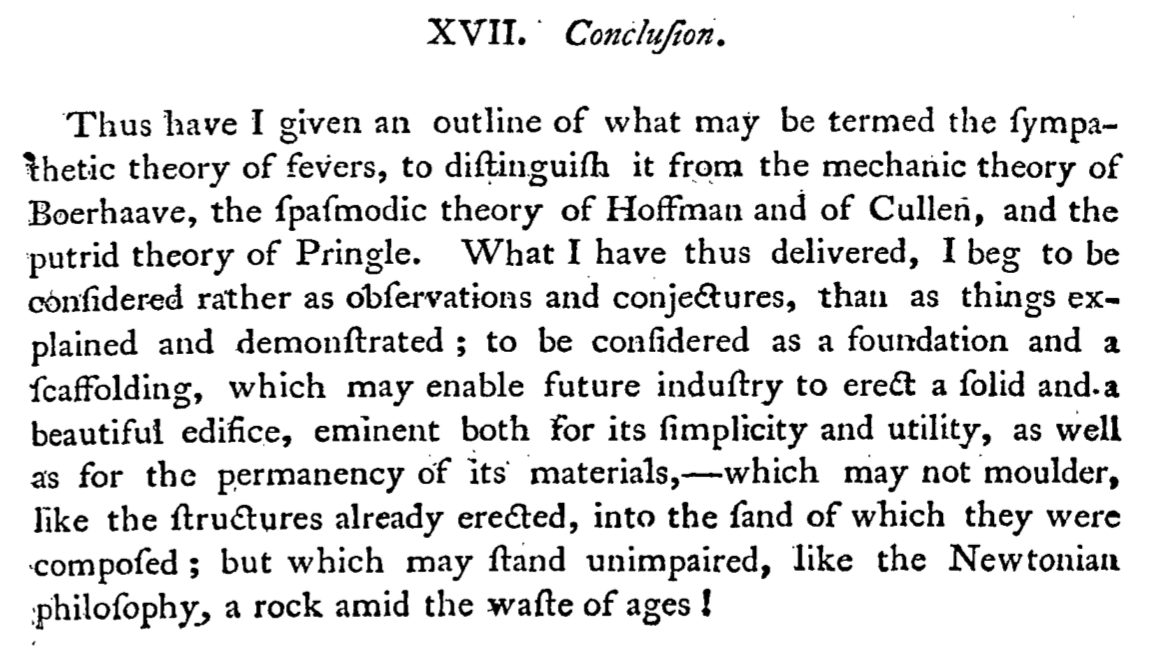
## 3.3 Some texts are their own barriers to access

*Consolation for the scorbutic* and *A letter to three converted Jews* are difficult to read because they are hard to get ahold of. Erasmus Darwin’s 1,400-page *Zoonomia* is difficult to read because it is long, dry, and painfully incorrect in largely uninteresting ways. The research method of this chapter felt closest to farce when I was, each night, tucking in for 15 pages of medical treatise before bed. A review of *The Essential Writings of Erasmus Darwin* explicitly describes the barrier to study posed by *Zoonomia*’s length: “Anybody who has tried to read Erasmus Darwin’s *Zoonomia* or his *Botanic Garden* will be familiar with the *longeurs* of those extraordinary compositions and be prepare to turn with relief to the brief selections of important passages which are offered here.” (Poynter 111) The value of the abridgement is that it can “introduce more readers to one of the more colourful characters in English scientific history than have ever been gained by the original texts.” (Poynter 112)

My first impulse for justification is to retell the good stories,[[2]](#footnote-1) but to highlight these stories is, for the most part, to misrepresent the book itself. It was difficult to find secondary work on *Zoonomia*, since most work on Darwin is interested in the publications before and after: either they are interested in him as a literary figure, and discuss his *Botanical Garden*, or they are interested in him as a precursor to Charles Darwin’s theories of evolution, so they discuss his next work.

*Zoonomia* gets some mention in evolutionary histories, but to discuss this book primarily through the lens of evolution is to fundamentally misunderstand it. The few paragraphs on evolution are typically quoted out of context, or even paraphrased inaccurately, to emphasize as much as possible those aspects which match our own knowledge of DNA and natural selection. In context, however, it is clear that Erasmus is wildly off base — for example, he doesn’t think the mother contributes any traits directly to the offspring. Those things which sound proto-Darwinian are, in context, clearly Lamarckian evolution. His ideas may be less wrong than some of his peers but they’re also not as accurate or complete as they have been presented. Moreover, they had no real impact on other thinkers, providing no grounds for description of Erasmus Darwin as a “pioneer of evolutionary theory” (Schwartz 27). More importantly, proto-evolutionary theories are not important to *Zoonomia* as a work. These theories do not inform any of his explanations of anatomy or disease, which are the topics of the other 1,380 pages of this 1,400 page work

What one learns from actually reading *Zoonomia* in its entirety is, actually, the painful depth of failure of the work. Unexpectedly, the encomiums on Darwin presented by the necessarily-biased Erasmus Darwin House Museum recognizes the failure of *Zoonomia*’s ambition: “One reviewer claimed that *Zoonomia* ‘bids fair to do for Medicine what Sir Isaac Newton’s Principia has done for Natural Philosophy.’ It didn’t, but it was a nice thought.” Darwin refers to Newton several times as the model for his ambitions, and particularly describes the hope that his work will enable a new understanding of fevers.



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Time has destroyed Darwin’s immortal tablet; his flimsy edifice of ideas has mouldered into the sand of which they were constructed. [Somehow, this is getting to something that I have important questions about: when is it right for a text to be forgotten like this? Why should Time admire Zoonomia?]

There’s an echo of the end of one of William Jones’ religious pamphlets: “as I have long lived, so now I hope to die; leaving behind me this paper, as witness that / there was one man, of little note, and of no ambition, who, having his eyes opened to see some great errors of the time … could not refrain from warning his brethren” (*A letter to the Church of England* 32-33)

# 4. Other stories

All ten items could be evaluated through the lens of “pleasure” or “seriousness”

Nine works address war with France. The only title with no link to France is the ballad, though even then it might be notable that “The excellent old ballad of the babes in the wood” is not a political ballad.

Eight works provide material for a discussion of gender

Seven works can be discussed together for the light they shed on Christianity in 18thC culture, especially the relationship between religion and politics

Five works would relate to a history of the Gothic

Four works are related to the 18thC failure to recognise the cure for scurvy which had already been discovered and experimentally demonstrated.

Four works discuss (or could be used to discuss) racial difference

Three works are directly related to Oliver Goldsmith -- his novel appears; he’s prominent in the jestbook; and Darwin prescribes his “moral writing” as a cure for some mental diseases

The “print culture” lens struggles to resolve into a coherent story. Attempting to account for how and why all of these texts came into being, in a form that accounts somehow for “the 1790s,” seems like a more ridiculous task when I imagine trying to describe the equivalent description of “the 1990s.” But there is something here about trying to shift our baseline of what a “normal” text is. A lot of work of comprehensive bibliography— and especially a lot of digital work attempting use use bibliography to answer sociological questions— is focused on the novel. But only one of my 10 items is a novel, and it wouldn’t even be considered a 1790s novel.

# 5. So, if this works, what works?

The value of speculative computing, as a methodology in a liminal space between the humanities and computer science, lies in its ability to be useless in a thought-provoking way. Of course one would not seriously suggest that we study literary history through texts chosen at random, but what would happen if we did it anyway? The perversity of this method might seem like a bad-faith interpretation of literary studies, or an attempt to debunk or hoax literature scholarship. If scholars expend considerable expertise in order to select specific illustrative texts to support their arguments about a period of literature, why should it “work” to skip that expertise? If I produce an analysis from random texts, doesn’t that mean that other scholars’ choices of texts don’t matter? But I do this experiment in part to understand why literary analysis *does* work: if textual selection isn’t the important part, then the important part lies elsewhere. At first, I thought it was very possible that this would not work, that I would produce an incoherent list with nothing to offer our understanding of 1790s literature. (Indeed, my reader may still judge that I have failed.) But as I began to read, it seemed like literary close-reading can in fact find informative meaning even with completely arbitrary texts. I think this success is not, in fact, too remarkable. If the core thesis is something like “historical contexts have perceivable impacts on literary output,” then those impacts ought to be present in all texts— and therefore ought to be perceivable in any text.

One of the pleasurable impulses that drives literary-historical research is the feeling that one’s explorations are special. Often it can seem as if you are the first person to read, or to care about, a text or a person in hundreds of years. That intimacy across time gains its sacred aura in part from its exclusivity; to love Jane Austen has a very different tenor than if one loves Charlotte Smith, or loves Susannah Goodall. Sharing one’s discoveries is a double-edged sword: love asks to be shared, but if it is shared too successfully, one’s own love may be threatened with diminishment, lost in a more general and therefore less special love.

Selecting items completely at random may seem to be a poor methodology to find a new love. But what reparative reading shows us is that the object of love need not be worthy of that love; it may shape or colour the form of love, but the “plenitude” comes from the lover, not the beloved. Any object becomes lovable when examined with a loving eye. To observe, in minute detail, is to love.

Literature is, surely, tied to cultural capital. But it is also tied to pleasure, and potentially to love. When we discuss literature with others, we enter capital’s world; one may wish to seem erudite, or one may wish to seem “hip,” and one may present a particular literary ‘face’ accordingly. But the literature one discusses need not align too closely with the literature one loves. [This is too bland/generic, but also possibly getting toward the important thing]

1. As I hope my discussion will show, I take this monograph as an example because I think it is exceptional, representing a success of our field’s methods. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Darwin logically implies that plants have wet dreams (vol 1, p 103-7); Darwin thinks any time you pee too much, it’s diabetes, and test-anxiety-diabetes can be cured by friendship or by opium (vol 2, p 522); Darwin wants to know what would happen if you gave a blood transfusion but with milk (vol 2, p 587). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)