

Introduction

The title pages of early to mid-eighteenth-century fictions rarely announce that what follows is a “novel.” Instead, they forecast tales, memoirs, travels, fortunes and misfortunes, histories, lives and opinions, sketches, journals, adventures, and expeditions. These tags point to the long gestation of what Samuel Richardson called this “new manner of writing” and its equally protracted struggle to escape its lowly rank in the hierarchy of genres. Only late in the period, in fact, do the novel’s contours as a distinct and creditable form become fully visible. Its deferred elevation owes something to the writing of literary critical histories that began with Clara Reeve’s 1785 *Progress of Romance* and to such collections as Anna Laetitia Barbauld’s 1810 *The British Novelists* in fifty volumes and Walter Scott’s 1821–4 *Ballantyne’s Novelist’s Library* in ten volumes. Even before such efforts to label and sort, however, the vagueness about names was more apparent than real, since actual readers throughout the period clearly grasped the family connection between the diverse titles. But the categorical slippages also, and importantly, reflect the status of the novel as a mode in process, its history one of continuous, if uneven, experimentation. This *Introduction to the Eighteenth-Century Novel* aims to convey a sense of that variety and experimentation by listening to the conversations novelists pursued through the medium of their fictions with their fellow writers, literary forebears, and surrounding culture.

Looking back, we can partially reconstruct the context for some of these experiments and speculate about the reasons for their eclipse or survival. Numbers flourished only briefly and left little trace (including the “it-narratives” written from the perspective of objects that follow Charles Johnstone’s *Chrysal: Or, The Adventures of a Guinea* in the 1750s and 1760s). Other subgenres seemed to drop from favor only to be adapted later to a more complex hybrid form (as with Samuel Richardson’s modifications of amatory and pious tales). Intrinsic merit in itself rarely accounts for the endurance of certain modes and the disappearance of others. In some instances, the reasons for these contrary courses postdate the original publication by several generations. Many early eighteenth-century writers, for instance, were casualties

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of early nineteenth-century efforts to enhance the respectability of novels by defining a masculine tradition stretching from Henry Fielding and Tobias Smollett through to Walter Scott. Some fell victim to Romantic-era disciplinary divisions that assigned value to works of a certain kind of imagination, relegating exceptions to the lesser status of the local or ephemeral. Over the very long term, the vagaries of fashion also resulted in particular writers and political stances cycling in and out of critical repute. Many of our shapely, received histories of the early novel, in short, are products of their own critical moments and hence less than true to the disorderliness of the contemporary literary field.

And what of readers? Do their tastes and expectations offer an alternative route to a fuller understanding of the early phases of the novel? In a *Rambler* essay from 1750, Samuel Johnson declares that “the young, the ignorant, and the idle” are the principal consumers of what he refers to at first as the “comedy of romance” and later as “familiar histories.”¹ Modern scholars agree that novel readers were likely to be young, but resist the slurs of ignorance and idleness, suggesting that these express Johnson’s own prejudices and insecurities: he regarded Greek and Latin as essential components of a good education and was ambivalent about the leveling impulses intrinsic to the eighteenth-century commercialization of leisure. Behind his lamenting of the novel’s appeal to “minds unfurnished with ideas, and therefore easily susceptible of impressions; not fixed by principles, and therefore easily following the current of fancy; not informed by experience, and consequently open to every false suggestion and partial account” (21) lies an anxiety about the potentially disruptive effects of the spread of solitary reading across social ranks. Concern was roused not simply by the doubling of literacy over the course of the century, but by the patchiness of an expansion that saw it take hold first within concentrated and volatile populations – urban dwellers were more likely to read than rural ones, and young men, at least initially, more than women. The absence of reliable statistics on the spread of literacy, however, makes it difficult to quantify or categorize reading audiences. The surviving limited sources of quasi-statistics are themselves controversial (hence the ongoing historical debate about what hard information might be extracted from the registry signatures required after the mid-century passing of Lord Hardwicke’s Marriage Act). In relation specifically to novels, subscription lists – authors sometimes appealed to friends, family, and patrons to underwrite the costs of their publications and then publicized the names of the contributors – and circulating library records offer glimpses into the network of print exchanges. But neither of these very partial archives

captures a social or chronological range sufficient to take us much beyond Johnson's generalizations.

Information about authors and publishers is similarly limited. While an exceptional few had their correspondence preserved or personalities noted in the letters and diaries of their peers, many authors are known only through occasional records and anecdotal scraps, and even more left no trace beyond their surviving texts. The tradition of anonymous and pseudonymous publication (governing over 80 percent of novels in the 1770s and 1780s) further complicates the task of assembling reliable individual or corporate profiles. It is generally accepted that before the 1790s, more men than women wrote novels, and that most came from the ranks of the middling or propertied orders. Throughout the period, the economics of the publishing industry were stacked against authorial self-sufficiency; the combination of cheap copyright, steady demand for new material from circulating libraries, and the high price of books sold to individuals created what amounted to a buyer's market for novels. At the other end of the publication spectrum reaching from composition to distribution, little survives to indicate the identities of those involved in the trade as investors and promoters. We do know that most novels appeared first in London, that some booksellers refused on ethical grounds to deal in them, and that London publishers gradually strengthened ties with their English provincial counterparts in an effort to protect their monopoly and offset the threat of pirated editions from Dublin, Edinburgh, and Glasgow. An important aspect of this slow devolution was the tendency of the London booksellers to found circulating libraries to rent out the fiction they published (which they also continued to sell directly to individual readers and to other commercial libraries). By 1770, there were more than twenty circulating libraries in London and by 1790, in excess of 250 operating in the provinces.

The breaking up of the London publishing cartels after a 1774 legal ruling upheld the limits on copyright established in the 1710 Copyright Act (and more or less continuously since then simply ignored) transformed the industry. The 1774 House of Lords decision on the case of an Edinburgh bookseller, Alexander Donaldson, abruptly ended the long-standing control of the trade by a clutch of copy-owning booksellers. One consequence of the ensuing instability was a sudden flush of early "classics" made available to less affluent readers through the cheap reprints issued after the 1780s by entrepreneurs like John Cooke, John Harrison, and John Bell and through the second-hand market that these in turn created. But this late-century expansion of audiences was principally fed by reissues rather than new works. In the face of modes of publication that favored booksellers – including subscription, outright copyright

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sale, self-funding, or assumed liability for any losses – most contemporary novelists continued to struggle financially.

Recent scholarly interest in book history has led to significant gains in knowledge about contemporary print culture. But the mass of archival material available for research in the Victorian period simply does not exist for the previous century. The surviving advertising, taxation, and in-house records of eighteenth-century booksellers are as incomplete and erratically preserved as the identities and biographical details of the novelists who supplied them with their fictions. Many literary critics sidestep problems relating to this dearth of information about readers, authors, and publishers by looking to the novels themselves for evidence of the impulses that shaped the genre's emergence and development. Most respond – either through adjustment or active resistance – to the arguments presented in Ian Watt's 1957 study, *The Rise of the Novel*. Watt there identifies Daniel Defoe as the first English novelist on the grounds that he fulfills the “lowest common denominator of the novel genre as a whole, its formal realism” when he purports to offer a “full and authentic record of human experience, and is therefore under an obligation to satisfy its reader with such details of the story as the individuality of the actors concerned, the particulars of the times and places of their actions, details which are presented through a more largely referential use of language than is common in other literary forms.”² This combination of specificity of time and place, original plot, exploration of a multi-faceted personality, and language unshackled by inherited romance or epic conventions was, again according to Watt's thesis, a product of its historical moment, one that enabled a synchronized “triple rise” of the novel, of the Protestant privileging of individual conscience, and of a coherent bourgeoisie hostile to aristocratic mores.

Aspects of Watt's argument have been questioned, including its reliance on a Whig model of progress that makes the novel's anticipation of nineteenth-century norms a foregone conclusion, its highly selective survey of early eighteenth-century fiction, and its assumption of a coherent middle class already in existence by the 1720s. Numbers of critics contest his claim that the novel emerged first in eighteenth-century England by citing Continental instances of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century romance fictions or reaching further back to the classical period. Some of the evidential limits of his account have been corrected by considering the significant role played by women as both writers and readers of novels. Alternative models for describing the relation between author, text, and culture have also helped to refine Watt's account. These include theories that complicate the straightforward “rise” pattern by invoking ideologically inflected processes of “dialectical engagement,” ones that pay close attention to the huge range of texts available to early readers, or

that identify the consolidation of the novel as a distinct genre with the winnowing down, repudiation, or willed forgetting of these diverse materials, and still others that argue that the novel emerges to counteract the unsettling effects of political crises. Each of these indirectly testifies to the enduring power of Watt's thesis by making it a touchstone for gauging the role of particular historical and formal elements in the emergence and development of the novel.

Many of the theories alluded to in this very truncated list will be touched on later in the analysis of individual works. So, too, will paradigms drawn from political history and philosophy. Among these is Isaac Kramnick's framing of eighteenth-century political ideology through the contrasting metaphors of the "chain of being" and "the race." The "chain of being" images the divinely sanctioned, hierarchical order of classical republicanism, addressed at the beginning of the period through a civic humanist discourse that envisions, in the words of the poet Alexander Pope, "All [as] but parts of one stupendous whole."³ The metaphor of the "race" appealed, in turn, to those who rejected the defense of the status quo central to the "chain of being" model. In adapting John Locke's ideas, these proto-modernists made marketplace competition (rather than submission to God's order) the governing figure for a view of life as a "race" in which individuals are pitted against one another. Another important context is supplied by Charles Taylor's description of a distinctively eighteenth-century notion of identity, itself the foundation of modernity, that he argues depends on three key factors: first, a conceptualizing of inwardness based on the powers of disengaged reason and of self-exploration, second, an assumption of the uniqueness of individual selves, and third, an affirmation of ordinary life and of the egalitarianism that promises. The convergence of these three impulses in the period had wide-ranging effects. One relates to the eclipse of medieval and early modern temporalities by a new sense of time that allows identity to be articulated not through reference to archetypes but through circumstantial details that anchored the self in relation to memory, unfolding experiences, and, as we will see, new ways of conceptualizing history. More recently, the literary critic Michael McKeon has suggested that this eighteenth-century turn away from traditional attitudes involved a superseding of tacit, often unexamined, political, social, and cultural practices by a distinctively modern self-consciousness, itself discernible in a new sequence of conceptual divisions in the period, including sex from gender, the private from the public, inwardness from exteriority, political absolutism from political hegemony.

The history of novel criticism from Ian Watt to the present moment in many ways recapitulates the formation of the genre he described. When modern literary critics gain a purchase for their narratives by refuting those of

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their predecessors, in other words, they rehearse the early novel's own habit of overriding inherited modes. But the process is not straightforwardly reactive or backward-looking. Nor is it insular. Both eighteenth-century fiction and society change over the era charted here and another of the aims of this Introduction is to argue for the novel's alertness to the larger transformations it helped to mediate for an expanding and increasingly knowledgeable audience. The intersections between literary and other developments, however, are too approximate to allow for the designation of a specific "first" novel. Even within the orbits of single careers, the cross-generic reach of individual writers defies neat classification: Daniel Defoe adds to hundreds of previous titles when he publishes *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) in late middle age (and then capitalizes on its success with the series of fictions discussed in Chapter 1), Henry Fielding was a successful playwright (until the 1737 Stage Licensing Act closed down all but two state-sanctioned theaters in London and required that performances be licensed by the Lord Chamberlain) and Tobias Smollett hoped to be one; Eliza Haywood was not only an actress in Fielding's Little Theatre in the Haymarket in the 1730s, but also a drama critic, translator, poet, and periodical editor. At century's end, William Godwin was, like Defoe, Haywood, Smollett, and Fielding before him, a journalist, historian, and political commentator (and a philosopher, biographer, literary critic, and children's writer as well). The three broad clusters that structure this Introduction – "Secrets and singularity," "Sociability and community," "History and nation" – aim to order this thematic, formal, and contextual diversity without unduly regimenting it. Before describing these rubrics in more detail, it might be helpful to pursue an alternate approach and consider what some more miscellaneous elements – the representation of children, of place, of domestic interiors, and of writing and reading – can tell us about changes in novelistic representation over the course of the period.

In their own right, children play minimal directive roles in contemporary fiction (though the period caters to the emerging modern sense of childhood as distinct and special with the publication of juvenile novels, including Sarah Fielding's *The Governess; Or, Little Female Academy* [1741], the anonymous *History of Little Good Two-Shoes* [1765], and Thomas Day's *Sanford and Merton* [1783]). When Samuel Richardson's and Henry Fielding's novels close with references to the birth of a new generation, they are not romanticizing a privileged state of innocence, but marking the adult protagonist's achievement of a coherent social identity and, with it, the ability confidently to look to the future. The ending of Fielding's *Tom Jones* – retirement to the country, marriage, and the birth of a son and daughter – thus folds the hero into a larger narrative of continuity and progress. The legatees, in particular, resolve

the novel's inheritance themes (personal and national) by making possible the orderly conveyance of "real" property and power. The historical specificity of these emblematic functions accounts in part for the differences between early and later novelistic representations of children. In Defoe's fiction, the impermanence of familial bonds and raw numbers of children abandoned without harsh moral judgment are consistent with the tendency of his characters to regard others as instrumental to the true business of their lives, the amassing of "mobile" property or money. Even the apparent exceptions, Moll Flanders and Roxana, confirm the pattern since their maternal feelings are depicted as merely situational, a form of emotional interest at best enjoyed in middle age and only after their finances have been secured. Later in the century, in keeping with new views of maternity, the narrative functions of children change again. Many 1790s novels, including those of Mary Hays, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Elizabeth Inchbald, foreground a strong sentimental bond between mother and child, representing it as both innate and mutually authenticating. In doing so, they confirm Dror Wahrman's speculation that after 1770 a growing intolerance of behavioral transgressions goes hand in hand with a naturalizing of gender differences that makes maternity essential to women's identity (and in the process constrains her powers of choice).

Such biological determinism contrasts sharply with the easy assumption and discarding of roles in Defoe. In his fiction, characters often seem impelled less by self-conscious decisions than by random events on which they opportunistically seize. Over the course of the century, the contingent sense of self that such openness to experience makes possible is gradually reined in. Circumstances may drive protagonists to undertake adventures or to experience a dislocating estrangement from the past, but after Defoe, the serial invention (and equally inconsequential shedding) of distinct identities is increasingly unusual. Role-playing now comes to mark individuals of unusual villainy, frequently those who have betrayed their family origins. At one end of the social spectrum, the well-born Lovelace in Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* willfully confuses class distinctions in his filial relationship with the bawd "Mother" Sinclair, his corruption of servants, and his direction of prostitutes to pose as his aristocratic relations; at the other end, the street urchin Vallaton in Elizabeth Hamilton's *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* invents a romance narrative to conceal his low birth and uses the cover of revolutionary rhetoric to indulge his desire for wealth, power, and sexual dominance.

The physical backdrop to these dangerously multiple, performative selves, in *Clarissa* and *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers*, as in Defoe's work, is the city. Throughout eighteenth-century fiction, spaces that provide visual evidence of deeper cultural changes – from the generalized emblems of city and country

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to the specific domestic architectural innovations of corridors, realigned living quarters, and private closets – highlight tensions between customary and vanguard impulses. In particular, novels exploit the relation between literal and figurative mobility, that is, between physical movement and the aspirational desire for social advancement (and its alternatives, the graceful acceptance of one's given position or the much-feared fall into ignominious poverty).

Defoe represents this newly mobilized self as most perfectly and continuously realized in London. Later novels more often make urban experience a testing ground or prelude to rural retreat (the latter confirming the triumph of assigned identity over the assumed or experimental ones associated with the city). The reward of return, as Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* makes clear, is not limited to the comic marriage endings of Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* or Frances Burney's *Evelina*. Clarissa's wish that her corpse be brought from London and buried in the family vault denotes the tragic culmination of her unswerving faith in the social hierarchies traditionally identified with the country. When Frances Burney re-writes this plot of female exile and return, she maintains and further specifies the dangers of mobility emblemized in Clarissa's London experiences: Evelina's encounters with those like Sir Clement Willoughby or her grandmother Madame Duval who wish to take advantage of her uncertain standing recurrently involve conflicts in or about carriages, vehicles that carry the heroine beyond the reach of those who would protect her. At the same time, however, the alienating conditions in London push her "not only to *judge*, but to *act*" independently, a forced self-reliance that paradoxically (but typically) is made a condition of the final social integration she achieves as acknowledged daughter and beloved wife.⁴

This development of the ambiguities attaching to mobility – actual, social, and individual – is observable throughout eighteenth-century fiction. It is often manifested in attention to comparably transitional architectural spaces, including closets, the forerunner of the modern bedroom or individual study (Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*), passages and hallways (Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*), and staircases (William Godwin's *Fleetwood*). Each of these structural features is also implicated in the growing period connection between privacy and privilege, a connection Mark Girouard traces in the evolution of domestic interiors to afford improved access to both seclusion and hospitality for the socially advantaged. Thus back stairs allowing unobtrusive movement through the house and sleeping quarters in distant attic rooms reinforce the lesser status of servants, part of a larger process that sees a narrowing of the definition of "family" from all household members to immediate blood relatives only; the isolation of bedrooms on the second floor formalizes the distinction of private from public space; and, from the 1720s, the reorganization

of the ground floor as part of what Girouard calls “the social house” creates dedicated venues for self-display and sociability.

Another important site for negotiating the relation between private and communal domains is print itself, one to which novelists are, hardly surprisingly, particularly attuned. The “instrumental stance” that the modern identity assumes in relation to self and world, Charles Taylor suggests, is bound up with the expressive powers of language.⁵ Early in the century, novels underscore their own language-centered status by making articulateness a critical survival mechanism. For Daniel Defoe, Jane Barker, and Delarivier Manley’s characters, writing is connected with secrecy, a form of self-mastery through print that often serves as an alternative to intimacy with the family, friends, and business acquaintances from whom knowledge is deliberately withheld. At the same time, in their novels as in Aphra Behn’s, internal conversations about reading and writing function obliquely to direct the interpretations of the “real” audience. Later fictions retain this interest in the integrity of individuals while also authenticating various kinds of consensual experience that cast a negative light on those who choose autonomy over community. A favored method of conveying these tensions is scenes of reading. From the 1750s (Henry Fielding’s *Amelia*, Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote*) through to the end of the period (Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*, Amelia Opie’s *Adeline Mowbray*), authors depict their characters’ reading habits as variously leading to redemption and social reconciliation or infamy and exile.

These reflexive representations are both local and global in intent: they express the desire to guide interpretation of particular texts and reflect the increasing awareness of the potential ungovernability of actual readers. In response to the latter anxiety, authors attempt to shape readers into something resembling a community of the like-minded. Many of the novel’s formal features contribute to this end, most notably through participation in what the literary critic Carey McIntosh describes as the mid-century shift away from the oral and colloquial and toward a decorous civility identified with print. The normalizing of polite speech in turn allows exemptions from this standard to be exploited to political, ethical, or aesthetic ends. Dialect, idiolect, and vernacular are thus increasingly used to signal exceptionality, sometimes an authentic because untutored sincerity, but more often in the negative terms of Tobias Smollett’s *Humphry Clinker* where the characters’ speech and writing graduate their class, gender, and intellectual traits on a scale stretching from illiteracy to gentility. When the irredeemably vulgar Mrs. Botherim in Elizabeth Hamilton’s *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* praises Dr. Orwell for his ability to “speak in print”, she testifies to the familiarity of 1790s audiences with this marker of difference – and consolidates their corporate identification

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as a group sympathetic to Hamilton's conservative values. That Mrs. Botherim cannot discriminate between Orwell's unaffectedly polished speech and her own daughter's entirely derivative "talking out of them there books" might well also confirm her readers' doubts about the late-century pressure to extend literacy.⁶

These general comments about family, place, and language will be subject to qualification in the analysis of individual works to follow. The broad themes to which the Introduction's separate parts refer – "Secrets and singularity," "Sociability and community," "History and nation" – are likewise intended to be flexible rather than prescriptive. They are designed to map the contemporary novel in relation to a trio of contexts, each of which undergoes substantial modification over the course of the century. The first part, "Secrets and singularity," focuses on the representation of exceptionality in three distinct registers. Chapter 1, "The power of singularity," traces the depiction of autonomy through *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), *Capt. Singleton* (1720), *Col. Jacque* (1723), *Moll Flanders* (1721), and *Roxana* (1724). Chapter 2, "The virtue of singularity," looks at the rewarding of exemplary goodness in Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (1742) and *Amelia* (1751) and in Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747–8). Chapter 3, "The punishment of singularity," examines sensibility in both female-authored novels – Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* (1752), Sarah Fielding's *Ophelia* (1760), Frances Sheridan's *Sidney Bidulph* (1761), and Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) – and male-authored ones – Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1765–7) and *A Sentimental Journey* (1768), Henry Mackenzie's *Man of Feeling* (1771), and William Godwin's *Fleetwood: Or, The New Man of Feeling* (1805). Whether shaped by a proto-modern solipsism or nostalgic views of integrity, these novels imagine an adversarial and alienated relationship between character and world.

The second part, "Sociability and community," explores the complementary spheres of conciliation and connection from three widening and increasingly abstract perspectives. In Chapter 4, "The reformation of family," paired texts from mid-century forward – Samuel Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753–4) and Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766); Eliza Haywood's *Betsy Thoughtless* (1751) and Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815); Eliza Fenwick's *Secresy* (1795) and George Walker's *Theodore Cyphon* (1796) – help to elucidate the complexities of the nuclear and extended family. Chapter 5, "Alternative communities," considers novels that describe unfamiliar collectivities either by drawing on established subgenres, such as utopian and travel narratives, or by advancing new conventions, as in Gothic. Among the former are Sarah Scott's *Millenium Hall* (1762) and *Sir George Ellison* (1766), and Clara Reeve's *School for Widows* (1791). The anonymous *Henry Willoughby*