Paul Keen explores how a consumer revolution which reached its peak in the second half of the eighteenth century shaped debates about the role of literature in a polite modern nation, and tells the story of the resourcefulness with which many writers responded to these pressures. From dream reveries which mocked their own entrepreneurial commitments, such as Oliver Goldsmith’s account of selling his work at a “Fashion Fair” on the frozen Thames, to the *Microcosm’s* mock plan to establish “a licensed warehouse for wit,” writers insistently tied their literary achievements to a sophisticated understanding of the uncertain complexities of a modern transactional society. This book combines a new understanding of late eighteenth-century literature with the materialist and sociological imperatives of book history and theoretically inflected approaches to cultural history.

**Paul Keen** is Professor of English at Carleton University.
This series aims to foster the best new work in one of the most challenging fields within English literary studies. From the early 1780s to the early 1830s a formidable array of talented men and women took to literary composition, not just in poetry, which some of them famously transformed, but in many modes of writing. The expansion of publishing created new opportunities for writers, and the political stakes of what they wrote were raised again by what Wordsworth called those "great national events" that were "almost daily taking place": the French Revolution, the Napoleonic and American wars, urbanization, industrialization, religious revival, an expanded empire abroad and the reform movement at home. This was an enormous ambition, even when it pretended otherwise. The relations between science, philosophy, religion, and literature were reworked in texts such as *Frankenstein* and *Biographia Literaria*; gender relations in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and *Don Juan*; journalism by Cobbett and Hazlitt; poetic form, content and style by the Lake School and the Cockney School. Outside Shakespeare studies, probably no body of writing has produced such a wealth of comment or done so much to shape the responses of modern criticism. This indeed is the period that saw the emergence of those notions of "literature" and of literary history, especially national literary history, on which modern scholarship in English has been founded.

The categories produced by Romanticism have also been challenged by recent historicist arguments. The task of the series is to engage both with a challenging corpus of Romantic writings and with the changing field of criticism they have helped to shape. As with other literary series published by Cambridge, this one will represent the work of both younger and more established scholars, on either side of the Atlantic and elsewhere.

For a complete list of titles published see end of book.
LITERATURE, COMMERCE, AND THE SPECTACLE OF MODERNITY, 1750–1800

PAUL KEEN
For John Barrell, and for Neve, Abbey, and Morgan, distinguished scholars, the lot of them.
Literary space is not an immutable structure, fixed once and for all in its hierarchies and power relations. But even if the unequal distribution of literary resources assures that such forms of domination will endure, it is also a source of incessant struggle, of challenges to authority and legitimacy, of rebellions, insubordination, and ultimately, revolutions that alter the balance of literary power and rearrange existing hierarchies … From the point of view of the history and the genesis of worldwide space, then, literature is a type of creation that is irreducibly singular and yet at the same time inherently collective, the work of all those who have created, reinvented, or reappropriated the various means at their disposal for changing the order of the literary world and its existing power relations.

Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*

For the materialist historian, every epoch with which he occupies himself is only prehistory for the epoch he himself must live in. And so, for him, there can be no appearance of repetition in history, since precisely those moments in the course of history which matter most to him, by virtue of their index as “fore-history,” become moments of the present day and change their specific character according to the catastrophic or triumphant nature of that day.

Walter Benjamin, *The Arcade Project*
## Contents

*List of figures*  \hspace{2cm} page ix  

*Acknowledgements*  \hspace{2cm} x  

1  The ocean of ink: a long introduction  
   The more things change  \hspace{1cm} 1  
   The last masquerade at the Pantheon  \hspace{1cm} 6  
   This invisible je ne scay quoi  \hspace{1cm} 16  
   The fashion fair  \hspace{1cm} 30  

2  Balloonomania: the pursuit of knowledge and the culture of the spectacle  \hspace{2cm} 40  
   Beautiful invention  \hspace{1cm} 40  
   The present rage  \hspace{1cm} 44  
   Adventurous heroes  \hspace{1cm} 54  
   Cautious philosophers  \hspace{1cm} 64  
   The world as it goes  \hspace{1cm} 68  

3  Bibliomania: the rage for books and the spectacle of culture  \hspace{2cm} 78  
   Bedlam  \hspace{1cm} 78  
   Curious libraries  \hspace{1cm} 82  
   The cacoethes scribendi  \hspace{1cm} 91  
   The Helluo Librorum  \hspace{1cm} 94  
   Men of taste  \hspace{1cm} 98  

4  Foolish knowledge: the little world of microcosmopolitan literature  \hspace{2cm} 102  
   Diffusing knowledge far and wide  \hspace{1cm} 102  
   The historian of character and manners  \hspace{1cm} 107  
   The miscellany of life  \hspace{1cm} 111  
   Trifling occurrences and little occupations  \hspace{1cm} 118  
   The politics of politeness  \hspace{1cm} 125
## Contents

5 Uncommon animals: literary professionalism in the age of authors
   “The low-life of literature” 133
   Houseless wanderers 136
   The highways of literature 146
   The crowd of life 151
   Scattered seeds 157

6 The Learned Pig: enlightening the reading public
   Illiterate readers 165
   Erudite swine 173
   Wonderful knowledge 182
   Advertising culture 188
   Incredulous readers 195

7 Afterword: A swinish multitude: the tyranny of fashion in the 1790s 202

Notes 209
Bibliography 223
Index 242
Figures


5 *The Downfall of Taste and Genius, or, The World As it Goes*. Etching. By S. Collings. Published by W. Humphrey, 227 Strand. c. 1784. © The Trustees of the British Museum. 72


7 *The Quacks*. Etching. Published by W. Humphrey, 227 Strand. 1783. © The Trustees of the British Museum. 186

8 *Bubbler's Medley, or a Sketch of the Times*. Etching and engraving. Published by Carington Bowles. 1720. © The Trustees of the British Museum. 200
Acknowledgements

It is entirely appropriate, given the topic of this book, that I have been so lucky in my debts. I have benefited greatly from the suggestions and honest feedback of a number of colleagues, many of whom I have been doubly fortunate to count as friends. John Barrell, Mary Fairborough, Ina Ferris, Kevin Gilmartin, Georgina Green, Thomas Keymer, Jon Klancher, Don LePan, April London, Deidre Lynch, Julie Murray, Daniel O’Quinn, Mark Phillips, Andrew Piper, Mary Poovey, Jonathan Sachs, Betty Schellenberg, and Alex Wetmore all helped enormously, asking the right question at the right time and, in many cases, offering honest criticism of draft versions of many of these chapters. I not only learned a lot from them, but have valued the process all the more for having had the chance to enjoy their spirit of collegiality. I was fortunate to have a chance to work through many of these ideas in a variety of seminars and workshops. I would like to thank the organizers of the Digital Retroaction Conference at University of California, Santa Barbara, a work-in-progress seminar at the 2008 NASSR conference in Toronto, and the Eighteenth-Century Studies Group in Ottawa. The opportunity to discuss many of these ideas with the people who attended the Bookish Histories conference I co-organized with Ina Ferris was especially helpful. Parts of three chapters appeared elsewhere, and I am grateful to the publishers for permission to reprint material in a revised form: “Foolish Knowledge: The Commercial Modernity of the Periodical Press” (European Romantic Review 19 [2008]); “The ‘Balloonomania’: Science and Spectacle in 1780s England” (Eighteenth-Century Studies 39 [2006]); and “‘Uncommon Animals’: Making Virtue of Necessity in the Age of Authors,” in Bookish Histories: Books, Literature and Commercial Modernity, 1700–1900, ed. Ina Ferris and Paul Keen (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). I have benefited enormously from the thoughtful and constructive responses of the anonymous readers in all three of these cases, and from the extraordinarily nuanced and perceptive suggestions of Reader A for Cambridge
Acknowledgements

University Press. My thanks as well to Linda Bree and Josephine Lane for the helpfulness and sound judgement with which they guided the manuscript through the publication process. Much of this research was made possible by the generous support of grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, including the provision of a year’s leave from teaching. In an age when the humanities face unprecedented attacks on the financial support that makes so much of our work possible, SSHRC’s generosity is especially appreciated. Finally, this book would definitely not be the same without the “help” of our three daughters, Neve, Abbey, and Morgan, all of whom arrived during the years that I have been working on it, and my wife Cynthia, whose ideas and encouragement were every bit as helpful in this book as they were in my first. I have been lucky in my debts.