Introduction: the textualization of judgment

Without analogizing too neatly, the motivating premise of this book is that early literary critics stood at a crossroads similar to the one that confronts literary scholars today. Then, as now, the material basis for critical judgment was shifting. Where we face the rise of digital media and online publishing, early critics wrote against the background of a rapidly changing landscape of books. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries witnessed a massive spread of cheap print, as newspapers and other ephemeral publications proliferated throughout an increasingly diverse literary marketplace. New publishing practices brought with them new modes of authorship and new ways of reading: among these was criticism. By the eighteenth century, the critic was recognized as a species of author whose publications enveloped poetry in a web of contention. What were the protocols of reading in this increasingly contentious field? What did it mean to be a critic or a judge of books and how did that meaning change? Within what genres of writing did criticism appear and how were those genres valued? And, at the most abstract: what relation does the textual discourse of criticism have to the experience of reading, talking, and knowing about literature? This book is about the competing answers that English writers gave to these questions. It is about how criticism first came to be understood as a mode of publication and a form of knowledge.

I ought to begin by acknowledging that early criticism was met with a great deal of skepticism. The more that writers valued the approval of “true judges,” the less stock they claimed to place in “criticks.” Differentiating between these two groups of readers and declaring alliance with the first was, for many authors, the whole point of writing a preface in the first place, and it is in such supplementary genres – prologues, prefaces, dedications – that much early critical writing appears. Thus, for most of its early history, criticism is marked by a strongly negative, often sneering attitude toward critics. As Phillip Smallwood has remarked, “The birth of
criticism out of the satire of itself is one of the great founding paradoxes of its history.” Indeed, no discipline emerged with greater ambivalence toward its own practitioners. For writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, criticism promised an elevated discourse of literary judgment, but actual critics were rarely thought to meet this ideal. The first modern use of the word “criticism” appeared in 1677, when John Dryden invoked a tradition of critical writing that was “instituted by Aristotle” and “meant as a standard of judging well.” Modern-day critics were not part of this tradition, however. Dryden writes, “We are fallen into an age of illiterate, censorious, and detracting people who, thus qualified, set up for critics.” Similarly, Anthony Ashley Cooper, Lord Shaftesbury was among criticism’s staunchest advocates, calling it “the props and pillars . . . of the commonwealth of wit and letters,” but he too complained that few critics met this standard: “Though there are many Answerers seen abroad, there are few or no critics.” For Shaftesbury, critical writing promised an expert discourse of literary knowledge but instead merely replicated the malicious fault finding of ill-natured readers. Thus he advocated for criticism in general by condemning it in practice. He was not alone. Bad critics were the period’s most persistent and self-defining bogeymen, especially among the professed literati. Criticism was thus built on a fundamental contradiction: it was a field of knowledge defined against its knowers.

In what follows I’ll attempt to tease out some of the many consequences of this contradiction. First is the problem of definition. Any history of English criticism that reaches back to its earliest periods is faced with the problem that little of the writing we now call seventeenth-century criticism was known to contemporaries as “criticism,” nor did many authors self-consciously adopt the title of “critic.” As the comments cited above suggest, from the beginning there has been a disjunction between what criticism is thought to be and what critics are said to do. For this reason, any useful operating definition must be applied retrospectively, and scholars have usually opted to define the field as broadly as possible. For example, René Wellek described the subject of his magisterial History of Modern Criticism (1955) as “any discourse on literature,” gathering together as much material as he could to map criticism’s origins. Unfortunately, this definition carried latent ambiguities in both of its key terms. Early critical writing appeared in a wide range of genres that often bear little resemblance to modern essays, so what counted as “discourse” was difficult to specify. Also, “literature” had not yet consolidated into a unitary object of inquiry, and so critical discussions from this period wandered in and out
of genres and topics with a palpable disregard for the category Wellek used to contain them. The axis that separated literary from nonliterary discourse was by no means fixed, nor was the boundary between the critical and the uncritical. Once acknowledged, this heterogeneity leaves criticism notoriously porous.7

These complications suggest another. If we think about criticism, not as a mode of writing, but in practical terms as the activity of a critic (that is, if we ask not “What is criticism?” but “What do critics do?”), Wellek’s definition is not merely anachronistic but is fundamentally at odds with seventeenth-century uses of the term. Early on, criticism was not defined as a kind of writing at all, but rather as a kind of response. As Douglas Lane Patey has pointed out, “References to the act of criticism suggest not written but oral communication, whether in pit, coffeehouse, or polite social gathering.”8 A 1656 dictionary defined criticism as the “Art of judging or censuring mens words, writings, or actions.”9 Dryden, as we have already seen, separated the “standard of Judging well” from the behaviors and activities of actual critics. During the seventeenth century, when authors complained about “criticks” they usually seemed to imagine readers and playgoers rather than pamphleteers or essayists. Even in the case of Dryden, who wrote and published essays clearly meant to demonstrate his superior critical faculties and his deep knowledge of classical and French poetics, there’s little to suggest that he believed writing essays was what a critic did. Instead, his arguments were directed outward to readers – to critics – who subjected his books to their judgment.

This point is worth pausing over. Published critical arguments on literary topics flourished in England as early as the 1590s. Renaissance treatises like George Puttenham’s Arte of English Poesie (1589), Sir John Harington’s preface to Ariosto (1591), and Sir Philip Sidney’s Defence of Poesy (1595) developed a highly intellectual and elegant English poetics.10 Poesy emerged in their writing as a topic of inquiry and a vital arena of public disputation, as something under attack and in need of defending.” The Marprelate controversy and other pamphlet disputes involving writers like Thomas Nashe and Gabriel Harvey appeared around the same time, while Thomas Campion and Samuel Daniel debated the merits of rhyme in Observations in the Art of English Poesie (1602) and A Defence of Ryme: Against a Pamphlet Entituled: Observations in the Art of English Poesie (1603), respectively.12 The commercial theaters provided another forum of debate. By the turn of the century, dramatists jostled for prestige in the playhouse and in print, reaching a kind of climax in the extraordinary authorial career of Ben Jonson, whose critical writing established him as
England’s first modern, “possessive” author. Moreover, the works of European classical scholars like Joseph Scaliger and Daniel Heinsius were making their way into the English print marketplace, where they provided a deep well of theoretical argument from which writers like Jonson could draw. Texts of the sort we now call critical played an important role in the formation of Renaissance print culture. They were responsible for, among other things, the first appearance of the critic as a literary trope. In *Nevves from Hell* (1606), Thomas Dekker warns: “Take heed of Criticks. they bite (like fish) at any thing, especially at bookes.” In their earliest figurations, critics appear as malevolent readers closely associated with contemporary print culture and all of its perceived debasements.

The advent of pamphlet publishing in London in the 1580s was followed in the next century by an explosion of controversial books, newspapers, and other cheap print, especially during the tumultuous 1640s and 1650s. The expansion of the pamphlet press and newsbooks opened a new and, to many, disturbing arena of public debate. Nigel Smith has called this a “media revolution,” and rightly so. Whereas the authority to speak publicly had been bound up in structures of secrecy and privilege, by the end of the century new genres of critical argument had emerged to supplement (or, as some worried, supplant) those institutions. Still, the dominant image of the critic as an illiterate reader or heckler endured well into the Restoration period, and it wasn’t until the early eighteenth century that “criticism” was consistently associated with a mode of writing or acknowledged as a species of authorship.

What results is a curious disjunction between the vibrant and expanding field of published criticism, on the one hand, and, on the other, the enduringly narrow definition of criticism as such. Although not surprising in itself – one expects a cultural practice to exist long before it requires explicit theorization – this delay effect poses a thorny methodological problem. Historians of literary criticism take as their subject an unruly archive of texts, but those same texts define criticism as a repertoire of reading practices. Consequently, while scholars treat the evolution of criticism as the rise of a genre, they generally avoid the more fundamental question of how criticism came to be recognized as a mode of writing in the first place. For this reason, throughout this study I use the term “critical writing” to describe the generically heterogeneous mix of texts that engage arguments about poetry, plays, and prose fiction, and I use the term “criticism” in a much broader sense as the socially realized exercise of judgment. Criticism only sometimes addressed literary topics and only sometimes appeared in written form: understanding the period’s critical
writing means attending to the way writers positioned themselves within this larger, complexly mediated context of reading.

Many worried about how the new discourse of written criticism would change the familiar experience of judgment. How would writing criticism affect reading books? As the controversial press exploded during the middle of the seventeenth century, this question became increasingly pressing. The controversial press offered new ways to talk about poetry, but it also raised fears that reading had been compromised beyond recognition. Pamphleteering and scandal-mongering seemed the very antithesis of proper judgment. After all, how can good thinking appear in bad writing? As this written discourse of critical argument continually thrust itself into the eyes and imaginations of readers, what it meant to do criticism – and thus what it meant to know about literature – fundamentally shifted. The consequences of this shift would reverberate across the eighteenth century. Without any pretense of treating the subject comprehensively, my goal is to describe criticism’s transformation across the seventeenth century and to follow some of the more intriguing paths cleared by eighteenth-century writers as they navigated this dangerous, uncharted terrain.

Rather than a story of criticism’s institutionalization, then, this book is about the discourse’s origins during an undisciplined – even antidisciplinary – period of media shift. An extraordinary body of scholarship has built over the past twenty years showing how textual practices changed between the years 1580 and 1720. It is now taken for granted that print existed alongside other forms of textuality – writing, speech, performance – as part of a complex repertoire of communication practices. Booksellers’ shops were sites of gossip; coffeehouses and taverns were places of communal reading; news spread in handwritten letters and printed pamphlets; drama moved from the playhouse to the printing house and back.

These networks of communication were strongly resistant to direct institutional control. Attempts to exert monopoly power in one area bumped up against the proliferation of opinion in other areas, and indeed the literary marketplace offered few mechanisms for dictating the content or tone of critical argument in general. After the extraordinary output of the Civil War and Interregnum years, the 1662 Licensing Act limited the number of printers that were allowed to operate in London, but licenser Roger L’Estrange had little positive control over the contents of published books. Just as important for regulating the book trade were the formal and informal codes of conduct that stationers used to maintain credit with each other and avoid destructive competition. As I shall argue in the next
chapter, Interregnum and Restoration patrons and publishers shaped the dramatic criticism of the period, but they had little power over the print marketplace as a whole. Stationers’ Hall had little interest in regulating literary criticism, per se. Nor were institutions of stage censorship much help. The Master of the Revels had little real power after the Restoration, and when plays were suppressed, it was usually to avoid giving offense to specific, influential politicians. Even when offending plays or passages of plays were kept off the stage, they could often be included in book form, or traded in a vibrant market for clandestine satire in manuscript. There was little outside control over the literary marketplace, and the controversial discourse we retrospectively call literary criticism seems to have slipped under the radar of those who exerted what influence they had. Consequently, authors and publishers were afforded few opportunities to impose a programmatic set of standards and they lacked any effectual system for policing participation. The practice of writing and publishing literary criticism flourished in this turbulent context.

By identifying our discipline’s origins with the emergence of criticism in this undisciplined period of heterogeneity and conflict, I diverge sharply from most recent histories of the field, which tend to focus on criticism’s later institutionalization and in particular on the formation of the concept of “literature.” Such studies mark a division in the mid eighteenth century that separates modern criticism from its pre-modern predecessors. Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton, Jonathan Kramnick, Clifford Siskin, John Guillory, and Robin Valenza have shown how literary studies distinguished itself against other fields of knowledge: against the sciences, within the university, and against commercial journalism, without.

This specialization has become, indeed, our discipline’s founding myth. The history of the discipline and the history of criticism are often confounded, because they are often imagined to share a common origin in the conceptual narrowing of criticism’s object and ideal. Criticism and literary studies enter history with the ideal of literature for its own sake and, more fundamentally, the consolidation of the category “literature as such.” This specialization was lamented by Eagleton, who worried about critics’ isolation from political activism, but has been mobilized most recently by Siskin (along with William Warner) as an argument to “stop” cultural studies because of its supposed inconsistency with criticism’s defining concern with high culture. What all of these studies have in common is their near total disregard for criticism before mid-century. Indeed, the history of literary criticism and the history of literary studies have branched into largely separate areas of scholarly inquiry. Early
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criticism fails to treat literature like a discipline, and so it’s usually left out of the story of the discipline. When included at all, it’s carefully excerpted to emphasize a modern, consolidated telos.29 By attending only to criticism that conforms to a post-Romantic isolation of the literary, such histories inadvertently enforce the norms they mean to trace in their emergence. The result is a Janus-faced blindness that denies both the history and the present of the discipline. Early criticism doesn’t fit the definition, nor does, by implication, much current work in the field. In effect, such polemics define literary studies against the work of actual literary scholars.

As I’ve already suggested and as I’ll argue throughout this book, this contradiction has been central to the practice of criticism since its beginnings. When Dryden and his contemporaries debated the proper modes of judgment, they did so in large part by accusing each other of being false pretenders, trading mutual accusations of plagiarism, institutional sycophancy, and pedantry.30 The field of dramatic criticism was not defined by a clearly marked and agreed upon subject, but by the network of animadversion that established dramatists as interlocutors. Similarly, when polemicists in the field of literary studies debate its relationship to other academic disciplines, like history, communications, or race and gender studies, they often articulate ideals of the discipline that differ, sometimes widely, from the actual work of literary scholars. The rise of cultural studies in the 1990s was one recent flashpoint of disciplinary conflict. Stanley Fish’s Professional Correctness (1995) argued, for example, that “the purpose of literary interpretation is to determine what works of literature mean; and therefore the paradigmatic question in literary criticism is ‘What is this poem (or novel or drama) saying?’”31 Working from a unitary definition of the field’s subject of study, arguments like Fish’s push against contemporaries by defining them as outsiders, essentially saying, “That’s not what we do around here.” Attention to criticism’s origins suggests that such rhetorical sleights of hand are both inevitable and fundamentally misguided. Competing lines of critical argument map the intellectual disciplines, not as neatly nested branches on a great tree of knowledge, nor as discrete departments in the labyrinthine bureaucracy of the modern university, but as a many-threaded fabric of interpenetrating intellectual labor that simultaneously overlaps and conflicts in all its points.

Insofar as this book is polemical – as I believe any history of the discipline can’t help but be, at least implicitly – its lodestar idea is this: criticism exceeds the institutions that hope to define it. The field is vibrant, exciting, and defined more by contradiction than consensus. Our polemical balancing act is playing out again surrounding the advent of digital
humanities. Electronic media promise to open access to scholarship even as they threaten the institutions of scholars. Questions about digital humanities – What are they? Whose interest do they serve? – are deeply implicated in the institutional pressures changing the economics of the profession and the modes of scholarly publishing. The shifting grounds of discussion can be seen in field-defining essays like Matthew Kirschenbaum’s “What is Digital Humanities and What is It Doing in English Departments?” as well as position papers like Alan Liu’s “Where Is Cultural Criticism in the Digital Humanities?” Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s Planned Obsolescence addresses the problem of the discipline by speculating how changing publishing formats will affect academic criticism. Most recently, Franco Moretti, Ted Underwood, and Matthew Jockers have argued that new forms of computational analysis will enable a new form of cultural “macroanalysis” that will allow scholars to trace massive-scale changes over time. Together these scholars argue that the textual condition of literary knowledge is shifting in ways that may require a complementary but potentially disruptive shift in the institutions that promote that knowledge. In their respective moments of media flux, both early criticism and the digital humanities confront the worry (or, the exhilarating promise?) that old forms of literary knowledge will become obsolete and forgotten while new genres dissolve into mere chatter. Then and now, criticism’s fault-lines and boundaries are marked by sharp, biting polemical debate. Much of the fun of working on this topic for the past several years has been to watch these debates unfold in parallel, quite literally in different windows on my computer screen. Criticism’s undisciplined past illuminates its ambivalent, contested, and never fully disciplined present. Such, at least, is the informing premise of this book. The rest of this introduction outlines criticism’s emergence as a field of textual exchange over the course of the seventeenth century. From there, the book is divided into two parts. The first chapter begins during the 1640s and 1650s in the shops of London booksellers who used critical discourse in printed books – prefaces, dedications, and commendatory verse – to simulate an elite coterie of literary judgment. My second and third chapters trace the development of criticism through the Collier controversy and its wake, when critical handwringing over the role of drama in the nation-state brought new attention to poetry and the Covent Garden community of poets. The discourse of gallantry and wit brought criticism in direct conversation with the politics of gender and sexuality, a trend encouraged by the influx of women writers after Aphra Behn’s death. The “Female War” and the rise of epistolary and periodical criticism
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contributed to the popularization of critical writing and to the rise of the novel. The last three chapters focus on eighteenth-century writers who navigated a literary field that seemed irredeemably dysfunctional. I discuss Anne Finch’s poetry, Alexander Pope’s *Dunciad Variorum*, and James Boswell’s relationship with Samuel Johnson. Together, these chapters show how criticism narrates its history while negating its contentious present.

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Until recently, the history of criticism has been treated as the history of literary theory, a loose and difficult to define discourse concerned with, among other things, delimiting the boundaries that separate literary genres, sorting texts into hierarchies and establishing canons, categorizing aesthetic programs, identifying contributions of important critics, and tracing literature’s relationship to philosophy and other branches of knowledge, including political theory. Broad as this research program was (and still is), a new body of scholarship, coming mostly out of the field of book history, has significantly altered the terms of historical investigation. Early criticism is often folded into histories of media that are concerned primarily with the norms of communication, rather than the development of literary concepts. In the case of print and manuscript culture, this set of concerns has prompted new histories of authorship and reading, and, in such studies, criticism often functions as an important body of evidence. Prefaces and dedications, in particular, have proven useful for book historians because they “encode in bibliographic artefacts the essential issues of patronage, dissemination, demographics, and stylization of audience status.”

Under this socio-technological framework, the presumptive object of criticism from the past is not literature but media: the critical tradition has been retheorized as a “metadiscourse” that established the “protocols” of reading, writing, and publication. In Michael Warner’s words, criticism offers a “normative construal of the reading situation” that elevates critical reading from its variously undisciplined uncritical antitheses. This approach has been adopted recently by Scott Black and Lee Morrissey, who see critical essays as a form of reading that reflects upon and regulates the print marketplace. Others have shown critical argument to be central to manuscript culture and theater. Rather than a discourse that stands apart from literature and comments upon it from the outside, criticism is woven into the very mental and social fabric of textuality.
As this expanding body of research has shown, for early modern writers, the social situation of reading was fraught with anxiety about new forms of publicity that seemed to unfold around them through print. The “critick” very quickly came to personify this condition, at least in its normatively bad forms, and authors painted them with rhetorical panache. John Florio’s preface to *Worlde of Wordes* (1598) describes critics as “those notable Pirates in this our paper-sea, those sea-dogs, or lande-Critikes, monsters of men, if not beasts rather than men; whose teeth are Canibals, their toongs adder-forkes, their lips aspes-poyson, their eies basiliskes, their breath the breath of a grave, their words like swords of Turkes.”

Underneath such hyperbole, it’s not hard to see concern about how the conditions of textuality were shifting. The expanding field of book publishing seemed to engulf writers like an ocean where numerous and potentially malicious readers threateningly lurked. At the same time, critics were quickly associated with a debased sociability marked by urbane foppishness. In his play *Monsieur d’Olive* (1606), George Chapman’s eponymous fool hopes to replicate a French salon:

> I will have my chamber the Rende-vos of all good wits, the shoppe of good wordes, the Mint of good iestes, an Ordinary of fine discourse, Critickes, Essayists, Linguists, Poets, and other professors of that facultie of wit, shall at certaine hours ith day resort thither, it shall be a second Sorbonne, where all doubts or differences of Learning, Honour, Duellisme, Criticisme, and Poetrie shall be disputed.

The wits, the hecklers, the fops, the dunces, the criticks—these men parasitically consumed books, and authors needed protection from them. To read books well, such tropes suggest, is to ally imaginatively with the author against this dangerous and motley group.

Prefatory criticism thus drew authors and readers into a peculiar form of interaction premised on the notion that other readers read books badly. When Jonson dedicated *Volpone* to the “Most Noble and Most Equall Sisters, The Two Famovs Universities,” he submitted his comedy to the judgment of “the learned, and charitable critick.” In another poem Jonson contrasts the learned critick from the typical, putatively ignorant reader, “My Meere English Censurer.” Such contrasts sort good readers from bad ones as the necessary precondition for sorting legitimate writers from hacks: learnedness confers authority, which in turn legitimizes fame. Jonson’s selective elevation and condemnation looks outward into a field of reception and establishes one set of parameters for the critical situation in which his *Workes* were bound. In doing so, Jonson