

Introduction
The Schoolroom in the Marketplace

Not surprisingly, perhaps, in this age of conduct books and “how-to” books, the printing trade disseminated all that people of all ages and ranks might need or wish to know about reading books and periodicals. Eighteenth-century people could go to printed texts to learn for themselves how to decipher scripts and fonts and how to understand printers’ English. Print taught readers how to absorb, remember and reflect upon their reading; how to recognize genres and interpret texts; how to decode the seditious ideas frequently secreted in popular writings; how to teach reading; and how to write themselves. Pamphlets, books and periodicals also taught readers the rudiments of reading aloud and conversing about books, and showed them what kinds of things they ought to know, how to learn subjects, how to figure as polite readers, and how to think for themselves. During the eighteenth century, printers, booksellers and the authors they patronized were energetically using print to transmit the skills, practices, apperceptions, motives, and tastes that could – and in the course of the century did – transform an unevenly and spottily educated populace into staunch readers, buyers and borrowers of newspapers, periodicals and books. What James Raven aptly calls “the complex penetration of print through eighteenth-century society” and William St. Clair, “The Reading Nation,” was not achieved without ensuring that a broad range of new, non-traditional customers could learn from print how to use the printing trade’s printed commodities.¹

This is a study of printed guides to six eighteenth-century manners of reading, and an account of what they taught readers about reading. Some guides have not been noticed before, or have not been identified as such, because they took a variety of generic forms or because their contents are divided up under different modern disciplines. Some manners of reading have been overlooked for the same reasons, or because we have assumed that one kind of text tells us all that we can or need to know about how people read. Guides took many forms. Some manners of reading were

transmitted primarily through schoolbooks;² some primarily through popular genres such as periodicals, pamphlets, miscellanies, conduct books, and fictions; many were transmitted through some combination of the two. Manners of reading were not all of a piece either. Some sharply conflicted with others – indeed, battle raged over how, as well as what, the generality of people ought to read. And while all manners of reading were conjoined to manners of writing and speaking, some favored auralness, speech and conversation more. But for most of the century, all the guides to be considered here were directed at adults outside school settings, not just at children, and either geared to, or re-presented in forms adapted to, the abilities of men and women at all ranks. This is particularly noteworthy in the case of genres that are now associated exclusively with children and middle-class schooling, such as English spellers and grammars (Chapter 1), guides to study (Chapter 3) and fables (Chapter 5). During the eighteenth century, these did double duty to the point where, by the century's end, educators were complaining that in their current forms, they were “fitter for Men than for Children.”

Reading is and was a collection of practices, performed in diverse, but always very specific ways. The eighteenth century said as much by classifying reading among the “arts” – an art being a skill or craft based on special knowledge but consisting of material practices and acquired hands on. By “methodizing” reading as an art and embracing different forms of reading, eighteenth-century print culture speaks directly to those historically specific, interdisciplinary patterns and practices which Roger Chartier calls “manners of reading.” I use his term because it usefully includes manners or methods of reading – the means, media, skills and mental processes that contemporaries employed to put books to specific uses – and manners or mores of reading – those proprieties, practices, rituals, and modes of judgment and expression which performed “the task of showing distinctions, of making manifest differences in the social hierarchy.” The plural form, “manners,” reminds us that multiple manners of reading might be in circulation at any given time, and that readers might have more than one at their disposal. Clearly, too, everyone did not acquire all manners of reading, attain the same proficiency in each, or inevitably apply them in the prescribed ways; and it was always possible to mix and match. But some familiarity with historical manners of reading in all these senses is, as Chartier points out, “indispensable to any approach that aims to reconstruct how texts could be apprehended, understood and handled by interpretative communities in the past.”³ Manners of reading can serve as a base-line of sorts, whether one's principal interests lie in history,

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literature, philosophy, education, grammar, rhetoric, hermeneutics, aesthetics, reader-reception, literary criticism, children's literature or women's writing, in the commonplace books of particular readers or the practices of book-related institutions, in the interactions of voice, script and print, in the history of books or the history of reading itself.

Chartier's call for study of manners of reading countered other prominent scholars who urged historians of reading to concentrate on empirical case studies. In what relates to eighteenth-century Britain, the latter has been most widely heeded. Here much of the ground-breaking recent work consists of case studies of the reading practices of individual readers as far as these can be determined from their marginalia, diaries, and commonplace books, and of studies of reader-behavior (borrowing habits, the conduct of coteries or reading clubs, the disposition of library furniture).⁴ This has produced invaluable information, some of which will be incorporated below. But studies of reader behavior do not directly address what readers did, or thought they were doing, while they were reading. And scholars very properly preface their case studies with warnings that what can be discovered from an individual reader is incomplete, and possibly atypical. As John Brewer notes, "the reader's reader is a fragile, imaginative construction that grows out of an elaborate negotiation between prevailing prescriptions on how to read and the desires of the reader." Mark Towsey found, likewise, that while some rural readers of Scottish Enlightenment texts did read "compliantly," many farmers, artisans, professionals, gentlemen and merchants "trawled" books instead, to "create meanings that were informed by their professional interests, political loyalties, existing commitments, worries and deeply held beliefs."⁵ What "prevailing prescriptions" eighteenth-century readers were negotiating and, indeed, whether "non-compliant" readings were demanded or encouraged by any contemporary prescriptions for reading, remains largely unexplored. To assume we know what the prevailing prescriptions were from the belletristic-formalist critics and aesthetic theorists admired by the New Critics and canonized by twentieth-century histories of criticism, is to mistake a faction of imperious but embattled – and by their own account, still largely ineffectual – "men of taste," for the whole.

Expanding our understanding of the prevailing prescriptions for reading does not replace, much less invalidate, empirical case studies; it contextualizes and supplements them. For instance, the many and varied recommendations in guides to study can help us understand the transition to "note-taking" that David Allan discovered in eighteenth-century commonplace books. They can help us see what John Money's provincial

excise officer was doing, or thought he was doing, when he filled hundreds of pages with writing about his reading; why Chesterfield's early letters to his son consisted of his own summaries of Roman history; and why Ryder and his friends at Middle Temple met to exchange verbal accounts of different books each had read.⁶ Studying manners of reading through printed guides sheds light on prevailing protocols and practices, and on the social, economic, political and pedagogical functions that contemporaries designed them to serve.

One of the unexpected things that emerges from this study is the extent to which the period was dominated by "discontinuous" reading practices that contradicted the now more familiar manner of reading proposed by "men of taste." "Discontinuous reading" is Peter Stallybrass' term for the kind of reading instituted and made possible by early Christianity's adoption of the codex (or "book"). Unlike the scroll preferred by the Romans, he explains, the codex was a "technology" that enabled readers to easily "navigate" compendia of miscellaneous fragments (as in the Book of Common Prayer); it therefore facilitated the reading of segments from different devotional books on the same religious occasions.⁷ Inculcated and deployed at all levels of eighteenth-century culture, discontinuous reading practices were required both by the learned and unlearned, for secular as well as religious purposes. Printers and authors catered to discontinuous readers through the piecemeal and miscellaneous construction of most print publications, including books, in the conviction that like high society, the "generality of readers" who were growing the market for print, had limited attention spans, little time for sustained reading, and no patience, desire or ability to follow long convoluted arguments. Discontinuous reading was fueled and sustained in the popular marketplace by a widely disseminated curiosity- and variety-based aesthetic and by what Shaftesbury called the public's preference for "the miscellaneous manner of writing," which came to include the novel, the periodical, and the magazine.⁸ Discontinuous reading was also frequently practiced spontaneously by readers – for instance, by those who read extracts from a favorite novel aloud to friends of an evening, by those who borrowed odd volumes of multi-volume novels from libraries, and by those who got through several books simultaneously, alone or *en famille*, by reading a portion of each intermittently or at set times each day.⁹ Other discontinuous reading practices were shaped by the learned, from a revivification and adaptation of humanist techniques for fragmenting and recombining texts, and from new rational ways of "methodizing" information for ease of recollection and "enlargement of the mind." The "men of learning" and "men of

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taste” – who disparaged miscellaneous, discontinuous texts and the reading practices associated with them in an attempt to give the public a taste for “Unity, Uniformity and Probability”¹⁰ and themselves an important public role – themselves produced fragmentary, miscellaneous texts in the form of spellers, grammars, books of elocution, anthologies of “beauties,” dictionaries, encyclopedias, and collections of lectures. It is not irrelevant, either, that the first printed matter a reader encountered – the hornbook, the primer or speller, the grammar – were, like the Book of Common Prayer and the Catechism, composed of fragments. While familiarizing would-be readers with the distinctive characteristics of printed writing and the discontinuous character of texts, these instructional books provided them with strategies for negotiating a print world filled with miscellaneous discontinuous writing. Overall, this is perhaps the richest and most neglected dimension both of the history of reading and of what John Barry called eighteenth-century “literacy and literature,” and will receive considerable attention below.¹¹

The “New Critics” of the last century, who were in many respects their heirs, familiarized us with the principles of those eighteenth-century academic belletristic-formalist critics who were among the foremost “men of taste.” But these principles were more contentious, and less widely accepted, then, than they later became. As we will see in Chapter 3, men of taste propagated, idealized and methodized neo-classical “laws” or “rules” for reading and writing perspicuously in clearly distinguished literary and oratorical genres with beginnings, middles and ends. Interpreting Aristotelian *mimesis* to mean imitation of the enduring traits of human nature, they privileged the universal over the particular or local, and excluded the marvelous or supernatural in favor of the probable and familiar. They judged that unity, continuity and connection among a work’s parts was essential to its beauty as well as to its moral and emotional effect, and equated the beauty of formal unity with that of pure morality and universal truth. Equally annoying to contemporaries who favored discontinuous, hybrid forms, they insisted that the “trained taste” of classically educated men of learning like themselves, “who had experience and knowledge” of the literature of all times and places, constituted “the standard” of correct aesthetic judgment to which everyone must adhere.¹²

In the wake of deconstruction which dismantled pure and proper genres, and of hypertexts and randomized computer games, hybrid, fragmentary forms have become visible and interesting to us again. But in the absence of any history of discontinuous writing, much less of the diverse reading practices associated with it, scholars have been claiming it as new in

almost every historical period: in the Renaissance; among the Romantics; in Postmodernism. Some have identified it exclusively with certain historical genres: the commonplace book, the anthology, sonnet sequences.¹³ Others have studied its prevalence in the literature of Puritans or of the early Republic, without relinquishing the politically inspired hope that discontinuous elements were, or can be, unified into some virtual whole.¹⁴

Eighteenth-century writers, by contrast, thought more like Peter Stallybrass, who looks back to early Christianity, and Malcolm Heath, who shows that the basis of Greek poetics lay not in Aristotelian “unity” as neo-classicists and New Critics pretended, but in an idea of “completeness” and “appropriateness” that made diversity (*poikilia*) “an indispensable virtue,” and digression the key to holding readers’ interest through long narratives.¹⁵ As we will see in Chapter 4, the eighteenth-century writers and scholars I call “miscellarian” (following Shaftesbury) or “miscellanists” (following Isaac Disraeli) traced discontinuous, miscellaneous writing back, through a long and learned tradition, to the ancient Greeks and Romans, or sometimes to the Bible, viewed as a compilation of diverse, generically miscellaneous and often unconnected texts. They characterized the demands of “men of taste” for pure genres and formally unified works as an artificial imposition on customary practices, and mocked the “philosophical,” merely “conjectural” and usually academic, proponents of this manner of reading and writing, for marginalizing themselves.

Grounded in long-standing readerly and writerly practices, discontinuous reading was also naturalized by Lockean epistemology. Locke and his eighteenth-century followers imagined that we receive from the senses only disconnected impressions which the mind’s eye initially perceives as a stream of independent and unrelated ideas. Time too is experienced as a linear succession of discrete instants. Experience (or what we might call information) thus first presents itself empirically to the mind as a succession of separate and discontinuous perceptions, like points on a line, characters in an alphabet, successive words on a printed page, or the cavalcade of unrelated units in a miscellany. Everything begins from discontinuity and disconnection. It is up to the understanding to connect and combine isolated singular impressions into more comprehensive and meaningful constructs. To understand anything at all, one has to attach separate perceptions, letters, words, or passages, by connecting them into (or through) higher-order ideas. Manners of reading might therefore be viewed as so many strategies for connecting and associating discontinuous letters, words or texts. Beginning from discontinuity did not preclude the construction of meaningful coherences; but it did make the reader’s

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construction of meaning a partly personal, and always potentially eccentric and unpredictable, psychological act. This was a matter of some concern to conservatives who feared, and throughout the century bemoaned, the dangerously destabilizing effects of permitting literacy to spread to “the multitude” and to women.

Before turning to the method and structure of this book, it will be helpful to supply two key contexts for the chapters and the manners of reading they contain: what contemporaries said each was for; and who was engaged in disseminating which.

Uses of Reading

Conservatives could not halt the spread of literacy because reading was not just a recreation for those with leisure to enjoy it – a pleasant diversion for dull or solitary hours, a source of social entertainments for literary coteries – though it was this too. Printers, booksellers and their authors marketed reading in utilitarian terms. Some manners of reading (including those described in guides to taste) were partly or wholly conceived as training for various kinds of work. Others showed readers how to use their “idle” hours to “improve” themselves by acquiring knowledge that would enhance their working skills, or better fit them to discharge their public offices and perform their relative duties, and thus enable them to sustain their character, grace their station, or rise in the world. Printed texts tirelessly explained how reading to acquire “useful Learning” would make people at all ranks more “serviceable to themselves and others,” and more “beneficial both to themselves and their country.”¹⁶ Useful reading – learning to read and reading to learn useful things – made useful citizens.

Promising to supply everything requisite in future editions of what would become a best-selling grammar, printer John Brightland pointed out in 1711 that such knowledge of grammar, rhetoric, poetry and logic as was required to read, write and speak English “Sensibly” and “without Absurdity” was “certainly commendable in Persons of all Stations, but in some indisputably necessary.”¹⁷ Literacy was indisputably necessary for what I will call “Writers by Trade” – people using reading and writing *by hand* to perform their jobs – because commerce and political institutions depended increasingly on competent readers and writers to function. If, as Adam Fox argued, during the sixteenth and most of the seventeenth century “being unable to read and write in no way restricted people’s capacity to perform skillfully and dexterously in most aspects of their daily lives,”¹⁸ the turn of the eighteenth century saw vigorous promotion of the idea

that, because all the nation's commercial and government business was conducted in the vernacular, it was necessary for people even in the lower ranks to be competent readers and writers of English. Literacy had become not only “*useful in Business*” but “*Essential in furnishing out a Man of Business*.”¹⁹ As Malachy Postlewayt noted in 1755, merchants and tradesmen who lacked the necessary vernacular skills, were hiring clerks and factors who had them, not coincidentally making “the computing house” one target audience for grammars.²⁰ Reading and writing literacy were also prerequisites for “ciphering” (arithmetic) and thus for new numerate jobs such as book-keeping, surveying, land management, and navigation. Government too needed growing numbers of readers and writers to forge a paper nation and a paper empire that depended for their functioning on the literacy of coast guards, customs officers, army officers, ships’ captains, justices of the peace, spies, and local councils, on the copying of clerks, the record-keeping of secretaries to committees, and the written orders sent by civil servants.

Urban, rural, commercial, government and maritime jobs requiring reading and writing were available to individuals issuing from the unpropertied ranks, including from the lower orders, provided they had the necessary skills. Consequently, one reason that was given for teaching poor children reading, writing and some arithmetic in charity schools, and for passing laws requiring masters to teach the apprentices and domestic servants indentured to them by the parish to read and write, was that this would “in useful Way” fit the poor, who did not have “any other way of Living, than by turning Vagabonds, Beggars and Thieves,” with “some honest worldly Calling or Employment.”²¹ Reading and writing were becoming necessary for all kinds of work. As contemporaries claimed and modern studies have confirmed, servants, apprentices, minor government officials, shopkeepers, artisans and clerks, became increasingly important sectors of the new public for print.

Extending vernacular literacy was also the impetus behind the new “English School” movement, which rejected the “liberal education” in Latin and Greek provided by grammar schools and English universities as “prejudicial to the commonwealth” and “contrary to the Frame and Profit of a Trading People,”²² in favor of instruction in the vernacular and in practically useful arts and sciences. But in practice, even at the end of our period, Britain, like the United States, contained only “a highly unregulated, disorganized, private and largely unprofessional patchwork of educational institutions,” as Alan Richardson has pointed out.²³ In Britain, before the Education Act of 1870 made schooling mandatory, many more

boys and girls were apprenticed, set to work after minimal schooling, or home-schooled to a point by a parent, governess or tutor, than were subject to any regular, continuous and complete course of institutionalized education. In America, outside the major cities, the situation was often complicated by vast distances and a perennial shortage of teachers and of working hands. After some instruction in the ABCs of reading at home or at a petty school, many eighteenth-century people (including those who had to teach others) were therefore, if at all, largely self-taught from books. This is certainly one reason why, for most of the century, elementary schoolbooks were designed as much for adults and youth outside school settings as for children in school, as much for women as for men, and as much to aid “ignorant teachers” and maternal instructors, as to serve as “silent teachers” for the self-taught. Nor were schoolbooks the only kind of book aimed at “a dual audience.” What Matthew Grenby calls “cross-reading” – adults reading what we classify as children’s books, and children reading what we classify as adult books – was common for works of all kinds.²⁴

The grammar was the most important of the elementary schoolbooks. Grammarians and historical linguists today concentrate on the two parts of eighteenth-century grammar which modern grammar has retained, leaving the first part, “spelling,” to historians of early childhood education and the fourth part, “prosody,” to literary critics. The pioneering work done on the “mental operations” that reading taught, was extrapolated from spelling alone, and generalized from there to all reading and writing. However, as we will see in Chapter 1, taking all four parts of eighteenth-century grammar together and including *all* the miscellaneous fragments that recur in eighteenth-century books, shows that – in addition to whatever else they did – ABCs, spellers and grammars were brilliantly designed to provide would-be readers with a complex of strategies for comprehending printed writing. One overlooked function of spellers was to introduce speakers with different local and regional dialects to an already homogenized form of printed English that still differed significantly from script and speech, in order to cultivate instantaneous word recognition of print orthography and conventions. Except in copybooks, printers did little or nothing for script, with the result that, by mid-century, some were arguing that speakers and writers by hand should imitate print’s artificial homogenized forms. The other three parts of grammars combined fragments of etymology, syntax, rhetoric, logic, poetics and stylistics to give beginning readers techniques for deciphering the “hard words,” figurative language, elisions and convoluted structures of complex sentences in printed discursive and literary works. Separately and together, the four parts of grammars taught readers

methods of analogical thinking on which reasoning and higher-order reading depended. This compound of skills, strategies and mental operations explains why contemporaries celebrated grammar as “the Foundation or Groundwork of Polite Learning,” and said that grammars were designed “for all those who desire to understand what they read.”²⁵ Though modern disciplines were in the process of formation as several modern scholars have shown,²⁶ they were often, as here, deployed in combination where reading was concerned.

Readers were urged to move beyond grammars by other uses of reading. If, as Adam Fox has argued, during the seventeenth century “in the small communities in which people lived, what was important was the seasonal cycle of work, the operation of local custom, the love and tradition of the neighbourhood, and the gossip about its inhabitants...none [of which] were written down,”²⁷ by the turn of the eighteenth century, what was important was the ability to use reading to acquire such general knowledge of the wider world and of the new scientific and geographical discoveries as would “enlarge” the “narrow” minds of people living (as most of the population did) in small, isolated localities, and fit them for an expanding commercial empire. A “Trading People,” which needed literate workers to connect small communities in the British Isles, and link them to markets all over Europe and the New World, and which sent armies, governors, customs officers and other civil servants in the wake of trade, needed people with some knowledge of the larger world in which trade and government operated. But, as Isaac Watts observed in 1741 in one of his transatlantic best-sellers, men who had traveled little beyond their native town or village “know not how to believe anything wise or proper besides what they have been taught to practice.” “Confin[ing] themselves within the circle of their own hereditary ideas and opinions,” they refused to believe that the sun did not rotate around the earth, that the telescope and microscope did not “delude the eye with false images,” or that peoples in distant places had customs, manners and beliefs different from their own. Widespread general reading was needed to cure widespread ignorance. Reading was a necessary nostrum for men who “stand amaz’d like a meer Stranger at the mention of common subjects,” at once too credulous of prodigies and wonders, and too disbelieving of demonstrated fact and evident truth. After the discoveries of the new sciences and the new world, the heavens and the earth were full of things that were “new and strange” but also “true,” and Britons needed to know and accept them.²⁸ The relevant knowledge and information was conveyed to different target audiences in different ways.