Introduction: the modernity of the past

The English literary canon achieved its definitive shape during the middle decades of the eighteenth century. The idea of national tradition to which we have given a final burial was born at that time from debates over the past. Eighteenth-century literary critics looked to older works in response to a prolonged and pronounced transformation: the opening of the cultural product for a nation of readers. What we have learned to call "the canon" – a pantheon of high-cultural works from the past – came into being as a contradiction. Modernity generates tradition. The swelling of the book trade, the passing of aristocratic authority, the rise in literacy, the prominence of women writers and readers, the professionalization of criticism, together provoked over the course of the century a recourse to older works as national heritage. Canon formation, then as now, partook in wide-ranging debates about the nature of the cultural community. Critics weighed the value of older works and pondered their relation to modern writing. They also contemplated the character of modern readers, and examined how the education, class, and gender of the reading audience had changed over time. The paradoxical establishment of tradition out of a sense of modernity happened when literary culture was seen to be under considerable duress, even in crisis. Whereas the new literary and social world was unpredictable, and readers and genres no longer conformed to a settled pattern, works written before the onset of cultural modernity exhibited a contrasting splendor.

The decisive reception of the English literary past was settled during the mid-eighteenth century. Years of critical discussion coalesced then into a durable model of literary history and aesthetic value. Consider the following pronouncement by Joseph Warton in 1756: "Our English poets may I think be disposed in four different classes and degrees. In the first class, I would place, first, our only

sublime and pathetic poets, Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton."[1] Warton's canon may now seem rather conventional, but the idea that older English writers composed a trinity of classics was new to the mid-eighteenth century. Before then, the literary past was typically considered a progressively unfolding lineage. One writer followed another in a steadily flourishing line of achievement. Like the exuberant economy and military, England's literature improved with time. For literary critics of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, writers like Spenser and Shakespeare were rather uncouth. Far from classics, writers from the early ages of English society were imperfect versions of their modern progeny. Warton's limpid enshrinement of the English greats was, in this sense, distinctive and portentous. Midcentury critics had difficulty sharing the optimism of their predecessors. Modern culture seemed beleaguered by the book trade, literacy, and rationality. In contrast, the past shone with value and achievement.

I examine the increasing luminance of the past in the writings of British literary critics over the first two thirds of the eighteenth century. My argument is built out of readings of figures like Joseph Warton, critics whose activity over the period was instrumental to the reception of older works. Some of these figures are among the most well-known of the time, Joseph Addison and Samuel Johnson for instance. Others have faded into near obscurity, William Huggins and Charlotte Lennox for instance. Still others were as anonymous to the eighteenth century as they are to the twentieth. The genres and media in which these critics wrote span periodical essays, editions, treatises, reviews, disquisitions, pamphlets, and poems. My use of the term literary criticism to describe these writings and literary critic to characterize their authors is deliberate but not anachronistic. I would not want readers to think that I am suggesting that the eighteenth century knew literature or criticism in the way that we do now. Nor would I want to suggest that either the noun or adjective were then fixed. Rather, much of what follows traces out the varied meanings of "literary," "criticism," and "literature." Within the shifting meanings, we can detect underlying cross-currents of change. The first two chapters of this book attempt to capture the wide inclination of these currents: among them, the turn from amateur to professional criticism, the shift from the beautiful to the sublime, the separation of commercial from aesthetic value, the rise of literary expertise. The second two chapters examine the cases

of Shakespeare and Spenser. The last chapter examines the problem of national literary culture. I remain throughout as it were on the surface of the critical cross-currents. My interest in print-capitalism should not lead readers to expect an empirical sociology of reading.[2] The thesis about modernity, commerce, and print is built, rather, from the inside out, from the wide course of criticism as it variously responds to and maps out the public and the market.

We have inherited a canon formed during the tumultuous decades of the mid-eighteenth century. But this canon was both long in the making and formed out of intricate conflicts about literature, reading, and even history itself. Perhaps the broadest conflict obtained over the nature of the past and its relation to the present. The midcentury's new valuation of historical distance and older writers established itself against an earlier hostility to the crude works of English antiquity. Canonical works were now honored on the terms of their former rejection. The idea of the past was turned on its head. In this sense, canon formation is tied to developments in midcentury culture with which readers will already be familiar: the rise of gothic historicism, for example, or the growing interest in the sublime. But the appearance of these period motifs in this study will, in another sense, be not so familiar. The midcentury's interest in older and sublime forms was profoundly mediated by its own past. The revaluation of English antiquity grew out of a cultural crisis that had been established during the heady days of the early eighteenth century. Critics from that time, so the midcentury complained, had opened up the literary product to polite conversation only to let it descend, eventually, to the level of the market. In response, midcentury writers championed the very terms their predecessors abused. Perhaps the clearest example of this dialectic can be found in the category gothic: first a term of abuse for archaic vulgarity, later a sign of the past's iridescent charm.

Midcentury critics learned to treasure the antiquity of English writers. This idea of English antiquity was patterned on the prior notion of the classical age of Greece and Rome. The present paled in comparison to a golden age of cultural achievement. In this way, the canon grew out of the "battle of the books" and was the battle's most lasting product. It is difficult to overstate either the importance of the "ancient" and "modern" antitheses during the period or the complexity of its long-term development. In the initial fray between Wotton and Temple, the period term "ancient" referred exclusively

to Greco-Roman antiquity, whose literary monuments were on all accounts superior to the best of English writing. The entirety of English writing fell under the period term "modern." Within this overarching conception of modern culture – comprising not only Dryden but Chaucer – relatively contemporary writers were closest to the ancients in the regularity and decorum of their verse. The most modern of the moderns were paradoxically the most like the ancients. Even in the early years of the battle of the books, therefore, the antithetical contrast of ancient and modern crept into the discussion of English literary history. Ancients versus moderns reappeared within the category of the modern. The antiquity of older English writers, initially, distanced them in value and form from the antiquity of the classics, whose mannered precision was uniquely like contemporary English. As critics grew concerned about the conditions of literary culture, the disparity between ancient and modern English widened and the scales of valuation began to turn. First, the entirety of English writing was modern. Later, a singularly English antiquity separated from its modern descendant. But now the English ancients were more like the classical ancients than were the English moderns. The criteria of canonicity likewise shifted, from the graceful regularity of the classics to their sublime weight. In the updated battle of the books, English ancients like Shakespeare did battle with English moderns like Pope. In this transposition of terms, an important event in literary culture occurred. Critics established English antiquity as the moment of literary achievement against which all subsequent writing would be measured. A national canon formed on the precedent example of the classical canon took shape. This canon was necessarily old and carried with it much of the aura of antiquity: difficulty, rarity, sublimity, masculinity. In the effort to make the national literature weighty and recondite, canonical English began to take on the qualities of Latin and Greek. A quasi-classical language, canonical English stood apart from the language of trade and commerce.

The endeavor to establish English literature as a world unto itself was paradoxically obsessed with the demeaning argot of polite society and consumer culture. The idea of a separate domain of national, literary treasures went hand in hand with the idea of public culture. In thinking about this puzzling dialectic, I have made recourse to Jürgen Habermas's influential account of the growth of the public sphere.[3] Habermas's analysis has become increasingly

central to eighteenth-century studies. This book should be taken as an attempt to reflect critically on his early work. As is now widely familiar, Habermas argues that the discussion of news and books in such places as the coffee-houses and salons, the establishment of the circulating library, and the growth of the popular novel, brought about a "public sphere" involved in "rational critical debate" over cultural and political norms. To this conventional narrative (borrowed extensively from Ian Watt, Richard Altick, and Arnold Hauser), Habermas adds his distinctive twist: the literary public derived from the epochal separation of state and civil society, government and commerce, power and sociability.[4] In a dramatic retelling of the dialectic of enlightenment, instrumental reason springs from the nexus of print and commerce.[5] Stripped of feudal publicity, private classes found in books and news a medium of cohesion against the oligarchic state and for their shared needs. Cultural debate shaped manners and habits suited to the modern regime. The separation of public from private, Habermas points out, was repeated within the private sphere, from the publicly relevant domain of commerce to the public domain of literature all the way to the core of intimacy, the bourgeois family itself.

The attraction of this model for eighteenth-century studies, it seems to me, has been that it places special emphasis on literary culture in the making of modernity. The following chapters share in this attraction, but attempt also to transform the conventional reception of Habermas's narrative. Owing perhaps to Terry Eagleton's influential study *The Function of Criticism* (1984),[6] a prevailing reading of the public sphere has emphasized a bourgeois encroachment on aristocratic institutions. Criticism here was at the vanguard of the middle classes' farewell to elitism, whether in the Church, the Universities, or the Court. The appeal of this narrative for late twentieth-century readers is clear. For a criticism that now sees itself bereft of a public vocation, Eagleton's story provides a contrasting relief. If we are now functionless for the technocratic age, at least we were once an agent of bourgeois hegemony. Against this model, I will argue for the dialectical development of publicity and specialization. Criticism took arms against restricted culture, to be sure. This was the great war waged on "pedantry" throughout the long eighteenth century. Yet a new group of scholars also fought public culture. This was the battle over professional expertise. Struggles between the academy and journalism, sociability and training, are

not new to literary criticism or to culture wars. They are, rather, present at the very origins of literary canon formation itself.

It is in this light that I would revise our understanding of the public sphere and literary culture in the eighteenth century. The dialectic of public and private had an agile career. The commerce in books did not just foster rational discussion of matters of taste; it led also to a mordant concern about the dissemination of literary goods. The opening of culture for a nation of consumers joined with the seclusion of older works in a clerisy of experts. These developments were, I argue, importantly modern and set the terms for literary study as we know it. But they are not finally reducible to the rise of the middle class. Critics fond of public culture often dwelled on the mannerly gentility of the elite classes. In contrast, scholarly mandarins were generally opposed to the aristocratic cult of leisurely dilettantism. The development of criticism during the eighteenth century was, in other words, a great deal more complicated than the conventional reading of Habermas might suggest, even if it still followed a discernible pattern. The worry over public culture produced corresponding modes of specialized privacy, whether the rarefaction of delicate taste or the expertise of professional scholars. The idea of the reading audience underwent a corresponding shift: from the crowd of modern consumers to the historical spirit of common English. Forms of public culture discovered they had a specialized component. Modes of specialization took on a public cast.

These variant paths of critical thought converged around the integral unit of the national literature. So much is implied, of course, in the subtitle to this book. The phrase "print-capitalism" comes from Benedict Anderson's seminal study of nationalism, *Imagined Communities* (1983).[7] For Anderson, as for myself, print-capitalism refers at once to the trade in books and to the wider dialectics of modernization brought about by literacy and commerce. Anderson's thesis is now well known. One of the first fully capitalized commodities, print assembled vernacular languages and audiences into nations: "imagined communities" bound by language, territory, and custom. In the climate of contemporary cultural studies, public and nation are often used interchangeably, as they were frequently enough by the critics discussed in the pages below. Still, one goal of this book is to trouble this too easy identification. For eighteenth-century criticism, the public could in fact stand for the nation, just as

it could also stand for the polite stratum of educated readers hovering above the toiling masses of vulgar illiterates. Likewise, the nation could mean the imagined community of readers, the plenum of fellow Shakespeare lovers, just as it could also mean an antique heritage expressed in works from the deep past. In its various forms, the canon oscillates between these two models and slowly binds them together. By 1770 the canon alternately "looms out of an immemorial past," in Anderson's words, and expresses the essential Englishness of modern readers.[8] Like the public, the idea of the nation was built out of a complicated tension among different strands of critical thought.

One such tension stemmed from, as it were, the capital of print-capitalism. As critics pondered the imagined community brought together by print, they were not uniformly enthusiastic about the simultaneity of collective reading or about the dispersion of the national literature. More and more, print commodification was seen to have a deleterious effect on cultural value. To understand the impact of the market on the apperception of aesthetic value, I have drawn from time to time on the cultural sociology of Pierre Bourdieu. For Bourdieu, the modern period is defined by the growing market in cultural goods and by a division within that market of high-cultural from mass-cultural products. Bourdieu's varied corpus presents a compelling narrative for students of the history of criticism. As the traffic in literature and art expands, the economic field exerts a pervasively negative influence on the cultural field. Exchange value opposes itself to aesthetic value. The dominant principle of cultural stratification derives from a work's "autonomy" from the pressure of politics and commerce. In this "economic world reversed," symbolic profit and the cash nexus meet each other in continuous reversal. The cultural field splits into two modes of organizing production and reception: the "field of restricted cultural production" and "the field of large-scale cultural production." The "field of restricted culture" is shaped by the rejection of the market of readers, while the "field of large-scale culture" is coordinated to consumption and public demand.[9]

These terms provide a supple means of grasping the eighteenth-century's ambivalence toward the cultural market and the peculiar development in which genres that notionally appealed to a wide readership, like the novel, served to buttress a vision of the past as difficult and unpopular. I have found the idea of "restricted culture"

particularly useful in understanding the growth of critical specialization during the eighteenth century, the emergence of both the professional reviewer writing for the periodical press and the philological scholar laboring in the archives. In each case, expert knowledge authorizes the subject and object of criticism. One must have an adept sensibility or an exceptional training to apprehend literary works. These works are deserving of learned treatment. Either way, canonical texts confront readers with difficulty and require a system of interpretation. Works of restricted art "owe their specifically cultural rarity to the rarity of the instruments with which they may be deciphered."[10]

Still, I would caution against conceiving of midcentury criticism as a continental rift between restricted and large-scale production. While such a conception may be intrinsic to the metaphor of field itself, it seems important to stress that in the period under consideration restricted and large-scale culture were not broken apart into rigid topographical zones. Rather, the idea of the canon grew out of the torsion between the two. Restricted culture itself gets accused of serving the market. This is that peculiar and important contradiction familiar to students of eighteenth-century culture: the accusation against the scholarly class that it is part of Grub Street; before Colley Cibber, after all, there was Lewis Theobald. Large-scale culture likewise turns out, for some critics, to ensure canonical status. This is that equally novel development in which consumer culture ceases to demean aesthetic value but becomes the means of gauging literary achievement, the very test of time itself. Secured by historical continuity, reading weaves into the fabric of a work its status as a permanent artifact of the national culture. Canonical works neither lose their aura of rarity nor quit receding into the past. According to this model, cultural consumption transforms into a system of value analogous to economic consumption. In any case, restricted and large scale, public and private culture prove to be in dynamic interaction over the course of the century, with important results: Shakespeare's unique position in the canon is largely explained by his simultaneous popularity and antiquity.

In writing the history of canonicity, I have chosen an object now under considerable duress. As with the eighteenth century, debates in our time over a wide range of curricular, social, and economic matters have telescoped into the question of the cultural past and its allegedly monumental works. The culture wars of the eighteenth

century provided the object, if they did not set the terrain, for the culture wars of the late twentieth century.[11] By treating the English literary canon less as a timeless achievement of a lithesome antiquity than as a symbolic product of the modern age, this book does take an implicit stand in the canon debate, such as it still preoccupies the academy today. Likewise, by tracing the recursive arch in which canonical works recede into the past, the study provides, I think, an historical accounting for what recent criticism has discovered as the exclusion of women writers and others from the canon of literary greats. The intricate and compound turn to English antiquity was the matrix of what from hindsight is somewhat mistakenly perceived as an expulsion.[12] As eighteenth-century critics of all stripes were well aware, older works were necessarily more restricted in the gender and social class of the author. For many critics, this restriction was precisely the point. For others, the opening up of culture to women and commoners augured modernity's laudable triumph. For still others, women readers provided an elegant alternative not just to the boorish past but to the presence of that past in the lower classes. Canonical "exclusion" thus has a more elaborate pedigree than is often presumed. The burden for us is to understand the present without abbreviating the past. Were it not for the contemporary culture wars, of course, this book would probably not have been written, or would have taken a different cast. Today the idea of English antiquity itself seems antique, a relic of a past age. Yet the anachronism of the canon in the twentieth century should not obscure its origins in the eighteenth. The dusk of the canon throws light on its making.

Like everything that passes, the canon is easier to see in its twilight. But the view does change with time. For an influential tradition of left cultural studies growing out of the work of Raymond Williams, the idea of "literature" as a finite category referring exclusively to imaginative works takes shape only in the late eighteenth century. The enlightenment narrowed the term from all printed works to well-written poems, plays, and novels. The categorical tapering of literature and the placement of it in the hands of the educated middle classes was part of the larger shaping and domination of culture by a bourgeoisie ever eager to find an expression of its values and legitimacy. Eventually, literature named a national tradition that loomed above what common people actually read and wrote. For Williams and his students this history sketched a cau-

tionary image of how the idea of literary tradition had been usurped and deployed by the ruling classes. Their counter-history proposed a theory of culture premised on a radical popularizing of signification, an appreciation of the wide variety of writing that composed the real national heritage. Now, I would not want to dispute the achievements of this program. Much of the proceeding argument takes off from Williams's political philology. I am particularly interested in, for example, the way in which the winnowing of "literature" into works of the imagination concurrently displaced the older portmanteau category "poetry" and made it the regal subset verse. The chapters below document how literature grew to name a domain of imaginative writing within which poetry lorded over the prose works favored by the public of readers. Still, the present study should be considered a departure from Williams's school in several important respects. For Williams, the growth of aesthetic philosophy, professional criticism, and literary scholarship was tied to a common gentry/bourgeois regime. In the present study, this narrative neither explains the course of these developments nor charts the relations among them. The point is not so much to dispute a thesis of social change as to outline its intricacy, to see how cultural categories emerge from an abiding sense of dislocation and crisis. It is difficult to reduce any single position mapped in the following pages to one or another class. (To whom, exactly, do the scholars speak? What interest is expressed in deriding their work as pedantry?). But it is not so hard to detect the period's novel sense of change. In the organs of national-culture building, the shock of modernity opened the future only to fall into the past. The first great wave of literary history writing gave to us progress and nostalgia, dilettantism and expertise.

The revision I propose does not just ask for greater attention to the effective variations of critical development. It also introduces a thesis operative at the most general level of analysis: the idea of literary antiquity was indelibly linked to the institutions of modernity, to the market, the public, the nation, and the division of labor. This model, I think, better captures not only the past but also the present crisis. The tenor and argument of the chapters below derive from a culture war now shifted into a dramatic new phase: no longer the fight over the curriculum alone but the effort to sustain academic work in the face of institutional downsizing and resurgent anti-intellectualism. In this forbidding and straitened context, struggles to rid ourselves of