I

CONTEXTS AND MODES

1

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Readers, writers, reviewers, and the professionalization of literature

'Reading is to the Mind, what Exercise is to the Body', wrote Richard Steele in his periodical paper, the *Tatler*, in 1710.[1] By the middle of the eighteenth century, readers of all classes and kinds were plentiful, and were growing in both wealth and influence. Men and women, gentry and professionals, merchants and urban servants read all kinds of printed works, from scientific treatises and travelogues to jest books, sentimental plays, advertisements, collections of poetry, periodical journals and, in increasing numbers, novels. They read for information, for entertainment and for profit, but as the period wore on they were increasingly reading for a further reason: moral improvement. Reading had become a route for the development of the individual into a fully formed member of society. Thus, what people read, as well as how and where they read it, could be seen to indicate much about them. 'Miss Eliza Bennet . . . despises cards', sneers Caroline Bingley in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), as Elizabeth picks up a book: 'she is a great reader and has no pleasure in any thing else.'[2] To this shallow and jealous upstart, Elizabeth Bennet's love of reading proves her a dangerous rival for the aristocratic Darcy's affection, for it denotes Elizabeth's natural refinement. By now, reading shows both social and moral merit.

Austen does not tell us what Elizabeth is reading, but it is certainly some form of imaginative literature, and the chances are that it is either a novel or a volume of history or travels. These long prose genres burgeoned in the eighteenth century, especially after 1770, fed by cheap print, hopeful authors, and eager audiences, themselves stoked by newly efficient booksellers and publishers who understood how to profit from literature. Moreover, such genres were produced by a growing class of writers who considered themselves professionals, and vetted by another new type of professional, the literary critic. These emergent professions of writer and critic arose from yet another kind of professionalization: the systematization of the entire process of making and selling books. Together, printers, publishers, booksellers, writers, readers, and critics transformed literature in the eighteenth

century from a rarified pleasure tasted by an elite and leisured gentry into a ubiquitous consumer product.

The rise of reading as a sign of internal merit also reflects the rise of a new category for printed works of learning and imagination: the category of 'literature' itself. In his *Dictionary* of 1755, Samuel Johnson had defined literature as 'learning, skill in letters', but by the century's close it had come to mean a material product and a profession. The *OED* defines the term as 'literary work or production; the activity or profession of a man of letters', and, by 1813, as 'the body of writings produced in a particular country or period'. This revolutionary idea of literature reflects four key and intertwined changes in literary culture that gained pace in the period. The first is the evolution of the book trade from a relatively haphazard, loose-knit craft into a professional, profit-seeking industry. The second is the corresponding transformation of writers from gentlemen dilettantes into professional authors. These changes reflect and propel a change in who was reading: the reading public expanded from the small, traditional groups of leisured gentry and practical businessmen into a widespread national audience of both genders and all classes. In turn, readers understood themselves as participants in public culture. Finally, imaginative literature itself was redefined: no longer a luxury of the wealthy and learned, it was conceived as a commodity fit for all palates.

Who was this audience, and how much did they really read? Although the number of different titles produced annually at the beginning of the eighteenth century was below two thousand, this annual figure had risen to about six thousand by 1800, and literacy rates continued to increase.[3] By the middle of the century, at least 40 per cent of women and 60 per cent of men could read and write (albeit with varying levels of competence), out of a total population that more than doubled in England alone from a base of 5.6 million in 1741 to 13.3 million in 1831.[4] Such a large proportion of literate people meant that those who considered themselves readers belonged not merely to the traditional elite, but to all classes of professionals, merchants, farmers, tradespeople and skilled artisans, together with many servants and labourers and, of course, women of all ranks.

In the expanding readership of the period, these last categories were of new importance. By 1768, 107,000 copies of an astrological almanac aimed at labouring-class readers, *Moore's Vox Stellarum* (generally known as *Moore's Almanack*), were printed annually, whereas the more self-consciously polite periodical the *Gentleman's Magazine* (subtitled *Trader's Monthly Intelligencer* on its launch in 1731, but increasingly aimed thereafter at a genteel readership) crested at 10,000. By 1800 the print order for Moore's stood at 353,000, peaking at of 560,000 in 1839.[5] Despite these differences, publishers

continually aimed at crossover genres. The other newly ascendant audience was women. As readers, writers, topics and targets in literature, women and female concerns leapt into the forefront of literary culture. As the century wore on, literary ventures aimed at women burgeoned. Periodicals such as Henry Mackenzie's *Mirror* (1779–80) anatomized feminine manners, education, and expectations; plays such as Richard Sheridan's *The Rivals* (1775) satirized adolescent maidens' appetite for hot novels; and both women and men, some using female pen-names, themselves wrote fiction for this hungry new audience. On the bustling streets of late eighteenth-century British cities, shops and circulating libraries bulged with sentimental novels, monthly periodicals containing serialized stories, gift books, poetical miscellanies, and conduct books, all directed at middle-class female readers.

Printing had always been a risky business. Official restrictions on the publication of political or erotic material were punitive, and few printers operated because the government controlled their numbers and charged heavy fees for licences. Bankruptcies throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries remained high, as inexperienced printers took risks on unknown authors or expensive editions. One melancholy instance involves Richard Chandler, an entrepreneurial printer-bookseller of London and York, who rose rapidly from lowly apprentice to master bookseller before reaching twenty, and published a successful though meretricious continuation of Richardson's *Pamela*, John Kelly's *Pamela's Conduct in High Life*, in 1741. Within three years, his fortunes had completely reversed. In 1744, now thirty-one and facing bankruptcy, Chandler shot himself in the head – only then, in a further reversal, for his business partner Caesar Ward to retrieve the financial situation (going on to print, among other works, Sterne's *Political Romance* in 1759).[6] Such veering unpredictability persisted throughout the period, although attempts had already been made by early eighteenth-century booksellers to reduce their risk of failure by forming coalitions to expand both the number of works they could produce, and the places where these were sold. With this development, the fluid traditional pattern of book-trade relationships began to undergo radical change. These coalitions of trading booksellers, known as congers, banded together to buy the copyrights for new works, and indeed to buy up all the extant copies of works whose copyrights they held. Although in competition with one another, nonetheless they also collaborated, so that smaller booksellers were frequently put out of business. Moreover, the congers were able to expand their means of disseminating print, capitalizing on increasingly efficient networks of communication and distribution to offer their books not only across London, but all over rural England and Wales, Scotland, Ireland, and even in North America.

With the formation of congers, booksellers – traditionally rather lowly members of the book trade – achieved new prominence and influence. Previously, men and women who sold books from shops were merely retailers. Whereas printers produced fresh works, urban booksellers offered readers books from their ageing stock that were often already out of fashion, while travelling booksellers known as chapmen provided inexpensive, low-grade books (with ribbons, songs, and other ephemeral items) to country-bound consumers. Neither category of bookseller, however, had much influence on the kinds of book that he or she could offer for sale. The advent of congers meant that booksellers increasingly became producers of literature themselves. As an association of copyright-holding publishers who both ordered works to be printed and organized the selling of them, the conger became a kind of bookselling firm empowered to tell printers, and sometimes authors too, what to produce. By forming monopolies that fixed prices, they kept the cost of books artificially high, and by controlling the dissemination of literary works, they kept them in the category of precious and rare items. Congers thus helped to maintain the prestige of literature as a luxury item, even while profiteering from it. Moreover, they manoeuvred the courts into preserving the traditional common-law system of enduring copyright protection so that they, and they alone, had the power to issue fresh editions of old as well as new works. The bookseller became the most influential figure in publishing.

These congers had another profound effect on the literary culture of the eighteenth century. They made literature the pre-eminent subject of sophisticated conversation. This resulted partly from their skilful manipulation of the concept of a canon: a roster of renowned authors whose works exemplify the language and thought of the nation. The notion of a selective list of exemplary authors had existed from Elizabethan times, and although it stretched forward far enough to add Shakespeare, Jonson, and other Renaissance poets to the litany of medieval greats like Chaucer and Gower, it still remained by definition exclusive. Congers and enterprising booksellers, however, made literary exclusivity a matter of novelty rather than time-tested worth: their sales pitch was topicality, not timelessness. Since they could publish old as well as recent texts, however, they could also manipulate the audience to desire both. By repeatedly reissuing both renowned works by classical authors and English literature from recent decades (both 'ancients' and 'moderns', in the shorthand of the day), they identified a native, poetic tradition with the classics of the Graeco-Roman world. They kept topical literature like Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* in print, and made literature a fashionable commodity. High literary culture came to include ephemeral

current works, delights to be savoured while fresh from the press, rather than only weighty and traditional matter, mulled over and meditated upon by clerics and historians. The literary canon became a question of contemporary debate.

Eighteenth-century publishing booksellers also used their copyright privileges to attract new audiences and to preserve the reputation and money-making power of the authors whose copyrights they owned. Through creative packaging, they broadened the appeal of rarified works, imitating the practice of the early innovator Jacob Tonson, who had issued his six volumes of *Miscellany Poems* (1684–1709) not as expensive folios but as unpretentious octavo volumes, adorned with stylish frontispieces, and later in miniature duodecimo, suitable for pocket or reticule. As congers controlled prices, copyrights, and even the distribution of copies of books, they also helped to establish niche markets: particular audiences attracted by specific kinds of literature. Booksellers began to work closely with writers to find, even invent, new tastes and desires in the reading audience. Some of this inventiveness appears in the presentation of books. Early eighteenth-century literature features elaborate printing devices, including fonts ranging from grim Gothic to spidery cursive; random italics; and startling capitals designed to attract even unskilled readers. Later books use crisp roman numerals on wide swathes of page to tout their classic simplicity. Early novels feature long, detail-dotted titles that provide a sample of the plenitude of narrative pleasures within, like Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722), which advertises on its title-page 'a Life of continu'd Variety' in which the heroine 'was Twelve Year a *Whore*, five times a *Wife* (whereof once to her own Brother) Twelve Year a *Thief*, Eight Year a Transported *Felon* in *Virginia*, at last grew *Rich*, liv'd *Honest*, and died a *Penitent*'. Subsequent fictions simplify their titles to signal familiar genres, as in Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–67). Virtually no eighteenth-century book emerges from the printer without pages of advertisements, printed or pasted onto the back, for other books issued by the conger and sold at both local and far-flung shops. By diligent advertising in the newspapers, by soliciting critical reviews, and by printing catalogues of available stock in bookshops and libraries, publishing booksellers identified and differentiated genres for their readers. Through such delicate manipulations of the emerging distinctions between levels of literary culture, these new booksellers defined culture without actually writing or printing anything themselves. Rather, they facilitated the dissemination of literary works to the widest possible audience while preserving the aura of literature as a high-class commodity. Print promoted print.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, readers were growing more experienced and discriminating, while book sales temporarily stagnated. These were the second generation, at least, of novel-readers, accustomed to the titular lures of novels and their generic medley, and moreover they were surrounded by a competitive, sophisticated literary marketplace. In response, booksellers modified forms for selling poetry to assure readers not only of multiplicity and variety but also of quality. Since the Restoration, publishers had issued anthologies, miscellanies, and compendia of verse, ephemeral works, jokes, and literary fragments, but these had remained something of a second-class form, a patchwork creation slapped together from leftover poems and pamphlets. In the mid-eighteenth century, however, Robert Dodsley, an enterprising footman who had changed his livery for literature, issued a collection of verse that made contemporary poetry a matter of high moral seriousness. Entitled *A Collection of Poems by Several Hands*, the series appeared in six volumes from 1748 to 1758, and was revised, continued, and imitated throughout the century. Dodsley's *Collection* was a watershed in the transformation of eighteenth-century poetry from an ephemeral entertainment to a touchstone of refinement. Indeed, it continued to designate the elite, literary taste of the eighteenth century's 'Graveyard School' well into the next century, retaining a prestige registered by Jane Austen when, after selling her father's edition of Dodsley's *Poems* in 1801 for ten shillings, she naughtily confesses that the sale 'please[s] me to the quick, & I do not care how often I sell them for as much'.[7] Dodsley's feat was to commission fashionable poets such as Edward Young, Samuel Johnson, and Thomas Gray to compose fresh pieces specifically for his collection, to print these beside verse by Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, and other renowned names of the recent past, and to publicize the venture as the epitome of reading sophistication. This anthology created a taste for proto-Romantic poetry, and at the same time an audience for it composed of the culturally ambitious and fashionable gentry.

The evolution of the book trade into a profit-making machine – into big business – changed the way literature was quite literally produced: how it was conceived, written, printed, and sold. In order to publish their works, authors had long relied on the generosity of patrons whom they flattered in prefaces and dedications. An alternative, if they could afford it, was to publish by commission: authors would bring their manuscripts to printers and pay for the publication themselves, with the agreement that the printer would distribute copies and take a fee for each that was sold. However, once literature became a fashionable commodity, booksellers took a more direct part in actually creating literature. Now that publishing booksellers

like Dodsley were willing to commission literary works themselves, poets and prose writers could turn to them for patronage, instead of relying on the whims of ambitious nobility as had generations before them, and the editors of critical journals also served as unofficial patrons to writers favoured for reasons that were often partisan. Pope prided himself on being the first poet to live purely on the public sale of his work, boasting that 'I live and thrive, / Indebted to no Prince or Peer alive',[8] while influential critics like Samuel Johnson came to act as patrons themselves for neglected talent. For writers, it may not have been any easier to please a publisher whose eyes were narrowly fixed on profit than an earl with a misty view of his own immortal fame; nor was writing to deadline necessarily congenial: Johnson would famously keep the printer's devil – the boy who delivered text to the press – knocking on his door as, paid by the word, he dashed off each last periodic sentence. Still, the real audience for literary authors was not the bookseller but a tolerant and varied readership: the shifting, increasingly opulent, urban classes, the colonials abroad, and the country gentry and professions in the rural British Isles.

Another way of producing books was by subscription: a contract between selected readers, and an author and a publisher. By this plan, interested readers, attracted by the description of a proposed new work, would provide the means to pay for its publication, and would eventually receive one of the limited number of copies themselves. This method was used throughout the century to promote elite works like expensive translations of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*: indeed, in the passage quoted above, Pope's point is that his own freedom from patronage was in the first place 'thanks to *Homer*'. Henry Fielding noted Pope's success in *Joseph Andrews* (1742) and attempted to emulate it the following year with a three-volume subscription edition of his own *Miscellanies*. Authors and publishers also used subscription to raise money for poor or unknown authors, the conspicuous case being the Irish poet Mary Barber, whose London-published *Poems on Several Occasions* (1735) attracted 918 subscribers, a quarter of them of noble rank. Like many women who found it difficult to penetrate the literary market, Fielding's sister Sarah Fielding employed the same device for two of her works, and Johnson often turned to it for his charitable endeavours, attempting in the 1770s, for example, to help a poverty-stricken but ungrateful Charlotte Lennox by raising a subscription for 'A New and Elegant Edition, Enlarged and Corrected, of the Original Works of Mrs. Charlotte Lennox'.[9] As the failure of this venture shows, however, the days of subscription publication were numbered: the literary market was expanding, readers from the middling classes were multiplying, and speculative publication to readers at large was

increasingly the better option. As the century drew to a close, the entire thrust of literary publishing moved away from limited, fine editions and towards the discovery or creation of works for a wide readership.

One form perfectly fulfilled the bookseller's need to keep readers buying fresh works that were inexpensive to produce: serial publication. Serial publication really began with daily journals of political news. Since London adopted the penny post in 1680, newspapers had sprung up everywhere: by 1710, London boasted twelve newspapers; by 1750, some twenty-four; and by 1790 there were thirteen morning, one evening, two bi-weekly, and seven tri-weekly newspapers.[10] In the process of this huge growth, the definition of news itself evolved to include gossip, announcements and discussions of cultural events, reviews of books, plays, and entertainments, and extracts from literary works. This mixture came to characterize a distinct form of serial publication and one of the quintessential eighteenth-century genres: the periodical. Topical, inclusive, shapeless, and collaborative, the periodical jumbles together snippets of different genres written by different people – from journalistic essays to poetry – and rushes them into print. Fact, fiction, literature, and gossip intermingle as authors, editors, and contributors from the readership together conjure an atmosphere of intimate, sophisticated, fashionable conversation. Indeed, since current information was blended with imaginative fiction, literature here became indistinguishable from news. Originating in the late seventeenth century with journals dedicated to answering readers' inquiries such as John Dunton's *Athenian Mercury* (1691–7), periodicals leapt into literary prominence with the huge success of Addison and Steele's *Spectator* (1711–12, 1714). Purportedly the observations of an urban *flaneur*, the *Spectator* interlarded reviews of London events with tales of a gaggle of characters, relayed in sentimental vignettes. Although no more than 3,000 copies of the original *Spectator* papers were published, and even the century's most influential journal, the *Gentleman's Magazine*, never topped 10,000, readers shared copies, coffee-houses provided them to clients, and circulating libraries stocked them. As a result, all London and much of provincial England knew what the latest issue had printed. The periodical was sociability in print.

Periodicals quickly grew into one of the century's most prolific and influential forms. By 1745, there were thirty periodical journals, and in the next fifteen years forty-five more would appear, but the one that most strongly shaped the literary culture of the second half of the eighteenth century was Edward Cave's *Gentleman's Magazine*. Founded in 1731, and continued in various forms until 1914, the *Gentleman's Magazine* propelled the profession of literary critic into public culture. Originally a miscellaneous digest of opinion, essays, poetry and political news that skirmished persistently with

contemporary copyright and censorship laws, Cave's magazine included relatively little literary criticism in its early years, which are now best remembered for the audacious parliamentary reporting of Johnson (whose columns were dressed up as debates from the senate of Lilliput to evade an official ban). Cave later saw the opportunity for a separate reviewing magazine, and drew up plans with collaborators to issue a new periodical that would 'give an impartial account of *every* work publish'd' under the title 'the Monthly Review'.[11] But instead Cave's young rival, the dissenting Whig Ralph Griffiths, caught wind of his design, and two months later slipped into the press the first non-specialist periodical devoted exclusively to reviewing, insolently naming it the *Monthly Review* (1749–1844). In a quick countermove, the *Gentleman's* began including a substantial number of fresh compositions and serious essays of literary criticism, which evaluated recent poetry and fiction or (as in a celebrated later controversy of 1789–91) debated the relative ranking of such authors as Dryden and Pope. The *Gentleman's* not only made politics part of elite literary conversation, but also refigured literary criticism as a moral commentary on society; moreover, both politics and literary became consumer items whose value as 'news' lay in their freshness. Within a few years, Tobias Smollett's Tory venture the *Critical Review* (1756–91) and its short-lived but influential rival, Johnson's *Literary Magazine* (1756–8), sprang into print. The literary reviewer had become an ideological touchstone, and the reader became – if only by rhetorical conjuring – part of a public sphere of informed debate. The formal identification of politics with literary evaluation stamped literary critics and their readers as participants in national, public culture.

This pattern of duelling periodicals persists into the nineteenth century, but with changes of tenor. Immediately following the French Revolution, ideology became far more contentious than in the relatively consensual period that followed Walpole's fall and the defeat of Jacobitism in the 1740s. In 1796, the Jacobin Richard Phillips issued his first number of the radical *Monthly Magazine*, a wide-ranging periodical that ran until 1825. First edited by the physician John Aikin (brother of the poet and essayist Anna Laetitia Barbauld), it included essays on European and oriental literature, science, politics, and other topics by such writers as William Godwin, Thomas Malthus, and William Hazlitt, all men identified with revolutionary liberalism. In high-spirited defiance, the Tory George Canning founded the *Anti-Jacobin* (1797–8), which melded political and literary satire in crisp parodies of weighty German drama, Francophile morality, and Romantic verse. Subsequently, the more serious and literary *New Monthly Magazine* (1814–84) drifted away from condemning Jacobinism to concentrate on literary publishing, including works by respected poets such as Wordsworth and Keats.