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0521824346 - Reading, Society and Politics in Early Modern England

Edited by Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: discovering the Renaissance reader**Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker*

Learning to read is one of our earliest rites of passage. Reading is the first test in a system of public pedagogy; acquiring its skills is our entrance into the world of letters. Reading makes possible at once public and private identity. Because learning to read is fundamental and reading is ubiquitous, it scarcely occurs to us that reading has a history, that its forms and practices have a past, that it is neither universal nor natural but socially specific and culturally constructed. Yet for all our insistence on the natural and the universal character of reading, we also recognize its difficulties and artificialities. Debates in educational psychology, the growing public awareness of dyslexia and the crisis over adult illiteracy serve to remind us that reading is neither natural nor ubiquitous, that geography, race and class are among the determinants that enable and delimit literacy.

To appreciate, in our own time, that reading is a variable product of circumstance impels us to address its history, to tell its stories of long continuity, of specific moments and of change. And our own moment is particularly opportune to return reading to its histories.¹ In a broad public way, talk of the end of the book, the dominance of the electronic image and the pervasiveness of the sound bite not only suggest the fragility of literary culture but also underscore the historicity of reading. Within the academy disciplinary developments have similarly opened a series of inquiries into the nature of the text and the meaning of reading.

Most famously, or perhaps infamously, deconstruction has claimed the death of the author. Without the author, the deconstructed text has no fixed meaning; words themselves act as unstable signifiers, purveyors of multiple meanings. In the critic's world of the endlessly multivalent text, any determination, any fixing of meaning is the property and prerogative of the reader.² With text (rather than book) in hand, the reader becomes the authoritative determiner, indeed the author, of meaning. For whatever mischief postmodern criticism has made, deconstruction, by permanently

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discrediting simply positivist notions of meaning, intention and authorship, has foregrounded the reader as a central subject of study.³

No less importantly, changes in historiography have, albeit unintentionally, opened possibilities for a history of reading. Where literary theory has decentred the author, the new history has deconstructed the traditional narrative of dynasty and ministry. In the new social history, in micro-histories, case studies and alternative histories, authority itself has been seen to be not centred and fixed but dispersed and uncertain, contingent and contestable. Though these histories have not taken reading as their subject of enquiry, the implication of their address to fragmented authority and multiple narratives is the reader as subject and citizen.

Less publicly, and even more surprisingly, developments in that most traditional form of literary scholarship, bibliography, have refigured texts, authors and readers. Where the old bibliography aimed at a perfect text, reflecting in every accidental and recovering in every archaeology of syntax and typography the imprint and immanence of the author, new bibliographical traditions have wholly discredited the authorial imprint, the authentic material text.⁴ Research in printing practices, design and format, punctuation and typography has disclosed the distance between authorial intention and the material text and revealed both the wilful transgressions and the slippages that transformed authorial utterance into a myriad of textual variants.⁵ Textual variance demonstrates that meaning is a confluence of activities, a narrative of multiple collaborations and transformations performed by authors, publishers, licensers, printers, typesetters, proofreaders, booksellers – and readers. Modern bibliography invites study of the text not as the single act of a transcendent author but as a set of events within the social histories of production and consumption.⁶

Deconstruction, social history and the new bibliography have, along their various paths, led us to the reader. They have theorized the position of the reader; they have suggested the social dimensions of reading; they have sketched the material culture of the book. What they have not achieved, or even attempted, is a history of reading or a historicizing of readers. The beginnings of that enterprise have been most in evidence among those scholars often referred to as historians of the book. Here, studies of *bibliothèques bleues*, of an Elizabethan facilitator annotating classical texts, of the construction of heterodoxy by a Friulian miller and of the new sensibility of a Romantic reader have pointed up the rich possibilities of particular histories.⁷ Such cases have questioned earlier assumptions that the history of reading might be simply written as a chronology from script

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to print, from intensive to extensive reading, from the authority of state control to the freedom of individual readers. The prospect of a more nuanced narrative of reading will surely depend upon many more such case studies. As practised, however, the case study has its limitations.⁸ For all their revelation of the social dimensions of readers and their texts, the case histories of Menocchio, Harvey and Ranson remain attached to a stable notion of the text and assume the transparency of language. In part this attachment to stability and transparency goes to the core of the historian's own reading practices and to a historic resistance to theorizing.⁹ Where the historian typically reads the document for its content, theorists and critics have located signification in forms and grammars, in metaphors and figures, in elisions and repressions.

Such a reading of our own contemporary practices suggests a way forward: a true collaboration between case study and theory, between materiality and aesthetics, between social history and exegesis. It is such an interdisciplinary conversation that this volume of essays seeks to open and extend. Interdisciplinarity is, of course, not a new mode of conversation: we are quite familiar with the politics of literature, with the aesthetics of revolution, with the ideologies of modernism. But such interdisciplinary praxis has in the past been delimited, constrained by the notion that meanings and events are principally the story of authorial acts. A new history of reading will turn our attention to all those performances of texts from the very moments of their conception and constitution. That history only begins to be written with the act of authorship. Every reconstitution of the text – its journey to the publisher, the copy prepared for the printer, the compositor's work with text and the processes of printing, distribution, acquisition and binding are all crucial moments in the lives of texts, in the continuous configurations and refigurations of meaning. In such a history all these performances complicate any simple or stable notion of authorship. We also need to recognize that all these acts and moments of production are acts and moments of interpretation, too – in the most literal sense, acts of reading.

Rather than the simple story of constitution and reception, our new history of reading stresses continuous transactions between producers and consumers, negotiations among a myriad of authors, texts and readers. Our address in this volume is therefore to all the ways and all the moments in which those negotiations shaped texts, fashioned modes of reading and even positioned authors. What we want to stress is the power and centrality of the reader in all the commerce of the book.

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HUMANISM, PROTESTANTISM AND PRINT

Textual negotiations, of course, predate the age of print and no doubt will outrun it. Martial's epigrams are everywhere marked by awareness of the troubling exchanges between authors and readers, and of the potential independence of script. The electronic text would seem to dissolve authorial identity and textual stability into a myriad of transactions and rescriptions, an ever-opening set of permutations. It is the age of print, however, that not only multiplies and intensifies all the complex negotiations between texts and readers but also releases a new self-consciousness about textual strategies and relations. One facet of that self-consciousness was surely humanism. As Joseph Loewenstein demonstrates so fully for the case of Ben Jonson,¹⁰ humanism was centrally concerned with the recovery of texts, with translation, emendation, reproduction and appropriation in all of its forms. No less, humanist pedagogy was preoccupied with the constitution of the ideal reader. While the ideology of humanism sought the textual production of the Christian commonwealth and virtuous subject, the practices of humanism, its curriculum of exegesis and rhetoric, opened the book to alternative interpretation. As well as directing and policing readers, that is, humanism educated and enabled readers to perform their own readings, and to construct their own, often dissenting, values and politics.¹¹

There is no more obvious manifestation of that capacity for dissent than Protestant reformation. The reformers, of course, no less than Catholic expositors or humanist pedagogues, sought to exercise control over the meaning of Scripture; it was the purpose of a preaching ministry to expound and to gloss the word in every parish. Yet the Protestant emphasis on individual conscience and personal scripturalism, on each godly man's reading and wrestling with Scripture, ultimately democratized the word. For Protestantism throughout Europe drove the great project of vernacular Bibles. An English Bible in every parish and nearly every household literally placed Scripture within everyone's reach. For the literate and learned the Bible became not only an authority but a text to be edited, emended, retranslated, glossed, interrogated and, *in fine*, deconstructed. Beyond the intellectual elites the synchronism of Protestantism and print drove and made possible expanding literacy, what we might even call the beginnings of a reading nation.¹²

We have long understood the ways in which the synchrony of print, Protestantism and humanism constituted a textual revolution, a radical transformation in the authorship and production of, and in the marketplace

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for, books.¹³ What we have not addressed is their collaboration in the creation of the modern reader. The modern reader, we would argue, emerged from the new availability of texts and techniques, the marketing not only of books but of hermeneutic strategies. Protestant humanism preached the need and fostered the skills for a new criticism – the capacity to hear and to read, to compare and conflate, to discern and apply meaning. It is these skills and these readers that this volume seeks to return to their central place in the narratives of early modern spirituality, politics and culture.

Those narratives begin, of course, with the book itself. For historians and critics the early modern book has often appeared more a simple object than a complex subject for study. But what we are learning from the new bibliography and from the history of the book is all the complexities of the book's composition, construction and production and the relation of those complexities to the creation of meaning. The early modern book conveyed meaning even before its pages were opened. The size and format at once determined and responded to audience and traced the hierarchies of class and authority. The stately folio was destined for the gentleman's library, the pamphlet and broadsheet for wide distribution.¹⁴ But format was also imprinted with genre; the epic could best be imagined in folio sheets, the scatological woodcut on the ephemeral quarto. Though the playbook always appeared as a cheap quarto, it is hardly surprising that the aspiring laureate, Ben Jonson, determined to publish his works as a folio. The folio probably secured permanence as well as authority. Whereas most early modern books were sold unbound, the expensive folio was likely to be bound and hence preserved for posterity.¹⁵ In the gentleman's library a hierarchy of texts was structured not only by binding itself, by all the qualities and character of binding and by the owner's decisions as to what texts to bind together. In addition, the binding stamp, often the armorial insignia of family and descent, not only marked the reader's ownership and authority but rendered the book an emblem of lineage and pedigree. The psychology of such materiality should not pass without comment: the book bound with family arms performed, we might say was enclosed within, a nexus of aristocratic codes and values which shaped its meaning. How different was the experience of reading the unbound penny pamphlet, seldom a prized object, more likely promiscuously distributed in alehouses, hung on bushes or hawked on street corners.¹⁶

Size, format and binding, then, begin the work of signification before the book has even been opened. The book once opened may seem to us more obviously, more transparently the script of meaning; but before the early modern reader confronted what we regard as the book, an elaborate set of

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paratexts unfolded in various ways to engage the reader and to shape the reading experience. The presence and style of a frontispiece portrait, an image frequently of the author, not only underscored writerly authority but vividly conveyed that authority to the reader.¹⁷ Similarly the architecture of the title page framed the authority of and entrance to the text, at times literally with column, arch and cartouche. The bold superiors of the title itself, often the Latin epigraph or scriptural verse, the licence, indeed place of publication, name of publisher and printer all functioned to locate and legitimize the text, to place the reader within a geography of textual, economic and political power. The cynosure of power and authority in early modern England was patronage. And patronage was immediately announced in the dedicatory epistle. Here, while humility and supplication were, more or less conventionally, expressed, the author simultaneously wrote the approval, taste and authority of the aristocratic patron into the text, as a public marker of intimacy with social privilege. In the case of Spenser's *Shepheardes Calendar*, it is the name of the patron, Sir Philip Sidney, rather than the author that appears on the title page.¹⁸ In a similar fashion, literary authority might be appropriated and conveyed by commendatory epistle or verse. While a verse or two from a friend or intimate might commend and domesticate the author and book, sometimes a panoply of eulogies and commendations formed a virtual academy of association and mapped a community of literary and political validation.¹⁹

Other kinds of paratextual apparatus were less inflected with patronage and power but participated no less in constituting meaning. When they were deployed, tables of contents, indices, abstracts and epitomes worked to endow the text with substance and *gravitas*, and of course structured a journey through the book, an organization of its meaning.²⁰ Indices also suggested the uses of the book and marked the passages that might, perhaps should, be extracted and commonplacéd. All the paratextual matter of the early modern book was part of its design, in every sense of that word.

The early modern page, from the inception of print to what Richard Wendorf describes as the artfulness of Augustan typography, was a site of complex designs. Most obviously in either its promiscuous or calculated mingling of typefaces and styles – gothic or roman, italic or bold, literals of various sizes – the early modern page orchestrated and modulated the word. Gothic type was for a long time associated with tradition and authority; until the Restoration all proclamations were published in black letter; even now we speak of red-letter days, which once graphically distinguished important calendrical celebrations. But white space could signify as much as

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black or red. In early modern England, space, like leisure, was a mark of privilege. When paper was the most expensive element of any book, the wide margin and generous ruling announced the conspicuous consumption of both publisher and purchaser. By contrast, the crowded and irregular teeth of the radical pamphlet, where lines teemed to the edge of the page, suggest not only thrift but the urgency of salvation and revolution.²¹

Nor should we forget the margins of the early modern page. For here space was designated for a series of relations with and commentaries on the page. Printed marginal annotations might privilege the citation of authorities, translations, glosses and polemical debates. In some cases – in print polemic, for example – marginalia threaten to invade and overwhelm the page, from the side or below. Nor was the margin, whatever the desires of authority, a space preserved for the privileges of print. The long-standing traditions of manuscript *adversaria* and the habit of commonplacing invited the reader into and instructed the reader in active engagement with the text.²² Sometimes this was simply the correction of typographical error – though, as Seth Lerer shows us, there was even a ‘poetics’ of errata.²³ Often correction swelled into the dispute and contest of argument. Frequently readers marked their texts with simple or complex signs of return: underscoring, cross-hatching in the margin, pointing fists, flowers, astrological figures.²⁴ All witness the busy, at times turbulent, activity of the early modern reader. When as modern readers we open the early modern book, we are often confronted with the teeming business of the page, with the traces of multiple hands and dissonant voices.

While many of these features and traces are continuous facets of the early modern book, they both have a history and still need to be historicized. Such gestures as preface and dedication have a continuous life through the history of the book. But not least because such practices were implicated in all the social arrangements and transformations of the age, they were inflected by long-term cultural shifts as well as by particular crises, in ways that have yet to be studied. We can surely hear in the dedications of Restoration histories and plays the memories of civil strife and social dislocation sometimes distanced and tempered by new tones of irony and scepticism. Other features of the book – from black-letter print to erratic punctuation – decline, while the advertisement and the subscription list announce a thorough commercialization of the book.²⁵ Changes in the material book both trace and inscribe historical change in the culture and commerce of print.

Scholars have long recognized and theorized the relations, in the late seventeenth century, between the new commercialization of print and the

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emergence of a public sphere.²⁶ The growth of the gazette, the development of a periodical press and the proliferation of news in coffee house, theatre and spa are surely central to the historical narrative of Augustan England.²⁷ What recent work is beginning to indicate is that the confluence of print and publicity both requires deeper historicizing and a different chronology. Elizabethan religious polemics and providential narratives, early Stuart ballads and squibs and the deluge of Civil War pamphlets all press the claim for a public sphere of print and news a century before its Habermasian moment.²⁸ What they also demonstrate is a new, vibrant, often unruly commodity culture of print and a commercialization of author, book and reader.

But in the traditional story of the commercialization of print, somewhat surprisingly, it is the reader who has been neglected. Historians have of course debated and disputed the nature and extent of literacy,²⁹ but no study has placed readers at the centre of a history of the publication, distribution and commercialization of print, nor recognized the commanding presence of the reader as consumer. The new history of consumption has yet to recognize the position of the reader not just as economic consumer but as a driver for change in taste, fashion and value.

Our discussion of the early modern reader is, of course, a simplification. Any consideration of the market naturally leads to notions of targeted markets, market sectors and market share, not least because such language, for all its anachronistic qualities, quite properly describes both the conditions and perceptions of the early modern book trade. Authors, publishers and printers, that is, responded with increasing sophistication to the changing circumstances and constituencies of reading. Most obviously, across the period as a whole increasing literacy beyond the metropolis among women and the lower orders opened new markets for different forms of print. Changing tastes and fashions in turn formed new markets for new or newly constituted genres of writing – romance, travel narrative, lyric miscellany and, importantly, as Adrian Johns demonstrates, the emergent forms of learned periodical and scientific paper.³⁰ The drive of events, too – the Thirty Years' War, Civil War and Exclusion, colonialization and Popish Plot – excited new curiosities and literary forms such as newsbooks, state trials and poems on affairs of state. What the early modern book trade recognized was the diversity of communities of reading. The concept of reading communities – 'interpretive communities' – is well known to us from literary theory. Stanley Fish has interestingly theorized the shared conditions, ideologies and strategies of reading collectives.³¹ Though he himself has not pursued its historical dimension, the model of interpretive

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communities draws attention to the specific historical circumstances and contingencies, as well as the geographies, of reading communities.

As soon as we glance back to early modern England, the historical force of interpretive communities is immediately obvious. At the most basic level Catholic and Protestant readers defined themselves through distinctive forms of the book and modes of reading. Though the different theologies of confession and election are fundamental to religious history, they are also crucial psychologies and soteriologies of reading in an age when the word was the key to salvation. Similarly, class has long helped to define forms and modes of literacy; we speak frequently of the gentleman scholar or the middle-class reader. Here, too, as well as economic boundaries, class inflected a range of reading sensibilities and psychologies: the salon constitutes a different interpretive community as well as social environment for reading from the dissenting academy.³² And in an age of revolution, political difference powerfully defined reading parties. In their divisions of court and country, Royalist and Roundhead, Whig and Tory, contemporaries discerned and delineated not only political alliance but generic proprieties and interpretive sensibilities. The obvious communities of Catholic and Protestant, Royalist or Roundhead, only begin to open what we might call a historical psychology of the book. How differently a Quaker sister interiorized the word from a Presbyterian minister, let alone a recusant or latitudinarian. And how differently a Whig grandee and his circle imbibed political invective from the members of the Green Ribbon Club or Jacobite mob.³³ And religion, class and politics in all their complexities and combinations do not exhaust the sites of reading and communities of readers. Throughout this period, the household, godly or profane, the family, humble or aristocratic, the classroom at the petty school or university were elemental sites of reading. What these sites recall is the multiplicity of reading communities to which an individual at any time might belong, and the shifting affiliations and associations formed and reformed by the book. The theory of interpretive communities awaits not only historical specificity but a more nuanced, a more finely graded sense of the shifting and contending force of these communities in forming reading habits and hermeneutic principles.

Hermeneutic principles and reading communities were encoded by and within genres. Literary scholars have traditionally written the histories of literature almost exclusively as narratives of genre: the emergence of the city comedy, the eclipse of Cavalier lyric, the rise of the novel. Nor is this inappropriate for a humanist culture that described literary transmission as a generic process and that determined literary value by generic hierarchy from

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the lofty epic to the lowly comedy, from forensic to epideictic rhetoric.³⁴ Historians do not often deploy the lexicon of genre, yet there can be no doubt that forms and genres, and not just annal, chronicle and history but scaffold confession, statute and state trial, have always been the conveyers of cultural meaning. The discussion of genre, however, has been curiously confined to the creation and content of books: we are perfectly aware of the way writers deploy the verse epistle, epic diction and the familiar rising and falling structures of tragedy. What has not been charted is the complex interplay between the generic coding of texts and communities of consumers and individual readers. We appreciate the ways in which genre assumes shared interpretive habits, indeed readerly complicity – the romance in all of its transmutations anticipates and inscribes gender, class and sensibility;³⁵ but we should not assume a neat and straightforward move from textual genre to readerly experience. Whatever the hopes of authors and publishers, and however idealized the ‘implied reader’ of traditional literary criticism, early modern readers followed generic prescription neither homogeneously nor slavishly.³⁶ Not every reader came to his or her text with a full command of the complex codes of classical or modern genres and rhetorics. Irony and play, on the other hand, were the prerogatives as much of sophisticated readers as of authors. The history of translation, parody and adaptation, not least of Shakespeare himself, speaks to the force of readerly play and desire.³⁷ Frequent authorial appeals to the sceptical or resistant reader, finally, betray and point us to the importance of readerly contest of generic mark and freight. Any full history of the material book, of the marketplace and of the interpretive community in early modern England must address genre theory and history as the site of subtle and shifting negotiations between readers and authors.

PRINT, PRIVACY AND PERSONALITY

The social arrangements of genre, the marketplace of print and the many interpretive communities we have identified constitute the public arenas and conditions of early modern reading. But our modern sense of reading as private, personal and isolate certainly had early modern precedence and defenders. It is to these more personal and intimate sites and circumstances of reading that we now turn.

For all the emphasis on the preaching ministry – on godly household and the invisible community of the elect – at the core of Protestant doctrine, the priesthood of all believers, we find the individual Christian struggling alone with faith and the word. Where Catholic doctrine and ecclesiology