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978-1-009-32196-9 — Romantic Fiction and Literary Excess in the Minerva Press Era
Hannah Doherty Hudson
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Introduction
The Minerva Press Era

> What a number of *Novels* are continually poured from the prolific press . . .! —'General Observations on Modern Novels,' *The Lady's Magazine* (1787)[1]

> Never, surely, was there an age in which novels were more generally read than the present. —Mary Meeke, preface to *Midnight Weddings* (1802)[2]

> [I]t is apparent, that novel reading, under proper restrictions, is not injurious to the morals; on the contrary, both amusing and instructive: the only danger is that of running into excess. —'On Novel Reading', *The Kaleidoscope* (1821)[3]

In a letter to the editor of the *Universal Magazine* in 1793, the pseudonymous 'Lucius' held forth on novels at some length.[4] Bemoaning the fact that 'a taste for reading the most superficial novels is . . . on the increase', he specifically decried 'that collection of trash incessantly poured out from our professed manufactories, where fresh novels are advertised for in quantities!'[5] While Lucius is considerably more alarmist about the dangers of novel-reading than the author of my final epigraph, his preoccupation with volume, (im)moderation, popularity, and prolificity is shared by all of the epigraph writers and, indeed, echoes across countless other discussions of novels and novel-reading in the Romantic period. As this book demonstrates, the belief that there were simply too many novels, that their proliferation was threatening (economically, morally, physically), and that their numbers necessitated an ongoing process of categorizing, managing, and evaluating them pervaded the Romantic period. To understand the development of the novel around the turn of the nineteenth century, I will argue in these pages, thus requires us both to acknowledge and to resist the centrality of this discourse, understanding how it shaped the period's fiction and how it still urges us, so often successfully, to replicate its historical hierarchies and structures of value.

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Discussions of fiction from this period almost invariably describe it in terms that emphasize its sheer quantity. Romantic novels, in such accounts, aren't written or crafted, they are churned out, poured forth in torrents or mass-produced; they don't simply appear but swarm and deluge, springing up like mushrooms or many-headed hydras.[6] Both novelists and presses are described as prolific in a way that interferes alarmingly with readerly agency: readers, we are told, do not seek out these novels of their own volition, but are flooded with them, addicted to them, or bewildered by them. '[T]he larger our libraries are the greater the impossibility of knowing what they consist of', as another contributor to the *Lady's Magazine* declared in 1789.[7] While the long novel was certainly nothing new in England by the end of the eighteenth century, now critics complained that every novel, however thin the plot, ran into three, five, or even seven thick volumes, sometimes because of the author's 'superfluous garrulity',[8] sometimes through the use of deplorable stratagems such as page layouts with 'tremendous breadth of margin',[9] which helped to populate those increasingly large libraries by spreading a small number of words into a great number of volumes. As the range of descriptions listed here suggests, anxiety about literary overproduction may begin with complaints about the numbers of books published, but it rapidly extends into discussions of narrative length, readerly attention span, the appetite of the reading public for new fiction, and even the motivations of book publishers. Both the material characteristics of book production and the emotional implications of widespread reading are portrayed as underlying reasons for, but also inevitable outcomes of, rising numbers of novels on the market.

A sense of literary overload is obviously neither unique to Romantic-era England nor inspired exclusively by novels. It has always been possible for an individual reader to feel overwhelmed (or for undesirable authors to seem too numerous), and the advent of early modern printing technologies made such feelings all the more frequent. The seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, in particular, saw an increase in printed material – and complaints about its volume – that in many ways foreshadow the end-of-century characterizations I document here.[10] Alexander Pope's satirical poem *The Dunciad*, for instance, famously mocks the age's 'groaning shelves' and skewers both authorial prolixity and the sheer mass of printed matter with references to 'whole pile[s]' of books and volumes 'of amplest size'.[11] Throughout the poem, Pope returns to some recurrent themes: the overproduction of printed material, the poor quality of much literary work, and the grossly commercial motivations of authors, concerns echoed

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by other writers and critics of the 1720s and 1730s. These refrains continued into the mid-eighteenth century, as scholars including Christina Lupton have documented.[12] But the later eighteenth century, particularly the years after 1780, saw a surge in printed material that outpaced all previous growth, and the complaints about excess that accompanied this change both intensified and multiplied.[13] By the end of the eighteenth century, a contemporary writer could describe books with reasonable justification as 'heaped upon the world, not in small quantities, but in multitudes'.[14] David Higgins pithily describes this period as 'an era marked by an exponential increase in the availability of printed matter'; as Andrew Piper has argued, this shift is fundamental to the literary and philosophical developments of the early nineteenth century: 'Romanticism is what happens when there are suddenly a great deal more books to read, when indeed there are *too many* books to read.'[15]

Though all sorts of printed materials were available in newly overwhelming quantities during this time, in this book I explore the ways that the novel was specifically susceptible to critique on these grounds.[16] As a relatively new genre, a seemingly extraneous and unnecessary genre (always at risk of being perceived as shameful entertainer rather than beneficial educator), and a genre strongly associated with 'undesirable' literary developments including professional women authors and working-class literacy, it was the novel, as scholars including Melissa Sodeman, Ina Ferris, and Emma Clery have suggested, that was seen as both a primary symptom and a cause of this new age of overwhelming abundance.[17] And while Romantic critiques of the novel on these grounds often take the form of vague and rhetorically loaded complaints, like Lucius's, they do have a clear bibliographical basis: as the data in *The English Novel* (2000) so compellingly demonstrates, even as rates of literacy among English readers increased at the end of the eighteenth century, so too – dramatically – did the number of novels on the market.[18] The story of this rise is inseparable from the history of one publishing house, the Minerva Press, which operated in London between 1790 and 1820.

The Minerva Press has a complicated relationship to the Romantic era's perceptions of fictional overproduction. The Minerva's founder, William Lane, entered the London book trade in the 1770s, selling books from his father's poultry shop before starting his own business.[19] In 1790, he founded the Minerva Press, quickly adopting a distinctive black-letter imprint that distinguished his title pages from those of other publishers (see Figure 1).[20]

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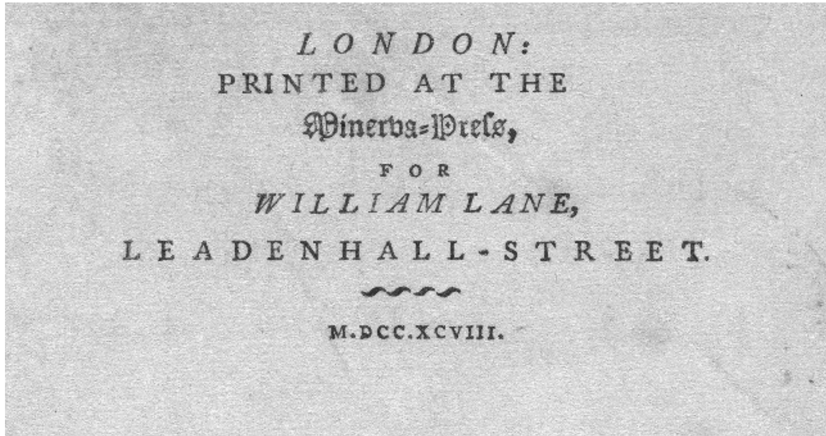
LONDON:
PRINTED AT THE
Minerva-Press,
FOR
WILLIAM LANE,
LEADENHALL-STREET.
M.DCC.XCVIII.

Figure 1 Detail, title page, *Phedora*, vol. I, *EC8 C3818 798p. Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Located in the commercial environs of Leadenhall Street (also home to the East India Company) rather than the more traditional book-selling locations around St Paul's Churchyard and the West End,[21] the Press invited mockery for both its literary pretensions and its orientation towards profit, a conjunction epitomized by the infamous golden statue of Minerva that Lane hung over the door of his premises.[22] There is a strong air of snobbery around much of the criticism directed at the Minerva Press: Lane's humble beginnings were a target of derision, as were the untalented women said to read and write the Press's novels.[23] Writing in 1815, W. H. Ireland managed to mock both Lane's working-class past and the intellect of his present readers with the quip: 'instead of Minerva, a goose should have been the designation of its far-famed press'.[24] With its dual implications of an ungentlemanly proximity to poultry shops and the unearned wealth produced by the goose that laid the golden egg, the insult simultaneously brings to mind familiar descriptions of young women readers as 'silly geese' – certainly not the images Lane's ambitious imprint hoped to evoke.

The press also attracted attention for another reason: within a few years, it was producing more novels than any other publisher in England. In part this success was due to Lane's savvy business model, which combined a publishing house with multiple in-house printing presses and a large and famous circulating library, not to mention a newspaper and a thriving mail-order business for ready-made small libraries.[25] The Minerva Press

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published six novels in its first year, and twenty-two the year after, rapidly picking up momentum over the course of the decade.[26] By 1800, it was clear that the Minerva Press was out-producing every other source of novels in the market, a dominance that would characterize its thirty-year lifespan, although the Press's actual output rose and fell substantially in different years during this period.[27] Bibliographic research tells us that Lane, his successor A. K. Newman, and the Minerva Press published around 600 novels between 1790 and 1820, amounting to more than a quarter of all the new novels in England, and more than five times as many as any other single publisher during that time period.[28] This feat is remarkable both for being unprecedented in the history of the English novel and for the rapidity with which the Press increased its production and relative market share. While in the entirety of the 1770s barely 300 novels were published in England, by the 1790s that number had more than doubled, and much of that growth is attributable to the Minerva.[29] It is unsurprising, then, that the Minerva Press should have been strongly associated with the Romantic age's fictional excesses: in many ways, it produced them.

The connection between the Minerva Press and Romantic views on novels and novel-reading is, however, more complicated than a simple numerical statement of the press's vast output can explain. Even as the Minerva increased the sheer number of new novels, both through its own publications and by spurring competition in other publishers, it also came to be associated with everything about novels that society most feared and rejected. Its novels were characterized, variously, as lurid, boring, and derivative; sensational, unoriginal, and mass-produced; addictive, poorly written, and corrupting. The enormous Minerva library, similarly, served as a focal point for societal anxieties about circulating libraries (and their patrons) in general. All the fears about fiction outlined above, in other words, attached in particular to the infamous Minerva novel; indeed, Michael Gamer has argued that the Minerva 'functioned at the turn of the nineteenth century as a synecdoche, as a way for critical writers to embody and isolate undesirable changes throughout the publishing industry'.[30]

The centrality of the rhetoric of fictional overload to this historical moment, and its ties to the Minerva Press, has been documented by many scholars of the period, particularly those working on issues of gender and literary genre. Ina Ferris, for instance, has explored how metaphors of multiplication and growth were used to condemn popular fiction by women.[31] Citing the critic John Wilson Croker's derisive reference to

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More Information

'the thousand-and-one volumes with which the Minerva press inundates the shelves of circulating libraries', Ferris argues that 'over and over again, the . . . novel is depicted as stamped out by machines, produced not by authors but by printing presses'.[32] She continues, 'Ordinary novels appear in "hordes", "swarms", and "shoals" – always plural and undifferentiated', pointing out that 'critical discourse responded to the ordinary novel as a signifier of potentially uncontrollable, destructive energy'.[33] The threat posed to society by the Minerva Press novel and its ilk is at once immediate and vague; these are novels that crash upon the public like a wave, exceeding demand and resisting categorization. The increasing number of women writers in the late eighteenth century, and the association between certain literary genres and women readers, plays an important role in the era's discourses of excess, as Ferris demonstrates, and as studies of reviewing – an occupation that often pitted male critics against women novelists – have shown.[34] However, concerns about literary excess and growth were by no means limited to literary pursuits perceived as 'feminine'. Novels of all types and by many different authors were characterized in this way, a conceptual approach that perpetuated the adversarial relationship between authors and reviewers, but also set the stage for later critical approaches to the novel. 'Uncontrollable' novels seem to justify ongoing attempts to control them; moreover, though, this way of thinking about fiction is often in fact a way to *avoid* thinking about (certain kinds of) fiction. Both the discourse of literary excess and its realities are in part responsible for the body of Romantic texts that, in Lee Erickson's memorable formulation, 'no one has been willing to read for a long time and . . . only a few scholars today are even willing to read about'.[35] Excess offers critics a way to describe without describing and to dismiss without reading; conversely, however, as I show in this book, the dominance of the narrative that novels were self-propagating and numerous has specific effects on the ways that novels were written and received.

Inevitably, perceived problems with the Romantic novel were seen as both a product of and a threat to the habits of Romantic readers. As David Higgins argues, 'Pope's [early eighteenth-century] concern with the multiplication of bad writers became in the nineteenth century a concern with the multiplication of bad readers.'[36] It was, thus, not only the novels themselves that were conceptualized as a terrifyingly large and unruly group. Describing the expanding demand for popular fiction in this period, Emma Clery writes, 'With the tentacles of the bookselling industry now reaching into the previously untouched fastnesses of the provinces,

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the market for novels was made strange. Was there any limit to its appetite? How could the wishes of this prodigy be anticipated?'[37] The mutually reinforcing relationship between seemingly self-reproducing texts and uncontrollably ravenous readers – and the prodigious market created by this relationship – has long been understood as a crucial context for Gothic fiction in particular. James Watt suggests that 'the "Gothic" romances published by a press such as William Lane's generated anxiety primarily because of their quantity, their self-proclaimed commodity status, and – ultimately – their popularity'.[38] And Gamer argues that gothic writing, including that published by the Minerva Press, was 'blamed for various changes in literary production and consumption: perceived shifts from quality to quantity; originality to mass-production; and the text-as-work to the text-as-commodity'.[39]

The commercial nature of the Minerva novel was clearly an important part of the equation; in addition to offering a convenient way to deny it any artistic merit, conceiving of the novel as a 'commodity' explains how it could be understood as at once overproduced and ungovernably desired. These characterizations had broad ramifications, as Melissa Sodeman, drawing attention to the frequent unflattering comparisons between popular novels and 'mechanically produced goods', points out. She argues that quantity negatively affected the way many people thought about the novel genre itself: 'For many eighteenth-century commentators . . . the sheer number of new novels – most of which were unabashedly sentimental, gothic, or some amalgamation of the two – seemed to have depleted the genre's possibilities.'[40] These perceptions have had lasting critical effects; as Deidre Lynch puts it, this is a 'literary period frequently dismissed' as a time 'when novels' numerical increase led to their qualitative decline'.[41] The inverse relationship between numbers and status is self-perpetuating: the commodified novel *must* be bad, because it is mass-produced; the numerous novel *must* be a commodity, because it is written to meet overwhelming demand. Ideas about fictional production and reception are entangled with qualitative judgements about the novel, with fundamental concerns about oversupply and uncontrollability underpinning them all.

If Romantic novels are frequently described in terms of their proliferation, the *contents* of these numerous volumes have similarly been characterized as undesirably multiplicative. Edward Jacobs has suggested, in a discussion of the ways that circulating library conventions contributed to the development of the gothic genre, that 'the commonplace complaint of eighteenth-century critics that Gothics were mere "manufacture" underscores the fact that Gothics reproduced an unusually stable set of

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conventions in an unprecedented number of texts'.[42] Accusations of unoriginality, derivative plots, and downright plagiarism abound in the period's criticism.[43] Elizabeth Neiman ties these critiques to the novel's proliferation, pointing to 'the idea that because they are formulaic, circulating-library novels practically self-reproduce'.[44] As Jacobs's discussion of 'manufacture', Ferris's reference to novels 'stamped out by machines', and Sodeman's 'mechanically produced goods' suggest, these claims are often governed by metaphors of automated production, which deny either talent or authorial volition to novel-writers. Aesthetic standards are subordinated in such accounts to the demands of novel-production on a massive scale.

All these discussions, in different ways, show the Romantic period's preoccupation with literary quantity, and the power the many metaphors used to characterize the age's fiction had (and indeed, still have) to diminish and dismiss the works to which they are applied. They reveal how common anxieties about reading and literature have been mapped onto ideas about growth, volume, and scale, and hint at the clear rhetorical connections between literary production and other kinds of industrial production in flux at the turn of the nineteenth century.[45] Moreover, as the examples above suggest, *all* novels in such a crowded and newly industrial milieu might potentially be deemed dangerous or superfluous, but some are much more likely to be the targets of such accusations than others. Concerns about overproduction of fiction thus often turn out, upon closer inspection, to be concerns about gender, ethics, or prestige; conversely, discussions about the aesthetic qualities or moral dangers of the Romantic novel frequently shade into debates about such works' length, size, or print run.

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This book is an attempt to grapple seriously with the widespread, stereotypical, even formulaic critiques of the novel in the years around 1800, to understand the basis for these negative views, but also, more crucially, to explore the underlying beliefs about the novel they reveal. These shifting beliefs, as these pages demonstrate, generated new ways of writing and thinking about fiction. Rather than accepting dismissive complaints about poorly written popular fiction, women's fiction, gothic fiction, or sentimental fiction at face value, or attempting to recuperate individual works or genres through extended close reading, I develop a critical framework that re-evaluates the undesirable multiplicity and largeness of the

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Romantic novel. I examine how pervasive ideas about overflowing shelves and overextended plot lines – not to mention the real (albeit often exaggerated) presence of these phenomena in readers' lives – influence the style of novels written during this period, inspire new ways of imagining the novel's temporality, and lead to an increased emphasis on the novel's physical qualities and material presence. This account does not necessarily seek to challenge the stereotype that many popular novelists of this period were at least as motivated by commercial success as by artistic idealism, but it demonstrates that the conditions in which these novels were written, published, and read did have real effects on their aesthetic qualities.

The starting point for the particular negotiations I outline is the widespread claim by contemporaries that the field of fiction is *too* large and that parameters must be set to exclude some parts of it from view.[46] But, as I also show, this persistent assertion is inseparable from a whole cluster of other debates about fiction, its value, and its legacies. To disentangle and trace these varied threads, I begin with a consideration of one key term, frequently used in contemporary discussions of fiction: excess. As I will suggest here, this term not only highlights the interrelatedness of physical and emotional, qualitative and quantitative assessments of the novel that I have outlined above, but also calls attention to the overlapping language found in both discussions of fiction and debates surrounding other economic and cultural controversies of the period. Excess, in its simplest sense, marks the fluid boundary between just enough and too much, between abundance and overload. Like the words 'trash' and 'waste' (with which it is sometimes used interchangeably), excess can be used to signal worthlessness, disposability, or repugnance, and, like these terms, it can be highly subjective.[47] Unlike these related concepts, however, excess is strongly tied to both volume and value: while trash can often be identified as such even in isolation, and waste implies a discarded by-product, 'excess' indicates that *some* part of the thing being discussed is admirable or desirable, and only the amount that exceeds desire or necessity is unwanted. In other words, the negative concept – excess – implies, even requires, the existence of a positive sufficiency. While some commentators, like Lucius from the *Universal Magazine*, were ready to relegate novels en masse to the category of 'trash', most argued that some, even many, novels were valuable and worthwhile; thus, handling their numbers was merely a matter of identifying where that line between enough and too much might fall. It is this fragile boundary that

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critics and supporters of the novel alike exploit, whether by identifying entire groups of novels as superfluous or consciously reframing excess as plenitude.

Outside the realm of fiction, Romantic commentators frequently used terms like 'excess' or 'excessive' in the context of ongoing debates about scarcity and worth. Thomas Malthus's 1798 treatise *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, perhaps most alarmingly, outlined the catastrophic future in store for a world in which the population outpaced global resources.[48] For Malthus, distinguishing between a sustainable sufficiency and a dangerous 'excess of population' was quite literally a matter of life and death.[49] Crucially, an overgrowth of population was portrayed as something that would gather its own momentum, reproducing out of control as soon as it passed the tipping point. The *Monthly Review*, looking back at two decades of Malthus's influence, summed up his argument: 'population ha[s] a tendency to increase much more rapidly than the means of subsistence', and 'powerful checks' are thus required to maintain equilibrium, lest more drastic measures be required.[50] The threat of unstoppable and dangerous proliferation resembles that so often invoked in contemporary discussions of novels, with critics assuming the burden of warning against and averting such growth. As we will see, fears about both self-perpetuating reproduction and competition for scarce resources were mobilized in discussions of fiction as a means of warning against fictional overproduction and justifying the necessity of measures to 'check' this growth. There are obvious limitations to the metaphorical comparison between Malthusian excess and that to be found between book covers: the life-or-death consequences of a scarcity of natural resources have no real parallel in the publishing world. Yet the hyperbole such a metaphor invited – and, as I discuss below, there was no shortage of apocalyptic metaphors when it came to novels – was clearly convenient to the commentators who warned of dangerously teetering stacks of novels, bewailed the scarcity of their limited reading time, or worried that the oversupply of novels would endanger their authorial survival by increasing the competition for increasingly scarce publishing resources. Romantic authors from William Godwin to Lord Byron (themselves both frequent commentators on the current state of publishing) engaged with and satirically cited Malthusian ideas, but the connection between his work and the literary scene is perhaps most explicitly articulated by a later scholar, P. P. Howe, who, in a 1912 *English Review* essay on 'Malthus and the Publishing Trade,' declared: 'In the present over-populated state of the book-world – which none can be found to deny and few not to deplore – it is surprising that . . . no one should have

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