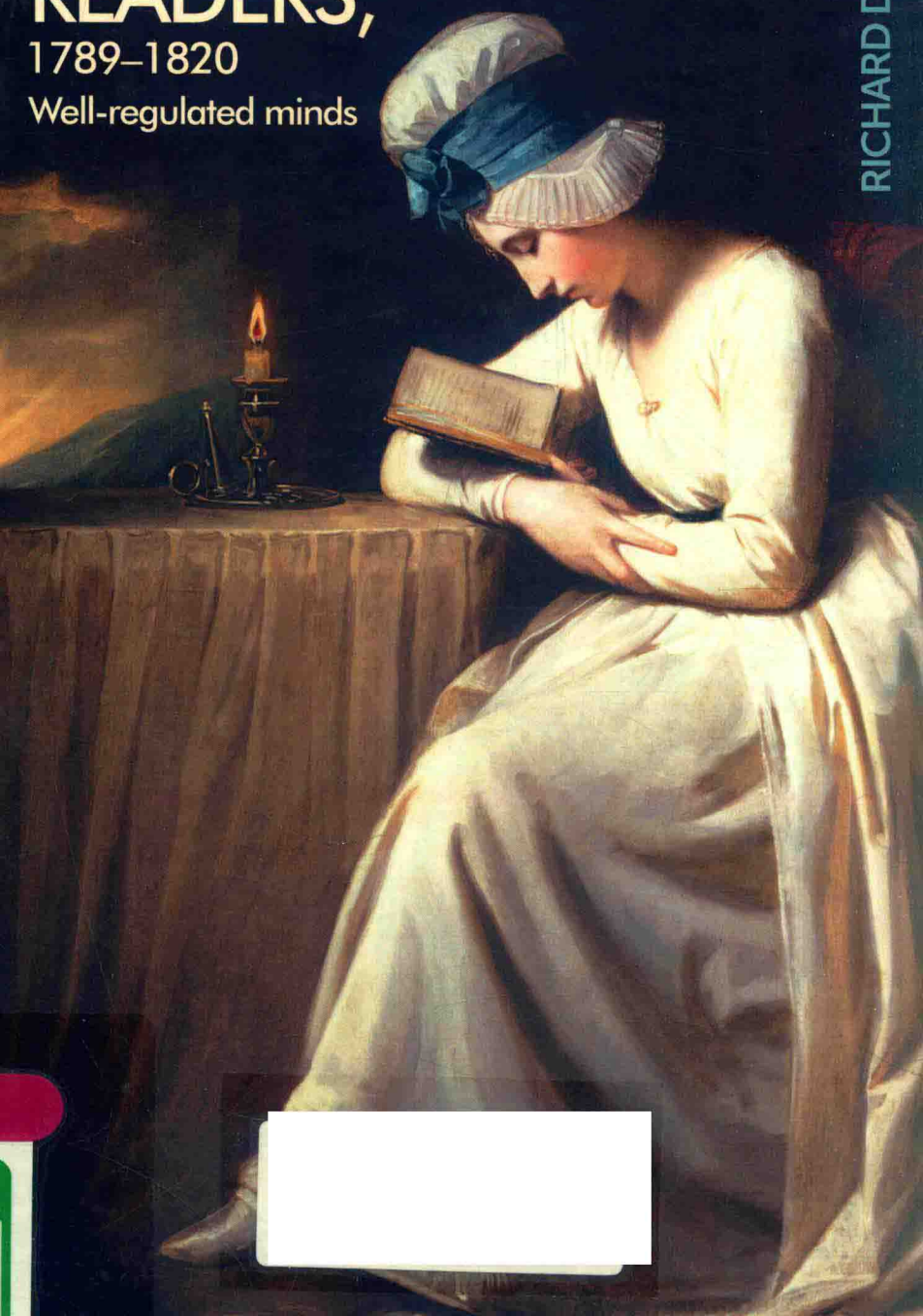


# IMAGINING WOMEN READERS,

1789–1820

Well-regulated minds

RICHARD DE RITTER



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*Richard De Ritter*

Manchester University Press

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The person I would most like to read this book is no longer here; this book is dedicated to the memory of my mother.

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## Introduction: women and the act of reading

This book investigates the place of the female reader in British culture between 1789 and 1820. It suggests that debates about women's reading in this period were shaped by a range of social and cultural pressures, which saw the act of reading conceptualised through discourses associated with the public, as well as the private, sphere. In this respect, this book is informed by the notion that 'the history of reading is also a history of the culture in which it takes place'.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, this book suggests that debates about reading provide a perspective on historical forms of femininity. The belief that reading is constitutive of identity was widespread in this period: as Nancy Armstrong notes in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, the idea that 'literacy offer[s] the most efficient means for shaping individuals' was 'the *raison d'être* of conduct books'.<sup>2</sup> Taken predominantly from conduct books, educational treatises and novels, the readers discussed in this book are, for the most part, textual constructions. But if these texts suggest that the act of reading is crucial to forming a cohesive and coherent image of womanhood, the readers they depict are inevitably shaped, and sometimes unsettled, by traces of the social and historical context in which they are formed.

In her influential study *The Woman Reader, 1837–1914*, Kate Flint suggests that feminist criticism which looks 'at the construction of the woman reader primarily as a textual phenomenon' has had 'the effect of de-historicizing the concepts of "woman" and of "reading" alike'.<sup>3</sup> While I am alert to the dangers that Flint describes, this book suggests that focusing on the textual construction of readers draws attention to their historicity, by illuminating



the way in which acts of reading are conceptualised in relation to the discursive debates that shaped the period's cultural landscape. Rather than 'de-historicizing' women readers, the approach pursued in this book emphasises the social and cultural specificity of those constructions, and demonstrates how acts of reading can be implicated within 'such momentous processes as long-term social mobility, political and religious revolutions, changing gender relations, growing class identities, and the formation of public cultures'.<sup>4</sup> While this book draws upon an eighteenth-century genealogy of writing about reading, it also focuses on a period dictated by political and literary history. It commences in 1789, at the outbreak of the French Revolution, and concludes in 1820, by which time the novel – a genre that looms large in accounts of women's reading – had begun 'to make itself felt decisively as a significant cultural form'.<sup>5</sup>

Primarily, this book is concerned with how women readers were imagined in the period's 'strictures about reading women and women's reading'.<sup>6</sup> It recognises that these strictures come in various guises: from the explicitly didactic – in the form of conduct books, educational texts and essays – to the more subtle lessons imparted by the presence of 'intradiegetic' readers within fictional narratives.<sup>7</sup> While it focuses on theoretical representations of the act of reading, this book also draws upon the practices described in letters and diaries. In this respect, the present book is indebted to recent investigations of 'actual readers' and their reading habits. Since the turn of the millennium, critics such as David Allan, Jan Fergus, Matthew Grenby and Katie Halsey have offered detailed accounts of the practices of specific constituencies of readers.<sup>8</sup> While Robert Darnton reminds us that the task of establishing a poetics of reading 'may seem impossible because we cannot look over the shoulders of eighteenth-century readers', the work of these critics has contributed to our understanding of the complexity of exactly what and how people read in historically remote periods.<sup>9</sup> As Jacqueline Pearson notes in her comprehensive study *Women's Reading in Britain, 1750–1835*, in many respects 'real life' reading practices were 'richer and stranger' than the prescriptions of moralists allowed.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, those prescriptive accounts can tell us much about the anxieties generated by the conjunction of reading and femininity within this period. What we must guard against, however, is mistaking their fears and preju-

trices for historical facts: a point that has particular relevance to accounts of women readers from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>11</sup> As recent critics have demonstrated, contrary to the assertions of previous literary historians, women of the middle ranks were by no means the dominant consumers of literature within this period. Jan Fergus argues that studies which propagate the idea that 'women "dominated" the fiction-reading public' are factually inaccurate, and are informed by 'the accusations of eighteenth-century reviewers and moralists' rather than empirical evidence.<sup>12</sup> What Fergus draws attention to is the way in which the woman reader is not only a 'historical reality' but a 'sign, with a bewildering range of significations'.<sup>13</sup> The multivalence of this sign perhaps lies in the fact that the act of reading '[points] inwards and outwards, to the psychological and the socio-cultural'.<sup>14</sup> The following section of this introduction – and this book as a whole – pursues that idea, tracing the connections posited between the mind of the individual reader and the society in which she lived.

### 'Pernicious' practices and 'well chosen books'

Contemporary commentaries on women's reading remain compelling, if uneasy, documents; their vehemence provides a vivid image of the period's cultural prejudices. An example of this tendency is provided by J. L. Chirol's *An Enquiry into the Best System of Female Education* (1809). There, he denounces books of a 'mischievous description' which 'by some means or other, find their way into boarding-schools'.<sup>15</sup> Such texts, he writes,

are calculated to irritate the senses, to inflame the imagination, to relax soul and body at once, and lead to such practices as are, in themselves, a sure, though slow suicide: for girls, not being apprised of the pernicious nature of these practices, indulge in them the more eagerly; and their secret thoughts are constantly engrossed with the subject.<sup>16</sup>

Chirol's censorious, yet fascinated, description may say more about his own insecurities and 'inflame[d] imagination' than it does about the historical realities of women readers in the early nineteenth century. His anxiety focuses on the insidious mobility of 'mischievous' books, which first find their way into schools, before saturating the 'imagination', 'soul' and 'bod[ies]' of their young

readers. However, it is important to remember that women's reading was not exclusively considered a 'dangerous' activity: a point which is perhaps easy to overlook considering the impact that sensationalistic accounts such as Chirol's still have today. For instance, within *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* (1808) (a novel that Chirol approvingly describes as being 'of inestimable worth'), Hannah More is concerned with the positive effects of 'well chosen books'.<sup>17</sup> There, the character of Mr Stanley, who occupies the moral centre of the novel, observes that

A woman, whose whole education has been rehearsal, will always be dull, except she lives on the stage, constantly displaying what she has been sedulously acquiring. Books on the contrary, well chosen books, do not lead to exhibition. The knowledge a woman acquires in private, desires no witnesses; the possession is the pleasure. It improves herself, it embellishes her family society, it entertains her husband, it informs her children. The gratification is cheap, is safe, is always to be had at home.<sup>18</sup>

While books of a 'mischievous description' 'irritate the senses', making reading an act of the body as well as the mind, More describes reading as an essentially self-effacing activity. Eschewing forms of education that require an 'exhibition' to prove their value, she celebrates the fundamentally 'private' nature of reading. Indeed, what More describes accords with Barbara Benedict's assertion that 'a new kind of reader' emerged in the mid-eighteenth century, who 'engaged in the solitary and imaginative re-creation of culture through critical reading'. This, Benedict states, 'is the modern reader'.<sup>19</sup> As we shall see, the emphasis upon predominantly silent, internalising patterns of reading can be seen as both a mechanism of regulation and an enabling, even resistant, prospect. For Chirol, the very notion of privacy is profoundly disturbing. It suggests a realm of female interiority that exists beyond the limits of his knowledge, and leads him to speculate upon the 'subject of readers' 'secret thoughts'. More neatly avoids the problems that might arise from the acknowledgement of this unregulated, potentially resistant space. While Chirol's readers are characterised by self-absorption, embodied by his allusions to the solitary pleasures of masturbation, More places acts of reading at the centre of domestic sociability. Instead of encouraging solipsistic fantasy, the reading of 'well chosen books' helps women to fulfil their duties as

wives and mothers. It is a thoroughly domestic activity, safely located within the 'home'.

Ostensibly, More's intention is to remove the reader from social circulation and to locate her within a strictly domestic context. This is not to say, however, that the woman reader is imagined to be an apolitical figure. As I suggested above, within Chirol's *Enquiry* the perceived porosity of the female mind fuels a vaguely prurient paranoia; within More's *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799) it takes on an explicitly political resonance. The *Strictures* appeared at a 'moment of alarm and peril', when the shock-waves of the French Revolution were still palpably felt in British society.<sup>20</sup> Attacking the malign influence of the 'French press' (i, 39), More establishes literature as both the channel through which the nation's morals are jeopardised and the means by which the female population can resist such threats. Claiming that 'the modern apostles of infidelity and immorality' direct their attacks 'against the female breast', More describes how 'the women of our country' have been targeted by 'novels and romances' which 'have been made the vehicles for vice and infidelity' (i, 39, 41, 42). Within the *Strictures*, the way in which women read becomes instrumental to defending the nation from the threat posed by revolutionary France, presenting women with the opportunity to 'come forward, and contribute their full and fair proportion towards the saving of their country ... without blemishing the delicacy of their sex' (i, 4). This is underlined when she asserts that 'a mind so softened' by 'the indolent repose of light reading' will find it 'peculiarly hard'

to rescue itself from the domination of self-indulgence, to resume its powers, to call home its scattered strength, to shut out every foreign intrusion, to force back a spring so unnaturally bent, and to devote itself to religious reading, reflection, or self-examination: whereas to an intellect accustomed to think at all the difficulty of thinking seriously is obviously lessened. (i, 168)

More's anti-invasion rhetoric is conspicuous here, with 'foreign intrusions' appearing to stand both for innocuous 'light reading' and the threat of pernicious French revolutionary ideology. Similarly, the senses of 'home' in this passage are manifold, suggesting both the domestic household and, in its opposition to 'foreign intrusions', the nation. As Miranda Burgess notes,

national security was considered to rest upon 'the character and order of British households'.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, as Kathryn Sutherland points out, More views the 'woman in her family' as the source of a 'practical politics of domestic reformation' and national regeneration.<sup>22</sup> In this respect, the *Strictures* provides a powerful illustration of 'the enhanced moral status of the domestic sphere' in the 1790s: an elevation in status intended to '[combat] public excesses of all kinds'.<sup>23</sup> At the centre of this idealised vision of middle-class agency is the domestic woman.

Much of this book will focus on the way in which this figure is constructed through the act of reading. One consequence of this is the relative absence of labouring-class women within this study. While this period witnessed 'the extension of literacy to the labouring classes', the mode in which authors such as More, in particular, addressed these readers constitutes a distinctive discourse.<sup>24</sup> As Olivia Smith notes, in the collection of ballads and narratives that constitute her *Cheap Repository Tracts*, More appeals to 'the appetites of her readers': a strategy that 'leaves her in the odd position of describing her relation to her audience as one of righteously seducing people who have no control over their passions'.<sup>25</sup> Such an approach stands in contrast to the kind of self-regulation that More and her contemporaries encourage in readers of the middling ranks. These readers' disciplined habits are, I will suggest, central to a broader process of 'middle-class liberal reform'.<sup>26</sup> By More's reckoning, it is this class's judicious reading of 'well chosen books' that enables women to exert a stabilising moral influence not only upon their family but upon the nation as a whole.

### Imaginative economies and 'well-regulated minds'

The connection between the mind of the woman reader and the state of the nation is underpinned by what Angela Keané describes as an individual's 'imaginative economy'.<sup>27</sup> It is a concept that provides a crucial perspective upon the social significance of women's reading within this period. The word 'economy' derives from the Greek *oikonomia*, where it denotes the management of the household: a meaning that persisted throughout the eighteenth century.<sup>28</sup> At the same time, the concept of 'political economy' began to achieve wider currency, specifically with the publication

of James Steuart's *Inquiry into the Principles of Political Oeconomy* (1767). Defined in the *OED* as 'the art or practical science of managing the resources of a nation so as to increase its material prosperity', political economy functions as an extension of domestic economy. As Steuart notes, 'what oeconomy is in a family, political oeconomy is in a state'.<sup>29</sup>

James Thompson has described the publication of Steuart's text as signalling 'the gradual distinction or separation of household or domestic economy from political economy'.<sup>30</sup> Yet, as Steuart's comments indicate, the analogous relationship between these two models of economy remained intact, and was available to writers who wished to draw attention to its significance.<sup>31</sup> Among those who did were female authors of diverse political and cultural backgrounds, such as Maria Edgeworth, Elizabeth Hamilton, Hannah More, Charlotte Smith, Jane West and Mary Wollstonecraft, all of whom are discussed in this book. The parallels between the regulation and maintenance of the household economy and that of the political economy allowed these authors to assert a claim for the public, and national, significance of women's domestic duties. It meant that they could assume, in Anne K. Mellor's words, the mantle of 'mothers of the nation': a role in which the domestic and familial mingles freely with the public and the political. For Mellor, the work of Hannah More exemplifies this theory, encapsulating 'the argument that household management or domestic economy provides the best model for the management of the state or national economy'.<sup>32</sup>

Commenting on this idea, Keane makes the pertinent point that viewing the 'domestic economy' as the 'best model' for the 'national economy' risks undermining the material impact of the activities carried out within the home. With reference to the work of More, Keane usefully draws attention to the fact that, rather than being 'simply analogous' to one another, 'domestic and national economy exist on a material continuum'. Additionally, and crucially, Keane identifies the existence of another, more fundamental, economic model embedded at the heart of More's conception of national order: 'the well-regulated mind'.<sup>33</sup> It is the management or regulation of one's 'imaginative economy' that forms the basis of national stability. As More puts it in the *Strictures*:

Economy, such as a woman of fortune is called on to practise, is not merely the petty detail of small daily expenses, the shabby curtailments and stinted parsimony of a little mind, operating in little concerns; but it is the exercise of a sound judgement exerted in the comprehensive line of order, of arrangement, of distribution; of regulations by which alone well-governed societies, great and small, subsist. She who has the best regulated mind will, other things being equal, have the best regulated family. (ii, 5–6)

More forcefully argues that, far from being ‘petty’, ‘stinted’ or trivial, the principles of domestic economy exert a ‘line of order’ that supports states as well as households. Having made this point, she identifies the foundation upon which both of these enterprises are based: the ‘regulated [female] mind’.

A brief survey of the conduct books, educational tracts and novels published between 1789 and 1820 reveals just how firmly embedded the concept of the ‘well-regulated mind’ was within the period’s culture.<sup>34</sup> If many of these texts are to be believed, the prudent management of one’s imaginative economy was among the greatest attainments to which a young lady could aspire. Priscilla Wakefield outlines just why this attribute is so desirable in her *Mental Improvement* (1794):

a well regulated mind is marked by the judicious disposal of time, converting even amusement into instruction. Nature and art present so many objects, calculated to amuse and interest, that none but the idle need want a succession of employment.<sup>35</sup>

In contrast to More, Wakefield does not, at this point, look beyond the local significance of the individuals she describes. Nevertheless, it is clear that her proposal is dictated by a broader, publicly orientated ethic of productivity. The ‘well-regulated mind’ is distinguished by its ability to extract the maximum benefit from the stimuli with which it is presented. Its exacting efficiency ensures that even ‘amusement’ is ‘[converted] ... into instruction’. This relentless drive towards self-improvement is reflective of what Raymond Williams describes as capitalism’s ‘morality of improvement’: an ethic that infiltrated a variety of discourses, both public and private.<sup>36</sup> The comprehensiveness of this sweeping urge to improvement is underlined by the parallels between ‘political economy’ and the management of one’s imaginative economy; while the former increases the nation’s ‘material prosperity’, the

latter produces an increase in the moral prosperity of the individual. It has the effect of distinguishing the possessor from the 'idle' who, in a culture of self-improvement, are castigated for their social inutility.

One aim of this book is to explore the impact that reading was thought to have upon the regulation of an individual's imaginative economy. For some commentators, such as J. L. Chirol, the propensity of reading to 'inflame the imagination' reveals its ability to disrupt the efficient management of one's mind and desires. But the emphasis placed upon the ideals of efficiency and productivity meant that even forms of reading that had no discernible effect were liable to be condemned. In 1789, the *Lady's Magazine's* 'Hints on Reading' reports:

The most extraordinary of all readers are those who read *to kill time*. To such it makes no difference what they read, for they remember *nothing*. Ask them what they have been reading – they can't tell. – Ask them what the subject was – they don't know. – Ask them if the book is a good one – they don't remember – Ask them where they left off – they refer you to the piece of paper they put between the leaves.<sup>37</sup>

Throughout this period, forms of reading which fail to have any palpable beneficial effect upon the reader are frequently presented as entirely devoid of value. Perhaps the most damning feature of this hypothetical interrogation is the way in which readers are exposed as having to refer back to their bookmark in order to ascertain where they 'left off'. It functions as evidence that there has been no meaningful transaction between reader and book, as well as foregrounding the physical presence of the book itself. It also works as a reminder of the material dimensions of reading, something which the *Lady's Magazine* is particularly alert to, especially when it comes to the buying of books: 'A few of mankind have been ruined by buying books. This was for want of asking themselves before they went to purchase, Do I really want this book? Have I read and studied what I possess already?'<sup>38</sup> The compulsion to self-examination provides an example of how seamlessly the regulation of one's imaginative economy could become entwined with the management of a material, financial economy. Indeed, it highlights the fundamental tension that runs throughout the article's account of the way in which reading constructs



identity. For the most part, it is concerned with women's intellectual development: it promotes an ideal of domestic femininity founded in ideas of privacy, interiority and inner depths. This notion of the private self is complicated, however, by the idea that reading is akin to a commercial transaction, out of which the maximum value must be extracted. The formation of 'the domestic woman' is, in this instance at least, revealed to be formed through metaphors drawn from the modern marketplace.

My first chapter explores this tension in more detail, taking John Locke's ideas about education, reading, and identity-formation as a conceptual basis. Following a discussion of the 'Hints on Reading', I explore the way in which writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays and Hannah More view reading as offering a strategic resistance to commercial forms of identity. Concluding with a consideration of the impact of these writers' polemics, I turn to Charles Frognall Dibdin's paean to the printed word, *Bibliomania* (1809): a text in which expectations about reading and gender are inverted. There, the tensions provoked by a female self founded on metaphors of exchange are, to some extent, resolved, and replaced with an idealised, prudent female reader.

Chapter 2 continues this discussion of the way in which 'domestic' femininity was defined in relation, rather than opposition, to the public discourses of work and productivity. Focusing predominantly upon examples of conduct literature by Hannah More and Jane West, it explores the ways in which reading was imagined to be a form of 'wholesome labour', allowing women to identify with a version of the middle-class work ethic without leaving the security of the domestic sphere (*Strictures*, ii, 58). At the same time, I show how, by utilising discourses of labour to depict the effort of reading, these writers risked violating the rigid codes of gender and propriety to which they otherwise subscribed. The virtuous readers that these authors imagine are thus revealed to bear a strain that they are incapable of supporting.

While the first two chapters are concerned with market-based forms of identity, Chapter 3 turns to an event which dominated the cultural landscape of the 1790s: the French Revolution. In the work of authors such as Maria Edgeworth, Elizabeth Hamilton, William Godwin and Mary Hays, education offers the means through which ideas about social progress can be brought to fruition. But finding the most appropriate method of ensuring the