

The Appearance of Print *in Eighteenth-Century Fiction*

CHRISTOPHER FLINT



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OF PRINT IN
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY
FICTION

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THE APPEARANCE OF PRINT IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY FICTION

Eighteenth-century fiction holds an unusual place in the history of modern print culture. The novel gained prominence largely because of advances in publishing, but, as a popular genre, it also helped shape those very developments. Authors in the period manipulated the appearance of the page and print technology more deliberately than has been supposed, prompting new forms of reception among readers. Christopher Flint's book explores works both by obscure "scribblers" and by canonical figures, such as Swift, Haywood, Defoe, Richardson, Sterne, and Austen, that interrogated the complex interactions between the book's material aspects and its producers and consumers. Flint links historical shifts in how authors addressed their profession to how books were manufactured and how readers consumed texts. He argues that writers exploited typographic media to augment other crucial developments in prose fiction, from formal realism and free indirect discourse to accounts of how "the novel" defined itself as a genre.

CHRISTOPHER FLINT is Associate Professor of English at Case Western Reserve University, Ohio.

'Tis an unpardonable Presumption in any Man, either to answer, or
censure, what He has thought fit to publish.

(Anon., "An Essay on the Pride of Authors," 1718)

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Frontispiece: Thomas Rowlandson, *Doctor Syntax and the Bookseller* (1877).
 Courtesy of Harvard Art Museum, Fogg Art Museum, The Kate and
 Maurice R. Seiden Special Purchase Fund in honor of Charles Ryskamp.

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Fiction 14. 3–4 (April–July 2002): 627–72 (for Chapter 3); and “Speaking Objects: The Circulation of Stories in Eighteenth-Century Prose Fiction,” *PMLA* 113 (March 1998): 212–26 (for Chapter 4). My family has always been supportive and patient during the years I have spent on this project. They will be happy not to hear about print technology for a while, and my son, Gray, can now stop pestering me about when the book will appear in print. As ever, the bulk of my thanks goes to Athena Vrettos, who has steadfastly advised me to be less prolix. I hope I have disappointed her less and less over the years.

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Introduction: prose fiction and print culture in eighteenth-century Britain

I do not think altogether the worse for a book for having survived the author a generation or two. I have more confidence in the dead than the living.

(William Hazlitt, "On Reading Old Books," 1821)

This work opens with the simple proposition that eighteenth-century British prose fiction, what Hazlitt largely means by "old books" (xii, 220), focused considerable attention on the material appearance of the printed book and connected that scrutiny to the appearance of a seemingly new type of popular fiction. Such awareness, I contend, assumed a wide variety of forms. It included experimentation with the physical layout of the page and the deployment of different fonts and typographical marks. It similarly involved representations and descriptions of printed or handwritten matter within a text – such as letters, found manuscripts, legal documents, sermons, lists, books, pamphlets, newspapers, and so on. More generally, this fascination with the physical properties of books extended to the public circulation of texts themselves. In *The Appearance of Print* I confront the seeming paradox that a genre supposedly invented to make mundane reality transparent, visibly recorded the self-conscious manipulation of its typographical nature. As a collective effort to reproduce everyday experience, what made a great deal of eighteenth-century fiction culturally effective was its capacity to circulate intimacy and affect without appearing to be a self-conscious or self-consciously public artifice. I stress the word "appearing" because, in fact, popular fiction, customarily about private lives, was inevitably a highly public form of discourse. That is, "the novel" was not so much a record of privacy and individualism as a vehicle by which such elusive concepts could be publicly mediated. As Robinson Crusoe's "Editor" notes, "If ever the story of any private man's adventures in the world were worth making publick, and were acceptable when published, the editor of this account thinks this will be so" (i). Implicit in Defoe's authorial self-effacement as "Editor" of

The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe (1719) is the complementary erasure of “private” experience when made “acceptable” as “published” work.

The Appearance of Print argues that a determining cause for that paradoxical state was a coalescence of historical shifts in how authors sought a living, how books were made, and how readers learned to consume texts. It focuses on the period between the lapse of government licensing of printed works in 1695 and the advent of industrialized book production in the early nineteenth century, tracing the establishment of publishing as a specialist commercial undertaking. As I will be claiming in later chapters, many of the noted features of eighteenth-century fiction, such as the evolution of free indirect discourse, anti-romance rhetoric, modern gender assumptions, and pretenses to ordinariness and realism, were intricately related to the particular status of the book in the Hanoverian period. In Britain (as in Europe generally) the advent of print coincided with new conceptions of psychological introspection and national consciousness that became enshrined in popular fiction. Ultimately, I address how Hazlitt’s “old books” integrated formal, thematic, and material elements, mapping the connections between the various producers, distributors, and consumers that contributed to prose fiction’s effectiveness as a commodified form of literature. The period between 1640 and 1740 provided a hospitable medium for the growth of a literary genre that appeared distinctive enough for subsequent readers, publishers, and writers to ascribe the rediscovered name “novel” to it as a means of converting prose fiction into a marketable genre for a print-dominated culture. Perhaps more than other genres or modes of discourse, “the novel” has been closely allied with print, an observation especially current as a source of study, perhaps because of the belief that conventional books are rapidly headed for obsolescence. The increased popularity of eighteenth-century fiction, I allege, cannot be adequately understood without confronting the direct and indirect ways in which producers, distributors, and consumers materially shaped the spread of fictional texts.

To a large extent, this book approaches the study of printed fiction as a topic belonging largely to literary history and genre studies. At the same time, the dynamic interplay among authors, book producers, and readers in eighteenth-century fiction reflects more general historical conditions in the nature of technological communications. As Roger Chartier has argued, the history of the book necessitates investigation of the reciprocal relations among three basic categories: the creation of the text (how authors shape the book’s written content); the nature of the reader (what

skills, access, and modes of reading are brought to the printed text); and the material state of the book (such as its scribal or printed forms, or means of distribution) (*Order*, 18). The interrelation of these categories creates what Robert Darnton calls a “communications circuit” (*Kiss*, 111) and Friedrich Kittler identifies as a “discourse network” or “information networks” (*Discourse*, 2, 370). According to Kittler, discursive technologies become viable forms of media only when a society distinguishes them as interventions in the circuit of material representation. The appearance of new media, he claims, modifies the overall means of communication, or “chain of chains” (*Gramophone*, 4), within a particular culture. This transformation alters not only the niches occupied by prior media, diversifying those modes of reproduction even when they are ostensibly unrelated to the new media, but also the various relations among producers, distributors, and consumers.¹ Adapting these observations about media technology, *The Appearance of Print* couples its focus on genre with historical analysis of print culture, arguing that genre and technology are often mutually constitutive.

After Johann Gutenberg in the mid fifteenth century, and more pointedly William Caxton at the end of it, British familiarity with print grew exponentially and revealed how effectively new communications technology could alter the chains of thought. But scholars differ widely in postulating when the “advent of print” reached critical mass. Neil Rhodes and Jonathan Sawday, editors of *The Renaissance Computer*, report that “it has been calculated that 20 million individual books were in circulation in Europe by 1500. Irrespective of whether or not they could actually read the products of the presses, few Europeans at that time could have been unaware of the flood of printed material flowing out of urban centers” (1). While such numbers may rely on liberal assessments of the book trade, and fail to account for variables in the distribution and audience for such output, they indicate a substantial cultural transformation in Western discursive practice. On the surface, such a view appears to contradict the claim by Terry Belanger that “England in the 1790s was a well-developed print society; in the 1690s, especially once we leave London, we find relatively little evidence for one” (6). Regarding the years between 1727 and 1783, Paul Langford similarly declares: “the sheer volume of printed matter produced in the period is striking testimony to the extent of the reading market” (91). Despite the notable presence of books in Renaissance Europe, it would appear that English culture did not embrace bookishness until much later. As H. J. Jackson claims, “At the end of the eighteenth century, to state the obvious, print media monopolized education

and communications and had a dominant share of what we now call the entertainment industry" (9). Appearances can be deceiving; the assessments of early modern print culture become only murkier if we accept the claim by scholars of nineteenth-century Britain that the "advent" of print culture started in the last two to three decades of the eighteenth century, but culminated in the third decade of the nineteenth when, as Clifford Siskin maintains, "the basic printing processes, from papermaking to typesetting to the press itself, are fully mechanized – a point reached by roughly 1830 after decades of largely British innovations that were then followed, with the start of the railroads during that same decade, by the mechanization of the distribution network" (11–12).² All these factual claims are essentially accurate, but by isolating quantitative measures from qualitative ones, such accounts hold the fluctuating development of print society to a model of acculturation that discounts the myriad, and occasionally competing, forces that, over time, shape dominant forms of media.

Even the most trenchant modern scholarship on eighteenth-century British book history varies widely about whether, when, and where print culture in any identifiable sense arose. Adrian Johns' *The Nature of the Book*, for example, not only rejects claims such as Elizabeth Eisenstein's that a printing revolution occurred in the sixteenth century, but also challenges the companion argument that typographic fixity then helped generate a relatively uniform and dependable "print culture."³ According to Johns, "print culture of the eighteenth century could be perceived by contemporaries, not as a realization of the rationalizing effects so often ascribed to the press, but as destabilizing and threatening to civility" (28). Like Johns, Richard Sher emphasizes how individuals in particular locations and cultural contexts affect cultural processes, but his concentration in *The Enlightenment and the Book* on collaborative, and often beneficent, relationships between authors and publishers yields a more sanguine assessment of print culture. Acknowledging the "tense and strained, even hostile" partnerships that could arise between authors and publishers (*Enlightenment*, 7), Sher nonetheless stresses the intricate personal, economic, and national interests that unified eighteenth-century Scottish publishing. His focus allows for the examination of a highly integrated local set of practices as if these were stable and consistent patterns of production and exchange. His work, like Johns', thus prompts a highly polarized view of early modern book culture, that, I would argue, has repeatedly energized but also at times constricted the history of the book.

Examples of this polarization can be elaborated almost without end. William St. Clair's influential *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, for instance, dates the "reading nation" in Britain to the Romantic period. Focusing mainly on readers, St. Clair posits that the modern notion of a mass audience emerged as authors escaped the booksellers' earlier controls and bargained for better terms. Only after effective annulment in 1774 of the 1710 Copyright Act (8, c.19), which had enabled London booksellers to control authorial rights and maintain prices at artificially profitable levels, were there enough cheaper books for readers to become a decisive cultural force. St. Clair calls this "the most decisive event in the history of reading in England since the arrival of printing 300 years before" (109). The result of this change was an "explosion of reading" (355), not only in urban centers but also "at the boundaries of the reading nation" as provincial readers, reprints, and circulating libraries multiplied, thus fostering a surge in Romantic creativity and literacy (347–56). Jan Fergus reveals, however, that the nature of books frequently proves elusive (243–4). Whereas St. Clair's account assumes that reading follows legal and economic influences, Fergus highlights the shaping practices of consumers themselves. Because St. Clair concentrates mostly on the legal context of copyright and publishers' archives to characterize the book trade, he implies that book cost and accessibility drive consumption. Subject to market concerns and juridical constraints, readers themselves seem to have limited agency. Restricting her data to the purchase of fiction, Fergus, in contrast, portrays active readers whose demands may have influenced the publication of works as much as and perhaps more than copyright decisions or insider trading. As she observes, "canonicity is not produced by what the market makes available or advertises or keeps reprinting but by what customers choose to purchase" (76). Sher similarly postulates that the 1774 copyright ruling hardly affected the actions of authors, booksellers, or readers in the English-speaking world. Using private correspondence, memoirs, and account ledgers, he divulges that the book trade had long relied on "honorary copyright," a tacit agreement between authors and publishers (*Enlightenment*, 30).⁴ Scrutinizing exactly what actual readers bought allows Fergus to similarly question if not entirely dispel several persistent assertions about eighteenth-century fiction's role in fostering a reading revolution, among them that novels were a particularly influential form of literature. One sign of the volatile history of print is that St. Clair substantiates his claims about the reading explosion that followed *Donaldson v. Beckett* by focusing, as he openly admits, on book production (14), even though books were just one prominent element in the eighteenth-century

print landscape. It might, however, be as feasible to argue, pace Michael Harris (Suarez and Turner, 413–23), that the 1695 lapsing of the Licensing Act in conjunction with innovations in distribution prompted the documented flood of periodicals that must also have galvanized a new and larger readership, echoing, in turn, the pamphlet war that accompanied the earlier Revolutionary period, and anticipating later reading explosions. Moreover, given the amalgam of fact and fiction in periodical, and often serial, literature, readers were being acclimated to imaginative prose of a distinctive modern cast well before the late eighteenth-century period favored by such scholars as Leah Price, St. Clair, and Clifford Siskin. Books continued to be expensive items in the eighteenth century; it may therefore be as likely that demotic growth in reading began with more modest forms of both printed and scripted discourse.

Explanations for disparate assessments of the advent of print culture (as distinct from the advent of print) include biases of period scholars, changes in our knowledge over time, contrary notions of evidence, differences between urban and provincial perspectives, and varying definitions of culture, Europeans, and readership. This book is concerned not with adjudicating these disputes, but rather with determining how quantitative changes in publishing induced qualitative changes in how producers and consumers approached texts. Scholars often claim that printed books added significantly to the late sixteenth-century discourse network, but, as Wendy Wall contends, they still largely urged consumers to “read according to manuscript principles – to reassemble printed material within their commonplace books and produce collaborative work” (59). That inclination largely disappears by the eighteenth century, probably because of new habituations to reading printed texts. Re-mediating unity, temporality, and spatiality, new technologies frequently endorse particular embodiments of discursive exchange. These re-mediations, in turn, modify how individuals perceive themselves as social agents. Such developments constitute neither a sudden metamorphosis in subjectivity nor a mere extension of pre-existing norms but what might be called a series of conversions, often unpredictable and uneven in their effects. As David Zaret puts it, “novel developments in print culture can be understood only if we grant equal importance to social and technical aspects of printing” (134). Moreover, while new media provide the framework for re-imagined modes of communication, old technologies often die hard. For instance, just as printed texts still bear the traces of manuscript forms, digital text customarily borrows from print culture, and, in fact, abets the proliferation of conventional books.

Moveable type has long been considered a key media technology that contributed to the rise of modern Western consciousness, in which prose fiction also conventionally played a vital role. As Walter Benjamin observes:

The earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling is the rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times. What distinguishes the novel from the story (and from the epic in the narrower sense) is its essential dependence on the book. The dissemination of the novel became possible only with the invention of printing. (87)

Although past critics have noted overt displays of textual features in eighteenth-century fiction, the study of imaginative works as material objects has only recently received concentrated attention. Both Ian Watt and Lennard Davis assert that “the novel” owed its particular existence to print technologies, and George Justice calls it “the first overwhelmingly commodified type of writing” (*Manufacturers*, 153). While these may be overstatements, they underscore the links between forms of fiction and the materiality of books. As Thomas Keymer remarks, eighteenth-century fiction shows “the readiness of novelists to explore the impact of print technology and publishing format on literary meaning and the reading experience” (*Sterne*, 67). Indeed, since the revival of interest in the history of the book in the last two decades, studies of prose fiction have frequently granted “the early novel” a crucial and representative role in the communications revolution of the period. Several of these scholars consider the matter of the page and what lies on it principally in terms of the authorial act or, at the very least, the function of the author in relation to the print industry (Catherine Gallagher and George Justice). Those who focus primarily on the reader, such as Ellen Gardiner or William Warner, prioritize the consumption of texts. Few scholars attend closely to the print industry’s production of prose fiction, but those who do often pursue some other issue – character development (Deidre Lynch), modernism (Thomas Keymer), graphic arts (Janine Barchas) – to which print culture is then annexed. Lynch’s study of the double significance of character as typographical mark and as personality, for example, links the acceleration of the market in printed literature to developments in the construction of a relatively modern notion of deeply textured subjectivity. All of these studies indicate a salutary tendency in linking the “rise of the novel” to “the history of the book,” which can, in many instances, be traced to landmark studies by Eisenstein, Jürgen Habermas, Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong, and Watt. It is implicit, as well, in several important theories of the rise