

The Old and the New: Literacy and Reading in Eighteenth-Century America

David D. Hall

Harvard Divinity School

*A lecture presented by the Center for Interdisciplinary
Studies of Writing and the Composition, Literacy, and
Rhetorical Studies Minor*

**Speaker Series
No. 14 ♦ 1999**

**Lillian Bridwell-Bowles,
Series Editor**

The Old and the New: Literacy and Reading in Eighteenth- Century America

David D. Hall

Harvard Divinity School

*A lecture presented for the Center for Interdisciplinary
Studies of Writing and the Composition, Literacy, and
Rhetorical Studies*

**Speaker Series
No. 14 ♦ 1999**

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Series Editor
Erika R.L. Rivers, Editor

THE CENTER FOR INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES OF WRITING
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
227 LIND HALL
207 CHURCH STREET S.E.
MINNEAPOLIS, MN 55455

Director: Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Professor, English
Associate Director: Hildy Miller
Assistant to the Director: Ann Browning
Research Assistants: Kristin Brown, Elizabeth Leer, Erika Rivers, Michael Seward,
Mary Strunk, Sara Van Wormer

Policy Board: John Carlis, Associate Professor, Computer Science; Terence Collins, Professor, General College; David Frank, Associate Professor, Mathematics; Laura Gurak, Associate Professor, Rhetoric; Elizabeth Leer, Graduate Student, Curriculum and Instruction; Holly Littlefield, Teaching Specialist, Carlson School of Management; Toni McNaron, Professor, English; Carol Miller, Associate Professor, American Studies; Rosemary Park, Associate Professor, Education; Jim Perry, Professor, Forest Resources; Gerald Rinehard, Director of Undergraduate Studies, Carlson School of Management; Don Ross, Professor, English; Muriel Ryden, Professor, Nursing; Michael Seward, Graduate Student, Creative Writing; Geoffrey Sirc, Associate Professor, General College; Ruth Thomas, Professor, Family Social Science; Constance Walker, Associate Professor, Curriculum and Instruction; Art Walzer, Associate Professor, Rhetoric

Copyright © 2000 by The Board of Regents, University of Minnesota
All Rights Reserved

ISBN: 1-881221-39-3

The University of Minnesota is committed to the policy that all personnel shall have equal access to its programs, facilities, and employment without regard to race, color, creed, religion, national origin, sex, age, marital status, disability, public assistance status, veteran status, or sexual orientation.

Preface

David D. Hall, Bartlett Professor of American Religious History at the Harvard Divinity School, is the general editor of *A History of the Book in America*. The first volume of this five-volume series, *A History of the Book in America 1: The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*, was recently released by Cambridge University Press. Hall also wrote *Cultures of Print: Essays in the History of the Book*, published by University of Massachusetts Press. Hall's 1990 book, *Witch-hunting in Seventeenth Century New England: A Documentary History, 1638-1692*, has been re-released as an enlarged edition, published by Northeastern University Press in 1999.

On January 26, 2000, Hall delivered a keynote address at the University of Minnesota as part of the Speaker Series for the Minor in Composition, Literacy, and Rhetorical Studies (CLRS). By exploring booksellers' inventories, ownership of books, and the reading habits of individuals, Professor Hall demonstrates that "the story of reading in eighteenth-century America is as much or more one of continuity and persistence as it is of change and innovation." The text of his lecture, *The New and Old: Literacy, Reading, and Interpretive Communities in Eighteenth-Century America*, is reprinted here.

This Speaker Series complements the Center's primary mission, which is to improve undergraduate writing at the University of Minnesota. The lectures in this series, along with our colloquia, faculty development workshops, conferences, publications, and other outreach activities, are designed to foster active engagement with issues and topics related to writing among all of the members of the university community. In particular, the Minor is a graduate program designed specifically for graduate students interested in the teaching of writing, literacy in its broadest terms, and the historical roots for contemporary theory and practice.

In addition to the activities mentioned above, the Center annually funds research projects by University of Minnesota faculty who study any of the following topics:

- curricular reform through writing across the curriculum,
- characteristics of writing across the curriculum,
- connections between writing and learning in all fields,
- characteristics for writing beyond the academy,
- the effect of ethnicity, class, and gender on writing, and
- the status of writing ability during the college years.

We are pleased to present Dr. Hall's lecture as part of an ongoing discussion about the history of literacy and the book in the United States. We invite you to contact the Center about this publication or our other publications and activities.

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Series Editor
Erika R.L. Rivers, Editor
June 2000

The Old and the New:

Literacy and Reading in Eighteenth-Century America

Few things in life or in scholarship are as simple as they may pretend to be, and the two words that stand at the center of this lecture this evening, literacy and reading, are good examples of misleading simplicity. Just when we think we have their meaning cornered, they elude our grasp. Such words remind me of one of my favorite scenes in literature, the croquet party in *Alice in Wonderland*, when various birds and animals were pressed into service as mallets, balls, and wickets: these, we learn, are restless birds and animals, so that the “wickets” suddenly unfold and walk away, the “balls” straighten themselves out, and the “mallets” crane their necks in such a way that no player can hit anything.

In our times we are experiencing an intellectual restlessness within the disciplines that is akin to that topsy-turvy party—who would dare say categorically any longer what an author is, or a text—but I would propose that our perception of literacy and reading as contingent and relative in their meaning is not merely the conventional wisdom of our times but is writ large in the materials that historians like myself use in writing the histories of literacy and reading. My lecture falls into two parts: first, some general reflections on the history of reading, with incidental side glances at the history of literacy; and second, a description of reading practices in eighteenth-century America, a description I borrow in large part from what I and others say in *A History of the Book in America 1: The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*.¹ In this second part, as in the first, my concern is the same: to foreground certain problems of interpretation or leading questions that seem to persist even though our strategies for answering them may vary or immerse us in disagreement. Because I am a historian, you will

experience, before too long, a gentle rain of details, or what historians like to refer to, in their own disingenuous way, as “facts.” I am very fond of facts, but I hope that those I cite this evening point toward matters of interpretation and method that in some sense are inescapable, whether one is concerned with the eighteenth or fourteenth or twenty-first centuries.

What is literacy? The multiplying of adjectives in front of this noun is perhaps the most obvious sign of definitional distress: to name but a few, visual literacy, computer literacy, television literacy, “restricted” literacy,ⁱⁱ and a phrase that at first glance may seem an oxymoron, “oral literacy.” Not so, however, if we agree with the English anthropologist Ruth Finnegan that orality is a mode of deciphering signs (albeit of a different kind than those which are written) and therefore of navigating the everyday world. As Finnegan aptly remarks, writing is not “the only, or the ‘natural,’ way . . . of representing the world. Indeed, even as things are currently organized, writing is actually rather a poor medium for some purposes,” among the others being, “emotive or multiparticipant interactions.” Her larger point is to expose what she terms “the mythical charter” that in western culture privileges a single kind of literacy, the ability to decipher written texts, and in doing so portrays western history as the march of progress up and away from the confusing uncertainties of the oral and the visual to the clarity and precision of the written.ⁱⁱⁱ Her critique serves to remind us that it is almost impossible to divorce literacy from a series of dichotomies all of which are prejudicial to the opposing term: the litteratis of the middle ages, those who know and use Latin, evolve into the “men of letters” of the Enlightenment and modern times; but the illiterate go nowhere, unless to descend into the condition of the pre literate or the non

literate. As a student of literacy among Native Americans has pointed out, “We have no neutral (let alone positive) way of talking about either a person or a people who do not define themselves in reference to literacy.”^{iv} To say that literacy is the ability to read or, if you will, the ability to read and write does not take us very far, for these two technologies, each of which can be practiced with more or less skill, are embedded in a complex web of meaning almost impossible to separate from the “merely” technical.^v

Reading is no less value laden or freighted with associations—some of them positive or whiggish, others not so positive and perhaps even threatening. As a historian of reading my concern has been to map some of the contours of reading as a practice in western culture since the Renaissance and Reformation(s). The pioneers in this field were scholars in schools of education who wrote histories of how reading had been taught over the centuries, or else intellectual historians who interested themselves in the books that have influenced important philosophers, theologians, scientists, statesmen, and writers.^{vi} Some forty years ago in France and Germany, and then in Britain and in this country, other kinds of historians—those who studied society and culture, followed not long thereafter by women’s and literary historians, the last of these armed with “reception theory”—suddenly became interested in the history of reading for one or more of several reasons: in order to understand wider, more “popular” currents of thought (sometimes termed *mentalité*); the shaping of women’s subjectivity^{vii}; the connections between high intellectual history and social history^{viii}; and literary texts outside of an excessively formalist, author-centered framework.^{ix} Even though some of the approaches that once seemed so promising have not led us very far,^x the field continues to flourish as historians realize that the organizing generalizations that did such good service

half a generation ago—for example, the distinction between silent reading and reading aloud or the contrast between “intensive” and “extensive” reading—are in need of revision. The more we accumulate closely nuanced accounts of reading as practiced in specific social milieus, the more these studies are forcing us to rethink larger stories sustained within the history of education or within cultural and social theory. David Vincent’s contrarian analysis of the consequences of state-mandated literacy training in late Victorian England is an example of the former, while Janice Radway’s critique of “mass culture” theory and Roger Chartier’s of class-based interpretations of cheap print are examples of the second.^{xi}

But it also may be that the history of reading appeals to anyone who has experienced what Radway has recently characterized as the “romance of reading,” the experience of being swept away, possessed, enthralled, enraptured, transformed—I multiply these verbs deliberately—by a text whose pages cast a spell upon the person who begins to read them. Experiences of this kind abound in autobiographies and letters, the great example being, of course, Augustine’s encounter with Scripture as narrated in the *Confessions*. Perhaps it is fitting, if slightly immodest, to relate an experience of my own. At my church’s Christmas bazaar a few years ago, I wandered from my post of duty to look through the table of second-hand books, where I discovered a mint copy (mine for all of twenty-five cents) of John R. Fox, Jr.’s *The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come*, a novel of the turn of the century that was in my parents’ bookshelf, and that I read and reread as a child. On the spot, I opened it up and reread without pause this tale of a young orphan, a waif who is possibly illegitimate, uneducated, and penniless. Chad emerges from his native hill country of southeastern Kentucky into the land of bluegrass, where he is befriended by a lonely plantation owner who

sees in him the elements of the natural gentleman. There in the bluegrass Chad also encounters the beautiful planter's daughter Margaret, unapproachable because of the differences in status between them, until, of course, he is revealed to be a legitimate grandson of the major's. As a young adolescent I too was that shy, waif-like Chad, but it was bewildering to me that the ladies to whom I was attracted did not recognize that behind my awkwardness lay . . . a natural gentleman. Such is the power of reading to distort life, as Henry James pointed out long ago in that tale of misplaced trust and love, *Portrait of a Lady*.

My proper subject this evening is, however, something a good deal more sober, the history of reading as I attempt myself to practice it. I want to outline what I would consider a sensible approach to the subject and then look more critically at some of its limitations before turning, in the second part of these remarks, to reporting some aspects of reading in eighteenth-century America as described in the just-published *Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*.

A sensible approach to a social and cultural history of reading in the West since the invention of printing involves four interconnected questions, and the research that is needed to answer each of them.

1. Finding out who could read: that is, the extent of reading literacy. So far, no historian or sociologist studying the early modern or colonial periods has come up with a better means of answering this question than the signature count method, which depends on locating a large archive of the same type of document, usually wills made just before death, and counting the ratio of wills that are signed to those that are marked with an "X" or similar sign. Because it is a method that relies on writing and because it measures the ability to write at only a single

moment in a person's life, it surely understates the percentages both of those who could manage to write and, more dramatically, the percentage of those who could read, for three or four or five centuries ago, as is still somewhat the case, the skill of learning how to read was taught before the skill of writing, and a good many persons, especially women, were not expected to learn to write. In my own work on seventeenth-century New England I have looked extensively in court records for references to persons who, in making depositions or confronted with documents of various kinds, could neither read nor write; and have always been surprised by how few such references there are.

2. A second question is, how many books or pieces of printed matter were being produced and distributed, and, if we are interested in what the generality of the literate were reading, did printers and booksellers publish imprints that were inexpensive enough to pass into general distribution? Questions of this kind have been important to historians of the Protestant Reformation who want to know how widely books such as Luther's catechism or a translation of the New Testament into the vernacular, or a vernacular edition of the Psalms, were produced and distributed; they have also interested the English historian Margaret Spufford and her student Tessa Watt as they investigate the religious culture of ordinary people in England in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Spufford and Watt have been pioneers in studying almanacs, chapbooks, and broadside ballads, all of which cost very little because the amount of paper involved was almost insignificant and because they were sold unbound. Thanks to the survival of certain booksellers' inventories made at the time of death, Spufford has been able to demonstrate that by the 1660s and 1670s, a consortium of booksellers in London was issuing quite remarkable quantities of these items—as many as

600,000 copies of almanacs per year.^{xii} Often, however, the evidence is much less direct or certainly less explicit about quantities, and the historian has to generalize from stray references.

3. It is tempting—very tempting—to exaggerate the production and diffusion of print, cheap or otherwise,^{xiii} which leads me to the third leg in what I am calling the sensible model of the history of reading, the analysis of books that people owned, as ascertained from inventories of someone’s property made after death. In the United States this kind of evidence is no longer available to us after 1830 or 1840 in any systematic manner, but it exists in abundance for the colonial period—as I can testify from having read through some 2,000 or 3,000 wills from Virginia, Maryland, and the New England colonies—and exists as well in England, France, and elsewhere for the early modern period. Autobiographies, diaries, and letters offer other glimpses of what people were reading, though by their very nature such sources do not permit systematic analysis.

Let us suppose that a group of us were collectively working our way through inventories from a particular time and place, and, as though we were participating in a vast bingo game, cries would be heard, I’ve got one . . . and whoever was keeping score would add one to the side for books. By the close of the game, if it were a New England town for the seventeenth century we were studying, the tally would probably show that fifty or sixty percent of the inventories include a reference to books—and if our research were, as Margaret Spufford’s is, in the service of a hypothesis that ordinary people were serious about their Protestantism, we might feel that she is right. But what do these references to books

actually tell us? Three-fourths or four-fifths of them are nothing more than an entry in a long list of entries concerning livestock, chairs, linens, pots and pans, and the like—an entry that characteristically reads, “old books” or, at best, “a bible and another book,” and that gives a value for them that is less than the value of a pair of linen sheets. In only a small fraction of households, less than one out of ten, do there seem to be more than five or ten books, and only in one or two households within a given town—the minister’s, the local magistrate’s—is there anything resembling a substantial library of 200 or 300, a good many of which are in Latin. The minuscule size of most private libraries is misleading in one respect, for inventories record books that were preserved, meaning, in most instances, books that had bindings, and therefore tell us relatively little about the forms of print, such as broadsides and almanacs, that were sold unbound and that had no commercial value as used books.^{xiv}

Probate inventories and booksellers stocks cry out for interpretation: they don’t tell us what they mean in and of themselves. Does a paucity of books in a probate inventory mean that the people of that household cared little about books, or *did* care and perhaps came to know their three or four books, and especially the Bible, extremely well? Is the cup half full or half empty?^{xv} Some historians may interpret the inventories as signifying difference and hierarchy, for they show that book holding—and literacy as well—correlate to some degree with household wealth (occupation). Gender is another factor, for the larger libraries invariably belong to men, who alone in the seventeenth century command the skills of the learned, and when men willed books to their wives and daughters, these were commonly Bibles or books of devotion.^{xvi} Others may want to emphasize the breadth of book ownership and therefore propose that “the people” shared a common mentality or religious outlook. And

still others may want to emphasize the presence of so many households apparently without books at all, and therefore sketch a picture of religious ignorance, or indifference: an a-religious, even unorthodox popular culture.

4. Which brings me to the final leg of a traditional model of reading history, assertions about the impact of books on people's thinking. The means of doing so is usually to classify by subject or theme the titles that booksellers were distributing or that are mentioned in inventories or autobiographies and diaries—so many books on “dying well,” so many stories of “remarkable providences” that dramatize God's intervention into the everyday world, so many “religious” books as contrasted with those that are “secular,” so many on the law or history Behind this classifying lie two assumptions: 1) that books directly form the mental world of those people we are studying; and 2) that any given text can be slotted under a distinctive heading, say, “religion” or “Protestantism,” headings that then provide a map to the thinking of people in past times.

The sensible model remains *sensible*. The research that it encourages is necessary to advance a social history of reading, and these kinds of research can be undertaken with some ease. But the model has its limitations, four of which deserve brief attention. On the side of texts, the scheme is inadequate or misleading in two respects. The more obvious of these is that any effort to classify texts as “religious” or “secular,” or as containing *this* theme or that argument, shortchanges the multiplicity of voices within all forms of writing as well as fluidity of the boundaries between genres or, at a deeper level, between the religious and the secular. As Anne Bartlett notes in *Male Authors, Female Readers: Representation and Subjectivity in Middle English Devotional Literature*, the answer to the question, how were

women represented in these texts is not that they encountered—as they surely did—an essentially negative or restricted representation of themselves, but that they were shown at least three other representations of women each of which was far more positive.^{xvii} Hers is but one of a thousand examples of texts that resist being confined to a single argument or theme or consequence: texts like the Harlequin romances that Janice Radway studied in *Reading the Romance* or the dime novels that, more contentiously, Michael Denning analyzed in *Mechanic Accents*, or the temperance novels that David Grimsted has read with a fresh eye.^{xviii} I choose these examples deliberately, because in each instance the genre or format implies simplicity or, as we would say, formula: yet Radway, Denning, and Grimsted demonstrate the opposite—that these are not cut and dried, one-dimensional texts.

A second aspect of texts that is not accounted for in the sensible model is the presence of an implied reader and the construction *by the text itself and its material form* of how it should be read. The broader point I wish to emphasize is that, within western culture, we inherit and transmit anew a stock of assumptions about the act of reading, assumptions that intervene between us and the words that we encounter. No one comes innocently, in the guise of John Locke's blank slate, to a text. Because every text contains, in Larzer Ziff's play on words, a "pretext," the reader often knows in advance what is expected of him or her, just as, in choosing a film to see, we select among a repertory of story frameworks, anticipating in advance the narrative structure that will unfold before us.^{xix, xx}

Let me sketch one of these frameworks of meaning that provide a template, as it were, of what reading should be like. For this example I return to the *Confessions* of St. Augustine in which he models what may well be the most influential and long lasting

“pretext” that we have in western culture. For him, the key text was the Word, or Scripture, and in reporting his own experiences as a reader of the Word he argues, first, for a distinction between an “aesthetic” reading that gives us pleasure and an “ascetic” reading that promotes a self-discipline that in turn is the basis of the moral life. Second, Augustine makes a distinction between the material form of the text and its immaterial, living presence outside of us but within ourselves as well. The medium is material, but the materiality of the written page reappears, transformed, in the mind of the faithful as a changeless Word, an immaterial vehicle of communication. The act of reading is therefore an act of interpretation as we learn to “see” or “hear” what lies beyond or behind the actual page. Augustine is proposing, in effect, that the act of reading exists in tandem with another process, an attentiveness to the inner or hidden meaning that is captured by mediation, by turning into one’s self. For him this act of absorbing the text must eventuate in practice, in ethically informed action. Reading is therefore a technology of self reform.^{xxi}

In the *Confessions* Augustine not only describes such a manner of reading but models it for us. The fusion of reading and ethical practice that he teaches and enacts remains, to this day, a powerful framework for understanding what reading is or *should* be like; the ethical imperative to read in one manner presupposes that we can be enticed to read for other ends. The trope of good reading as occurring slowly and repeatedly descends from Augustine, as in this advice from a medieval writer: “as [do] your clean beasts, we there regurgitate the sweet things stored in our memory [from reading], and chew them in our mouths like cud for the renewed and ceaseless work of our salvation.”^{xxii} Shorn of Augustine’s Platonism and attendant concepts of memory, this framework remains recognizable among the young clerks

in mid-nineteenth-century New York who, as Thomas Augst has shown us, regarded reading as central to the ascetic practice that, in their terminology, would yield them moral character, or simply, “character.”^{xxiii}

Beyond these two ways of enriching our concept of text, we need also to enrich our concept of reader. One step is to acknowledge that real people, which is to say, actual readers, are something other than the sum of what they read. As Roger Chartier has recently insisted, we must not construe the reader as mentally no more than the effects of the books he or she has encountered. Notwithstanding the “romance of reading” and all those verbs that suggest absorption or passivity, and notwithstanding my own tale of how I became absorbed in *The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come*, the reader retains an irreducible element of agency, of suspicion and resistance . . . a figure that Michel de Certeau, from whom Chartier derives his argument, likens to a pirate, never fully confined by the text or pretext. Accordingly, the ironies are many. In late nineteenth-century England, the newly schooled working class became officially literate for the first time in English history, but as the social historian David Vincent points out, two of the uses of this new-found literacy were to mis-use the technology for which school reformers had such high hopes—to engage in gambling and to write penny post cards from holiday resorts.^{xxiv} The second correction is contrary to the first: not to emphasize the agency as individuals of the reader but, in keeping with the deeper significance of David Vincent’s analysis, to acknowledge that individual readers are embedded in social and cultural matrices that strongly affect how and what they read. One simple measure of the “social” or collective dimensions of culture is the importance of zip codes to mass marketers, who vary their advertising strategies according to zip codes that in

turn alert them to patterns of consumption linked with social, cultural, and economic circumstances. Booksellers and publishers in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe and America did not have zip codes at their disposal, but they commanded a relatively sophisticated grid of who would buy what and when. When we reverse the perspective and consider marketing from the reader's angle of vision, a helpful term is "reading" or "interpretive communities," a phrase that social and cultural historians borrow (and adapt) from the literary critics who helped launch "reader response theory." An interpretive community can be as historically specific as a literary coterie or religious sect, each of them generating texts intended mainly for internal use and perhaps fully understood only by the members of the group; or it can be somewhat more distended and elastic, as when historians of nineteenth-century America speak of "evangelicals" or "evangelical culture," identifying as they do so a certain set of reading practices and reader preferences. Merely to reflect on our own reading practices as academics is to be sharply reminded of our own participation in and dependence on an interpretive community.

In this interplay between agency and structure, the individual and community, lies the central tension that pervades the history of reading, and a central dilemma for how we continue to do further research. How can we bring together into a single, coherent narrative the innumerable records left by individual readers, each of which bears the mark (or seems to) of that person's unique situation, with the no less abundant evidence of "pretexts" and wider social structures that strongly shape how we use our literacy?

But let me turn away from these general considerations to the story of readers and reading in eighteenth-century America. What is the story of reading in this century that saw

the scattered settlements of 1650 begin to knit themselves into a nation as the 250,000 settlers in the British colonies of European descent became the two million (some of whom were Germans or other ethnicities) of 1770 and the nearly three million of 1790, and as domestic production went from an annual total of 68 imprints in 1700 to some 800 in 1789?

For some historians, and especially literary historians, the meaning of the century lies in a dramatic shift in readers' preferences and the shifting importance of genres. To simplify their argument, the key to the century is that fiction replaced the sermon as the dominant genre. A distinguished literary historian has even specified the year in which this happened: 1740. Others have located the transition closer to the end of the century, as the late eighteenth-century novelist Royall Tyler did in celebrating the new age of reading: the hero of his novel, *The Algerine Captive*, a country bumpkin named Updike Underhill, disappears from America for a few years. At the moment he left, "certain funeral discourses, the last words and dying speeches of Bryan Shaheen, and . . . some dreary somebody's Day of Doom, formed the most diverting part of the farmer's library. On his return from captivity, he found a surprising alternation . . . in our inland towns, booksellers . . . had filled the whole land with modern travels, and novels almost as incredible . . . with one accord, all orders of country life forsook the sober sermons and practical pieties of their fathers, for the gay stories and splendid impieties of the traveler and the novelist."^{xxv}

This narrative of change from "dreary Days of Doom" to the gaiety of fiction, from religious-centered reading to reading that is playful and secular, gains a measure of support from historians who argue that, in eighteenth-century Britain and America, a "consumer revolution" was unfolding, a transformation embodied in new forms of consumer goods such

as china, tableware, and clothes, amenities for the middling classes that signaled their participation in the ethos of gentility and in new methods of marketing that emphasized fashion and newness.^{xxvi} The proliferation of bookseller catalogues in the American colonies after 1760—these being a principal means of advertising books—together with a veritable explosion of notices in newspapers heralding “the Newest Books” just imported from England, suggest that the consumer revolution encompassed some kinds of texts. Not all kinds, for in keeping with Royall Tyler’s analysis, the major urban booksellers in Charleston, Philadelphia, New York, and Boston emphasized their stock of newly arrived fiction as well as the presence of such periodicals as *The Gentleman’s Magazine* in appealing to prospective customers.^{xxvii}

Were some of these customers women? As we will see in a moment, women are conspicuous by their absence in the sales records kept by booksellers who catered to the learned or who mainly dealt in government-related forms of print. But the greater presence of women as customers for print is suggested by the sudden proliferation in 1720s and 1730s England of periodicals addressed specifically to them. In this context it is easy, perhaps too easy, to suppose that women were playing a new and important role as consumers of the ascendant genre of fiction and, especially, “sentimental” fiction.^{xxviii} On our side of the Atlantic, one tantalizing sign of change that involves women was the founding of circulating libraries in places such as Annapolis (1765; it lasted barely a year) and Philadelphia. We know a good deal about the circulating library founded in the latter city in 1769 by a venerable firm of printer booksellers, the Bradfords, because a register survives of books that

were borrowed during the course of a year. The Bradford library made available about 300 different titles to its customers, who paid a weekly fee in exchange for borrowing books. Unlike the emphasis in the “social” libraries, most famously the Library Company of Philadelphia that Benjamin Franklin helped organize in 1731, on having a stock of history, moral philosophy, and other kinds of non-fiction, the Bradford library consisted mainly of fiction (two-thirds of all titles) and, for a sample month during which 617 books were requested, eighty-six percent were for fiction with plays and verse constituting another seven percent. Women accounted for about half of the borrowers; and a subset of women and men were “voracious” readers, borrowing as many as twenty-one titles, some of them multi-volume novels, in a single month.^{xxix}

The astonishing modernity of these readers may indeed signal a major transformation. Yet, in the spirit of Henry David Thoreau’s observation, “hold on hard to the huckleberry bushes,” I want to trace with some care the broader evidence for patterns of book selling and book ownership before turning to the shape and nature of reading or interpretive communities in eighteenth-century America. To give away my conclusion in advance, inventory studies of the kind I have described in outlining a “sensible” approach to the history of reading reveal continuity, not change. From a typical such study of thousands of wills left by residents of Maryland, we learn that the average Marylander owned fewer than ten books and that the most commonly owned title was the Bible. In Revolutionary Virginia, half of all probate inventories made no references to books and of those that do, a quarter

refer *only to the Bible*. Fiction or, for that matter, any kinds of material we might deem secular is strikingly absent from these inventories.

Thanks to the chance survival of certain records, we can supplement the evidence provided by inventories with the sales that were occurring in three urban book stores, one in Williamsburg, another in Philadelphia, and a third in Boston. What appealed to the customers of these stores? Those who frequented Jeremy Condy's mid-century shop in Boston were, almost to a person, affluent and learned men or students at Harvard. Of the 600 customers identified by name in Condy's ledgers, a quarter were Harvard students buying textbooks, a good many of them imported from overseas. Of the others, half were Harvard graduates many of whom were ministers. Not for them the fiction that the worldly Philadelphians were borrowing, but serious stuff on religion, or else John Locke's *Treatise on Government* or *Essay on the Human Understanding*. Condy was running the equivalent of a good university-related bookstore of his day.

The bookstore in mid-century Williamsburg—as far as we know, the only retail bookstore in the colony—had some 565 customers during a four-year period of time, all but twelve of them men. Most of what they bought were Anglican works of devotion, including sermons, printed editions of laws issued by the local government, grammars, geographies, and travel, although there was a certain leaven of poetry and plays being purchased in the early 1760s. The bookseller David Hall of Philadelphia advertised *belles lettres* more than any other kind of subject matter. Yet when we look closely at how many copies of any title these booksellers were ordering and distributing, the figures are astonishingly modest: the booksellers in Williamsburg had a stock of 295 titles but sold a grand total of 1,827 copies,

which means that the *active* customer (and many were much less active) bought in the course of four years some three or four books (not counting almanacs and newspapers). The largest Boston bookseller of the 1770s, Henry Knox, ordered in four years about 500 copies, total, of 100 different novels; the largest for any single novel was twenty-two copies, and in the case of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, the text that some historians single out as commencing the sentimental/ commercial revolution in reading, he ordered but four. Do such quantities signify a consumer revolution keyed to fiction? During his tenure as a printer bookseller Benjamin Franklin learned otherwise, for when he printed the first (and for a long time the only) American edition of *Pamela* in the 1740s, he lingered two years over the job and the sales were so disappointing that he never issued another novel of any kind. Altogether, before 1790 American booksellers and publishers risked their capital on a grand total of 65 novels, a tiny proportion of all they were printing and distributing.

What, then, kept printers and booksellers busy? Printing newspapers, for one, and also printing and distributing certain inexpensive formats and genres such as almanacs, primers, spellers, psalters, sermons, chapbooks, statute laws, and government proclamations, none of which used up much paper or required bindings. Individually and collectively, most of these formats and genres sold in much greater quantities than any of the titles that were imported from overseas. The leading almanac in mid-eighteenth-century New England was issued in annual editions of up to 60,000, Franklin and his partner David Hall sold some 30,000 a year of their series of almanacs, and even the Williamsburg printers disposed of 4,000 or 5,000 copies. It is a nice irony that even at the end of the century the genres Royall Tyler condemned as outmoded were outselling fiction, including his own novels, by a vast

margin. The strength and conservatism of the market for cheap print may suggest healthy demand, but *not* a consumer revolution tied to “fashion” and women as consumers. Save for the Bradford circulating library and the sales tactics of a few urban booksellers, little evidence for that revolution emerges from the kinds of data I have been surveying. It seems safe to suggest, therefore, that the turning point must lie beyond 1800, and possibly beyond 1830.^{xxx}

In closing this account of the eighteenth century I want to return to the history of reading and the interplay between autonomy and structure, individual and community. What can be said about the shape of reading or interpretive communities in eighteenth-century America, and what light do their practices throw upon the question of change or continuity?

Joseph Royle, the only printer bookseller in Williamsburg, Virginia, in the 1750s, sold very few copies of any single title to a slow acting base of customers. Well aware, no doubt, of the limits of demand, he was reluctant to risk his capital on publishing much besides the perennial sellers: almanacs, the *Virginia Gazette* (the colony’s sole newspaper), and government-related work. But in 1751 he issued a book of poems written by a Presbyterian minister of Welsh descent, Samuel Davies, *Miscellaneous Poems, Chiefly on Divine Subjects*. At once the book began to sell: one customer ordered 200 copies and another three (one of them Davies) ordered 111. Though these quantities may seem minuscule, in the context of the literary culture of mid-eighteenth-century Virginia they are quite robust. Who then were the buyers? The answer is at once ethnic and religious. From the 1740s onward, Welsh and Scotch-Irish Presbyterians were pouring into the Shenandoah Valley and spilling out into the Piedmont, where Davies and other missionaries were busy

setting up new churches. These newcomers to Virginia were an educated, literate people for whom Presbyterianism mattered; and it was this reading community that became Davies' patrons.

A decade beforehand, a movement known in American religious history as the "great awakening" got off to an explosive start. The spark that set off this explosion was the open-air preaching of an English clergyman allied with John Wesley in the nascent "Methodist" wing of the Church of England, a young man in his mid-twenties when he came to the colonies and became an itinerant who moved from one end of the thirteen colonies to the other: George Whitefield. His preaching aroused nominal Christians, or those who came to feel that this was their condition, to seek and experience the signs of "new birth" or conversion. As the revival movement spread from town to town with the aid of other ministers who turned itinerant or in their own parishes began to preach in a more fervent manner, printers and booksellers took notice. Production spurted upward as, for about two years, demand surged for Whitefield's sermons and journals as well as for religious books that had been published in the seventeenth century. One of these was the English minister Robert Russell's *Seven Sermons* (c.1699), interesting in this context because the Philadelphia bookseller ordered 450 copies of this single title from England at a time when he was ordering five or ten copies of leading novels. A book new to the market was a spiritual biography written by Jonathan Edwards of a young missionary who died of tuberculosis, David Brainerd. When a Boston bookseller announced the forthcoming publication of *The Life of David Brainerd*, almost 2,000 persons subscribed in advance, twenty-five percent more than would subscribe some fifteen years later to the first American edition of

Blackstone's *Commentaries*. (*The Life of David Brainerd* would become the best selling of Edwards's publications, almost never out of print since it was first issued.)

Brainerd, Russell, Whitefield, Davies: the popularity of these writers in eighteenth-century America helps to define what I would like to name an "evangelical vernacular" reading community. Thanks to the diary of a Congregational minister in a small town in New Hampshire, we can witness this reading community in action on a local scale. Hearing in late 1739 of Whitefield's arrival and early success, the Rev. Nicholas Gilman responded by seeking out books that conveyed further news of the awakenings. In a single month (January 1740) he read four of Whitefield's publications, and about the same time recorded in his diary that he was reading sermons by four seventeenth-century New England ministers—that is, texts by such writers as the long dead Thomas Shepard that the Boston trade was reprinting in response to consumer interest. Gilman shared his ever growing library of evangelical reading matter with parishioners who gathered at his house to hear him read aloud from these sermons and reports. Others borrowed books, as when a local woman took home a copy of Edwards's *Faithful Narrative of Surprizing Conversions*.

Here, as revealed in a diary, is a reading or interpretive community in action: gathering in a single place to listen to texts being read aloud, borrowing certain kinds of books, patronizing printers and booksellers who made these texts available, and becoming, some of them, writers and speakers themselves. For Hannah Heaton, a farm woman living in North Haven, Connecticut a little later in the century, the experience of reading the English Baptist John Bunyan's autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, amounted to

an act of inward, spiritual identification that she recorded in a diary: “his trials and temptations although not exactly like mine yet in the nature alike.” So too, when she read *The Life of David Brainerd* she wrote, “Ah methinks I had fellowship with him.” The point should be obvious without my having to remark upon it: her imagined, literary fellowship with Bunyan and Brainerd, a fellowship created and sustained by reading, exemplifies the power of texts and of social milieu to impose a framework of meaning on individual experience.

It is no less pertinent to remark that the framework of meaning within which Hannah Heaton read Brainerd and Bunyan descends from St. Augustine. That genealogy is even more apparent in the spiritual diary of another eighteenth-century “New Light,” the Connecticut farmer Nathan Cole. “I was filled with a pining desire to see God’s own words in the Bible,” Cole wrote in one entry in this diary, “and I got up off my bed being alone; and by the help of chairs I got along to the window where my bible was and I opened it and the first place I saw was the 15th chap. John on Christ’s own words and they spake to my heart and every doubt and scruple that arose in my heart about the truth of God’s word was took right off; and I saw the whole train of Scripture all in a connection, and I believe I felt just as the Apostles felt the truth when they writ it, every leaf line and letter smiled in my face I got the Bible up under my Chin and hugged it, it was sweet and lovely . . . then I began to pray and to praise God.” In this scene as in so many others within the evangelical vernacular community, the act of reading becomes a matter of inward, spiritual experience.

Among other Americans, however, different modalities of reading prevailed. An alternative framework is revealed in a letter Thomas Jefferson wrote in 1771 to his

prospective brother-in-law, Robert Skipwith, in response to Skipwith's request for advice on choosing books "suited to the capacity of a common reader (as Skipwith described himself) who understands but little of the classicks and who has not leisure for any intricate or tedious study. Let them be improving and amusing." Jefferson came up with a list of 148 titles that he accompanied with an explanation for his choices. The key task was to address the censoring—reiterated many times over by Whitefield and others within the evangelical community—of imaginative literature and especially fiction as false to or distracting from the great end of life. Plays and novels, he wrote Skipwith, should not be condemned as mere "entertainment" or "fiction" but as richly instructive of the "moral rule[s] of life." "Everything is useful," Jefferson declared, "which contributes to fix in us the principles or practice of virtue . . . we never reflect whether the story we read be truth or fiction . . . We neither know nor care whether Lawrence Sterne really went to France or whether the whole [of *Sentimental Journey*] be not a fiction The spacious field of imagination is thus laid open to our use, and lessons may be formed to illustrate and carry home to the mind every moral rule A lively and lasting sense of filial duty is more effectually impressed on the mind of a son or daughter by reading *King Lear*, than by all the dry volumes of ethics and divinity that ever were written."^{xxxix}

That Jefferson valued genres such as fiction that all evangelicals distrusted is surely a sign of change: the "republican" and "polite" cultures in which he participated were half-way houses on the road to secularization and a more positive appraisal of leisure time. Yet his advice to Robert Skipwith is consistent in one respect with the pretext St. Augustine had

voiced in the fourth century. Novels and plays make for satisfactory reading, Jefferson says, if they are placed in the context of ethics, or the higher ends of life. To be sure, Jefferson grounded his ethics not on divine grace, as Jonathan Edwards had done in describing “true virtue,” but on a “moral sense” that was natural capacity, along with free will and reason, of human nature. As the Skipwith letter makes clear, eighteenth-century Americans approached the practice of reading in different ways. It reminds us that, like historians of literacy, historians of reading must endeavor to remain historically specific in describing a practice that too easily lends itself to large generalizations. That some Americans were beginning to be touched by the “consumer revolution” or by other currents of change does not mean that the culture as a whole was suddenly transformed. As I hope I have demonstrated, the story of reading in eighteenth-century America is as much or more one of continuity and persistence as it is of change and innovation.

Notes:

ⁱ (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

ⁱⁱ A term used by Francois Furet and Jacques Ozouf, *Lire et ecrire: l’alphabetisation des francais de Calvin a Jules Ferry* (Paris, 1977).

ⁱⁱⁱ Ruth Finnegan, “Literacy as Mythical Charter,” in *Literacy: Interdisciplinary Conversations*, ed. Deborah Keller-Cohen (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1994), 38.

^{iv} Walter Mignolo, “Literacy and the Colonization of Memory: Writing Histories of People Without History,” *ibid.*, 95; Ron Sconlon, “Cultural Aspects in Constructing the Author,” *ibid.*, 214.

^v A superb demonstration of the “cultural” and political meanings of handwriting is Tamara Thornton, *Handwriting in America: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996). An interpretation of literacy in context that brilliantly indicates its non-technological qualities is D. F. McKenzie, “The Sociology of a Text: Oral Culture, Literacy, and Print in Early New Zealand,” in *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (London: British Library, 1983), 77-130.

^{vi} For references to work of this kind, see David D. Hall, *Cultures of Print: Essays in the History of the Book* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 170-171.

^{vii} See, e.g., Anne Clark Bartlett, *Male Authors, Female Readers: Representation and Subjectivity in Middle English Devotional Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

^{viii} Robert Darnton regards “the history of the book,” which for him includes the history of reading, as a means of achieving a “social history of ideas.” Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), viii.

^{ix} W. Daniel Wilson, “Readers in Texts,” *PMLA* 96 (1981): 848-63.

^x See, in particular, Robert Darnton’s early critique of French scholarship: “Reading, Writing, and Publishing in Eighteenth-Century France: A Case Study in the Sociology of Literature,” in *Historical Studies Today*, ed. Felix Gilbert (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972).

^{xi} David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England, 1750-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Janice Radway, “Reading is Not Eating: Mass-Produced Literature and the Theoretical, Methodological, and Political Consequences of a Metaphor,” *Book Research Quarterly* 2 (1986): 7-29; Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), Introduction and passim..

^{xii} Margaret Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1982); Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550-1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Margaret Spufford, ed., *The World of Rural Dissent, 1550-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

^{xiii} As I did in *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Knopf, 1989); compare my analysis of the “Usher” invoices (pp. 48-49) with that of Stephen Foster, “The Godly in Transit: English Popular Protestantism and the Creation of a Puritan Establishment in America,” in *Seventeenth-Century New England*, ed. David D. Hall and David G. Allen (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1984), 222-23.

^{xiv} Inventory studies: Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, appendix, 247-51; Hugh Amory, “‘A Bible and Other Books’: Enumerating the Copies in Seventeenth-Century Essex County,” in *Order and Connexion*, ed. R. C. Alston (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997); *A History of the Book in America 1: The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*, ed. Hugh Amory and David D. Hall (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), references in chaps. 2, 4.

^{xv} Social historians worry, and rightly, about how representative the probate inventories are of the general population; in no instance of which I'm aware do they represent more than 70 percent of households or individuals, and the question becomes, is a significant cohort, presumably those who were least wealthy, excluded from this data?

^{xvi} *History of the Book in America*, ed. Amory and Hall, 73-74, 125.

^{xvii} Bartlett, *Male Authors, Female Readers*, Introduction. Bartlett also points out that the manuscripts which contain these devotional texts were often a *recule* or collection of disparate texts; and she proposes that these juxtapositions weakened the authority that was claimed by the (male) devotional writers.

^{xviii} Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (London: Verso, 1987); David Grimsted, "Books and Culture: Canned, Canonized, and Neglected," in *Needs and Opportunities in the History of the Book: America, 1639-1876*, ed. David D. Hall and John B. Hench (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1984), 191.

^{xix} Larzer Ziff, "Upon What Pretext: The Book and Literary History," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 95 (1984).

^{xx} Radway's romance readers (see n. 18) bring, as she demonstrates, high expectations to the genre they read so avidly.

^{xxi} I borrow this paragraph from Brian Stock, *Augustine the Reader Meditation, Self-Knowledge, and the Ethics of Interpretation* (Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press, 1996), esp Pp. 12-14. The longer history of this framework may be followed in David Lyle Jeffrey, *People of the Book: Christian Identity and Literary Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996).

^{xxii} Bartlett, *Male Writers*, 17 (quoting William of Saint Thierry, *Meditations*).

^{xxiii} Thomas Augst, "The Business of Reading in Nineteenth-Century America: The New York Mercantile Library," *American Quarterly* 50 (1998): 267-305.

^{xxiv} Roger Chartier, "Laborers and Voyagers: From the Text to the Reader," *diacritics* 22 (1992), 51, quoting Michael de Certeau, "La lecture absolue..." in *Problems actuels de la lecture*, ed. Lucien Dallenbach and Jean Ricardou (Paris, 1982); Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture*.

^{xxv} Royall Tyler, *The Algerine Captive*, ed. Jack B. Moore (Gainesville; Schokus' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1967), vi-ix.

^{xxvi} See, in general, Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

^{xxvii} The detailed evidence for these statements is provided in chap. 11 of *A History of the Book in America*, eds. Amory and Hall; statements that follow that are not otherwise documented are based on this or other chapters in HBA.

^{xxviii} Kathryn Shevelov, *Women and Print Culture: The Construction of Femininity in the Early Periodical* (London: Routledge, 1989); B. C. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). See also Kevin J. Hayes, *A Colonial Woman's Bookshelf* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997).

^{xxix} *History of the Book in America*, ed. Amory and Hall, 403.

^{xxx} See, e.g., David D. Hall, "The Uses of Literacy: New England, 1600-1850," in *Printing and Society in Early America*, ed. William L. Joyce et al. (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1984), 1-47.

^{xxxi} *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Julian Boyd et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), 1: 76-81, 374-75.