Print into Fiction, Readers into Authors

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Of Eastbourne Mr. Gell
From being perfectly well
Became dreadfully ill
For the love of Miss Gill.

So he said with some sighs
“I’m the slave of your eyes,
Oh! Restore if you please
By accepting my ease.”

Where does a text stop and the reader’s idea of it start? Or is it the other way around? How is it that eighteenth-century readers were moved by typographical signals like flowerets and asterisks on a page to believe in a text’s realism? In the patch of doggerel quoted above, stimulated by a newspaper advertisement, Jane Austen collapses the printed letters “i” and “e” into a pun on the couple’s names, as well as a charade on “i. e.” In the printed edition, a further manuscript hand has marked the puns, and replaced “Of” with “At.” This little poem exhibits both the circulation and physicality of print recognized by eighteenth-century authors as they attempted to negotiate the reader’s consciousness of typography, and the reader’s interactive engagement with print. This is the tangle of authorship, reception, and material culture that occupies Christopher Flint’s The Appearance of Print in Eighteenth-Century Fiction (Cambridge, 2011).

Although he does not cite this particular rhyme, Flint takes on these and other big questions about reading and the development of the eighteenth-century novel in this new contribution to the study of eighteenth-century print culture from Daniel Defoe to Austen. Book history, into which this study fits, is a complex and expanding field. It comprises not only the history of textual production from writing, printing and binding through publishing and book-
selling, but also the history of reading itself, the difficult question of how texts
inhabit readers and readers make texts. This project necessarily entails exam-
ining books as objects, and print itself as an objectified form of language. As
early as 1982 in *Orality and Literacy*, Walter J. Ong postulated a cultural shift
in the way Westerners think, resulting from the replacement of oral traditions
with print. Recent scholarship, notably Adrian Johns’s *The Nature of the Book*
(1998) and Richard B. Sher’s *The Enlightenment and the Book* (2006), however,
has challenged Ong’s idea that print made writing into an object and Elizabeth
Eisenstein’s famous claim that the Renaissance printing revolution that fixed
print stabilized it. This new work suggests rather that the dissemination and
reception networks destabilize print.

The physicality of print and its role in making the novel forms the basic
topic of investigation in *The Appearance of Print*. The book explores nothing less
than “how words traverse the space between writers, publishers, and read-
ers,” and demonstrates the ways in which the materiality of print, particularly
typographic devices, enabled the development of fictional devices (20). Most
important among these, perhaps, is formal realism, which since Ian Watt’s *The
Rise of the Novel* (1957) has served to define the eighteenth-century novel it-
self. Flint concentrates on the way this technique sought to spread the intimate
experience of quotidian reality while concealing its intentionality or artifice.
However, he also examines other kinds of novelistic realism, notably free indi-
rect style and the anti-romance stance. Among the problematic elements facing
Flint here is the question of what exactly constitutes prose fiction, and how it
differs from “the novel.” Flint largely evades this by examining periodical texts
and anomalous works by Charles Gildon and Jonathan Swift’s *The Tale of a Tub*
(1704), and in the end it seems not to matter much. This seems right, since the
genre of “the novel” was, in fact, mutating. Still, in this British-centered study,
little is made of the influence of Continental models, particularly French ro-
mane, on English forms, or of cross-pollination.

Flint follows a strong tradition of scholarship that locates the novel at the
center of the development of printed culture. Although he rightly observes
that the novel was a specialized product for the expanding niche market of
middle-class readers rather than the dominant form of the book, he identifies
the genre specifically with the particular development of printing technology.
In this, he echoes Janine Barchas, Thomas Keymer, Jan Fergus and others, but
his complementary argument maintains that eighteenth-century fiction’s self-
consciousness about its own textuality affects the cultural concept and uses of
print. Neither of these claims is altogether new. What is new, however, is Flint’s
meticulous and deeply learned documentation and analysis of just exactly how
print developed—including changes in paper-making and other details; how
the dissemination of printing technology worked; and how it influenced the de-
velopment of the novel to make typography seem natural to readers. Flint fills
in what other scholars have claimed with the details and facts that make the
argument compelling and important, and provides a new, persuasive understanding of realism itself. One of the book’s strongest claims is that eighteenth-century novels both endorse and resist the conditions of their existence, and that they embody a complex matrix of decisions and conditions by individuals, market forces, and technologies.

The Appearance of Print asks how changes in the sheer volume of printed material—and its unprecedented accessibility—changed the production and consumption of texts. This is not unplumbed territory. On the contrary, following Rolf Engelsing, Robert DeMaria in 1992 suggested that the new torrent of texts demanded “extensive” rather than “intensive” reading, thereby inducing an entirely new process of textual consumption. While many book historians have since disputed these claims, nonetheless the question of how quantity affects quality is an old one in the field. Flint’s unusual contribution is his argument that prose fictions are, essentially, collaborative forms, deeply dependent on readers. This is a hugely important insight. Many book historians still concentrate on the construction of the author in view of the battles over copyright, and there has also been a tradition dating at least since Thomas G. Tanselle’s Libraries, Museums, and Reading (1991)—but not mentioned in Flint’s book—of exploring the ways in which authors—particularly Alexander Pope—manipulate the materiality of paper, print design and book, notably Janine Barchas’s Graphic Design: Print Culture and the Eighteenth-Century Novel (2003). Flint, however, reverses the intentionality debate to point out how eagerly books and authors relied on readers, if not to invent, at least to inspirit their novels. He resurrects the importance of readers in forming the genre, and deconstructs the idea of the eighteenth-century writer as a proto-Romantic author of original genius. Instead, he declares authorial status—contested, mediated, indefinable as it was—actually remained unimportant through the period. The author for Flint is not exactly dead: s/he is more a Gene Wilder-built, Frankenstein’s puppet, constructed out of the matter of others, both subjectively motivated and also constructed by market forces: “the author is not the sole producer of a text so much as its sanctioned representative” (72).

The book falls into two parts, the first analyzing author-book-reader relations, and the second, dedicated to close readings of specific texts, reversing the formula to explore reader-book-author constructions. In part one, Flint explicates the general, cultural conditions that precede and follow the development of eighteenth-century British fiction in two chapters. The first on “Pre-scripts” provides a compact, soberly skeptical, remarkably comprehensive review of scholarly debates on the invention of “novelism”; the influence of readers’ choices on the rise of the genre and vice versa; the ambiguity of a conception of authorship that simultaneously stamps authors “Somebody” and “Nobody”; and the materiality of the novel and its physical circulation in culture. Most enlightening is Flint’s stress on “how consciously [eighteenth-century fiction] stages collaborative reading by directly seeking the consumer’s good will,” an
argument that he works through in the paired “Post-scripts” chapter (42). Here, he moves from the overview to a close reading of a particular example to demonstrate his argument that “eighteenth-century fiction’s paradoxical state as a literary form that denied its own ‘making’ derived from historical developments in how authors sought a living, how books were made, and how readers learned to consume books” (63). The result is a fascinating analysis of the under-studied collection of texts *The Post-Boy Robb’d of His Mail: or, The Pacquet Broke Open* (1692) by Gildon, Defoe’s gadfly. Flint examines how Gildon’s pretense that this collection of “letters” comprises authentic documents of intimate communication between friends reinforces its physical ambiguity as a text of texts spinning out into unstable sequels.

One of Flint’s richest contributions is the analysis of paper and ink as “primary symbols of a new form of subjectivity.” Building on Deidre Lynch’s work on the eighteenth-century novel’s construction of readers’ subjectivity, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (1998), Flint shows how John Locke’s “tabula rasa” becomes materialized, representing a circulation of meaning both literal and metaphorical. Flint, however, also traces the importance of paper over ink to the nationalization of the industry, illuminating the connection between Britain’s global position and the development of prose fiction.

The book’s second part analyzes how the text came to seem “an independent object” by close readings of a host of prose-writers, mainly canonical but not all—notably Thomas Armory’s *The Life of John Buncle* (1756) jostles Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1762). They include works by Swift, Defoe, Samuel Richardson, Frances Burney, Henry MacKenzie, John Kidgett’s early, proto-it-narrative *The Card* (1755), Eliza Haywood, and many more. Flint writes lucidly and well about the self-consciousness of print in these works, and although little of his meticulous detail will surprise aficionados of the novel, the narrative of the novel’s development that these detailed treatments sketch is enlightening. His splendid analysis of Austen’s self-conscious references to the materiality of fiction in *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* (both published in 1818) argues that the development of free indirect discourse reflects a peculiarly female relationship with authorship. Men, suggests Flint, could adopt an ironic mode that evades authorial responsibility both by pointing to the roles of editors, readers and paper and ink themselves, and paradoxically also by claiming their own physicality and limitations as individual humans. In contrast, women were forced to conceal their physicality to enable themselves to speak with authority. This is a thoughtful gloss on Catherine Gallagher’s *Nobody’s Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670–1820* (1994), but I am not entirely convinced that the difference is so absolute or that it can be so linearly attributed to gender. On a lesser note, I wondered that the treatment of letters, writing, and the mediation of relationships through paper and writing in *Persuasion* did not include the highly significant, first paragraph
of the novel, in which, as we open Austen’s book, the vain Sir Walter Elliott opens his in order to read himself in the printed Baronetage.

The Appearance of Print proposes a fresh and important reading of reading. Flint’s map of the interrelations of readers, authors and the material book redraws book history by shifting the weight of influence from authorship to readership. His claim for a collaborative dynamic replaces an anachronistic interpretation of the novel as the work of original, individual writers with a thoughtful portrait of the complexity of a form that insists on its own materiality and that negotiates this materiality to appeal to an evidently powerful readership. The result is a far more historically accurate portrait of the eighteenth-century novel as a unique form, providing a nuanced and sophisticated sense of the way marketplaces, individuals, and cultural forces interact and intertwine, complicating—if not, indeed, making impossible—the disentangling of specific causes for novelistic effects. This is a book that all readers interested in eighteenth-century print culture will want to read.

NOTES
