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Reading It Wrong

AN INTRODUCTION

This [allegory] will puzzle the Commentators of the next Age, for even in ours we can hardly guess at it.

—THE MEDLEY, 27 NOVEMBER 1710

none but Fools can Laugh heartily without knowing whom they Laugh at.

—THE FEMALE TATLER 60, 23 NOVEMBER 1709

WHAT DID EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY readers really understand in what they read? What do we actually know about how the uniquely, frustratingly tricky forms of the period – the satires and coded fictions and allegorical tales and pamphlets and sociable verse – landed in their own time? *Reading it Wrong* explores the role of imperfect readers and misreading in early eighteenth-century literary culture. It looks at literature from the point of view of readers who got it wrong, rather than those who got it right, showing that Augustan literary texts were both hampered and enabled by games of knowing and not knowing. All the works considered here depended on the notion that many of their original historical readers would not have had full understanding: they are works which either attempted to address that fact, or play with their imperfect readerly landings.

This is also a book about modern-day failings. It does not lament the relative paucity of knowledge in contemporary readers – that plaintive cry of so many critics and educators.¹ I am interested instead in the ways in which our own modern discipline and its investment in enlightenment and expertise hinders the recognition of ignorance, muddle, or incompetence. A critical and pedagogical focus on ‘right reading’ can make us peculiarly blind as modern readers to the existence, role, and benefit of reading wrong.

Historical Contexts

I start from two linked but not often coupled aspects of early eighteenth-century literary culture. The first is the widely recognized reality that the turn of the eighteenth century sees a step change in the evolution of print culture: there is a surge in the numbers and kinds of books available, a crafting of new genres and forms of writing for new kinds of readers. We see this across the board: in the availability of classical works in translation; in the packaging of information and expertise in forms designed to appeal to the amateur reader, one who might not bring a university education or cultural or linguistic fluency with them. This is also, crucially, the era that invented generalist literary criticism. In many studies of the period, such development is commonly described as a socioeconomic progress narrative. It is a story about inclusion and new forms of writing, the culture of the coffee house, or the creation of the bourgeois public sphere, and the opening up of print culture to women writers and women readers, as well as to labouring class writers and their admirers.² This changing dynamic between readers, authors, and print can be traced back into the mid-seventeenth century. In 1642, the Church of England clergyman and poet Roger Cocks wrote that: ‘Pamphlets, like wild geese, fly up and downe in flocks about the Countrey. Never was more writing, or lesse matter [. . .] *There is no end of making many books*’.³ He was commenting on the proliferation of printed opinion surrounding the English Revolution, a political crisis which unleashed voices and words on a scale hitherto unseen in English

culture. While the number of publications died down after the immediate heat of the civil war debates, the busy culture of printed political dialogue and opinionizing that it had generated was there to stay. Changes to the legal framework of publishing with the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1695 drove up publication rates, as the number of printers and publishers was uncapped, and restrictions on imported books went unenforced.⁴ A growing and hungry market for printed books created a demand for new authors and new forms of writing.

All these changes meant that the world of print looked profoundly different in the early eighteenth century to the way it had less than a century before. One historian claims that the numbers of items in print increased by a factor of ten after 1640, from an average of 300,000 volumes a year from 1576 to 1640 to two million or more between 1640 and 1660.⁵ Another notes that there are records of 848 published titles from 1640; just two years later, this had more than quadrupled to 3,666.⁶ There was a rise of 270 per cent in titles between 1641 and 1660. We can discern the appetite for debate and current affairs in the evolution of the newspaper. In 1641, the first newspaper trading in English domestic news appeared – less than three years later there were twelve. The rise continued over the course of the civil war period.

As the practice of writing moved away from aristocratic patronage and towards a busier, more populous, and often anonymous print marketplace, it created opportunities, but also profound anxiety – an anxiety resonant of the early twenty-first-century rise of digital culture. It has become normal to compare the advent of the internet with the invention of the printing press, but we might better make the comparison between the online media shift and the commercialization and expansion of print in the early eighteenth century. Both periods of innovation have posed challenges to users and legislators over the authority of the printed word and its credibility. Generic innovation, an uncertainty about the ownership of content, and the role of anonymity are features of digital and of early commercial print circulation. What's more, an uncertainty about how to write for an unknowable and unpredictable mass audience, and the problems created by what we now call 'context

collapse' are features of both eras, and they have shaped the terms of writing and engagement in some strikingly parallel ways.

The changes in consumption of the early eighteenth century were not confined to a rise in print volume or the derestriction of certain kinds of material. The seventeenth and early eighteenth century also witnessed a rise in the number of potential readers in the nation. By the end of the Stuart period, the English had achieved a level of literacy unknown in the past and unmatched elsewhere in early modern Europe.⁷ The evidence of historical literacy is complex – many could read but not write, and so using signatures to evidence competence is tricky. Literacy also varied enormously according to social class and geography. The historian David Cressy has shown that overall literacy rates for men during the 1640s were 30 per cent, rising to 58 per cent by the 1740s. For women, the corresponding dates show a rise from 10 per cent to 32 per cent.⁸ As this suggests, there was a steady rise in literacy, and the growth was stronger among women. The population was growing too. In 1696, the population of England was 5,118,000 – by 1756 it was 6,149,000.⁹ There were more people and there was more money to spend: British GDP rose by approximately 246 per cent (compared with 80 per cent in continental Europe). Correlating the rise in literacy with population growth, and an upward trend in disposable income reveals the remarkable growth of the English reading public over the course of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁰ In 1700, the English reading public aged fifteen and above was about 1,267,000. By 1756, it was more like 1,894,000.¹¹ And all those people had better and better ways of accessing books – the improvement of transport networks across the country, the development of the Post Office, and the role of coffee houses and, later, libraries were all crucial to the growth of readers and reading in this period.

Forms of Confusion

The second historical phenomenon of the period that is crucial to its culture of misunderstanding is the peculiar flourishing of densely referential literary forms that relied on reader interaction. The proliferation

of ironic, coded, and allegorical works – of satirical forms dependent on shared understandings of subtext – means that rarely in the history of English literature has there been a body of texts so dependent on readerly interpretation to achieve an authorial vision. And rarely has there been a readership both in a dramatic state of flux and newly encouraged to interpret imaginative writing on their own terms. So what did these new and diverse readers find in front of them? One of the distinctive features of many works of the period is the hiding of names, places, and identities through a variety of textual and typographical features that signal almost instantly the clandestine or concealed nature of the text's meaning. Pages were pockmarked with half-written words and names, sometimes indicated through an initial and final letter, sometimes only a dash or series of asterisks. The use of palpably fictitious names such as 'Myrmillo', 'Horoscope', or 'Celia' forced readers into interactive engagement, asking them to supplement the text with their own knowledge of the setting or figures involved. Fictional works signalled their allegorical nature from the preface on, usually without spelling out the exact nature of the allegory. Contemporaries mocked the way in which such veneers of subterfuge became a way of spicing up otherwise unremarkable content. *The Female Tatler* observes that the combination of knowing and not knowing the identity of a subject of gossip made the revelation all the more alluring:

it is very easy by giving them Ingenious Nick-Names, and pointing at something or other remarkable about them, to let every body that is not a Stranger to the Town, know whom you mean without naming them, or being very particular; and when thus the Picture is drawn to the Life, whatever is writ underneath must be true, when the Hints that must make 'em known, are finished, put upon them what Scandal you please, it will go for Current.¹²

Other writers claimed that the meanings were hidden but self-evident:

We have several Ways here of abusing one another, without incurring the Danger of the Law. First, we are careful never to print a Man's Name out at length; but as I do that of Mr St——: So that although

every Body alive knows whom I mean, the Plaintiff can have no Redress in any Court of Justice. Secondly, by putting Cases; Thirdly, by Insinuations; Fourthly, by celebrating the Actions of others, who acted directly contrary to the Persons we would reflect on; Fifthly, by Nicknames, either commonly known or stamp'd for the purpose, which every Body can tell how to apply.¹³

Print forms used typography not to clarify content but to obscure it. Here, for example is the title page to a 1704 verse satire entitled *The M——d C——b; or, the L——th. Consultation* (figure 1).¹⁴ What on earth does this mean? It has no meaningful title, yet, although the key terms are blanked out, they do not appear to conceal names or seditious content: 'M——d' stands in for 'mitred', 'c——b' for club or cabal, and 'L——th' for Lambeth. The denial of disclosure is used to create an impression of controversial content rather than genuine protection of identity. There is no information about the author, nor publisher. Its two epigraphs tantalize with suggestions of treachery and vengeance but rely on some classical knowledge to achieve this. The first, famous quotation, 'Et tu Brute?', is Caesar's line to Brutus on realizing his betrayal, while the second quotation, 'Acheronta Movebo', comes from Book VII of Virgil's *Aeneid*: 'flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo' ('if Heaven I cannot bend, then Hell I will arouse').¹⁵ It is a form of paratext, which, like so much of the literature of the period, demands a lot of its readers at the point of entry. The pages which follow sustain this playful withholding of meaning with repeated references to 'm——d' bishops and 'L——th'. And they also supplement it with a scattering of blanks to disguise names:

Can W——r tell with Prophetick Vein,
When'er he'll be L——d Almoner again?
Can Gl——r, Br——l, Zealous O——rd know
The happy Time when they shall not be so.¹⁶

The M——d C——b is a satire relating to a very specific political issue, in this case debates over religious conformity during the early years of Queen Anne's reign. It uses occluded words and names as a way

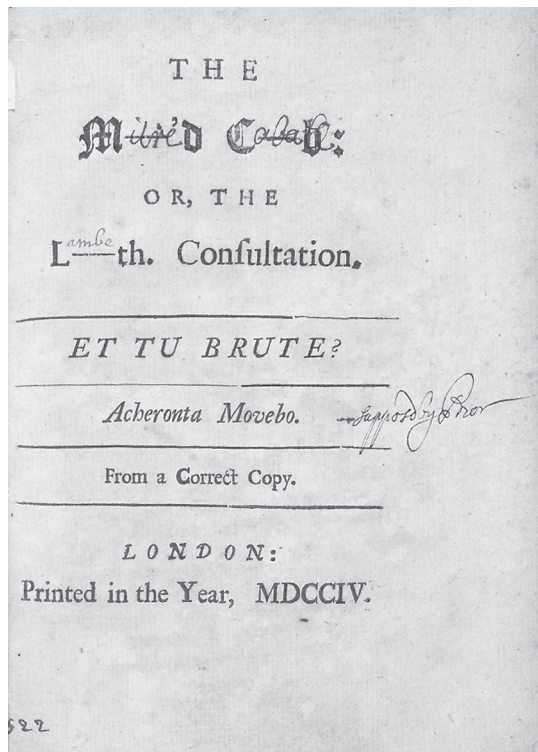


FIGURE 1. *The M—'d C—b: Or, The L—th. Consultation* (London, 1704), title page. William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, Los Angeles, *PR.3291.M682.

of signalling politically risky content and creating an interactive game for its readers, who are forced to complete identities in order to make meaning from the semi-complete text. Such ludic strategies are also used in very different kinds of works. *A Pipe of Tobacco: In Imitation of Six Several Authors*, a 1736 poem by Isaac Hawkins Browne, is a comic exercise in pastiche in which Hawkins Browne imitates six contemporary authors, attempting to hymn the virtues of a tobacco pipe with all the stylistic parody and bathos that that entails.¹⁷ The imitated authors are not anywhere named in the text, so it is left to the reader to firstly work out the intended subject, and secondly, how the resulting imitation relates to their previously published work. One annotated

copy in the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library helpfully provides the identities of the six: Colley Cibber, Ambrose Philips, James Thomson, Edward Young, Alexander Pope, and Jonathan Swift.¹⁸ The reader's literary knowledge is gratified (or not) by the identification of the imitated authors, and the joke only works if those identifications are made.

Different again is a work such as the Welsh poet Jane Brereton's *Poems on Several Occasions* (1744), a collection of occasional verses 'written for the amusement of the author, and three or four select friends.'¹⁹ This collection of sociable verse declares its origins in Brereton's local Wrexham social circle, and the content is heavily autobiographical. According to the preface, the poems were not designed for publication: 'only a few can be said to be prepared for Publication, as they were to make their Appearance in a feigned Name'. The contents of the volume both grant the reader access to the genteel friendship group, and withhold it. There are poems such as 'Epistle to Mrs Anne Griffiths', 'On seeing Mrs Eliz. Owen, now Lady Longueville, in an embroider'd Suit, all her own Work', and 'On Mrs Sybil Egerton's singing an Anthem in Wrexham Church' which clearly allude to episodes from the local life of the author. Alongside these there are titles which obscure identity, but which also allow those identities to be easily guessed: 'To J—n M—r, Esq'; 'To Miss W—ms, Maid of Honour to the late Queen'; 'To Mr Y—ke'. Here the interactive game of the presentation seems designed to create an impression of special access to a private world of a friendship group.

Yet at the same time as these forms of occluded meaning proliferated, authors also mocked their contemporaries for being absurdly suspicious. They laughed at their attempts to unpick the words in front of them, and charged them with galloping away with their ingenious hermeneutics, turning the most ordinary words and phrases into hidden codes. In *Gulliver's Travels* we hear of a particular type of reader who is

very dextrous in finding out the mysterious meanings of Words, Syllables and Letters. For Instance, they can decypher a Close-stool to signify a Privy Council, a Flock of Geese, a Senate, a lame Dog an

Invader [. . .] When this Method fails, they have two others more effectual which the Learned among them call Acrosticks and Anagrams. *First* they can decipher all initial Letters into political Meanings. Thus *N.* shall signify a Plot, *B.* a Regiment of Horse, *L.* a Fleet at Sea. Or *secondly* by transposing the Letters of the Alphabet in any suspected Paper, they can lay open the deepest Designs of a discontented Party. So, for Example, if I should say in a Letter to a Friend, *Our Brother Tom hath just got the Piles*, a Man of Skill in this Art would discover how the same Letters which compose that Sentence, may be analysed into the following Words; *Resist*;—*a Plot is brought home, The Tour.* And this is the Anagrammatick Method.²⁰

It was all very well for Swift to mock these kinds of over-elaborate interpretations, but slightly ironic in the context of his own works, which continue to test our abilities to discern their purpose and topical focus. What is, for example, Swift's real aim in *Gulliver's Travels*? The fact that there are well-developed schools of 'hard' and 'soft' interpretations of the final book shows little consensus on the overall meaning of the text, while *A Tale of a Tub*, a satire in defence of the Anglican church, was read in its own time either as an endorsement of religious heterodoxy, or as being a game with no clear purpose.²¹

All the examples discussed above represent creative forms which needed decoding, which were dependent on shared forms of knowledge, on shared interpretative strategies. In his essay 'What is the History of Books Revisited', Robert Darnton observed that 'of the many kinds of reading that developed in early modern Europe, one that I think deserves special attention is reading as game-playing. You find it everywhere, in libels, novels, and literary reviews, which constantly invite the reader to penetrate into secrets hidden between the lines or beneath the text.'²² Yet, as suggested above, such forms emerged at a moment at which the game itself was changing, in which shared bonds and understandings were under pressure.

This book explores what happens when tricky books collided with a transformed marketplace and a changing readership eager to engage

with literary texts. It shows how a combination of hyper-referentiality and a shifting dynamic between authors and readers created a particularly acute sense of puzzlement and confusion around the meaning of books and who ought to be able to read them. We don't often stop and wonder what effect these changing points of access and conditions of reading had on readerly competence, on the contracts between author and reader, and on the texts produced. Yet such shifts in print culture and readership are crucially related to the nature of reading and perceptions of reading, and this in turn fed the literature of the period. The history of reading, as well as the evidence of copies of books and of individual reader responses, offers us ways into better understanding how this all played out. *Reading It Wrong* draws on eighteenth-century discussions of the challenges of reading and interpretation, examining how readers were advised to negotiate partial comprehension, looking across the fields of scriptural, historical, and aesthetic understanding. Through a series of examples, we can see the impact that imperfect reading had on the literary works of the time. Rather than seeing the densely allusive and often *recherché* texts of the eighteenth century as a closed circuit of communication which we have to try to tap into, we might instead recognize the degree to which the literature of this period flourished in a climate of partial comprehension and a playful confusion of meaning. Many of the major works of the period depended on the fact that their readers wouldn't know all the answers. Some, like Pope's *Dunciad*, derived their satirical energy from such partial comprehensibility. That poem is not based on a readership that knows everything. Rather, it is dependent on a more flawed and intellectually vulnerable audience, one that has been trained to feel wrongfooted. Other works, like the social verse of the period, used their readers' partial knowledge of particular individuals and contexts to build a sense of exclusivity, or intimacy.

The critical neglect of this cloud of unknowing is partly a product of disciplinary and professional bias towards right reading. In our critical focus as editors, critics, and teachers focusing on correct or good interpretation, we haven't been able to recognize the many ways in which misreading is productive – it is generative of argument, intimacy, and

social cohesion. Our dominant models for thinking about ignorance – shame and silence – equip us poorly for framing partial understanding or misunderstanding in positive ways. The existence of a complex and mixed model of reading and readerly inclusion does not sit well with the ways we teach, edit, and describe this period, all of which, for different reasons, tend towards hypothesized notions of an ideal reader. In thinking again about the role of misunderstanding in the literary culture of the period we can start to move beyond assumptions about paradigmatic ideal readers who have tended to dominate accounts of the period, and instead see the historical, social, and creative value of imperfect reading. We can also move beyond a crude distinction between elite and non-elite readers: as this book shows, the culture of partial knowing was widespread, complex, and not solely determined by class and income.

Evidence

The material and anecdotal evidence of reading in the early eighteenth century shows us a complex picture of reception. Marginalia on eighteenth-century texts demonstrates that Augustan literary forms generated multiple forms of engagement. Most of the time we don't know the identities of individual annotators and can only guess at what their marks (or absence of marks) mean. But the collation of anonymous multiple marginal responses to works of the period display a proliferation of interpretation and a lack of consensus over the 'right' meaning. One detailed study of 149 different copies and all the various printed keys of Dryden's satirical mock Biblical poem *Absalom and Achitophel* shows that there were almost as many different readings of some individual characters in the mock biblical satire as there were annotated copies.²³ And within this sea of guesswork there were some readers who had only a very partial grip of the figures and places referenced in the allegory: one copy of Dryden's poem, in the library at Townend farm in Cumbria, has only five names identified on its pages.²⁴ My small-scale comparisons of Samuel Garth's *Dispensary*, or Pope's *Dunciad*, or Delariviere Manley's *The New Atalantis*, confirm a pattern of varied, partial,

and inconsistent application – contemporary readers entertained a much wider range of referentiality than we acknowledge on paper or in teaching.²⁵ The material evidence of individual annotators of poems with blanked out or fictional names shows that very few readers were able to complete all the hidden identities in a poem.

Letters and diaries offer further evidence of the mixed reception of new works. There is frequently a sense of bewilderment at texts that we now accept as part of the literary innovation of the period. A member of the Ottley family, relaying a first encounter with Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, was both impressed and confounded by what he read in his four-volume edition:

In these tracts are the strangest facts related that ever enter'd the Brain of man to forge, & the Alphabet as strangely distorted in feigned languages and inexpressible words; in short the whole is so unaccountably odd, yet wrote with a great deal of learning, & surprising Genius.²⁶

On her first dealings with John Gay's *Beggar's Opera*, the diarist Gertrude Savile spluttered that 'it was impossible to expect anything so odd and out of the way', while the trainee lawyer Dudley Ryder commented of Gay's earlier satirical play *The What D'Ye Call It*, 'It is thought he had some design to reflect upon some authors by it, but to me it seems as if he had no design at all but to write something very new and out of the way'.²⁷ And here is the Swiss theologian Jean Le Clerc talking about Jonathan Swift's prose satire, *The Tale of a Tub*: 'an odd game . . . goes on throughout the book, where we often do not know whether the author is making fun or not, nor of whom, nor what his intention is'.²⁸ This uncertainty was not just the preserve of those at a distance from the author. Jonathan Swift wrote to his close friend and collaborator Alexander Pope in July 1728 on reading an early printed version of the *Dunciad*: 'I have long observ'd that twenty miles from London no body understands hints, initial letters, or town-facts and passages; and in a few years not even those who live in London'.²⁹ He wrote to John Gay about his *Beggar's Opera*, 'I did not understand that the Scene of Locket and Peachum's quarrels was an imitation of one between Brutus and

Cassius till I was told it'.³⁰ John Arbuthnot wrote to Swift discussing *Gulliver's Travels*: 'Lewis [close friend and political ally] Grumbles a little at it & says he wants the Key to it'.³¹ And having got themselves an explanatory key to a work, early readers were not necessarily sure what *that* meant: 'His Excellency our Governour Burnet has also obliged me with the *Dunciad*, and a Key to it: But whither the Key be written by a Friend or an Enemy I found something difficult to determine'.³²

Across all the examples discussed in this book, acts of misunderstanding are found among very different types of readers. Sometimes misreading seems to be related to access to knowledge, and to class and gender, as, for example, in the Somerset writing master John Cannon's transcriptions of Latin he did not understand, or Ann Wolferstan's seemingly irrelevant listing of classical rulers in her edition of Juvenal. And sometimes it appears unconnected to social status: those we might expect to know the answers just didn't, like the figures at the political heart of Queen Anne's reign who were unable to unpick Delariviere Manley's recently published *New Atalantis*. And sometimes readers just had a strange sense of how best to understand things: the customs officer William Musgrave amassed pointless arcane biographical and genealogical detail in order to gloss secret histories of the early eighteenth century.

Two things are worth clarifying at this point: *Reading It Wrong* uncovers many different modes of reader engagement, from ignorance to wilful misinterpretation to uncertainty and muddle. There is an important distinction to be made between deliberate and accidental misreading, between having no answer to a puzzle, and having one different to that intended by the author. However, what all these modes have in common is that they are imperfect responses, and not part of a history of good historical reading with which we have become more familiar. And the second point is that while the transformation of print culture and the expansion of readership in the early eighteenth century clearly opened up many newly challenging textual encounters, it is not possible to describe misreading as a product of a single set of circumstances. It is, however, possible to see that much of the literature of the early eighteenth century created, depended upon, and suffered from acts of imperfect reading and interpretative confusion.

As the quotations and examples above suggest, there is much evidence of imperfect reading in this period: anecdotal evidence, material evidence of annotation, and history of reception. But it is important also to acknowledge the challenges posed by the evidence. As lots of critics have observed, the history of reading is generally the history of writing, of using textual marks to piece together something that is by its very nature impossible to capture. The commonest marking on a page is no marking. Or pen trials. We have to work quite hard to reconstruct reading habits from the slim evidence base of used books and pages. Does marginal annotation represent what readers did know, or didn't know? Sometimes it seems to indicate an absence of knowledge. For example, the National Art Library's copy of Jonathan Swift's edition of Pope's *Dunciad* contains a few markings by Swift (or perhaps Thomas Sheridan, who later owned it), but what was it that they registered on those pages about the Scriblerian masterwork?³³ The volume has got two annotations: next to the line 'Something betwixt a H*** and Owl' a handwritten note identifies H*** as 'Heydegger', clarifying that the opera manager Johann Heidegger is the intended recipient of this slur. And next to the line 'Sore sighs Sir G***' they have written 'Sir Gilbert Heathcoat', referring to the merchant and Whig politician. Heidegger and Heathcote were definitely not the only identities that either reader would have spotted in Pope's poem. It's much more likely that they were the ones they didn't get, and later found out. Another copy of the 1743 *Dunciad* only has one annotation, next to the line 'Behold yon Pair, in strict embraces join'd', which the reader has marked as 'Tom Burnet and Col Ducket'.³⁴ Why does this impossibly difficult work have only one annotation? Was this a reference that eluded the original reader? It may be that marginal glosses used to identify figures and references tell us more about an absence of comprehension than they do about what readers did know. But what seems more common is that early modern readers do not often use their marks to indicate a lack of comprehension – they are much more likely to mark a book with supplementary information or correction. So they might write the name of an author on the title page of a pamphlet of anonymous satire, and

summarize its contents below, as in the case of a copy of Defoe's *Shortest-Way with the Dissenters* whose title page bears the note 'Madam, this villainous tract was written by Daniel De Foe, a furious scribbler for the Whiggs with a wicked design to Blacken.'³⁵ Or they filled in the blanks in a printed page even when the meaning was absolutely clear and in no need of clarification: a copy of a work entitled *A Pair of Spectacles for Oliver's Looking-Glass Maker* (1711; figure 2), probably owned by the historian and collector Narcissus Luttrell, shows him busily filling in all the omitted letters from words which were completely uncontroversial and obvious, such as 'H——e of L——ds' or 'D' for (Duke) and 'K' (King).³⁶ Or, in a state of uncertainty over a precise identification, they list the possibilities: one owner of a copy of Pope's *Epistle to Bathurst* (figure 3) noted that 'old Cato' was 'Sir Edward Hungerford' while another later annotator added 'or Sir Edward Seymour Bart'.³⁷

Other readers acted like amateur textual critics, comparing different versions of a work and transcribing variants, as the Hardman family did with their 1733 copy of Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*.³⁸ Copies of works are commonly marked up with their owners' observations on printing errors and misquotes, misattributions, or cross references with other reading. The owner of *Rocks and Shallows Discovered: Or, the Ass kicking at the Lyons in the Tower*, writes at the end of the pamphlet: 'Thanks to my Patience, I am at last arrived to the *last* page of his Discourse, where the Author being sensible of drawing near his End, does not justify, but *freely acknowledges* all his *Mistakes*'. They complain next to a particular passage: 'these 2 words clashing so soon together & all ye Nonsense in this Pamphlet is in Imitation of the Author in his Discourses'.³⁹ The annotator of an edition of Jacob Tonson's *Miscellanies* uses their notes to attribute verses to unnamed authors, and to copy in supplementary verses to create a fuller collection.⁴⁰ A reader named William Fletcher uses his comments on a copy of *Aesop's Fables* to correct the verse to make it scan more smoothly, commenting in the margins 'trochaic verse' and 'anapestic'. On one page, next to a correction of the translation is written 'a mistake deserving correction'.⁴¹ The owner of a copy of Pope's *Works* evidently decided to use their marginal space

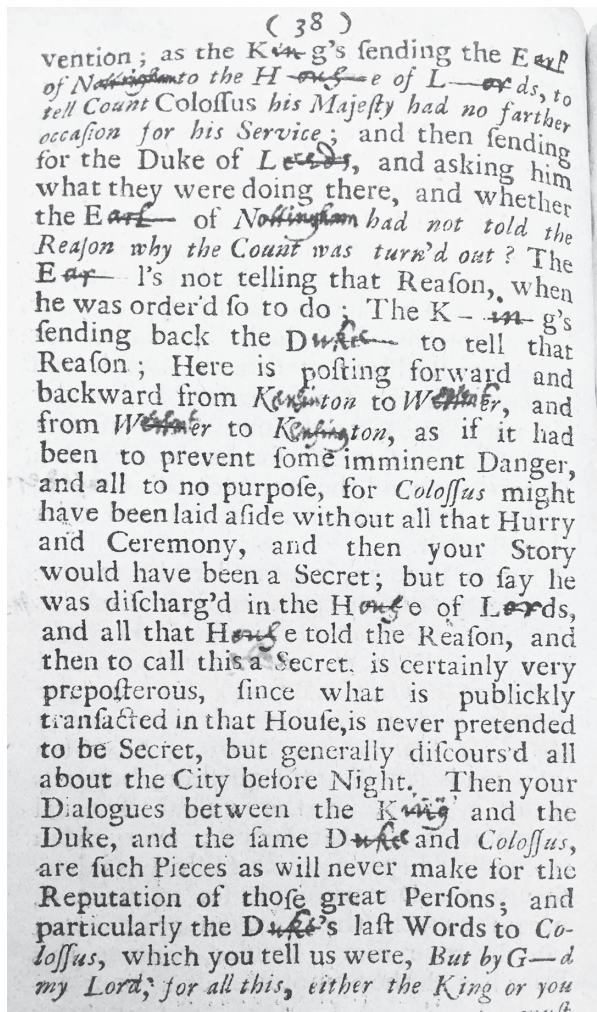


FIGURE 2. A Pair of Spectacles for Oliver's Looking-Glass Maker (London: J. Baker, 1711), Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, College Pamphlets 906 9, p. 38.

to set Pope right about his claims for the superiority of classical languages over English: where Pope had written that Greek and Latin 'became universal and everlasting while ours [is] extremely limited both in extent and duration' the annotator comments 'but neither is used in

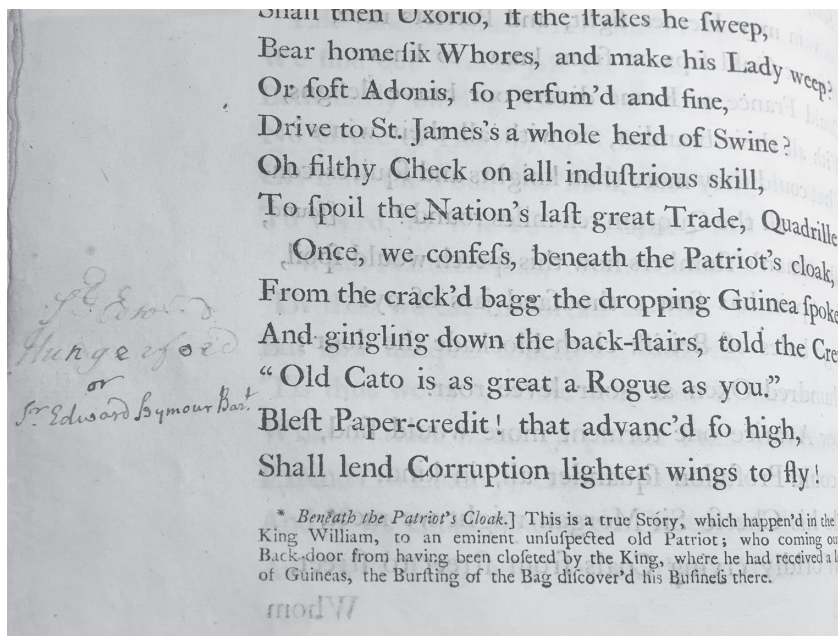


FIGURE 3. Alexander Pope, *Of the Use of Riches, An Epistle To the Right Honourable Allen Lord Bathurst* (London: J. Wright, 1732 [1733]), British Library, C.59.h.9.(4.), p. 4.

any Nation nor Living in any one except by Grammars & Dictionaries: which omit the Pronunciation.⁴² A woman identifying herself as ‘Eliz Robinson Jun.’ marked her copy of *The Grove; or a Collection of Original Poems* (1721) only very slightly, making a correction to the translation in Lewis Theobald’s translation of the Greek poet Musaeus’s *Hero and Leander*, ‘Her ~~æsie~~ lilly Fingers with dumb Transport prest’, and ‘snatch’d her ~~æsie~~ lilly hand away.’⁴³

We can also find evidence of readers who complete missing information, and as they do so, they replicate the same habits of omission in their annotations that they found in the printed original. An anonymous reader of John Dryden’s 1680 comedy *Mr Limberham: or the Kind Keeper* clearly understands that the reference to ‘Fleckno’ in the dedication refers to the playwright Thomas Shadwell, and in the margin writes ‘alias Sh—well.’⁴⁴ From whom are they hiding this disclosure, and why do they feel the need to hide it? Perhaps the habits of concealment and

indirection so prevalent in the literature of the time rubbed off on readers in ways that don't necessarily make logical sense now. It is hard to characterize all these discrete interventions collectively, but as an overall picture, it is easier to find readerly self-assertion than readerly doubt. However little they knew, eighteenth-century readers often wanted to show they knew it.⁴⁵

Letters and diaries show a similar pattern – readers don't tend to show off their ignorance. The Sussex shopkeeper Thomas Turner left multiple volumes of detailed diaries, tracking his reading habits and his responses to individual texts. He was reading some sophisticated works and he was not a sophisticated man.⁴⁶ His evaluative comments give insights into the ways in which he understood major works, and he frequently offers up his own judgements on the books he has encountered. Across the five volumes of diaries we learn what he made of works ranging from the *Odyssey* and *Iliad* to *Paradise Lost*, to Richardson's *Clarissa* and Shakespeare's *Merry Wives of Windsor* and *King Lear*. It is intriguing that Turner only very rarely says that he has not understood what he is reading, that it is beyond him, or that he has misinterpreted it: 'Tho. Davy supped with us and stayed near 3 hours with us. I also read Bally's poem on the wisdom of the Supreme Being, which I think is a very sublime piece of poetry and almost too much so for my mean capacity. But as I find the author's views are good, I do, as I am bound in duty, like it very much.'⁴⁷ 'Read part of Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding*, which I find to be a very abstruse book.'⁴⁸ We might also note here the way in which appreciation is not dependent on full comprehension: George Bally's poem is approved of because its author's views are approved of, despite the fact that Turner isn't quite sure he understands it.

The diaries of other non-elite readers are similarly unforthcoming on the problems of understanding. John Cannon, a self-taught ploughboy and shepherd turned scribe and notary living in the Somerset levels in the first decades of the eighteenth century was a wide reader.⁴⁹ With minimal formal education, he cannot have grasped all the allusions and classical tags in the contemporary satires and literary works that he cites, but nowhere does he state this, or register any doubt about his

interpretative abilities. This habit of omission may be particular to the aspirant reader: in the letters of elite readers we tend to find more examples of uncertainty. There is also a gendered element to the admission of ignorance – eighteenth-century women's correspondence often reveals an anxiety about a lack of knowledge or understanding, particularly of scholarly or theological subjects. But it is worth bearing in mind that we may be looking for signs of habits and responses that readers were reluctant to commit to paper.

Understanding Misunderstanding

If we accept that, despite these evidentiary challenges, readerly incomprehension was a widespread phenomenon in the early eighteenth century, we might wonder how it was understood in its own time. Contemporary explanations for the gap between authorial intention and readerly understanding were varied. As we have seen, *The Female Tatler* declares that cloaked references were comprehensible to 'every body that is not a Stranger to the Town'. This idea that country readers, or those outside a particular metropolitan social group, were those most likely to struggle with occluded meaning is also evident in the prefaces to allegorical works and secret histories, which commonly blamed the interpretative lack in readers on geographical location. The preface to *The court-Spy; Or, Memoirs of St J-M-S'S* (1744) observed that:

Some *Country* Readers, indeed, may be at a loss to explain the *Characters*, introduc'd in the Place of those *Names* that were in the Original; which, for certain very *important* Reasons, he did not chuse to publish.⁵⁰

Other texts were prefaced with material suggesting that doubt over their meaning might be cleared up through consultation with others: they are suggestive of a world of sociable exchange of information that the reader might need to engage with in order to access meaning. *The Secret History of Arlus and Odolphus, Ministers of State to the Empress of*

Grandinsula (1710), for instance, a thinly fictionalized account of the change of ministry under Queen Anne, contains a 'Word to the Reader':

If upon the Perusal of the Title-page you find your self in the dark, whisper the first Honest Gentleman you meet (whom you will now easily distinguish by a certain new Life in his Looks) and you will be set right in a moment.⁵¹

It's worth considering that although many of the dominant historiographical narratives of this period have focused on the ways in which spheres of knowledge and understanding were opening up through the democratization of literature, or the spread of enlightenment values, this was also a literary culture in which muddle and uncertainty were at the heart of the reading experience. And that context was in itself generative of much of the literature of the period. We can see this both in the proliferation of forms of print designed to demystify the acts of interpretation and meaning-making, either through generalist literary criticism or keys to satirical works. And we also see it in literary forms which played with readerly comprehension, from the tantalizing references to coterie circles of sociable verse, to the ironies of works such as *Tale of a Tub* or the *Dunciad*, to the blanks, asterisks, and allegories of countless poems, fictions, and prose pamphlets of the era. These texts were built to encourage readerly misunderstanding as much as their authors were frustrated by it. They often depended on a readership that didn't or couldn't know all the answers. As this book shows, the response of contemporary readers shows very varied forms of engagement and comprehension. In the flourishing of misunderstanding or uncertainty in this period we find positives. A shared sense of not understanding among readers could be a form of community building.⁵² It also seems clear that the act of encouraging readerly confusion or incomprehension was a desired effect in many literary contexts, helping to support a sense of a coterie, or an argument about cultural decline. Rather than seeing incomprehension as a form of failure, we could also recognize it as a generative force, producing new works, new editions, and new forms of engagement. In examining the reading histories of texts which are neither time transcendent nor universally understood

in their own time, we gain transformative, historically nuanced insights into the big questions of literary history: meaning-making, intention, interpretation, access. This book puts the evidence of the printed reception of literary texts alongside the archival evidence of their material form and the marks made by their early readers to open up a lost history of misunderstanding.

The book falls into two halves. The first part explores the changing nature of readerly expertise and the intellectual contexts that have shaped how we think about misunderstanding. We begin with the present moment, and the way literary criticism, pedagogy, and editorial practice have positioned ideas of the ‘good reader’. The second chapter examines perhaps the most universal form of reading in the eighteenth-century – religious and biblical reading. The notion of ‘*sola scriptura*’, that the good Protestant reader could find salvation through the Bible alone, placed enormous pressure on the individual to work out God’s meanings. In an era of increasing textual democratization, scriptural decoding and unlocking offered an influential model for interpretation. In the third chapter we encounter the nature of access and expertise in classical knowledge, looking at how neoclassical in-jokes worked for the many eighteenth-century readers with mixed literacy in ancient languages. What did it mean to be an expert – what did it mean to be a good reader in the context of profound debates about the Ancients and Moderns and how to interpret words of the past? The fourth chapter takes us to the matter of literary criticism, and the move towards amateur, generalist, and polite appreciation of literary works enabled by contemporary periodicals and other print publications. Each one of these historical sections illustrates a profound shift in ideas about where knowledge comes from, who owns it, and how it might be used. Together they form an essential bedrock for thinking about how understanding and misunderstanding operate in the literature of the period.

The second half of the book explores the consequences of the culture of misunderstanding and misreading for literary texts. Chapter 5 explores the interactive puzzles of topical political satire, and the evidence of historical readers who can show us how the interpretative games of elusive verse forms might have played out in practice. Chapter 6 focuses

on the various ways hidden or allusive meaning was used to create intimacy and exclusivity in the social verse of the period. Chapter 7 examines the use of code, allegory, and the key in the popular scandal narratives of the period, and what this meant for matters of authorial responsibility and interpretative authority. And what about when all this went wrong? Chapter 8 shows what could happen when a book landed disastrously and was read in ways that were damaging to its author. In the concluding chapter we arrive at Pope's *Dunciad*, perhaps the high-water mark of playfully obscure satire in this period. Reading that mock-heroic poem in the context of so many forms of reading it wrong, we see we are all Pope's dunces.

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