Modern Reading in Historical Context: From Gutenberg to Naked Women

Transcript

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MODERN READING IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT:
FROM GUTENBERG TO NAKED WOMEN

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Until the middle of the 15th century reading involved an intimate encounter between a reader and a scribe. What
was read was a unique hand-produced or hand-copied manuscript. Then, around about 1440, a young
engraver and gem-stone carver had an ingenious idea. Instead of carving wooden blocks to reproduce
illustrations – which was already in practice - why not cut letters out to produce re-usable ‘type’? Over a period
of some years, he invested very large sums of money in his risky entrepreneurial venture which involved
adapting mechanical instruments used in wine-making and book-binding.

[Image 1- fruit press]

[Image 2 - binding studio]
The craftsman who came up with this ingenious idea was, of course, Johannes Gensleisch zur Laden zum
Gutenberg, known to us as Johann Gutenberg, or even just Gutenberg.

[Image 3]

In this woodcut, from 1568, the printer on the left is removing a newly-printed page from the press, while the
one on the right is inking the text-blocks for the next impression. From old price tables it has been calculated
that, around 1600, a printing press could produce some 3,500 impressions. This is based on what we know of
the average day’s work for workmen around the time – a gruelling fifteen hours.

And one common conception of what the ‘modern’ period of history is, is that it coincides with the invention of
movable type and the printing press in the mid-15th century. So our ideas about historical periods can be said to
be very closely bound up with the history of reading itself.

So tonight’s lecture, ‘Modern Reading in Historical Context’ begins with Gutenberg’s extraordinary invention. I’d
like to sketch out the relationship between the rise of printing and literacy and the rise of urban populations. I’d
then like to return to the fifteenth century to explore the key role that the Reformation also played in the rise of
reading.

Between 1450 and 1455 Gutenberg printed a bible – the first ever book printed from moveable type. And
presses were soon established throughout Europe: in Italy in 1465, in France in 1470, in Spain in 1472, in
Holland and England in 1475, in Denmark in 1489. Interestingly, the printing press didn’t reach the New World
until 1533 when a press was set up in Mexico City. And it wasn’t until 1638 that Cambridge, Massachusetts, had
a printing press.

The movable-type printing press was clearly the great innovation in early modern information technology. But
what difference did the advent of the printing press make to people’s lives? For the first time in human history it
was possible to reproduce reading material quickly and in very large quantities. And, of course, printed books
were very much cheaper than manuscripts. Within 50 years of its invention, the price of books dropped by
roughly 66%. This made a dramatic difference to the way ideas spread, speeding up the process and widening
the circle in which they circulated. And some historians have argued that the printing press was one of the most
revolutionary inventions in our history.

But while historians make a convincing case, economists, until recently, have been unable to prove that the
printing press – and the increase in reading that came with it - made any difference to productivity and the
economy overall. Some economists have even concluded that the economic impact of the printing press was
limited and this would mean, by extension, that reading and literacy were equally marginal to the economies of
the sixteenth century. But a study undertaken in 2011 examined data on cities in relation to the diffusion and
adoption of the printing press and examined the technology's impact from a new perspective. The study
provided estimates to ‘show that cities that adopted the printing press in the late 1400s enjoyed no growth
advantages prior to adoption’, that is there was nothing to give them any expansion advantages over the urban
settlements with which they were then compared. However, ‘after the adoption of the printing press they grew
by at least 20 percentage points—and as much as 78 percentage points—more than similar cities that did not
adopt the printing press in the period 1500-1600. These estimates imply that the impact of printing accounted
for at least 18% and as much as 68% of European city growth between 1500 and 1600’. So, this suggests that
reading was key to economic growth in the period.

At the same time, between roughly 1500 and 1800, European cities provided the fertile ground for the ideas,
activities, and groups that produced modern, capitalist economic growth. So these recent findings suggest that
movable type print technologies – and literacy – ‘had very substantial effects in European economic history
through their impact on cities.’

The Industrial Revolution from the late 18th century on, brought further changes, first to the printing processes, including typesetting. Friedrich Koenig (1774–1833) developed a printing press powered by steam. The first commercial unit was bought by the London Times in 1814. [Image 4]. It could print 1100/hr, which was a very significant improvement on hand-operated presses. And it was principally Koenig’s steam-machine that accounts for the birth, and rapid rise, of the ‘daily’. Newspapers were widely circulated and widely read. Then, in 1835, the first commercial ‘web’ press was invented. Instead of printing a whole series of sheets of paper, a ‘web’, or continuous roll of paper was used. The paper was then cut into ‘pages’ after it had been printed. Finally, in 1844, Richard Hoe (1812–1886) in the United States developed the rotary press [Image 5]. And this press could print an astonishing 20,000 copies per hour.

The Industrial Revolution (including printing and its knock-on effects), which developed quickly in England from 1750-1850, and spread to the continent after the Napoleonic Wars, brought about other profound changes including the expansion of towns and cities. Throughout Europe, only 17% of the population lived in cities in 1801 but by 1851, only fifty years later, the percentage had increased to 35%, and by 1891, it was 54%. [Figs 4,5,6]

The growth of cities was most marked in England in the first half of the nineteenth century with an ‘industrial Midlands’ – Manchester, Birmingham and Leeds – developing in an area which, only some half century earlier, had been almost completely rural. [Fig 4/6] Meanwhile the great capitals and cities of London, Paris, Vienna, Berlin, Rome, Madrid, and New York grew apace.

A corollary of this was that towns and cities became the privileged places for reading. Books found their way into rural areas, of course, but the immediate availability of reading material in urban areas gave them a distinct edge particularly given that literacy rates also tended to be higher in the towns and cities, and leisure time, while limited for the majority, was greater than in rural areas. The rise of the railways and a modern postal service improved matters but it is perhaps only the Internet that has really levelled the playing field. One German tourist, at the end of the eighteenth century penned an astonished account of the state of affairs in Paris:

Everyone is reading.... Everyone, but women in particular, is carrying a book around in their pocket. People read while riding in carriages or taking walks; they read at the theatre in the interval, in cafes, even when bathing. Women, children, journeymen and apprentices read in shops. On Sundays people read while seated at the front of their houses; lackeys read on their back seats, coachmen up on their boxes, and soldiers keeping guard.

But leaving the history of reading, printing and its relationship with the rise of modern cities aside for a moment, we need to return to the sixteenth century, and remember that Gutenberg’s invention coincided with, and of course further fuelled, another profoundly significant event, a major theological schism in Western Christianity – the Protestant Reformation. In 1519 the Roman theologian Sylvester Prieiras declared that the Bible had to remain a ‘mystery’ and that it could only be truthfully transmitted through the power and authority of the Pope. Luther, by contrast, claimed that God’s grace descended as a function of individual faith and not through the agency of the Church and he, and others of like mind, particularly in Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland, argued that everyone – man, woman and child – had the ‘divine right’ to read. Luther’s position wasn’t altogether new but the circumstances were. The invention of printing, together with the German princes’ desire to break free from the controlling power of Rome, conspired to protect Luther and to allow for the dissemination of ideas. Luther protested against indulgences, for example, and this led to the production of literally thousands of poorly-written and cheaply-produced pamphlets that circulated throughout the Holy Roman Empire. So this is a moment of extraordinary historical coincidence. Printing promoted the Reformation and the Protestant reformers promoted literacy and reading, which in turn supported the rise of print culture. Bibles were translated into the vernaculars – that’s to say the languages of everyday life - which meant that everyone who could read, could read the Bible, regardless of whether or not they had had a classical education. Erasmus, who kept his distance from Luther and looked for reform within the Church, nevertheless shared Luther’s conviction that direct access to the Bible was in the interests of the faith. Erasmus wrote, ‘I wish that even the weakest woman should read the Gospel- should read the Epistles of St Paul. And I wish that these were translated into all the languages so that they might be read and understood, not only by Scots and Irishmen, but also by Turks and Saracens’ (by which he meant Muslims). When Luther was working on his German translation of the Bible he advised those who were helping him, ‘You must ask the woman in her house, the children in the streets, the common man in the market, and look at their mouths, how they speak and translate that way; then they’ll understand and see that you’re speaking to them in German.’

From the fifteenth century on most Church traditions doggedly encouraged literacy for both boys and girls, and parents were enjoined to provide their children and other members of their household with a Christian education. The practice of learning the Ten Commandments, of reciting psalms and prayers, and becoming familiar with Bible readings, all encouraged broader reading skills. But despite the teaching of these basic reading skills, few ordinary people became prolific readers in part because of a lack of reading material. It remained the case, from the fifteenth century until the eighteenth, that the vast majority of serious readers – as we might call them - were members of the aristocracy, the clergy and women religious, doctors and wealthy merchants. Some less wealthy tradesmen – and indeed tradeswomen – exercised their literacy skills in their work but few owned books. And the limited number of books owned by the literate went hand in hand with ‘intensive reading’ as it has become
known in the history of the book. All but the wealthy, who might collect and have established their own private libraries, or those who had access to medieval university libraries, for example, would read and re-read a limited number of books.

But a literate ‘middle class’ we might say - slowly emerged. Crudely speaking the end of the Middle Ages marked the beginning of a gradual rise of a middle class that began to control new economic and commercial enterprises. With wealth came an increased desire to play a part in political processes (further fuelled by and fuelling the rise of newspapers) and a wish to participate in cultural activities which had previously been the almost exclusive privilege of the wealthy.

By the eighteenth century, in England, a fortuitous combination of events conspired further to boost reading: the rise of education and literacy, cheaper printing and paper-making techniques, better transport systems and, crudely speaking, a general political consensus that literacy strengthened nationhood and the economies of competing European nations. The most radical changes in eighteenth-century reading took place in England, followed by France and Germany, and then the rest of Europe. By the turn of the century the newly-independent United States of America opened up as a rapidly growing and particular market. Literacy rates in some areas of the United States were more impressive than anywhere else in the world. In the decade between 1787 and 1797, 84% of New Englanders and 77% of Virginians signed their wills; a crude measure of literacy, or course, but significantly higher than anywhere else.

This chart shows the sudden rise in the number of titles published in Europe. [Image]

So what was this ever-growing audience of readers reading? Newspapers and journals, sermons and manuals - but above all novels. Here is a graph produced by the English Short Title Catalogue of the British Library: [Image]

So what we see is the meteoric rise of novel reading. Poetry and theatre are still popular as are sermons and other religious tracts, histories and books of instruction. These too are on the rise, but overtaken by far by the novel.

And how do we explain it? In his seminal study, The Rise of the Novel (1957), Ian Watt hypothesised that the major works of Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding, constituted the beginnings of the modern novel. In an earlier draft he had devoted a first chapter to a theoretical exploration of the formal qualities of the modern novel. But he thought it dull to read and lacking in the complete intellectual rigour which he sought in all his writings. So he abandoned the entire chapter and began instead, ‘If Defoe, Richardson and Fielding constituted the beginnings of the modern novel...’.

[ Watt remarkable not just as a scholar on Eng. Lit.; @ C'bridge, WWII, Singapore, Japanese prisoner of war camp for 3 yrs building Burma railway; 12,000 prisoner died, serious malnuitrition, 2 yrs later C'bridge PhD (1947)!]

Novels by three of the most widely-read authors of the eighteenth century are in part, he argued, the result of changes in who had access to reading, a new sense of individualism, including economic individualism (crudely each for himself or herself), and of the ‘spread of Protestantism, especially in its Calvinist or Puritan forms’ (p. 60). These factors influenced the movement to individualize characters – moving away from ‘types’ or caricatures, and to present detailed and convincing descriptions of setting and situation which could readily be imagined by the reader. Watt sought to demonstrate that biographical, sociological, and historical knowledge explain the forms of works of art. He showed that this understanding both facilitates the reader’s ability to retrieve what the author wrote while at the same time allowing the reader to understand cultural history in a way that the author and his or her contemporary readers would have been unable. Literature, Watt pointed out, was important not only because it reflected the Zeitgeist – the Spirit of the Age - but also because it in turn became a significant part of cultural and intellectual history exerting a force in its own right.

Watt’s main contentions can be summed up as follows:

1. He lays emphasis on the way in which the ‘middle class’ authors Defoe and Richardson challenged Augustan values (order, clarity decorum) and places their challenge in an historical context. The ‘rise’ of the novel becomes an expression of, and a challenge to, traditional class hierarchies (he should have added gender hierarchies too), to the dominance of the aristocracy, to the central position of what he terms the Anglo-Catholic Church, in the nation’s religious life, and to the accepted conventions of literary genres and notions of decorum.

2. Watt sees novels as trying to address certain formal ‘problems’ and conducting ‘inquiries’ into the possibilities of the genre of the novel itself. Novels are, after all, also ‘about’ what fiction can and can’t do. At some point as readers we can stop ‘believing’ what we’re reading and simply give up on what we’re reading.

3. He argues that readers desires for certain kinds of vicarious experience particularly in relation to private lives, individualism, and their economic motives, were themselves factors in creating the eighteenth-century novel.

4. He conceives the development of the novel in terms of a growth from simpler to more complex forms and the eighteenth-century novel as a necessary stage in the development of English fiction, standing in the same kind of
relation as early Elizabethan drama might to Shakespeare. For Watt, the novel doesn't fully realise itself, its full potential, until Austen: 'It cannot be claimed that either [Richardson or Fielding] completely achieved that interpenetration of plot, character, and emergent moral theme which is found in the highest examples of the art of the novel' (p. 15). But Austen wouldn't have been able to do what she did without the work of her predecessors: 'Jane Austen faces more squarely than Defoe, for example, the social and moral problems raised by economic individualism and the middle class quest for improved status; she follows Richardson in basing her novels on marriage and especially on the proper feminine role in the matter; and her ultimate picture of the proper norms of the social system is similar to that of Fielding although its application to the characters and their situation is in general more serious and discriminating' (p. 298).

4 In his praise of Austen's innovations or refinements, Watt writes: 'She was able to combine into a harmonious unity the advantages both of realism of presentation and realism of assessment, of the internal and of the external approaches to character; her novels have authenticity without diffuseness or trickery, wisdom of social comment without a garrulous essayist, and a sense of the social order which is not achieved at the expense of the individuality and autonomy of the characters’ (p. 297).

5 Finally, by arguing that the author might be better understood with reference to the historical background of the period, and the world reflected in the novel, he disputed the then popular reliance on psychology – particularly Freud and Jung – to make sense of the novel, its characters or the author.

Watt's The Rise of the Novel changed the way the modern novel is read – by those who read his study! All works of literary criticism should in the end, change the way we read – otherwise what is their raison d'être? To sum up, Watt encouraged novels to be read within a particular historical context that informs us of how they were read when they were first published, and one which gives us a sense of why the author wrote the work he or she did, and how he or she envisaged that it might in turn be read.

So, we know that there was a sudden rise in the novel in the mid-eighteenth century and Watt's explanations for that rise seem to me to be very convincing. Remarkably, there have been no absolute or substantive complete refutations of Watt's theory in the fifty years plus since its first publication. As a footnote I should add that at this point – the period Watt focuses on - 'intensive reading' (what happened when people had access to very few books) is replaced by 'extensive' reading, when newspapers, journals and the novels flooded the market. But how did people read in the modern period? How did they engage with novels? As I emphasised in my last lecture on 'Ancient Reading in Historical Context', I'm interested – as Watt was - both in the 'what?' in relation to people's reading, but also the 'how?' Reading is a very funny business. To substantiate this point I should ask - why is it that when we re-read a work that we read earlier in our life that we can have a distinct feeling that the book has changed? It hasn't - but we have. Reading, at least when it comes to complex texts, is not a straightforward and stable process. So there are two key questions about the novel when in the ascendant: what were people reading? And how? The second is much more difficult to ascertain and in my view much more important and intriguing. How was the new market-share leader in reading – the novel - read? How 'seriously' was reading taken? How did reading affect people's ideas, in terms of how they then wanted to live – whether social, religious, philosophical, political, or gender-related or any other of the ways in which reading can inform how we'd like to live? The history of the book can tell us about what was published when, and at what cost. It can tell us about the size of editions and often how publications were disseminated. It can tell us whether or not a title is listed in a library catalogue. It can tell us - to some degree about reception - if and when a book was reviewed or discussed and discussions were recorded. But given the very private nature of most novel-reading and the fact that it is generally ephemeral, leaving no trace, what can we say about how people read? It's a huge subject and tonight I'd like to look simply at two cases. The first is the startling case of Goethe's The Sorrows of Young Werther (1774). The second concerns the rise of the novel – by women authors, enjoyed by women readers.

In 1774, two hundred and forty years ago, Goethe published a novel called The Sorrows of Young Werther. It is an epistolary novel (that is made up mostly of letters), and it is in some ways obviously autobiographical. Now, on 30th OCTOBER 1772, two years before the publication of the novel, Karl Wilhelm Jerusalem, a friend of Goethe's, shot and killed himself with a pistol borrowed from J.C. Kestner, another of Goethe's friends. Goethe had first met Jerusalem when he was a student in Leipzig, and their friendship was confirmed during the summer of 1772, in Wetzlar, central Germany. Needless to say, the tragedy made a profound impression on Goethe, and The Sorrows of Young Werther can be seen as a way of trying to vindicate his friend. Jerusalem's death was presumably discussed by Goethe and other friends of Jerusalem. Much of what appears in the fictional Werther's letter of 12th August, 1771 in The Sorrows of Young Werther, may have been a summary of the discussion Goethe himself may have used in trying to make sense of, or even to justify, Jerusalem's suicide. In addition, there are various obvious parallels between Jerusalem's life and Werther's, not least their shared unhappy (and unrequited) love for a married woman. The rest of Goethe's novel is largely from his autobiography. He was passionately attached to Charlotte Buff, later the wife of Kestner, and the letters that Goethe wrote to her bear close resemblance to Werther's to the fictional Lotte.

As Bayard Quincy Morgan wrote: 'The result of this combination of actualities was a milestone in German literature. Werther is the first German novelette (a form in which German writers have excelled), the first German epistolary novel and the first German work of any kind to make both its author and his country's literature internationally known. Translations appeared promptly in France and England, where twenty six separate editions (of a translation from the French) were published up to 1800. No less a realist than Napoleon was a great
admiring of the story, which he is said to have read seven times, and which he discussed with Goethe when they met in 1808. In Germany the work created a tremendous sensation: within twelve years after its first publication twenty unauthorized editions had been issued. The Werthertracht (Werther costume), consisting of blue tailed coat, yellow waistcoat and trousers with high boots (16th September 1772), was adopted everywhere and was worn at Weimar by the court when Goethe went there in 1775. ‘I should add that it initiated one of the earliest cases of intensive merchandizing in Germany. Scenes from the novel decorated porcelain, fans, and even buttons; silhouettes of ‘Lotte’ circulated; a perfume was named after Goethe’s hero (eau de Werther); and the Werther costume could be seen in the pages of fashion books. For those of you who know the novel, its extraordinary success on publication make strike you as somewhat puzzling. It remains a moving, and in many ways believable story, but it is difficult to take the excesses of emotional outpourings seriously. Not one of my three sons, all in their twenties, however taken with a young woman would, I think, ‘shed a thousand tears’, or impress ‘a thousand kisses’ on a picture of her. The Sorrows of Young Werther needs to be read as Watt would have us read. It shows us how young men felt and behaved in the eighteenth century and the way people in the eighteenth century liked to think that a lover’s devotion should express itself.

More dramatic still is the fact that it was said that people in many countries were so persuaded by the novel that, if disappointed in love they imitated Werther’s manner of death. According to Goethe, ‘My friends…. thought that they must transform poetry into reality, imitate a novel like this in real life and, in any case, shoot themselves; and what occurred at first among a few took place later among the general public. . . .’ (Goethe, quoted in Rose, 1929) That there was significant imitation of Werther’s suicide was never demonstrated conclusively but we do know that various authorities were sufficiently concerned to move them to ban the book in, for example, Italy, Leipzig, and Copenhagen.

It is difficult to see how today, one might ascertain whether or not there was a sudden rise in the suicide rates of broken-hearted young men in the eighteenth century, but recent research by psychiatrists suggests there almost certainly is a ‘Werther effect’ as copy-cat suicide is known in psychiatric work today. As a result, many countries have now devised guidelines for the media to follow when reporting suicides. It turns out that it is not the fact of a suicide that can prove influential but the manner in which it was reported. Contrariwise, trying to prevent suicide by the method of reporting has very recently been named the ‘Papageno effect’, after the character of that name in Mozart’s opera ‘The Magic Flute.’ Papageno fears that he has lost his love, Papagena, and is planning his death when he is prevented at the last minute by three child-spirits who suggest that he rings his magic bells to summon Papagena. She duly appears.

So the anecdotal evidence of the suicides provoked by reading The Sorrows of Young Werther begins to look more convincing. But I’d like to propose a further reason for its credibility, to add to the recent evidence of psychiatry, and that is to do with the narrative technique of the novel. The epistolary form of the novel is more peculiar than the term ‘epistolary’ suggests. Unlike earlier epistolary novels, Goethe’s has a peculiarly original distinction and that is that Werther’s correspondent’s letters are missing. So Werther writes to his friend, the pragmatic Wilhelm, but the reader isn’t able to see his replies. The reader, therefore, becomes Wilhelm’s stand-in. Eighteenth-century readers would be used to novels with a clear moral message, often articulated by the narrator. But reading Werther we are left to intuit Wilhelm’s responses on the basis of Werther’s subsequent letter. Having identified so completely with Werther, readers then have to make sense of the sudden and disturbing suicide which the ‘editor’ (who appears late on in the book), informs us of at the end. I would argue that it is this – the manner of telling of the tale – that has such a profound effect on the reader. We’re left to try to make sense of it much as Goethe was when Jerusalem shot himself. We have, to a degree, to tell ourselves the tale. And some young men may well have done this in a way which deepened their sadness. Others may have conducted a different – and more optimistic story. Interestingly, as we heard earlier, it appears to be the manner of the telling of real suicides in the press, that has to be so carefully handled in order to minimise the possibilities of copy-cat suicide. So to sum up the answer to the question, ‘how was Goethe’s book read’, we can conclude that it is very likely that some young men took it extremely, fatally, tragically, seriously.

So from Goethe I’d like to move on to women authors of the eighteenth century, partly because Watt didn’t concern himself with them much, but also because I’d argue – I’m not alone - that they are a very important part of the ‘rise of the novel’, and they give us interesting insights into the ‘how’ of how some women, at least, read in the eighteenth century. A typical example of a woman writer’s enormous influence, and popularity with readers, who was also much read in translation, was the aristocratic but later impoverished Mme de Genlis. She was largely self-educated and like many women of the period both a great reader herself and keenly interested in the education and the promotion of women’s reading and pedagogy more broadly. She was much struck (not wholly favourably) by her reading of Rousseau’s famous educational novel in five books, Emile: or, On Education, published in 1762. One of the volumes focused specifically on the education of a girl, Sophie. According to Rousseau the education of young women was to be geared exclusively to men’s happiness:

Thus the entire education of women must be relative to men. To please men, to be useful to them, to be loved and honoured by them, to raise them when they are young, care for them when they are grown-up, to console them, to make their lives agreeable and gentle – these are the duties of women in all times and this is what they must be taught from childhood. Rousseau did believe that women should read to ‘cultivate their minds’ but, again, for the purposes of pleasing their husband and his social circle. Women’s conversation would thus be ‘pleasing but not brilliant, and thorough but not deep…. When people talk to her they always seem to find what
she says attractive’.
Rousseau claimed that his theories were based on the directions of ‘Nature’ and it was this emphasis that led, no sooner were his tomes out, to their banning in both Paris and Geneva. They became European bestsellers all the same and no doubt in part because of Rousseau’s ideological extremism. At the time of the French Revolution Emile served as one of the inspirations for what became a new national educational system. During the second half of the eighteenth century (1751–96) it appeared in no less than sixty-one English editions, most likely making it the most read book in England, after the sceptical philosopher Voltaire. Mme de Genlis was both shocked and impressed by it and her reading inspired her to write her own educational treatise, Adèle et Théodore, in 1782. Tellingly, the girl’s name is ahead of the boy’s in her title. Its popularity in England almost eclipsed the reception given to Rousseau and Voltaire. Genlis objected to Rousseau’s libertinism, particularly his claim that original sin does not exist, which she saw as a direct threat to Christian principle. But she also objected to Rousseau’s prescriptions for only limited female education. This runs through Adèle and is expressed fully and explicitly in the third volume of her Veillées du Château (Late Night Tales at the Castle; 1784). This work was her most successful to date. The initial print-run of 7,000 copies sold out in eight days. It was immediately translated into numerous foreign languages with at least sixty printings in France, Britain, America, Germany, Spain and Italy. What Genlis had to say about women’s education and the ways in which men have controlled it was a direct attack on Rousseau:

When men condescend, which is very seldom, to employ themselves a little on our education, they wish to give us vague notions, consequently often false, superficial knowledge, and frivolous talents….A man of letters, whose daughter gives evidence of wit and love of poetry, may be induced to cultivate these talents, but what will be her father’s first care? Why, to rob the young scholar of that confidence that inspires fortitude, and that ambition which surmounts difficulties. He prescribes bounds to her efforts and commands her not to go beyond them…. [He] traces a narrow circle round his young pupil over which she is forbidden to step. If she has the genius of Corneille or Racine, she is constantly told to write nothing but novels, pastorals and sonnets.

Genlis was admired for her relative conservatism but also for the novelty of her educational method and for her equal concern for the education of girls and boys. One of her most imaginative innovations was to make the reading – or the acting out, while reading – of short morality plays an integral part of education. She believed that this instilled the right values and was also an excellent way of honing literacy skills. The same method had been practised in Mme de Maintenon’s school for impoverished young gentlewomen at St Cyr. But nobody in the eighteenth century before Genlis had written new morality plays adapted to the needs of a young lady’s polite education. Her Théâtre à l’usage des jeunes personnes (1779–80) was successful as it was seen to be particularly suited to the education of young girls. The famous Mrs Elizabeth Montagu (1718–1800), social reformer, patron of the arts, hostess, writer and founder member of the Bluestockings, recommended it to her nieces. It was celebrated in the Critical Review, when first translated in 1781 (Theatre of Education), and described as ‘particularly serviceable to young women, whom they were principally calculated to instruct’.

Maria Edgeworth read Adèle et Théodore as soon as it was available and immediately began an English translation, but another translator published ahead of her. Other women readers were equally struck. Jane Austen approvingly refers to it in Emma, and Mary Wollstonecraft studied it carefully while writing her A Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792). But when Genlis arrived in England in 1791 in the wake of the French Revolution, the British public discovered that she was not altogether the rare case of a morally upright Continental woman writer she had been taken for: she had separated from her husband in 1782 and two of her daughters were most likely illegitimate. This was at a time when the apparent morality of an author’s life was often seen as a prerequisite for authoring moral works, and Genlis lost the admiration of many of her friends and readers including the Romantic poets and Frances Burney. But the sales of her books remained strong all the same. Reading Genlis alongside contemporary male writers allows us to see what she approved – or disapproved of in their writings and how she set the record straight – as it were.

The newfound confidence of many eighteenth-century women readers naturally prompted reactions. Figures like the Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713), statesman, politician, philosopher and highly-influential writer, sounded dire warnings. He had been tutored by the philosopher John Locke and is remembered above all for his letters to his illegitimate son, most of which are concerned with his and other young men’s education and which were published a year after his death. But he also campaigned vigorously against the modern novel and feared for its effects on women readers. In his work, Soliloquy, or Advice to an Author (1710), he criticised contemporary writers as rakish and flirtatious in their attempts to seduce their readers, particularly women, likening their works to ‘poisonous fungi, edifying mushrooms, fancy clothes and fancy fictions’.

Elizabeth Carter (16 December 1717 – 19 February 1806) was an equally serious and critical reader. She was strongly encouraged in her education by her clergyman father and learnt several modern languages, Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Arabic. She wrote some poetry but her major contribution was as a translator of works that she thought should be made accessible to English women readers, most importantly Francesca Algarotti’s Newtonismo per le donne (Newtonianism for Women, 1737). Despite its earnest and somewhat misleading title, it was a book she much admired and her translation became an eighteenth-century bestseller. It was a crucially important work and one of the main publications through which Newtonian ideas reached the general public in Europe. But it is not the dry anti-religious scientific treatise that the reader might expect. The book is in fact a lively and light-hearted dialogue between a chevalier (cavalier or knight) and a marchioness (la marchesa di
Through their delightful conversation, even banter, past theories of the nature of matter and light are sketched out and then dismissed as unsubstantiated. The setting is an Italian villa near Lake Garda and this location allows for the clever experimental use of dining rooms with mirrors, picture galleries, gardens and fountains to stage the spectacle of Newtonian optical science. By the end, the marchioness has to agree that Newton is right and not just about light, but almost everything else embraced by his philosophy. Algarotti allows for an extrapolation of experimental science into the realms of metaphysics, morals and politics – it was the only work of popular Newtonianism to be placed on the Catholic Index (1739). Carter had been well aware of the radical importance of the Italian work, disguised within a genteel rococo conversation. Hers was the first translation and others in English, French, German and Dutch followed it. Carter had proved herself one of the most discriminating women readers of the eighteenth century. It was by no means unusual for translators to provide titles for their works that were unlike the original; that Carter translated Allgarotti’s as closely as possible indicated her belief that women, above all, should read the work. What women chose to translate gives as a clear idea of the works of which they approved.

We also have the apparent evidence of women’s own testimonies in relation to their reading experiences. Numerous women exchanged letters with Richardson including contemporary women writers such as Sarah Fielding, Jane Collier, Elizabeth Carter and Hester Chapone. But by far the most important of Richardson’s woman ‘reader-critics’ as we might term them, was Lady Bradshaigh. She was from a landed family whose fortunes had fallen and then risen again and she was in many ways typical of his female audience. She had a dim view of intellectual women, not uncharacteristic of her class. Her voluminous correspondence with the novelist was circulated by Richardson in manuscript form among those close to him, and he considered publishing it, describing one section of it as ‘the best Commentary that cd. be written on the History of Clarissa’.

Lady Bradshaigh’s earliest letters to him, in 1748, were anonymous. In breathy prose she described her reading experience of Clarissa thus far:

Had you seen me, I surely would have moved your pity. When alone, in agonies would I lay down the Book, take it up again, walk about the room, let fall a flood of tears, wipe my eyes, read again, perhaps not three lines, throw away the book, crying out, excuse me, good Mr Richardson, I cannot go on; it is your fault – you have done more than I can bear; [I] threw myself upon my couch.

The difficulty is that this may or may not be self-parodying. It’s a further example of the problematics of not reading a novel within the contexts Watt advocates. To the modern reader it sounds melodramatic and one is therefore tempted to read it as gently self-mocking. On the other hand we see behaviour of this sort by characters in eighteenth century novels. Take Werther, for one.

This intimate and playful relationship between an author and a woman reader was far from uncommon. Alexander Pope corresponded with many of his women readers who were remarkably open in their enthusiasms or reservations about his work, particularly his portrayal of women. Henry Fielding’s sister, Sarah, herself a novelist, was her brother’s most important reader. She may well have also contributed to some of his writing. For over twenty years Jonathan Swift regarded Esther Johnson, ‘Stella’, as ‘his most valuable friend’. Between 1710 and 1713 he wrote a famous series of letters to her, later published as The Journal to Stella in Sheridan’s edition of 1784. Swift constantly asks her view of his latest writings. From his time to our own there has been speculation that the two were secretly married – since their relationship seemed as inexplicable then as now. In myriad ways, women readers exerted considerable and direct influence over what men wrote. They were not the passive, impressionable readers that some have cast them as.

And it’s with an image of a perhaps impressionable but not altogether passive woman that I’d like to end. Before I do, I should reassure you that I don’t believe the eighteenth century to constitute the end of the ‘modern period’ - and that I will be talking about reading in the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries in subsequent lectures. It’s partly the very peculiarity of reading in the eighteenth - suicides and all - that made me decide to make it the focus of this evening’s lecture. The big change as we move into the nineteenth century is that there are ever-growing pressures on women not to read novels. So, here’s the closing image. This is a painting by Antoine Wiertz (1806 -1865), entitled La Liseuse du roman. So a final answer to ‘how did women read in the modern period?’ would be with a view to pleasures, pleasures that some men and indeed women, wanted strongly to discourage.

Thank you.