REVIEW
Modernities, Polite and Vicious

Christopher Loar

Paul Keen

*Literature, Commerce, and the Spectacle of Modernity, 1750–1800*

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012


Simon Dickie

*Cruelty and Laughter: Forgotten Comic Literature and the Unsentimental Eighteenth Century*


The last two decades of scholarship in book history and print culture have provided new conceptual tools for scholars and students of eighteenth-century literature and culture. Critics are now able to ground textual interpretations more carefully in the material practices of print production and of circulation. The two studies considered here use these tools to explore quite distinct projects. Paul Keen’s *Literature, Commerce, and the Spectacle of Modernity* is closer to the main line of recent works in book history but builds on them by examining how literary and cultural value were imagined in the expanding commercial world of eighteenth-century Britain. Simon Dickie’s *Cruelty and Laughter* examines long-neglected print phenomena—jestbooks and other purportedly humorous writings that, by modern standards, are shockingly insensitive and cruel—in order to challenge literary historians and others who are too uncritical in their discussions of “polite culture.” Both studies are well-researched, provocative, and highly readable; both also contribute to and challenge our understanding of what literate Britons valued in the later eighteenth century.
Keen's book investigates the response of writers to the conditions of modern commercial authorship, and the development of new categories and concepts that authorize reading, writing, literary value, and consumption more generally. Keen joins Robert Darnton and others in the field of book history in identifying parallels between our own historical moment and the eighteenth-century explosion of print. These comparisons are suggestive, though sometimes seem too facile; it is not clear whether, for example, Clay Shirky's argument about the “shock of inclusion” in the digital age can easily be adapted to these different forms of circulation and different media. Nevertheless, Keen convincingly suggests in his rich and detailed introductory chapter that accounts of print culture and readership by James Raven, William St. Clair, and others have not done quite enough to attend to the discursive construction of literature as a category that tries to stabilize and taxonomize the value of cultural artifacts and of the individuals who produce and consume them. While a deeper knowledge of how books, periodicals, miscellanies, and broadsides were produced and circulated has vastly increased our understanding of eighteenth-century literary cultures, Keen urges us to keep in mind that printed objects are never simply objects; they are invariably also signals or signs, demanding interpretation and evaluation. And in the later eighteenth century, the proliferation of texts and readers provoked and required new interpretive models. Commerce, consumption, and marketing were changing rapidly in ways that undermined older conceptions about the value of printed texts. Books could be thought of as markers of taste, cultivators of knowledge, or forms of entertainment. But if writers, critics, and readers were to imagine reading and writing as valuable practices and not the mere mindless consumption of sensation, then the market for books required new models of value.

Keen then turns his attention to a surprising topic: the ballooning craze of the 1780s. Acknowledging that this might not seem like the most logical starting point for his discussion, he persuasively argues that the mania for balloons and ballooners had important similarities to the burgeoning book trade. Balloons were a novelty and a scientific innovation; they inspired wonder and admiration in the vulgar public as well as among the elite. Balloons conveniently figured ambivalent responses to literature and the circulation of printed matter: while balloons made scientific progress visible, many people questioned their practical utility, seeing them only as sensational and potentially debasing entertainment. The wonder that balloons provoked was highly ambivalent: for many skeptics, ballooning’s potential as an emblem of and tool to generate human knowledge was always shadowed by emptiness, spectacle, and directionlessness—traits that Keen persuasively shows were also emblematic of criticisms of fashion and fashionable culture. Ballooning’s “fusion of productivity and waywardness” (41) replicated and anticipated key features of the chaotic print market as well.

Keen’s next chapter considers the book trade’s associations with various figures of pathology. By representing bad reading habits and purposeless writing as forms of
mental or physical illness—“bibliomania,” the “itch of writing,” and bookish gluttony—authors and critics attempted to produce frameworks that could legitimate reading and writing. The association of “mania” with literary production and consumption was one way, Keen suggests, of managing the incoherence provoked by the unregulated and unrestrained production of books and periodicals. Keen traces several efforts to tame or cure this problem, including a fascinating discussion of proposals for a universal archive of all writing—a “metascience” or “totalizing knowledge” (86). The “cure” for these maladies emerged as the construction of more sophisticated tastes—distinguished, however tenuously, from mere fashion—and the impetus toward canonization and narratives of national literary history.

However, the education of a tasteful public and the formation of a national literature were only two possible solutions to the conundrums of print’s proliferation. Chapters 4 and 5 attend instead to critics who reevaluated literature’s new attention to the quotidian, the local, and the trivial as appropriate topics for literary production—a turn that Keen somewhat playfully terms “microcosmopolitanism.” The dominant concern in the fourth chapter is periodical publication, which aptly represents the paradox of partition and trivia coming together with totalizing system. A periodical issue is always a minor fragment that imagines itself as part of a comprehensive series. Keen’s work here echoes that of recent studies of periodical literature by Manushag Powell and Iona Italia, among others. In a marvelous turn, however, he demonstrates that the very triviality of the concerns of periodicals came to figure their universality—the periodical essay, in its attention to minutiae, asserted “the primacy of the particular” (124). But this literary sympathy for the trivial posed certain problems to literary professionalism: how could an author be understood as an authority when his or her primary concerns were so ordinary? To resolve this conundrum, Keen’s fifth chapter argues, writers increasingly represented the best authors as those immanent to the sphere of polite commerce rather than loftily above or outside it: immersed in the everyday, they presented themselves as the cultural figures best positioned to make claims of comprehensive knowledge. Even the author’s necessary dependence on the crowd of readers could be understood as essential, mimicking the more general practices of polite and responsive sociability as essential to the proper functioning of this world. Not yet, Keen reminds us, did literary culture strongly value the withdrawn and strongly individualized author of the romantic literary imagination. Authors in this period were to be more boon companions than bards.

If this authorial role were to be secure, however, authors needed a reading public capable of intelligently consuming what they had to offer. In his final full-length chapter and a brief coda, Keen suggests that imagining a reading nation proved difficult, since the forces of commerce that produced an educated and polite reading public also threatened to transform it into an effeminate and superficial throng of spectators, or—alternately—into dangerous crypto-Jacobin revolutionaries. Keen takes particular interest in porcine metaphors: to skeptics, the reading public appeared as “learned pigs” displaying false erudition, or “swinish multitudes” inclined toward mob rule. A full-length chapter discusses the way in which the reading public itself became a
spectacle of modernity—an object of endless discussion and fascination for critics of all sorts. A brief coda links critiques of fashion to criticism of British crypto-Jacobinism, suggesting ways in which the radicalism of the revolution was reconceived by conservative writers as a mere fashion; this turn simultaneously belittled radicalism and highlighted the dangers of fashion.

Keen’s research is thorough, his prose engaging, and his argument persuasive. The material does become somewhat repetitive at times; the chapter on the reading public covers some of the same ground discussed in earlier chapters, for example. And though the book abounds in quotations and references, these references are sometimes not clearly contextualized. Keen reports that Henry Mackenzie’s periodical The Lounger asserts that “Fashion, not taste, rules every thing” (100); this phrase, however, comes not from Mackenzie’s eidolon directly but from a reported conversation attributed to the aptly named “Mr. Glib.”1 Some readers might wish for more attention to shadings of tone and irony. Keen is also somewhat opaque on the question of periodization. Opening with a note of regret that his work does not tell the story of “how things changed” (1), he instead identifies his project as an exploration of a crucial moment in the history of print media. But many readers may wonder how these debates differed from those of the earlier part of the century, when similar arguments about literary value and commodification raged (as Keen’s own frequent references to Joseph Addison and Richard Steele remind us). But though Keen misses opportunities to identify the distinctiveness of this period, any reader concerned with print culture, periodical literatures, book history, or histories of reading will find his book of tremendous interest.

While Keen’s volume is immersed in debates about modernity and change, Dickie’s Cruelty and Laughter reminds us that expanding readerships and publication networks did not immediately transform Britain into a modern and polite nation. Dickie contends that those who study the eighteenth century are sometimes too quick to accept the period’s claims about the importance of sensibility, politeness, and reform. What Dickie describes as “the politeness-sensibility paradigm” (3) for reading the eighteenth century is a valuable critical tool, but it has too often obscured the period’s rudeness and brutality. Dickie’s text aims to be a counterweight to this tendency. Drawing on a neglected body of printed material such as jestbooks, Cruelty and Laughter makes a series of fascinating and important arguments about the ongoing importance of insensitivity, cruel jokes, and unsentimentality. Somewhat surprisingly, this material does not circulate primarily as ephemera or as cheap print matter for the working class; most of the works Dickie discusses appeared in expensive volumes sold to and consumed by gentlemen and, to a remarkable degree, gentlewomen. Indeed,

Dickie emphasizes the importance of his study for developing a more complete and complex picture of female writers and readers. Though some recent scholarship has begun to assail the picture of the eighteenth century as polite and sentimental, no prior study has drawn from such a broad range of understudied texts, and none has offered such a comprehensive discussion of the acceptability at midcentury of literary and quotidian cruelty. Though much of Dickie’s analysis is preliminary and tentative, this book offers a bracing correction to critical commonplaces.

Dickie’s first chapter is a deep, detailed voyage through the jestbook archive. Examining more than two hundred such books, he studies the forms in which jests circulated and the forms in which they were consumed. The latter is a fascinating question; Dickie demonstrates that these books were commonly read aloud in company, but that they also served as substitutes for company for travelers and other solitaries. They also, he finds, served as “how-to manuals” (36) for would-be wits; prefaces to these works often provided tips for recitation or performance of jokes. Dickie acknowledges that public exhibitions of the sort of humor these books describe were becoming more risqué by midcentury; perhaps the books were to some degree a compensation, a covert circulation of forms of humor increasingly frowned on by the polite.

Dickie’s later chapters build on these insights to examine attitudes toward and practices surrounding various forms of cruelty. His second chapter looks closely at disability and disfigurement in fiction, poetry, the theater, and the lived lives of Londoners. Locating his argument in the evolving field of historical disability studies, Dickie finds a persistent attitude toward maimed and disfigured bodies in fiction, vernacular verse, and dramatic performances: they offered prospects for amusement. The remarkable essay on deformity by the “hunchback” MP, William Hay (surely overdue for a critical edition), provides evidence that cruel jests were common in the street and about town as well. The chapter concludes with more general reflections on disability studies of the eighteenth century. Noting that most poor and working-class Europeans could expect to become disabled over the course of their working life, Dickie reflects on the way in which the middling and higher sort justified or refused to acknowledge the terrible working conditions that produced these disabilities. This is a wide-ranging chapter, examining a rich archive with impressive critical sophistication.

The following chapter examines class and servitude. Reminding us of how powerfully felt class distinctions remained, this is a somewhat depressing read; Dickie notes, for example, that when Charlotte Lennox and Jonathan Swift beat their servants, they were doing nothing illegal or particularly out of the ordinary. The tolerance for “upper-class roistering” associated with the Restoration and the earlier eighteenth century persisted into later decades; “midcentury dissolutes” like John Wilkes and Francis Dashwood, Dickie argues, attempted to imitate earlier rakes in their laughter-provoking torments. Dickie marshals this background to shed light on Richardson’s Lovelace, whose appeal to some eighteenth-century readers has been difficult to interpret. Dickie briefly reads Lovelace’s visit to the Smiths’ shop in Clarissa as an instance not only of his growing madness but also of a not-unusual libertine performance.
This brief commentary on Richardson reminds us that Dickie's research sheds light not only on print culture but also on canonized and widely read fiction and verse. Dickie demonstrates this emphatically in his fourth chapter, which leverages his research on cruel jests to reevaluate Henry Fielding, particularly his novel *Joseph Andrews*. This chapter, though written in a tone of moderation and deference, is in fact a tour de force, offering a model for how a richer understanding of eighteenth-century insensitivity might illuminate complex texts that have been distorted by readings emphasizing virtue and politeness. Opening with a discussion of the ambiguities of the famous roasting of Abraham Adams, Dickie notes that many eighteenth-century readers interpreted this scene not as an indictment of the roasters' cruelty but rather as richly and unironically hilarious. This was not the result of a simple misreading, Dickie argues; the roasting scene and others like it are deeply ambivalent, torn between a desire to condemn heartlessness and to laugh alongside the heartless. This reading leads to a more thorough discussion of the peculiar figure of Abraham Adams, whose haplessness has been difficult to reconcile with readings that make him unproblematically into a satiric norm. Dickie reads Fielding as highly ambivalent about the various indignities and cruelties heaped upon Adams. Not merely a Quixote who is too good for this world, Adams is characterized in a way that draws heavily on anticlerical satire; his pieties hew more closely to superstition and enthusiasm than to the latitudinarianism with which Fielding is usually credited.

A fifth chapter turns to the difficult and unsettling topic of the rape joke. Dickie brings to this material all the sensitivity and caution that it requires but does not shy away from a difficult fact: despite gradually shifting structures of feeling circulating around women's bodies and sexuality, sexual assault continued to be a rich source of humor for eighteenth-century readers. Drawing on an important bibliographical recovery—the finding of the only known extant copy of *Humours of the Old Bailey* (ca. 1772)—Dickie attends with particular care to rape trials, which were reprinted in this volume in unedited form as inherently ludicrous. Jokes circulate in particular around supposedly false rape accusations, which, Dickie notes, were complicated by standards of female modesty that blurred and confused ideas about consent. His readings of rape trials as comic performances is disturbing—though not, it should be said, altogether surprising, given the continuing stigma associated with being a rape victim even in the twenty-first century. His readings help sharpen our understanding of how rape signifies in sentimental fictions; the sentimentalization of Clarissa's rape, he reminds us, is necessarily exceptional, and needs to be understood against the background of a culture that assumed most rape accusations to be motivated by frivolity or malice.

A short conclusion discusses a popular genre that Dickie identifies as “ramble fiction” (251). Drawing on James Raven's research, Dickie points out that 75 percent of novels published between 1740 and 1770 were by now-unfamiliar or unknown writers—more than 800 titles, almost entirely unread today. Hundreds of these titles were thinly plotted tales of silliness and amusement; their central organizing principle is not the character but the joke. The ninety works he examines were, he notes, at least as popular
as the sentimental novels with which they competed, and while many of them are low-grade and artless, some are obviously the product of talented storytellers. Dickie examines the market for these fictions, which included prominent members of the aristocracy such as Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, who consumed these works by the handful. Dickie challenges critics to consider these remarkably popular works alongside the other ever-growing list of challengers to what was once taken as the eighteenth century’s paradigmatic fictional form: the realistic novel. The book’s conclusion suggests that we need to continue to reinterpret our sense of this period’s genres not only in light of the persistent romance, the proliferating Oriental tale, and shorter periodical fictions, but also these sprawling, brawling narratives of cruelty and jest.

Given what this book accomplishes, it is probably churlish to criticize it for not doing more. Yet one does wonder if it might not have made some arguments, however tentative, about continuities and breaks with the trend toward politeness and feeling documented in the works that Dickie critiques so ably here. Like Keen, Dickie has eschewed that sort of explanatory narrative, adopting an explicitly anti-teleological critical stance. But readers of this book will often find themselves provoked to speculate about the transition from brutality to politeness to sentimental propriety. How do cruelty and insensitivity gradually come to serve as class markers as the eighteenth century progresses? The good news is that by framing these materials and beginning the task of taxonomizing them, Dickie has made it easier for future scholars to approach these questions.

Both Dickie and Keen demonstrate the interpretive possibilities opened up when scholars attend to the vast archive of eighteenth-century printed matter and to the economic and social contexts of its reception. They both draw on recent work in bibliographic study and book history to challenge and reshape conventional readings of this period’s literary culture. What is particularly exciting about these studies—and makes them gratifying to consider in tandem—is their divergent conclusions. Starting with similar assumptions about literary archives and considering similar periods, they open very different lines of critical inquiry. Keen asks us to understand the later eighteenth century’s construction of its own modernity, while Dickie reminds us of the uneven rate of change in attitudes and in readers’ tastes. Scholars, regardless of their own attitudes and tastes, will find these books to be essential reading.

Christopher Loar is an assistant professor of English at the University of California, Davis. His essays have appeared in Eighteenth-Century Studies, Genders, Studies in English Literature, and Eighteenth-Century Fiction. His first book, forthcoming from Fordham University Press, is entitled Political Magic: British Fictions of Savagery and Sovereignty, 1650–1750.