

Eve Tavor Bannet, *Eighteenth-Century Manners of Reading: Print Culture and Popular Instruction in the Anglophone Atlantic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 306 pp.

Reviewed by **Rachael Scarborough King**, University of California, Santa Barbara

The history of reading has always presented a conundrum for book historians. Despite ingenious works tracking illuminating case studies—such as John Brewer’s discussion of Anna Larpent’s reading or Naomi Tadmor’s description of the household reading of Thomas and Margaret Turner—the extent to which scholars can generalize from such examples remains doubtful. Marginalia, as William Sherman and Ann Blair each have shown, provides some evidence of how readers responded to texts, but again cannot be taken as systematic or generalizable. Even the question of what constitutes evidence of the ability to read and/or write, and thus can establish literacy rates for the period, is vexed. In this context, Eve Tavor Bannet’s *Eighteenth-Century Manners of Reading: Print Culture and Popular Instruction in the Anglophone Atlantic World* offers a new approach to the problem, looking at how printed works themselves disseminated various “manners of reading” (a phrase she adopts from Roger Chartier), which were not necessarily either complementary or mutually exclusive. In a welcome move, Bannet purposefully avoids a developmental narrative, arguing that her six manners—grammatical and analogical thinking, reading aloud and conversing about books, methodical study, acquiring correct taste, discontinuous reading, and secret writing—coexisted throughout the eighteenth century. Especially as new groups joined the reading public, printers and booksellers needed to offer various advice for both how and what to read.

Bannet’s most corrective and persuasive argument, then, concerns the extent to which reading remained, in her terms, discontinuous and miscellaneous in the eighteenth century—rather than moving toward the model of the individual reader reading from the first to last page of a bound book. Building on the work of Peter Stallybrass, who has argued that in the early modern period printers printed and readers read sheets, not books, Bannet shows how this tendency was recast in the eighteenth century’s new print genres. She writes, “the tastes of readers both in the propertied classes and in the lower ranks continued to run to the new, miscellaneous and discontinuous, generically mixed, non-classical forms—the popular periodicals, puppet shows, ballad operas, jest books, miscellanies, romances, newspapers, magazines and novels of the day” (171). This was particularly the case in colonial and early America, she notes, where the vast majority of printing was in such miscellaneous genres. Although scholars and clerics producing what Bannet calls guides to study and guides to taste argued for the importance of unified, continuous reading, they also undercut their own points by publishing in forms such as essays, anthologies, and paratextual commentaries on

collections of extracts. Such genres offered a multiplicity of manners of reading despite assertions to the contrary.

Bannet emphasizes that what we would now classify as schoolbooks were not intended only for the young. Instead, printers and booksellers marketed grammars to anyone with “limited literacy,” a situation that cut across ranks, genders, and ages. Manuals identified anywhere from 10 to 17 different manuscript “hands” in use in the period, meaning that a person could have the ability to read one kind of handwriting but not another. A solution to this problem was standardization through print, but this process, Bannet argues, was not completed until the nineteenth century, in part because of the tendency in the eighteenth century for grammars and dictionaries to be excerpted, repackaged, and issued in new editions. “Even if Lowth’s *Grammar* or Johnson’s *Dictionary* were authoritative and prescriptive, readers were neither gaining access to these works in a single invariable form nor receiving identical prescriptions in their name,” she writes (75). Once again, miscellaneity and nonstandardization were the rule in the eighteenth-century print marketplace.

Novels, too, were part of this discontinuous style, contrary to present-day assumptions that the correct way to read a novel is from beginning to end. Instead, readers read abridgements or anthologized excerpts, read single volumes at a time, or skipped digressive chapters to follow a work’s main plot line. They also made their own selections in commonplace books, creating another method of excerpting and interpreting. From this perspective, novels were just as discontinuous as periodicals, which readers could also pursue in different manners—reading one issue after another or (after issues had been bound into volumes)—jumping between numbers to follow favorite topics. As Bannet writes, “Navigating books in highly personal ways by reading only the fragments one selected, and extracting only what one wanted, was practiced by all types and levels of readers” (209). And in one very brief, understated connection, she shows how we still engage in (or may have returned to) this manner of reading, as she notes “the public[’s] abiding preference for fragments, miscellanies, sound bites and tweets” (214).

In these ways, Bannet’s careful, book-historical attention to varieties of print formats helps displace assumptions that may be based on the content rather than the materiality of the book. That is, privileging an author’s assertion that his or her goal is to offer a uniform standard for spelling or reading over what the object of the book is telling us—that such outcomes remained elusive—can support a progressive account that Bannet eschews. Her six manners of reading coexisted and overlapped. However, this focus on the object of the book can sometimes lead to a tendency to anthropomorphize print culture: as, for example, when she writes that “diversity was introduced by print

culture's proclivity for providing abridgements, epitomes and altered versions of popular or useful texts" or that "print culture also catered separately to each of these discontinuous manners of reading novels" (74, 203). This phrasing can give monolithic force to "print culture," a phrase whose meaningfulness scholars such as Lisa Gitelman, James Raven, and Paula McDowell have questioned. At the same time, Bannet shows throughout how print did not displace older media like speech and manuscript; instead, the genres on which she focuses conspicuously encouraged intermediality. Periodicals invited readers to write in with their own contributions, while "conversation pieces" modeled how to talk about literature. Guides for reading aloud used punctuation to make "the printed page into something like a musical score," while history books left blank spaces for readers to add updates from newspapers, presaging Donald Graham's twentieth-century description of the newspaper as the "first rough draft of history" (97). Even as she sometimes falls back on the explanatory power of the phrase "print culture," Bannet thus adds to recent work questioning the teleology of print in the eighteenth century.

*Eighteenth-Century Manners of Reading* marks a welcome addition to ongoing interest in the many questions surrounding earlier reading practices: how, what, when, where, why, with whom, and how much people read (among others). The primary connection between all of the modes she investigates is that reading was considered to be an "improving" practice: "There was hardly any genre of publication—not excluding the newspapers, periodicals, reviews, sermons, voyages, memoirs, lives, conduct books, how-to books, and novels which dominated popular reading—that did not claim to inform, instruct, or 'improve' their readers in some way" (21). Different genres offered various approaches to the Enlightenment buzzword of "improvement." Integrating printers', booksellers', and authors' pronouncements about such topics with information gleaned from the material texts they produced, Bannet provides a useful methodology for dealing with the many challenges of assessing the history of reading. Her detailed, thorough study will be a necessary resource for anyone researching the history of the many genres she surveys—from grammars and dictionaries, to academic guides and history books, to novels and periodicals—but, more importantly, she shows how to integrate attention to form and content to produce a new understanding of the significance of reading to eighteenth-century society.