

The Cultural Dynamics of Reception

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The cultural dynamics of reception are best understood as a reiterative process of reshaping and reframing. Reception as an object of critical study embraces first the history of how texts were read, disseminated, and consumed across media, languages, and geographical regions. But if this is the first port of call, such analysis quickly draws in questions about the relationship between reception and production, audience and agency, contemporary and posthumous reputation. Reception studies as applied to early modern culture is not limited to assessing impact, but is deeply immersed in activities of revision, reuse, and re-presentation across forms, languages, and time. Where the agents involved in a text's initial production can exploit an armory of tools (such as paratext and format) in order to frame its reception, the audience avails of an even broader toolset as the text is interpreted and circulated. The signs of use and engagement range from annotation through to translation and fresh composition. Texts, personalities, historical figures, and events are recast for different and new audiences.

If reception is the evidence of having reached an audience, even an audience of one, then dissemination is paramount. Receivers are also often agents of transmission. We are familiar, from Robert Darnton's concept of a communications circuit, with the multiple agents of book history; his reader is a purchaser, borrower, or club or library member.¹ But the agents involved in dissemination from the perspective of early modern culture are multifarious and grounded in the many modes of reception itself: annotators, translators, adaptors, underliners, editors, publishers, poets, biographers, letter writers, and reviewers are all mediators of ideas, events, and reputations. It is true that the documentary record is tailored toward a particular kind of receiver—the kind inclined to mark, report, leave a trace—and is subject to the whims of fate that determine survival to posterity. Deirdre Shauna Lynch and Evelyne Ender warn that “archivally minded historians who

believe they are discovering what people read are, strictly speaking, discovering only what was published and printed and what the readers purchased or borrowed.² Concerned, like Darnton, with print culture, Lynch and Ender's point nevertheless has relevance for the dynamics of reception history across all periods: we can only work with the evidence we have (whether manuscript marginalia, personal accounts, creative responses), and the field is therefore skewed in favor of those who were most engaged and who left records of their engagement. Lynch and Ender are surely right to call attention to this bias and its consequent implications for generalizing about readers, but the quality of that engagement might also prompt us to think about reception as an act of cultural production in its own right, regardless of how representative it may or may not be.

The articles in this special issue attest to a spectrum of reception as cultural production. Traversing the genres of poetry, romance, letters, history, hagiography, autobiography, and reviews, the trajectories of cross-national engagement lead from the Low Countries to Italy, Ireland to France and the Spanish Netherlands, Spain to England, and England to France. Themes encompass Italian soldiers' epistolary news from the battlefield, the wrangling over female reputation played out in manuscript poetry, the repackaging of a seventh-century female saint to accord with Tridentine prescriptions of behavior, the appeal of Saint Teresa to seventeenth-century Anglophone readers, gender and the writing of Anglo-French monastic history, contemporary readers of George Herbert, later readers of Philip Sidney and the nature of unpopularity, and the application of topic modeling to a digital corpus of literary reviews. Embracing canonical and less familiar writers, these articles are united by their concern with mediation: the reconstitution of text, reputation, narrative, or event for new audiences. These new audiences were of different language-traditions and geographical locations, accessing materials through different forms and media. As these articles show, the task of translating for later audiences shaped reception in sophisticated ways. Furthermore, the reworking of a text or figure for a new audience is an act of translation that often itself emerges as a distinct act of creation.³

The shaping of reception holds a different charge depending on whether it is engaged with contemporaries and contemporaneous events or their afterlives. It often manifests as an intervention on behalf of reputation, or as an opportunity to redirect established narratives. In addition, such interventions are always implicated in the receiver's own agenda(s). Hence in Nina Lamal's article, soldiers report news to build their own reputations and

contacts; their framing of contemporary events as “news” serves the simultaneous purpose of self-promotion. Rosalind Smith’s article analyzes the false attribution of poems to historical women in order to explore how contemporary reputation is plumbed and exploited—in the case of Mary Stuart, by creatively manipulating her infamy as an act of retaliation. English translations of the autobiography of Teresa de Ávila are analyzed by Danielle Clarke as historically situated intercessions to establish both her international reputation and particular model of life writing. The prominence of contemporary agendas is more pronounced at a temporal distance: John McCafferty’s study of the revision of Saint Brigid for Counter-Reformation readers is a matter of survival, both for the figure herself as a patron saint of Ireland and for the perpetuation of the status of the medieval Irish church in Europe. The conditions for ongoing relevance are rooted in, and in turn illuminate, the evolution of ideas about authorship and readership, as Joel Swann, Natasha Simonova, and Sarah Connell and Julia Flanders show us. The shifts enacted by mediator-receivers were responses to contemporaneous cultural currents, but they were also responding to real demand, articulated via direct commissioning, as Lamal and Clarke show, or via the commercial marketplace, as demonstrated by Swann, Simonova, and Connell and Flanders.

Nina Lamal’s study of letter-writing soldiers as purveyors of news from sixteenth-century battlefields in the Low Countries mines a new source for the information history of early modern Europe by directing attention to the military on the ground rather than the diplomatic corps. Italian soldiers were solicited for up-to-date, detailed reportage. Their letters narrated events for audiences in Italy and served as a means to build social capital, with the aim of enhancing their future employment prospects. Lamal shows how the letters written by both rank-and-file and officer-class soldiers framed the reception of events in Italy, as they described and critiqued military tactics, strategy, and their compatriots’ comportment abroad. That their accounts of the revolt against Spanish-Habsburg rule reached eager and unanticipated readers is evident from subsequent scribal and print publication evidence.

Rosalind Smith focuses on reception as misrepresentation in order to explore how women’s notoriety was negotiated in late sixteenth-century poetic culture. Her article considers the phenomenon of the false attribution of poems to contemporary women as *prosopopeia* (the adoption of rhetorical personae, an exercise endemic in humanist schoolrooms). Using the examples of Anne Vavasour, Anne Cecil, Elizabeth I, and Mary Stuart, Smith shows how attribution fuelled circulation by exploiting topicality, by turns

castigating, redeeming, and repairing reputation. Traditionally problematic for the feminist recovery project, which has sought empirical evidence of female authorship, Smith challenges literary historians to embrace such articulations of the female voice as opening up new spaces for poetic identity. She argues that “these poems were circulated and received as fictions of women’s textual production” but that this very fictionality supplied an array of possibilities for literary composition, unlimited by gender.

John McCafferty, Danielle Clarke, and Jaime Goodrich illuminate issues of translation and reuse, centering on women religious as public figures and textual producers. This has become a thriving field of early modern scholarship partly, as these articles demonstrate, because the transnational reach of religious orders facilitated cross-linguistic and international flows of reception. McCafferty analyzes the repurposing of the medieval Irish Saint Brigid for European Counter-Reformation audiences. The problems posed by the medieval Brigid were both doctrinal and gendered. In need of a “saintly facelift,” McCafferty shows how Brigid became aligned with emerging models of canonized, enclosed female exemplarity. He uncovers the gradual streamlining of her biography as it was pitched at Continental as well as Irish audiences. Clarke’s discussion of the Spanish saint, Teresa de Ávila, concentrates on translations of her life narrative into English. She reveals the centrality of exiled communities of women to the generation of these translations and locates them in their historical moments. The 1611 translation is seen in light of the campaign for canonization (achieved in 1622); that of 1642 as a Counter-Reformation “effort to distribute Teresa’s writings and image to advance Catholic doctrine and spirituality.” In literary terms, Clarke argues, the key transition exemplified by the *Teresian Life* is the shift to an awareness of external audience and an expectation of recycling for future use. Goodrich’s comparative study of historiography as practiced by Claude Estienne de la Serrée and Anne (in religion Mary) Neville reminds us that authors are also readers, and that the act of authorship entails decisions about form and genre that are always informed by reception of a previous generation’s writing. The comparison opens up formalist analysis of the prose produced by the religious orders. Challenging what Goodrich sees as the exclusion of women’s history writing from teleological accounts of historiography, she argues that the genres of monastic history (annals, chronicles, life writing) were valued as historically continuous models by female and male religious. Gender and monastic vocation are identified as equally important determinants of how history was received and written.

Joel Swann and Natasha Simonova engage with the reception history of canonical male authors: George Herbert and Philip Sidney. Swann's study of George Herbert's *The Temple* opens by establishing the contemporary international demand for Herbert's book. Turning to booksellers' lists and those of the new public libraries, Swann ascribes an apparent reluctance to acquire the volume to its generic ambiguity, straddling as it did the categories of religious, morally improving, and secular literature. The second half of this article presents the results of Swann's examination of 120 surviving copies of *The Temple* printed between 1633 and 1709. Bindings demonstrate esteem and care; corrections to print errata fit with Adam Smyth's and Stephen Orgel's recent arguments that print was never perceived in terms of fixity by early modern readers.⁴ One particular feature of surviving copies is what Swann terms a "commonplacings mentality." But even the activity of underlining is "a form of intense attention to the language of the text," suggesting an interest in formal qualities rather than digestible extracts. Material evidence that the book, or its constituent poems, were read in surprising juxtapositions is proposed as "a model for modern critics of how to read the text in sympathy with its historical reception"—a circuit of reception whereby the early modern inspires the modern. Simonova's article delves into established narratives of decline and fall, asking of Philip Sidney's *Arcadia*, "how was this text published and read *after* it substantially ceased to be published and read?" Her study contextualizes eighteenth- and nineteenth-century dismissals of the Renaissance romance (noting en route that rejection also constitutes reception). Simonova reveals that versions of the *Arcadia* were "available at every price point in the print market" into the nineteenth century and examines readers' accounts of their encounters with them. This careful parsing of the contexts through which the *Arcadia* persisted in the cultural conversation is not, however, directed at a simple overturning of the conventional view of its declining reception. Rather, Simonova prompts us "to ask what it meant for it to be unpopular, and to suggest that 'little-read' is not the same as 'unread.'" Reception's orbit embraces all stops between positive and negative and, moreover, both extremes might be held simultaneously by the same reader.

The final article, by Sarah Connell and Julia Flanders, experiments with the techniques of topic modeling to probe the culture of literary reviewing. Maintaining this issue's interest in the longer footprints and implications of reception history, this article is the product of recent moves by the *Women Writers Project (WWP)*—best known for *Women Writers Online*, a full-text collection of writing by women printed between 1526 and 1850—to

consider the cultures of reception surrounding early women's writing. Here, the authors explore what reception history means for a digital collection—specifically, the *WWP*'s corpus of literary reviews, printed between 1770 and 1830. Their extension of our remit into periodical review culture offers new and transferable models for identifying and describing the language of reception. The application of topic modeling (which trains algorithms to identify clusters of words co-occurring with each other) to this corpus seeks to identify patterns in the language of reviewing culture, not only in relation to critical judgment but more particularly to the emergence of distinctions about kinds of readers. Centrally concerned with the vocabulary of assessment and evaluation, and its implications for changing ideas about readership and authorship, their findings reveal “anxieties about reading in an age of increasing literacy, where the female reader also stands in for ‘the herd of readers’ and the broadening of literacy across class lines.” Ultimately, these techniques are valued not for supplanting qualitative analysis but for supplementing it, materializing patterns that send us back to the texts with fresh eyes while also unlocking new possibilities for comparative analysis.

An increasing number of digital projects are harnessing modern technology's capacity for storage and accretion of data relating to reception. The transformative promise of this work consists in widening access and facilitating large-scale analysis, yet the production of digital resources is equally enmeshed in decisions about representation. The *Reading Experience Database (RED)* founded in 2006, for example, seeks to gather together as many accounts of reading as possible, soliciting evidence from the general public as well as from a research team, assigning an editor to check all contributions and devising metadata for the taxonomizing of the reading experience (defined as “a recorded engagement with a written or printed text—beyond the mere fact of possession”).⁵ This now amounts to “over 30,000 records of reading experiences by British subjects, at home and abroad, and of visitors to the British Isles, between 1450 and 1945.”⁶ The model was sufficiently successful to spawn spin-offs in Canada, the Netherlands, and New Zealand. Delimited according to the interests of participants and funding, as all such projects are, *RED* delivers on its goal of aggregating and consolidating reception evidence. Users can search via keyword, century or half-century, type of receiver (reader, listener, reading group), text or author being read, or place and time of day of reading experience. Alternatively, one can browse by reader, author, or reading group.⁷ These categories might appear self-evident but they are the product of design decisions (how to represent), scholarly

expertise (what to represent), and the anticipation of users' interests (what others will want to find).

Similarly, the *Women Writers Project* has shifted its focus from the full-text *Women Writers Online* and accompanying materials (*Women Writers in Context*) to exploring “cultures of reception,” resulting in the digitization of periodical reviews and the *Women Writers in Review* interface described by Connell and Flanders in this issue.⁸ As Connell and Flanders show, the digitizing of reception evidence can open up new vistas for our understanding of the big picture. But the categorization of these reviews requires careful consideration of, and reflection on, the mode of representation; potentially limitless user access is enabled by such technology but the materials are nonetheless mediated by choices relating to design, search, and taxonomy. In the case of *Women Writers in Review*, users encounter review materials by searching for author or work reviewed, source, or “tags.” The latter enables more complex searching via taxonomies of genre (e.g., theatrical review), theme (e.g., racial identities), format (e.g., advertisement), reception (on a spectrum from very positive to very negative), and miscellaneous.⁹ These taxonomies facilitate deeper exploration of the dataset—reviews of early women’s writing—but also affect how the user approaches the reception evidence. As Connell and Flanders self-reflexively observe, the *WWP* “is itself a contemporary experiment in the recirculation and reawakening of readership for early women’s writing.” Rather than providing transparent access to primary sources, these categories are the product of scholarly interpretation, balanced in this case by a commitment to open-source ideals via the publication of technical infrastructures alongside the user interface.

The *Reception and Circulation of Early Modern Women’s Writing* (*RECIRC*) project (2014–2020) stemmed from a similar impulse: to gather as wide a range of evidence relating to the reception and circulation of early modern women’s writing as possible, in order to experiment with quantitative analysis and discern the “big picture,” or at least a bigger one.¹⁰ The considerable energies of feminist scholarship had been directed toward recovery research since the first flourishing of the 1980s; we wanted to build on this body of work by posing questions about the impact of that writing: which women were read or circulated, and how? In our case, the different stages of database design have reflected the project’s evolution. Initially, a web application was built so that the team’s researchers could store and share the evidence they were uncovering as they consulted archives in Belgium, Ireland, the UK, and the USA. Seeking to compare the forms of reception, taxono-

mies were preemptively conceived, then tested and revised. The prospect of releasing this material in a format that might appeal to a wider audience entailed a further redesign. At issue in the moves from raw primary source to researcher-driven database through to open-access resource are questions of representation and usefulness. Digital resource creation is a newer kind of mediation than that outlined in all but one of the essays in this issue, but it is no less immersed in the shaping of reception for its contemporary audience and, in this case, *RECIRC* was originally determined by a specific set of research questions. Self-reflexivity is a crucial control against the illusory expectation of all-inclusive coverage. The *RECIRC* resource reflects what we found according to the parameters of this particular project; articulation of such limitations is necessary if users are to be empowered to engage afresh with the materials presented. At the risk of foreclosure, our open-access version has eliminated categories of reception for which we found no evidence.¹¹ Prompted by Peter Beal, for example, we originally included “horoscope” as a potential mode of engaging with an author.¹² But its removal results from our self-imposed restrictions rather than any all-encompassing absence; we did not find an example but some may be out there. Questions of audience, too, arise. Scholarly perspectives thrive on layers of granularity, and technologically proficient expert users embrace lists and tables of complex results. The more open-ended anticipation of a general user’s interests must be faithful to the original research questions but also provide (ideally stimulating) modes of exploring the material. Thus, graphic and visual modes of presentation shape how users will encounter and engage with primary materials and metadata.

The very different approach taken by the *Archaeology of Reading* project (*AOR*)—taking its cue from the seminal work of Lisa Jardine and Anthony Grafton on marginalia made by the humanist scholar Gabriel Harvey—offers a dynamic online viewer that enables users to manipulate as well as simply access the annotated books of Harvey and John Dee.¹³ A taxonomy of annotations, numbering in the hundreds of thousands across the libraries of the two scholars, is searchable and the resource allows users to store, link, and map their searches. A straightforward access remit is addressed by the digitization of this store of rare books, but the dynamism of the interface invites the user to engage more intimately with the digital surrogate, which becomes a new form of artifact. Holding that “as a collective body of knowledge the history of reading has . . . remained limited to isolated, partial, and impressionistic studies of single texts read by single annotators,” *AOR* aims to enable comparison and systematic analysis of early

modern reading practices.¹⁴ Hence, the research environment built around the digital volumes can be tailored by the user to create new versions and combinations of the marginalia captured—the parameters of which are set by these two libraries.

A key driving factor of such projects is the capacity to scale up. Archival work grounded in the careful pursuit and assembly of the traces of reception has inevitably been constrained by the individual's ability to construe items of evidence and travel to often far-flung archives. The ability of digital resources to pool and make accessible online enormous quantities of evidence invites and makes feasible analysis on a scale previously impossible. The democratic goal of expanding access to sources underpins these projects, notwithstanding the reality that computer or internet access and paywalls sometimes militate against ideal outcomes. The potential for reaching hitherto unimaginable audiences is a notable feature of the reception of such projects, as evident in the acclaim that greeted *The Pulter Project*, launched in 2018. This is an online multiedition of the seventeenth-century poet Hester Pulter, whose work was discovered in 1996. The vast gulf between Pulter's contemporary audience (there is no evidence that the manuscript left her Hertfordshire estate) and the global public that could now read her work was immediately celebrated in the *Financial Times*.¹⁵

These digital projects focus and elucidate questions of reception, in that their research agendas are focused on the study of reception history but they also frame and direct others' reception of those materials. Of course, this is what critics have always done in their analyses, but the distinction in format (book or article versus digital resource) can lead to an illusion of artlessness and transparency that is not warranted. The issue of how to present our research findings is always immersed in the matter of shaping reception. When digital innovations raise these questions in unfamiliar ways, they clarify the transtextual, multiform nature of reception itself.

The methodological conundrums inherent in digital humanities projects, as they grapple with questions of design and the optimal representation of evidence as data, expose our own immersion as critics in shaping the reception of early modern culture. But this is as much a product of political imperatives as technological advances thrown up by our own historical moment. The most conspicuous value of reception, from this perspective, lies in its capacity to demonstrate ongoing relevance—a factor of strategic import in the present utilitarian climate of higher education, which has not favored traditional humanities subjects. The appeal of reception studies, of uncovering and understanding the continuing resonances of historical texts

and reputations, is pronounced in an academic environment preoccupied with demonstrating interest in these disciplines and their impact on society. The developments captured by this special issue demonstrate how reception studies has built upon and moved beyond such key works on the history of reading as those by Heidi Brayman Hackel, William Sherman, and Sasha Roberts to consider international, comparative, and new material contexts.¹⁶ Now formally established at the vanguard of classical studies, as evident from the strength of the *Classical Receptions Journal* founded in 2009, the approach of reception studies is exciting scholars of the early modern world as a means of exploring beyond individual disciplines, language traditions, and literary periods. Its transdisciplinary consolidation and currency are evident in, for example, the publication of Ika Willis's *Reception* in Routledge's New Critical Idiom series.¹⁷ Similarly, the energetic response to a call for papers for the collection "Cultures of Reading" has resulted in two consecutive issues of the *PMLA*.¹⁸ The conference that inspired this special issue of *JMEMS*, on the topic "Reception, Reputation, and Circulation in the Early Modern World, 1500–1800," held in 2017, attracted fifty-five speakers from the fields of book history, digital humanities, art history, music, material culture, and literature spanning China, England, France, Ireland, Italy, the Low Countries, Peru, Poland, Russia, Scotland, Spain, and Wales.¹⁹ If present imperatives are feeding into this moment, the new potentialities for transcending disciplinary and period boundaries and pursuing quantitative, comparative research are convergent forces, supporting and enabling analysis at different scales. Indeed, convergence and scale are precisely the rationale for the *READ-IT* project (2018–2020), which aims to aggregate existing resources for the history of reading from the eighteenth to twenty-first centuries.²⁰

Finally, the collision of multiple temporalities that energizes the cultural dynamics of reception incorporates an important disruption of teleology. As Natasha Simonova reminds us of print dissemination, "[T]he printing date is actually the beginning, not the end, for a particular work: 'publication' should be seen as a continuous process rather than a singular event, and even for a purchaser in the mid-seventeenth century, the works of Philip Sidney might constitute a 'new book.'" Cultural shelf-life is long, and we all come to a work for the first time. Our study of reception is itself an instance of engagement in an ongoing flow; linearity and chronology are not prerequisites.

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Notes

- 1 Robert Darnton, "What Is the History of Books?," *Daedalus* 111, no. 3 (1982): 65–83, at 68.
- 2 Deirdre Shauna Lynch and Evelyn Ender, "Cultures of Reading," *PMLA* 133, no. 5 (2018): 1073–82, at 1075.
- 3 See also Katherine Acheson's articulation of a shift in marginalia studies that sees reading as writing, in "Introduction: Marginalia, Reading, and Writing," in *Early Modern English Marginalia*, ed. Katherine Acheson (New York: Routledge, 2019), 4.
- 4 Stephen Orgel, *The Reader in the Book: A Study of Spaces and Traces* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 10; Adam Smyth, *Material Texts in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
- 5 The *Reading Experience Database* is located at *UK RED*, The Open University, open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/UK/search.php; and see "What Is a 'Reading Experience'?", at *RED Project*, The Open University, open.ac.uk/Arts/RED/experience.htm.
- 6 See "The Reading Experience Database (RED), 1450–1945," at *RED Project*, open.ac.uk/Arts/RED/index.html.
- 7 For browsing *RED*, see *UK RED*, open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/UK/browse.php.
- 8 *Women Writers in Review*, Northeastern University, at wwp.northeastern.edu/review/index.html. See also the "Intertextual Networks" project focused on intertextuality within the *Women Writers Project* primary-source collection, at Northeastern University, wwp.northeastern.edu/research/projects/intertextuality/index.html.
- 9 For these search capabilities, see *Women Writers in Review*, wwp.northeastern.edu/review/tags.
- 10 For a description of the *RECIRC* project, see *RECIRC: The Reception and Circulation of Early Modern Women's Writing, 1550–1700*, National University of Ireland, Galway, at recirc.nuigalway.ie. The project was funded by the European Research Council under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP/2007–2013 / ERC Grant Agreement n. 615545).
- 11 For a detailed account of the project's parameters and methodology, see *RECIRC*, recirc.nuigalway.ie.
- 12 Peter Beal, *A Dictionary of English Manuscript Terminology, 1450–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 189.
- 13 Lisa Jardine and Anthony Grafton, "'Studied for Action': How Gabriel Harvey Read His Livy," *Past & Present*, no. 129 (1990): 30–78.
- 14 *The Archaeology of Reading*, The Sheridan Libraries, Johns Hopkins University; Centre for Editing Lives and Letters, University College London; and Princeton University Library, at archaeologyofreading.org/what-is-the-archaeology-of-reading.
- 15 *The Pulter Project: Poet in the Making*, Northwestern University, at pulterproject.northwestern.edu; Gillian Tett, "A Woman's Voice—heard at last," *Financial Times*, Dec. 8, 2018, 7.
- 16 Heidi Brayman Hackel, *Reading Material in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); William Sherman, *Used Books: Marking Readers in Renaissance England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Sasha Roberts, *Reading Shakespeare's Poems in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

- 17 Ika Willis, *Reception* (London: Routledge, 2018).
- 18 Evelyne Ender and Deidre Shauna Lynch, eds., “Cultures of Reading,” *PMLA* 133, no. 5 (2018), and 134, no. 1 (2019). For a survey of developments in relation to the early modern period, see Edith Snook, “Recent Studies in Early Modern Reading,” *English Literary Renaissance* 43, no. 2 (2013): 343–78.
- 19 For the program, and to listen to podcasts of papers presented, see *RECIRC*, recirc.nuigalway.ie/conference2017.
- 20 *READ-IT: Reading Europe Advanced Data Investigation Tool*, Le Mans Université, Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, readit-project.eu/about-the-project.