



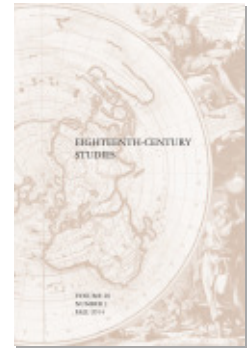
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LITERARY CRITICISM AMONG THE DISCIPLINES

Jonathan Brody Kramnick

Almost ten years ago, *Eighteenth-Century Studies* convened a special number to inaugurate its new design and format. Varied though the contributions were, each shared a desire to complicate the claim for “interdisciplinarity” that had long been a hallmark of the journal.¹ One common theme was a need for greater sensitivity to the origins and meanings of the disciplines themselves. With new attention to the emergence of such fields as history and political theory, natural science and economics, scholars of the eighteenth century ought to become aware of the advantages as well as the limits of specialization. The goal of the present essay is to consider how the problem of specialization worked itself out in literary criticism written in England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.² I hope to demonstrate that a certain worry over expertise is integral to the period and forms an important feature of our long history. The now familiar desire to transcend the confines of disciplinary thinking was an important element of the building of disciplines. Criticism is particularly interesting in this respect, I argue, because it was there that expert knowledge had to defend its public vocation most vociferously. The procedures of analysis that belonged to criticism as a discipline appeared to many as a threat to the intended object of study. Should one person have more to say than another about what is, after all, a shared culture of literary works? Should criticism become a science? These questions accompanied the emergence of criticism and gave shape to its methods. To show this, I’ll begin with the largest context in which criticism had to make its way as a discipline: the advent of science as a category of restricted knowledge.

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I'll then turn my attention to the particular institutions of literary study: the treatise, the periodical, the edition, and the university.

I

The problem of expert systems has long been a centerpiece of social theory, where it describes an important point of transition between “traditional” and “modern” culture.³ On this view, modernity is the name for the historical condition in which society has differentiated its parts into linked domains of practice, each with its own aura of technical concentration. In a modern society, one must cede authority over many areas of knowledge, which then appear as distant realms of specialization.⁴ Like Swift's floating island of Laputa, the expert cultures of science, technology, law, and art drift away from the world to which they should be anchored. Swift's is perhaps the most memorable image of this concern, which roiled learned and popular writing from the seventeenth-century invention of “science” onward. The disciplines were greeted with anxiety at their birth, as the languages of prestige untangled themselves from the languages of common life. One result was a search for forms of mediation that could redirect specialized knowledge back to the culture from which it had broken. Viewed from this summit of abstraction, the long-term evolution of disciplinary culture never shucks a certain ambivalence toward specialists: we entrust others to bring knowledge to us, but we suspect their distance and authority. This dilemma will be easier to see if we move closer to the foundation of language use and institutional practice.

In what did the eighteenth century's establishment of the disciplines of knowledge consist? Clifford Siskin has offered this answer: “a shift in the ways of knowing from the older organization, in which every kind was a *branch* of philosophy, into our present system: narrow but deep disciplines divided between humanities and sciences.”⁵ To this succinct thesis I would add that philosophy was itself the initial occasion for the slender depth Siskin finds in the separate disciplines. That is, the modern division of knowledge began earlier, during the seventeenth century, in a revolt against an older system of classification derived from Scholastic Aristotelianism.⁶ Modern thought was supposed to be both more disciplined and *less* authoritarian than its antique forebear. The modern's often steely-eyed account of this achievement centered on methods of detachment, by which means objects could be differentiated from each other and from their subjects alike. “The first task of true induction,” wrote Francis Bacon in 1620, “is the rejection or exclusion of all the separate natures that are not found in any instance where the given nature is present, or are found in any instance when the given nature is absent . . . Then indeed, after the rejection and exclusion have been properly made, in the second place (at the bottom, as it were), there will remain, all volatile opinions vanishing into smoke, the affirmative form, solid, true, and well-defined.”⁷ “Now this is quickly said,” Bacon adds, “but is only reached after many twists and turns” (169). Knowledge is a compound procedure of separation, of quantities from each other, of the “reaching” consciousness from external nature. Thinking is arduous and severe—it winds the mind up in things—but it is also the basis for an order of learning that will topple the idols of the academy: “Philosophy and the intellectual sciences stand like statues, worshipped and celebrated, but not moved forward” (8). Only a scrupulous course of division

and analysis will bring progress to philosophy, by returning its equal footing among thinking subjects.

It is important to notice how the attack on the Schools aligns precision with the broader community (of literati, at least) because an important tension will soon exist between the two. At this point, the rhetoric of opposing the authority of official philosophy—the “authors who set up a virtual dictatorship in the sciences and hold forth so confidently” (10)—enjoins thought to scour the world for what has been hidden in Scholastic mystery. The institutions of the book and the Schoolmen impede learning; “for it is hardly possible at one and the same time to gaze with admiration upon authors and to excel them, knowledge being like water which does not rise higher than the level from which it descended” (11). Only diligent thought will place philosophy ahead of the mark of the past. Who would think that the rising tide could also sink? Before long, Bacon’s modernity succumbs to that peculiar fate: the very methods of detachment intended to overcome the idols turn into mysteries in their own right. “The Sciences, are small power,” writes Thomas Hobbes in 1651: “For Science is of that nature, as none can understand to be, but such as in a good measure have attained it.”⁸ Like Bacon, Hobbes reserves his greatest scorn for “the canting of Schoole-men,” whose traditional categories get in the way of the new philosophy. But his suspicion of “science” reveals an important adjustment within the intellectual cultures of the seventeenth century. The methods of study peculiar to “the sciences” belong to a minority culture within the broader community. The intellectual detachment of modern thought requires and attends a related detachment from the social world.

We may find this tension spelled out in the well-known case of Rochester’s *Satyre on Reason and Mankind*. Rochester’s poem is no less severe than Bacon in its attack on the Schools, but the terms have changed subtly:

Reason, an Ignis fatuus in the Mind,
Which, leaving Light of Nature, sense, behind;
Pathless and dangerous wandring wayes it takes,
Through Errour’s fenny boggs and thorny brakes:
Whilst the misguided follower climbs with pain
Mountains of whimses heapt in his own brain;
Stumbling from thought to thought, falls headlong down
Into doubts boundless Sea, where like to drown,
Books bear him up a while, and make him try
To swim with bladders of Philosophy.⁹

The important word introduced in these lines is “sense,” the basis upon which the speaker will later define a “right reason” that serves to guide action in the world of desires (ll. 99–100). The reason of the scholars has elevated itself over the world designed for study; that world, in turn, is not simply inert nature but the very material of social life itself, the give and take of sensory experience. The mind serially cut off from the world devolves into a vertiginous swirl of detachment: winding through paths, climbing mountains, falling to the ocean. The problem of the bookish scholar is that he has split knowing the world from living within it: “His Wisedome did his Happiness destroy,/ Ayming to know that world he should enjoy” (ll. 33–34). This antinomy is of some consequence. Within the

polite decorum of the couplet, the poem both announces and disavows the split of thought from action. The subsequent effort to imagine a kind of sensuous learning, alive to the flux of social experience, must continually run into figures of intellectual blockage, each of whom elevates reason into disembodied erudition: the “thinking Fools/ Those Reverend Bedlams, Colledges and schools,” the “modern Cloystered Coxcombs who/ Retire to think, ‘cause they have nought to do” and so forth (ll. 82–83, 92–93). The negative image of the scholar in these lines is familiar from the revolt against Scholasticism, but the meaning has widened considerably. Enspiraled in the warp of thought, falling and rising in turns, Rochester’s scholar illustrates early-empirical culture set against itself. The same detachment and specialization that advances learning also lifts it from the realm of daily living and so freezes it in the past. The rhetoric avails itself of a type of anti-intellectualism later common to the enlightenment: in order to build a worldly philosophy, we must take learning away from the priestly institutions of the college and out of the esoteric language of the pedants. Yet, the grounding institutions of the *Satyre*’s complaint strike an important contrast to what will come next. When Rochester writes, “our sphere of Action is life’s Happiness,” the pronoun refers to a small group of courtiers whose behavior forms the world from which the scholar is sadly removed (l. 96).¹⁰ What would befall the task of understanding the world once we include in it all those who can read, and all that is printed, in English?

If by the end of the seventeenth century the trouble with expertise was seen to inhabit the new methods of detachment and specialization, that trouble called also for a reconsideration of scholarly work. John Locke begins his influential *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, for example, with a noteworthy caveat: “I pretend not publish this Essay for the Information of Men of large thoughts and quick apprehensions; to such masters of knowledge I profess myself a scholar, and therefore warn them before-hand not to expect any thing here, but what being spun out of my own thoughts is fitted to men of my own size.”¹¹ The imagery of size in this declaration of scholarliness is deceptive. The wide girth of the quick-witted indicates their imprecision. Diminutiveness is, by contrast, the condition of expertise, the ability to separate and discern by exacting judgment. The effect of Locke’s language is to turn around the accusation against scholars by exchanging a vertical for a horizontal image. Scholars are not too far above society; they discriminate its parts. Wits are not broadly sociable; they are inexact and sloppy. The difficulty of sustaining this position—a difficulty that will persist into the eighteenth century—becomes evident as Locke struggles to find a place from which to say that expertise has a lateral use. The idea of diminutive description implicates the scholar in what seems unavoidably a raising of knowledge out of the world it is to understand. The lateral metaphor is, at any rate, soon complicated by Locke’s famous account of what he imagines to be the *Essay*’s utility within the larger division of knowledge:

The Commonwealth of learning, is not at this time without master-builders, whose mighty designs, in advancing the sciences, will leave lasting monuments to the admiration of posterity; but every one must not hope to be a Boyle or a Sydenham; and in an age that produces such masters, as the great—Huygenius, and the incomparable Mr. Newton,

with some other of that strain; 'tis ambition enough to be employed as an under-laborer in clearing the ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish, that lies in the way of knowledge; which certainly had been very much more advanced in the world, if the endeavours of ingenious and industrious men had not been much cumbered with the learned but frivolous use of uncouth, affected or unintelligible terms, introduced into the sciences, and there made an art of, to that degree that philosophy, which is nothing but the true knowledge of things was thought unfit, or incapable to be brought into well-bred company and conversation. (10)

Locke's complicated maneuvering in this important passage is worth taking apart piece by piece. The passage begins by re-introducing the vertical model he had been striving to avoid, but with an important difference. The division of knowledge that separates science from the world it studies is recapitulated once more between science and philosophy. The former is the domain of master-builders and the latter their under-laborers. Each dwells above the sociable intercourse of "well-bred company and conversation," but science is encased in the lofty realm of monuments, while philosophy labors near the clearing ground of the lifeworld. Science is the pure domain of expertise, but that means it has accreted a crust of jargon to its ethereal domain. The impenetrability of its language is the most visible sign of its closure to the world of ordinary meanings. Philosophy now has the job to scrub the jargon off expertise and re-introduce it into the give-and-take of good breeding. Only science produces concepts of the world—Locke was rather unique in arguing this—and that is because philosophy has the critical function to make sure that specialized knowledge does not run adrift of its grounding culture.

II

Writing as a scholar, Locke gives one of the period's more important critiques of expertise: without the mediation of philosophical under-laborers, knowledge in the pure form of science tends to wall-off the new specialisms in technical language. Locke is significant also because he begs a question increasingly vital to turn-of-the-century culture. Why is it the *idiom* of expert systems—and not simply their practice or location—that needs to be monitored? One answer is that it is by virtue of linguistic alienation that expertise most clearly betrays a split from the practical norms of the everyday. In other words, late seventeenth-century culture was especially concerned to imagine social harmony by means of shared habits of speech.¹² (Locke's recourse to "well-bred company and conversation" is, in this sense, neither ironic nor unusual.) The linguistic dimension to the problem of intellectual culture is ready to transform dramatically. Modern as Bacon was, his Latin-reading community ("tiny literate reefs on top of vast illiterate oceans" in Benedict Anderson's memorable phrase) was still far from the vernacular public of the enlightenment.¹³ Rochester's courtly milieu, with its fixed norms of proper English, is closer to the national print culture that will face the cognoscenti of the eighteenth century, but even he would find it hard to imagine the shape and destiny of a common literary culture. The dilemma will, in certain respects, be familiar to readers of recent work in eighteenth-century studies. As many have argued, the early decades of the century saw in England a new sense of

the public as print-based and commercial, literate and middle-class, vernacular and democratic.¹⁴ One facet of this change was a new specificity accorded to “literary” works within the broader culture of letters. The exact nature and timing of this specialization has recently become the subject of spirited debate.¹⁵ I’d like to suggest here that we may appreciate the complexity of the problem by turning our attention to the discipline of criticism as an arena in which literary specialization was intensely argued. The weight placed upon the vernacular for social cohesion meant that literary expertise was particularly troubled: its quasi-technical language was lifted out of the community precisely where communality was most instrumental. For this reason, the status of criticism as the expert mediation of the literary remained in tremendous flux, often with an open derision levied against it. “Poets would grow negligent,” Thomas Rymer wrote in 1674, “if the Criticks had not a strict eye over their miscarriages.”¹⁶ But not everyone agreed. For many, literary specialists worked in an arcane idiom that was of little use to a society more and more defined by its shared reading of the national literature. Once this literature was detached from other realms of discourse, it seemed to require a custodial profession of experts. Yet, the separation was achieved with such a measure of regret that almost all its language bore the tinge of jargon.

This predicament received its first great airing during the battle of the books that raged throughout the 1690s. Joseph Levine’s painstaking reconstruction of this important episode has revealed for us precisely how much it was concerned with sorting out the methods of critical detachment.¹⁷ For the defenders of the order of classical writing (Temple, Swift and others), the party of the moderns (Bentley, Wotton and others) were pesky scholars committed to making the common culture of the ancients difficult and obscure. Modern learning, according to the Swift of *A Tale of the Tub* (1704), expressed only a desire for “a *superior position of place*” above traditional and agreed-upon meanings.¹⁸ All modern writers are finally suspect of “erecting certain edifices in the air” and using “those methods by which they must exalt themselves to a certain eminency above the inferior world” (28). Intellectual culture expresses an ostensibly primordial alienation of customary experience. But this is especially the case with literary-critical expertise insofar as the classics have a distinctive role in building relations of cultured civility. Since the crime of modern scholars lies in their estrangement from traditional culture, Swift’s broad satire on learning returns consistently to the particular institutions of literary knowledge. Criticism gets its own digression in the original *Tale* and then a vivid, allegorical treatment in the appended *Battle of the Books* where it appears as a “malignant deity” on whose spleen suckles “Noise and Impudence, Dulness and Vanity, Positiveness, Pedantry, and Ill-Manners” (115).

Among the items on this list, “pedantry” was a particularly important and lasting accusation. The experts of vernacular culture were pedants because they endeavored to make criticism into a science and so to encrust their language with a suspicious argot. Criticism was a most beleaguered specialty. Consider the exemplary fate of John Dennis.¹⁹ Among early-Augustan writers, Dennis was perhaps the most vocal in claiming the title of critic, yet his career begins and ends on the defensive: criticism is “not an invidious ill-natur’d thing” or a “vain and unsuccessful attempt,” he writes in 1696; it does not tend “to the certain diminu-

tion of the happiness of the reader.”²⁰ Rather, criticism is the name for the order of writing that provides “rules” for poetry and drama: it is the expert discourse of literary judgment. We are now especially in need of this expert discourse because the sphere of literary production and reception has so markedly expanded: “as there never was more occasion for a just and impartial *Criticism* on account of the generality of the Writers,” Dennis writes in 1702, “so, there never was more necessity for one on account of the Readers and the Spectators.”²¹ Literary culture apparently calls out for criticism to become a specialist practice: “We begin then with a Criticism upon poetry in general; in which we endeavour to shew its Nature, and its End, and the means which it ought to use for the attaining that End” (1: 331). The trouble was that the same proliferation of reading and writing that provided for Dennis a grounds for expertise provided for others a reason to worry about a discipline that claimed so much authority. When Dennis wrote, as he often did, that “the taste of both the Readers and the Spectators was never so debauch’d as it is at present” he seemed to represent criticism as chuntering pedantry (1: 328).

And so Dennis felt the lash of public scorn.²² Writing to a friend near the end of his life, he reflected on the oft-levied “accusation of ill-nature” in interesting terms.²³ “As this accusation is brought against me by those who are utter strangers to me, it must proceed from the books which I have publish’d, and particularly from the books of criticism” (2: 412). The bemusement ranges widely. Dennis’s professional title grows from the new culture of print; this same culture assembles his audience into a public of hostile strangers—hostile because they, too, feel estrangement but as a kind of censorious distance. The critic’s recourse is to find in publication and rebuke a lonely solace: “if in my Criticism I am in the right, my very being so must be sufficient apology” (2: 412). The public’s resentment signals the critic’s success. It means that Dennis has carved for himself the space of precise rule-making that constitutes literary criticism as a discipline. The result is a curious oscillation between detachment and anguish: the place of criticism within the division of knowledge is a cultivated and unhappy solitude: “I knew very well and foresaw, that by this very endeavor to serve them, I should draw upon me the hatred of a great part of my countrymen, and by consequence a thousand different slanders. They have given me distempers of body, and defects of mind.” (2: 413). The pathos Dennis accords to himself is the pathos of rigor, the desolate science of hard thinking that serves a public who know only to abuse. “I can proceed no further,” Dennis closes, “tho’ I have many things to say” (2: 213). What sets the rigor of critical science against its audience? Dennis leaves an important clue in this same letter: “For what does the good critic design? He designs the advancement of a noble art, and by it the interest and glory of his native country, which depend in no small measure upon the flourishing of the arts” (2: 213). Tied by birth to the vernacular print market of the early eighteenth century, the discipline of criticism takes authority and uneasiness at once. Its dilemma may be understood as a question of rationale. If each new discipline needed a pretense specific to its field, that which belonged to criticism was quite vexed: the particular rationale of literary rule-making performed the general rationale of guiding the national literature, which, in turn, resisted its particular experts.

III

It is this paradox that explains the regular appearance of the critic as a figure of abuse during the early decades of the eighteenth century. In the repeated singling out of criticism as the loneliest and most abject of sciences, however, lies a further complication: many of the loudest accusations came from within the profession, from “critics” who made a great deal of refusing expertise and choosing instead the path of sociability. According to this refusal, criticism should be the name for a worldly philosophy open to all cultivated readers. Consider the very familiar case of Addison and Steele. We often look their essays to find the beginnings of a periodical based, professional criticism. Yet it is instructive to consider the lengths to which they went to dissolve literary commentary into an idea of a shared culture. The effort was to value the language of social integration. Here is Steele writing in the *Tatler*: “In conversation, the medium is neither to affect silence or eloquence; not to value our approbation, and to endeavour to excel us who are of your company, are equal injuries. The great enemies therefore to good company, and those who transgress most against the laws of equality, (which is the life of it) are the clown, the wit and the pedant.”²⁴ The crime of the pedant is that he claims that he knows more than the rest of us. In a community defined by the modest deferral of one’s merely personal opinion, the pedant warns readers of the temptation of expertise. The pedant also allows Steele to model his exemplary figure of how criticism can adhere to the “laws of equality” among good company: “Urbanis,” he writes, is a “man one might live with whole years . . . His great good will to his friends has produced in him such a general deference in his discourse, that if he differs with you in his sense of any thing he introduces his own thoughts by some agreeable circumlocution . . . In a word, there is no man more clear in his thoughts and expressions than he is, or speaks with greater diffidence” (3: 250). In its idealized sense of itself, then, criticism sets terms for urbane conversation and so remains close to the world it serves. The consistent emphasis on language—the proper syntax for equable dialogue, the dangers of false eloquence—allowed criticism to claim an essential use within polite society as the very epitome of good manners. But the emphasis also allowed for the accusation of pedantry. Too much attention to language could make it seem less like the spring of social cohesion and more like the occasion of blockage (recall the frequent and otherwise puzzling hostility toward the merely verbal wit of anagrams, acrostics, and puns).

The problem of linguistic blockage was especially pronounced in the new textual science, where the derivation of words and the history of works focused the reader on the particulars of time and place. Textual criticism had been a source of controversy since the first volleys of the battle of the books and soon grew to crystallize around the figure of Richard Bentley, Cambridge’s eminent scholar of the classics.²⁵ “Modern” scholarship like that practiced by Bentley provided a convenient foil to diffident conversation, as it supposedly asserted the singular knowledge of the critic above the public of readers.²⁶ “Profit and Pleasure,” wrote George Berkeley in his 1713 *Guardian* paper on the varieties of knowledge, “are the Ends that a reasonable Creature would propose to obtain by Study.”²⁷ “There are nevertheless certain Criticks,” he continues,

who, seeing that Greek and Latin are in request, join in a Thoughtless Pursuit of those Languages, without any further View. They look on the ancient Authors, but it is with an Eye to Phraseology, or certain minute Particulars, which are valuable for no other Reason but because they are despised and forgotten by the rest of Mankind. The divine Maxims of Morality, the exact Pictures of Human Life, the profound Discoveries of Arts and Sciences, just Thoughts, bright images, sublime Sentiments, are overlooked, while the mind is learnedly taken up in verbal Remarks. (285)

Berkeley's version of this familiar complaint is worth our notice because it reveals some of the important points of tension in the resistance of the Enlightenment to expert cultures. The "men of deep learning without commonsense," as Addison put it, block the circulation of literature to a nation ready for its perusal (*Tatler*, 1: 386). They have no other goal but to preserve works in the official mausoleums of literary science. ("Some on the leaves of ancient authors prey, / Nor time nor moths e'er spoil'd so much as they" was Pope's formulation in the *Essay on Criticism*.) Critics should make authors enjoyable and profitable to present-day readers of the vernacular language. The effort to distinguish this undertaking from a textualism that had little of what Berkeley calls "Publick spirit," in other words, makes final recourse to a doctrine of the aesthetic: the "divine Maxims," "bright images," and "sublime Sentiments" that please and educate the common (285). The result is of considerable importance for the history of criticism, especially after it makes its way into the modern university: expertise disavows aesthetic pleasure and instruction, while aesthetic pleasure and instruction gratify the public.

Addison's famous proclamation in the *Spectator* to "have brought philosophy out of closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea-tables and in coffee-houses" ostensibly declares a commitment to the democratic culture of the reading public.²⁸ We may now see precisely how unstable this confident declaration was. The voyage from school to coffeehouse narrowed the cleft of expert mediation, while also claiming for it a vast role in the building of national culture. In this way, the critics who set norms for polite reading in English could at once claim that they were doing no particular labor—that they were merely reading and talking like the rest of the community—and also that they were ushering in a new age of enlightened, public culture. "I take upon me absolutely to condemn the fashionable and prevailing custom of inveighing against critics as the common enemies, the pests and incendiaries of the common wealth of wit and letters," wrote Lord Shaftesbury in his influential treatise *Characteristics* (1711): "I assert, on the contrary, that they are the props and pillars of this building; and that without the encouragement and propagation of such a race, we should remain as Gothic architects as ever."²⁹ Like Dennis, Shaftesbury launches a defense of criticism that takes recourse in an idea of national culture, but he does not see the critic as that culture's expert; rather, the bond to national identity allows criticism to make strong claims on its own behalf without drifting into the esoteric dialect of the sciences. Criticism need not worry about being separate from polite conversation because it is the same as that conversation. It has brought the vernacular idiom into being. Jargon henceforth was no mere annoyance; it was for some (and again without irony) a form of treason.³⁰

IV

The figure of the pedant allowed writers like Addison or Berkeley to imagine a type of literary knowledge that would stay close to the world from which it had been taken. As we've seen, theirs was not the only model of expertise during the period, nor was the scholarly enemy entirely fabricated. These writers also engaged the period's real practice of textual reading. Eighteenth-century textual scholarship grew out of classical philology and biblical hermeneutics, in such works as Bentley's essays on *Phalaris* (1699) and edition of Horace (1711), Richard Simon's *Critical Histories* of the Old and New Testaments (1682, 1689), and Robert Lowth's *Lectures* on Hebrew poetry (1753).³¹ As early as Patrick Hume's "annotations" of *Paradise Lost* (1695), a scholarly approach was taken to vernacular works as well.³² The method neither disguised its desire to be a specialism nor attempted to get beyond jargon. Hebraic scripture and the literary works of Greek, Roman, and English antiquity had grown corrupt with the passing of time. A proper scholar should collect manuscripts, emend corruptions, gloss obscure diction, and describe metrical patterns. Criticism of this variety strained to distinguish the past from the present, by drawing attention to antique meter and distant references, or by dwelling on the difficulties of transmission and attribution. In their rhetoric of modest and methodical scrupulousness, textual scholars came closest among the schools of criticism to imitating the procedures of experimental science. The result was an important paradox: the most traditional bodies of knowledge—scripture and classics—were made to serve the most secular and modern ends.

"How is his genuine text to be discovered and retrieved?" asked John Upton of Shakespeare in 1746: "how but by consulting the various copies of authority? by comparing the author with himself?" and by "knowledge in ancient customs and grammar"?³³ The method was deliberately tedious. In fact, tedium was a sign of rigor, of a method placed at a safe distance from the bright fanfare of the public's taste. Scholarliness was not entirely without its own enthusiasm, however, which could appear in the most revealing of ways:

We are to proceed with caution, with doubt and hesitation . . . 'Twere well therefore if a careful and critical reader would first form to himself some plan, when he enters upon an author deserving a stricter inquiry: if he would consider that originals have a manner always peculiar to themselves; and not only a manner, but a language: if he would compare one passage with another; for such authors are the best interpreters of their own meaning: and would reflect, not only what allowances may be given for obsolete modes of speech, but what a venerable cast this alone often gives a writer. I omit the previous knowledge in ancient customs and manners, in grammar and construction; the knowledge of these is presupposed; to be caught tripping here is an ominous stumble at the very threshold and entrance upon criticism; 'tis ignorance, which no guess-work, no divining faculty, however ingenious, can atone and commute for. (135–138)

It is difficult to imagine a more brusque assertion of disciplinary prerogative or a more complete wrenching of literature from the realm of common meanings. Critics possess a technical knowledge of language and history alike. The split of the liter-

ary from the everyday language of readers yields a corresponding rift on the axis of time. Texts are shorn from the present and lodged in the past: “originals have a manner always peculiar to themselves; and not only a manner, but a language.” Textual science thus proceeds as a series of detachments—from the reader, from present culture—which together establish the literary as an object of knowledge.

Still, it would not be entirely correct to say that this variety of disciplinary knowledge secludes literature entirely from public meaning; rather, the ascetic severity of the model leads to a different sort of mediation. For scholars of the Bible, a belief in the literal truth of scripture had enjoined a technical method designed to pin down the circumstances of transmission and to restore as far as possible the original text. This procedure was adapted by the scholar of secular material, who still behaved in the manner of a cleric approaching a sacred work. Upton’s system of reading Shakespeare, for example, repeats strictures he learned not just as an editor of Arrian but also from Protestant exegetics. Compare his language to Matthew Poole’s influential *Annotations upon the Holy Bible*, published over sixty years earlier: “our design, good reader, was not to tell thee, how the Fathers interpreted Texts . . . nor yet to tell thee what conclusions of Truth may be raised from the verses . . . Our work hath been onely to give thee the plain sense of the Scripture, and to Reconcile seeming Contradictions where they occurred, and as far as we were able to open Scripture which is its own best Interpreter.”³⁴ With this transfer of method from the Bible, the literary text accrues a persistent religiosity, a “venerable cast” often elaborated as a theory of the sublime. This connection was drawn with greatest virtuosity by Robert Lowth, Professor of Poetry at Oxford from 1741 to 1751. Lowth’s *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (1753, English translation, 1778) tied textual obscurity, historical distance, and divine subject-matter into a comprehensive portrait. “I bring, if no other accomplishment, at least industry and inclination,” Lowth began his lectures to his colleagues: “I receive this appointment as an honour, for which the utmost exertions of labour and assiduity will be but a very inadequate return.”³⁵ Scholarly labor procures an aesthetic of lasting weight: “While the imagination labours to comprehend what is beyond its powers, this very labour itself, and these ineffectual endeavours, sufficiently demonstrate the immensity and sublimity of the object . . . Here the mind seems to exert its utmost faculties in vain to grasp an object, whose unparalleled magnitude mocks its feeble endeavours” (1: 353). With the turning of textual study into a profession—“a particular department of science” (1: 4) in Lowth’s words—we thus witness an interesting wrinkle in the oft-remarked transition to a secular culture, wherein literary and other aesthetic monuments occupy the place previously held by religion. Literature is like scripture both in the method of its interpretation and the aura of its presence. The effort to bring literature back into the fold of common experience casts it with the nimbus of the sacred. So wrenched out of the public and encased in difficult language, textualism can only re-introduce literature into the everyday world in alienated—or, if one prefers, sublime—form as hallowed artifacts. Over the long term, the supersession of religious by literary meanings takes form in a canon of national writers, whose very separateness from the world that reads them expresses their transcendent value.³⁶

No single work of textual science realized every element of this project, and it would be difficult to say, in hindsight, that the eighteenth century managed

to finish building a national philology on the ruins of religious faith. Yet, in works like Thomas Tyrwhitt's 1775 edition of the *Canterbury Tales*, even the simple attempt to read historically Chaucer's idiom and meter tied manuscript learning to scholarly detachment and national culture formation alike. How should a critic read Chaucer?

He would first, I presume, enquire whether all the irregularities were in the genuine text of his author, or only the mistakes of copyists: he would enquire further, by comparing the genuine text with other contemporary writings and monuments, whether many things, which appeared irregular, were not in truth sufficiently regular, either justified by the constant practice, or excused by the license of the age: where authority failed, he would have recourse (but soberly) to etymology and analogy; and if after all a few passages remained, not reducible to the strict laws of metre by any of the methods above mentioned, if he were really (as I have supposed him) a sensible critic, he would be apt rather to expect patiently the solution of his difficulties from more correct manuscripts, or a more complete theory of his author's versification, than to cut the knot by demanding presumptuously, that the work was composed without any regard to metrical rules.³⁷

Here is a most intoxicated defense of critical sobriety. Patient erudition returns Chaucer to the language world of the fourteenth century and so protects him from the meddlesome expectation that the iambs sound modern. It is at this point of supreme retreat from polite society, however, that textualism goes farthest toward mediating expertise in the direction of something like a public culture, as that takes one shape in the idea of a national literature. For in the transposition of method from the Bible and the classics to the vernacular lies the recovery of English monuments and the reverential bond to that nation's past: "that Norman-Saxon dialect, which I suppose to have prevailed in the age of Chaucer"—"the language of our ancestors"—"in substance, remains to this day the language of England" (29, 42).

V

This program had gained a certain institutional footing by the 1770s. While the syllabus at Oxford and Cambridge was still entirely dominated by works in the classical languages, the vernacular had begun to make important inroads in English dissenting academies and, as Robert Crawford and Clifford Siskin have shown us, in the Scottish Universities as well.³⁸ Even the official English universities paid new attention to the national literature. William Warburton noted with sly mockery in his 1747 edition of Shakespeare that "The famous University of Oxford . . . which hath long so justly held, and, with such equity, dispensed, the chief honours of the learned World, thought good letters so much interested in a correct Edition of the best *English* writers, that they, very lately, in their Public Capacity, undertook one of this very Author, by subscription."³⁹ Warburton refers here to Thomas Hanmer's 1744 Shakespeare. The following decade Thomas Warton, Oxford's Professor of Poetry from 1756 to 1766, published his two-volume study of Spenser (1754, 1762). Eventually, he would release his magisterial *History of English Poetry* (1774–1781). Yet, mid-eighteenth-century textual-

ism was not without resistance—Warton’s Spenser study was reviewed as “a voluminous farrago of impertinence and pedantry!” a mere “bedroll of quotations” useful only for “meditative fumigation” or time spent sitting on “the Cloacinian offertory”⁴⁰—nor was it without alternative in the attempt to reconcile expertise. Periodical criticism had always stood conveniently at the interface of intellectual and public culture. By the middle decades of the century, however, it had begun to assume a relation to its readers quite distinct from the relation that marked the moment of *The Spectator*.⁴¹ This is perhaps easiest to detect in the emergence of publications like *The Monthly Review* (1749) and *The Literary Magazine* (1756), journals that catalogued, sifted through, and evaluated the new works of the press. Insouciant chattiness here gave way to a new temperance. The *Monthly* represented itself as “a periodical whose sole object should be to give a compendious account of those productions of the press, as they come out, that are worth notice; an account, in short, which should, in virtue of its candour, and justness of distinction, obtain authority enough for its representations, to be serviceable to such as would choose to have some idea of a book before they set out their money or time on it.”⁴² The point was not so much that the public lacked discrimination as the new dispersal of reading and writing left that public in need of a custodial hand to select products worth its attention. Criticism of this variety relied on the perception of specialized knowledge, yet its authority rested also on the realization of its selections by a nation of readers. A great weight fell on the *mediation* of expertise and laity, whereby criticism chooses certain works to write about and to offer the public as worth reading. For the *Literary Magazine*, the process of selection became the central instance of precisely this sort of mediation: “It is not to be expected,” the editors wrote in the first number, “that we can insert extensive extracts or critical examinations of *all* the writings which this age of writers may offer to our notice. A few only will deserve the distinction of criticism, and a few only will obtain it. We shall try to select the best and most important pieces, and are not without hope that we may sometimes influence the public voice, and hasten the popularity of a valuable work.”⁴³ The problem of expertise is resolved by a procedure of valuation: intellectual and lay cultures reunite at the instance in which critical selection itself constitutes the public and its literature.

As criticism became the expert mediation of the literary, its practitioners had another means of arguing for their utility besides polite speech or exegetical training. As we’ve seen, the dilemma of criticism in the modern period expressed with particular vigor the larger unease bred by the division of knowledge: the discovery that various forms of understanding were both separate from each other and from their objects of study. This division rested on a correspondence (sometimes tacit, sometimes explicit) with the division of labor, the separation of tasks, classes, and values. For *The Literary Magazine*, the future of criticism lay in drawing out and exploiting this correspondence. Selecting, reading, and evaluating the diversity of literary products required a skilled and assorted staff: “We shall labour to attain as much exactness as can be expected in such a variety, and shall give as much variety as can consist with reasonable exactness; for this purpose a selection has been made of men qualified for the different parts of the work, and each has the employment assigned him, which he is supposed most able to dis-

charge” (i). To the differentiated order of literature fits a differentiated order of critics; each has a role to play in the making of a modern literary culture. As they guard against transforming that role into a specialism, periodicals like the *Literary Magazine* endeavor to explain the work of the critic as a kind of labor. Critical expertise wards off pedantry by invoking the market, whose means-ends rationality secures a practical integration of knowledge into the social whole. Expertise in this case represents a skill with a specific function, not simply positive knowledge but knowledge linked (and so generalized) to consumption. Periodical criticism still finds its legitimacy as a public enterprise, but now forswears diffident politeness for economic assiduity. Here is how one frequent contributor to the *Monthly* described this change:

There is a species of assurance in men of real knowledge . . . As critics by profession, they must necessarily either display their assurance by insisting on their own merit, or, in fact, confess themselves bunglers, or impostors. And indeed why should they not? . . . Why should a critick . . . be thought too assuming in laying publick a claim to that merit, which they actually possess? What should we think of an artisan or manufacturer, who should, in his advertisements and shop-bills, *modestly* affect a diffidence of being able to give his customers satisfaction?⁴⁴

The complaint is unusually candid in drawing out both the difference between older and newer modes of periodical expertise and in making the analogy between criticism and commerce. Modest disavowals of authority fail to offer the public the satisfaction of a well-made product, while periodical expertise manufactures good readings. The analogy to manufacturing should be taken, of course, with a grain of salt. One suspects that criticism is not really understood to be a workshop so much as it is defended within the language of economic utility. The long-term importance of the argument is to imagine that periodical criticism is one profession among an array of professions, each offering a specific expertise to the laity. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that this model eventually led to the review culture of the nineteenth century.⁴⁵ My point in closing with this example, however, is not to suggest that the model of professional journalism achieved a dominant position during the period with which we’ve been concerned. Diffident amateurs and writer / critics still proliferated in the market of letters. My point here is, rather, to show how one model of criticism joined the division of knowledge with that of labor and thus, like other models, staked its claim to offer a specific type of knowledge—its claim to be a discipline—on its ability to solve the problem of disciplines themselves.

VI

The path from origins to the present is never direct. Still, tracing criticism to its beginnings does provide insight into its special role as a discipline. Several years ago, I argued in *The Modern Language Association’s Profession* (literary criticism’s journal of disciplinary self-reflection) that present-day attacks on critics repeat old patterns, that criticism still makes people anxious about expertise.⁴⁶ Looking back, I am more convinced now by how much has changed with time. Eighteenth-century debates over whether criticism should be a disci-

pline were set against a common understanding of the importance of literary study in a modern society. It would be difficult today to make that claim. Criticism woke from its project of building a national culture to find itself one specialism among others. Viewed from the eighteenth century, this so-called crisis of literary study is more chronic than acute and is unlikely to be remedied in the near or long term. If there is a crisis of literary study, it lies deep in the structure of the discipline. Surely it would be gauche to argue that criticism should aspire to be a science, yet the question of knowledge will abide any consideration of the field. Few disciplines claim to be without method, object or knowledge. As we have seen, these gave shape to the contretemps over criticism in its formative years. The past decade has witnessed a lively and fruitful discussion of the relation between criticism and its public. Let's look forward to an equally lively consideration of its disciplinary rationale. We may begin by returning to a question first posed by our predecessors: What is the object of literary study today and where is its place in the division of knowledge?

NOTES

This essay has been benefited from the responses of audiences at Duke University, The University of Southern California, The University of Tennessee, and Stanford University.

1. *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 28 (1994).
2. A definitive conspectus may be found in Douglas Lane Patey, "The Institution of Criticism in the Eighteenth Century," in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol 4., *The Eighteenth Century*, ed. H. B. Nisbet and Claude Rawson (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997), 3–31.
3. For a recent exposition, see Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1989).
4. For the classical discussion of expertise as a matter of "professions," see A.M. Carr-Saunders and P.A. Wilson, *The Professions* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1933). For recent historical studies, see Geoffrey Holmes, *Augustan England: Professions, State and Society* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1982) and the essays collected in *The Professions in Early-Modern England*, ed. Wilfred Prest (London: Croon Helm, 1987).
5. Clifford Siskin, *The Work of Writing: Literature and Social Change in Britain, 1700–1830*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1998), 21; see also 29–53. See also Michael McKeon, "The Origins of Interdisciplinary Studies," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 28 (1994): 17–28.
6. See Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001) and *The Rise of Modern Philosophy: The Tension between the New and Traditional Philosophies from Machiavelli to Leibniz*, ed. Tom Sorrell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).
7. Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum* (1620), trans. Peter Urbach and John Gibson (Chicago: Open Court, 1994), 169. Subsequent references are to this edition and noted parenthetically.
8. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan, or The Matter, Forme, and Power of a Common-Wealth, Ecclesiastical and Civill* (1651), ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), 63.
9. John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, *A Satyre on Reason and Mankind* in *The Works of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, ed. Harold Love (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), ll. 12–21; subsequent references are to this edition and noted parenthetically.
10. Courtly not just in social terms, but also literary medium. Rochester's mode was the circulated manuscript not the printed text; see Harold Love, *Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993).

11. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), ed. Peter Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 8; subsequent references are to this edition and noted parenthetically.
12. For the relation between science and polite conversation, see Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994).
13. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 15.
14. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989). Habermas's influence on eighteenth-century studies has been as immense as it has been varied and controversial. See for example the special issue of *Eighteenth Century Studies* on "The Public and the Nation," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 29, 1 (1995).
15. See the special forum on canon formation in *Eighteenth-Century Life* 21, 3 (1997): 80–107.
16. Thomas Rymer, "Preface" to Rapin's *Reflections on Aristotle's Treatise of Poesie*, in *The Critical Works of Thomas Rymer*, ed. Curt Zimanski (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1956), 1.
17. See Joseph Levine, *The Battle of the Books: History and Literature in the Augustan Age* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1993).
18. Jonathan Swift, *A Tale of the Tub, Written for the Universal Benefit of Mankind* (1704), in *A Tale of the Tub and Other Works*, ed. Angus Ross and David Ross (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986), 27; subsequent references to the *Tale* and the *Battle of the Books* are to this edition and noted parenthetically.
19. In fact, Dennis's first long statement was meant as his contribution to the battle of the books; see *The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry* (1701) in *The Critical Works of John Dennis*, ed. Edward Hooker, 2 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1939), 1: 197–278.
20. Dennis, *Remarks on a Book Entitled Prince Arthur* (1696) in *Works*, 1: 48.
21. Dennis, *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704), in *Works*, 1: 328 and 331; subsequent references are to this edition and noted parenthetically.
22. For an intelligent discussion of Dennis's career and reputation, see John Morillo, "John Dennis: Enthusiastic Passions, Cultural Memory, and Literary Theory," in *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34, 1 (2000): 21–41. Morillo is particularly lucid on Dennis's politics, which are beyond the scope of the present essay.
23. Dennis, "To Mr. Bradley" (1720/21) in Hooker ed. *Works*, 2: 412; subsequent references are to this edition and noted parenthetically.
24. Richard Steele, *Tatler*, no. 244, in *The Tatler*, 3 vols., ed. Donald Bond (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 3: 251; subsequent references are to this edition and noted parenthetically.
25. Scholar of the ancients, Bentley was received as the consummate modern for daring to dispute the authorship of Phalaris's epistles; see Richard Bentley, *Dissertation Upon the Epistles of Phalaris* (London, 1699); Joseph Levine, *The Battle of the Books*, and note 31 below.
26. See Addison's paper on "Tom Folio," *Tatler*, no. 168, in *The Tatler*, ed. Donald Bond, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 1: 383–386.
27. George Berkeley, *Guardian*, no. 77, in *The Guardian*, ed. John Calhoun Stephens (Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1982), 285; subsequent references are to this edition and noted parenthetically.
28. Joseph Addison, *Spectator*, no. 10, in *The Spectator*, ed. Donald Bond, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), 1: 44.
29. Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Third Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions and Times*, 2nd rev. ed., 3 vols. (London, 1714), 1: 235–236.
30. The examples are many. Here is one: "Critics are apt to talk in a supercilious, magisterial way, to obtrude their sentiments on the world, and maintain every singular opinion with stiffness and ill manners," Henry Felton, *A Dissertation on Reading the Classics and Forming a Just Style* (London, 1718), xiv.

31. For classicists, see C. O. Brink, *English Classical Scholarship: Historical Reflections on Bentley, Porson and Housman* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985); E. J. Kinney, *The Classical Text: Aspects of Editing in the Age of the Printed Book* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1974); and Reudolf Pfeiffer, *The History of Classical Scholarship from 1300 to 1850* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1989). For the reading of scripture, see Marcus Walsh's fine essay, "Biblical Scholarship and Literary Criticism" in *History of Literary Criticism*, ed. Nisbet and Rawson 4: 758–777. Hans W. Frei's suggestive book, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1974), seems to me to be wrong when it claims that historical method does not arrive until the end of the eighteenth century and then first in Germany.

32. Hume's full title provides a sense of the exegetical project: *Annotations on Milton's Paradise Lost, wherein the texts of Sacred Writ, related to the Poem, are Quoted; the Parallel Places and Imitations from the most excellent Homer and Virgil, Cited and Compared; all the Obscure Parts render'd in Phrases more Familiar; the Old and Obsolete Works, with their Originals, Explain'd and made Easie to the English Reader*. The notorious instance of vernacular textualism came when Bentley published his edition of *Paradise Lost* in 1732. Following Bentley, and in great measure as a response to his "excesses," a generation of classical and Biblical scholars turned their attention to English works: important examples include Lewis Theobald's edition of Shakespeare in 1733, followed by Thomas Hanmer's in 1744, William Warburton's in 1747, and Thomas Warton's *Observations on the Faery Queene of Spenser* in 1754 (vol. 1) followed by John Upton's edition in 1758. For detailed analyses of the editing of vernacular classics during the eighteenth century, see Simon Jarvis, *Scholars and Gentlemen: Shakespearean Textual Criticism and the Representation of Scholarly Labour 1725–1769* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995) and Marcus Walsh, *Shakespeare, Milton, and Eighteenth-Century Literary Editing* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997).

33. John Upton, *Critical Observations on Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (London, 1748), ix, 137; subsequent references are to this edition and noted parenthetically.

34. Matthew Poole, *Annotations upon the Holy Bible, wherein the Sacred Text is Inserted and various Readings Annexed, together with the Parallel Scriptures, the more difficult Terms in each Verse are Explain'd, seeming Contradictions Reconciled, Questions and Doubts Resolved, and the whole Text opened* (London, 1683).

35. Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, trans. G. Gregory, 2. vol. (London, 1787), 1: 2–3; subsequent references are to this edition and noted parenthetically.

36. See my *Making the English Canon: Print-Capitalism and the Cultural Past, 1700–1770* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998) and Trevor Ross, *The Making of the English Literary Canon from the Middle Ages to the Eighteenth Century* (Toronto: McGill Queens Univ. Press, 1998).

37. Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Thomas Tyrwhitt, 4 vols. (London, 1775), 4: 90–91; hereafter in parentheses.

38. For the importance of dissenting academies, see John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 1993), 85–133. For the Scottish context, see Franklin Court, *Institutionalizing English Literature: The Culture and Politics of Literary Study, 1750–1900* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1992); Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992); Robert Crawford ed., *The Scottish Invention of English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998); and Siskin, *The Work of Writing*, esp. 79–99.

39. William Warburton, *The Works of Shakespeare* (London, 1747), xxiii.

40. William Huggins, *The Observer Observed: or Some Remarks on a Curious Tract Intituled Observations on the Faerie Queene of Spenser* (London, 1756), 18, 27–28.

41. On mid-century periodicals with particular attention to the *Monthly Review*, see Frank Donoghue, *The Fame Machine: Book Reviewing and the Making of Literary Careers* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1996).

42. Anon., *The Monthly Review. A Periodical Work, Giving An Account, with proper abstracts of, and extracts from, the New Books, Pamphlets, etc. as they come out* (London, 1749), vol. 1, no. 1, advertisement.

43. Anon., *The Literary Magazine* (London, 1756), vol. 1, no. 1, I; hereafter in parentheses.

44. William Kenrick, "On the Modesty of Men of Letters," in *A Defense of Mr. Kenrick's Review of Dr. Johnson's Shakespeare* (London, 1766) 50–51.

45. See John Klancher, *The Making of the English Reading Audiences, 1790–1832* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1987).

46. See Jonathan Brody Kramnick, "Origins of the Present Crisis," *Profession* 97 (December 1997): 84–92.