Newspapers and Literature

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Literature and the Press

A reader of eighteenth-century literature might suppose that newspapers are merely a source of background information, providing diurnal records of contextual events such as accounts of battles, storms or state occasions. It is certainly true that newspapers offer readers unparalleled contemporary detail, albeit often contradictory, confusing or obscure. It is also true that a different kind of contextual literary information is provided by newspaper advertisements: for example theatrical advertisements, announcements of books published, and the various notices concerning spectacles and amusements: exhibitions of paintings, pleasure gardens, panoramas, zoos, museums, wonders and curiosities. Advertisements like these have allowed modern literary scholars to date precisely when a book was published or a play performed. In this sense, the newspaper is an unparalleled guide to the wider cultural and social history of the eighteenth century, within which literary writings find their place.

Eighteenth-century newspapers and periodicals, however, were also a significant medium for the publication of literary writing—especially essays, poetry and fiction—by a wide range of authors, from minor anonymous hacks to established and canonical authors. Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, Eliza Haywood, Samuel Johnson, Tobias Smollett, Oliver Goldsmith, James Boswell, Mary Wollstonecraft and Samuel Taylor Coleridge all wrote extensively for newspapers and the periodical press. Financial desperation, or at least need, was the cause of many a writer turning to journalism. This was work that could be completed quickly, was immediately remunerative, and paid comparatively well. As almost all of these contributions were anonymous, the great majority of this kind of writing remains unidentified. Secure attributions have been possible in only a small number of cases, and it is probable that a great many more remain to be discovered.

The Periodical Essay

The emergence of the essay as one of the most significant literary genres of the eighteenth century was dependent on the expanding market for newspapers and periodicals. The essay, a short prose composition on a particular subject, was defined by Samuel Johnson in his Dictionary (1755) as a ‘loose sally of the mind, an irregular undigested piece’. While an essay might address a serious philosophical, ethical or scientific topic, it does so in the same easy and conversational style in which it might relate the follies of society or narrate the history of a courtship. The Tatler (1709-11) and The Spectator (1711-14), written mostly by Richard Steele and Joseph Addison, set the model: a publication issued three or more times a week, comprising a single essay accompanied by a small number of advertisements. Numerous imitators flourished in the eighteenth century, including Samuel Johnson’s The Rambler (1750-52), and Henry Fielding’s Covent Garden Journal (1752).

The essay was also a staple of daily newspapers. This was writing designed to capture the imagination and to attract a loyal following to the paper. When John Newbery established his daily newspaper the Public Ledger, or Daily Register of Commerce and Industry, he made a contract with Oliver Goldsmith ‘to furnish papers of an amusing character’ [Taylor, Goldsmith as
Goldsmith, p. 98). For the issue of 24 January 1760, Goldsmith provided a letter from a ‘Chinese Philosopher in London’ who he named Lien Chi Altangi. Over the next two years, Goldsmith wrote 119 of these letters, sometimes more than ten a month. As he was new to British culture, the fictional Altangi described all his experiences with a fresh and ironic comedy. His letters addressed the follies of everyday life in London, such as the ridiculous diagnoses offered by quack doctors (27 March 1760) or the popular taste for freaks and wonders (9 June 1760), but also made insightful estimations of English manners and philosophy, such as those on marriage customs (10 September 1760) or the role of science in society (10 October 1760). Goldsmith’s Chinese letters, later published as The Citizen of the World (1762), were a great success, earning Goldsmith 100 pounds a year, almost sufficient to maintain a genteel lifestyle.

Newspaper Poetry

In addition to prose essays, a great deal of poetry was published in newspapers. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Jonathan Swift’s ‘A Description of A City Shower’ first saw publication in Richard Steele’s periodical The Tatler (No. 238, 17 October 1710). In the last two decades of the eighteenth century especially, newspaper proprietors found a ready audience for poetry: ballads, songs and sentimental effusions were especially favoured, but more ambitious and difficult verse also found its place. One newspaper to capitalise on the public taste for poetry was Daniel Stuart’s anti-ministerial daily The Morning Post, which went out of its way in the 1790s to attract the best in new and experimental poetry. Under Stuart’s aegis, The Morning Post published verse by a group of revolutionary young poets, including Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, Mary Robinson and Robert Southey (the core of the English Romantic poets). Stuart paid extremely well: in December 1797 Coleridge agreed to supply poetry to the newspaper at the rate of a guinea a week. This was a rate of productivity Coleridge found difficult to maintain, but by ransacking his commonplace book, and revising some of his friend Wordsworth’s juvenilia, Coleridge published at least nine poems under various pseudonyms in the newspaper in the next six months, including ‘Lewti’ on 13 April 1798, an early version of a poem later published in the first printing of Lyrical Ballads (1798).

Journalism as Literature

Despite the number and variety of their press contributions, many writers continued to have an ambivalent attitude to journalism. Writing for newspapers and periodicals was accorded little prestige, was associated with poverty and dullness, and was conventionally represented by the figure of the Grub Street hack. But the eighteenth century also saw an increasing professional regard for the disciplines of newspaper writing. Samuel Johnson, in the first of his ‘Idler’ essays in John Payne’s Universal Chronicle (8 April 1758), caught this ambiguity well:

A Journalist is an Historian, not indeed of the highest Class, nor of the number of those whose works bestow immortality upon others or themselves; yet, like other Historians, he distributes for a time Reputation or Infamy, relates the opinion of the week, raises hopes and terrors, inflames or allays the violence of the people.
As Johnson reminds us, journalism itself has literary qualities. As such, it requires the same kinds of analysis and research that critics usually reserve for literature. Furthermore, many critics have argued that journalism itself had an important influence on eighteenth-century literature, especially on the rise of the novel. The newspaper and the novel share significant formal properties: not only a regard for novelty and circumstantial detail, but also a realist style of writing, a concern with entertainment and a reverence for everyday life.

Bibliography


