

Not taking it personally: from ‘gentle reader’ to the common reader

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The development in the eighteenth century of reading publics, mass audiences, imagined communities and the common reader has been discussed by scholars as diverse as Ong, Habermas and Darnton. But the precise mechanisms by which readers learned to be common or to join imagined communities are still unclear. This paper addresses two questions about ‘the reader’:

1. how did readers in the first half of the eighteenth century learn to adopt the role of ‘the reader’?
2. how far was this a contingent process and how far did it follow predictable patterns seen in other cultures as the written, printed or typed word expands?

To address the first question I present evidence about the nature of reading and writing in the late seventeenth century, suggesting that readers took texts ‘personally’. For example, Pepys is shown to evaluate texts as ‘impertinent’ if they are written by a social inferior on a topic proper to gentlemen, particularly if the writer fails to beg pardon for addressing higher ranks without invitation. I go on to discuss evidence from both writers and readers in the mid eighteenth-century who to some extent detached themselves from their personal identities and explore how this came about. I assess competing explanations for this process, such as the changing nature of social networks and the balance of supply and demand in the literary market place. I conclude by comparing my findings with the experiences of twentieth and twenty-first century societies experiencing a comparable rise in the importance of texts and assess how far taking texts *impersonally* is an inevitable stage in this process and how far it is culture specific.

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