Shared Words

The culture-making act of reading together.

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Some historians talk about a "reading revolution" in the middle of the 18th century, during which literacy rates rose and people came increasingly to prefer reading silently over reading aloud—mainly novels, a relatively new literary form. In *The Social Life of Books*, Abigail Williams, a professor of 18th-century studies at Oxford, says the reading revolution was much weaker than historians have suggested; the old tradition of reading out loud remained alive and well. To support her argument, Williams cites myriad sources: diaries, journals, commonplace books, letters, library withdrawals—enough sources to justify her thanking five researchers for their help.

There were practical reasons for reading books aloud. "Domestic lighting was primitive, and prohibitively expensive," Williams says. "Why strain the eyes with insufficient light and small print when a single person with a well-lit book could do the work of many?" Also, eyeglasses were rare until late in the 18th century, so it made sense for a person with good eyesight to read to people whose eyesight was poor. And reading aloud was a way of entertaining others—including people who were illiterate and could not read for themselves—while they were doing housework.

There also were moral reasons for reading aloud. Many observers thought it was dangerous for young women to read novels by themselves. Young women, one 18th-century moralist said, were susceptible to "giddy and fantastical notions of love and

gallantry" that they imbibed from novels. Samuel Richardson recommended that his novel *Pamela* be shared among company.

Reading aloud stayed in vogue for other reasons. Eighteenth-century Britons admired good oratory. In the 1750s, so-called "spouting clubs"—debating and reciting societies—became popular with tradesmen. In these venues reading aloud was a spectator sport. And more generally, Britons prized sociability. Many people enjoyed reading aloud with their families or friends. A self-help book on marriage recommends reading aloud with one's spouse. "And though you should not naturally be disposed to the same taste in reading or amusement, this may be acquired by habit, and by a hearty desire of conforming to his inclinations and sharing in his pleasures." A satirical self-help book takes a different view. The author of *An Essay on the Art of Ingeniously Tormenting* says you can torment your husband by continually interrupting him when he's reading a Shakespeare play aloud.

Not everyone enjoyed being read to. William Wilberforce, the abolitionist, complained, "I cannot make the same use of passages I notice in books that are read to me as if I had read them with my own eyes, and could know them at a glance." Some listeners grumbled that readers would drone on without noticing that no one was interested in what they were reciting. Williams quotes one woman griping that a houseguest insisted on reading the newspaper "aloud to us paragraph by paragraph, half of which are bad news of retreats of our army."

Sometimes reading aloud was a punishment inflicted on children. The engraver Thomas Bewick remembered that when he got into a fight his parents required him to spend Sunday evenings reading "the Bible, or some other good book, to old Mrs.

Beilby and her daughter, or others of the family." One wonders how Mrs. Beilby felt about being reluctantly read to by a boy.

The subtitle of Williams's book—*Reading Together in the Eighteenth-Century Home*—is misleading; her book is not only about how 18th-century Britons read, it is also about what they read. Her conclusion is startling: Most Britons only read books "partially." They mainly read abridgments, extracts, and miscellanies—that is, anthologies.

Until the invention of the steam-powered printing press in the mid-19th century, books were expensive, so most people read low-priced chapbooks, which were sold by itinerant hawkers. The contents "ranged from ballads, cut-down seventeenth-century romances, . . . stories of British heroes . . ., true-life criminal tales, [and] religious material to scaled-down versions of prose fiction." People mostly read the famous 18th-century novels—*Gulliver's Travels*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Tom Jones*—in chapbook versions.

Britons also read abridgments of plays. "For a couple of pennies, readers could acquire heavily abridged forms of stage plays, shrunk into one act." Williams mentions Thomas Bowdler—the man who took the bawdy passages out of Shakespeare and gave us the word "bowdlerize." Algernon Swinburne, the decadent late-19th-century poet, defended Bowdler's *The Family Shakespeare*: "No man ever did better service to Shakespeare than the man who made it possible to put him into the hands of intelligent and imaginative children."

The most popular compilations contained sermons, theological tracts, and religious verse. When Robert Burns was managing a small library in Lanarkshire, he was irritated that the patrons wanted him to order books of divinity that he called

"damned trash" rather than such secular pleasures as *Don Quixote*, *Joseph Andrews*, and the *Arabian Nights*.

Many readers made their own personal compilations: commonplace books, in which they would write down passages from books for future enjoyment or reference. Commonplace books, which occasionally were read aloud, were "an eclectic and inventive hotchpotch of materials," Williams writes; they'd sometimes include recipes. In keeping with the way the word was used at the time, Williams uses commonplace as a verb, referring, for example, to an 18th-century clergyman who "commonplaces useful observations" from the books he reads.

One might conclude from Williams's survey that 18th-century Britons were mainly interested in hearing (or reading) extracts of verse or prose that were uplifting, edifying, moving, or heartwarming. The educator Hannah More attacked "the Swarms of *Abridgements*, *Beauties*, and *Compendiums* which . . . may be considered in many instances as an infallible receipt for making a superficial mind." Williams says that commentators of the era "worried about learning bought too easily and readers who could no longer engage with whole texts."

From the vantage of two centuries on, the view is sunnier and more democratic: Chapbooks, abridgments, extracts, and miscellanies made snippets of great literature available to the middle class and the poor. The effect on British (and by extension American) identity was enormous. For example, while we rightly esteem Shakespeare's linguistic creativity, it wasn't until long after his death that his influence came to be fully felt. "Over the course of the eighteenth century," Williams writes, "Shakespeare became ever more firmly ensconced as the national bard." Many men and women first read passages from Shakespeare in a chapbook

or heard Shakespeare being declaimed in a spouting club. If they liked what they read or heard, they might decide to borrow the whole play from a circulating library. The stories and ideas that shaped our culture weren't just transmitted pristine and silent from mind to mind across the pages, but were also passed hand to hand and shared with voices raised.

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Abigail Williams