# **Eighteenth-Century Fiction**

Volume 24

Issue 2 Form and Formalism in the British Eighteenth-Century Novel

Article 2

1-6-2012

# Counting, Resonance, and Form, A Speculative Manifesto (with Notes)

David A. Brewer
The Ohio State University

### Recommended Citation

Brewer, David A. (2012) "Counting, Resonance, and Form, A Speculative Manifesto (with Notes)," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*: Vol. 24: Iss. 2, Article 2.

Available at: http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/ecf/vol24/iss2/2

 $Copyright @2014\ by\ Eighteenth-Century\ Fiction, McMaster\ University.\ This\ Article\ is\ brought\ to\ you\ by\ DigitalCommons@McMaster.\ It\ has\ been accepted for\ inclusion\ in\ Eighteenth-Century\ Fiction\ by\ an\ authorized\ administrator\ of\ DigitalCommons@McMaster.\ For\ more\ information,\ please\ contact\ scom@mcmaster.ca.$ 

# Counting, Resonance, and Form, A Speculative Manifesto (with Notes)

#### **Abstract**

The recent quantitative turn in literary studies has reminded us of the breadth and variety of the literary field of the past. In so doing, however, it has necessarily levelled out the felt distinctions between various texts, and so risks working against the very sort of literary history that its new vistas promise: one which does justice to the workings of form across time and space. In particular, the presumptive interchangeability of texts that is required to put them into a series susceptible to quantitative analysis ignores the massively different footprint left by commercially successful (and socially canonical) texts as we move beyond their moment of initial publication. *Evelina*, for example, may have been just another novel of 1778 when it first appeared, but it loomed far above all other productions of that year a decade later (or anywhere beyond the metropole). Such footprints, I argue, changed the significance of their texts' form, making it seem richer, thicker, more resonant or definitive -- perhaps, for some, more stifling or oppressive -- than that of their apparently similar but less successful counterparts.

## Keywords

quantitative turn, distant reading, canonicity, history of reading, literary history, footprint, resonance, formalism, form, eighteenth-century literature, critical theory

# Counting, Resonance, and Form, A Speculative Manifesto (with Notes)

# David A. Brewer

The recent quantitative turn in literary studies has reminded us of the breadth and variety of the literary field of the past. In so doing, however, it has necessarily levelled out the felt distinctions between various texts, and so risks working against the very sort of literary history that its new vistas promise: one which does justice to the workings of form across time and space. In particular, the presumptive interchangeability of texts that is required to put them into a series susceptible to quantitative analysis ignores the massively different footprint left by commercially successful (and socially canonical) texts as we move beyond their moment of initial publication. Evelina, for example, may have been just another novel of 1778 when it first appeared, but it loomed far above all other productions of that year a decade later (or anywhere beyond the metropole). Such footprints, I argue, changed the significance of their texts' form, making it seem richer, thicker, more resonant or definitive-perhaps, for some, more stifling or oppressive—than that of their apparently similar but less successful counterparts.

THE CHIEF virtue of the recent quantitative turn in literary studies championed by Franco Moretti, Clifford Siskin, William St Clair, and others has been to remind us of just how broad and varied the literary field of the past actually was, and what a small fraction of it receives scholarly attention of any sort. At the same time, this exciting new (to us) vista has been accompanied by a sobering reminder that our customary modes of investigation are simply not up to the task of really grasping this broadened field and its forms: put simply, we have neither world enough nor time to read all that we would need to read—nor would "reading everything" necessarily lead us to any view that was greater than the sum of its parts, for we would still need to figure out the underlying dynamics structuring the relations between "everything," which would probably

Eighteenth-Century Fiction 24, no. 2 (Winter 2011–12) © 2012 ECF ISSN 0840-6286 | E-ISSN 1911-0243 | DOI: 10.3138/ecf.24.2.161

take another lifetime or two. Hence the appeal of counting and other forms of what Moretti has provocatively termed "distant reading," which, through their very reductiveness and abstraction, can allow us to see patterns (or notice kinships and draw distinctions) that we would not otherwise have been able to discern.<sup>1</sup>

But, as with all things, the insights that the quantitative turn has afforded us come at a cost. In order to be countable (and so graphable or otherwise capable of being traced over time), texts have to be treated as if they were comparable units: apples to apples, as it were. This is an indispensable move in constructing any kind of historical series, and I readily grant both its necessity and its utility. Indeed, it would be impossible to show that novelistic genres have a typical life expectancy of twenty-five to thirty years (as Moretti does), or that novelists' use of anonymity dropped dramatically in the 1790s (as James Raven does), without having first put the titles of a given range of years into a series.2 In this way of working, a text such as Evelina is necessarily just another novel of 1778, no different for the purposes of counting than, say, The Example: or the History of Lucy Cleveland (another epistolary novel about the high stakes of young women's behaviour during courtship).

There is a certain romance to this way of thinking that goes beyond methodological necessity (and which may account for its current attractiveness): considering *Evelina* and *The Example* as comparable units, at least from the perspective of 1778, nicely undoes the monumentalizing that so often accompanies the academic canon (despite our frequent gestures to the contrary) in order to take us back to a time when Frances Burney and another "young female Adventurer in letters"—as the author of *The Example* describes herself—were, as J.M.S.

- <sup>1</sup> Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," New Left Review 1 (January–February 2000): 56–58. I am grateful to Sandra Macpherson, Franco Moretti, Rebecca Morton, Roxann Wheeler, and the "fit audience ..., though few," who heard the initial version of this manifesto ridiculously late at night, as part of a 2007 MLA session which asked, "Are Eighteenth–Century Studies Changing Literary Studies? Novels and Readers."
- <sup>2</sup> Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (London: Verso, 2005), 12–26; James Raven, "The Anonymous Novel in Britain and Ireland, 1750–1830," in *The Faces of Anonymity: Anonymous and Pseudonymous Publication from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Robert J. Griffin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003): 141–66.

I have certainly been charmed by the romance of this move; I even made an abortive expedition into the brave new world of literary graph-making. But however valuable it is to see the trends that emerge by treating *Evelina* and *The Example* as comparable items in a series, doing so risks distorting the massively different place they occupy in the history of reading, and so, I would like to argue, may actually work against the kind of literary history that we should all be moving towards: a history that can do justice to the workings of form across time and space.

Put simply, *Evelina* (to stick with that text for a moment) has a massively different footprint than The Example. Both are novels of 1778, but The Example only exists in a single London edition, while Evelina came out in at least twenty-three different editions prior to 1801. And those editions were produced across a much wider swathe of the world: London, to be sure, but also Dublin, New York, Philadelphia, Worcester, Massachusetts, even Dresden. Similarly, while The Example seems to have slipped quietly into a few of the larger circulating libraries (it is in seven of the catalogues scanned for Eighteenth-Century Collections Online and Early American Imprints), Evelina was listed in twenty-six circulating library catalogues—and Jan Fergus's research has added two more—and this is only counting what is readily available from my desktop; I suspect a more thorough investigation would add significantly to Evelina's total.4 Moreover, after an initial, at best mixed round of reviews, The Example passed from critical notice, while Evelina was repeatedly invoked by reviewers and other writers over the next few decades as a stick with which to beat subsequent novelists and novel readers.<sup>5</sup> And while there is no record of

Eighteenth-Century Fiction 24.2 (2011-12)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> The Example: or the History of Lucy Cleveland. By a Young Lady (London, 1778), v; J.M.S. Tompkins, The Popular Novel in England, 1770–1800 (London: Constable, 1932), viii.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Jan Fergus, *Provincial Readers in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 85.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> For subsequent novelists, see Laura Runge, "Momentary Fame: Female Novelists in Eighteenth-Century Book Reviews," in *A Companion to the* 

anyone ever having been curious as to whom the "young female Adventurer in letters" responsible for *The Example* might have been, speculation about the authorship of *Evelina* began almost immediately (as Burney's own journals quite delightfully record), and was quickly pounced upon by booksellers eager to capitalize on her brand: for example, *The Sylph* was advertised in such a way as to suggest that it was part of the same oeuvre as *Evelina*, while *Harcourt: A Sentimental Novel, In a Series of Letters* (Dublin, 1780) carried an attribution on its title page to "the Authoress of Evelina." Indeed, as late as 1799, the young Jane Austen was reporting to her sister that an Oxford student of her acquaintance, one "Mr Gould," "has heard that Evelina was written by Dr. Johnson."

All this is to say that Evelina loomed far larger in the last three decades of the eighteenth century than The Example. There were probably upwards of 11,000 more copies of Evelina in the world (conservatively assuming an average of 500 copies per edition, which is probably an underestimate: an average of 750 copies per edition would yield 16,500 more copies of Evelina). Those copies were more geographically dispersed, both for purchase and for rental at a circulating library. The press kept up a steady drumbeat of references and allusions to Evelina, such that its heroine, Lord Orville, Mme Duval, Captain Mirvan, and Mr Macartney were something close to household names in polite circles, a status decidedly not enjoyed by Miss Cleveland and her confidant, Mrs Dormer. And Evelina became part of a recognizable oeuvre, first spurious, and then, with Cecilia and later Camilla, genuine (and, if anything, those subsequent

Eighteenth-Century English Novel and Culture, ed. Paula R. Backscheider and Catherine Ingrassia (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 292–94; and the closing line of the account of Henry and Isabella in Critical Review 65 (1788): 486: "we wish ... in short, to see ... another Evelina." For novel readers, see Jacqueline Pearson, Women's Reading in Britain, 1750–1835: A Dangerous Recreation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 128.

- <sup>6</sup> "On Tuesday next will be published, ... THE SYLPH: A NOVEL Printed for T. Lowndes in Fleet-street. Where may be had, just published ... EVELINA, a Novel" (London Chronicle, 26–28 November 1778). Despite complaints from the Burneys, which eventually convinced Lowndes to stop, the attribution continued to circulate. For details, see *The Early Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney*, ed. Betty Rizzo (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 4:169–70n9.
- 7 Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, 2 June 1799, in *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. Deirdre Le Fave, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 43.

I chose *The Example* for comparison here because it comes immediately after Evelina in an alphabetic list of the novelistic titles of 1778, and I thought a little arbitrariness could help drive my point home. But really, I could have chosen almost any title and come up with a similar result. Of the 300 novels of the 1770s (following James Raven and Antonia Forster's definition of the form), 156 came out in a single edition prior to the end of the century. Another seventy-five exist in only two editions, and the overwhelming majority of those involved one in London and one in Dublin (which, for the most part, served distinct and non-competing markets). That is, more than three-quarters of the novels of the 1770s seem to have satisfied their markets without ever being reprinted. Another thirty titles (or 10 per cent of the total) had enough demand to justify a reprinting or two-for a total of three or four editions, usually with some geographic dispersal. So 87 per cent of the novels of the 1770s had no more call for them in a given market than 500 or 1,000 copies could supply (and, in many cases, that number must have been significantly more than enough). Only eight titles—The Expedition of Humphry Clinker, The Man of Feeling, The Man of the World, Julia de Roubigné, The Champion of Virtue (soon to be retitled The Old English Baron), Evelina, The Sorrows of Young Werther, and Emma Corbett—went into ten or more editions before the end of the century. Yet these eight titles account for 152 out of 632 total editions. Less than 3 per cent of the total titles amount to more than 24 per cent of the total number of editions. If we just focus on those titles that went into more than twenty editions (Humphry Clinker, The Man of Feeling, Evelina, and the various translations of The Sorrows of Young Werther), we still get more than 16 per cent of the total. If we assume edition size remains constant (a dangerous assumption, I know, but I think that in this case it errs on the side of caution), almost one in six of the total number of copies in circulation prior to 1801

was one of these four titles. And given the fact that excerpts from The Man of Feeling also appeared in various newspapers, magazines, and anthologies; and that Mackenzie's work had its own set of attributional gossip and false ascriptions swirling around it; and that Humphry Clinker and The Sorrows of Young Werther were included in The Novelist's Magazine (some volumes of which were produced in editions of 12,000); and that Goethe was probably also read in French and German; and that, on top of all this, super-successful texts probably require an even larger multiplier than usual, when it comes to estimating how many readers read a particular copy, then it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that probably considerably more than one in six late eighteenth-century readers of novels from the 1770s read at least one of these four titles.8 That is, the odds that a reader of, say, 1790 had read Evelina or The Expedition of Humphry Clinker or The Man of Feeling or The Sorrows of Young Werther were exponentially higher than the odds that they had read The Example or The False Step or The Man of Honour or The Surry Cottage (to continue my selections of the next title in line alphabetically). These few massively successful titles had a huge footprint, one which, I propose, has to make a qualitative difference in how we think about the broadened view of the literary field (and so literary form) that the quantitative turn has made possible.

What that difference could look like can be best grasped, I think, by considering how these dramatically varying footprints might affect what Wai Chee Dimock has termed the changing "resonance" of a text. Dimock's metaphor draws upon the acoustic phenomenon of stochastic resonance, in which the interaction between a signal and the ambient noise in which it is being heard can boost or suppress particular frequencies, so as to make different aspects of the allegedly "same" signal audible at different times and places. By this account, "a text cannot and will not remain forever the same object": "the work of time" "that keeps a text vibrating," that "thickens [its] tonality, multiplies [its] hearable echoes, makes [it] significant in unexpected ways" and so allows it to "endure," can only do so if that text is not "a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 246.

<sup>9</sup> Wai Chee Dimock, "A Theory of Resonance," PMLA 112 (1997): 1060–71.

fixed set of attributes within fixed coordinates," if it is "neither fully formed in space nor fully articulated over time." A text that endures past its initial moment—such as one of our novels with a big footprint—is "a prime example," for Dimock, of what W.V. Quine has termed "a twilight half-entity," whose attributes are not integral to the object per se, but rather (in Dimock's words) "continually emerge" and recede with "the passage of time." 11

This, it seems to me, is quite commonsensical. My *Evelina* is hardly the same as, say, "Daddy" Crisp's *Evelina*, and both are presumably different from that of A.D. Forbes, who, in 1800, boldly signed both volumes of the copy of the 1793 Dublin edition that has been scanned for ECCO (for one thing, Forbes's copy, unlike my own or Crisp's, did not include Burney's dedication "to the Authors of the Monthly and Critical Reviews" or her preface, and the poem to her father rather inexplicably appears at the beginning of volume two.)

But I would like to suggest that, in the somewhat unlikely event that Forbes also read The Example that week, it would have resonated differently for him than Evelina for reasons that go beyond the innate differences between their respective plots, characters, uses of epistolary form, etc. That is, the sheer weight and visibility that Evelina had achieved by 1800—what I have been calling its footprint—gave it a different significance (and so a different resonance) than a text like The Example, which was fast slipping away into what Margaret Cohen has described as "the great unread." 12 Resonance is thus not simply a matter of the changing relation "between a tonal presence and the way it is differently heard over time"; it is also a matter of the felt centrality and ubiquity of that "tonal presence"—or the marked lack thereof.<sup>13</sup> These two epistolary novels of 1778 that are by, about, and largely for young women may have had a similar "tonal presence" at their respective moments of publication; they almost certainly did not by the end of the century.

What I would like to contend (and I realize that I am on speculative ground here, but that's what manifestos are for) is that

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Dimock, 1062-64.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Dimock, 1064; W.V. Quine, "Speaking of Objects," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 31 (1957–58): 20; Dimock, 1061.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Margaret Cohen, *The Sentimental Education of the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 23.

<sup>13</sup> Dimock, 1064.

late eighteenth-century readers regarded texts that took up as much space as the ones we are considering as formally different from their less successful counterparts—as richer, thicker, more resonant or definitive; perhaps for some, more stifling or oppressive—and that this felt distinction, which, of course, develops after the moment of initial publication, needs to taken into account if we are going to be able to write a literary history that can actually do justice to the workings of form across time and space. That is, any putatively historicist account of the significance of, say, the manuscript fiction framing the discontinuous episodes of The Man of Feeling cannot just be an account of that form as an intervention in or of 1771. Rather, we need to be able to explain how and why that form so resonated for readers of the decades following 1771, and yet trailed off, such that by the mid-1820s, Louisa Stuart could famously find "the touches that I used to think so exquisite" quite laughable: "Yet I remember so well its first publication, my mother and sisters crying over it, dwelling upon it with rapture."14 We need to be able to explain how those "touches" came so largely to define what a "touch" should look and feel like, such that departures from the Mackenzian model would be experienced as diminutions of "rapture."

What I am proposing is implicitly theorized for us by the jest at the end of the introduction to *The Man of Feeling*. After describing the text that follows as "a bundle of little episodes, put together without art, and of no importance on the whole, with something of nature, and little else in them," the narrator confesses that "I was a good deal affected with some very trifling passages in it; and had the name of a Marmontel, or a Richardson, been on the title page—'tis odds I should have wept: But One is ashamed to be pleased with the works of one knows not whom." In this conceit, what distinguishes these "trifling passages" from some presumably similarly trifling yet "affecting" portions of the work of Marmontel or Richardson is, precisely, the presence of the authorial name as a guarantor of value. But, of course, the value accorded to those names is the value of the big

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Louisa Stuart to Walter Scott, 4 September 1826, in *The Private Letter-Books of Sir Walter Scott: Selections from the Abbotsford Manuscripts*, ed. Wilfred Partington (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1930), 273.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> [Henry Mackenzie], The Man of Feeling, 2nd ed. corrected (London, 1771), viii. The first edition also included "a Rousseau" in this list.

# Counting, Resonance, and Form

169

footprint: those authors and texts that are dear to the hearts of readers over a significant span of time, what Moretti has termed the "social canon." What marks the trifling as tear-worthy is thus a reader's sense that a lot of other readers have found and continue to find it so: a collective "rapture" for which the size of a text's footprint can serve as a convenient proxy. What marks the trifling as tear-worthy, that is, is not something inherent to the form of a text itself, nor simply a disposition brought to that text by a particularly lachrymose reader. Rather, it is a function of the resonance which that form had for a given reader in a particular time and place. It is, to revert to Quine's terms, a matter of the relation between attributes and an object, for which the notion of strict identity simply does not apply. However (and this is where I part company with Dimock), that reading does not take place in a vacuum, but rather is set against all the other readings and potential readings that collectively constitute that reader's sense of the literary field—a sense that is, in turn, shaped by what that reader keeps running into, what other readers seem to have found significant and valuable and tear-worthy. Accordingly, something like the tale of "Old Edwards" (which, in addition to appearing in the probably at least thirty-two editions of *The Man* of Feeling that came out prior to 1801, was repeatedly serialized, anthologized, alluded to in plays, published as a stand-alone episode, and engraved) would have a rather different resonance than another, less successful account of a family's suffering, quite simply because the latter would not have already been so familiar, so likely to conjure up a sense of déjà-lu. I suspect much the same was true of, say, the episodes of ritual humiliation (of Mme Duval, of Lovel) which punctuate Evelina, and which, starting in 1779, were frequently illustrated in its London editions. There are dozens, probably hundreds of similar scenes in the work of Burney's contemporaries (Simon Dickie is right to point out how "unsentimental" the eighteenth century could be), but their resonance, I am proposing, must have felt rather different, if only because most of those other scenes were not part of anything nearly so successful as Evelina.<sup>17</sup> To modify that opening jest

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Moretti, "The Slaughterhouse of Literature," *Modern Language Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2000): 209n3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> See Simon Dickie, Cruelty and Laughter: Forgotten Comic Literature and the Unsentimental Eighteenth Century (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

from *The Man of Feeling*: "I was a great deal amused with some very coarse passages in it; and had the name of a Burney been swirling around it—'tis odds I should have laughed: But One is ashamed to be pleased with the cruelty of one knows not whom."

Ultimately, I want to suggest, anyone aspiring to write literary history or to do justice to literary form these days has to come to terms with the sheer breadth and variety of the literary field that the quantitative turn has opened up. No longer can we make grand pronouncements about "the sentimental novel" that turn out to be simply pronouncements about The Man of Feeling. But, as I have tried to argue, we also cannot reduce The Man of Feeling to just another item in a series of sentimental novels because, for a tremendous number of readers in the 1770s and 1780s and 1790s and on into the early nineteenth century, The Man of Feeling was "the sentimental novel." To ignore its felt centrality—what I have been calling its footprint—is to evade the question of why people in the past cared enough to read and write what they did, without which we would not only have a literary history of surpassing boredom, but also one that would vitiate our only justification for asking our society to underwrite the work we do. So (to pose one of the questions implicitly framing this special issue of Eighteenth-Century Fiction) what place is there for formalism in the age of full-text databases and presumptive historicism? A splendid and enduring one, ifwith the tools of the quantitative turn—we can make the shifting pleasures and significance and resonance of form across time and space a routine part of how we talk about literary history, which is to say, if we can make our conception of form every bit as subtle and shifting as the "twilight half-entities" of form itself.



David A. Brewer is an associate professor of English at The Ohio State University; he is currently working on the uses to which authorial names were put in the eighteenth-century Anglophone world.