

**NOVELS, RHETORIC, AND CRITICISM:
A BRIEF HISTORY OF *BELLES LETTRES*
AND BRITISH LITERARY CULTURE,
1680 – 1900**

by

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Series in Literary Studies



VERNON PRESS

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www.vernonpress.com

In the Americas:
Vernon Press
1000 N West Street, Suite 1200,
Wilmington, Delaware 19801
United States

In the rest of the world:
Vernon Press
C/Sancti Espiritu 17,
Malaga, 29006
Spain

Series in Literary Studies

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022939779

ISBN: 978-1-64889-476-3

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Acknowledgements

The archival work in chapter five was made financially possible through a Northwest University Pope Faculty Enrichment Grant which allowed me to travel to Edinburgh in 2010. I am deeply indebted to the library staff at the Mary Coats Burnett Library at Texas Christian University and to the special collections staff at the University of Edinburgh Library, the National Library of Scotland, the Johns Hopkins Sheridan Libraries, and the University of Washington Suzallo Library for their expertise and willingness to find anything I ever asked for.

Portions of chapter six were drawn from my previous publication, “David Masson, Belles Lettres, and a Victorian Theory of the Novel,” which originally appeared in *Victorian Literature and Culture*, volume 43, issue 1 (2015). These sections are reproduced here with the permission of Cambridge University Press.

Thank you to Linda Hughes and Richard Enos for their support and mentorship; to David Elder, Jason King, Angela Gonzalez, and Moriah McCracken for their camaraderie; to Martha Diede for space to write and research as a new faculty member; to Jessie Fast for her excellent – and fast! – proofing and editing; to David Dormaier for his feedback about publication and marketing prospects; and finally, to my wife, Lorri, and our three daughters, for everything.

Chapter 1

Introduction: *Belles Lettres* and Histories of the British Novel

I shall depend on you for encouragement when deserved, – correction where I am mistaken, and allowance where wanted . . . If I skim over the subject lightly it will be doing nothing; and if I am too minute I may grow dull and tedious, and tire my hearers.

Clara Reeve, *The Progress of Romance*

Most histories of the novel begin with an investigation of origins: Ian Watt ponders the significance of Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding as progenitors of the British novel (Watt 9); Michael McKeon peers into seventeenth-century French prose fiction (McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel* 25); Patricia Meyer Spacks begins with the profusion of British prose fiction of the early eighteenth-century (Spacks 2–3). Yet rather than starting with a search for the origins of the novel, I propose to begin *in media res*, two centuries, more or less, after the emergence of the earliest examples of what would come to be known as the British novel. For this history of the intertwined relationship among British novels, eighteenth-century *belles lettres* rhetoric, and Victorian novel criticism, I will begin in an unlikely place: the servant's quarters of the Verinder household, with Gabriel Betteredge, House Steward to Lady Julia Verinder.

Betteredge is the first narrator in *The Moonstone*, Wilkie Collins' 1868 detective novel, and through his eyes the reader is first introduced to Collins' wide cast of characters; through his thoughts and actions, the mystery of the Moonstone is first unfolded against the backdrop of life in the country manor of an aristocratic Victorian family. Betteredge is the model of an unflappable English butler: his concern for the reputation of the Verinder family is the driving force behind his approach to relating the mystery to his audience. His calm, unruffled, and (mostly) dispassionate demeanor provide the perfect entry to understanding the various subplots and undercurrents in the Verinder household. But in private moments, when Betteredge is shaken by a new revelation or one of Detective Cuff's clever insinuations, Betteredge retreats from the family and takes solace in his pipe and a particular book:

I have found it my friend in need in all the necessities of this mortal life.
When my spirits are bad – *Robinson Crusoe*. When I want advice –

Robinson Crusoe. In past times, when my wife plagued me; in present times, when I have had a drop too much – *Robinson Crusoe*. I have worn out six *Robinson Crusoes* with hard work in my service. On my Lady's last birthday she gave me a seventh. I took a drop too much on the strength of it; and *Robinson Crusoe* put me right again. Price four shillings and a sixpence, bound in blue, with a picture into the bargain. (Collins, 61)

Betteredge's tribute to the restorative qualities of *Robinson Crusoe* may seem a bit out of place in a literary history: as Betteredge says of his own narrative approach, "I seem to be wandering off in search of Lord knows what, Lord knows where" (Collins 61). But even if Betteredge seems unsure of *Robinson Crusoe's* place within his narrative of the *Moonstone*, the house steward's relationship to Defoe's novel is an excellent place to begin examining the history of the relationship among British novels, *belles lettres* rhetoric, and novel criticism.

Betteredge's ode to the consolations of Defoe is hardly singular within Victorian fiction. Nearly two decades earlier, Dickens' David Copperfield found comfort in a host of early British novels, including *Roderick Random*, *Peregrine Pickle*, *Humphrey Clinker*, *Tom Jones*, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, and *Robinson Crusoe*¹ (Dickens 53). Little David Copperfield, at the mercy of the cruel Murdstone household, turns to early British novels to stave off the effects of his potentially damaging early childhood. David credits these novels with his salvation, claiming that the suffocating influence of the Murdstones would have left him "almost stupefied but for one circumstance" (Dickens 52). That circumstance was his father's collection of early British novels:

From that blessed little room, Roderick Random, Peregrine Pickle, Humphrey Clinker, Tom Jones, The Vicar of Wakefield, Don Quixote, Gil Blas, and Robinson Crusoe, came out, a glorious host, to keep me company. They kept alive my fancy, and my hope of something beyond that place and time . . . and did me no harm; for whatever harm was in some of them was not there for me . . . This was my only and my constant comfort. (Dickens 53)

David later drives the point home even more dramatically, when he claims that his time spent reading was time spent "reading as if for life" (Dickens 53). Like Betteredge, young David Copperfield turns to novels – and specifically early British novels – when he finds himself in need of solace or comfort. The novels mentioned by Collins and Dickens are so firmly entrenched in the cultural milieu of Victorian England that the mere mention of these early novel titles is

¹ Dickens also includes the titles of two early non-English language proto-novels: *Don Quixote* and *Gil Blas*.

clearly intended to communicate a wealth of meaning and importance shared by the author and his audience.

The inclusion of these titles and the narrators' descriptions of their application in difficult times tells us much about the novel's progression from Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* and William Congreve's *Incognita* in the late seventeenth century to the work of Collins and Dickens. We can see that the novel has become culturally instituted throughout British literary culture in a relatively short amount of time, between one and two hundred years. We see the novel as a vital part of the interior life of individuals, yet familiar enough to the reading public that no explanation is necessary to understand Betteredge's refrain of "*Robinson Crusoe*" or David's youthful exuberance in the exploits of Roderick Random or Tom Jones. We find the novel is part of the social, intellectual, and – in Betteredge's unapologetic declaration of the purchase price of *Robinson Crusoe* – economic life of Victorian England.

The rapid progression of the novel from the morally dubious and aesthetically ambiguous "new romance" or "true history" in the latter part of the seventeenth century to a genre so firmly entrenched – within nineteenth-century British culture, if not yet within the academy – that the mere mention of *Robinson Crusoe* carried significant cultural meaning is a story with a great many permutations. And while tracking down the immense range of influences that contributed to the development and cultural establishment of the novel is a task beyond the scope of this study, I seek to restore a largely forgotten or overlooked portion of the story of the novel. The social, cultural, and intellectual forces that converged to foster the emergence of the British novel also gave rise to a new discourse that shared many of the same concerns as the early novel. This discourse was recognized, by the middle of the nineteenth century, as literary criticism; however, as it developed throughout the eighteenth century, it was primarily known by another name: rhetoric.

The task of developing a history of the British novel requires the inclusion of a vast range of cultural, economic, religious, social, and aesthetic influences. But the role of eighteenth-century British *belles lettres* rhetorical theory in the emergence of the novel – and the critical discourse surrounding that emergence – has often been neglected or forgotten. The influence of *belles lettres* rhetorical theory in the development of the British novel is undeniable, and changes to rhetorical theory in Britain during the eighteenth century went on to shape the critical aesthetic discourse about the novel in Victorian Britain. This study makes the case for the direct influence of eighteenth-century *belles lettres* rhetoric on the novel and its critical reception in Victorian Britain and argues that eighteenth-century belletristic rhetorical theory played a key role in developing a horizon of expectation concerning the nature and purpose of the novel that extended well into the nineteenth century. There is a connection

between the emergence of the British novel, eighteenth-century British rhetorical theory, and Victorian novel criticism that has been overlooked or lost; this study recovers and articulates that connection.

The character and shape of the early British novel, its development throughout the eighteenth century, and its subsequent rise to prominence in Victorian literary culture is a well-told if not universally agreed upon story, usually focusing on the novel's emphasis on the commonplace and everyday, on the individual and specific, and on the interiority of fully realized characters rather than the external exploits of archetypes and allegorical stand-ins typical of romance and epic literature. But little attention has been given to the ways eighteenth and nineteenth-century Scottish scholars and teachers of rhetoric impacted the progression of the novel and novel criticism in British literary culture. These rhetoric scholars, such as Hugh Blair and James Beattie, developed a rhetorical system intended to foster a shared national conception of aesthetic taste and judgment. Scholars of rhetoric have certainly investigated the importance and influence of eighteenth-century Scottish rhetoricians – including Blair, Beattie, George Campbell, Adam Smith, and many others – but this work is by and large focused inwardly on how these rhetoricians altered rhetorical theory or on how their theories altered the study of English within the academy. Relatively little scholarly work examines the effect of these rhetorical theories on literary criticism, and even less is focused on the influence of eighteenth-century rhetoric on specific genres, such as the novel.

Yet the relationship between eighteenth-century rhetorical theory and literary genres and criticism is important. James Engell argues that while the impact of this group is vastly underappreciated, their relevance to literary history deserves to be recognized: “The New Rhetoricians, properly considered a unified movement, are, prior to the twentieth century, the most important and cohesive group of critics in English” (Engell 217). If Engell is correct, then an examination of the influence of these rhetoricians in relationship to the dominant literary genre of nineteenth-century British literary culture – the novel – is worth pursuing. Ian Watt begins his investigation of the early British novel by arguing that the emergence of three writers the caliber of Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding within the same generation “was probably not sheer accident” (Watt 9). If I may borrow Watt's logic, the simultaneous emergence of the novel as a distinct genre at the same time as a new approach rhetoric concerned with taste, judgment, and propriety was hardly coincidence either. There is a connection among the emergence of the British novel, eighteenth-century British rhetorical theory, and nineteenth-century British novel criticism that has been lost or overlooked; this study attempts to recover and articulate that connection.

However, identifying exactly where and how the influence of Engell's New Rhetoricians touches on the development of the novel is complicated. The

difficulty in defining the novel is a well-known component in the history of the genre, but rhetorical theory of the eighteenth century is almost as difficult to pin down. In their attempts to revise and refocus rhetoric, Scottish rhetoricians looked to theories of cognition and linguistics; they borrowed from advances in the sciences; they incorporated the work of philosophers and artists. The immense range of influences on eighteenth-century British rhetorical theory is daunting in its scope, in large part because these scholars and intellectuals give relatively few clear attributions to contemporary external works. Another difficulty is the sheer range of influence: a study of eighteenth-century rhetoric might lead to an examination of associationism, the Sublime, cognition, psychology, linguistics, genre theory, aesthetics, the history of rhetoric, grammar, composition theory, disciplinarity, morality, ethics, cultural imperialism, or a host of other possibilities.

Thus, examining the impact of British rhetorical theory on the development of the British novel – and the discourse that surrounded the novel – is perhaps beyond the scope a single project. Instead, I will pursue just one shared area of concern between the emergence of the British novel and the development of British rhetorical theory, one that emerges both within the pages of the novels themselves and within the body of criticism which quickly grew up around the rapidly expanding genre during the eighteenth century. Michael McKeon and Marthe Robert, among other scholars, argue the novel was the location where battles surrounding the cultural shifts of eighteenth and nineteenth century England were fought; I argue that revisions to eighteenth-century rhetoric – and particularly within what came to be known as *belles lettres* – made these battles possible.

Once again, I turn again to Gabriel Betteredge to aid me in explaining the complicated relationship of British novels, British rhetorical theory, and the aesthetics of morality. As *The Moonstone* draws to its conclusion, Betteredge returns to the narrative, first as part of medical assistant Ezra Jennings' journal entries and later as the final narrator of the mystery. Jennings' relationship with Betteredge is incalculably damaged when Betteredge discovers that Jennings has not read *Robinson Crusoe* since he was a child. This, in Betteredge's estimation, is a serious moral failing and one that requires the venerable house steward to re-evaluate Jennings, at one point telling the medical assistant that "[T]here are great allowances to be made for a man who has not read *Robinson Crusoe*, since he was a child" (Collins 430). In these few words, Betteredge, whose sensible, practical worldview centers the Victorian reader's perspective, sums up the importance of *Robinson Crusoe*. According to Betteredge, repeated readings of *Robinson Crusoe* are necessary for proper moral and ethical development; thus in Betteredge's view, Jennings' character and motives are severely damaged because he has not had sufficient contact with Defoe's novel.

For Betteredge, *Robinson Crusoe* occupies a place far beyond mere diversion: *Crusoe* has become oracle and moral code for the house steward, something clearly understood by the hero of *The Moonstone*, Franklin Blake. Blake, who has known Betteredge from childhood, succinctly points out Jennings' deficiency: "You have let him [Betteredge] see that you don't believe in *Robinson Crusoe*? Mr. Jennings! you have fallen to the lowest possible place in Betteredge's estimation" (Collins 430).

Jennings, a man of science and medicine, fails to grasp the importance of *Robinson Crusoe*, and Collins is on some level, of course, poking fun at Betteredge's reliance on Defoe's novel. But Collins is also making an important point about the position of the novel within Victorian culture: it is a source of comfort, wisdom, ethics, and morality for the Verinder house steward, a man of impeccable manners and propriety. Furthermore, in the words of Betteredge we can hear the echoes of eighteenth-century rhetorical concerns about the moral purpose and function of literature. Betteredge's reliance on *Robinson Crusoe* in times of trouble seems to echo Scottish belletristic rhetorician Hugh Blair's evaluation of *Robinson Crusoe*: "No fiction, in any language, was ever better supported than *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. . . it suggests . . . very useful instruction; by showing how much the native powers of man may be exerted for surmounting the difficulties of any external situation" (Blair 423). This interest in the moral and didactic function of literature was one of the central concerns of British belletristic rhetorical theory, and the moral function of the novel occupied a great deal of nineteenth-century criticism of the genre. And while it is difficult to draw a straight line directly connecting the early novel to *belles lettres* to nineteenth-century novel criticism, it is worthwhile investigating the set of concerns shared by novel writers, rhetoricians, and novel readers during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In this study, then, I will tell the story of how rhetorical theory of the late eighteenth century centered the novel as a locus of controversy in the struggle between ethics and aesthetics in Victorian literary culture. I will build on the work of scholars such as D.A. Miller or Nancy Armstrong² (among many others), who have explored how the novel changed the way its readers understood themselves and their behavior within culture. In pursuing the relationship of rhetoric and the novel, I want to follow the interaction of the rhetorical concepts embodied in *belles lettres* and the criticism of the novel, with particular attention to the metadiscourse of the novel.

² I am thinking of D.A. Miller's *The Novel and the Police*, which argues that the Victorian novel acted as a sort of literary panopticon and also Nancy Armstrong's work in *Desire and Domestic Fiction* and *How Novels Think*, in which Armstrong explores the novel's effect on Victorian conceptions of identity, individuality, and gender roles.

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