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The Order of Books

Readers, Authors, and Libraries
in Europe between the
Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries

Roger Chartier

Translated by Lydia G. Cochrane

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Preface

In bringing together under this title the three essays that make up this book I hope to highlight a question that runs all through it: how did people in Western Europe between the end of the Middle Ages and the eighteenth century attempt to master the enormously increased number of texts that first the manuscript book and then print put into circulation? Inventorying titles, categorizing works, and attributing texts were all operations that made it possible to set the world of the written word in order. Our own age is the direct heir of this immense effort motivated by anxiety. It was in those decisive centuries, when the hand-copied book was gradually replaced by works composed in movable type and printed on presses, that the acts and thoughts that are still our own were forged. The invention of the author as the fundamental principle for the designation of a text, the dream of a universal library, real or imaginary, containing all the works that have ever been wirtten, and the emergence of a new definition of the book that made an indissoluble connection between an object, a text, and an author – these are some of the innovations that transformed

people's relationship with texts, both before and after Gutenberg.

That relationship typically contains an internal contradiction. On the one hand, every reader has to deal with an entire set of constraints and obligations. The author, the bookseller-publisher, the commentator, and the censor all have an interest in keeping close control over the production of meaning and in making sure that the text that they have written, published, glossed, or authorized will be understood with no possible deviation from their prescriptive will. On the other hand, reading, by definition, is rebellious and vagabond. Readers use infinite numbers of subterfuges to procure prohibited books, to read between the lines, and to subvert the lessons imposed on them.

The book always aims at installing an order, whether it is the order in which it is deciphered, the order in which it is to be understood, or the order intended by the authority who commanded or permitted the work. This multifaceted order is not all-powerful, however, when it comes to annulling the reader's liberty. Even when it is hemmed in by differences in competence and by conventions, liberty knows how to distort and reformulate the significations that were supposed to defeat it. The dialectic between imposition and appropriation, between constraints transgressed and freedoms bridled, is not the same in all places or all times or for all people. Recognizing its diverse modalities and multiple variations is the first aim of a history of reading that strives to grasp – in all their differences – communities of readers and their 'arts of reading'.

The order of books has still another meaning. Whether they are in manuscript or in print, books are objects whose forms, if they cannot impose the sense of the texts that they bear, at least command the uses that can invest them

and the appropriations to which they are susceptible. Works and discourses exist only when they become physical realities and are inscribed on the pages of a book, transmitted by a voice reading or narrating, or spoken on the stage of a theatre. Understanding the principles that govern the 'order of discourse' supposes that the principles underlying the processes of production, communication, and reception of books (and other objects that bear writing) will also be deciphered in a rigorous manner. More than even before, historians of literary works and historians of cultural practices have become aware of the effects of meaning that material forms produce. In the case of the book, those forms constitute a singular order totally distinct from other registers of transmission of the canonical works as ordinary texts. This means that, even though it is not emphasized in the present book, keen attention should be paid to the technical, visual, and physical devices that organize the reading of writing when writing becomes a book.

This work has another aim in its three chapters: to initiate more general reflection on the reciprocal relations between the two meanings that we spontaneously give to the term 'culture'. The first designates the works and the acts that lend themselves to aesthetic or intellectual appreciation in any given society; the second aims at ordinary, banal practices that express the way in which a community – on any scale – experiences and conceives of its relationship with the world, with others, and with itself.

Works – even the greatest works, especially the greatest works – have no stable, universal, fixed meaning. They are invested with plural and mobile significations that are constructed in the encounter between a proposal and a reception. The meanings attributed to their forms and

their themes depend upon the areas of competence or the expectations of the various publics that take hold of them. To be sure, the creators (or the 'powers' or the 'clerics') always aspire to pin down their meaning and proclaim the correct interpretation, the interpretation that ought to constrain reading (or viewing). But without fail reception invents, shifts about, distorts.

Works are produced within a specific order that has its own rules, conventions, and hierarchies, but they escape all these and take on a certain density in their peregrinations – which can be in a very long time span – about the social world. Deciphered on the basis of mental and affective schemes that constitute the 'culture' (in the anthropological sense) of the communities that receive them, works turn the tables and become a precious resource for thinking about what is essential: the construction of social ties, individual subjectivity, and relationship with the sacred.

Conversely, any work inscribes within its forms and its themes a relationship with the manner in which, in a given moment and place, modes of exercising power, social configurations, or the structure of personality are organized. Thought of (and thinking of himself or herself) as a demiurge, the writer none the less creates in a state of dependence. Dependence upon the rules (of patronage, subsidy, and the market) that define the writer's condition. Dependence (on an even deeper level) on the unconscious determinations that inhabit the work and that make it conceivable, communicable, and decipherable.

To consider in this way that all works are anchored in the practices and the institutions of the social world is not to postulate any general equivalence among all the products of the mind. Some, better than others, never exhaust

their significative force. If we try to understand this by invoking the universality of beauty or the unity of human nature we will fall short of the truth. The essential game is being played elsewhere, in the complex, subtle, shifting relationships established between the forms (symbolic or material) proper to works, which are unequally open to appropriation, and the habits or the concerns of the various publics for those works.

What any cultural history must take into consideration today is the paradoxical articulation between a *difference* – the difference by means of which all societies, with varying modalities, have separated out from daily practice a particlar domain of human activity – and *dependencies* – the dependencies that take a variety of ways to inscribe aesthetic and intellectual invention within the conditions of possibility and intelligibility. This problematic connection is rooted in the very trajectory that gives works their most powerful meanings – meanings constructed on the aesthetic or reflective transfiguration of ordinary experiences, grasped on the basis of practices proper to those works' various publics.

Reflection on how the figure of the author was constructed, on the rules for the formation of communities of readers, or on the significance invested in the building of libraries (with or without walls) may perhaps contribute to focusing a few of the questions that currently inhabit the disciplines of knowledge and public debate. By reintroducing variation and difference where the illusion of universality spontaneously springs up, such reflection may help us to get rid of some of our over-sure distinctions and some over-familiar truisms.

1

Communities of Readers

> Far from being writers – founders of their own place, heirs of the peasants of earlier ages now working on the soil of language, diggers of wells and builders of houses – readers are travellers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it themselves. Writing accumulates, stocks up, resists time by the establishment of a place and multiplies its production through the expansionism of reproduction. Reading takes no measures against the erosion of time (one forgets oneself and also forgets), it does not keep what it acquires, or it does so poorly, and each of the places through which it passes is a repetition of the lost paradise.[1]

This magnificent passage from Michel de Certeau which contrasts writing – conservative, fixed, durable – and reading – always of the order of the ephemeral – constitutes both an obligatory base and a disquieting challenge for any history that hopes to inventory and make sense out of a practice (reading) that only rarely leaves traces, that is scattered in an infinity of singular acts, and that easily

shakes off all constraints. Such a proposal is based on a dual presupposition: that reading is not already inscribed in the text with no conceivable gap between the meaning assigned to it (by its author, by custom, by criticism, and so forth) and the interpretation that its readers might make of it; and, as a corollary, that a text exists only because there is a reader to give it meaning. To return to Michel de Certeau:

> Whether it is a question of newspapers or Proust, the text has a meaning only through its readers; it changes along with them; it is ordered in accord with codes of perception that it does not control. It becomes a text only in its relation to the exteriority of the reader, by an interplay of implications and ruses between two sorts of 'expectation' in combination: the expectation that organizes a *readable* space (a literality), and one that organizes a procedure necessary for the *actualization* of the work (a reading).[2]

The historian's task is thus to reconstruct the variations that differentiate the *espaces lisibles* – that is, the texts in their discursive and material forms – and those that govern the circumstances of their *effectuation* – that is, the readings, understood as concrete practices and as procedures of interpretation.

Michel de Certeau's suggestions provide a basis for suggesting some of what is at stake and the problems and conditions of possibility of this sort of history. Its space is usually defined by three poles that the academic tradition usually keeps separate: first, the analysis of texts, be they canonical or ordinary, to discern their structures, their themes, and their aims; second, the history of books and, beyond that, the history of all objects and all forms that bear texts; third, the study of practices that seize on

these objects and these forms in a variety of ways and produce differentiated uses and meanings. For me, a fundamental question underlies this approach that combines textual criticism, bibliography, and cultural history: in the societies of the ancien régime, how did increased circulation of printed matter transform forms of sociability, permit new modes of thought, and change people's relationship with power?

Hence the need to stress the way in which the encounter between 'the world of the text' and 'the world of the reader' – to use Paul Ricoeur's terms – operates.[3] To reconstruct this process of the 'actualization' of texts in its historical dimensions first requires that we accept the notion that their meanings are dependent upon the forms through which they are received and appropriated by their readers (or hearers). Readers and hearers, in point of fact, are never confronted with abstract or ideal texts detached from all materiality; they manipulate or perceive objects and forms whose structures and modalities govern their reading (or their hearing), thus the possible comprehension of the text read (or heard). Against a purely semantic definition of the text (which inhabits not only structuralist criticism in all its variants but also the literary theories most attuned to a reconstruction of the reception of works), one must state that forms produce meaning and that a text, stable in its letter, is invested with a new meaning and status when the mechanisms that make it available to interpretation change.

We must also keep in mind that reading is always a practice embodied in acts, spaces, and habits. Far from being a phenomenology that wipes out all concrete modalities of the act of reading and characterizes that act by its effects, which are postulated to be universal (as with the operation of response to the text that makes the subject

better understand himself or herself thanks to the mediation of interpretation), a history of reading must identify the specific mechanisms that distinguish the various communities of readers and traditions of reading. This move supposes the recognition of several sets of contrasts, the first of which is in the realm of reading ability. The essential but oversimplified separation of the literate from the illiterate does not exhaust the full range of differences in the reader's relation to writing. All who can read texts do not read them in the same fashion, and there is an enormous gap between the virtuosi among readers and the least skilled at reading, who have to oralize what they are reading in order to comprehend it and who are at ease only with a limited range of textual or typographical forms. There are equally great differences between the norms and conventions of reading that define, for each community of readers, legitimate uses of the book, ways to read, and the instruments and methods of interpretations. Finally, there are differences between the expectations and interests that various groups of readers invest in the practice of reading. Such expectations and interests, which govern practices, determine the way in which texts can be read and read differently by readers who do not have the same intellectual baggage or the same relationship with the written word.

Michel de Certeau gives an illustration of this sort of approach when he discusses the characteristics of mystical reading: 'By "mystical readings" I mean the set of reading procedures advised or practiced in the field of experience of the solitaries or the collectives designated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as "illuminated," "mystic" or "spiritual".'[4] In this minor, marginal, and dispersed community that was the mystical milieu, reading was regulated by norms and habits that

invested the book with original functions: it replaced the institution of the church, held to be insufficient; it made discourse possible (the discourse of prayer, of communication with God, of the *conversar*); it indicated the practices by which spiritual experience could be constructed. The mystical relationship with the book can also be understood as a trajectory in which several 'moments' of reading succeed one another: the installation of an alterity that provides a basis for the subjective quest, the unfolding of a sense of joy, a physical reaction to the 'manducation' of the text that leaves its mark on the body, and, at the end of the process, cessation of reading, abandonment of the book, and absolute detachment. One of the first tasks of a history of reading that hopes to understand the varieties of the paradigmatic figure of the reader as poacher is thus to ascertain the networks of reading practices and the rules for reading proper to the various communities of readers – spiritual, intellectual, professional, and so forth.[5]

But to read is always to read something. Naturally, if it is to exist the history of reading must be radically distinguished from a history of what is read: 'The reader emerges from the history of the book, in which he has long been merged, indistinct. . . . The reader was taken to be the effect of the book. Today he becomes detached from those books whose mere shadow he was supposed to be. And now that shadow is unshackled, it takes on relief and acquires an independence.'[6] That founding independence is not an arbitrary liberty. It is limited by the codes and the conventions that regulate the practices of a membership community. It is also limited by the discursive and material forms of the texts read.

'New readers make new texts and their new meanings are a function of their new forms.'[7] D. F. McKenzie

perspicaciously notes here the dual set of variations – variations in the readers' resources and in textual and formal mechanisms – that any history that takes on the task of restoring the fluid and plural signification of texts must take into account. One can profit from McKenzie's dictum in several ways: by noting the major oppositions that distinguish the various modes of reading from one another; by specifying the practices most popular among readers; by focusing attention on the publishing formulas that offer old texts to new readers of a humbler sort and in greater number.

This perspective reflects a dual dissatisfaction with the history of the book in France in the last twenty or thirty years, where the historians' chief concern has been to measure the unequal presence of the book in the various groups that made up the society of the ancien régime. This led to the construction (incidentally, quite necessarily so) of indicators to reveal cultural gaps at a given place and time: among such indicators are the percentage of probate inventories mentioning ownership of books, the classification of book collections according to the number of works they included, and thematic description of private libraries according to the place that the various bibliographical categories occupy in them. In this perspective, giving an account of the reading matter of the French between the sixteenth and the eighteenth century was above all a question of constructing data sets, establishing quantitative thresholds, and noting the cultural equivalents of social differences.

These procedures were adopted collectively (by the author of the present work among others), and they permitted the accumulation of a body of knowledge without which further investigation would have been inconceivable. They raise problems, however. First, such procedures

rest on a narrowly sociographic conception implicitly postulating that cultural cleavages are necessarily organized according to pre-existent social divisions. I think we need to reject this dependence that relates gaps in cultural practices to a priori social oppositions, whether on the macroscopic scale of contrasts between dominant and dominated or between the elites and the people or on the scale of smaller differentiations, as for example among social groups in a hierarchy of conditions, professions, or levels of wealth.

Cultural divisions are not obligatorily organized in accordance with the one grid of social divisions that supposedly commands the unequal presence of objects or differences in behaviour patterns. We must turn the perspective around and begin by designating the social areas in which each corpus of texts and each genre of printed matter circulates. Beginning with objects, in this fashion, rather than with classes or groups leads to considering that the French style of sociocultural history has too long continued to exist on the basis of a mutilated conception of the social. By privileging only socioprofessional classification it has forgotten that other and equally social principles of differentiation might explain cultural divisions even more pertinently. The same is true of gender-based and generationally based distinctions, of religious affiliations, of communitarian solidarities, of educative or corporative traditions, and more.

Furthermore, the history of the book in its social and quantitative definition attempted to characterize cultural configurations on the basis of the categories of texts that were supposed to be specific to those configurations. This operation was doubly reductive. First, it equated the identification of differences with mere inequalities in distribution; second, it ignored the process by which a text takes on meaning for those who read it. Several shifts

of emphasis could be proposed to correct these postulates. The first situates the recognition of the differences most deeply rooted in society in differing uses of shared materials. In the societies of the ancien régime the *same* texts were appropriated by 'popular' readers and other readers more than has been thought. Either readers of more humble social condition were put in possession of books that were not specifically designed for them (as was the case of Menocchio, the Friuli miller, Jamerey Duval, the shepherd from Lorraine, or Ménétra, the Paris glazier),[8] or else inventive and canny bookseller-printers made available to a very large clientele texts that formerly had circulated only in the narrow world of wealth and letters (which was the case with the *pliegos sueltos* of Castile and the Catalan *plecs*, English chapbooks or the publishing formula known in France under the generic title of the Bibliothèque bleue). What is essential is thus to understand how the same texts can be differently apprehended, manipulated, and comprehended.

A second shift of emphasis reconstructs the networks of practices that organized historically and socially differentiated modes of access of texts. Reading is not uniquely an abstract operation of the intellect: it brings the body into play, it is inscribed in a space and a relationship with oneself or with others. This is why special attention should be paid to ways of reading that have disappeared in our contemporary world. One of these is reading aloud in its dual function of communicating the written word to those who are unable to decipher it themselves but also of cementing the interlocking forms of sociability that are emblematic of private life in the intimacy of the family circle, in worldly conviviality, and in literary circles and spheres of scholarly sociability. A history of reading must not limit itself to the genealogy of our own contemporary manner of reading, in silence and using only our eyes; it

must also (and perhaps above all) take on the task of retracing forgotten gestures and habits that have not existed for some time. The challenge matters because it reveals not only the distant foreignness of practices that were common long ago but also the specific structure of texts composed for uses that are not the uses of today's readers of those same texts. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the reading style implicit in a text, literary or not, was still often an oralization of the text, and the 'reader' was an implicit auditor of a read discourse. The work, which was addressed to the ear as much as to the eye, plays with forms and procedures that subject writing to demands more appropriate to oral 'performance'. Many examples of this sort of continuing link between the text and the human voice can be found, from the motifs in *Don Quixote* to the structure of texts adapted for the Bibliothèque bleue.[9]

'Whatever they may do, authors do not write books. Books are not written at all. They are manufactured by scribes and other artisans, by mechanics and other engineers, and by printing presses and other machines.'[10] This remark can serve to introduce the third shift in emphasis that I would like to suggest. Contrary to representation elaborated by literature itself and taken up by the most quantitative form of history of the book, which state that the text exists in and of itself, separate from anything material, we need to remember that there is no text apart from the physical support that offers it for reading (or hearing), hence there is no comprehension of any written piece that does not at least in part depend upon the forms in which it reaches its reader. This means that we need to make a distinction between two sets of mechanisms, the ones that are part of the strategies of writing and the author's intentions, and the ones that result from publishing decisions or the constraints of the print shop.

True, authors do not write books: they write texts that become written objects, which may be hand-written, engraved, or printed (and, today, electronically reproduced and transmitted). The space between text and object, which is precisely the space in which meaning is constructed, has too often been forgotten, not only by the traditional sort of literary history that thinks of the work as an abstract text whose typographic forms are without importance, but also by the 'aesthetic of reception' that, in spite of its desire to historicize the readers' experience, postulates a pure and unmediated relationship between the 'signals' emitted by the text (which play with accepted literary conventions) and the 'horizon of expectation' of the public to which those signals are addressed. In this perspective the 'effect produced' in no way depends upon the material forms that operate as a vehicle for the text.[11] Still, those forms also fully contribute to fashioning the reader's expectations and to calling for a new public or novel uses.

Thus we have been brought back to the triangle that was our point of departure, the relationship set up among the text, the book, and the reader. The variations in that relationship describe several simple figures for the connection between 'readable space' (*espace lisible*) and 'effectuation', to use Michel de Certeau's terms. The first variation considers a stable, literal text that is available for reading in printed forms that change. In his study of the innovations introduced into editions of William Congreve's plays at the beginning of the eighteenth century, D. F. McKenzie has shown how apparently insignificant formal changes (moving from a quarto to an octavo edition, numbering scenes, the presence or absence of a decorative element printed between one scene and the next, recalling the names of characters present at the

beginning of each scene, marginal indications of the name of the character speaking, mention of exits and entrances) had an important effect on the status of the works. A new readability was created by a format that was easier to manipulate and by a page layout that reproduced within the book something of the movement of the staging, thus breaking with time-honoured conventions that required plays to be printed with no restitution of their theatrical character. This was thus a new manner of reading the same text, but it also provided a new horizon of reception because the mechanisms used in the octavo edition of 1710, borrowed from devices used for printed editions of French plays, gave a new legitimacy to Congreve's plays, henceforth 'classics' and part of the literary canon, and induced their author to make changes here and there to refine the style of his works and make them conform better to their new 'typographic' dignity.[12] Variations in the most purely formal aspects of a text's presentation can thus modify both its register of reference and its mode of interpretation.

The same is true, on a greater scale, of the greatest change in the way texts were cast into print between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries, 'the definitive triumph of white over black'[13] – that is, the introduction of breathing space on to the page by the use of more paragraphs to break up an uninterrupted continuous text and by paragraph indentations that make the order of discourse immediately visible. The new publishers suggested a new reading of the same texts or the same genres, a reading that fragmented the text into separate units and echoed the intellectual or discursive articulation of the argument in the visual articulation of the page.

Chopping up the text in this manner could have far-reaching implications where Scripture was concerned.

John Locke was troubled by the new custom of dividing the text of the Bible into chapter and verse. For him it risked obliterating the powerful coherence of the Word of God. Locke says, speaking of the Epistles of Paul, 'Not only the Common People take the Verses usually for distinct Aphorisms, but even Men of more advanc'd Knowledge in reading them, lose very much of the strength and force of the Coherence and the Light that depends on it.' The effects of breaking up Scripture in this manner were disastrous: it authorized every religious sect or party to found its legitimacy on the scriptural passages that seemed to support its views:

> If a Bible was printed as it should be, and as the several Parts of it were writ, in continued Discourses where the Argument is continued, I doubt not that the several Parties would complain of it, as an Innovation, and a dangerous Change in the publishing of those holy Books. . . . He [the member of a particular church] need but be furnished with Verses of Sacred Scriptures, containing Words and Expressions that are but flexible . . . and his System that has appropriated them to the Orthodoxie of his Church, makes them immediately strong and irrefragable Arguments for his Opinion. This is the Benefit of loose Sentences, and Scripture crumbled into Verses, which quickly turn into independent Aphorisms.[14]

A second figure pertains when a text is transferred from one form of publishing to another, dictating both a transformation of the text and the constitution of a new public. This is quite obviously the case with the corpus of titles that made up the catalogue of the Bibliothèque bleue. If that series has long claimed the attention of French historians it is because it has seemed to furnish direct access to the 'popular culture' of the ancien régime,

which has been supposed to have been expressed and nourished by works such as these and distributed en masse among the humbler sort of readers.[15] This was not really the case, and for three main reasons. First, it is clear that the works that made up the French stock of the pedlar's book trade had never been written for that purpose. The Bibliothèque bleue was a publishing formula that dipped into the repertory of already published texts and picked out the ones that seemed most likely to meet the expectations of the broad public it sought to reach. Thus we need to take two precautions: not to take texts in the familiar blue format as 'popular' in and of themselves because they belonged to all the genres of learned literature; to keep in mind that such texts usually had an earlier publishing existence and often a long publishing history before they entered the repertory of books for a wide audience.

A study of the works in the 'popular' catalogue has shown that techniques of the most formal and material kind can by themselves inscribe indications of cultural differentiation in published works. In fact, the basic specificity of the Bibliothèque bleue resided in editorial changes made in the texts in order to make them readable by the wide clientele that the publishers were aiming at. The vast labour of adaptation – shortening texts, simplifying them, cutting them up, providing illustrations – was commanded by how the bookseller-publishers who specialized in that market envisioned their customers' abilities and expectations. Thus the very structure of their books was governed by the way that book publishers thought that their target clientele read.

That reading style was always thought to demand such visible signals as anticipatory headings, recapitulative summaries, or woodcuts that functioned as reading

protocols much like the mansions in the system of the arts of memory – a style of reading at ease only with brief and self-enclosed sequences set off from one another and readers content with a minimal level of coherence. It was certainly not the manner of reading typical of the lettered elites of the age, even if certain notables deigned to buy the blue-covered books. Works printed for a broad public counted on their readers' previous knowledge. By the recurrence of extremely coded forms, by the repetition of motifs that return from one work to another, and by reuse of the same illustrations, an acquaintance with texts that the reader had already encountered was mobilized into serving for the comprehension of unfamiliar reading matter. In this way the 'blue' catalogue organized a manner of reading that was more recognition than true discovery. It is thus specific formal aspects of the 'blue' editions and the modifications that they imposed on the works they made use of that reveal their 'popular' character.

In proposing this re-evaluation of the Bibliothèque bleue my intention has not been uniquely to reach a better understanding of the most powerful of the instruments of acculturation to the written culture in ancien régime France.[16] It has also been to say that identification of sociocultural differentiations and a study of formal and material mechanisms, far from being mutually exclusive, are necessarily connected. This is so not only because forms are modelled on the expectations and abilities attributed to the public at which they are aimed, but above all because works and objects produce their social area of reception much more than they are produced by crystallized and previously existent divisions. Lawrence W. Levine has proposed a fine demonstration of this.[17] Analyzing the way in which Shakespeare's plays were

produced in America (mixed in with other genres such as melodrama, farce, circus turns, dance, and so forth), Levine shows how this type of representation created a numerous public that was 'popular' in that it was not limited to the lettered elite and that it participated actively in the performance by its emotions and reactions. In the late nineteenth century the strict division that was established among genres, styles, and places split up this 'general' public, reserving Shakespeare to the 'legitimate' theatre and a smaller audience and sending off the rest of the audience to more 'popular' entertainments. Changes in the actual form in which Shakespeare's plays were presented (but the same was true of symphonic music, the opera, and works of art) played a large part in the constitution of a 'cultural bifurcation', and a time of mixed and shared offerings was succeeded by a time in which a process of cultural distinction produced a social separation. The traditional mechanisms for representing the Shakespearian repertory in America were thus of the same order as the 'typographic' transformations that the publishers of the Bibliothèque bleue performed on the works they chose: in both cases, the intent was to inscribe the text into a cultural matrix that was not the one that its original creators had in mind, and by that means to permit 'readings', comprehensions, and uses that might have been disqualified by other intellectual habits.

These two examples lead us to consider cultural gaps as the effect of dynamic processes rather than as an expression of static and fixed divisions. On the one hand, a transformation in the forms and the mechanisms through which a text is proposed authorized new appropriations, thus it created new publics and new uses. On the other hand, the fact that an entire society shared the same objects invited a search for new differences to mark

distances that had been maintained. The trajectory of print works in ancien régime France stands as witness to this. It was as if the distinctions among ways to read were progressively reinforced as printed matter became less rare, less often confiscated, and a more ordinary commodity. Whereas the mere possession of a book had long signified cultural difference, with the conquests of printing, reading postures and typographical objects were gradually invested with that function. Henceforth readers of distinction and handsome books stood opposed to hastily printed works and their awkward decipherers.

As we have seen, however, both groups often read the same texts, whose plural and contradictory significations were invented along with their varying uses. This means that the question becomes one of selection: why did certain texts lend themselves better than others to durable and multiple reuse?[18] Or at least why did book publishers consider them capable of reaching very different publics? The response lies in the subtle relationships that were set up between the structure of the works, which were not all open to reappropriation in the same degree, and the multiple determinations, both institutional and formal, that regulated their possible 'application' (in the hermeneutic sense of the term) to very different historical situations.

There is a third figure of the relationship among text, print, and reading when a text that is stable in its letter and fixed in its form is apprehended by new readers who read it in other ways than did previous readers. 'A book changes by the fact that it does not change when the world changes'[19] or, to change the statement to fit the scope of the present work, '. . . when its mode of reading changes'. This remark is enough to justify a projected history of reading practices that would seek to identify the

major oppositions that can give different meanings to a *same* text. It is perhaps time to question three of these fundamental cleavages, which are held to be certain. First, the opposition between a reading in which comprehension depends upon oralization, either out loud or mumbled, and another, possibly visual, reading.[20] Even though his chronology is open to question, let me recall Michel de Certeau's remark about the reader's freedom and silent reading:

> Reading has become, over the past three centuries, a visual poem. It is no longer accompanied, as it used to be, by the murmur of a vocal articulation or by the movement of a muscular manducation. To read without uttering the words aloud or at least mumbling them is a 'modern' experience, unknown for millennia. In earlier times, the reader interiorized the text; he made his voice the body of the other; he was its actor. Today, the text no longer imposes its own rhythm on the subject, it no longer manifests itself through the reader's voice. This withdrawal of the body, which is the condition of autonomy, is a distancing of the text. It is the reader's *habeas corpus*.[21]

The second accepted cleavage falls between an 'intensive', reverential, and respectful reading of a small number of books that relies on hearing and memory and an 'extensive' reading that consumes many texts, passes nonchalantly from one text to the next, and holds less sacred what is read.[22] The third cleavage is between a private, cloistered, solitary reading, considered to be one of the essential elements for constituting a sphere of private life, and the collective reading – both disciplined and rebellious – of communitarian spaces.[23]

These widely accepted oppositions suggest a chronology that sees as major mutations the gradual advances in

silent reading in the Middle Ages and the entry into the world of extensive reading in the late eighteenth century. They prompt several reflections, however: some of these would reduce the simplicity of the dichotomies present in these contrasts by shifting attention to gradations within each opposed entity, by introducing nuances into the criteria that too abruptly differentiate styles of reading, and by reversing the automatic association of the collective with the popular and the elite with the private.[24] Others suggest a connection among three sets of transformations whose effects have often been imperfectly untangled: 'revolutions' that have taken place in techniques for the reproduction of texts (first among them, a shift from 'scribal culture' to 'print culture'); changes in the very forms of the book (the change from the roll or *volumen* to the book in signatures or *codex* during the early centuries of the Christian era was the most fundamental of these but other and less sweeping changes modified the visual aspect of the printed page between the sixteenth and eighteenth century);[25] wide-scale change in reading skills and in modes of reading. These different evolutions did not develop at the same pace and were not punctuated by the same breaking-points. The most interesting question posed to and by the history of reading today is certainly that of the ways in which these three sets of mutations – technological, formal, and cultural – related to one another.

The response to that question obviously depends upon a re-evaluation of the trajectories and divisions characteristic of the society of the ancien régime. More than is admitted, they were organized on the basis of the presence of written matter. That presence has long been gauged uniquely in one of two ways: either by signature counts aimed at establishing literacy rates, hence at evaluating

variations in the ability to read according to ages, sites, sexes, and conditions; or by scrutiny of library inventories drawn up by notaries or booksellers in an attempt to measure the circulation of books and reading traditions.

In societies of the ancien régime as in our own, however, access to print cannot be reduced to book ownership alone: every book that is read is not necessarily a book that is personally owned, and all printed matter kept in the home is not obligatorily a book. Moreover, written materials lay at the very heart of the culture of the illiterate and were present in rituals, public spaces, and the work place.[26] Thanks to speech, which deciphered writing, and to the image, which mirrored it, written matter was made accessible even to those who were incapable of reading it or who, left to their own devices, would have had only a rudimentary comprehension of it. Literacy rates do not give an accurate measure of familiarity with the written word – all the more so since in older societies, where learning to read and learning to write were two separate and successive operations, there were many individuals (women in particular) who left school knowing how to read at least a little but not how to write.[27] Similarly, individual possession of a book is an inadequate indication of how often those who were too poor to have any sort of 'library' in their homes might have handled a printed text.

Even if it is totally impossible to establish the number of readers who were not even able to sign their names or the number of readers who owned no books (or at least no books worthy of being appraised by the notary who drew up the inventory) but who could read signs and posters, news-sheets and chapbooks, we none the less have to postulate that they were many in order to comprehend the impact of printed written matter on the older forms of

a culture that was still largely oral, action-based, and iconographic. The two modes of expression and communication dovetailed in many ways. To take first the ways in which writing and gesture mixed: not only was the written word at the centre of urban festivities such as religious ceremonies, but a number of texts were intended to cancel themselves out as discourse and to produce practical results in behaviour recognized as being in conformity with social or religious norms. This was the case with the civility books, which aimed at teaching the rules of polite social intercourse or Christian propriety.[28]

There was also a dovetailing of speech and writing, which operated in two ways: first, the texts destined by their author and (more often) by their publisher to the most popular public often contained formulas or themes that came directly from the culture of the tale and oral recitation. The writing style of certain *occasionnels* (newssheets) that imitate the speech patterns of tale-tellers and the variants introduced in the 'blue' editions of fairy tales (which all originally came from literary collections) are good examples of an orality coming to the surface in printed matter.[29] Second, as we have seen, a number of 'readers' apprehended texts only thanks to the mediation of a voice reading them. Comprehending the specificity of this relationship with the written word thus supposes that not all reading must necessarily be individual, solitary, and silent, but, quite to the contrary, that one must acknowledge the importance and the diversity of reading aloud, a practice that has largely been lost.

This acknowledgement, which points to the strength of the penetration of print culture in ancien régime societies, leads to several others. First, it can account for the importance given to written matter and to the objects that bore writing by all the authorities who intended to

regulate behaviour and fashion minds. Hence the pedagogical, acculturating, and disciplining role attributed to the texts put into circulation for a wide readership; hence also the controls exercised over printed matter, which was subjected to censorship to eliminate anything that might threaten religious or moral order. Michel de Certeau invited us to recognize both the efficacy of these constraints, which were more and more binding as the individual was more strongly connected with the institution that decreed them ('The creativity of the reader grows as the institution that controlled it declines'),[30] and the various modalities for bridling the reader's interpretation, which ranged from exterior censorship – administrative, judiciary, inquisitorial, scholastic, and so forth – to constraining mechanisms within the book itself.

Texts from bygone years construct representations of the possible uses of the written word and the various ways of handling printed matter in which we can recognize the cleavages that those who produced books held to be decisive. Such perceptions are essential to the extent that they underlie strategies for writing and for publishing that were governed by the supposed skills and expectations of the various target publics. Hence those perceptions acquire an efficacy traces of which can be found in explicit protocols for reading, in the forms given to typographical objects, or in the transformations that changed a text when it was given to new readers in a new publishing formula. It is thus on the basis of the various representations of reading and of the dichotomies constructed in the early modern age (between the reading of a text and the reading of an image; between literate reading and hesitant reading; between intimate reading and communitarian reading) that we must attempt to understand the uses of and adjustments made in these print pieces humbler

than the book but just as omnipresent and which ranged from *images volantes* (illustrated broadsheets) and *placards* (topical illustrations and commentary) to the *occasionnels* and the little blue books (which often had illustrations).

Representations of older forms of reading and of the differences among them, as they are revealed on the practical level by the process of casting a text into printed form, or representations of their normative purposes in literary, pictorial, and autobiographical works constitute the basic data for an archaeology of reading practices. None the less, although they express the contrasts that were uppermost in the minds of their contemporaries, they mask other and less clearly perceived cleavages. For example, it is certain that many practices reversed the very terms of the opposition that has so often been depicted between solitary reading in the privacy of a bourgeois or aristocratic setting and reading in common among popular listeners. In reality, reading aloud while others listened long remained one of the practices that cemented elite sociability; conversely, printed matter penetrated to the very heart of the humble home, where it imbued modest objects that were by no means always books with traces of an important moment in private life, a memory of an emotion, or a sign of identity. Contrary to the classical image of 'the people', a product of the early modern age, 'the people' is not always to be sought in the plural, but rather in the secret solitude of the humble practices of individuals who cut out the images of the *occasionnels*, who coloured printed engravings, and who read the chapbooks for simple enjoyment.

The approach proposed in the present work (and put into effect in a few others) is tied to a particular terrain (France between the sixteenth and the eighteenth century) and to a specific problem (the effects of the penetration

of printed written matter on the culture of the greater number). It attempts to put into operation two propositions of Michel de Certeau. The first recalls, against all reductive attempts to deny the creative and inventive force of practice, that reading is never totally constraint and that it cannot be deduced from the texts it makes use of. The second stresses that readers' tactics, insinuated in the *lieu propre* (place of their own) produced by the strategies of writing, obey rules, follow logical systems, and imitate models. This reflects the paradox underlying any history of reading, which is that it must postulate the liberty of a practice that it can only grasp, massively, in its determinations. Constructing communities of readers as 'interpretive communities' (Stanley Fish's expression), discerning how material forms affect meaning, localizing social difference in practices more than in statistical distributions – these are the routes laid out for anyone who wishes to understand as a historian the 'silent production' that is 'the activity of reading'.[31]