

Popular Classics: Prose Fiction in Eighteenth-Century Britain and the Formation of a Canon

Abstract for the General Public

‘What is a classic?’ T. S. Eliot’s well-known essay, the text of an address to the Virgil Society in 1944, reformulates a longstanding question about how we think of certain works of literature as somehow ‘greater’ than others, whether in terms of genre, period, impact, or authorship. ‘Popular Classics’ reassesses how we might define ‘classic literature’ by situating eighteenth-century British prose fiction – commonly called ‘the novel’ – at the core of developing notions of a national literature, of canon-formation, and of the relationship between the old and the new, preceding models and futurity, origins and originality.

The eighteenth-century novel was crucial to the development of national literary identity in eighteenth-century Britain, and how literature and the arts shaped the perception of modernity in relation to the past – ‘classical’ classics – with the development of newer generic forms. Focussing on prose fiction provides a significant way of examining these intersections, offering a rich field of study into major and minor novelists – and how they have been given such a status – and the publication strategies that make a reading public think of some works and writers as ‘classic’ while other become forgotten. The relationship between the idea of a classic and of a popular work suggests a hierarchy, in which one is deemed more worthy of serious critical attention whereas the other is simply enjoyable, transient, or lightweight. However, as this project reveals, the so-called ‘academic’ and ‘social’ or popular canons intersect more than may be supposed – especially when focussed on a mixed generic form, such as the novel, which has fought to attain critical status through a range of critical and reading mechanisms that have played a significant role in establishing a national library of British literature.

Anthologies of fiction, collected single-author works, and series comprising particularly admired novels have all contributed to the formation of apparently important writers and their works – while raising significant questions about who, or what, has been excluded. Similarly, some publication venues that were major outlets for the dissemination of printed fiction have typically been excluded from histories of prose fiction: newspapers, magazines, and other so-called ephemeral publications were nonetheless important conduits for serialising existing works (often in abridged form) or for printing entirely new fiction – versions of ‘the novel’ that significantly challenge our understanding of what the form encompassed, and how eighteenth-century readers accessed and understood prose fiction. They were also influenced by the printed formats in which new fiction reached them: paratextual materials such as prefaces, annotations, and illustrations contributed towards establishing a work’s status for new reading publics – and, eventually, that work’s place in an emerging sense of a pantheon of national literature.

‘Popular Classics’ covers a timespan from 1740 to 1810 that touches upon major pressure-points in the history of canon-formation: from the novel’s first full emergence in the 1740s with the publication of fiction by Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, and Tobias Smollett, among others, to the onset of distinctive, Regency-era fiction from 1810 dominated by Walter Scott, and which included Jane Austen’s major works. By asking how some authors came to attain classic status, and by bringing to the fore now-forgotten but once popular novelists, this project illuminates our knowledge of eighteenth-century novelistic fiction, and lays significant groundwork for future studies.