ABIGAIL WILLIAMS, Oxford

How to Read a Book:
18th-Century Frontispieces and Popular Collections

Over the course of the 18th century, books acquired pictures. An increasingly crowded literary marketplace created a demand for ever more elaborately and attractively packaged books, and illustration was a central part of this competitive book market. This essay will consider the various roles of the literary frontispiece: what these images can tell us about the way individual works were marketed, and about how books were used. Existing discussion of frontispieces in 18th-century literary texts has tended to focus on authorial portraits, and their role in the self-fashioning or the literary afterlife of the author.1 But numerous works were not prefaced by pictures of individual authors: often because the book contained works by multiple writers, or because the works within were not attributed. The verse miscellany, a compilation of verse, music, and prose by a range of authors was one of the most popular literary forms in this period, and it offered a particular kind of reading experience for its consumers – verse and prose in sections or snippets, often unattributed, by a wide range of authors.2 The frontispieces of such collections framed their contents in very different ways to single author works, and in doing so, have their own story to tell us about the marketing of literature in this period.

The 18th-Century Book Market

The 18th century saw the exponential growth of the trade in printed books, and the history of printing and publishing in this period was shaped by commercial ingenuity. Booksellers, authors and readers came increasingly to see the products of the printing press as market commodities, goods directed at particular audiences (Raven 2009, 85). As the volume and diversity of publication increased after the mid-18th century, many publishers introduced competitive forms of packaging, presentational strategies aimed at encouraging demand from both those who were already used to buying books, and those who were new to the book owning world (Raven 2009, 86-87). The history of book illustration in this period reflects this shift in expectation. Over the course of the 18th century, illustrations in books became increasingly common and desired by customers. The medium generally used was engraving, or “burinating” on copperplate (woodcuts were used for cheap popular books). At the beginning of the period, literary works occasionally had engraved frontispieces, usually in the form of portrait frontispieces – typically produced by specialist engravers – and these were available as optional additions to large or small volumes. Other illustrations of works of literature were uncommon, and confined to separate books, or added to later editions of works to add new interest to a classic or established modern work (Clayton 2009, 241). But after about 1760 frontispieces became commonplace, and it was not unusual for several other plates to be inserted as illustrations (Clayton 2009, 232). The first modern British literary work to be heavily illustrated was Samuel Richardson’s 6th edition of Pamela (1742), followed by Laurence Sterne’s Tristram Shandy (1760) and

---

1 See, for example, Barchas (1998) and Nichol (1988).
2 For a good summary of recent work on the miscellany, see Batt (2012, 395).
A Sentimental Journey (1768). All these engravings also had afterlives as "furniture prints," separately issued prints which could be framed and displayed on the wall, separate from the book itself (Clayton 2009, 243). The way an illustration was described also seems to change in status: at the start of the century they are described in newspaper advertisements as "curious cuts," suggesting something of their novelty—but five decades later, they have become the more refined "elegant engravings."

**Role of the Frontispiece**

Although engravings became increasingly desirable over the course of the 18th century, they were expensive, and perceived as a luxury addition to the basic text of a book. Before the second decade of the 19th century, it was rare for a book to be sold in a permanent binding. Instead, the customers bought the book either in sheets, or card binding, and then had it bound to their own personal specifications. Because engraved plates added considerably to the cost of a book, additional illustrations were often sold separately, and were added in when the book was bound. Advertisements for these kinds of editions specified that versions were available printed "on common paper without the print," ideal for readers keen to trim costs. So for readers unwilling or unable to pay the extra shillings for the pictures, the frontispiece might well have been the sole illustration within the book, and as such, offered the only visual accompaniment on offer. The frontispiece also played a different interpretative role to that of interleaved prints, in that it guided readers towards the overall significance of a work, rather than the illustration of a particular scene or character. Of course, in many ways, these prefatory images tell us more about the desired readership or status of a work than about its actual nature. They offer us idealised fantasies - of erudition, authority or culture, and there was often a considerable gap between the image and the text. But they do nonetheless remind us of the worlds that their readers wanted to invest in – what they hoped their books might bring to them, however unlikely or unrealistic that aspiration.

During the 17th and early 18th century the dominant form of frontispiece within literary texts was an author portrait, commonly framed within a masonry frame, accompanied by a Greek or Latin inscription. The engraver George Vertue was the most celebrated practitioner of this form (Hammelmann 1975, 4). As Janine Barchas and Jim McLaverty have shown, author images produced by Vertue and others provided a guide to the works they prefaced, and "assert literary status and generic preoccupations, while containing local interpretive clues" (Barchas 2003, 27). So, for example in the case of Alexander Pope's portrait of himself inside his 1717 Works, Pope's insertion of a large Vertue engraving of a portrait by Charles Jervas played a key role in his self-projection as celebrity author. The engraving, which was also sold separately as a print, showed an elegant and bewigged Pope at ease, placed on a stone pediment, and marked "a subtle mingling of the personal and the monumental" (McLaverty 2001, 63). However, over the course of the 18th century, we see the evolution of alternative forms of frontispiece, particularly in miscellany volumes, and it is on these images that I wish to focus in this essay. Collections of works by various authors,
whether in verse, prose, jest book, could not by definition be prefaced by an authorita-
tive image of a single figure. In many cases, the material within them was anonymous,
and unattributed, even if the author was known. These kinds of compilations were
prefaced by frontispieces which frequently took the form of idealised depictions of
literary activity or literary culture. Allegorical images, influenced by French rococo
style, became popular, along with classical iconography representing muses, laurels,
books, and figures of wisdom and virtue proliferated (Hammelmann 1975, 4-5). One of
the notable features of these frontispieces was their aspirational quality: they framed the
book within a set of symbols and images designed to increase the literary status of the
contents.

Figure 1

There was often a gap between the idealised allegorical images of pipe playing shep-
chers and classical muses depicted on the frontpiece, and the contents of the collec-
tion, and one of the intriguing aspects of this area of print culture is the question of
how these images would have been read by their initial viewers. Many frontispiece
images seem fairly straightforward – the hack writer and compiler Richard Johnson's
*Poetical Blossoms: Being a Selection of Short Poems, intended for Young People to
Repeat from Memory* (1793), published in octodecimo by Elizabeth Newbery is pref-
aced by an image of the goddess Minerva standing in the Temple of Minerva, and
hanging out a volume of poetry to a group of eager children standing before her (see
figure 1). The enthusiasm of the children, and the emblematic depiction of classical
authority reinforce the volume's didactic message here, that "the rising generation
will be instructed while they are amused" (Johnson 1793, iv). But other frontispieces seem
to play a more complex role in relation to the text. *The Beau's Miscellany*, a collection
of poems presented as "A New and Curious Collection of Amorous Tales, diverting Songs,
and Entertaining Poems," a duodecimo volume, printed in 1731, and priced at one shilling, bears a frontispiece by the Dutch engraver, Hendrik Hulsbergh (see figure 2).  

The plate depicts Apollo, holding a lyre, in a pastoral landscape, pointing to two busts of Homer and Virgil, mounted on plinths. At the god’s feet are a collection of opened books, which lie close by a spring, representing the fount of Helicon. The image seems to suggest that this miscellany is the fruit of a number of authors, whose works are on a par with the great classical masters. What is interesting about the frontispiece in relation to The Beau’s Miscellany is that the contents of the collection do not fit the classicized image of poetic endeavour implicit in the image, which suggests that an aspiring poet must combine learning, imitation, and inspiration. The poems, all unattributed, are a collection of bawdy and comic material, jolly and light-hearted amusements for the young spark about town. The titles of the poems convey the flavour of the whole: "Upon a Lady, who by the overturning of a Coach, had her Coats behind flung up, and what was under, shewn to the View of the Company," (by John Oldham, but not attributed here); "A Cure for Cuckoldom," (Thomas Brown, not attributed) and "A Song in praise of Claret." So how seriously are we to take the frontispiece with its pedestals and classical iconography? Is the image part of the parody of this collection? Other elements of the paratext are a joke – the bookseller’s name in the imprint, "A. Moore" is fictitious – and the choice of image may be more knowing that it initially appears.  

Many of the comic poems play with classical models, inverting pastoral or

---

4 Hulsbergh, born in Amsterdam but living in London, engraved a number of copies of French prints and other foreign models for leading printellers, and appears to have engraved a number of Apollo-themed frontispieces (see Hammelmann (1975, 14) and Clayton (2004)).
5 Vincent Carretta makes this point in relation to this image, with reference to its use in an earlier edition of Boileau (Carretta 1986, 215).
heroic genres by situating them within the bawdy and the everyday. An anonymous poem prefixed with the epigraph "Malus Abstulit Error" tells of "Damon's conquest of Corinna," which results in his catching the clap. But it is also problematic to assume that the mismatch between image and text is purposefully ironic. The image was not originally designed for this volume — it was taken from the first volume of Edmund Curll's 1712 translation of Boileau's works, where it was titled "To front ye Art of Poetry," and this version was itself a reworking of an earlier 17th-century engraving (The Works of Monsieur Boileau, 85). We can glimpse here some of the transience of printed images in this period, and the way in which adaptation and recycling was part of the economy of the print marketplace. The use of the Hulsbergh Apollo frontispiece in The Beau's Miscellany could be an ironic neoclassical joke, but it could equally well be seen as an example of the commercial opportunism of 18th-century printers and editors.

These questions of text, image and literary status are evident in other collections. A Collection of Old Ballads Corrected from the best and most ancient copies extant. With introductions historical, critical, or humorous. Illustrated with copper plates (1723), probably edited by the poet Ambrose Philips, has as its frontispiece a copper-plate illustration designed and engraved by a J. Pirie (see figure 3).

![Figure 3](image-url)

Again, there seems to be a disjunction between this scene and the text which follows. What we find inside the book is a collection of anonymous ballads from popular English tradition, ranging from George and the Dragon to Dick Whittington, Robin Hood, and Chevy Chase. They are popular poems, songs and stories a long way from the

---

7 "On A Gentleman's Illness, occasioned by his Familiarity with a very handsome Woman." in The Beau's Miscellany (1731, 34).
8 This illustration was itself adapted from an earlier engraving by Guillaume Vallet after Antoine Paillet in Boileau's Oeuvres Diverses (1685); see Carretta (1986, 215).
9 The Engravers Copyright Act of 1735 gave designers 14 years copyright, forbidding any engraving to be made without the designer's permission, and giving one shilling fine for every copy of a pirated print found in a printseller's possession. The amended act of 1767 extended this to 24 years (Hammelmann 1975, 3).
classical iconography of the frontispiece. But when we read the preface to the volume, it becomes clear that the choice of image is deliberate. It is intended to reflect the design of the work: namely to raise the status of native British folk tradition, and to put it on a par with classical poetry. The editor, probably the poet Ambrose Philips, argues that "old Homer, if we may trust ancient Records, was nothing more than a blind Ballad-singer, who writ Songs of the Siege of Troy [...] and playing the Tunes upon his Harp, sang from Door to Door, till at his Death somebody thought fit to collect all his Ballads" (Philips 1723, ed. 1, vol. 1, iii). The frontispiece is designed to make this argument in visual form – Philips says that "it would be endless, to prove that the several Poets whose Bustos I have put in my Frontispiece, were Ballad-Writers [...]" (Philips 1723, ed. 1, vol. 1, v). The frontispiece emphasises that native ballads are equal to more established forms of literary authority, represented here by the figures on the pedestals. What looks like a crude mismatch between image and textual content has a real purpose. Yet what remains difficult about this appropriation of classical iconography is that Philips and his illustrator have yet to find a way within this imagery to figure anonymous authorship. The folk stories and songs within the Old Ballads do not have named authors, yet the frontispiece relies on author-based iconography to assert literary value. There is no pedestal for the ballads within the collection because they have no authors. Instead, they are represented through the figure of the woman and her artistic cherubic companions. It seems as though this is a picture caught between two different ways of viewing literature and authorship, but without the iconography to address this disjunction.

Philips's preface to his collection of ballads makes it very clear that he has been involved in the design of text and image, and that the frontispiece is part of the overall meaning of the book. His investment in illustrations for the collection is quite unusual for this time, the early 1720s, when the inclusion of copperplate engravings in a literary work was not widespread, particularly in a collection of popular, anonymous works such as this one. In a subsequent volume of the Old Ballads he explains why he has included illustrations: "I have known many a Body drawn in to read a Book, merely because they have liked the Pictures; if it had not been for this Reason, I can assure those who condemn them, that I should have been as glad as they possibly could be, to have had them omitted. That Additional Charge was not at all necessary in a Work that without it has cost dear enough" (Philips 1738, ed. 2, vol. 3, v). Philips was not exaggerating about the additional charge and the expense of the book, which would have been out of the reach of most ordinary readers. At 6 shillings for 2 duodecimo volumes (bound in calf skin), and 9 shillings for all 3 volumes, this was popular material aimed way above the popular market. At this price, his argument that the illustrations might draw in readers could only have been true for a very few. Elite customers, who might otherwise dismiss printed ballads, were the only customers likely to be tempted by this high-end production, whose engravings and cost were part of a wholesale repackaging of folk culture. Philips was tapping into a rising literary interest in the ballad form, most famously articulated in Joseph Addison's Spectator essay on the ballad of Chevy Chase, and Philips's edition of illustrated ballads aimed what had been seen as worthless popular music towards the upper end of the literary market. The frontispiece to the Old Ballads was part of a wider repurposing of popular myth and music.

10 See Addison (1711). On the rise of interest in ballads in this period, see Fairer (2003, 172-174).
The *Collection of Old Ballads* is a clear case of a named editor controlling both the choice of texts within the volume and the design of the illustration to preface it. It is an example that enables us to talk with confidence of an individual editor or compiler's role in assembling and presenting texts and the agenda that they might bring to that activity. But this is a rare instance – in the vast majority of popular collections the editor is anonymous, the texts prefaced by little or no comment, and the precise relationship between editor, publisher and illustrator impossible to discern. These kinds of compilations thus present real challenges for subsequent literary analysis – can or should we attribute editorial or authorial intention in works which literally have no authors? As literary critics, we try to perceive the ways in which collocations of text and image create meaning – yet who is actually doing the meaning making? As we have seen in the case of the *Beau’s Miscellany*, there are significant challenges in viewing a frontispiece as part of a coherent and authorially-intentioned paratext for the work that follows it, because of the collaborative nature of the publishing process at this time, and the prevalence of anonymity, particularly in collections of works.

**Images of Reading**

The example of Ambrose Philips and the *Old Ballads* shows the way in which the frontispiece could be used to locate works within a more elevated literary sphere. The image tells us how to read the ballads in relation to literary historical tradition, and established forms of literary quality. Other works of this period depict the act of reading in a more literal way – by showing readers with their books. Many of those readers are solitary figures, perhaps by a window, or at ease in a shady grove, forms of book consumption which reflect our own modern predilection for silent, solitary reading. But a sizeable number of book frontispieces from the 18th century also show communal forms of reading, a book read out loud to an assembled company. In doing so, they remind us of the social role that books played in this period. This is particularly relevant in the case of many of the collections of verse and prose excerpts from the 18th century which were designed for entertainment and performance: with titles such as *Laugh and Be Fat* or *The Evening Fire-Side*, they provided material for a range of audiences. Recent critics have emphasised the ongoing role of reading aloud, which persisted at the same time that silent reading developed. The evidence of social reading practice in 18th-century diaries and letters is supported by the evidence of the hundreds of books devoted to the popular domestic enjoyment and performance of literature. Popular collections like Shakespeare’s plays made into easy-reading novels; novels turned into dialogues for home performance; songsters and recital books, and spouting companions were all designed to offer sociable home entertainment. In some cases, the role of oral delivery was explicitly addressed in both text and image.

Mary Ann Kilner's *A Course of Lectures for Sunday Evenings* (1787) begins with an anecdote about reading practices within a family:

> I went a few months ago to pass some time with an intimate friend who has several children; and whose custom it usually is to read to his family on a Sunday evening. But I was

---

11 See, for example, Tadmor (1996) and Jajdelska (2007).
12 The *Course of Lectures* was published by John Marshall, a publisher specialising in didactic material for children, who advertised himself as selling “a variety of Publications for the instruction and amusement of young folk” (*St James’s Chronicle, Or the British Evening Post*, 9-11 August 1787; issues 4136. n.p.)
rather surprised to find, that the younger part of his auditors appeared to be entirely inattentive to the serious truths contained in a very rational and well written discourse.

Kilner goes on to describe the way in which

The eldest daughter sat for some time listening with great earnestness; but by degrees, her eyes grew heavy, her head inclined alternately on either side, till she fell into a profound sleep, interrupted only by involuntary starts when in danger of falling. Her sister, though more wakeful, was not better engaged, as she employed herself in counting the spots on her pocket handkerchief, and twisting it afterward into various forms; which by attracting the observation of her brothers, seemed to engage them much more than anything they might have heard from their father. (Kilner 1787, xi-x iii)

The engraved frontispiece to the *Evening Lectures*, which may also have been sold as a print, is a visual rejoinder to this tale of bored listening. In this image, we see an ideal reading scenario (see figure 4):

![Figure 4](image.jpg)

There is no fidgeting or handkerchief knotting here! The image shows us the desirable family circle, obedient attentive children, the dim evening brilliantly lit by the candles and reflective glass. In this case, and many others, the frontispiece design suggests that ownership of the book will enable readers to attain the happy scene of sociability depicted. In this respect it can be compared with the way in which images of fictional characters were also being used to preface books at this time. Janine Barchas has argued that the portraits of fictional characters which came to feature as frontispieces in 18th-century novels "imply that to gain that experience [of the fictional world depicted in the image], readers must purchase the book" (Barchas 2003, 41).

Mary Ann Kilner's *Evening Lectures* depicts a scene of virtuous domestic piety, and reflects the practice of many families who gathered together for improving read-
ing of an evening. But reading aloud was not always improving, and the numerous
elocutionary guides of the period give us some insight into the range of ways in which
one might want to read. James Burgh's *The Art of Speaking*, first published in 1761,
is a text designed to equip the ordinary gentleman to speak well in the company he found
at home. Burgh told his readers:

> Suppose a youth have no prospect either of sitting in parliament, of pleading at the *bar*,
of appearing in the *pulpit*; does it follow, that he need bestow *no pains* in learning to
speak properly his *native language*? Will he never have occasion to read in a company
of his friends, a *copy of verses*, a *passage of a book*, or *newspaper*? Must he never read
a *discourse of Tillotson*, or a *chapter of the Whole Duty of Man*, for the instruction of
his children and servants? (Burgh 1768, 3)

We see here that instructional reading, like Kilner's *Evening Lectures*, was only
one part of what might be read aloud, and that verses, novels and newspapers might
also be read with friends. There are many scenes of groups of friends reading together
in book frontispieces of the 18th century, particularly in the jest books of the period,
comic miscellanies hugely popular amongst middle and upper-class readers. These
compilations have frontispieces which often seem to take a set form: a group of men
sitting around a domestic table, with punch and pipes, their faces lit by sociable enthu-
siasm (and punch). Sometimes the book itself is included in the picture, and some-
times not. They are images that suggest that to buy the book is to gain access to the
evenings of ready wit and mirth shown in the frontispiece, and as Simon Dickie de-
scribes, these books provided their readers with "*how-to* manuals for those wanting
to shine in company" (Dickie 2003, 8). *The Cabinet of Momus*, a jest book from 1786
is a typical example: it is described on the title page as "a collection of the most enter-
taining English and Scotch Stories," and its frontispiece, engraved by "L. Roberts,"
depicts a group of merry men gathered around a table, and bears an epigraph loosely
pieced together from Hamlet's lines on Yorick (see figure 5).

In the image itself, one bacchic-wreathed ringleader holds out a sheet with "The
Cabinet of Momus" written upon it. It looks as though he is taking it from the writer
with quill and paper who sits beside him, the wit freshly transcribed for the merry
occasion. There is a punchbowl on the table, and another man at the table clutches a
bottle of wine and glass. In the foreground a woman holds a satyrs's mask and a flail,
indicating the satirical nature of the content, and the ouroboros held up by the female
statue in the background suggests eternity. The combination of English and
Caledonian fare advertised within the collection is reflected in her flag, and in
the figure in a tam o'shanter. It is a type of many images of the 18th century – very
literally, in that the same image reappears a decade later as the frontispiece of another
jest book collection entitled *Mirth's Museum* (?1798). This volume contains less
Scottish material and is shorter, largely made up of comic stories and jests, this time
"*both English and Irish.*** Within the frontispiece, the title of the sheet held out has
been changed to "*Comic Songster*" – not the title of the present volume, but possibly
the title of a third, now lost work, for which the image had also been used. In both the
*Cabinet of Momus* and the *Mirth's Museum* images, the area around the title on the
book displayed is noticeably paler than other light areas, suggesting that this part of

---

13 For a recent account of the role of jestbooks in 18th-century culture, see Dickie (2003). Collections of
songs, with or without music, were another popular form of book illustration in which the emphasis is
on the recreational aspect of the genre, as in *Bickham's Musical Entertainer*, published in fortnightly
parts during 1737-1738 (Harthan 1981, 168).
the engraving has been scraped away, in order to change the title of the book. The repurposing of images such as this one should remind us again of the danger of over-reading the relationship between image and text – in an opportunistic marketplace, images and text were cut and pasted at will between popular collections such as this one.

Frontispieces played an important role in the packaging of books in an ever more competitive 18th-century book market. They positioned the works that they prefaced, and the ways in which they employ and redeploy imagery can offer insights into the representation of authorship, literary status and reading practices in this period. In some ways, they are easy for us to interpret, because they draw on an established iconography. But in other ways our understanding of them demands a fuller knowledge of the 18th-century print trade than is easily available. Electronic databases of texts can track the recurrence of individual poems, or lines of text – but it is only with painstaking analysis of individual volumes that we can determine the history of an image and its use.14 What is clear from this brief study of the collection frontispiece is that the art of learning to read an 18th-century book demands attention to the historical nuance of both text and image.

Illustrations

Figure 1: Frontispiece to Poetical Blossoms: Being a Selection of Short Poems, Intended for Young People to Repeat from Memory (London, 1793). © The British Library Board, shelfmark Ch 790/6.

14 Examples of datasets which enable the cross-searching of large bodies of text in this period are Eighteenth Century Collections Online, and the recently available Digital Miscellanies Index.
Figure 2: Frontispiece to The Beau’s Miscellany. Being a New and Curious Collection of Amorous Tales, Diverting Songs, and Entertaining Poems. (London, 1731) © The British Library Board, shelfmark 1493.l.33.

Figure 3: Frontispiece to A Collection of Old Ballads Corrected from the Best and most Ancient Copies Extant (London, 1723). © The British Library Board, shelfmark C.108.bb.33.

Figure 4: Frontispiece to Mary Ann Kilner, A Course of Lectures for Sunday Evenings (London, 1787). © The British Library Board, shelfmark 1111.d.17.

Figure 5: Frontispiece to The Cabinet of Momus, and Caledonian humorist (London, 1786). © The British Library Board, shelfmark 12316.d.20.

Works Cited

Addison, Joseph. Spectator no. 70, 21 May, 1711; Spectator no. 74, 25 May 1711; Spectator 85, 7 June 1711.


Burgh, James. The Art of Speaking in Two Parts. 2nd ed. Dublin, 1768.


