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The Tip of the Iceberg: Reading Practices in Mary Hamilton's Archive, 1783–1784

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This article evaluates the benefits and drawbacks of using quantitative digital analysis to reconstruct eighteenth-century reading practices using manuscript life writing. Our corpus is over a thousand pages of Mary Hamilton's letters and diary entries covering one year of her life. We report significant findings concerning the space, time, nature, and mode of Hamilton's reading, and the media, genre, authorship, and provenance of her material. Her reading diet is more dominated by female-authored manuscript prose, inflected by personal acquaintance, and reliant on a private loan economy than we anticipated – conclusions that we would not have reached using qualitative analysis alone.

Keywords: archival studies, Bluestockings, digital humanities, life writing, manuscript culture, reading practices

1. Introduction

This article evaluates the benefits and drawbacks of using quantitative digital analysis to reconstruct eighteenth-century reading practices using evidence drawn from manuscript diaries and private correspondence. Our case study is Mary Hamilton (1756–1816) and our evidence base is over one thousand pages of her life writing (letters and diary entries) covering one year of her life, 22 June 1783 – 20 June 1784. Capturing detailed information about Hamilton's reading over this period within a database enables us to uncover significant new knowledge about the space, time, nature, and mode of her reading and the media, genre, authorship, and provenance of

the texts she consumed. In particular, we find that Hamilton's literary diet was more dominated by manuscript prose and female authors, more inflected by personal acquaintance, and more reliant on a private loan economy than we had anticipated – conclusions that we would not have reached to the same extent by using qualitative analysis alone.

There were certain moments where our process invoked Nan Z. Da's critique (relating specifically to computational literary analysis) that 'what is robust is obvious […] and what is not obvious is not robust', and other times when it seemed to suggest a 'mismatch between the statistical tools that are used and the objects to which they are applied' (Da 2019: 601). However, we also encountered numerous instances whereby quantitative digital analysis of Hamilton's documented reading practice revealed a surprising figure or ranking which guided us to understand a quirk of her reading profile in hitherto unimagined ways. Ultimately we acknowledge the limitations of quantitative digital analysis when applied to eighteenth-century manuscript life writing but also commend its abilities, when united with more conventional literary approaches such as close reading and biographical research, to expose the tip of many a meaningful iceberg and mark the spot for further exploration.

The enormous archive of letters, diaries, manuscript books, and other papers left by Mary Hamilton (see Hannah Barker and Nuria Yáñez-Bouza's Foreword to this special issue) is particularly thick during the early 1780s. As part of the team creating a digital edition of this archive (see the Introduction to this issue by Coulombeau, Yáñez-Bouza and Denison), our guiding research question was: how might the digital capabilities of the edition enable us to gain a holistic overview of the rich variety of Hamilton's literary life? Such an overview is timely, since in the last few years Hamilton has been recognized as a pivotal and neglected figure in the manuscript culture and artistic world of the Bluestockings. Moyra Haslett recognizes that she played a crucial role in the dissemination of Hannah More's poem *Conversation: or, the Bas Bleu* (Haslett 2010). Madeleine Pelling notes that Hamilton was a frequent participant in antiquarian

historiography and that she catalogued and described the collections of her eminent friends (Pelling 2018, 2020). Nataliia Voloshkova includes Hamilton in her recent survey of Bluestocking engagements with travel writing (Voloshkova 2021) and examines her relationships with Horace Walpole (1717–1797), Mary Delany (1700–1788), and others in standalone articles (Voloshkova 2017, 2023, this issue). Such snapshots hint at important relationships between Hamilton's reading, her writing, and her social practice. However, in addressing Hamilton's treatments of specific genres, media, or texts in isolation, these scholars impose arbitrary distinctions between interconnected practices. Deploying a different methodology enabled by the creation of a digital edition of Hamilton's archive, we hoped to place her centre stage as reader in a holistic fashion.

Taking as our data sample the letters and diaries dating between 22 June 1783 and 20 June 1784 (see below for our rationale in selecting this year), we identified 552 distinct reading experiences (also defined below) for which Mary Hamilton is the agent. We then captured detailed information about the circumstances of each reading experience and analysed our results, hoping to establish where, when, who, what, how, and why Hamilton read. As well as considering methodological issues pertinent to all scholars of eighteenth-century literature and the digital humanities, our findings make significant contributions to the bodies of scholarship available on Mary Hamilton herself, Bluestocking literary sociability, and eighteenth-century reading practices.

Following this introduction, the article is divided into four parts. In Section 2, 'Modelling Reading Practice', we outline the principles that underpinned our research and the methodologies that shaped it, and present an original model of reading practice suitable for the task we faced. In Section 3, 'Findings: The Reading Experience', we pose questions addressing the space, time, nature, and mode of Hamilton's reading experiences between 22 June 1783 and 20 June 1784, and reveal the answers extracted from our database. In Section 4, 'Findings: The Reading Resource', we

address our findings in relation to the media, genre, authorship, and provenance of the reading resource. In 'Conclusions', we offer our summative thoughts about the project, including our so-called *unfindings* – moments of fruitful failure which, in lieu of the results we had originally sought, offered us valuable opportunities to reflect upon the limitations of life writing as source material for quantitative research into reading practices. We finish by suggesting how our experiment might inflect scholarly thought and practice within the field of interdisciplinary eighteenth-century studies.

2. Modelling Reading Practice

2.1. Critical Context

As James Raven notes, the understanding of reading remains 'the most significant and challenging dimension of the history of books' and a 'reader-centred strategy is required' to counter the 'invisibility of readers in most publishing, bookshop and even library records' (2018: 115, 123). Most scholars working in eighteenth-century studies agree that, from a historical perspective, first-hand accounts of reading can help us to understand how an activity of paramount cultural importance has been undertaken, constructed, and policed in the past, while from a literary perspective they offer scholars valuable insights into the manuscript and print lives of texts and their positions within or outside the literary canon. Yet, as Katie Halsey notes, there is no firm consensus about what sort of evidence can best help us to reach such understandings and insights (Halsey 2016: 2). Numerous studies have taken a qualitative approach to individual accounts of reading from private letters and diaries (e.g. Colclough 2007, Halsey 2012). A few, such as Markman Ellis' (2014) study of Elizabeth Montagu's reading habits using her letters dating from the 1750s, apply light quantitative analysis to a body of correspondence. Our creation of a digital edition of Mary Hamilton's archive gave us the opportunity – though taking a narrower chronological focus than Ellis – to extend his approach across a mixed-media archive

that includes different forms of life writing, and to push our scope beyond his categories of genre and co-discussant.

Like many other digital editions of manuscript material, *The Mary Hamilton Papers* were transcribed in XML files which conform to a Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) schema. One advantage of encoding the text in this way is that it can be 'tagged' with metadata, enabling digital capabilities such as data mining and relational analysis. As Simon Burrows and Glenn Roe suggest, such approaches can unlock exciting possibilities in relation to the interdisciplinary study of the eighteenth century: 'computational methods can fundamentally transform our ability to answer some of the "big questions" that drive humanities research, allowing us to see patterns and relationships that were hitherto hard to discern' (Burrows and Roe 2020: n.p.). Nonetheless, as Justin Tonra (2021) remarks, amidst recent scholarship exploring 'porous' borders between the fields of eighteenth-century book history and the digital humanities, digital editions of correspondence – and of life writing in general – have been under-utilized. We find such a gap reflected in the valuable recent special issue of the *Huntington Library Quarterly* addressing women in book history (Schellenberg and Levy 2021). In this volume, eighteenth-century and twenty-first-century cataloguing, publishing, and excerpting practices are subjected to quantitative analysis, while evidence from letters and diaries comes under qualitative scrutiny. But our specific combination – eighteenth-century life writing plus quantitative analysis – goes unrepresented. In the planning phase of our project we therefore pondered how we might bring such source materials and methods together to create new knowledge about eighteenth-century reading practices.

By tagging reading experiences as we transcribed Hamilton's letters and diaries, we could import them into a database before manually entering key information about

each experience according to a specified set of categories.[1] Our aims were to capture a range of data about reading practices in the archive, and to then ask questions of that data about where, when, who, what, how, and why Hamilton and her circles read. But there were decisions to be made, first, concerning scoping and definition.

2.2. Scoping the Research

Due to the volume of manuscript material and the density of reading within Hamilton's bookish life writing, we were not able to include in our database all the reading experiences in the archive. We therefore decided, like Ellis (2014), to demarcate a chronological period during which Hamilton produced an amount of manuscript life writing that was appropriate to our project's timescale, and to use the material from that period as our evidence base.

The years 1782–1785, when Hamilton was resident in a house-share arrangement with two friends in Clarges Street, were appealing for three reasons. First, a uniquely large amount of manuscript material was extant from that period.[2] Second, this material spans several different media in Hamilton's hand – diaries, letters, and

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[1] This database was created to our specification by Michael Falk, Community Technical Adviser at Heurist Network <https://heuristnetwork.org/> [accessed 31 July 2024]. We are grateful to Michael Falk and Ian Johnson for their labour and support.

[2] *The Mary Hamilton Papers* is not consistent in the chronological distribution of material, in that fifteen of Hamilton's seventeen extant diaries date from the early 1780s, making it by far the best-evidenced period of her life. Neither is it consistent in its spread of correspondence by author: the extant letters written to Mary Hamilton significantly outnumber the extant letters by her. For a description of the digital edition, see Denison, Yáñez-Bouza and Oudesluijs (2024), as well as the Introduction article to this special issue by Coulombeau, Yáñez-Bouza and Denison.

manuscript books – which we hoped would enable a richness of analysis unavailable to previous studies of individual reading habits. Third, as noted by David Denison and Tino Oudesluijs in their contribution to this special issue, the 'Clarges period' of Hamilton's life is particularly sociable (even hectic – Denison and Oudesluijs count 251 distinct 'nodes' in their first draft of a network map for this period). It was a bonus for us, as scholars of Bluestocking culture, that this was also the period in which Hamilton's friendships with figures including Frances Burney (1752–1840), Hannah More (1745–1843), Elizabeth Carter (1717–1806), and Mary Delany, were most active and well-evidenced.

We eventually selected the year 22 June 1783 – 20 June 1784 as our period of analysis. At the time of writing this article (October 2024), the corpus of life writing dating from this period includes nine diaries (HAM/2/3 – HAM/2/10), seven letters written from Hamilton, and 159 letters written to her: these were the documents from which we would extract our 552 reading experiences. The detail and granularity of Hamilton's diary entries, and the fact that we had an unbroken run of diaries for this period, were particularly important in building a detailed, reliable picture of her reading habits (they ultimately supplied more than 98% of the reading experiences for which she is the agent). Overall, we had over a thousand pages of manuscript life writing dating from this period to comb for evidence about Mary Hamilton's reading.[3]

Our next step was to model a reading practice, for which we turned to conceptual modelling practices outside the field of eighteenth-century studies, specifically the

[3] We excluded from scope the small amount of archival material written in a language other than English. We also excluded Hamilton's six manuscript books, since, among other reasons, their contents were often very difficult to date (for an overview see Coulombeau in preparation). Throughout this article, we frequently quote individual diaries or letters which fall outside our chronological scope where doing so can embellish or contextualize our findings.

attempt of the *Reading Europe Advanced Data Investigation Tool* (*READ-IT*) to produce 'a shared "language" for the formalisation of the phenomenon of reading to be used in the production of computable research data' (Antonini and others 2021: Section 1).[4] In 'focus[ing] on the reader's experience as a whole with the aim to support the integration of results concerning the different facets of the reading phenomenon' (Antonini and others 2021: Section 2), the *READ-IT* project seemed to provide a likely blueprint for our database design. There was much to admire, and to emulate, in the 'ontology of reading experience' produced by this team, here plotted in Figure 1.[5] It was particularly helpful for us to see the Reading Agent, the Reading Resource, and the Reading Process structured as three distinct fields which could then be parsed for more detailed information.

[4] We also examined the Reading Experience Database (*RED*, <https://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/reading/UK/> [accessed 31 July 2024]). Conversations with members of the project team at *READ-IT* who had also been involved with the *RED* revealed that similar models of reading practice underpinned both projects; it therefore made sense for us to focus on the more recent iteration.

[5] Drawn from <https://github.com/eureadit/reading-experience-ontology/blob/master/mindmap.pdf>[accessed 31 July 2024].

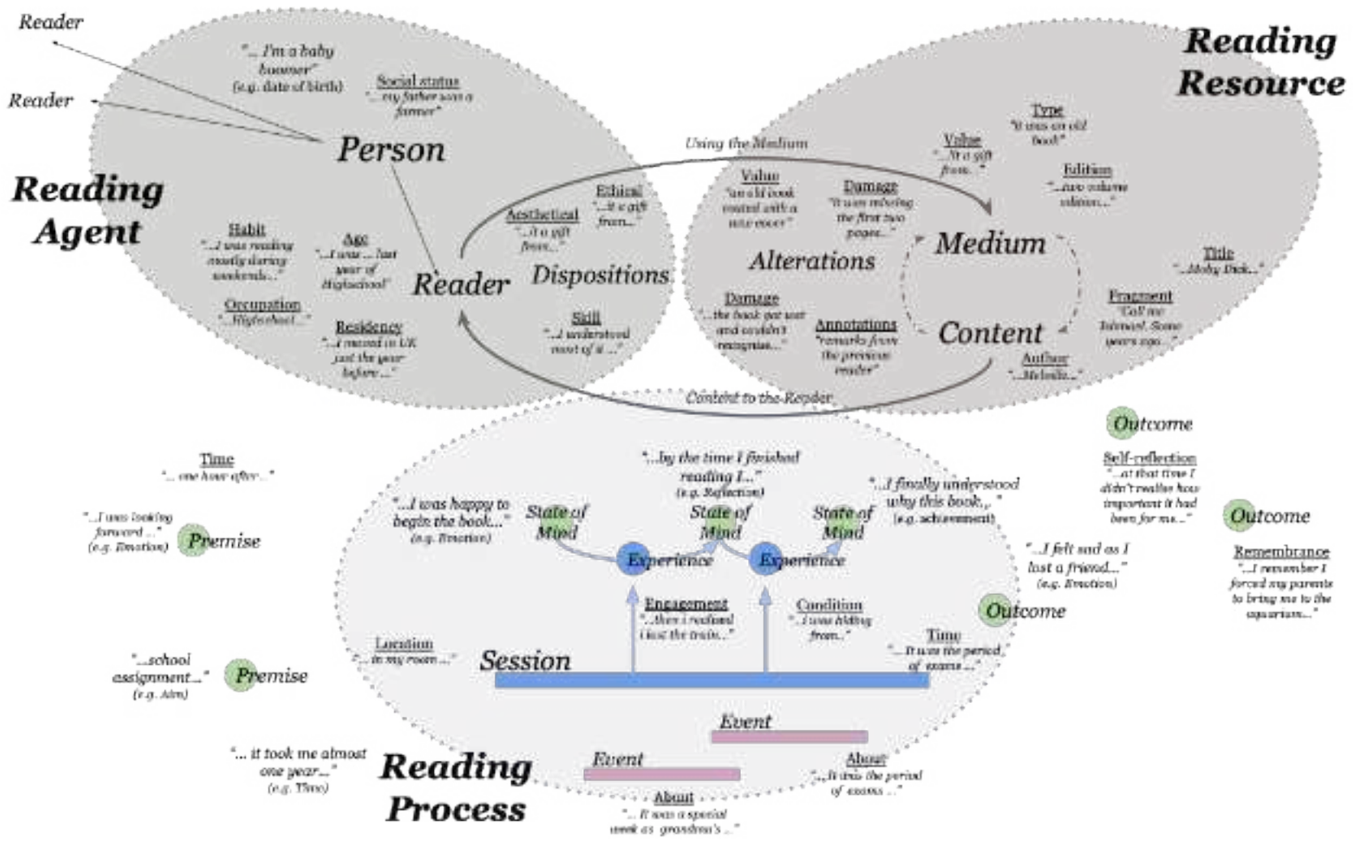

FIG. 1. Visualization of *READ-IT*'s Reading Experience Ontology.

However, this ontology was too general for us to use wholesale. Its central virtue – applicability to any reading experience in any region or period – also limited its value for our project. Ultimately, we developed our own model of reading practice which drew on the *READ-IT* ontology in formal terms but was shaped by the opportunities, and limitations, of the Hamilton archive itself, and spoke to important debates in eighteenth-century studies. We developed the following definitions for our four key data types:

1. **Reading Experience:** The engagement – whether material, aural, or imaginative – of a *reading agent* with a specific *reading resource*, reported within a letter or diary.
2. **Reading Agent:** The person whose *reading experience* (that is, their material, aural, or imaginative engagement with the *reading resource*) is foregrounded within the account.
3. **Reading Resource:** The textual object of the *reading agent*'s *reading experience*.

4. **Reading Effect:** The *reading effect* encompasses some of the ways in which the *reading agent* (a) receives and (b) responds to the *reading resource*.

Establishing these definitions involved controversial decisions. Take the requirement that a reading experience must include 'engagement – whether material, aural, or imaginative – with a specific reading resource'. While this definition enabled us to include Hamilton's discussions of a named text (we define these as imaginative reading experiences), it excluded similar conversations naming only an author. This meant that a lot of interesting literary gossip fell outside scope. Our reasoning was this: Hamilton knew so many of her most-read authors in person (see Denison and Oudesluijs this issue) that including every reference to them would have rendered the database unmanageable. As literary scholars, alert to the cadences of Hamilton's registers, we thought it would be easy to distinguish between mentions of figures such as Hannah More and Elizabeth Carter (who appear as both close network neighbours in Denison and Oudesluijs' analysis, and as frequently-read authors in our own) in their distinct social or literary capacities. As budding digital humanists reliant on precise definitions, however, we found it impossible. We therefore erred on the side of narrow definition, with this decision and many others.

Another tricky example involved manuscript correspondence. It quickly became apparent that, of the dozens or even hundreds of texts that crossed Hamilton's eyeline on a daily basis, the vast majority were notes and letters, to which she often refers briefly and implicitly. Should all such transactions – including sending and receiving, where no explicit confirmation is provided that the text was processed – count as 'reading'? In other words, is *any* interaction with a text, even the briefest of glimpses or touches – a 'reading experience'? We decided that if Hamilton explicitly mentions 'read[ing]' the text (or uses synonyms which frequently feature in her lexicon, such as 'look'd over' (HAM/2/4: 9), 'was deep in' (HAM/2/10: 37), or 'shew'd me' (HAM/2/9: 4), or comments on the text's content, then the interaction qualified. If not, it was outside

our scope. Again, we grudgingly prioritized feasibility and precision over including content that would have enriched our evidence base.

After wrangling over definitions, we were ready to design (see Figure 2). We used the four definitions outlined above as record types to create the structure of our database. Each record type was internally structured to allow the recording of detailed data, where Hamilton or one of her correspondents provides it, in sub-fields.

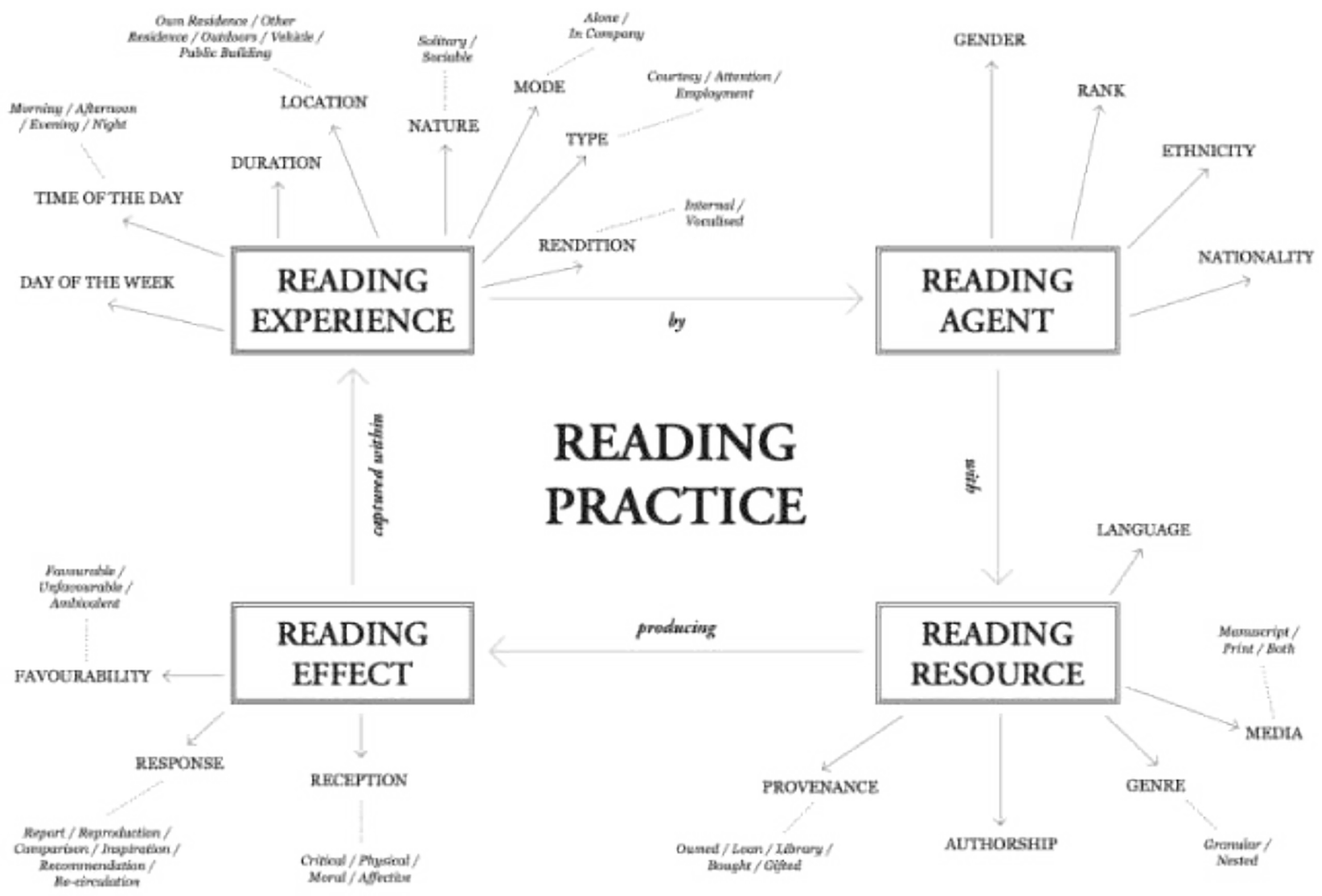

FIG. 2. Visualization of our Reading Practices Database. Designed by Sophie Coulombeau and Rich Hardiman.

3. Findings: The Reading Experience

3.1. Space

The 'spatial turn' has left its mark on scholarship addressing eighteenth-century reading practices. Abigail Williams remarks that while 'the schoolroom, the parish church, the tavern, the coffee-house, and the university all provided important locations

for reading aloud', the home was 'a space distinct in itself, a place that was both public and private, a site of intimacy and also of social display' (Williams 2017: 5). We were therefore interested to see how Hamilton's reading intersected with her negotiation of space. We found that the vast majority of reading practices, where a location is specified or can be reliably inferred, was undertaken within either her own residence (47%) or that of an acquaintance (50%). She occasionally reads outdoors during the summer months (3%). She seldom reads in a public building (1%) or a vehicle (1%). Williams is right, then, to underline the importance of the home as the reading location *par excellence* and to emphasize that this location did not exclude the possibility of public performance or sociable interaction; quite the opposite. Hamilton's gender is surely a factor here, since as an elite woman she did not have access to 'the schoolroom [...] the tavern, the coffee-house, and the university' (and her acquaintance with the church, addressed below, is surprisingly minimal too). There is also an important relationship between Hamilton's socio-economic status and the fact that she reads more at the home of an acquaintance than in her own residence. Hamilton spends much of this year staying at the homes of wealthier friends with well-furnished private libraries: Charlotte Boyle-Walsingham (1738–1790) at Thames Ditton; the Duchess of Portland (1715–1785) at Bulstrode; Lord and Lady Stormont (1727–1796, 1758–1843) at Wandsworth Hill; and Lord and Lady Wake (1742–1785, *c*. 1744–1823) in Essex. We explore this further in Section 4.4, where we highlight the crucial role played by private loans and libraries in Hamilton's reading ecosystem.

3.2. Time

Much scholarship around reading practices addresses the relationship between temporality and textuality. Benedict Anderson's seismic study of nationalist consciousness hinges on a theoretical daily simultaneity of leisured reading practice (Anderson 2016: 30), against which Christina Lupton argues that time spent with books during this period is rather 'defined [by readers] as fragile, hard to come by, and

good to hope for [...]', and that eighteenth-century reading 'involves irregular, stolen and anticipated moments as often as it does routine or synchronized or profitable ones' (Lupton 2018: 8). Relatedly, Williams draws attention to the fact that many readers pursued 'several and simultaneous' practices of 'skipping and browsing', rather than 'dedication to a single text over a long period of time' (Williams 2017: 73). Curious about whether Hamilton's experience would validate or disprove any of these proposed norms, we looked for information about the distribution of her reading across calendar and clock time, as well as the duration of her reading sessions.

3.2.1. Day of the week and religious devotion

Hamilton's reading experiences were distributed relatively evenly across the seven-day week, with Sunday the most popular day for Hamilton to record a reading experience (about one fifth of the total), and Monday seeing the fewest (closer to one tenth). These discrepancies are relatively small, since Hamilton's leisure activity was not subjected to the constraints of the working week: a much more significant factor in the life of a labouring-class or middling reader.

The most interesting implications of this distribution concern the relationship between reading and religious devotion. Hamilton only records reading religious material twenty times over the entire year. These readings often took place on a Sunday, as an alternative – not a supplement – to attending church. On one occasion Hamilton records, 'I could not go to Church therefore read y^{e}. Service of y^{e}. day' (HAM/2/8: 94), while on another she notes, 'Intended to have gone to Church wth. A[nna] Maria but as Betty was to dress us both – I was not ready when M^{r}. G[lover]. Coach came – read y^{e}. Service of y^{e}. day &c. in my own room' (HAM/2/9: 22).

Moreover, across the dataset, religious material is far from the dominant genre read by Hamilton on a Sunday. We encountered 102 reading experiences taking place on Sunday, with genre specified in sixty-six cases. Of these, only twelve (18%) involved 'Sermon' or 'Prayer', and none included 'Psalm', 'Missal', or 'Chapter [biblical]'. Other

texts which Hamilton chose to read on Sunday include Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie* (HAM/2/9: 2), Horace Walpole's *Anecdotes* (HAM/2/3/1: 25–26), and John Milton's 'Minor Poems' (HAM/2/8: 21). Such findings suggest that Hamilton – and her co-readers – did not exclusively reserve the Sabbath for spiritual replenishment, at least in terms of their reading material.

As a young Anglican woman, Hamilton's piety was a core element of the respectable identity that she sought to uphold. To her fiancé John Dickenson (1757–1842) she cites Hugh Blair's reflections on the 'Union of Piety & Morality' as reflective of her own 'opinions&tastes' (HAM/2/15/3: 12–13). She also records in one of her journals – in a rather self-conscious declaration possibly intended for somebody else's eyes – that she 'always' reads the *New Whole Duty of Man* 'Morning & Eve^{g}.' (HAM/2/9: 70). This might have been the case, but we found no evidence to support it within the archive. As one of us argues elsewhere, there is often a significant discrepancy between the image Hamilton presented to a particular correspondent and the empirical evidence reflected in herdiaries (see Coulombeau this issue). Her scriptural engagement is no exception.

3.2.2. Clock time and consumption

Like other eighteenth-century diaries, Hamilton's can 'yield […] clues to the texture of time in her culture' (Sherman 1996: 25). While she occasionally pegs her reading to clock time – for example, 'Miss Clarke came at 1 o'Clock and sat wth. me an hour ~~or two~~. read y^{e}. Papers & chatted' (HAM/2/9: 6) – this is too rare to reliably capture the length of the average reading experience. Neither does Hamilton always use the vocabulary of 'morning', 'afternoon', 'evening', and 'night' to locate her reading experiences. More frequently, she tends to position her reading sessions in relation to daily rituals of personal care and maintenance: rising, eating breakfast, having her hair dressed, eating dinner, eating supper, and retiring to bed.

Where a time can be accurately pinpointed, Hamilton's reading practices are distributed evenly across the waking day. Almost a quarter are conducted during the period we called the 'morning' (from rising around 8am until 12 noon, *c*. four hours), with just over a quarter carried out in what we have designated the 'afternoon' (12 noon until dinner around 5pm, *c*. five hours). The 'evening' slot (dinner to bedtime, about 5pm to midnight, *c*. seven hours) is comfortably Hamilton's favoured time slot for reading, with almost two fifths of her reading practices clustered here: however, the relative length of this period means it is no denser in reading practices than morning or afternoon. Perhaps for obvious reasons, 'night' (between retiring and rising) is the favoured slot for just 8% of Hamilton's reading sessions. Reading in bed, however, was not unusual: on one occasion she tells John Dickenson that she 'lay reading in bed till near ten o'Clock', HAM/2/15/3: 53), and on another, when she suffers from inflammation in her eyes, her housemate Anna Maria Clarke and physician Mr Churchill 'preach'd to me ab^{t}. sitting up late to read & write' (HAM/2/14: 35).

3.2.3. Duration and attention

We initially hoped to measure the average duration of Hamilton's reading experiences, thus providing valuable evidence relating to Lupton's (2018) theory about 'stolen moments'. But although we occasionally found the precise duration of a reading session specified – for example, 'Lady Wake read for an hour to me in ~~Bliks~~Blairs Essays in y^{e} Belles Lettres' (HAM/2/4: 25) – this was rare. We therefore turned to a different methodology. Perusing Hamilton's archive, we had become familiar with the distinctive phraseology she uses in relation to reading. We made loose attempts to taxonomize these quirks of phrase and to quantify how often they occurred. Two features of Hamilton's phraseology seem pertinent to Lupton's thesis.

First, Hamilton often relates her reading to notions of time, labour, and value, as in 'employ'd myself in reading' (HAM/2/4: 20), 'sat up reading' (HAM/2/3/2: 10), 'fill'd up the morning wth. reading' (HAM/2/10: 34). We call this *Reading as employment*. Of 552

reading experiences recorded for Mary Hamilton, the language used in 118 – more than a fifth of the total – suggest *Reading as employment* by relating reading to the wider temporal ecosystem of the day and the expenditure of Hamilton's own personal energies. Of course, this is partly a convention of the diurnal genre, two principal motivations for the keeping of which were anxiety about wasting time and determination to document it in order to avoid such a temptation (Sherman 1996: 188). But the relative prevalence in Hamilton's phraseology of an association between reading, time, and value also dovetails broadly with Lupton's argument that the relationship between temporality and textuality was as anxious, and fraught with value judgments, for eighteenth-century readers as for those of our own era.

Second, we found that Hamilton occasionally characterizes engagement with a text relative to the level of attention she was able to exercise (12%, sixty-six reading experiences). We called this *Reading as (in)attention*, and, within this category, we distinguished *perfunctory* reading from *immersive* reading. These two subcategories we understood as diametrically opposed: 'casting my Eye over' (HAM/2/10: 82) is an example of perfunctory reading, 'was deep in' (HAM/2/10: 37) would indicate immersive reading. Of the sixty-six reading experiences where a level of attention was specified, Hamilton describes fifty-six (85%) in such a way that we labelled them perfunctory, whereas she describes only ten (15%) in such a way that we characterized them as immersive. Though the numbers at stake are small, this seems a tentative vindication of both Lupton's thesis that 'stolen moments' were more common for eighteenth-century readers than marathon reading sessions, and Williams' theory that 'skipping and browsing' was a common mode of reading.

3.3. Nature and Mode

From the where and when of Hamilton's reading experiences, we now move to the how. Inspired by Williams' characterization of eighteenth-century reading as communal and sociable (Williams 2017: 6–7), we wanted to capture information about how

Hamilton read, according to two criteria called Nature and Mode. Nature refers to the number of readers involved in the reading experience: thus *solitary* vs. *sociable*. Mode is related to nature, but not identical; it captures whether the text is read *alone* or *in company*. Sometimes Hamilton specifies that a text is read aloud by one person for the benefit of several listeners, and this permits us to categorize the experience as *sociable* and *in company*. Other times, she might note that three readers sitting together read three different texts: in this case, we categorized each experience as *solitary* and *in company*.

Where a nature was specified, 44% of Hamilton's reading experiences were solitary and 56% were sociable. Where a mode was specified, 32% of her reading experiences were carried out alone, and the remaining 68% were undertaken in company. When she read in company, 92% of her reading experiences were sociable and 8% were solitary. Reading within Hamilton's circles, then, was an activity that took place both across private and public domains, both as a shared activity and a solitary pleasure. However, we found a modest but reliable skew towards sociable contexts and readings: another endorsement of Williams' (2017) thesis.

The findings outlined in this section suggest that qualitative and quantitative methods of assessing eighteenth-century reading practices based on life writing yield remarkably similar results. Lupton and Williams paint pictures of communal, sociable, polite reading, understood as a productive and improving way to spend leisure time and carried out in desultory bursts within the semi-public arena of the 'home'; and this is precisely what we find Mary Hamilton doing in 1783–1784. This may be pleasing not only for the scholars whose arguments are echoed by our findings, but also for those who, like Da, argue that applying quantitative analysis to literary texts generally serves only to tell us what we already knew. We should therefore highlight that, in the process of confirming such commonplaces, the database also yielded findings which, though incidental, were both new and valuable. Take, for example, Hamilton's dubious relationship with devotional reading. Finding that Sunday was the day upon which she

read the most prompted us to cross-check what the character of that reading was, and to compare our results with the image of her reading diet that she sought to project to others. We found significant differences between Hamilton's self-presentation as a pious reader and her privately documented secular practices. This, in turn, prompted one of us to find out if a similar gulf existed in relation to Hamilton's reading of the work of Frances Burney, the results of which provided a possible answer to a longstanding mystery about the relationship between the two women (see Coulombeau this issue). More broadly, establishing such a gap between presentation and practice, using evidence acquired through both qualitative and quantitative means, reminds us to view self-conscious first-hand accounts of reading practice with the scepticism they merit (Halsey 2012: 93–94).

4. Findings: The Reading Resource

This section outlines our findings pertaining to the Reading Resource: media (Section 4.1), genre (Section 4.2), authorship (Section 4.3), and provenance (Section 4.4).

4.1. Media

Several scholars have recently suggested that it is a mistake to characterize the late eighteenth century as predominantly an age of print.[6] Schellenberg and Levy call for 'an inclusive approach [within the field of book history] to modes of textual production' which recognizes the continued importance of manuscript circulation: they suggest that new theoretical models and methods may be best suited to exploring such a thing, 'especially those enabled by digital tools' (Schellenberg and Levy 2021: 1). We hoped

[6] See, for example, Schellenberg (2016), Friedman (2021), Schellenberg and Levy (2021).

to discover whether their contention that a flourishing scribal literary culture co-existed with print culture held true when we crunched the numbers for Hamilton's reading experiences during the early 1780s.

The answer was a resounding affirmative. Where a medium was stated or could be inferred, 55% of Hamilton's reading experiences involved manuscript, whereas 45% involved print (226 and 183, respectively). This majority is worthy of note in itself, but a methodological caveat makes the finding more resonant. As explained in Section 2.2, we excluded from our definition of a 'reading experience' any instance of Hamilton sending or receiving correspondence which does not explicitly mention, or lend itself to a very clear inference of, digesting the contents. This means that all such occurrences of such contact with correspondence (and there are probably hundreds of them in our corpus) went untagged and did not contribute towards this 55%–45% split.

When contemplating the merits and deficiencies of this finding, it seemed to us that our digital quantitative approach to the source material had served two functions. First, it had enabled us to establish that Hamilton read more frequently in manuscript than in print. And second, it had drawn our attention back to the technicalities of our own scoping process, obliging us to acknowledge the ways in which the definitions we had created had impacted the data we were now gleaning. In this case, our initial decision to exclude the sending and receiving of manuscript correspondence where reading could not be established beyond doubt (see Section 2.2) had worked, later in our process, to reduce the appearance of manuscript's dominance over print. Had we chosen differently, and included all those obliquely mentioned notes and letters, the number of reading experiences involving manuscript would almost certainly have overwhelmed the number of reading experiences involving print. It seemed to us that we were looking at the tip of an iceberg: unable to measure the full extent of the mass under the water, but now at least alert to its existence.

4.2. Genre

The slippery question of literary genre has long been a central preoccupation of historical scholarship around reading practices; computational analysis forces its difficulties to the fore. In Burrows' words, '[t]he systems of categorization that we adopt will both empower and limit the sorts of questions we can ask of our data' (2018: n.p.). The first question facing a researcher is: Do you want to label your reading resources according to (a) an established twenty-first-century taxonomy with which the reader of your scholarship will probably be familiar, or (b) an established eighteenth-century taxonomy of genre, more familiar to your reading agent themself? *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (*ECCO*) takes the first approach, producing a simple seven-part taxonomy of 'subject areas', also used across the *English Short-Title Catalogue* (*ESTC*).[7] Burrows' project *Mapping the Enlightenment* takes the latter approach, using 'the standard tree system used by eighteenth-century booksellers and library cataloguers' (2018: n.p.).

The advantages of using a modern taxonomy are twofold. First, usability: a taxonomy like that used by *ECCO* and *ESTC* is instinctively recognizable to the modern reader. Second, efficiency in terms of labour: if one allocates *ESTC* numbers to resources as one enters them into the database, it is easy to query the data to get a rough 'subject area' split. But this option also has significant downsides. On the one hand, there is the opacity of the modern genre taxonomy. In Burrows' words, 'we risk imposing twenty-first-century concepts of knowledge onto an eighteenth-century corpus of texts, and thereby missing key intellectual currents, experiences and

[7] These are: 'History and Geography', 'Social Science and Fine Arts', 'Medicine, Science and Technology', 'Literature and Language', 'Religion and Philosophy', 'Law', and 'Reference' (*Eighteenth Century Collections Online Fact Sheet*). Stephen Gregg (2020: 20–21) notes that these categories are a legacy of Robin Alston's cataloguing practices in preparing the *Eighteenth-Century Short-Title Catalogue* (later, *English Short-Title Catalogue*, *ESTC*) for microfilming.

relationships that shaped *ancien régime* culture and thinking' (2018: n.p.). On the other, since it only addresses print material, such a taxonomy ignores manuscript culture – which, as we show in Section 4.1, dominates Hamilton's reading diet. Using an eighteenth-century genre taxonomy deployed by librarians or booksellers might evade the first of these problems, but it too disregards the manuscript culture accounting for well over half Hamilton's reading. In order to incorporate manuscript culture into our investigation, therefore, we invented our own two-stage process of genre taxonomy.

4.2.1. Stage 1: Granular taxonomies

To start with, we let Hamilton guide us in classifying the texts she read. Each time she used a descriptive term to characterize an identifiable reading resource, we linked that term to the resource in our database.[8] When we surveyed the results, we were struck by the granularity of Hamilton's genre vocabulary: forty-eight distinct terms were used to describe the texts she read within the corpus. As shown in Figure 3,[9] the majority of terms are distributed sparsely and evenly; all except two account for fewer than 6% of

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[8] This was a non-exclusive process: a reading resource could register several terms used to describe it at different points in the corpus. As Burrows points out, this is one limitation of such an approach: 'As different books carry different numbers of keywords, some will have more influence on statistical tables than others' (2018: n.p.). Of 368 resources in the database, forty-seven have two keywords, and six have three. This should be borne in mind when assessing our results.

[9] Obtained via <https://www.freewordcloudgenerator.com/generatewordcloud>[accessed 1 July 2024]. Several multi-word entries, where we needed to qualify the nature of a term, have been rendered as portmanteaus in order to avoid confusing the WordCloud generator; e.g. 'Manuscript book', 'Paper [Newspaper']', and 'Chapter [biblical]'. Terms used to describe other people's reading material in the corpus (but not Hamilton's)

usages where a genre is specified. Those two exceptions are ‘Letter(s)’ (accounting for a massive 38%) and ‘Manuscript’ (17%, though ‘Manuscript book’ accounts for a further 5%).

FIG. 3. Wordcloud of forty-eight terms used by Mary Hamilton to characterize her reading material.

4.2.2. Stage 2: Nested taxonomies

One downside of the granular taxonomy, of course, is that it makes it hard to see the wood for the trees. We therefore experimented with ‘nesting’ some of Hamilton’s terms to create modern, recognizable categories. We started with the broad basics: prose,

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were: ‘Comedy’, ‘Eclogue’, ‘Epigram’, ‘Inscription’, ‘Journal’, ‘Novella’, ‘Pamphlet’, ‘Pastoral’, ‘Psalm’, ‘Review’, ‘Romance’, ‘Scripture’, ‘Song’, ‘Tale’, ‘Tour’, ‘Tragedy’, and ‘Treatise’.

poetry, and drama. Table 1 shows how we ‘nested’ granular genres into these broader categories.[10]

Table 1. Nested results for Prose / Poetry / Drama in Mary Hamilton’s reading diet.

Granular	Nested	Count	% of MH’s reading experiences with known genre (N=417)
Account + Almanack + Anecdote + Answer + Article + Catalogue + Chapter [biblical] + Character + Criticism + Description + Diary + Epistle + Essay + History + Lecture(s) + Letter(s) + Life + Memoir + Missal + Narrative + Note + Novel + Paper [Newspaper] + Parable + Prayer + Remark + Sermon + Story + Theme + Travels	Prose	319	76.5%
Ballad + Canto + Ode + Poem + Verse	Poetry	52	12.5%
Play	Drama	10	2%

[10] In Table 1, 417 is the number of reading experiences out of the 552 total instances in the database. Prose, poetry, and drama add to 381 experiences; the remaining thirty-six (9%) pertain to other ways of understanding the reading resource, namely ‘Book’, ‘Line’, ‘Manuscript’, ‘Manuscript book’, ‘Piece’, ‘Print’, ‘Translation’, and ‘Work’.

Subject to the limitations of such an approach (such as the subjectivity of our 'nested' combinations), we can pull out some interesting findings. More than three-quarters of Hamilton's reading is prose, compared to only 12% poetry and 2% drama. It is then possible to drill further down into the data by re-nesting (see Table 2). If we take all the granular entries under 'Prose', and re-nest them according to our perception of each genre's fictionality (double-checking the resource where a term, e.g. 'Narrative', strikes us as ambiguous), we see that fiction makes up a very small proportion of the prose total: non-fiction is much more prominent.

Table 2. Nested results for 'Prose' in Mary Hamilton's reading diet.

Granular	Nested	Count	% of MH's reading experiences (N=319, 77%)
Account + Almanack + Anecdote + Answer + Article + Catalogue + Chapter [biblical] + Character + Criticism + Description + Diary + Epistle + Essay + History + Lecture(s) + Letter(s) + Life + Memoir + Missal + Narrative + Note + Paper [Newspaper] + Parable + Prayer + Remark + Sermon + Theme + Travels	Prose non-fiction	308	74%
Novel + Story	Prose fiction	11	3%

What if we drill down even further into the enormous category of prose non-fiction? Here we start to see some really interesting results (Table 3). Life writing (Diary + Letter(s) + Life + Memoir + Travels) puts in a strong showing with 174 entries, while

Religious works (Chapter [biblical] + Missal + Parable + Prayer + Sermon) makes almost as paltry a figure (twenty) as prose fiction (eleven).

Table 3. Nested results for ‘Prose non-fiction’ in Mary Hamilton’s reading diet.

Granular	Count	% of MH’s reading experiences (N=308, 74%)
Life writing: Diary + Letter(s) + Life + Memoir + Travels	174	56.5%
Religious reading: Chapter [biblical] + Missal + Parable + Prayer + Sermon	20	6.5%
Other prose: Account + Almanack + Anecdote + Answer + Article + Catalogue + Character + Criticism + Description + Epistle + Essay + History + Lecture(s) + Narrative + Note + Paper [Newspaper] + Remark + Theme	114	37%

As Jennie Batchelor argues, studying the genres widely read during the eighteenth century, rather than those deemed aesthetically innovative by modern critics, can ‘powerfully disrupt our sense of literary history’ (Batchelor 2022: 47). Hamilton was not, as the authors of contemporary conduct books feared, poring over sentimental novels; but neither was she devoutly pursuing the course of scriptural reading and moral strictures that they favoured (and which, as we show in Section 3.2.1, she sometimes claimed to favour too). Rather, she was intensely interested in textual manifestations of lived reality, both past and present: what we now call ‘life writing’. Some of the people whose lives were of interest to her are the subject of the next section.

4.3. Authorship

Previous attempts to reconstruct eighteenth-century literary culture on the basis of empirical evidence have generally required that a text appears in print before it becomes eligible for recovery. Whether counting print runs and editions (Garside, Raven and Schöwerling 2000, St. Clair 2004) or borrowings of circulating libraries' holdings (*Books and Borrowing*), such studies effectively disenfranchise manuscript text as a subject of enquiry. Manuscript culture tends to veer clear of economic record-keeping. It thus withholds itself largely from data-driven recovery, leaving the field clear for print to dominate the picture.[11] By taking a reader-centred approach, however, our project was able to encompass manuscript culture – and the writers who worked exclusively within the manuscript media – within its scope.

It was not possible, for several reasons, to ascertain proportionate authorship characteristics for Hamilton's entire reading diet.[12] But, by looking at all 343 reading experiences where the author of the reading resource is specified and ranking Hamilton's top twenty authors in order of frequency, we hoped to capture a snapshot of key characteristics relating to the authors whose works were most frequently in her hands and her thoughts (Figure 4 and Table 4).

[11] For an interesting exception, see the database-in-progress described in Friedman (2021).

[12] These reasons include texts published anonymously, texts for which Hamilton does not specify an author, and the fact that complex weighting would be required to account for the frequencies with which texts were read.

FIG. 4. Wordcloud showing the twenty authors most frequently represented in reading experiences where Mary Hamilton is the reading agent.

Table 4. The twenty authors most frequently represented in reading experiences where Mary Hamilton is the reading agent and the author is known (N=202 out of 343).

	Author	Counting of reading experiences	% of reading experiences with a known author	Gender	Living or dead	Personal acquaintance?
1	Mary Delany	44	12.8%	female	living	yes
2	Hugh Blair	21	6.1%	male	living	no
3	Hannah More	19	5.5%	female	living	yes
4	Mary Hamilton	18	5.2%	female	living	yes
5	Frances Burney	9	2.6%	female	living	yes
6	Jean-Jacques Rousseau	8	2.3%	male	dead	no
7	Ann Litchfield	8	2.3%	female	living	yes

8	George Dodington, 1st Baron Melcombe	7	2%	male	dead	no
9	Horace Walpole	7	2%	male	living	yes
10	Alexander Pope	7	2%	male	dead	no
11	Mary Wake	7	2%	female	living	yes
12	Margaret Bentick, Duchess of Portland	6	1.8%	female	living	yes
13	Catherine Douglas	6	1.8%	female	dead	yes
14	James Bourdieu	6	1.8%	male	living	yes
15	Matthew Prior	6	1.8%	male	dead	no
16	John Milton	5	1.5%	male	dead	no
17	Edward Young	5	1.5%	male	dead	no
18	Catherine Hamilton	5	1.5%	female	dead	yes
19	Anna Maria Clarke	4	1.2%	female	living	yes
20	Court Dewes	4	1.2%	male	living	yes

Hamilton’s reading tastes, at least by author, are wide-ranging; her reading material is the cumulative product of many different writers rather than a favourite few. By a significant margin, the author best represented, with 13% of experiences overall, is her close older friend Mary Delany,[13] an artist and courtier who, like Hamilton, was never

[13] In their contribution to this special issue, Denison and Oudesluijs find that Delany is Hamilton’s third closest network neighbour (by tie strength) during the Clarges period (which they define as December 1782–July 1785): she is only surpassed by the Clarke sisters, with whom Hamilton actually lived.

published in her lifetime. When Hamilton mentions reading Delany, she almost always means reading the letters her friend wrote, often to people other than herself. As well as fulfilling a useful practical purpose in everyday life, the letter held significant aesthetic interest for Hamilton, and she often comments on the skills of epistolary artists. It is clear that Hamilton admired Delany's epistolary style immensely.[14] She frequently petitioned to borrow and copy letters written by Delany to other correspondents so that she could transcribe, consult, enjoy, and share them at a later date. One of Hamilton's six extant manuscript books is filled entirely with transcripts of Delany's letters, and her writings feature heavily in the others too (Voloshkova 2023, Coulombeau in preparation).

Hugh Blair (1718–1800), whose *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* were published in 1783, is the most well-represented male author and published author; his work accounts for 6% of Hamilton's readings during this period. In contrast to Delany, Blair's position in the line-up largely depends on sociable readings which Hamilton conducted with Lady Wake, Charlotte Walsingham, and Anna Maria Clarke. However, Hamilton also approved the work independently: after a reading with Walsingham she remarks in her diary, 'I think Blair one of y^{e}. most elegant writers we have – he interests and persuades' (HAM/2/12: 65). Close to Blair are two women, each of whose writings account for 5% of Hamilton's reading. The first is Hannah More, whose poem *The Bas Bleu: or, Conversation* was circulating throughout the Bluestocking circle during this period and came in for many readings, both solitary and sociable (see Haslett 2010 and Section 3.3 above). The second, unexpectedly, is Mary Hamilton herself. This entry is explained by the fact that Hamilton liked to read from her own self-authored letters

[14] Hamilton also admired Elizabeth Carter's style ('her letters are quite a treasure they are so characteristic', HAM/2/10: 130) and Elizabeth Vesey's ('so much fine imagination – yet so natural & so characteristic. so entirely from y^{e}: heart', HAM/2/13: 36).

and diaries, as well as her manuscript books – for which, only on occasions when we did not know the author of the specific entry she was reading, we designated her the 'author'. After this, the differences between authors are incremental, never accounting for more than 3% of Hamilton's known reading.

With the caveat that this 'top twenty' represents only 202 of 343 reading experiences, a few broad trends jump out. Although only half the authors are female, they tend to cluster around the top of the table, meaning that we find 126 reading experiences where the author is female, compared to only seventy-six where the author is male. In 153 reading experiences the author of the text is still living, while in only forty-nine are they deceased. Perhaps most strikingly, 143 experiences involve texts written by people whom Hamilton knows personally, whereas only fifty-nine involve texts written by strangers. We can conclude, then, that the list of Hamilton's top twenty most-read authors is dominated by women, by living writers, and by personal acquaintance. Her reading diet, at least within this sample, is characterized by an interest in the female, the contemporary, and the familiar.

4.4. Provenance

It stands to reason that an agent's economic circumstances inflect the manner in which they read. An outdated assumption that wealthy eighteenth-century readers would have infinitely more variety in their reading diets than middling or labouring-class readers has been complicated by research revealing how associational culture and the rise of subscription and circulating libraries opened up access to a broader range of material for less elite readerships (Fergus 2007, Allan 2008, *Books and Borrowing*). How does Hamilton fit into this picture?

Hamilton's socio-economic status is not as straightforward as it might initially appear. She was descended from a noble family and connected by blood or marriage to the powerful Greville, Napier, and Stormont clans. As one of us argues elsewhere, her noble birth and considerable personal charms means that she was perceived by

her peers to hold significant social and cultural capital (Coulombeau this issue). However, as the only orphan of a younger brother, with no significant land or business interests to generate an income – and, of course, very few prospective ways to work for a living without irrevocably tarnishing her reputation and prospects – she had relatively little expendable income of her own. She sold some jewels immediately after leaving Court in late 1782, presumably because she needed the money (HAM/2/3/1: 6). She seems to have depended mainly on a basic income of £80 per year: the 5% interest generated from two separate settlements of £1000 and £600 left her by her father, which her uncle Frederick Hamilton (1728–1811) managed on her behalf (HAM/2/2: 78, 81; HAM/2/13: 28). She was also supposed to receive rent from a house in James Street, left her by her mother, but the tenant, a Mr Wiggins, was apparently not punctual with his payments and at one point owed six months' rent; Hamilton had to borrow money from her friend's husband John Jackson to mitigate the shortfall in her income. Eventually she enlisted help from her uncle Frederick and her friend Lord Dartrey in persuading Wiggins to cough up (HAM/2/7: 64; HAM/2/8: 17; HAM/2/10: 25; HAM/2/12: 19, 31, 67; HAM/2/13: 39; HAM/2/14: 8).

Accordingly, Hamilton had a relatively frugal lifestyle, at least compared to many of her friends and acquaintances. She was herself a tenant, living with two friends (Anna Maria and Isabella Clarke, b. 1750 and b. 1749) in a house-share arrangement in Clarges Street in order to split household expenses and service.[15] She frequently

[15] The Clarges Street house was leased from the Yorkshire clergyman Sir Richard Rycroft (d. 1786). Hamilton and her housemates were careful about inspecting the lease and querying it (HAM/2/10: 118). The three housemates shared the services of two maids and a manservant (the identities of the latter fluctuate over time, suggesting short term or informal contracts); after leaving Court in late 1782, Hamilton 'parted from' her personal maid Goodyar 'because I could no longer afford to keep a Serv^{t}. in that Stile' (HAM/2/8: 83). The living arrangement between Hamilton and the Clarke

borrowed a relative or friend's carriage, having none of her own (e.g. HAM/2/2: 84, HAM/2/9: 7), and occasionally hired a chair, though she tried to avoid this expense where possible (HAM/2/10: 63, HAM/2/13: 1). She relied on wealthy friends for tickets to theatrical and musical entertainments (HAM/2/9: 21; HAM/2/10: 57, 109), and worried about expense when she was obliged to have a new dress made for an engagement at Carlton House.[16] Inevitably, this shaped her relationship to reading. For example, she laments her inability to buy books: upon being shown 'a curious&interesting work' by Mrs Walsingham, costing 'unbound a guinea & half', Hamilton notes: 'I s^{ld}. like to buy it but my pocket money wont allow of such indulgencies' (HAM/2/10: 21).[17] As such, we find Hamilton dependent, for her reading material, on a loan economy. Of her reading experiences where the provenance of the reading resource is noted (184), almost 80% (147) are borrowed from a personal acquaintance, 17% (31) are specified as belonging to Hamilton herself, and only 3% (6) are a gift. The Duchess of Portland was a frequent lender who gave Hamilton free run

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sisters is described in detail by Frances Burney: see the letter from Burney to Hester Maria Thrale, 12 March 1784 (Sabor and others 2015–2018: vol. 1, 34).

[16] 'I have too small a fortune to enable me to bear y^{e}. expence of dress – but in a quiet moderate way' – Hamilton's cousin Lady Stormont recommended 'her Milliner' and gave Hamilton tips about the current fashions ('a Black Velvet Body') but did not go so far as to subsidize her (HAM/2/8: 57, 59). Anna Maria Clarke and Hamilton's cousin Lady Frances Harpur kindly came to the rescue: Anna Maria 'was so obliging to offer me some black velvet she had by her to save me buying some for my ball dress &c', and Lady Frances 'offer'd me some fine Buckles for y^{e}. ball w^{ch}. I accepted' (HAM/2/8: 66, 67–68).

[17] This work was Thomas Astle's *The Origin and Progress of Writing* (London: Printed for the author), 1784.

of her library at Bulstrode Park (HAM/2/6: 66, 68). Eva Maria Garrick (1724–1822) was also generous: Hamilton reports that she 'sent me the Catalogue of her late Husbands library (y^e^. one at y^e^. Adelphi) to chuse out any books I wish'd to read' (HAM/2/14: 72). But the lenders could also be friends who were less ostentatiously wealthy. In April 1784 Mrs Handcock (the dependent companion of Elizabeth Vesey, d. 1789) lent Hamilton 'a Novel call'd Henrietta' (HAM/2/9: 63), while the following month Richard Glover (1712–1785) lent her Lord Melcombe's diary 'till Monday' (HAM/2/10: 90–91). There is also evidence that Hamilton herself lent texts around: in May 1784 the teenage William Wake (1768–1846) wrote, 'I return you with many thanks the ~~Book~~Treatise you was so good as to lend me on Teeth' (HAM/1/8/8/17: 1).

Interestingly, there is not a single mention in this dataset of Hamilton borrowing a book or anything else from an institutional or commercial library.[18] Indeed, the only occurrence we have found of her doing so *within her entire archive* occurs in her earliest extant diary (1776) when, travelling on the Continent with her friends Lord and Lady Dartrey, she reports 'hired some French Books at the Book Sellers' while the party stayed in Aix-la-Chapelle (HAM/2/1: 32). However, the syntax of the surrounding text indicates that this was probably done by the adult Dartreys rather than the teenage Hamilton herself.

The complete absence of public libraries from Mary Hamilton's reading ecosystem strikes us as curious. Hamilton had a well-documented love of books and insatiable appetite for reading, which she describes as her 'most favorite amusement' (HAM/2/14: 44). She had a restricted income and, by her own admission, could not afford to indulge her literary tastes; and she lived in a city well-resourced with libraries. Why did she patronize none of them? One possibility is that subscription fees were an

[18] She used the bookseller Robert Faulder (located at 42 Bond Street) to procure her some unspecified 'Reviews', but it is likely this was a standing purchase – like a newspaper round – rather than a loan (HAM/2/3/1: 15).

expense that she could not easily bear. A more interesting reason is that she felt it was somehow inappropriate or unsavoury to use such institutions to hire reading material.

Such a hypothesis requires contextualization from the wider archive. Was Hamilton alone, among her social set, in eschewing public libraries? Several of her correspondents and friends used them; but this was rarer than we expected, and it almost always took place when the agent was travelling. On a trip to the south-west of England in 1789, for example, her then husband John Dickenson 'get[s] a book' from an unnamed Bristol circulating library, and peruses newspapers at Bull's Circulating Library in Bath (HAM/1/2/15: 2, HAM/1/2/17: 2, HAM/1/2/20: 2). Elizabeth Iremonger (1721–1760) writes from the same location around the same time, dismissing the Bristol library as 'of so very Trumpery a sort, that we subscribe to Bulls at Bath instead,&have our Books from thence' (HAM/1/8/1/3: 2). Then, of course, there is the Dartreys' aforementioned 'hire' of French books from a bookseller in Aix-la-Chapelle in 1776. It may be, therefore, that among the upper gentry and nobility such institutions were seen as useful resources when on the road, but less necessary – and perhaps, given Iremonger's snooty comment, a little vulgar – when established in one's own permanent residence.[19] Such hints, emerging as both a tone of voice in one specific letter and a loud silence in our broad dataset, suggest that, as Mark Towsey (2013) and Melanie Bigold (2021) argue, private libraries occupied a crucial place in the lives of the bookish gentry.

[19] The *Books and Borrowing* database confirms that borrowing from Scottish public libraries during this period was overwhelmingly a plebeian and male-dominated activity. Of the documented borrowers, 95% were male, and only tiny proportions register occupations that would have fitted into Hamilton's social circles (e.g. 'Gentleman' accounts for 0.37%, 'Landowner/landlord/laird' accounts for 0.47%, 'MP' accounts for 0.76%) (s.v. 'Facts&figures' <https://borrowing.stir.ac.uk/facts>[accessed 9 April 2024]).

In sum, this evidence suggests what one of us has contended elsewhere: that when eighteenth-centuryists think about books, and indeed gifting cultures more broadly, the loan as concept and practice deserves greater attention (Coulombeau 2024: 8, 70–71), especially where the agents have a keen sense of themselves as arbiters of literary taste and are socially well-connected but do not have unlimited wealth to purchase printed texts. Such loans are carried out, exclusively for Hamilton herself, within an informal, rather than an institutionalized and administrated, economy which depends on personal friendship and membership of an elite social set. Here we can only make the most perfunctory gestures towards the implications of these findings, but we hope that historians of reading may find them useful when considering provenance and circulation as shapers of eighteenth-century elite reading practices.

The findings outlined in Section 4 have consolidated the arguments of Schellenberg, Levy, and others about the importance of manuscript culture to eighteenth-century readers, but they have also drawn such hypotheses into new territory, suggesting that manuscript culture could overwhelm print in the reading diets of some readers. Our findings addressing the genre of Mary Hamilton's reading show that prose non-fiction is easily her most favoured genre, and that life writing is dominant within that category. From two different angles, then, we suggest that the manuscript letter, as well as being a practical mechanism of communication, deserves new scrutiny as an aesthetically highly estimated category of prose non-fiction read for pleasure, improvement, instruction, and knowledge of character. Hamilton's most venerated epistolary artists are almost always women, often those whose publication profiles were slender or non-existent: we would not today characterize the retired artist Mary Delany, never published during her lifetime, as an important author, but she unquestionably was one in the eyes of her young friend. We also suggest that the extent of Hamilton's reliance for reading material on an informal rather than institutionalized loan economy may also relate to the dominance of manuscript in her reading diet, encouraging us to draw connections between economic materialities and textual diets.

5. Conclusions

Having outlined our findings, we conclude by reflecting on the value of an *unfinding*. The perceptive reader may have noted that the model of reading practice illustrated in Figure 2 contains fields for which we have not reported results; for instance, language, rendition, effects, and the experiences of reading agents other than Hamilton herself. As we populated the database, we frequently encountered difficulties extracting the information we wanted from the evidence that Hamilton's archive offered. Sometimes, these moments gave us valuable opportunities to reflect upon the limitations of life writing as source material for quantitative research into reading practices; for example, inspired by Gillian Dow's (2016) research addressing the cosmopolitanism of eighteenth-century reading material, we tried to extract information about the language of Hamilton's reading, but were frustrated by her lack of specificity on this subject. Other times, they prompted us to reflect that such things as the 'effect' of a reading cannot be meaningfully taxonomized and counted, because the terms Hamilton uses to describe such effects can be interpreted in so many different ways; at these times, we found ourselves thinking of Da's 'mismatch between the statistical tools that are used and the objects to which they are applied' (Da 2019: 601).

It is important to be frank about these moments, partly because they often delivered value in unexpected ways. Sometimes, as in Section 3.3, we started out looking for one thing but found another, which directed us into a new line of enquiry or provided an answer to a different research question. Other times, as in Section 4.1, our methodology enabled us to see part of a greater whole, upon which we could not put a number but which enhanced our understanding of Hamilton's textual husbandry. Still other times, we found nothing to report but ultimately benefited from being forced to reflect upon our own assumptions, prejudices and blind spots as researchers. For example, trying to quantify the language of Hamilton's reading resources or the rendition of her reading experiences forced us to recognize that we had made

unevidenced assumptions that were not supported by the evidence within her life writing; e.g. assuming that the English language, or internalized silent reading, was Hamilton's default mode unless otherwise stated. Accordingly, we were left without a solid answer to the questions of whether Hamilton read more in French or English, or whether she might speak aloud when reading in a room by herself, but we gained new knowledge about ourselves as researchers, and about the implications of negative evidence.

This article makes five principal contributions to the field of eighteenth-century studies. First, we offer an unprecedentedly detailed insight into Mary Hamilton's reading, writing, and socializing practices during the 1780s, which will be valuable for the growing community of scholars who recognize her importance in Bluestocking circles and as a life writer and antiquarian. Second, we offer a model of a reading practice which may be useful to both scholars of eighteenth-century British literary culture and those who research more broadly across the history and sociology of reading. Third, we validate the findings of many previous scholars of eighteenth-century reading, showing that qualitative and quantitative analyses of life writing deliver broadly similar results when considering space, time, mode, nature, and media. Fourth, we break new ground in combining different methodologies to find that Hamilton's literary life was more dominated by manuscript prose authored by women, more reliant on a private loan economy, and more inflected by personal acquaintance than we had anticipated; the form of the letter plays an especially important part at the intersection of these categories. Fifth, we use this conclusion to offer a candid account of our own experience uniting literary approaches and digital methodologies, including some of our unfindings. We show that, despite its limitations, quantitative analysis of life writing can be a valuable tool, when used in conjunction with qualitative methodologies such as close reading, to uncover meaningful knowledge about eighteenth-century reading practices.

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