The hypercritical tribe

This final chapter considers the place of literary history writing within two spheres of unprecedented rapid growth and vigorous competition for readers: periodicals and institutionally supported lectures. While my focus will be on the early nineteenth century, the conditions within which the more ephemeral print forms developed and the audiences to which they appealed suggest the usefulness of some preliminary attention to their antecedents. Eighteenth-century writers widely noticed – and occasionally made comic capital of – the miscellaneous quality of contemporary print culture. Some, like John Almon in his *New Foundling Hospital for Wit* (1768–73), exult in its diversity. Among the “Collections of Several Curious Pieces” that make up the *New Foundling Hospital* is an account of newspapers that serves at once to celebrate and parody the dominant features of his own radical satire: the newspaper is an “olio, or mixed composition of politics, religion, picking of pockets, puffs, casualties, deaths, marriages, bankruptcies, preferments, resignations, executions, lottery-tickets, India bonds, Scotch pebbles, Canada bills, French chicken-gloves, auctioneers, and quack doctors.”¹¹ For others, including Ralph Heathcote, eclecticism is less source of amusement than troubling evidence of a “redundancy of books,” a phenomenon he links to the growing diversity of reading audiences.² As the running title of his *Sylva; or, The Wood* (1786) suggests – “Being a Collection of Anecdotes, Dissertations, Characters, Apothegms, Original Letters, Bon Mots, and Other Little Things” – he opens himself to the charge of contributing to both forms of excess. His awareness of the irony of his position – conveyed by the questioning in *Sylva’s* opening pages of “what gentlemen who thus complain ... can possibly mean by adding to the number?” (vii) – only
makes additionally urgent his attempts to define for himself a legitimate middle ground within a rapidly changing literary field.

Projecting a cohesive readership is a crucial first step. In anticipation, Heathcote specifies those for whom “this work is not so much intended.” At one extreme, he exempts the “mere illiterate English reader,” at the other, the socially privileged (identified through reference to the “folios and quartos” they haphazardly scan). Unlike the latter, who “read” but do not “think,” his model audience vigorously engages with the world; they are “men who have been liberally trained, and are not unacquainted with languages; men who may wish to have some sort of pabulum mentis, or mental fodder, always at hand, but whose professions and situations in life do not permit leisure to turn over volumes” (x–xi). This is presumably the same constituency to which Henry Headley appeals the year following: those who, in their eagerness to exercise “that right which every one is entitled to, of judging for himself,” are also prepared to consider reading as a valuable, if occasional pursuit rather than a time-killing and passive form of recreation. Having identified this liberal ideal, however, Heathcote turns back to consider again those for whom “‘reading is nothing better than a dozing kind of idleness, and the book a mere opiate, that makes them sleep with their eyes open.’” While such readers currently favor “prints and periodical publications,” there are, he notes ironically, “works better suited to their capacities and taste”:

Those of a graver and more sedate cast will find much self-complacency and comfort in histories of England, biographical dictionaries, and the like. For those of universal knowledge, (and such we meet with, out of coffee-houses as well as in them) there are Magazines of various kinds, which will supply verbiage, or matter of talk and harangue, de omni scibili et non scibili. For the more gay and lively, novels and romances; and, lastly, for the critical or rather hypercritical tribe, who are ambitious to figure with airs of higher importance, there are Journals and Reviews, which will furnish the titles of all publications, with observations and strictures to descant upon them. Such aspirants will hence be enabled to pronounce upon all authors, without having read or examined any; to appear learned, without being so; in short, to be admired as critics and scholars, by those who are not critics and scholars: for this, surely, is as much as can in reason be desired. (x–xii)

In a series of closely linked devolutions – from public to private, from privileged to aspirational, from aristocrat to arriviste, from established