John Locke, perhaps more than any other eighteenth-century philosopher, becomes the topic of tales of reading and misreading almost from the moment of the Essay's publication in 1690. From Catharine Trotter's spirited defence of his credentials as a Christian in 1702, to Addison's satirical assessment of Locke's female readers, to Swift's play on his theory of language in book three of Gulliver's Travels (1726), to Walter Shandy's associationist psychology, eighteenth-century thinkers assessed the reading of Locke's Essay, in particular, to be definitive of character, but more importantly, to be definitive of the reading experience. Locke's simultaneous reputation for accessibility and for genius makes the question of who can and should read philosophy, who may aspire to be concerned with the great questions of human understanding, almost as significant as the content of the treatise.

While Trotter writes ‘like a rash lover, that fights in defence of a lady’s honour’,¹ styling herself a chivalrous and manly reader, Addison’s Leonora, in Spectator 37, shelves Locke’s Essay in a library that contains a miscellaneous, occasionally pornographic, and frequently superficial collection. The Essay lies among decorative ‘China ware’ and wooden books, and is marked ‘With a Paper of Patches’.² Addison’s narrator explains that, upon examining this curiosity, a ‘Lady’s Library’ (153), he discovers that most of the books ‘had been got together, either because she had heard them praised, or because she had seen the Authors of them’ (154). Despite Locke’s deep influence on Addison’s own writing, the appearance of the Essay in a woman’s library paradoxically indicates not that she is

1 R. Tierney-Hynes, Novel Minds © Rebecca Tierney-Hynes 2012
like Addison in her taste in reading material, but rather that she is as unlike him as possible. Locke’s much-touted accessibility presents a problem for Addison, and for eighteenth-century intellectual culture in general. His readership did not require a university education, nor schooling in theology or classics. Indeed, Locke appeals, for the proof of his theories, ‘to every one’s own Observation and Experience’. The question of how to distinguish among readers in the context of a newly vernacular and relatively populist culture of theoretical writing becomes a difficult one. Addison’s somewhat crude solution, taken up repeatedly over the course of the century, was to relocate good or intellectual reading from a bare ability to access the text to a constitutional capacity for certain kinds of reading. Leonora is capable of reading Locke, but constitutionally incapable of reading like Addison. Being ‘so Susceptible of Impressions from what she reads’ (158) would make Leonora an effective reader of Locke’s Essay, we might think. On the contrary, however: that damning paper of patches signals instead that Locke is being used to provide a superficial, deceptive, and fleeting beauty to Leonora’s mind. The Essay, as applied by Leonora, is a kind of cosmetic erasure of her real ignorance, as a patch might cover a blemish or a sore. Leonora’s library, echoing the Lockean image of the mind as a ‘dark Room’ or ‘Closet’ (II.xii.17: 163) furnished with ideas, is, in her case, a jumbled mess of cheap ornament mixed with pretension.

We can see, in this brief Addisonian intervention, exactly how it is that a new eighteenth-century fascination with the workings of the mind becomes tangled up with discussions of reading and of gender. If we can no longer effectively delimit an audience by mechanical means, we must limit it by psychological. And if the psychology of reading becomes as important as the text, the impressibility or sturdiness of the reading mind crucial to its effectiveness and to its affect, and the gender of the reader determinative of its significance, then processes of reading are written into empiricism itself, even beyond the simple fact that an intellectual movement is the sum of its reception as much as of its initiation. This, Locke tells us himself, in routine addresses to his readers and in his fascination with the effects of language on the mind. For Locke, it is in the process of reading that his theories are proven. He begins in the ‘Epistle to the Reader’ by analogizing his writing to his readers’ reading: ‘Reader’, he writes, the search for truth ‘is the Entertainment of those,