

Why Humphry Can't Read or Write: Tobias Smollett, 18th- Century Literacy, and Preservation of the Social Order

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*Winner of the 2013 William R. Wolfe Graduate Writing Award
Deans' Distinguished Essay Award recipient*

Abstract

*Literacy for lower socioeconomic populations in Great Britain did not enjoy a high priority in privileged eighteenth-century society. Although contemporary literacy theorists have only begun writing about a social turn in literacy in recent decades, Tobias Smollett's nearly 250-year-old novel *Humphry Clinker* offers significant clues that literacy—especially for the lower classes—has always carried social implications. By situating an illiterate servant cum lay preacher at the center of a novel that bears his name but denies his agency, Smollett extends his vocal critique of Methodism that threatened to unravel the hierarchical social order of late eighteenth-century Britain. Smollett's disdain for Methodism and its class-leveling practices was well known during his day—even to John Wesley, its founder. Smollett finds in *Clinker* the perfect foil on which to circumscribe his antipathy toward Methodism and the social reform aims of its architect—including universal literacy for all Britons. By labeling Methodism as injurious and making sport of it as a daft lay preacher, Smollett brackets the positive contributions of Wesley's followers in order to protect the social status quo. As I apply six components of social literacy theory from contemporary theorist David Barton's seminal article "The Social Impact of Literacy" to this picaresque novel, *Clinker* the character emerges as a true hero in Smollett's novel for the social revolution faith-based literacy efforts would exert on Britain in the latter eighteenth century and beyond.*

Literary foils often gain their force by posing a threat to a virtuous protagonist. Eighteenth-century novelists certainly trace this trope, particularly through villainy. The pedophile sea captain is but one enemy young Tommy Anderson encounters in Edward Kimber's *The History of the Life and Adventures of Mr. Anderson*. The deplorable landowner Barlow, who purchases the boy for indentured servitude and strives to deprive him the right to literacy, is the sort of opponent dynamic plots are built upon. All antagonists need not be felonious—just persistent. The daughter Roxana denies giving birth in Daniel Defoe's book by the same title, and continues to pursue justice and acknowledgement by a mother bent on her own aggrandizement.

In satirical fiction, however, conventional methods for sketching characters that embody the views the author wishes to lampoon distort the binary of hero and villain. Humorist Tobias Smollett, writing his novel *Humphry Clinker* just months before his death, casts his antagonist in an unlikely role as the title character in a virtually plot-less travelogue throughout the British Isles. Karen Duncan has noted that Smollett stages Humphry as a menial footman and a "loveable, bumbling fool" in order to accentuate and then dismiss "the previously perverse or threatening aspects of his Methodism" portrayed in the novel (n.p.). Clearly Clinker is no match in wits to the well-bred, well-read, well-traveled Matthew Bramble, a doppelgänger for Smollett himself. In this epistolary novel, Humphry is one of a few central characters not granted a pen to express his thoughts; his voice is only related secondhand (putting him in league with the farcical Lismahago). By situating an illiterate servant cum lay preacher at the center of a novel that bears his name but denies his agency, Tobias Smollett extends his vocal critique of Methodism that threatened to unravel the hierarchical social order of late eighteenth-century Britain in *Humphry Clinker*.

In order to investigate the satirical layers in this comic novel and their attendant social implications, one must initially interrogate the central character's odd name. Stephen Hart has amassed several sources of eighteenth-century slang terminology in an online database, including the *Lexicon Balatronicum* (1811) based on Francis Grose's *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*. The character's first name *Humphry* most likely stems from a colloquialism:

To dine with Duke Humphrey; to fast. In old St. Paul[']s church was an aisle called Duke Humphrey[']s walk (from a tomb vulgarly called his, but in reality belonging to John of Gaunt), and persons who walked there, while others were at dinner, were said to dine with Duke Humphrey. (Hart n.p.)

Since fasting is a practice customarily associated with both the pious (intentionally) and the poor (unintentionally), the moniker fits. The surname *Clinker* is more curious in origin. Hart's sources indicate the word meant at the time everything from "a crafty fellow" (from Nathan Bailey's 1737 *The New Canting Dictionary*) to "irons worn by prisoners" to "a kind of small Dutch bricks" (Hart n.p.). How the word came satirically to include human excrement may be traced to the *Oxford English Dictionary's* usage of *clinker* as "a mass of bricks fused by excessive heat and adhering together" (OED). By assigning him a name

equivalent to a bawdy joke, Smollett clearly intended to lampoon this lowly servant as a laughingstock.

Despite how the young man appears at his first meeting with Matthew Bramble (buttocks exposed, gaunt from fasting, devout, and illiterate based on his station—thus, a microcosm of the lower social classes), Humphry Clinker adopts a different persona by the end of the work. Admittedly, the whiteness of his bare buttocks would have signaled the eighteenth-century reader to the condition of Clinker's soul, since the equation of white skin with purity was commonplace. Of course, his name is changed when his true identity as the unclaimed, illegitimate son of none other than Matthew Bramble himself is restored (Smollett 172).

The surname "Lloyd" renders him Welsh. Smollett may have intended this reversal of Humphry's identity to reinforce the pre-modern values of an earlier era when social stratification was strictly enforced. Even his love interest confines him to a certain lower station. The Winn Jenkins character (whose letters are crudely constructed of various malapropisms) is likely fashioned after Swift's poems composed in the voice of a serving maid (Rogers 307). That the footman falls in love with Winn Jenkins (a woman now deemed by the Brambles as lower than his true station), in his former identity as Humphry Clinker and marries her despite his elevated status once his birthright is revealed, is a further subversive act against the social order emphasized in the novel. Smollett's protagonists often sport names that seem to pull in opposite (i.e. aristocratic/plebeian) directions: Roderick Random, Launcelot Greaves, and Peregrine Pickle. Smollett finds in Humphry Clinker the perfect foil on which to circumscribe his antipathy toward Methodism and the social reform aims of its architect—including universal literacy for all Britons.

HIS HEART WAS STRANGELY COLD

Smollett's disdain for Methodism and its class-leveling practices was well known during his day—even to John Wesley, its founder. In his *Continuation of the Complete History of England*, Smollett launches an invective about the religious movement: "Weak minds were seduced by the delusions of a superstition stiled (*sic*) Methodism.... Many thousands in the lower ranks of life were inflected with this species of enthusiasm" (qtd. in Anderson 204 and Gassman 67). Enthusiasm in the eighteenth century meant being overcome by emotion rather than ruled by rationality in a religious gathering, an objection to the Methodists and other demonstrative worshippers others shared with Smollett. Duncan notes that Humphry, as a character, is stricken with enthusiasm as well—a way to comment on the prevalence of unmitigated religious fervor among the Methodists (n.p.). Gassman agrees, noting that the "handling of Methodism in *Humphry Clinker* is designed to illustrate these charges" of enthusiasm and hypocrisy (68). True, Wesley's "heart was strangely warm'd" at Aldersgate, signaling his own conversion to Christianity, although he condemned excessive enthusiasm expressed in Methodist worship meetings (McInelly 84). Because of incidents like the one printed in Smollett's writing, Wesley penned a response in his own journal, "Poor Dr. Smollett! Knows nothing" of the Methodists' efforts to educate

the masses (Anderson 205). Smollett's ignorance of the fuller picture of Methodism is indicative of his failure properly to investigate the movement before forming his prejudices against it.

Smollett's own heart stayed cold toward the religious fanatics (as he viewed them) for the duration of his life. Gassman states that the aversion Smollett and other vocal critics held for the Methodists amounted to an "unqualified disapproval of the movement which the Wesleys and Whitefield had begun in the late 1730s" (67). Smollett employs the novel form with a "treatment of religion in *Humphry Clinker* [that] is basically satiric... an attack upon defects and abuses, follies and fallacies which the author believes to be dangerous" in his day (Gassman 71). Some critics claim that *Humphry Clinker* strikes a more conciliatory tone toward religion than Smollett's other works (Frank 126, Anderson 203). Moreover, Misty Anderson's article notes that Smollett considers "Methodism an inferior expression of taste, literacy, or feeling[,]" although he does not adopt the "paranoid hostility of Fielding or Foote" toward the sect (201, 204). Anderson cites several critics who trace Smollett's "career-long assault on Methodism," although she calls it a "more complex affair" than a simple denunciation (204).

This characterization of Smollett's longstanding condemnation of what he perceived as religious hypocrisy seems short-sighted. For example, Bramble's ranting at Humphry upon finding him preaching to the women in his family gives Smollett a platform for airing his own "sentiments and prejudices" against Methodism (Gassman 68). In Jerry Melford's letter from 10 June, the curmudgeonly Bramble asserts, "What you imagine to be the new light of grace... I take to be a deceitful vapour, glimmering through a crack in your upper story — In a word, Mr. Clinker, I will have no light in my family but what pays the king's taxes" (Smollett 155). This episode indicates how vehemently

Smollett denounces Methodism, because he considers it an offense against both order and reason, two of the principles of human life most cherished by him and many of his contemporaries. To Smollett Methodism was a further pernicious force in the threatened breakdown of a rational, ordered society. (Gassman 69)

By labeling Methodism as injurious and making sport of it as a daft lay preacher, Smollett brackets the positive contributions of Wesley's followers in order to protect the social status quo.

Early Methodists were social reformers whose tireless efforts with the poor, the indigent, women, and uneducated lay preachers often concentrated on increasing literacy rates for these marginalized groups (Burton 67). From the founding of the Holy Club at Oxford, John Wesley, his brother Charles, and their friends devoted themselves to work among the poor, especially with teaching them to read. Later, Wesley and his followers established numerous schools, especially in Wales, and Sunday schools, that exerted a "most potent influence on the spread of elementary knowledge though its means were necessarily limited, and its methods imperfect" (Adams 40). The record of history manifests "the tradition of early British Methodism as a rich site for examining historical connections

between literacy, rhetoric, and class equality” (Burton 68). Harvey J. Graff cites the research of Roger S. Schofield chronicling that at the time of the publication of the novel (1754-1784), illiteracy was around fifty-nine percent for the occupational group “Laborers and Servants,” of whom Humphry is representative (*Legacies* 234). Rab Houston asserts that male servants in Scotland were seventy percent illiterate while women servants were ninety percent illiterate (192-93). Graff notes that by the end of the eighteenth century, large swaths of Scotland (especially the Highlands) “remained more often illiterate than literate” (*Legacies* 246-47). Houston posits that “persistently high” female illiteracy could be linked to “the continuation of patriarchal dominance in Scottish society” (Houston 200). Filling a vacuum left by the sorry state of public education in England, charity schools helped to “socialize the poor” and to produce model denizens of a proper social order (Graff, *Legacies*, 231). Kristin Mapel Bloomberg grounds an analysis of nineteenth-century educational reforms in an eighteenth-century awareness of “the need for children’s general education ... [as] an English social concern” (48). While charity schools and Sunday schools proliferated, many dissenting religious reformers (Methodists included, although they remained within the ranks of the Church of England) cared more about morality instruction than functional literacy per se (Burton 71, Schofield 300). Often the heart received more attention than the head in these schools.

The impetus behind foregrounding morality in these religious schools is apparent. Learning to read the Bible for oneself ensured the “development of a God-fearing, moral, and subservient working class[,]” as a foundation for social welfare (Graff, *Legacies*, 239). When reviewing a book by Neuberger on literacy in the eighteenth century, Graff notes that charity schools employed “reading instruction which focused on the Bible and catechism through memory and rote learning [that] does not necessarily suggest that a ‘fluent’ reader comprehended much of what he or she enunciated” (Graff, *Labyrinths*, 155). The coursework covered in charity schools and Sunday schools was not limited to children; these organizations:

...offered instruction in reading and writing to working class people and their children. Wesley believed that literacy was important to spiritual development so that his followers could read not only the Bible but also other spiritual texts published by the Methodist Connexion (sic). (Burton 73)

Literacy education in parochial settings focused almost exclusively on reading rather than writing (Thomas 111). This is one reason that a religious education may have measured incomplete from a functional literacy perspective: Houston defines the primary “criterion of literacy” in the eighteenth century as the capacity to sign one’s name on a document (184). If the Methodists and other social reformers neglected writing instruction to privilege reading the Bible and religious texts, a complete sense of literacy may have failed to be fully realized. Still, these religious groups offered a valuable skill that would eventually upset the social class stratification upon which British society was founded: the capacity to read for oneself.

THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF LITERACY

Literacy for lower socioeconomic populations in Great Britain did not enjoy a high priority in privileged eighteenth-century society. Although contemporary literacy theorists have only begun writing about a “social view of literacy” in recent decades (Barton 185), Smollett’s nearly 250-year-old novel offers significant clues that literacy—especially for the lower classes—has always carried social implications. In the character of Humphry Clinker, Smollett creates an unwitting vehicle for his social critique. Co-opting this character in a rhetorical move reminiscent of Smollett himself, I wish to apply to *Humphry Clinker*’s six components of social literacy theory from contemporary theorist David Barton’s seminal article “The Social Impact of Literacy.” Read thusly through a lens of social literacy theory, Humphry Clinker the character emerges as a true hero in Smollett’s novel for the social revolution faith-based literacy efforts would exert on Britain in the latter eighteenth century and beyond.

Barton broadens the social parameters of literacy in liberating ways that resemble Humphry’s upward mobility from his position of servitude: “Literacy is a social activity and can be described in terms of people’s literacy practices which they draw upon in literacy events” (187). When Clinker is first introduced in the novel, his naked hindquarters are exposed, establishing him as a pitiable figure (Smollett 93). When he is subsequently seen as “exalted upon a stool, with his hat in one hand, and a paper in the other” preaching to his fellow footmen, Bramble mocks him as a huckster or snake oil salesman, telling him to fetch the hackney coach—in essence, to know his place and to retain it (Smollett 113-14). A footnote in Shaun Regan’s Penguin Books edition of the novel indicates that when Clinker vows to cure his “fellows in servitude and sin... [of] profane swearing... that avoids neither profit nor pleasure[,]” he is echoing popular sermons by Thomas Bradbury and others (415-16). Bramble castigates Clinker for his naïveté: “But, Clinker (said he) if you should have eloquence enough to persuade the vulgar to resign those tropes and figures of rhetoric, there will be little or nothing left to distinguish their conversation from that of their betters” (Smollett 114). Barton recognizes that the written word is involved in everyday life. By shaming his footman in front of his peers, Bramble causes Clinker to thrust a paper into his pocket—likely hiding a tract that had reached his hands from those apprenticing him to the Methodist laity. Maybe Humphry is trying to use the tract as preaching notes—even if he can barely read the words themselves. Seeing Clinker holding a document (even if he is unable to comprehend it) jars Bramble because

...along with women and apprentices, servants stood at the boundary of the literacy/non-literacy divide, and as such were a particular source of anxiety to the eighteenth-century ruling class, which was acutely aware of the ideology-forming powers of the printed word. (Frank 47)

When Barton refers to *literacy practices*, he means “common patterns in using reading and writing in any situation[,] and people bring their cultural knowledge to an activity” (188). Clinker is enacting a spiritual revolution of sorts on a micro-level (that eventually will have social implications) in this scene (recorded in Jery’s letter dated 2 June) by preaching a

message of liberation to those who like him are in servitude. Paula McDowell notes that the eighteenth century served as a “transitional period” in terms of literacy before a significant shift in “elite attitudes toward mass education” in the century to follow (185). Using novels like *Humphry Clinker* to serve as a “powerful analytic lens on historic transitions” is warranted (McDowell 186). Although Humphry Clinker is rendered a buffoon by Smollett—one deemed least likely to occupy a place as a member of the clergy, even in a performance such as an impromptu sermon on the dangers of swearing—he serves as a fitting prototype for the Methodist field preacher:

For Wesley, a rhetor was a good man or woman, regardless of class or education, speaking from scripture and experience, clearly, in plain style and with love, to an audience that includes all people. With this definition, Wesley effectively shifts the cultural structure of rhetoric from hierarchy to community, a lesson that extended beyond the limits of religion. (Burton 87)

By casting Clinker as an absurd preacher seated “[a]t the foot of the stair-case” preaching to a “crowd of lacqueys and chairmen,” Smollett has inadvertently emphasized how literacy transcends the limitations of socially-prescribed, class-based roles (113).

Barton expands the narrow definition of functional literacy into areas that Humphry Clinker experiences in the novel: “People have different literacies which they make use of, associated with different domains of life” (188). While he may not possess the capacity to read and write fluently, Clinker knows horsemanship in the novel—a nod Duncan notes to Methodist circuit riders (n.p.). Beyond his penchant for hospitality, Clinker possesses a natural protective sensibility for the man he serves. For example, the servant risks his own safety to save Bramble from drowning in the turbulent waves at Scarborough, even though the older man was never in danger. Bramble can accede to “Clinker’s intention [as] laudable, beyond all doubt; but nevertheless I am a sufferer by his simplicity” (Smollett 206). The metaphor to evangelistic zeal is clear: In order to be “saved,” the subject must acknowledge he is drowning in his sin. In essence, the Methodists concentrate on “saving” those who do not recognize a need to be saved. Instead, Bramble’s faint appreciation for Clinker’s misguided efforts serves as an affirmation of the “practical charity of the Methodists” (Gassman 72).

By denying agency to Clinker to use his varied knowledge for purposeful means, Judith Frank posits that *Humphry Clinker* despises servants even more than most fiction of its time: “[F]unctioning as mere signs, servants are the very antithesis of labor in this novel” (119). While I recognize what Frank asserts, I disagree with her conclusion. Humphry Clinker serves as more than a sign of unheralded social status in this work. Clinker becomes empowered in the novel long before his rightful social class is exposed, given the revelation of his biological father, Matthew Bramble. Clinker accomplishes several heroic feats—most notably saving Bramble from drowning—while he is relegated to servant status. On two occasions he holds the attention of other footmen and even members of Bramble’s

household as he preaches to them, all while occupying a servile role. In his humble station, Clinker demonstrates a key tenet of Methodism:

Wesley's students were laymen without access to formal higher education, individuals whom he trained to speak plainly in the language of common people. Wesley's preachers were a part of a system of community literacy that extended to the poorest members of the Methodist Connexion. (Burton 81)

In the academy today, modern theories of literacy emphasize skills beyond merely reading and writing; Humphry Clinker evidences a diverse familiarity with domains of learning that help him to serve his master well, even though he is not functionally literate.

The degree to which Clinker seamlessly assimilates into the Bramble clan confirms Barton's claim that "[p]eople's literacy practices are situated in broader social relations. People have networks of support and roles within these networks" (190). Initially Tabitha Bramble views Humphry derisively, but later she becomes one of his ardent pseudo-parishioners. The typical reader in 1771 would likely have been able to spot Tabitha Bramble and Humphry Clinker "as the characters in the novel most apt to succumb to the histrionics of the Methodists" (Gassman 70). Tabitha is shown to have "groaned in spirit" and "threw up the whites of her eyes, as if in an act of ejaculation" as "a footman was then holding forth to the congregation within" (Smollett 154, 153). Smollett seems to revel in portraying the figure of a desiccated "old maid" displaying strong emotions for further comedic effect.

This scene need not be read only in a jocular fashion. Clinker has won Tabitha over by appealing to her exaggerated emotionality; through impassioned preaching he has undone years' worth of class-based snobbery. To appreciate how stark this scene played in the eighteenth century, Keith Thomas observes that "the uneven social distribution of literacy skills [had] greatly widened the gulf between the classes" (116). Humphry equalizes the divergent classes through an inclusive gospel message that renders every person—noble or servant alike—on the same status. In so doing, he powerfully disrupts "a pervasive hierarchical structure of illiteracy" (Houston 189). Anderson charges that it is precisely *because* Humphry cannot read nor write that explains his appeal to the women in the novel: "He is also cleared from suspicion about his ulterior motives because he is not a writer in the novel. Eponymous but voiceless, he is artlessly present as a function of his actions and the impressions he makes on others" (214). Clinker cannot represent himself; he must be represented through the eyes of his fellow characters.

Clinker is more similar to the female characters than his male counterparts in that he is denied a fluent voice. The women's letters in the novel lack the mechanical polish and articulation of the ones composed by men. This association confirms a resonant fact from that era: "In Scotland as in England the most striking feature is the markedly lower literacy attainment of women compared to men" (Houston 189). Over the modern period (roughly the sixteenth to the nineteenth century), British men were twenty-eight percent illiterate while women were eighty percent illiterate (Houston 189). Although Matt

Bramble temporarily relegates Humphry back to the servile position for which he was hired by breaking up the worship service, "Clinker's Methodism threatens to undermine hierarchical social relations; thus, an outburst of patriarchal authority must curb this threat" (Gottlieb 93). The surprising fate of Clinker at the end of the novel, when he is revealed to be the bastard son of Bramble himself and no longer merely his menial servant reveals that the classes are not as rigid and constrictive as would first appear. Biology replaces class.

Humphry Clinker performs his literacy orally, coming to life in the novel via the speeches and observations others attribute to him. Barton argues that "[p]eople participate in literacy events where reading and writing are entwined with spoken language and with other means of communication" (191). The role of orality in eighteenth-century literacy has been a matter of considerable scholarly inquiry to date. Keith Thomas posits that early modern England was neither an oral society nor a "fully literate one" (98). That noted, Thomas contends that "print and writing did not entirely displace the spoken word.... In early modern England oral communication was still the chief means by which technical skills were transmitted, political information circulated, and personal relationships conducted" (113). Although Humphry holds a piece of paper during his impromptu preaching venue to the other servants—maybe a broadleaf, pamphlet, or tract produced by the Methodists for the proselytizing of the unconverted—it is his extemporaneous oratory that effected a change in his hearers. Unlike "lazier or less gifted" Anglican preachers who often read pre-printed "sermons of famous preachers" verbatim, the Methodists were known as spirited orators whose fervent preaching was marked by vocal flourishes (Burton 74). Wesley himself often preached at 5:00 a.m. to teeming mobs of hundreds of laborers before their workday began. A literacy that valued skillful oration had dynamic power to disrupt the social order as Methodists communicated whenever and wherever a preaching venue would open up—even outside the steepled churches of Britain.

Eighteenth-century lower classes were often denied access to literacy in their formative years by those, like Matt Bramble, who sought to reinforce stereotypical boundaries for them. Barton impugns this restriction of social literacy and agency as fundamentally inhumane: "People have awareness, attitudes and values with respect to literacy and these attitudes and values guide their actions" (192). The pre-modern social order questioned the "relative importance attached to literacy [for the lower classes] as compared with other activities, such as practical and physical activities" (Barton 192). In deference to his master's dictum, Humphry leaves the makeshift pulpit to get the carriage ready. By his boisterous assertion of power, Matt Bramble echoes compositionist Deborah Brandt's notion of "literacy sponsors...[as] any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy" through "powerful incentives" (556). Seeing such free exercise of power not granted to Clinker as a servant, Bramble could not bring himself to allow the young man to continue the masquerade as a lay preacher. Smollett undoubtedly knew the educational track that John Wesley granted to his initiates. If Humphry were to surrender to a vocational call to Methodist ministry, he would be educated to read and write in the process. Wesley was

systematic in preparing neophyte ministers, as he “laid out a course of study and sent his preachers books to read” that they were expected to spend up to eight hours per day studying (Burton 76). Moreover, Clinker would have also been encouraged to maintain a journal of his spiritual experiences that he would submit to his ecclesiastical superiors. Wesley himself often corrected mechanical errors to these journal entries before offering them for publication (Burton 82). Wesley believed in empowering any lower-class individual who felt a call to ministry despite his/her minimal education; he advocated for full sanction of that person’s *métier* without restriction. During the early modern period “illiteracy ... proved compatible with political and religious activism and Nonconformity” (Thomas 104). After Matt Bramble scolds Humphry, however, the servant “submits his religious identity to a premodern class hierarchy, which paradoxically allows him to continue a critique of social inequality in Methodist terms” (Anderson 214). Although he maintains a “serf-like relation to Matt” for the remainder of the novel, his recognition as a long-lost son (renamed Matthew Lloyd) circumnavigates class issues by recognizing that the young man belongs *naturally* to another (higher) class. While a class stratification will remain intact for many decades in Great Britain, the reversal of Humphry Clinker’s fate at the end of the novel prefigures how society would come to recognize a dismantling of the social class structure in England in years to come (Anderson 219).

The Humphry Clinker who initially meets the Bramble family in the most inauspicious of circumstances is not the same person rendered at the conclusion of the novel. Barton recognizes this metamorphic quality of social literacy: “People face changing demands and are learning about literacy throughout their lives” (193). This feature of literacy is the one most complicated by Smollett’s novel; by being inserted into Bramble’s family, Clinker would seem to automatically escape the need for education (unless one adopts a fairly broad definition of *education*.) Barton mentions the transformative power of “adapting social practices in a changing environment... [of] rapid social change where new technologies and political changes are changing the demands on people” (193). Many power brokers in proper eighteenth-century British society feared the influence education could have on the masses by “weaken[ing] society by alienating people from manual labor, threaten[ing] the natural social order, [and] promot[ing] social mobility” (Graff, *Legacies* 174). The nobility, as well as upper-class, landed gentry families like the Brambles, depended on the preservation of a society whereby they received preferential treatment based on their sense of entitlement. Teaching those who served the elite unnecessary skills like reading and writing stood to discompose such an elaborate system of privilege. Graff observes that “[e]ducation for the masses was based in a useful literacy, but above all, instruction in the duties of their social position, their estate, [that were] most important” (Graff, *Legacies* 178). Thomas claims that literacy was

...not necessarily subversive of existing social forms[,] and in early modern England it is very doubtful whether it did much at first to undermine the prevailing social order. Certainly the clergy did not think

so; for most of them saw literacy as a means of reinforcing the status quo, by instilling godliness, civility, and law-abiding behaviour. (118)

Granted, increased literacy rates do not exert upon their host society an immediate impact on par with revolution. In fact, heightened literacy may serve counterproductive aims. Houston acknowledges this paradox:

[T]he social mobility afforded by education to the lucky few was usually only to the level of schoolmaster or minister—positions of heavily circumscribed social, economic, and political power compared to that enjoyed by the land owners. Literacy may actually have strengthened rather than diminished socioeconomic inequality during the pre-industrial period. (200)

Over time, however, access to reading and writing enables marginalized groups to exhibit their own right to better themselves. Smollett did not position himself exclusively against education over the course of his writing career. In writing *Roderick Random*, for example, the author enacts a “valorization of literacy,” one that Jennifer Thorn questions due to the “absence of demonstrable proof that literacy did increase the odds of wealth” on behalf of the recipient of the instruction (693). *Random* is a Scotsman. According to Smollett’s Preface, one reason for this character choice is that education in Scotland was much superior to that available in England, so it was realistic that *Random* would know Latin. Despite a tenuous connection to economic viability, literacy empowers the learner to function in wider circles within his or her society—arenas that heretofore may have been off limits.

CONCLUSION

Given the seemingly arbitrary sequencing of the Bramble family travels, this picaresque novel by Tobias Smollett obviously intends to satirize Methodism and to reinforce rigid rules about social mobility by the illiterate lower classes, but this plan is actually supplanted when the history of literacy education since its publication is considered. Smollett may have thought he dealt a decisive blow to the “new light” (a colloquial sneer for Methodism) in his comic novel. History proves otherwise. Vicki Tolar Burton uses superlative terms when she describes the scope of Methodism’s empowering literacy campaign:

John Wesley expanded the boundaries of eighteenth-century rhetoric in both class and gender. . . . Giving all people liberty to speak, including those usually excluded, as well as bringing the masses to literacy are achievements that have been both praised and condemned, often around issues of gender and class. (Burton 84).

Privilege in eighteenth-century England was proffered upon those whose birth entitled them to such esteem. For people like Smollett, seditious religious movements that promised to elevate the status of the lower classes threatened the social order that had prevailed for centuries. Smollett’s solution for his pitiable, (literally) unlettered character is to reveal that he has been living below his privilege all of his life. Although Humphry immediately moves up in social class by being acknowledged as Bramble’s son, the fact remains at the novel’s

end he is still illiterate. David Barton's influential essay "The Social Impact of Literacy" notes that "functional literacy" (knowing how to read and write at a basic level) has been historically "tied to a narrow view of literacy associated with work" (194). In other words, literate lower classes would not know their place in society. Heretofore, Humphry had no legitimate (in the eyes of society) reason to be granted literacy. In fact, to be able to read and write articulately would have only furthered his inane (in Bramble's view) goal of becoming a Methodist field preacher. At the end of the novel he is established as a rightful heir of Bramble's, but is no way actualized to act accordingly to his newfound status because Smollett ultimately denies this character the capacity to read and write for himself. Despite the obvious economic benefit, Humphry is hardly better off than when he was first in Bramble's employ.

As in the novel *Humphry Clinker*, literacy continues to this day to be a means by which elite members of a society commodify those classes deemed beneath them. Barton acknowledges the sad irony literacy often accentuates in a culture: "Ultimately literacy reflects inequalities in society: inequalities of power, inequalities in the distribution of wealth, and inequalities in access to education" (196). It is my contention that Smollett unknowingly belies his objective in writing *Humphry Clinker*. He may have intended to demonstrate the farce of ignorant, illiterate upstarts following dubious religious movements, but what he accomplishes in this satire is a precursor to what would follow in Great Britain in coming decades: an upheaval of prohibitive social mores built upon a class-based system that could not survive the paradigmatic shifts that lay ahead.

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