

Amanda Licastro

May 2011

### The Rise of the Preface

Between 1650 and 1750, the use of the preface skyrocketed. I discovered this using a new tool from Google labs, Ngrams, by searching for the term “preface” in Google Books corpus of digitized texts published between the years 1600 and 2000 [Diagram 1]<sup>1</sup>. Why did the preface rise suddenly into use in the first half of the seventeenth century and die out just as rapidly in the second half of the eighteenth century? In order to find the answer I need to define the medium: What is a preface? More specifically, I need to determine the identifiable properties of the form, content, and function of this technology. In this experiment I will use both “new” and “old” tools of literary analysis in hopes of identifying patterns in both the form and content of the preface that will solve this mystery.

In Franco Moretti’s 2009 *Style, Inc. Reflections on Seven Thousand Titles (British Novels, 1740–1850)* he argues that titles are a valid and valuable medium of inquiry because, while we have access to a huge list of titles, our access to full texts is limited, and the title itself is important because, in the words of Claude Duchet, they are “a coded message - in a market situation” (Moretti 134). Due to the efforts of Google Books and the archivists encoding for the Textual Encoding Partnership (TCP),<sup>2</sup> only two short years after Moretti’s work was published, I do have access to millions of digitized eighteenth century texts in multiple formats. The problem

---

<sup>1</sup> Although I am aware that Ngrams draws from the texts Google Books has digitized, and that the books digitalized by Google have been criticized for being inaccurate, the results of this search does refer to actual prefaces, not just the occurrence of the word in a work of non-fiction or the occurrence of the word within the body of a text.

<sup>2</sup> According to the website “The Text Creation Partnership’s primary objective is to produce standardized, digitally-encoded editions of early print books. This process involves a labor-intensive combination of manual keyboard entry (from digital images of the books’ original pages), the addition of digital markup (conforming to guidelines set by a text encoding standard-setting body know as the TEI), and editorial review.” They are working primarily with EBBO and ECCO: <http://www.lib.umich.edu/tcp/about/about.html>

- or in my opinion, challenge - is how to approach this abundance of information. Moretti's examination of titles takes a logical approach - he starts at the very beginning, the very first point of encounter with a text: the title page. Taking the next logical step, in this study I will be looking at the next point of encounter: the preface.

### **Step I: "Cool" Research or Using New Tools**

To engage in the same methods Moretti used to draw conclusion about the function of the title in the eighteenth century, in this experiment I will be using a method coined by Moretti as "quantitative formalism." In order to do this I need to be "cool" in McLuhan's terms, "involved and detached at the same time like a surgeon operating" ("Medium" 77). While I am deeply involved in the content of my data - I am a woman of letters invested in words and their complex set of meanings - in order for the experiment to remain objective without unconsciously structuring the data set to produce desirable results, I must be detached. This detachment necessitates a departure from my training as a close reader. It also requires a machine, a digital conduit through which I can filter my data. For this experiment I am using several new tools that simultaneously distance me from the data, and allow me to enter into the data in more depth. This ratio of data to commitment is the essence of McLuhan's theory of "cool." Concordance programs process a body of text quantitatively producing only a list of words and numbers. In McLuhan's words, where the data level is low, the participation level is high ("Understanding Me" 71). The results leave many canyon-sized gaps only an experienced traveler familiar with the terrain can negotiate. The goal of the experiment is to fill-in these gaps, and map the terrain in a meaningful way.

The first step is to narrow my input objectively. I am drawing from a wide range of prefaces written during the slice of time determined by my Ngram query [Diagram 1], including

prefaces to texts I am familiar and those I have not previously encountered. My data set includes 36 prefaces written between 1600 and 1800. I am processing this data through several filters. I want to run my data through two programs to ensure accurate results, and to note major discrepancies as a part of the experiment<sup>3</sup>. The first program I use for this experiment is the Intelligent Archive developed at the Centre for Literary and Linguistic Computing, University of Newcastle, Australia. I was introduced to this program at a presentation by David Hoover of New York University.<sup>4</sup> The Intelligent Archive is free and open source. The main purpose of the program is to find word frequencies from a repository of texts the user creates; it is not a concordance program, nor can it create visualizations or specified results, but I wanted to see how it compared the the pricier, licensed programs. The other program I use here is QDA Miner, in conjunction with WordStat 6.1. Both of these programs are part of the same series of proprietary software created by Provalis Research, and are priced at well over \$4,000 for commercial use.<sup>5</sup> WordStat can be used for content analysis of open-ended responses, interview or focus group transcripts, analysis of news coverage or scientific literature, and automatic tagging and classification of documents, among other things. QDA Miner is used for mixed-model qualitative data analysis for coding, annotating, retrieving, and analyzing small and large collections of documents and images.

---

<sup>3</sup>In a basic word frequency test on the text of all 36 prefaces, both the Intelligent Archive and WordStat yield exactly the same results. For instance, among the most frequent words used, the word “reader” is used 73 times, and the word “author” is used 49 times.

<sup>4</sup> On March 9, 2011 the CUNY Digital Humanities Initiative welcomed Professor David L. Hoover of New York University to speak on “New-Fangled/Old-Fashioned Digital Literary Studies.” Hoover’s talk used examples of his recent work to show the kinds of literary analysis that are possible only with digital texts and digital tools, and focused on a relatively new method of extracting the characteristic vocabulary of an author, text, or group, similar to the methods I use in this experiment.

<sup>5</sup> The pricing for both commercial and academic use is available on the Provalis website:  
<http://provalisresearch.com/buyIt/ListPrice.php>

There are remarkable differences between the two programs, and as part of this experiment I would like to point to several that are significant in terms of textual analysis. The Intelligent Archive allows the user to filter out common words such as prepositions and articles, WordStat does not. It also allows you to search coded text if you have a text uploaded in the Textual Coding Initiative (TEI) format. As of May 2011, TCP has released thousands of TEI encoded eighteenth century texts, but they are still not publicly available to download.<sup>6</sup> The QDA Miner solves this problem by allowing you to code text easily within the program. The user can encode any amount of text and designate it as a part of a user generated category. The coded text can overlap and be coded as more than one category. The coded text is searchable, and the user can perform content and statistical analysis using the data from one category of coded text, or can compare multiple sets of data. For instance, you can do a word frequency on one set of coded text and the results will show that word in the context of a sentence or paragraph, determined by the user before the search. The user can then eliminate uses of the word that do not fit the experiment before opening the list in WordStat to create graphs or charts that display the results. This gives the user more control over their results by adding a process that at this time still necessitates human intervention, because the program cannot yet identify the meaning of a word by the context in which it is used. It would be impossible to create valid codes and properly narrow the results without a strong understanding of the original material. In other words, it is at this point when traditional literary scholarship is necessary.

## **Step II: “Hot” Research or Using Old Tools**

In his 1965 interview with Marshall McLuhan, Frank Kermode asks for clarification on the use of the label “cool” versus “hot”, and McLuhan refers to his conversation with a “youngster” who replied to the same question by saying “because you old folks had used up the

---

<sup>6</sup> In fact, at this time you must e-mail Laura Mandell for access to many of the texts.

word *hot* before we came along” (“Understanding Me” 71). The idea is that “hot” is old, and has been done before, so in this section I will be using the “old tools” of literary analysis: historical criticism and close reading.<sup>7</sup> In order to do this, I will look closely at the historical and cultural contexts in which prefaces were produced during the selected time period, 1650-1750. In his book *Paratext: Threshold of Interpretation*, Gerard Genette writes “The general history of the paratext, which follows the rhythms of the stages of the technical revolution which gives it means and ways, will probably be that of those endless phenomena of sliding, of substitution, of compensation, and of innovation”(“Introduction” 271).<sup>8</sup> While a complete history of the preface is not possible under the constraints of this paper, a brief look at the historicity and precedence for this form is necessary to establish a pattern of development that connects the preface to technological advancements in typography and publication. I will start by arguing that the role of the preface in the eighteenth century is similar to that of the prologue in Early Modern drama. In both periods the form and content of the prefatory material changes in direct relation to the market, and this significantly affects the role of authorship.

According to Tiffany Stern in “‘A small-beer health to his second day’: Playwrights, Prologues, and First Performances in the Early Modern Theater,” prologues were often only included in the first three performances of a play. These early prologues were typically

---

<sup>7</sup> It is clear from the attack currently being launched against the humanities that our research is no longer considered valuable, which is why I label this section “hot” research. It represents not only the “old” way to embark on literary research, but also my attempt to prove why training in these methods provides a necessary foundation for the “cool” methods also at work in this experiment. To extend the metaphor further, this section is “hot” in that it represents a new contact zone, a politically contested space where the majority meets the minority, the old meets the new, the past meets the future.

<sup>8</sup>Genette uses the term paratext to refer to all prefatory material including titles, dates, dedications, and prefaces. The term is useful here because Genette derives the compound word from J. Hillis Miller’s interpretation of the prefix “*Para* is an antithetical prefix which indicates at once proximity and distance, similarity and difference, inferiority and exteriority...a thing which is situated at once on the side and on that of a frontier, or a threshold or of a margin, or equal status and yet secondary, subsidiary, subordinate, like a guest to his host, a slave to his master. (Genette’s footnote 273).

performed by a chorus in the classical tradition, or later by a minor character in the play. Sterne claims that many critics assume prologues were meant to be a permanent part of the text which led them to draw conclusions about characterization that, in light of this discovery, could be called into question (4). In my study of Early Modern drama, I notice a shift in the early 1600s that suggests prologues were not only meant to be a permanent part of the text, but that they were intended to be read. I draw this conclusion from two factors. The first indicator concerns the content of the prologue, specifically the transition from prologues delivered by characters within the play, to those that were delivered in the voice of the author. This is supported by Stern's description of the prologue being delivered by a figure meant to represent the author on stage:

The Prologue is visually the 'author' of the play and takes on himself theatrical ownership of the text. He offers the play in the most positive way possible, standing wreathed in laurels won for the success of other plays (by other playwrights) and remembered fondly by the audience for the last new play 'he' introduced—and the one before. He it is who begs acceptance for the text in its youthful form, and he it is who takes responsibility for its faults. (36)

The second indicator concerns the changing form of Early Modern prologues. The poems, such as Ben Jonson's acrostic that opens his play *Volpone*, are clearly meant to be seen on the page, not just heard on the stage. This evidence is supported by the research of Alan B. Farmer and Zachary Lesser in their article "The Popularity of Playbooks Revisited" in which they establish a timeline that shows the trends in the publication of professional plays: [Diagram 2]

1614–1628: a gradual contraction, with production levels generally still above those of

1576–1597 (31 first editions, 65 second-plus editions)

1629–1640: a second boom (122 first editions, 84 second-plus editions)

1641–1649: a sharp contraction, with only one play published from 1643 to 1645

(17 first editions, 10 second-plus editions)

1650–1660: an expansion to levels slightly above those of 1614–1628

(58 first editions, 27 later editions). (7)

Ben Jonson is a key figure in understanding this transition from a visual to a print culture because, according to biographer David Riggs, Jonson sought out a readership for his plays. Riggs writes that with the success of *Every Man out of His Humour*, Jonson strategically sought a more refined audience “that could free him from his dependence on the stage” (63).<sup>9</sup> Jonson’s plays *Volpone* (1606), *Epiocene* (1609), and *The Alchemist* (1610) were all written at peaks in the publication of first and second editions.

This is the beginning of what McLuhan calls “The Gutenberg Galaxy,” or a period of history determined by the invention of typography. In *The Medium is the Message* McLuhan asserts that “[t]he printed book as a form created the public[...]It was a matter of immediate response on the part of the writers that their task as writers would be from now on the [...]evolving of self-portrait, and image[...]It was with the coming of the printed book that people suddenly felt the need to reflect, to bounce their image off this public as a form of self-expression” (“Understanding Me” 83). This is evident in Jonson’s work, when he seeks out a “refined” audience by presenting himself as both the sole author of his plays, outside the

---

<sup>9</sup>In the prologue of *Epiocene* Jonson distinguishes between the palate of the general public, and that of a discerning critic:

Yet, if those cunning palates hither come,  
They shall find guests' entreaty, and good room;  
And though all relish not, sure there will be some,  
That, when they leave their seats, shall make them say,  
Who wrote that piece, could so have wrote a play,  
But that he knew this was the better way.

collaborative efforts of his contemporaries, and as a learned scholar working in the classical tradition.<sup>10</sup>

The work of Horace Walpole in the eighteenth century draws useful parallels to the work of Ben Jonson in the seventeenth century. In the preface to the first edition of *Castle of Otranto*, Walpole writes under the pseudonym “William Marshall, Gent.” and through this mouthpiece tries to convince the reader this is a “found” document in the same way similar “Gothic” writers like Hogg, Shelly, Stoker, and Stevenson, among others, frame their work. In her book, *Novel Definitions*, Cynthia Nixon claims that in the eighteenth century “[p]refatory writing reveals not only the goals an author has for his or her individual text, but also the cultural understandings of the novel - the foundational discourse of the novel - that must be employed to explain that text” (61). Both the pseudonym and the imagined discovery of the text allow Walpole to experiment with this new literary form veiled in the safety of disguise. In this case, the document is supposedly the product of a darker age - the fourteenth century in northern Italy - and furthermore it is presented as an imperfect translation done by Marshall. Walpole uses this to excuse himself from condemnation for the suspension of belief needed to consume the content of this novel, even apologizes for the dangerous sentiments and questionable morals presented in the book: “Such a work as the following would enslave a hundred vulgar minds beyond half the books of controversy that have been written from the days of Luther to the present hour” (3-4). This is at a time when the novel was not an established form, and therefore authors often divorced themselves from their writing until they could be ensured the audience would respond

---

<sup>10</sup>. According to Dryden in “An Essay of Dramatick Poesie,” Jonson looked instead to classic authors: “He was deeply conversant in the Ancients, both Greek and Latine, and he borrow'd boldly from them: there is scarce a Poet or Historian among the Roman Authours of those times whom he has not translated in *Sejanus* and *Catiline*. But he has done his Robberies so openly, that one may see he fears not to be taxed by any Law. He invades Authours like a Monarch, and what would be theft in other Poets, is onely victory in him” (90).



favourably. This is in direct correlation to the Early Modern playwrights who distanced themselves from their plays until it was received with applause at three performances.

Similar to Jonson, Walpole was writing in a tenuous time in the history of print publication, a period when according to the research of Clifford Siskin (based on figures by James Raven), 20 to 40 titles were published per year, representing a small increase from the annual rate of 4 to 20 titles published in the decades before, and anticipated a huge leap to 90 per year in 1770 (“More is Different” 1779). In his book *The Fame Machine: Book Reviewing and Eighteenth-Century Literary Careers*, Frank Donoghue argues that in the eighteenth century an increasing number of writers made a patronage based system impossible, and without the acknowledgement of a patron authors had a difficult time gauging their audience and their fame. Writing became a market driven venture:

The expansion of the reading public made it very difficult for authors to determine whether they were successful, except in a purely material sense. By midcentury, readers could no longer be enumerated, either as people receiving a privately circulated manuscript or as names on a subscription list. Their large numbers and the volume of copies that reached them made specific assessments of their constitution and interests impossible. The most urgent question of the eighteenth century book trade became how to identify and cater to the tastes of this increasing plurality of readers. (Donoghue 2)

This would explain the trepidations of authors like Walpole, who published under pseudonyms early in their career, or when releasing work of questionable morality.

After the initial publication of *Castle of Otranto* in 1764, Walpole’s the book was well received and considered authentic. In fact the *Monthly Review* initially called it a “work of genius,” then retracted the comment after the second edition was released with Walpole’s

confession that he actually created the story.<sup>11</sup> As Nixon points out, in Frank Donoghue's *The Fame Machine* he also positions the mid-century as a turning point, arguing that the monthly reviews reshape the "emergent literary marketplace" by granting validity to the idea of the professional novelist; he advances the claim that, "from 1750 onwards, literary careers were chiefly described, and indeed made possible, by reviewers" (Nixon 24). After receiving praise from critics, Walpole immediately apologizes for the fabrication used to structure the first edition in the preface to the second edition, and his tone clearly desires attribution for the praise his book received, despite his attempt at humility. Also, in the preface to the second edition Walpole makes two arguments that represent the language used to establish the novel as a legitimate form: first, he distinguishes and defines his work as "an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern" (7), and second, Walpole claims that he "wished to conduct the mortal agents in his drama according to the rules of probability" (8). In both arguments the author attempts to situate his work as a mix of the past and present, directly comparing his work to classical drama, but instead of claiming adherence to the rules of time, action, and place, as Jonson does, Walpole evokes a new rule: probability.

### **Phase III: Conclusions and Questions for Further Research**

The preface functions in many of the same ways Moretti claims the title functions, it is a coded text that mediates the experience of the audience, bridging the world of "fiction" with the world of "reality." In examining the language of the preface we can draw conclusions about the role of the author in eighteenth century England. In her book *Novel Definitions*, Cynthia Nixon interprets the way in which eighteenth century texts define the term "novel" through mostly close reading of prefatory material. In this study she concludes that the first half of the century is characterized by "elaborate prefatory definitions or defenses to convince readers that novels

---

<sup>11</sup>*The Monthly Review; or Literary Journal: By Several Hands*, Vol. XXXII [32] (1764) [1765]: 97-99.

should not be dismissed out of hand,” while the second half becomes “a revealing barometer of the shifting place of the novel in literary culture,” in which issues of “morality, probability, and originality” start to “predominate over [...] formal concerns” (Nixon 24). In fact, that is exactly what is at work in the two prefaces of Walpole’s *Castle of Otranto*. As in work of Jonson in the Early Modern period, the form and content of Walpole’s prefaces represent a trend that extends beyond the work the individual; it indicates a pattern that can be seen throughout the known corpus of novels published in the eighteenth century. This is not to say that every preface in the eighteenth century serves to define genre, defend morality, and determine probability, but these typical elements work to establish the accepted definition of the medium at this time.<sup>12</sup>

These patterns can be proven quantitatively through content analysis of prefaces throughout the period. Walpole uses the terms “ancient” and “modern” to explicate his new form of fiction, and a search of all 36 prefaces from my data sample shows the terms ancient and modern both occur 12 times. After looking at the context of each occurrence, it does appear that many eighteenth century authors were attempting to align their writing with both classical and modern forms. Also, the word “history” occurs 36 times, and “romance” occurs 38 times, an indicator that eighteenth century authors were attempting to name this new form. The pie chart representing generic titles reveals the range and frequencies of these efforts [Diagram 4]. The word “probability” occurs 16 times, and variations on the word including different forms of the word “reason” and “truth” reveals that eighteenth century authors are trying to convince their readers that what happens in the fictional world of the novel does reflect reality. This quantitative analysis supports the conclusions of the traditional literary critics who study the rise of the novel, such as Siskin, Nixon, and Donoghue.

---

<sup>12</sup>This concept is drawn from the philosophies of enlightenment thinker Adam Smith.

Based on my research using both old and new tools, I have found that the need to assert one's ownership of a text gives way to a desire for anonymity when the a new format of expression emerges, and the risks and reward are yet unclear. In the Early Modern period, playwrights first used characters to deliver prologues to coax audiences into applauding for their plays in initial performances on stage, and only after printed manuscripts began to generate income did they write prologues from the voice of the author. Similarly, with the rise of the novel we see authors claiming their work as "found" documents, and framing their fictional tales as epistolary collections in which the letters are authored by various writers. However, competition and criticism caused the role of authorship to change in the eighteenth century. The access to and availability of cheap printing increased both the number of writers and readers, and led to the establishment of respected literary journals.

I hypothesize that this pattern continues through subsequent developments in print technology, especially the advent of the Internet and electronic publishing. I believe there is fertile ground for research in this area by using the methods I employ in this experiment to analyze the content and form of early web based publishing platforms. I believe that online authorship also developed in direct relation to the market; in other words, much of what was published online was anonymous until there were enough readers with affordable access to the medium for a website to have enough exposure and influence as to attract high value advertisers. As was the case for Jonson when he began to make his living from his published plays, web publications have reached a point where advertising can provide enough money for an author to make a living.

Combining traditional methods of literary analysis with the new methods of the digital humanities, I have discovered patterns in the role of authorship I did not encounter using either

method in isolation. But at this point in my research, I have only used these new tools to look back. Indeed, in the words of McLuhan, the old technology becomes the content of the new technology (“Understanding Me” 61). The next step is to use these tools on the current technology, and eventually to look forward and predict the trends of authorship in the future.

## Works Cited

- “Ben Jonson’s Conversations with William Drummond of Hawthornden.” ed. R.F. Patterson. Blackie and Son Limited, London: 1923. Archive.org. Web. Dec. 2010.  
<http://www.archive.org/details/benjonsonsconver00jonsuoft>
- Frank Donoghue. *The Fame Machine: Book Reviewing and Eighteenth-Century Literary Careers* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996), 3. Print.
- Dryden, John. “An Essay of Dramatick Poesie.” Ed. Jack Lynch. Web. May 2009.  
<http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Texts/drampoet.html>
- Farmer, Alan B. and Zachary Lesser. “The Popularity of Playbooks Revisited.” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Volume 56, Number 1, Spring 2005, pp.1-32 .The Johns Hopkins University Press. Web. May 2009. Print.
- Genette, Gérard and Marie Maclean. *New Literary History*, Vol. 22, No. 2, Probing: Art, Criticism, Genre (Spring, 1991), 261-272. Print.
- Jonson, Ben. *The Alchemist and Other Plays*. ed Gordon Campbell. Oxford UP: 2008. Print.
- McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Me*. Stephanie McLuhan and David Staines eds. MIT Press. Jan. 1965.
- The Monthly Review; or Literary Journal: By Several Hands*, Vol. XXXII [32] (1764) [1765]: 97-99. Web. May 2011.
- Nixon, Cynthia ed. *Novel Definitions: An Anthology of Commentary on the Novel, 1688-1815* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2009). \*Used both printed and electronic versions.
- Siskin, Clifford. “Chapter 30 - More Is Different: Literary Change in the Mid and Late Eighteenth Century.” Electronic version provided by author. May 2011.
- Stern, Tiffany. "A small-beer health to his second day ":Playwrights, Prologues, and First Performances in the Early Modern Theater." *Studies in Philology* 101.2 (2004): 172-199. *Academic Search Complete*. EBSCO. Web. May 2011.