

## Conclusion

Taken altogether, the arguments of the preceding chapters invite the conclusion that intertwined with, embedded in, benefitting from, and also enabling many of the greatest successes of the print-based trade in literature during the eighteenth century was a vigorous, uninterrupted system of scribal production that served its own social, economic, and esthetic ends while influencing and being reflected in literary culture at large. If it was to contemporary coteries that an element of eighteenth-century literary print culture looked for its values, its formal models, and its source materials, then an awareness of these groups and the media system within which they operated is necessary to a full understanding of the history of print publication in the period. Moreover, the close interdependence of several key coteries and the London print trade in the middle decades of the century, enabled by the network links between figures such as Philip Yorke and Thomas Birch, Samuel Richardson and Hester Mulso, and William Shenstone and Robert Dodsley, created a unique moment in relations between these two media systems that is worthy of closer attention.

This book has aimed to take seriously a mode of production and circulation that, following the lead of professional literary critics such as Samuel Johnson, we have tended to consider unproductive and peripheral to the course taken by literary history in the eighteenth century and beyond. In a number of the cases I have discussed in the preceding chapters – the print works of Hester Mulso Chapone published in the 1770s; the final three volumes of Robert Dodsley's *Collection of Poems by Several Hands*; the tributes to, and imitations of, William Shenstone in the magazines; the guides to domestic tourism – it is print that has appeared parasitic on manuscript form, bringing the esthetic and affective authority of coterie writing into play as a marketing device, often as a manifestation, in Michael McKeon's terms, of "the public-sphere aptitude for turning the secrecy of traditional elites to its own ends."<sup>1</sup> Yet the metaphor of

parasitism implies a gradual weakening of the host, whereas in these instances, print exploitation simultaneously reinforced the identification of good taste with manuscript production and its restricted modes of circulation. This paradoxical interdependence, or symbiosis, is arguably the most characteristic feature of manuscript–print intermediality in the eighteenth century, and as one of its consequences led to a strengthening of certain elements of manuscript culture in the period.

Functioning as sources of authority for upwardly mobile print forms of the second half of the century, specific manuscript practices and genres contributed to a general rejuvenation and elevation of this supposedly “earlier” or obsolete medium. Margaret Ezell has lamented the fact that the designation of manuscript culture as “aristocratic” has resulted in its critical marginalization, but this study has shown, more precisely, that eighteenth-century manuscript-exchanging coterie redefined that social cachet in the more egalitarian terms of good taste, moral authority, sophisticated consumerism, a value for literary tradition, and modernity itself. By “exhibit[ing] a clique yet aim[ing] at a general audience,” in turn, the booksellers who marketed the coterie reinforced a version of its culture. In all of these cases, human actors and their networks were making self-conscious choices, demonstrating Gitelman’s argument that the history of media is “ours” as much as it is the story of “essentialize[d] media.”<sup>2</sup>

I have attempted to show that a recognition of the persistence, mechanisms, and cultural function of manuscript literary creation and circulation in eighteenth-century Britain is necessary if we are to, first, acknowledge literary subcultures that were alive and well and not oriented solely toward print publication, and, second, understand the relative positioning of script and print in the cultural field of the day. There are many questions left open for future study. I have made suggestions about the trajectory of sociable literary culture into modernity, especially in the second half of the book’s discussions of the posthumous reception of Shenstone, the Montagu–Johnson debates over the commodification of a coterie author’s character, the promotion of manuscript travel writing through print-based canon-making, and the permutations of literary sociability detectable in personal miscellanies. These case studies have pointed in several directions without attempting to make any unified claim beyond the assertion that, together with a value for the manuscript as authentic point of origin, some form of script-based literary sociability persisted beyond the period 1740–90, always reconfiguring itself in relation to new realities in the culture of print. I look forward to the contributions of other scholars to these questions. In terms of the coterie groups surveyed in this book,

including those represented by the personal miscellanies of the final chapter, my discussions can offer but a distant overview of their literary activity. Studies examining more closely the range, nature, and artistic achievement of their compositions, their lines of connection or disjunction, or their patterns of interaction with particular print authors or works, for example, remain to be carried out – on these and on other coteries as well. If this book points the way, its primary end will have been achieved.