



A Reading of Gay's *Fables*

PATRICK SPEDDING

One "Miss Frances Stone" took two years to read *Fables of the Late Mr. Gay. In One Volume Complete* (London: J. Buckland [and twenty-six others], 1783).¹ We know this because her copy of this edition survives.² On 115 occasions between 21 October 1783 and 2 November 1785, Frances recorded in the margin of her book the date on which she stopped reading. She also recorded her name on the verso of the front free endpaper. Since few records of reading from the late-eighteenth century are as detailed as that provided by Frances, and such records are of increasing interest to book historians,³ the full evidence of her reading is transcribed below.

From Frances's 115 annotations it is clear that she read, on average, about three pages each time she opened her book, taking over eleven days to read each of the sixty-six *Fables*. It is also clear that Frances read on a regular pattern of days but read nothing at all in January and August of both 1784 and 1785.

This reading pattern, and the slow pace of reading, are suggestive. It seems unlikely that Frances was reading at her leisure and for pleasure, though it is certainly possible that this is the case: that she simply had very little time for reading, that she was unable to read at all in January and August of each year, and that she was methodical in both recording her reading and reading to the end every book she started. It seems far more likely that Frances's reading of Gay's *Fables* was undertaken as a part of her schooling and that January and August were her holiday periods, during which she was free of her obligation to read a certain number of lines of this

¹ ESTC: t013861 (locating 22 copies); *The Eighteenth Century* microfilm, reel 3758, no. 11; Eighteenth Century Collections Online (CW112198832).

² Author's collection; purchased in 1986 from C. P. Collins Old Books & Prints, 226 Clarence Street, Sydney.

³ Studies concerning the history of reading have proliferated in the last twenty years, and will shortly be the subject of a major international conference ("Evidence of Reading, Reading the Evidence," at the Institute of English Studies, University of London, 21–23 July 2008). The Reading Experience Database (<http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/RED/>), launched in 1996, collects evidence of reading between 1450 and 1945. The database now contains around 6,000 records derived from letters, diaries, journals and autobiographies, "mainly," we are told, "from the 'long' 18th Century, 1700–1840." Marginalia from this period has been the focus of two books by H. J. Jackson: *Marginalia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001) and *Romantic Readers: The Evidence of Marginalia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005).

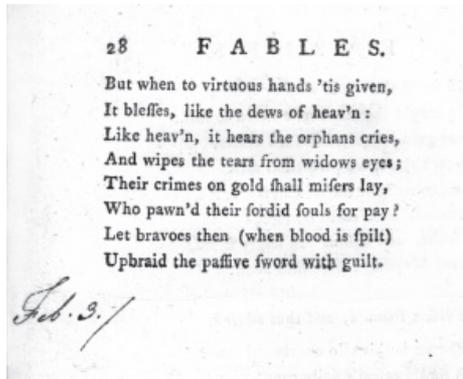


Figure 1.

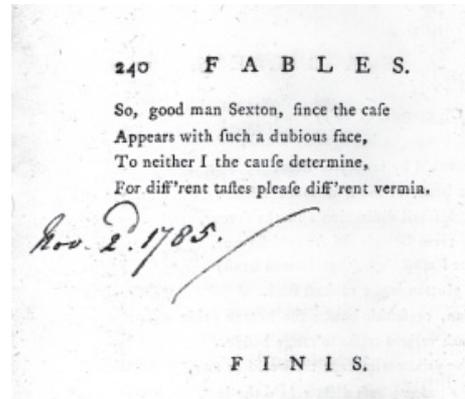


Figure 2.

book. The cheap paper and binding (sheep), and small illustrations,⁴ are certainly consistent with this volume being a school-book, and fables by some authors were recommended for moral instruction in the period.⁵ What the particular purpose of such reading might have been, however, is a question unlikely to be answered by the evidence available from this book alone and will not be discussed at length here. However, the most obvious pedagogic task is memorizing a given number of lines of poetry. It is also possible that each passage was assigned as an elocution or translation exercise, or that the passages were read aloud to a family group.⁶

Turning to Frances's book we find that the name of each month is provided in the first annotation of that month; otherwise we are given only a number to inform us of where she stopped. In the first year, two-thirds of these dates are at the foot of the page, or after the final line of type on the page concerned, but in the second year Frances frequently stopped between stanzas and marked her spot mid-page. (See figures 1 and 2.) This suggests that the pages of this book were the measure of Frances's reading, but, in fact, Frances averaged forty lines of poetry between

⁴ Although all Fables are illustrated in this edition, each illustration is small (most plates contain four such illustrations), crude and unsigned. (See the cover to this issue.) By contrast, earlier editions of Part One contained large, attractive engraved vignettes by Van der Gucht, and Part Two was published with superb full-page copper engravings by Hubert Gravelot: Gucht and Gravelot being talented and highly regarded artists. See, *Fables. By the Late Mr. Gay*, the Fifth edition (London: printed for J. and R. Tonson and J. Watts, 1737) and *Fables. By the Late Mr Gay. Volume the Second* (London: printed for J. and P. Knapton; and T. Cox, 1738).

⁵ Edward Moore, *Fables for the Female Sex* (1744) was recommended by Lady Pennington in 1770, and Dorothy Kilner favourably represented Gay's *Fables* in 1790. See Lady Sarah Pennington, *An Unfortunate Mother's Advice to her Absent Daughters*, 5th ed., Corrected (London: Printed by J. and H. Hughs; for J. Walter, 1770), 65; Dorothy Kilner, *Anecdotes of a Boarding-School*; or, *An Antidote to the Vices of those Useful Seminaries* (London: John Marshall and Co., [1790?]), 85–88.

⁶ Although it is possible that Frances was "learning," "performing," or "translating," rather than "reading" as such, I use the latter term here to cover all these possibilities.

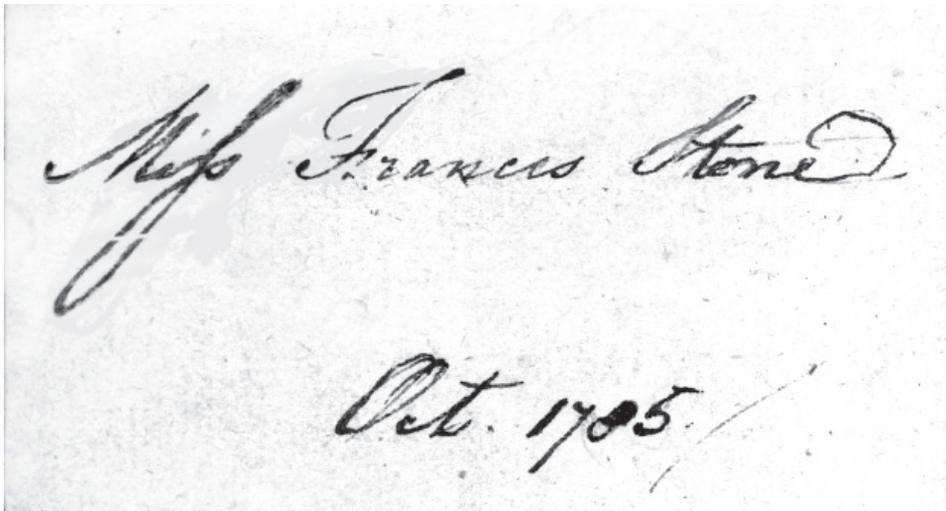


Figure 3.

successive dates,⁷ with longer and shorter passages reflecting the varying number of lines necessary to reach the end of a particular Fable. On seventeen occasions there is a gap of only one page between annotations (with a minimum of twenty-four lines of text)⁸ and on fourteen occasions there is a gap of three pages between annotations (with a maximum of fifty-six lines of text).⁹ The mean of this maximum and minimum is, conveniently and coincidentally, forty lines.

Matching the dates recorded to the days of the week we discover a very clear pattern. The first two dates are a Sunday; the next ten dates fall on a Tuesday; all but three of the following ninety-six dates fall on either a Monday or a Thursday; and the final seven dates fall on either a Wednesday or a Friday. That is, for the first three months Frances seems to have opened her new book only once a week, always on the same day, and thereafter she usually did so twice a week, almost always on the same days (though there are two periods of a month when she returned to the once-a-week pattern).¹⁰ There are six occasions when she missed one day of the week,¹¹ one occasion when she did not read for more than a week,¹² and the two

⁷ Part One of Gay's *Fables* contains 2,478 lines of poetry (50 Fables), Part Two contains 2,144 lines (16 Fables). The total of 4,622 lines divides into 115 passages of 40.19 lines each.

⁸ See *Fables*, 32 and 33, 78 and 79.

⁹ See *Fables*, 91, 94.

¹⁰ That is, on Mondays from 26 April to 14 June 1784 and Thursdays from 12 May to 9 June 1785.

¹¹ 12 April, 24 June, 25 October 1784; 24 February, 28 March, 28 April 1785.

¹² That is, between 19 September and 3 October 1785.

months of the year—already mentioned—when she did not read at all: January and August.¹³

Frances seems to have recorded her name and the date at the front of her book on two separate occasions. Having completed her reading, she wrote “Miss Frances Stone | Oct. 1785.” The date is heavily inked and it seems that, at this time, Frances actually changed “Oct. 1783” (the date she acquired the book) to “Oct. 1785” in order to memorialise the date she completed reading her book, the achievement of completing her two-year task apparently superseding in importance the date of acquisition. (See figure 3.)

Annotations

The following paragraphs give the page number of each annotation;¹⁴ all annotations appear at the foot of the text on the page indicated unless otherwise noted; when the annotation occurs mid-page the last line number before the annotation is given (that is, the line at which reading stopped). The location of the annotation is followed in brackets by the date. Since every date is followed by “./” this information is omitted here. The following list of annotations is broken at the four points where lengthy breaks occurred in Frances’s reading. For the sake of clarity, months are given in square brackets on all occasion where they were not provided by Frances.

1783

Page 10 ([October] “21”); 12 ([October] “28”); 15, 1.6 (“Nov. 4”); 16 ([November] “11”); 18 ([November] “18”); 20 ([November] “25”); 23 (“Dec. 2”); 25 ([December] “9”); 27, 1.10 ([December] “16”).

[Christmas/New Year break in reading]

1784

Page 28 (“Feb. 3”); 30 ([February] “10”); 32, 1.12 ([February] “17”); 33 ([February] “19”); 35 ([February] “23”); 37, 1.14 ([February] “26”); 39 (“March 1st”); 41 ([March] “4”); 43 ([March] “8”); 45 ([March] “11”); 47, 1.14 ([March] “15”); 48 ([March] “18”); 50 ([March] “22”); 52 ([March] “25”); 54 ([March] “29”); 56, 1.12 (“April 1st”); 57 ([April] “5”); 59 ([April] “8”); 62 ([April] “15”); 64, 1.8 ([April] “19”); 65 ([April] “22”); 67, 1.10 ([April] “26”); 68 (“May 10”); 70 ([May] “17”); 72 (“June 14”); 74 ([June] “17”); 76 ([June] “21st”); 78, 1.6 ([June] “28”); 79 (“July

¹³ Actually, there is a gap of seven weeks from 16 December 1783 to 3 February 1784, nine weeks from 26 July to 30 September 1785, seven weeks from 20 December 1783 to 7 February 1784 and six weeks from 25 July to 19 September 1785.

¹⁴ Contents: [i] title-page; [ii] blank; [iii] Dedication; [iv] blank; [v] vi–viii Table of Contents; 9–12 Introductory Fable; 13–16 Dedicatory Fable (Fable 1); 17–136 text of Part One (Fables 2–50); [137] title-page to Part Two; [138] Advertisement; 139–240 text of Part Two (Fables 1–16).

1st"); 81 ([July] "5"); 84 ([July] "8"); 86 ([July] "11"); 88, 1.12 ([July] "15"); 89 ([July] "19"); 91 ([July] "22"); 94 ([July] "26").

[Mid-year break in reading]

Page 96 ("Sept. 30"); 98 ("Oct. 4"); 100 ([October] "7"); 102 ([October] "11"); 104 ([October] "14"); 107 ([October] "18"); 109, 1.8 ([October] "21"); 110 ([October] "28"); 112 ("Nov. 1st"); 114, 1.18 ([November] "4"); 116 ([November] "8"); 118, 1.14 ([November] "11"); 119 ([November] "15"); 121 ([November] "18"); 123 ([November] "22"); 125 ([November] "25"); 128 ([November] "29"); 131 ("Dec. 2"); 133 ([December] "6"); 136 ([December] "9"); 141, 1.8 ([December] "13"); 143 ([December] "16"); 144 ([December] "20").

[Christmas/New Year break in reading]

1785

Page 146, 1.10 ("Feb. 7"); 148, 1.6 ([February] "10"); 149 ([February] "14"); 152, 1.10 ([February] "17"); 153, 1.20 ([February] "21"); 155 ([February] "28"); 157 ("March 3d"); 159, 1.14 ([March] "7"); 161, 1.10 ([March] "21st"); 162 ([March] "24"); 164, 1.16 ([March] "31st"); 166, 1.2 ("April 4"); 167, 1.8 ([April] "7"); 168 ([April] "11"); 171, 1.6 ([April] "16"); 172, 1.18 ([April] "18"); 174, 1.12 ([April] "21"); 176 ([April] "25"); 179, 1.2 ("May 2d"); 180, 1.12 ([May] "5"); 181, 1.16 ([May] "9"); 183 ([May] "12"); 186, 1.6 ([May] "19"); 188, 1.14 ("June 2"); 190 ([June] "9"); 192, 1.22 ([June] "13"); 194, 1.14 ([June] "16"); 196 ([June] "20"); 199, 1.2 ([June] "23"); 201 ([June] "27"); 204, 1.4 ([June] "30"); 206 ("July 3"); 208, 1.18 ([July] "7"); 210, 1.16 ([July] "11"); 212 ([July] "14"); 214, 1.20 ([July] "18"); 216, 1.14 ([July] "21"); 218, 1.8 ([July] "25").

[Mid-year break in reading]

Page 220 ("Sept. 19th"); 223, 1.8 ("Oct. 3"); 225, 1.12 ([October] "7"); 227 ([October] "12"); 230, 1.14 ([October] "14"); 232 ([October] "19"); 235, 1.4 ([October] "21st"); 237, 1.18 ([October] "28"); 240 ("Nov. 2d. 1785").