READING MATTERS: LIBERAL DISCOURSE AND THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF READING IN VICTORIAN LITERARY CULTURE


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This dissertation argues that the foundations of modern literary liberalism, or the belief that reading can nurture democracy, were cultivated in nineteenth-century England through liberal writers, who worked to stress the importance of reading held in the doctrine of self-help that characterized mid-Victorian liberalism. Given the popularity of narratives which propose that reading can encourage social and political harmony in contemporary liberal education, my dissertation also considers the way that modern critics who espouse such views inherited them from their nineteenth-century predecessors. Therefore, the principal aim of this study is to relate a genealogical story of literary liberalism.

Due to the developing British state, a central problem for liberal writers was how to ensure the development of proper citizens for an ideal nation without infringing on people's liberties. Their solution was to outline reading practices while simultaneously arguing that reading correctly was essential for realizing democracy. I examine these objectives in the writing of liberal thinkers like J.S. Mill and Matthew Arnold, in the institution of reading curricula and standardized literary readers in Victorian education, and in both eighteenth- and nineteenth-century legal and cultural battles over the concept of authorship, whose outcomes influenced the shape of attitudes towards reading practice.

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