



Welcome

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The Victorian Popular Fiction Association was established in 2009 in order to offer a regular forum for the dissemination of new research into nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century popular narrative. Ten years later Mariaconcetta Costantini and I are delighted to announce the emergence of *Victorian Popular Fictions* as the journal of the Association.

In line with the general drive to revision in historical and literary studies, we want to help re-evaluate our view of Victorian culture as a whole and how it might be considered, but we distinguish ourselves from similar undertakings by focussing on popular narrative in all its forms. Even if much of our material is devoted to imaginative prose narrative issued in volume form, we are very keen to explore drama, poetry, series, serials, travel writing, broadsides, ballads and epics, and even popular philology, science, history, criticism and education. We welcome debates about canonicity and hybridity, the effects of digitisation, and the identification of pedagogical issues in the teaching of Victorian popular fictions. By using “Fictions” in the plural we want to signal that we are open to all genres of fiction, from Wells’s scientific romances and their predecessors, through Boucicault’s sensation drama and Mary Robinson’s banned play *Richelieu in Love* (1844) – so ably discussed by Newey (1999) – to newspaper poetry such as that collected by Kirstie Blair (2016), or the working-class ‘Parnassian’ verse like Charles Swain’s *The Mind* and Thomas Cooper’s *Purgatory of Suicides* (Maidment 1987).

While we have a core that centres on “Victorian Popular Fictions,” policing borders, whether generic, chronological, technological, national or dependent on sales figures, is not our aim. As the polemical article by [King](#) argues in this issue, the “Victorian” for the Journal should refer not just to Britain or the years Victoria was on the throne but a long nineteenth century that stretches back with lessening densities to the eighteenth century and forward into the twentieth (and even the twenty-first under the guise of the neo-Victorian) and, crucially – though again with varying concentrations – around the globe. Fundamental to [Hatter’s](#) argument about Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Gerard; or, the World, the Flesh and the Devil* (1891) is the fact

that texts crossed national territories and influenced each other just as they crossed the borders between “high” and “popular;” Goethe, Marlowe, Reynolds, Corelli and Braddon’s own earlier texts all enter into conversation with one another in *Gerard* (perhaps Wilde chips in too). Texts operated thus throughout the nineteenth century, with fluctuating degrees of ease and difficulty according to the modulating possibilities that law and distribution technologies granted, but cross they did. The borders between genres as well as nationality and status are crossed as a matter of course. [Antosa](#) shows how fiction and non-fiction intermingle in Isabel Burton’s *The Inner Life of Syria* (1875) so that they become indistinguishable: reality is always already infused with fiction and feels most real when it is narrativized according to fictional tropes. [Ifill’s](#) analysis of Florence Marryat’s *The Blood of the Vampire* (1897) demonstrates the essentially dialogic nature of fiction (in Bakhtin’s sense) as she carefully unpicks the novel’s “scientific” and visual arts background, as well as comparing it with its far more famous fanged sibling, *Dracula* (1897). [Delafield](#), meanwhile, reminds us that fiction is always material: she carefully places Frederick Greenwood’s *Margaret Denzil’s History* (1863) into its publishing paratext, examining the images that the *Cornhill* ran with it, as well as related pieces it published during the course of its run. Not for nothing did Genette call his famous book about para- and peritexts *Seuils* (“Thresholds”), as texts constantly cross and re-cross them.

As for the very thorny issue of what “popular” might include, as good a place to start as any is Raymond Williams’s observation that the term changed meaning in the nineteenth century from a description of those in power seeking to curry favour from the “people” (we might well call that “populist” today) to what “the people” widely favour of their own accord (1976: 199). In this Journal our assumption is indeed based on the latter: we are assuming that “popular” means widely disseminated, encountered, consumed and considered, while at the same time we acknowledge that in itself the “popular” is a very labile term. The size of the audience for live popular theatre could never be as large as that for popular fiction, for example, and what might be very popular in one locality might sell in small numbers when considered in national terms (this is one of the major points of Hobbs 2018). We embrace the capaciousness of the term “popular” while nonetheless remaining alert to the power plays that its use always involves (as Shiach 1989 pointed out in what is still essential reading for everyone keen to explore the issue). For us, calling something “popular” is a pragmatic act. That is, the meanings of the term will vary according to the uses it is put to in context, enabling what Stuart Hall famously termed “the double movement of containment and resistance” (Hall 1981: 228).

Victorian writers (in our extended sense) were themselves very preoccupied with the idea of the “popular.” As Wilkie Collins reveals in perhaps the best-known Victorian essay today on Victorian popular (prose) fiction, “The Unknown Public” (1858), a public that could “be counted by millions” (Collins 1858: 217), caused anxiety as well as offering opportunity. Reactions varied a good deal throughout the century, though a clear trajectory can be traced based on ‘historical precedent, established generic codes, and the complex of elements that make up the describers’ political and cultural alliances and his

or her relations to the object described” (King 2004: 23).¹ Indeed, when we read it from a pragmatic, contextual viewpoint, we come to understand that Collins wrote “The Unknown Public” in response to the failure of his friend Mark Lemon under whose editorship the *London Journal* suffered a huge loss of circulation. The tropes he assembled to build his argument about the “unknown public” are governed by his tactical purpose in a specific cultural skirmish more than by some abstract desire to formulae an accurate description based on the objects themselves (King 2004: 36-7).

Yes, the *VPFJ* encourages the critical examination of now neglected fiction, forgotten creators, disseminators and interpreters of stories – poets, dramatists, novelists, journalists, journals, publishers, artists, critics and readers. But just because texts, creators or publishers are canonical does not mean they are automatically excluded (or indeed, as King reminds us, from the VPFA annual conferences): Dickens and Phiz, the Dickens stage adaptor Edward Stirling, Chapman & Hall and Bradbury & Evans are certainly as welcome as Braddon, Burton, Greenwood, Marryat, Southworth, Warner, their illustrators, adaptors and publishers. We also welcome submissions on those who aspired to the popular but who failed, like the painter Henry Nelson O’Neill whose reactionary satire *Two Thousand Years Hence* published by Chapman and Hall in 1868 remains, despite a couple of reasonably favourable reviews, little more than a catalogue entry in the British Library.² Returning to such texts can tell us a great deal about the limits of the popular and the part the publishing industry played in creating and controlling it, just as much as reading Collins or Wood and researching their publishing strategies can tell us about the successful. While we may not agree with Robert Louis Stevenson’s wording (formulated no doubt to fit the agenda of the periodical his piece was published in), we do agree with the underlying sentiment that “the most imbecile production of any literary age gives us sometimes the very clue to comprehension we have sought long and vainly in contemporary masterpieces” (Stevenson, 1874: 179).

We therefore welcome challenges to definitions of “Victorian Popular Fictions” through new data, new theory and new methodologies – and indeed the revival of unfashionable theories and methodologies that can make us look again and think anew. To effect this, each issue will offer space for one long polemical article that allows the author space to open a view onto new horizons in our landscape, followed by several articles of more normal length and narrower focus. Special issues are also welcome: we recognize that because of their heterogeneity of themes, issues and forms, Victorian popular fictions can sometimes most effectively be understood by selecting a set of recurrent elements to be explored and discussed by a group of scholars.

¹ See King 2004: 21-45 for a narrative map of the changing tropes of the popular from the 1820s up to the 1880s and, in less theoretical and political vein, Waller 2006 *passim* for the period 1870 to 1918 and beyond.

² The *Examiner* (“Two Thousand Years Hence” 1868: 7) called it a “light and agreeable volume” but there are more adverts than reviews of the volume, and not many adverts, suggesting that the publisher did not think it much worth promoting.

Each issue will also include book reviews under the eyes of Anna Breck and Mara Mattoscio: in the present issue we are delighted to see a review many of our readers will have contributed to, Kevin Morrison's *Companion to Victorian Popular Fiction*, along with reviews of Will Tattersdill's consideration of a key topic in the turn-of-the-century popular magazine, *Science, Fiction, and the Fin-de-Siècle Periodical Press*, a new book on Bram Stoker (*When Brave Men Shudder: The Scottish Origins of Dracula*) and the paperback issue of a volume those of us interested in mesmerism and hypnotism will find very useful, *That Devil's Trick: Hypnotism and the Victorian Popular Imagination*.

Believing that rigorous peer-review and scrupulous editing are essential to forwarding exploration of our field, we benefit from a distinguished international *Editorial Board*. We believe in civil communication and friendly council. Alert to the necessity of working to reduce the physical, social and economic barriers to academic participation and to fostering an environment where all persons enjoy equal respect, we are committed to Open Access and fostering new talent as well as new ideas.

We identify far less with the squabbles in the exclusive Athenaeum Club or with the oracular and often bad-tempered pronouncements of the Sages and Higher Journalism, than with the energy, daring, ambition, range and, above all, the productively convivial conversations of the Beetons, Braddon, and Eliza Cook.

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