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Victorian Pedagogy

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Victorian Pedagogy—Then and Now

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Thud, clomp, clack, creak. Although the students are not speaking, the sound of their footsteps on the wooden floor disturb the enforced quiet of the Victorian classroom (Fig. 1). As they file in, the students pass the very stern Miss Perkins, who is inspecting the pupils' appearances through glasses positioned midway down her nose. Miss Perkins herself, dressed in a full-length skirt and a high-necked blouse, stands next to the chalkboard, on which she has written the morning's lesson. Two students point to the dunce cap sitting on a stool by the chalkboard, causing more students to laugh. Miss Perkins hits the ground with her pointer to scold them, which only makes it harder for the students to contain their laughter.

The students take their seats. Because the sloping desks and chairs are connected, some students contort their bodies to adapt to the fixed-size units. Without being told to do so, a few students lift the lids of their desks and pull out their slate writing boards, much to the consternation of Miss Perkins. She hits the ground with her pointer once again. The students look up in a mixture of amusement and fear. From their seats, the most imposing feature of the room is Stanford's General Map of the British Isles, which towers over Miss Perkins, who stands to its right near the entrance to the classroom. To the left of the map is a portrait of Queen Victoria, presiding over the room with stately authority.

(Fig. 1. The Victorian classroom, Ragged School Museum. © Kevin A. Morrison. Courtesy of Shendrew Balendran.)

Once the students are all seated, Miss Perkins makes her way to the centre of the classroom. She instructs her pupils to lift the lids of their sloping desks and take out their writing slates and chalk (Fig. 2). She then begins a lesson in arithmetic. As Miss Perkins dictates mathematical principles, she hits the chalkboard with her pointer. Some students react nervously, almost paralyzed by wondering how to proceed. Others harness their anxiety about the lesson, writing down mathematical problems on their slates and applying the rules to solve them.

(Fig. 2. The Victorian classroom, Ragged School Museum. © Kevin A. Morrison. Courtesy of Shendrew Balendran.)

This scene—to which I will return—depicts a classroom in a school for poor children established in London in the late 1870s. Before the Elementary Education Acts of 1870 and 1880, which laid the groundwork for standardised, compulsory schooling, children were educated through a mixture of private and religiously affiliated schools.[1] State support came slowly. Parliamentary grants to so-called voluntary schools—elementary schools established by religious or philanthropic organisations—were first dispensed in 1833. However, the purpose of these funds was to supplement 'private subscriptions for the erection of school houses for the education of the children of the poorer classes in Great Britain'.[2]

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[1] For some time, the Education Acts of 1870 and 1880 have been seen as crucial turning points in the provision of mass education. This was a view first espoused in the nineteenth century. See Rowland Hamilton, 'Popular Education in England and Wales Before and After the Elementary Education Act of 1870', *Journal of the Statistical Society of London* 46.2 (1883), 283-349. It was the reigning view in the twentieth century as well. See Nigel Middleton, 'The Education Act of 1870 as the start of the modern concept of the child', *British Journal of Educational Studies* 18.2 (1970), 166-179, and W. H. G. Armytage, 'The 1870 Education Act', *British Journal of Educational Studies* 18.2 (1970), 121-133. Recent work suggests that early twentieth-century legislation may have been more significant. See David Mitch, 'The elementary education act of 1870: Landmark or transition?', in *School Acts and the Rise of Mass Schooling*, ed. by Johannes Westberg, Lukas Boser, and Ingrid Brühwiler (Cham: Palgrave, 2019), pp. 301-324.

[2] Alfred E. Ikin, *Organization and Administration of the Education Department* (London: Pitman & Sons, 1926), 4.

Two of the earliest recipients of government funding, the London-based Anglican National Society (NS) and the Dissenting British and Foreign School Society (BFSS), established Britain's first teacher-training colleges.

Funding in subsequent years, through 1861, was available to schools on an *ad hoc* basis. During this period, schools were eligible for grants to partially meet a variety of needs. To maintain accountability for public funds, a school inspectorate was established in 1837 to gather information on pedagogical techniques and educational outcomes. Beginning in 1862, block grants were awarded to schools based on student performance in annual examinations—facilitated by Her Majesty's inspectors of schools—covering arithmetic, reading, and writing. This system was known as 'Payment by Results'.[3]

The 1870 Act altered the educational landscape and the funding structures that supported it. The legislation called for the establishment of board schools in local authority districts. These were placed under the supervision of school boards that were in turn accountable to electors. Board schools laid the groundwork for universal primary instruction, which would be increasingly realised in the 1880s and 1890s. Because children needing to be accommodated outnumbered spaces in board schools, a range of different institutions to educate the poorer classes—funded by or through a combination of government subsidies, modest fees, or charitable contributions—persisted into the early twentieth century.

The wealthy, it was believed, could finance their own education. The sons of middle- and upper-class families often were tutored at home or at small schools run by local clergymen, or they attended public or grammar schools. The latter, stressing science, literature, and classical subjects, offered a rigorous academic curriculum, while the former were fee-based private schools that principally focused on character development. Indeed, instruction at public schools was above all 'religious and moral'. In the estimation of Thomas Arnold, longtime headmaster of Rugby School, inculcating these principles was of primary importance. Second in importance was 'gentlemanly conduct', with 'intellectual ability' third in order of priority.[4] Intellectual ability was honed through rigorous study of the classics, which, it was thought, provided the most appropriate foundation for pupils to undertake study at the ancient universities and assume positions of power or influence later in life.

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[3] Brendan A. Rapple, 'Payment by Results (1862-1897): Ensuring a Good Return on Governmental Expenditure', *The Journal of Educational Thought (JET) / Revue de la Pensée Éducative* 25.3 (1991): 183-201.

[4] Quoted in Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, *The Life and Correspondence of Thomas Arnold, D. D.*, Volume 1 (London: John Murray, 1875), p. 100.

The daughters of middle- and upper-class families were, for much of the century, educated at home, under the supervision of governesses, or at boarding schools. Curricula for these relatively privileged girls stressed the acquisition of languages, music, domestic skills, and social graces. Towards the latter half of the century, academically oriented secondary schools were established for girls. Although full university membership at Oxford and Cambridge was not available to young women until the early 1900s, they could attend classes and, increasingly, obtain degrees during this period. Emily Davis and Barbara Bodichon established Girton College (initially, the College for Women at Benslow House) at the University of Cambridge in 1869. Henry Sidgwick followed with Newnham College in 1871. By the end of that decade, two colleges for women at Oxford University, Lady Margaret Hall and Somerville Hall, had been founded.[5]

Aside from gender, access to a university education was greatly limited by social class. In the closing decades of the century, new institutions of higher education—from Newcastle and Leeds in the early 1870s to Nottingham and Liverpool in the 1880s—were founded to meet regional needs. With their greater focus on preparing a skilled managerial workforce, these universities were ostensibly more accessible than the ancient universities.[6] However, tuition, even if comparatively less expensive than Cambridge and Oxford, and in many cases inadequate educational preparation remained barriers for the lower middle and working classes.

For these populations, options for elementary and secondary education, until the advent of board schools, consisted of various types of charity schools. The majority of these institutions—funded through voluntary subscription and private benefaction—were first established in the eighteenth century as part of a widespread effort to provide poor, but not pauper, children with a basic education premised on Christian principles.[7] In addition to teaching pupils to say their catechism, charity schools, which educated boys and girls, equipped them with an understanding of simple arithmetic, spelling, and writing before apprenticing them to trades or arranging for them to enter domestic service.

Other types of charitable educational institutions included industrial schools and reformatory schools. Industrial schools focused on providing students with vocational training—reducing the possibility of workhouse

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[5] See Gemma Bailey, ed., *Lady Margaret Hall* (Oxford, 1923) and Alice Gardner, *A Short History of Newnham College* (Cambridge: Newnham College, 1921).

[6] Michael Sanderson, *The Universities in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1975).

[7] M. G. Jones, *The Charity School Movement: A Study of Eighteenth Century Puritanism in Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938).

dependency, which was seen as pernicious to both the individual and society—and moral instruction. Industrial schools were conceived as 'preventative institutions' that would teach children who were 'in danger, from whatever cause, of falling into crime against man's laws' but, at the time of their enrolment, still 'innocent, or nearly so'.[8] While industrial schools aimed to instil religious values in pupils from the start of their education, reformatory schools, often run by various denominations, sought to offer pathways out of crime. Reformatory schools 'occupy a middle ground between educational and penal establishments'.[9] By offering religious and industrial training as well instruction in basic literacy and numeracy, reformatory schools positioned themselves as an alternative to prisons for juvenile offenders.

Beginning in the 1840s, ragged schools—so named because the children who attended often wore tattered clothing—were established in urban industrialised areas. As charity schools, they targeted a population that was often excluded from any other educational opportunity:

> the children of costermongers, who sell in the streets and at stalls fruit, vegetables; [. . .] the children of brickmakers, a large class about Notting-hill, and elsewhere; of pig-feeders, persons earning a good deal of money, but altogether careless about the education of their children; the children of rag-dealers and Spitalfields weavers out of employment, and many others of uncertain occupations, who are in a dreadful state during the winter months[;] [. . .] the children of labourers, who are out of work in frost or bad weather, or who are thrown out of work at the docks frequently by ships not arriving; the children of knackers and cats'-meat men; of slop-tailors, who form a large number, who earn a bare subsistence, and who yet will not condescend to accept parochial relief; the children of washerwomen who go out to work in the day time, neglecting their children; the children of crossing-sweepers and street musicians, and the lowest mendicants and tramps, and persons who get their living by theft, who altogether neglect their children; the children of hawkers, pigeon-dealers, dog-fanciers, and other men of that class. A great portion of our children are those of worthless and drunken parents, and many others are

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[8] Robert Spence Watson, *Industrial Schools* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1867), p. 3
[9] Mary Carpenter, *Reformatory Schools: for the Children of the Perishing and Dangerous Classes and for Juvenile Offenders* (London: Gilpin, 1851), p. vi.

the children of parents, who, from their poverty, are too poor to pay even a penny a week for schooling.[10]

Even Sunday schools, out of which the ragged school movement grew, turned away many of the poorest children on behavioural grounds or out of social prejudices.[11] According to Mary Florence (Baring) Compton, titled the Countess Compton in 1893, when she published a paper on work in the ragged schools, order, cleanliness, and discipline were 'foreign' notions to the first generation of ragged school children. 'They thronged into the new schools with the purpose of having a bit of fun by upsetting everything', she writes in a retrospective account of women's work at the institutions. 'They blew out the candles', she continues, 'flung over the forms, let birds and mice loose in the room in order to create an uproar among the scholars and shake the nerves of the teachers'.[12]

Spreading widely throughout the United Kingdom from the late eighteenth century onward, Sunday schools brought together religious evangelicals and philanthropists who saw a pressing need for the children of the poor to be provided religious and rudimentary educational instruction.[13] While ragged schools incorporated religious instruction, and many offered Sunday services, they aimed to provide—in contrast to industrial schools' focus on vocational training—a general education that destitute children could receive in no other setting.

Although the options for primary, secondary, and higher education varied, the form of instruction was remarkably consistent. Nineteenth-century teaching methods stressed rote learning, with students expected to memorise facts and figures. The culture of examinations took shape in the eighteenth through early

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[10] 'Testimony of William Locke, Select Committee on the Education of Destitute Children. Minutes of Evidence' in *Charity and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Vol 3: Networks and Collaborations, ed. by Kevin A. Morrison (London: Routledge, 2025), pp. 59-104 (p. 60).

[11] J. Reid Howatt, 'Then and Now: A Sketch of 50 Years' Work of the Ragged School Union' in *Charity and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Vol 1: The Spur of Religion, ed. by Kevin A. Morrison (London: Routledge, 2025), pp. 105-115.

[12] Countess Compton, 'Woman's Work in the Ragged Schools', in *Charity and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Vol 4: Philanthropy, Charity, and Social Activism, ed. by Kevin A. Morrison (London: Routledge), pp. 370-375 (p. 371).

[13] Thomas Walter Laqueur, *Religion and Respectability: Sunday Schools and Working Class Culture, 1780-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

nineteenth centuries at Oxford and Cambridge.[14] The focus on examinations extended downward to secondary and primary schools for middle- and upper-class children. As the practice of cramming spread, so too did debates about its educational efficacy. Surveying the state of British education in an 1832 anonymously published essay in the *Monthly Repository*, John Stuart Mill laments that '[m]odern education is all *cram*'. He specifies: 'Latin cram, mathematical cram, literary cram, political cram, theological cram, moral cram'. Assuming it 'already knows everything', the world 'has only to tell it to its children, who, on their part, have only to hear, and lay it to rote (not to *heart*)'.[15] Imaginative literature offered compelling fictional accounts of the psychological and physical effects of cramming. In *Dombey and Son* (1848), Charles Dickens depicts the toll cramming takes on the pupils of affluent families at Dr. Blimber's Academy, located in the fashionable seaside town of Brighton. Nonfiction, including biography and autobiography, were sites of critique as well. As late as 1870, Anna Lloyd, an early student at Girton College, was objecting to 'being crammed like a Dorking fowl', as documented in her memoir.[16]

Even while formal educational opportunities were made increasingly available to children of working-class families, the emphasis on rote forms of instruction across schools and social classes remained firmly intact. Educational reformists differed in their assessments of this instructional approach. Thomas Arnold pioneered a variety of educational reforms at the elite Rugby School from the late 1820s through 1841. These included, among others, instituting a pedagogical hierarchy of discipline and subservience. His prefect system cast older pupils as moral and academic exemplars for younger ones. Arnold also launched an expanded curriculum including mathematics, modern languages, and history alongside the classics. However, he continued to assume that rote learning of Greek and Latin was essential.[17]

Other reformists contended that, as a pedagogical technique, rote learning greatly diminished the mind's capacity to synthesise, reason, or invent. As state funding in England and Wales became increasingly tied to student outcomes on

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[14] Christopher Stray, 'From Oral to Written Examinations: Cambridge, Oxford and Dublin 1700–1914', in *History of Universities*, Vol. 20.2, ed. Mordechai Feingold (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 76-130.

[15] John Stuart Mill, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, Vol. 1: Autobiography and Literary Essays, ed. by J. M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), pp. 329-339 (p. 337).

[16] Anna Lloyd, *A Memoir*, ed. by Edith M. Lloyd (London: Cayme, 1928), p. 63.

[17] Thomas Hughes, *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (London: Nelson & Sons, 1861).

annual examinations conducted by Her Majesty's Inspectors, however, the use of rote learning as an instructional method—even in the face of significant criticism—became more entrenched. Appointed in 1851 as a school inspector, Matthew Arnold, a son of Thomas Arnold, viewed the annual examinations as a 'mechanical contrivance' that allowed students to pass even if they did not know how to write or read, let alone reason. The instructor, in teaching to the test, 'tries to cram his pupils with details enough to enable him to say, when they produce them, that they have fulfilled the test requirements'.[18] In his report to the Education Department in 1884, the psychiatrist James Chrichton-Browne criticised the English educational system and cautioned against the government's continued efforts to provide universal access. One set of educational standards failed to account for the significant disparities among children of differing physical and mental abilities. Moreover, he argued, 'the evils of brain forcing are most likely to show themselves under a system of "cram" or spurt teaching, with a view to a specific examination, or of learning by rote and rule'.[19]

James Phillips Kay (later James Kay-Shuttleworth), another educational reformer, criticised the regimented rote learning of the monitorial process in which older students drilled younger pupils on facts and figures. This system—perceived by supporters as a cost-effective way of educating large numbers of poor children—was, he declared, 'humbug'.[20] In 1841, as part of the first wave of professionalisation, he established a training college for schoolteachers of the poor at his home in Battersea. Five years later, he introduced the pupil-teacher system. Unlike the monitorial system, this model—adapted from continental Europe—relied on pupils who were apprenticed to be teachers. Both innovations, along with forms of instruction that focused on children's own experiences with subject matter, were designed to improve the quality of teaching across the country.[21]

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[18] Matthew Arnold, *Reports on Elementary Schools, 1852-1882*, ed. by Francis Sandford (London: Macmillan & Co., 1889), p. 140.

[19] James Chrichton-Browne, 'Brain-forcing', in *Embodied Selves: An Anthology of Psychological Texts, 1830–1890*, ed. by Jenny Bourne Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth (Oxford: Clarendon Press), pp. 338–340 (p. 338). See also Sheila Cordner, *Education in Nineteenth-Century British Literature: Exclusion as Innovation* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

[20] H. C. Barnard, *A Short History of English Education from 1760–1944* (London: University of London Press, 1947), p. 122.

[21] See James Kay-Shuttleworth, *Four Periods of Public Education* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1862).

One of Kay-Shuttleworth's innovations was the object lesson. An early form of experiential learning, the object lesson emphasised hands-on instruction with objects. In *Lessons on Objects* (1830), which was widely read on both sides of the Atlantic, Elizabeth Mayo argues that students learn best when their 'mental powers' are stimulated 'to activity'.[22] Objects could serve this purpose. Whereas the rote instructional approach kept minds 'almost passive', with pupils developing 'a habit of receiving impressions from others', object-based learning allowed students to gain 'mental power by the exertion of their own faculties'.[23] There are, of course, clear parallels between Victorian object lessons, which placed student observations and experiences at the forefront of the educational experience, and twentieth- and twenty-first-century experiential learning. At the same time, Andrea Korda cautions that the Victorian object lesson could be 'used to objectify and dehumanise others who were not invited to share in the dominant viewpoint as equals', and contemporary forms of experiential learning need to keep in mind that 'a lack of knowledge or awareness of the histories of colonialism and dehumanization' may impact students' 'abilities to come to terms with these difficult histories' today.[24]

For different reasons, Dickens had his doubts about the object lesson. While the professionalisation of teaching ensured that instructors received some level of training and better pay, classrooms, he worried, remained too focused on factual knowledge at the expense of creative learning. In *Hard Times* (1854), published six years after *Dombey and Son*, Dickens critiques model schools of the sort that Kay-Shuttleworth had established. These facilities for teacher training were supposed to reflect best practices in education. Yet, in Dickens's depiction of the outcome of the object lesson, a horse is lost in a sea of factual, but essentially meaningless, detail:

> Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely, twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy

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[22] Elizabeth Mayo, *Lessons on Objects*, 6th ed. (London: R. B. Seeley and W. Burnside, 1837), p. 3. In the United States, the schoolteacher John Frost edited a version of Mayo's text and published it under the title *Lessons on Common Things*.

[23] Mayo, *Lessons on Objects*, pp. 3-4.

[24] Andrea Korda, 'Experiential Learning in the Victorian Classroom: What Can We Learn from the Object Lesson?' in *Victorian Culture and Experiential Learning: Historical Encounters in the Classroom*, ed. by Kevin A. Morrison (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), pp. 19-32 (p. 30).

countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.[25]

While the school board superintendent Thomas Gradgrind elicits this response from one of the model schools' pupils, the teacher Mr. M'Choakumchild is responsible—as his surname suggests—for having a stifling effect on student learning. The teacher 'knew all about all the Water Sheds of all the world (whatever they are), and all the histories of all the peoples, and all the names of all the rivers and mountains, and all the productions, manners, and customs of all the countries, and all their boundaries and bearings on the two and thirty points of the compass'. Dickens then wittily declares: 'If he had only learnt a little less, how infinitely better he might have taught much more!'[26] In Dickens's view, some educational experiments were as deadening as the forms of instruction they sought to replace.

If the object lesson focused on the accumulation of incremental knowledge through sensory examination and classification, another approach, active learning, stressed student involvement in the educational enterprise. By mid-century, some school inspectors were advising teachers to utilise techniques such as problem-solving, discussion, and thinking to engage students in their learning. 'A good teacher will habitually leave something purposely unsaid, and lead his scholars to infer it from what has gone before', one school inspector wrote in his annual report for 1853-54. 'It is not the teacher's duty to do everything for the children', the inspector added, 'but to lead them to do all they can for themselves'.[27] Countering methods of rote instruction, an increasing number of inspectors were encouraging schoolteachers to employ a variety of interactive methods.[28]

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[25] Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (London: Dent, 1907), p. 22.

[26] Ibid., p. 7.

[27] 'Union School Reports', *The English Journal of Education* Vol. 8 New Series (London: George Bell, 1854), pp. 409-416 (p. 414).

[28] Thus, current strategies of active learning, increasingly prominent since the 1990s, have their roots in the nineteenth century. The concept, which asks students to apply knowledge acquired in the classroom to specific activities assigned by the instructor, was popularised through the pioneering work of Charles C. Bonwell and James A. Eison, *Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom* (Washington, D. C.: George Washington University, 1991). For a few recent examples of projects in classrooms on the Victorian era that take this approach, see Klaudia Hiu Yen Lee, 'Bridging the Distance: Learning Victorian Literature Through Creative Projects', in Morrison, *Victorian Culture and Experiential Learning*, pp. 35-48, and Janice Schroeder, Barbara Leckie, and Jenna M. Herdman, 'Working with Mayhew: Collaboration and Historical Empathy in Precarious Times', in Morrison, *Victorian Culture and Experiential Learning*, pp. 49-64; and Leslee

In the nineteenth century, ragged schools were sites of neither active nor experiential learning. Dickens, who had himself visited ragged schools in 1846 on behalf of the heiress and philanthropist Angela Burdett Coutts, harboured an unrealised ambition to open a model ragged school, which would employ strikingly different educational methods to those he witnessed and depicted in his novels. In *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65), the 'oppressive and disagreeable' ragged school where young Charley Hexam is initially a pupil is 'crowded, noisy, and confusing', with some students falling asleep from the 'monotonous droning noise' emanating from others reciting from their spelling books.[29] Dickens thus supported the ragged school movement even as he criticised their forms of instruction.

Dickens's death in 1870 coincided with the passage of the Elementary Education Act. Many ragged schools immediately transitioned into boarding schools. Others continued to operate until almost all British children received some form of state-funded primary school education. Established by Thomas Barnardo in 1877, during these decades of transition, the Copperfield Road Ragged School—comprising three former warehouses on the towpath of Regent's Canal and located next to Mile End Park in what is now the London Borough of Tower Hamlets—was the largest of its kind in London. As with the nearly 250 other ragged schools in the metropolis, it provided a rudimentary education, including arithmetic, spelling, and writing, free of charge to the poorest children in its immediate vicinity. At the time of its closure in 1908, Barnardo's Ragged School had educated tens of thousands of children in the East End.

Today, this former educational facility is now the Ragged School Museum, which opened in 1990. A painstakingly reconstructed Victorian-era classroom on one of the museum's upper floors enables visitors to glimpse the institution as pupils would have experienced it in the first year of the school's operations (Fig. 3). As part of its community outreach efforts, the Ragged School Museum also offers a prearranged Victorian classroom experience. Taught by an actor in costume who assumes the role of Miss Perkins, the half-hour lesson on reading, writing, and arithmetic is principally designed for students who are following the national curriculum in key stages 1 and 2 (ages 5-11). But adaptations for other groups are possible.

Thorne-Murphy, 'Experiential Learning and the Value of Novice Scholars: Victorian Short Fiction and the Periodical Market', *Victorian Periodicals Review* 57.3 (2024): 323-347.

[29] Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (New York: Macmillan, 1907), p. 202.

For nearly a decade, while teaching summer study abroad courses in London on nineteenth-century urban cultures for an American university, I arranged for my students to visit the Ragged School Museum. As I have explored more fully elsewhere, experiential modes of learning, including field trips and study abroad programmes, have the potential, however tenuously, to bring the past alive for students and increase their historical empathy.[30] The classroom with Miss Perkins reflects the turn—beginning in the 1960s—toward 'living history'.[31] One may be critical of experiential modes that share the underlying premises of affective (or living) history—'conjectural interpretations of the past, the collapsing of temporalities and an emphasis on affect, individual experience and daily life rather than historical events, structures and processes'[32]—while recognising that the (historical) insights they engender simply cannot be gleaned by textual analysis of sources alone.[33] An approach that immerses students in historical interpretation through hands-on, experiential participation, living history is one of the many pedagogical techniques that link past and present.[34]

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[30] Kevin A. Morrison, *Study Abroad Pedagogy, Dark Tourism, and Historical Reenactment: In the Footsteps of Jack the Ripper and His Victims* (Cham: Palgrave, 2019). See also Peter Katz and Sarah Tanner, 'Mapping Feeling: Geography, Affect, and History on the London Streets through Study Abroad', in Morrison, *Victorian Culture and Experiential Learning*, pp. 143-60.

[31] See Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 1996), p. 193.

[32] Vanessa Agnew, 'History's Affective Turn: Historical Reenactment and its Work in the Present', *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 11.3 (2007), 299-312 (p. 299).

[33] For example, Alexander Cook sees value in the 'visceral, emotional engagement with the past' that forms of historical re-enactment engender, which may, he contends, 'invite participants and audiences to take seriously the challenge of considering historical actors as human beings rather than as incidental by-products of material conditions, the bearers of some abstract historical spirit, or as passive vehicles for self-articulation of discourse'. See his 'The Use and Abuse of Historical Reenactment: Thoughts on Recent Trends in Public History', *Criticism* 46.3 (2004): 487–496, p. 491.

[34] For other examples of experiential learning in courses on the Victorian era that stress embodied practices, see, among others, Jen Cadwallader, 'Adventures in Living Like a Victorian', in *Teaching Victorian Literature in the Twenty-First Century: A Guide to Pedagogy*, ed. by Jen Cadwallader and Lawrence W. Mazzeno (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 261-74; Helana E. Brigman, 'Cooking the Victorian Recipe: An Experiential Approach to Cookbooks in Victorian Studies', in Morrison, *Victorian Culture and Experiential Learning*, pp. 65-84; and Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi and John Plunkett, 'Play, Craft, Design, Feel: Engaging Students and the Public with Victorian Culture', in Morrison, *Victorian Culture and Experiential Learning*, pp. 101-20.

(Fig. 3. The Victorian classroom, Ragged School Museum. © Kevin A. Morrison. Courtesy of Shendrew Balendran.)

So too does this issue of *Victorian Network*, which brings together three essays that explore both pedagogical practices in the Victorian period and educational approaches by which contemporary students can apprehend the past. In 'Death of the Essay? Generative AI, Literature Teachers' Five Stages of Grief, and Alternative Assignment Design in Victorian Studies', Kimberly Cox, Riya Das, Shannon Draucker, Ashley Nadeau, Kate Nesbit, and Doreen Thierauf begin by taking another set of affects seriously: the 'shock, anger, denial, dejection, and bargaining that inflect the discourse on how this technology impacts literature and composition teachers' work'. Contextualising the introduction of generative AI within the larger framework of the neoliberal university, and in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), the authors 'think through the end of the standard academic essay, as it has been historically conceived and produced, in literature classrooms and . . . speculate on what lies beyond'.

Whereas Cox et al. consider our current moment of transition from one form of assessment to a variety of new possibilities, Ksenia Podvoiskaia, in her essay 'Re-inventing the Schoolmaster: Teacher Training in Early 19th-century London', examines another period of 'major transformation' in the history of pedagogy. Between 1810 and 1840, pedagogical training and the

professionalisation of teachers assumed more modern—and, indeed, more imperial—forms. The schoolmaster evolved, Podvoiskaia argues, from 'an individual whose professional career was tied to a personal reputation to an accredited, trained professional' representing broader organisations with imperial ambitions. Focusing on the aforementioned National Society (NS) and the Dissenting British and Foreign School Society (BFSS), both of which employed the monitorial system, Podvoiskaia shows how these private organisations, utilising teachers as the vehicles for maintaining and extending a religiously inflected national and imperial education, laid the groundwork for state-led developments following the 1870 Education Act.

Although moralism was a fundamental principal of the ragged school classroom I described at the beginning of this introduction, many instructors today would disavow moralistic instruction by insisting that one's 'own moral claims' are 'something other than moral claims'. Yet, Jacob Romanow suggests in 'The Moralist Critic and the Student Activist: A Reconsideration', 'disciplinary denialism about the moralism of our own political and aesthetic judgment' can lead to 'reactionary framings' of student activism as 'cancel culture' rather than seeing such activism 'as part of ongoing processes of canon formation'. Excavating the links among nineteenth-century critics, contemporary Victorianists, and cultural activists, Romanow argues that 'acknowledging the moralism of presiding forms of scholarly inquiry' can go some way toward bridging the gap between inquiry and activism that only 'benefits right-wing attacks on higher education and on leftist activism' more generally.

In the last decade, the topic of Victorian pedagogy has gained increased prominence. Any number of books now consider both the instructional practices that dominated Victorian classrooms and the techniques utilised by instructors today to teach the literary and cultural productions of the Victorian era. This issue concludes with reviews of books published in the last decade that have contributed to this vital reassessment.

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Death of the Essay?
Generative AI, Literature Teachers' Five Stages of Grief, and Alternative Assignment Design in Victorian Studies

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Abstract

In this essay, we discuss the ongoing fallout from generative artificial intelligence (AI) for literature instructors and reflect on our own and other scholars' experiences with students' adoption of such language generation tools, particularly in courses on Victorian literature. Since the essay in its current academic form is itself a mostly Victorian invention, many teachers of Victorian literature have a deep commitment to the genre. Given recent developments in AI-generated writing, we – along with many instructors – are in the process of grieving ongoing changes to a cherished teaching practice. For this article, we use what are popularly called 'the five stages of grief' as a heuristic to think through the end of the essay in undergraduate literature classrooms and to speculate on what lies beyond. This essay takes instructors' affective responses seriously and critically examines what these affects reveal about literary studies and the field's assumptions about the essay's validity as a mode of assessment. Ultimately, we make the case for rethinking the traditional essay assignment and for treating literacy exercises like the Victorians did: as spaces for exploration of personal literacy and world-building, as tools for imaginative play and for generative failure.

Are analytical or argumentative essays the best way to assess student learning in literature classrooms? In this article, we discuss the ongoing fallout from the recent introduction of generative artificial intelligence (AI) for literature instructors and reflect on our own and other scholars' experiences with students' adoption of such language generation tools, particularly in courses on Victorian literature. Much of the discourse surrounding these tools focuses on what generative artificial intelligence means for the 'standard academic essay' – that

cherished genre for so many teachers. While, as John Warner writes, the idea of '"standard" academic writing . . . doesn't actually exist in nature', most instructors of literature would likely agree on some of its key features: an original argument, quotations from literary passages, close readings of those quotations, and perhaps (in upper-level classes) a 'they say/I say'-style critical intervention. Indeed, this format remains the norm for journal articles and conference papers in professional literary studies.[1] Given recent developments in AI-generated writing, many instructors are in the process of grieving ongoing, and apparently inevitable, changes to this form as an established teaching practice. Even for those who have long incorporated rich alternatives or complements to the standard academic essay, AI developments have caused considerable concerns for academic writing generally. The key challenge that AI poses to college classrooms, as Carmen Kynard identifies, is that 'ChatGPT does an excellent job at writing the kind of white, school academese that most teachers, schools, institutions, corporate offices, and their rubrics value'.[2] Given the essay forms that AI-generated writing can imitate so easily, the six of us view the advent of ChatGPT and its ilk as an invitation to question what forms of assessment may be the most beneficial in literature classrooms.[3]

For this article, we use what are popularly called 'the five stages of grief' as a heuristic to think through the end of the standard academic essay (as it has been historically conceived and produced, in literature classrooms) and to speculate on what lies beyond.[4] Odd as it may seem to frame our field's response to generative AI through the lens of popular psychology, anyone who has read *The Chronicle of Higher Education* or attended a conference in the past two years will be familiar with feelings such as shock, anger, denial, dejection, and bargaining that inflect the discourse on how this technology impacts literature and composition teachers' work. This essay takes these affective responses

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[1] John Warner, *Why They Can't Write: Killing the Five-Paragraph Essay and Other Necessities* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), p. 14. Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, *'They Say/I Say:' The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing,* 6th edition (New York: Norton, 2024).

[2] Carmen Kynard, 'When Robots Come Home to Roost: The Differing Fates of Black Language, Hyper-Standardization, and White Robotic School Writing (Yes, ChatGPT and His AI Cousins)', *Education, Liberation & Black Radical Traditions for the 21st Century* (11 December 2023) http://carmenkynard.org/when-robots-come-home-to-roost/ [accessed 15 April 2025] (para. 12 of 12).

[3] We six authors are tenured or tenure-track faculty members at teaching-intensive institutions from across the U.S. Though we were trained as Victorianists, we all teach a wide range of generalist literary studies and composition classes at all undergraduate levels.

[4] Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan Press, 1969).

seriously, critically examining what they reveal about literary studies and the field's assumptions about the essay's validity as a mode of assessment. It begins with an acknowledgment of the trepidation that many instructors feel about the consequences this most recent technological revolution has had and continues to have on academic ethics and labour, as well as the collective shock of just how quickly things in higher education can fall apart (again).

Following this, we consider the efforts many instructors have made to retain the literary analysis or argumentative essay as the gold standard of academic assessment, despite its problematic privileging of Standard English. We then address the denial and bargaining that underlies the turn towards AI-detection software and other policing practices. Finally, we highlight the resulting reorientation that can come from asking not how to police AI in students' essay writing but whether the essay is the most useful pedagogical tool in the literature classroom in the first place.

In the end, we make the case for rethinking the standard academic essay assignment and suggest that professors of Victorian literature should treat literacy exercises according to the potential Victorians once attached to them: as spaces for exploration of personal literacy and world-building, as tools for imaginative play and generative failure. For the Victorians, after all, 'the essay' rarely resembled the kinds of academic writing most instructors encounter today and that are so AI-hackable. As David Russell's 2018 book on the Victorian essayistic tradition argues, nineteenth-century writers adopted the form so they could ponder 'social relationships, moral responsibility, education and culture'.[5] Above all, for Victorians like Charles Lamb, Matthew Arnold, George Eliot, and Walter Pater, the essay is a social and poetic genre, 'a creative rather than controlling, a playful rather than violent way of handling not only other people, but also the world and its objects'.[6] The point of the essay, historically, is to instil both self-reliance of cognition and deep understanding of social interdependence – albeit for those privileged enough to have the time and literary background for such writing. The essay is both personal and political, both accountable and holding others to account, experimental, hyper-local, and open-ended. It is play, it is aesthetic, 'not quite literature, not quite philosophy, not quite politics'.[7] It's

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[5] David Russell, *Tact: Aesthetic Liberalism and the Essay Form in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 69.

[6] Stephanie Kelley, 'David Russell on The Victorian Essay', *Five Books* (2018) https://fivebooks.com/best-books/victorian-essay-david-russell/ [accessed 15 April 2025] (para. 5 of 71).

[7] S. Kelley (para. 27 of 71).

everything that generative AI is not. We propose, for teachers of Victorian literature, not a return to the Victorian essay form per se, but a reorientation toward this ethos.

Shock and Anger

For all of us, our first reactions to receiving AI-produced student work were shock and anger. One of us received her first AI-produced student paper in March 2023. It was a response to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'The Cry of the Children', and it very competently analysed the following lines:

> But they answered not our wailing;
> O they knew not we were human.
> Not a soul to hear the sighing of the guiltless man,
> Not one voice to claim him from the council of the damned,
> None to break the shackles, which the god-like foe had planned.

These lines, as readers might realise, are not Barrett Browning's. They were hallucinated by the large language model. The AI imagined 'The Cry of the Children' as a call to release an unnamed group of people from an unnamed oppression, using vaguely nineteenth-century poetic vocabulary.

The chipper self-assurance with which the student handed in this paper mirrors AI's overly confident voice, and both are a sign of the times. Something has gone awry in education, fuelled by technological disruption and societal trauma. In the words of Eleanor Courtemanche, who recently published a blog post on ChatGPT, we are reaping the fallout from a growing 'cynicism of the compromised post-pandemic classroom'.[8] Courtemanche links the issue of 'academic integrity' to that of the 'integrity of authorship'.[9] In our example, the student abdicated their responsibility to reflect on an actually existing cultural artefact (i.e., Barrett Browning's poem), failed to check whether the quoted lines in the essay matched the ones we had discussed in class, and put their own name in the document's header. They handed in 'content' in its purest form, something fact-free, context-less, and somewhat spooky, hoping that it would pass muster,

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[8] Eleanor Courtemanche, 'AI and Academic Integrity: What Kind of Crisis?', *Personal Brand Blog* (31 July 2023) https://eleanorcourtemanche.wordpress.com/2023/07/31/ai-and-academic-integrity-what-kind-of-crisis/ [accessed 15 April 2025] (para. 3 of 7).

[9] Courtemanche (para. 3 of 7).

and remaining rather unmoved when it did not. Just as OpenAI and dozens of other AI-developing companies shamelessly harvest stolen creative endeavours to train their models, this student reproduced the 'larger crisis of accountability in our profit-driven culture'.[10] These contemporaneous crises, of academic integrity and personal accountability, are, in fact, the same crisis. As Courtemanche cautions, 'AI is a trail that leads from nowhere to nowhere, and is completely indifferent to truth'.[11] As instructors, we have grieved (often with a fair share of anger and bitterness) what is lost when students take this trail. In the case of this 'The Cry of the Children' essay, the instructor was the one who mourned the student's lost opportunity to confront a profoundly moving and skilfully constructed piece of poetry; the instructor was the one who began to trust all her students a little less.

And yet, as we have realised, directing this anger at our students is misguided. At a time of industrial-style defunding, deskilling, and automation of faculty labour through educational technology; of computerised surveillance of students; of suspension of academic freedom, of phased-out tenure lines and eradicated institutional structures, AI is not where many of us want to focus our energies. Rather, AI's (thus-far) flat, detail-bereft, analytically empty, grammatically and orthographically correct prose appears to us like the ultimate victory of Standard English, the pinnacle of a lifeless, labour-extracting, rent-seeking system. As Alexandra Milsom argued, Standard English and current rules of academic essay writing descend from late-nineteenth-century theories of eugenics and processes of managerial standardisation that enforced white and wealthy norms of language use across primary, secondary, and higher education systems.[12] In a similar vein, Kynard asserts that '[t]his [disembodied language produced by AI] is exactly how school has taught us to write. And now, ChatGPT can do it faster and better'.[13] What generative AI reveals is how attached academics remain to these problematic forms.

Milsom suggests that to counter white language supremacy in the writing classroom means to 'stop policing' Standard English in students' essays: 'Students are not widgets, and strategies to meet their learning needs cannot be

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[10] Courtemanche (para. 3 of 7).
[11] Courtemanche (para. 6 of 7).
[12] Alexandra L. Milsom, 'Assessing and Transgressing: On the Racist Origins of Academic Standardization', *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, 17.1 (2021) http://ncgsjournal.com/issue171/milsom.html [accessed 15 April 2025].
[13] Kynard, 'When Robots Come Home' (para. 8 of 12).

mass-produced'.[14] Next to the obvious labour issue, this is why we meet calls to teach with generative AI with suspicion. Do we want students to write perfect, AI-powered essays in perfect, white-standardised English? Do we want to teach meta-cognition by having students analyse and write about prose created by a model that has come into being through massive, unregulated theft of creative labour by for-profit tech companies?[15] Do we want to teach essays at all?

Where scholars such as Kynard have responded to ChatGPT and other generative AI tools as an opportunity for investigation and reflection, academia en masse, us included, has responded with shock and anger at the death of the essay in the literary classroom. Knowledge that students can turn to generative AI tools for varied forms of academic writing has exacerbated the policing, norming, and dehumanising of writing as anxiety about plagiarism and anger about having to catch it has become the focus of assignment prompts.

Denial and Dejection

One response to this frustration and fatigue is simply to say 'screw it' and continue teaching as one always has.[16] Another has been to take up the administrative call to familiarise and incorporate AI to avoid being deemed a 'dinosaur'.[17] Yet, amid the administrative push, few of us have been prompted to think about why we assign essays, let alone if we even should. The six of us attended six different U.S. graduate programs and now teach at six different colleges and universities. The standard academic essay is still the dominant genre of assessment at all of these institutions. Those of us who received pedagogical training in graduate school often did so in the context of a university writing centre or program where we learned best practices for composition instruction, including drafts, conferences, revisions, reflections, and portfolios – yet these exercises were all in service of the standard academic essay. We wrote article-style seminar papers in our own graduate classes, and we taught undergraduate

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[14] Milsom (para. 27 of 37).

[15] Alex Reismer, 'These 183,000 Books Are Fueling the Biggest Fight in Publishing and Tech', *The Atlantic* (25 September 2023) https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2023/09/books3-database-generative-ai-training-copyright-infringement/675363/ [accessed 15 April 2025].

[16] Susan D'Agostino, 'Why Professors Are Polarized on AI', *InsideHigherEd* (13 September 2023) https://www.insidehighered.com/news/tech-innovation/artificial-intelligence/2023/09/13/why-faculty-members-are-polarized-ai [accessed 15 April 2025].

[17] D'Agostino (paras. 18-21 of 36).

students to do shorter versions of the same. Though some of us were encouraged to assign work in alternative genres, such as blog posts or podcasts for public audiences, these assignments were mostly complements to – not fundamentally reconsiderations of – the standard academic essay. In other words, even alternative genre assignments did not prompt us to question the essay as the dominant form of assessment. For most of us, pre-semester syllabus planning has rarely involved questions like, 'What genre of work should I assign to best facilitate and assess my students' learning?' Instead, we asked: 'How many essays should I assign, how many pages should I require, and do I need to include a research component?' As Warner notes, 'The "research paper" is simply another example of education folklore. I used to assign one because that's what you're supposed to assign. This is college, and college is for academics, and the research paper is academic'.[18]

This unreflective reliance on the standard academic essay as a mode of assessment perhaps explains why, when ChatGPT first launched in late November 2022, one prominent affect among many college teachers, including ourselves, was denial. We remember reassuring ourselves with statements such as: 'ChatGPT won't be a problem for the kinds of classes I teach! It might be a problem for high school essays, not college papers. Maybe it will pose a problem for history classes more than English classes. It definitely can't close-read like I teach my students to do'. Not only is it wishful thinking to suggest that the college-level English paper is so rarefied and sophisticated that it is somehow immune to replication, but such rhetoric additionally devalues and misrepresents the work of teachers in secondary schools and other fields.[19] ChatGPT could already pass the first-year curriculum at Harvard in mid-2023, as Maya Bodnick writes, and it quickly learns how to produce 'better, more specific, more pointed' essays when users know how to refine the prompts, as Corey Robin reflects.[20]

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[18] John Warner, *Why They Can't Write: Killing the Five-Paragraph Essay and Other Necessities* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), p. 191.

[19] For generative AI's assignment-writing capabilities, see Kevin Jacob Kelley, 'Teaching Actual Student Writing in an AI World', *InsideHigherEd* (18 January 2023) https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2023/01/19/ways-prevent-students-using-ai-tools-their-classes-opinion [accessed 15 April 2025]; Anna R. Mills, 'ChatGPT Just Got Better. What Does That Mean for Our Writing Assignments?', *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (23 March 2023) https://www.chronicle.com/article/chatgpt-just-got-better-what-does-that-mean-for-our-writing-assignments [accessed 15 April 2025].

[20] Maya Bodnick, 'GPT-4 Can Already Pass Freshman Year at Harvard', *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (26 July 2023) https://www.chronicle.com/article/gpt-4-can-already-pass-freshman-year-at-harvard [accessed 15 April 2025]; Corey Robin, 'How ChatGPT Changed My Plans for the Fall', *Corey Robin* (30 July 2023)

We empathise with and have shared the impulse to deny the problem. We admit to feeling great momentary relief that the current iterations of generative AI haven't quite yet figured out how to perform a skilled close reading of a literary text, let alone synthesise a series of close readings into a coherent thesis with well-articulated stakes, though, as Ted Underwood warns, AI will soon develop the capacity for more sophisticated tasks like metacognition.[21] We derive some measure of comfort from the notion that, for now, there do seem to be clear 'tells' for AI-generated essays, such as made-up quotations. Denial, after all, can help us get through the day. This denial, however, is also closely tied to another set of affects plaguing many educators today: exhaustion, burnout, grief, and doom. Or in a word: dejection.

After all, AI necessitates the second major overhaul to our teaching in under five years. Didn't we *just* rethink our pedagogy for the pivot to online learning during COVID-19 and the attendant crises that continued, and were often exacerbated by, 'return-to-normal' instruction? These pandemic-era pivots were certainly not without rich pedagogical benefits, as some of us have written, but they were, and continue to be, profoundly exhausting.[22] When conversations about ChatGPT began to circulate in December 2022, one of the dominant responses we noticed among teachers was not panic, but weariness. When we read Bodnick's claim that '[p]rofessors need to completely upend how they teach humanities and social sciences', we feel tired.[23] Do we even have the energy to deal with another major crisis in higher ed – one that, as Matt Seybold writes, will certainly extend academia's 'well-documented labor intensification since 2020'?[24]

The 2023 working paper of the MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force on Writing and AI recommends 'prioritiz[ing] the development of critical AI literacy in faculty leaders' and 'expand[ing] institutional investment in writing

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https://coreyrobin.com/2023/07/30/how-chatgpt-changed-my-plans-for-the-fall/ [accessed 15 April 2025] (para. 8 of 17).

[21] Ted Underwood, 'We Can Save What Matters about Writing – at a Price', *Ted Underwood* (31 July 2023), https://tedunderwood.com/2023/07/31/we-can-save-what-matters-about-writing-at-a-price/ [accessed 15 April 2025] (paras. 6-8 of 16).

[22] Kimberly Cox, Shannon Draucker, and Doreen Thierauf, 'Introduction: "Teaching to Transgress" in the Emergency Remote Classroom', *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, 17.1 (2021) https://ncgsjournal.com/issue171/introduction.html [accessed 15 April 2025].

[23] Bodnick (para. 21 of 31).

[24] Matt Seybold, 'The Trash-Text Tsunami', *The American Vandal* (15 December 2023), https://theamericanvandal.substack.com/p/the-trash-text-tsunami [accessed 15 April 2025] (para. 9 of 18).

instruction'.[25] While this sentiment sounds great, it also sounds like a lot of un- or under-compensated faculty labour. Many of our readers will not be interested in teaching students to experiment with AI for their writing. Many will be too tired to revamp their entire pedagogy for the current version of generative AI. More versions will follow, and quickly, and these versions will be more sophisticated than current ones. Jill Ehnenn and Carolyn Betensky, in a 2023 blog post, pointedly ask who would take responsibility for training tens of thousands of writing teachers to effectively incorporate AI into their classrooms: Who will pay for the training? Are instructors receiving course releases as they read the hundreds of think pieces, well-meaning educational guides on how to teach with AI, and addenda to statements grandly made by the joint MLA-CCCC taskforce as they discard everything they have learned about university-level writing instruction and start from scratch? Ehnenn and Betensky observe that 'ChatGPT represents a serious labor issue for faculty' and, with them, we want to think about setting 'healthy boundaries … instead of putting in more labor'.[26] It is fine to refuse to change one's pedagogy on someone else's terms and without institutional support. The unrelenting need for panic-mode instruction has instructors in constant cycles of overwork, exhaustion, and burnout, and it has instilled in many profound grief for an – admittedly idealised – 2019 classroom, along with a deep sense of doom for the future of academic careers and for the profession.[27] Those of us who have been in the profession for under a decade have now spent the *majority* of our careers under a state of emergency. While none of the six of us entered our careers with starry-eyed notions of academia, we did not anticipate this level of constant crisis or this scale of despair.[28]

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[25] MLA-CCC Joint Task force on Writing and AI, 'MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force on Writing and AI Working Paper: Overview of the Issues, Statement of Principles, and Recommendations' (July 2023) https://hcommons.org/app/uploads/sites/1003160/2023/07/MLA-CCCC-Joint-Task-Force-on-Writing-and-AI-Working-Paper-1.pdf [accessed 15 April 2025] (p. 11).

[26] Jill Ehnenn and Carolyn Betensky, 'ChatGPT and Academic Labor', *ACADEME BLOG* (22 August 2023) https://academeblog.org/2023/08/22/chat-gpt-and-academic-labor/ [accessed 15 April 2025] (para. 5 of 9).

[27] We want to acknowledge our immense privilege here as six tenured and tenure-track faculty members, though the 'demographic cliff' in the United States and program and college closures in both the United States and the United Kingdom leave none of us immune to higher education's escalating crises.

[28] This sense of despair is near omnipresent. The comments section of Robin's article, for example, are littered with phrases like 'sadness', 'sense of loss', and prospects 'too depressing to bear'.

Bargaining

Faced with all this doom, a common impulse is to bargain. Perhaps we can't stop students from using AI, but we can catch them when they do. We have seen, and have at times employed, a variety of approaches for prevention and punishment, including stringent syllabus policies related to plagiarism, writing assignments that require lockdown browsers, proctored essay exams, in-class, handwritten essays, oral exams, 'Trojan Horse' writing prompts, and AI-detection tools that provided glimmers of relief, though tools such as OpenAI and Turnitin have not turned out to be particularly useful.[29] Though some of these approaches may have unexpected pedagogical affordances, they nonetheless smack of surveillance culture and leave students vulnerable to exploitation by detection service corporations like Turnitin that, as Sean Michael Morris and Jesse Stommel write, can 'strip mine and sell student work for profit'.[30] Moreover, a reliance on such tools places us in a combative relationship with our students, transforming them from 'learners into potential plagiarizers' and us from teachers into plagiarism police.[31] In this context, to quote Kevin Gannon, students and teachers become 'adversaries' rather than 'allies'.[32] Rebecca Moore Howard helpfully summarises how this culture of surveillance and paranoia fostered by detection software harms the student-teacher relationship:

> Many of our colleagues are entrenched in an agonistic stance toward
> students in the aggregate: students are lazy, illiterate, anti-intellectual

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[29] See Robin; Mondaysmadeeasy [@mondaysmadeeasy], 'Here's Some Advice for Using This Teacher Hack', *Instagram* (23 November 2023) https://www.instagram.com/reel/C0AetCixWRx [accessed 15 April 2025]; Owen Kichizo Terry, 'I'm a Student: You Have No Idea How Much We're Using ChatGPT', *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (12 May 2023) https://www.chronicle.com/article/im-a-student-you-have-no-idea-how-much-were-using-chatgpt [accessed 15 April 2025]; and Marc Watkins, 'Will 2024 Look Like 1984?', *Marc Watkins* (30 July 2023) https://marcwatkins.org/2023/07/30/will-2024-look-like-1984/ [accessed 15 April 2025].

[30] Sean Michael Morris and Jesse Stommel, 'A Guide for Resisting EdTech: The Case Against Turnitin', in *An Urgency of Teachers: The Work of Critical Digital Pedagogy*, ed. Morris and Stommel (Middletown, DE: Hybrid Pedagogy, 2020), pp. 245-59 (p. 245).

[31] Morris and Stommel, p. 255.

[32] Kevin Gannon, *Radical Hope: A Teaching Manifesto* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2020), p. 37.

cheaters who must prove their worth to the instructor. Turnitin and its automated assessment of student writing is a tool for that proof.[33]

Even more troubling, the adversarial relationship between teachers and students fostered by plagiarism detection and anti-AI surveillance software only exacerbates the preexisting, justified feelings of stress, doom, and loss that loom over underserved and minority student populations at a time when these same populations are under attack. In the United States, concerns surrounding student-use of AI have been accompanied by the lingering effects of the global pandemic, along with its disproportionate effects on minority populations, suspensions of reproductive freedoms, revoked visas and deportations without due process, and threats of violence, all of which have disproportionately affected students and scholars of colour. Frustration and anger are inevitable for those inhabiting this traumatic landscape, especially when they must face an added culture of distrust and surveillance in the humanities classroom, which should be one of the few remaining safe spaces.

Viewed from the perspective of teacher-student relationships, the advice offered to underserved students navigating these intersecting crises can reproduce the same classroom culture of disingenuity and distrust fostered by illicit AI use. In a column directed at HBCU communities, one of the proposed strategies for student success involves 'playing nice':

> Even when it feels like administrators, faculty, or staff could be doing something differently . . . play nice. Being rude, overly frustrated, or angry is not going to make the process or person move more quickly; it may actually get in the way or slow something down . . . Evaluate what works to get you what you need, and keep doing that![34]

We do not fault this advice as ineffective or unnecessary. In certain contexts, playing nice is the only practical stance for underserved academic communities to continue receiving vital educational and bureaucratic support. But we do want

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[33] Rebecca Moore Howard, 'Arguing against Turnitin', *Chenango Metonymy* (4 May 2013) https://rmoorehoward.wordpress.com/2013/05/04/arguing-against-turnitin/ [accessed 15 April 2025] (para. 2 of 4).

[34] Antione D. Tomlin, Geoffrey L. Colbert, and Joshua Spivey, 'Thriving Despite the Challenges: Tips for HBCU Students and Faculty', *Interfolio* (11 March 2021) https://www.interfolio.com/resources/blog/tips-for-hbcu-students-faculty/ [accessed 15 April 2025] (para. 12 of 13).

to point out that to 'play nice' is to not resolve anger through affective strategies such as open and honest communication, but rather to suppress it and put up a professional front. This emphasis on professionalism over honest communication mirrors to some extent generative AI tools' ability to simulate professional and academic writing, empty of true sentiment or discursive exchange. Both strategies for student success produce an academic environment where appearances and the preservation of norms are more important than authentic connections that foster learning and growth for teachers and students alike. And both demand heightened observation on the part of instructors to detect affective and academic dishonesty and develop open learning communities. Yet, as a field, we seem willing to bargain away our students' freedom from surveillance to preserve institutional norms, specifically the academic essay and other traditional forms of assessment, rather than question the validity and utility of these pedagogical practices.

Acceptance and Reorientation

Where, in this mess, can instructors carry out their mission to educate individuals and create communities of learners? And, further, can educating individuals ever simply be a goal in academia's current assessment culture where evaluation, and, ultimately, market-driven imperatives of financialisation reign supreme?[35] In light of all we have discussed above, we argue that one of the major threats to higher education posed by generative AI is one of distraction. Instead of focusing our energies on addressing deeply rooted educational inequities, recent political attacks on academic freedom, and the very real attacks on our students' physical and mental safety, we are caught up in endless trainings on how to write with AI in the classroom and how to police against it – all to preserve the standard academic essay, and academic writing more generally, as the ultimate form of literary engagement. Why? What do we actually teach by insisting on the essay as a demonstration of learning in the literature classroom? Would it be such a bad thing if the essay, as it's traditionally taught, were dead?

Despite our lingering anger, as well as our continued tendency to despair and temptations to bargain, we have ended up here: we have accepted that generative AI has, well, killed the essay and we are ready to reorient our pedagogies to alternative ways of practicing and evaluating learning. Efforts to maintain the standard academic essay ultimately foreclose reassessment of how

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[35] Cris Shore and Susan Wright, 'Audit Culture Revisited: Rankings, Ratings, and the Reassembling of Society', *Current Anthropology*, 56.3 (2015), 421-44 (p. 425).

the genre replicates white supremacist systems of oppression through its privileging of Standard English and conventional modes of critical engagement. We speculate that attachment to the essay as an academic form is rooted in the values that undergirded its earliest functions. After all, Michel de Montaigne, the sixteenth-century inventor of the medium, used the essay as a 'laboratory for testing but not proving ideas', as a site where writers could explore authorial experience, where they could be 'unapologetically "romantic", "egocentric", and "self-indulgent"' if they wanted, all features that are obviously antithetical to the academic essay.[36] Much like Montaigne used the form, we wish for our students to experiment, to meander, to comment on thought as it is being formulated, to reflect on their cultural conditions of possibility, to foster intellectual growth and social change through personal and embodied engagement with other texts. Essay writing poses a challenge to the current generation of students who are often working, often first-generation, often nontraditional, often distance, and who do not have the time to learn both how to engage in this form of learning and how to demonstrate it in writing. Generative AI forces a reorientation of our literacy and writing aims back to these ideals.

But the industrialised form of the essay that contemporary academe insists upon no longer engages in such exploration and play. Kynard has written extensively about how academia's insistence on the traditional essay and Standard English promulgates the racism inherent in the genre and asserts that '[i]t shouldn't come as a surprise that students will turn to AI to write these white-standardized essays'.[37] AI, she convincingly argues, mirrors the expected language and structures of academe 'in the most sanitized and distant way possible. Violent as hell'.[38] According to Kynard, it is the white-standardised language and form, AI's insistence on form over content, that is 'violent'. While Kynard's focus is the composition classroom, the concerns she raises about whether traditional research papers, in fact, facilitate learning and whether the rubrics faculty attach to these essays do the kind of diversity-oriented work they often claim to do still applies to the types of essays commonly assigned in literature classrooms:

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[36] Derek Owens, 'Essay', in *Keywords in Composition Studies*, edited by Paul Heilker and Peter Vandeberg (Portsmouth: NH, Boynton/Cook, 1996), pp. 85-87 (p. 85).

[37] Kynard, When Robots Come Home' (para. 6 of 14).

[38] Kynard, 'When Robots Come Home' (para. 9 of 14).

> The one stock essay form seems the easiest to teach and grade . . . This, however, does not mean that this is the only way to teach writing [or close reading in the case of the literature classroom], that this is a worthwhile assignment for teachers to give or students to complete, that there is only one kind of essay and one way to write it, or that there is only one kind of information and one way to dump it into writing.[39]

Instead of asking how to teach students to write with AI, how to catch students who have written with AI, or how to create essay prompts that will, somehow, beat AI, literature faculty should be asking why we want to hold onto the standard academic essay at all. In our estimation, this is a topic more readily discussed in composition studies and one that needs to be taken up by literature teachers as well.

To that end, Asao B. Inoue poses an important question: 'What I mean is how does a teacher not only do no harm through [their] writing assessments, but promote social justice and equality?'[40] As we thought through the challenges AI poses to contemporary literature classroom instruction and moved beyond the initial dejection, we became increasingly frustrated with the innate racist practices we were holding on to, even valuing, including the expectation that the essay constitutes the only valid form of student evaluation. In addition, assessment culture in academia has shifted the focus of teaching, moving discussions away from student learning and silencing the fact that exploration, play, and failure are essential to learning.[41]

While we acknowledge that rethinking the essay will not solve many of the challenges facing higher education today, we do believe that this is a first step in processing our collective grief and perhaps rebuilding a more equitable learning environment. As we designed the alternative assignments we share below, we asked ourselves what we wanted students to learn and what we wanted them to glean from the process of demonstrating that learning, instead of asking how we wanted our students to fit what they had learned into an essay. We all took different roads to a similar observation: the creation of pedagogically meaningful

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[39] Carmen Kynard, '"Getting on the Right Side of It": Problematizing and Rethinking the Research Paper Genre in the College Composition Course', in *Genre Across the Curriculum*, ed. by Anne Herrington and Charles Moran (Logan, UT: Utah University Press, 2005), pp. 128-51 (p. 135).

[40] Asao B. Inoue, *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future* (Anderson, SC: Parlor Press, 2015), p. 3.

[41] Shore and Wright, p. 431.

alternative assignments requires risk-taking, play, and a willingness to fail and try again.

If Not the Essay, Then What? Alternative Assignments for the Victorian Literature Classroom

Teachers of Victorian literature have devised countless creative alternatives to the standard academic essay. Indeed, when we presented the below list at the North American Victorian Studies conference in Bloomington, Indiana, in November 2023, a vigorous discussion followed during which many scholars shared their own riffs on these assignments. Resources such as the Collaborative Organization for Virtual Education (COVE) and *Undisciplining the Victorian Classroom* provide robust collections of assignments in this vein.[42] Here we list some of the alternatives to the standard essay assignment that we have developed in our Victorian literature classes or in classes that feature Victorian literature. We have found these assignments and activities to assess or practise many of the same skills we hope students develop through traditional literary analysis essays. While these assignments tend to be less ChatGPT-hackable, that feature is less important to us than the fact that they more authentically engage our students in their learning.

In our opinion, and here we echo Seybold's *American Vandal* podcast, any response to the encroachment of technology capitalism on scholarship and on teaching has to be a collective one.[43] In sharing these alternative assessments, then, we wish not only to offer a glimpse into the wide range of alternatives to the standard academic essay, but also to engage in a practice of collective labour-sharing. We hope that readers will use, adapt, develop, and hack these assignments in their own classrooms, so that we might together build a robust collection of new ways for our students to write, think, and feel.

Teach Something!

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[42] Pearl Chaozon Bauer, Ryan D. Fong, Sophia Hsu, and Adrian S. Wisnicki (eds.), *Undisciplining the Victorian Classroom* (2021) https://undiscipliningvc.org [accessed 15 April 2025].

[43] Matt Seybold, 'EdTech, AI, & The Unbundling of Research & Teaching: *Criticism LTD*, Episode #13', *American Vandal Podcast* (2 November 2023) https://marktwainstudies.com/unbundling [accessed 15 April 2025].

Kimberly Cox developed her 'Teach Something!' assignment for her lower-division British literature survey at a public, open-enrolment college in remote Nebraska. The assignment challenges students to teach the class how an assigned section of a novel can be situated within its historical context (which the class explored during the first part of the semester) and to guide the group through an exercise that facilitates critical thought and verbal engagement. During the weeks dedicated to this final assignment, students determine what content will be discussed by deciding what they each find significant about the assigned novel. Cox's rubric rewards students for their depth of thought in the conception and planning of the activity more than for their success in running the classroom.

Key to this assignment is that Cox transfers control over classroom content and pedagogy to her students, becoming a facilitator and co-learner instead of teacher. She moves around the classroom, assuming the seat of the student who is presenting and whatever role the presenting student assigns her. Students are given half of a class period for their teaching demonstrations, and Cox grades students predominantly on their reflection that is due by the class period following the activity. One future high-school language arts teacher asked the class to imagine being twelfth graders preparing for an upcoming test on Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) by playing mad libs; Cox and students had to provide character names and plot details for the pre-written sentences, and also had to come up with emotions, moods, and tones to describe portions of the novel, which required unexpectedly interpretive work. Another presentation had the class imagine they were consumers asked to review a trip aboard the Nellie from Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* (1899) using *Yelp* to criticise British colonialism in the Congo.

This assignment emphasises close reading, analysis, creativity, synthesis, and both spoken and written discourse without privileging the essay format. The assignment's structure requires risk-taking and results in the decentring of traditional authority in the classroom. It facilitates deeper engagement with the course itself and its readings because students are tasked with determining content and managing a class, a particularly productive experience for English education majors who are often sidelined in literature programs. And, finally, it gives students space to mess up or fail and reflect on perceived successes and failures, which, in turn, helps them think about learning as a process rather than product. Cox has run versions of this assignment in face-to-face and online classrooms for a decade now and continues to find that this assignment generates students'

investment and creativity because it demonstrates her interest in what her students have to say.

'Inspired by'

Riya Das developed the '"Inspired by" Creative Project', an assignment asking students to synthesise course materials of their choice to reflect their creative interests. Students prepare an original creative piece inspired by a specific aspect in the syllabus, such as a historical figure, poem, essay, or novel. The assignment simultaneously introduces students to the process of adaptation or remediation of a text and empowers them to conceptualise creative work as academically valuable. Das initially developed the assignment for an introductory interdisciplinary humanities course at an R-2 classified Historically Black University outside of Houston. Befittingly inspired by her introductory students' enthusiastic responses to not just the creative artifacts they produced but the active processes of contemplation, creation, and reflection, Das later revised and used the assignment in an intermediate survey on world literature and an advanced course on Shakespeare at her institution.

For the '"Inspired by" Creative Project', students may adapt a text temporally, for example, writing a modernised screenplay based on a scene in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* (1862). Students may also adapt a text into a different genre, for example, by creating a painting or a collage based on Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (1853). Students may further modernise a text and represent it on a twenty-first century digital platform, for example, by creating social media feeds for a character from Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1893). Finally, students write a reflection detailing the significance of preparing a creative work focused on the literary or historical material of their choice, thereby centring their own voices in their writing. Students are thus able to play with and interpret texts through multimodal channels, while also learning to translate their original creative ideas into thoughtful narrative. This transmediation is an empowering method of intellectual engagement and writing beyond the bounds of the traditional essay.

The notable adaptability of the 'Inspired by' assignment not only allows Das to assess the effectiveness of her major essay-alternative assignment across instructional levels and subjects, given the broad range of courses most Victorianists teach, but also enables students to put their creative capacities in conversation with the academic material they were studying in class, thereby

rendering the act of writing a part of their creative process and output. As Das's students often note about this assignment, it amplifies their abilities and voice, and, in turn, mitigates the urge to seek original interpretations of texts elsewhere.

Victorian Museum

Shannon Draucker created a 'Victorian Museum' assignment for an upper-level Victorian literature class at a Franciscan liberal arts university in Albany, New York. Throughout the semester, students encounter several examples of the Victorians' fascination with exhibitions from the rise of institutions such as the Victoria and Albert Museum (1852) and Natural History Museum (1881) to the Crystal Palace Exhibition (1851) and the Colonial and Indian Exhibition (1886) as well as texts such as TN Mukharji's *A Visit to Europe* (1889). These examples encourage students to think critically about the politics of the Victorians' impulses to collect, preserve, and display artefacts. Throughout the semester, Draucker urges her students to find delight and intrigue in the many strange cultural artefacts the Victorians left behind: photos of the London Zoo's famous hippopotamus Obaysch, notices of performances by spiritual mediums, and advertisements for pills for 'sluggish livers' and other ailments. She prompts students to connect these artefacts to broader social and political phenomena such as the imperialist implications of the exotic animal trade and the emergence of zoos, the gendered and racial dynamics of the rise of spiritualism, and increased anxieties over public health and growing knowledge about disease spread.

The 'Victorian Museum' project invites students to create small exhibits on Victorian-era topics of their choice. The assignment has two parts. Part One, 'You as a Curator', invites students to write an exhibit introduction and compile a collection of at least eight artefacts, with captions for each. These artefacts can be literary, such as quotations from novels or poems, or cultural, including photographs, advertisements, and newspaper articles. Two of the eight artefacts must be present-day items: images or links to articles reflecting their topic's ties to contemporary concerns. In spring 2020, for instance, a student paired articles about the 1854 Broad Street cholera outbreak with photographs of healthcare workers during the early COVID-19 pandemic to draw parallels between these two crucial moments in public health history. In Fall 2022, a student examined diagrams of nineteenth-century dance forms (soft shoe routines, skirt dancing, polkas, and mazurkas) alongside photographs of twenty-first-century performer Misty Copeland to investigate the gendered and racial politics of dance culture

both in the nineteenth century and today. The exhibits can be presented digitally, for instance on blogs, PowerPoints, Word documents, or PDFs, or physically, as on poster boards. Part Two, 'You as Museum Visitor', takes place on the final day of class, and invites students to display their exhibits in the classroom and visit each other's exhibits.

The 'Victorian Museum' assignment helps students to develop their primary-source research skills and practice using digital databases such as the *British Newspaper Archive*, the *City of London Picture Archive*, and *HathiTrust*. It prompts students to organise, interpret, and synthesise information. On the exhibit day, students practice oral communication skills such as speaking in public and asking good questions. Most importantly, the exhibit day creates a vibrant learning community: the room buzzes as students walk around their museums and share excitement about each other's artefacts in ways far more dynamic and interactive than a traditional essay allows.

Narrating Victorian Poetry

Ashley Nadeau developed her 'Narrating Victorian Poetry' assignment as a complement to her study of student experiences with audiobooks in the Victorian literature classroom. Because her Victorian literature courses also serve as research sites, Nadeau's syllabi are weighted towards those nineteenth-century novels that are readily available as audiobooks at the expense of other genres of writing, like poetry. Wanting to expand her reading list and expose her students to a more diverse body of writers, Nadeau devised a choose-your-own-adventure assignment that challenged her students to become an expert on a poem of their choice and produce their own audio narration and interpretation of the text to share with their classmates. Provided with a list of suggested authors (including some from COVE's own list of 'Works by and about People of Color')[44], students choose a poem to research, recite, and post as a recorded narration in a shared, digital COVE anthology. They then write narrator's statements describing how their research informed their narration and reflecting on how the act of recitation shaped their critical and affective response to the poem.

The recorded narrations and accompanying narrator's statements are evidence of Nadeau's students' sustained, intimate, and creative engagements

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[44] COVE, 'Works by and about People of Color'
https://editions.covecollective.org/content/works-and-about-people-color [accessed 15 April 2025].

with these texts. Students have compared Emily Brontë's 'No Coward Soul is Mine' with their own feelings of faith, provided a carefully timed and historically appropriate score for a narration of Amy Levy's 'A Wall Flower', and reflected on the complexities of representation and appropriation in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point'. One admitted to reading and re-reading her poem over one hundred times as she perfected her narration. While not every student is so assiduous, few will soon forget the poem they practiced and recorded for an audience of their peers.

Although Nadeau's assignment maintains a written component, this multimodal project fosters both intellectual and emotional engagement with literature. In terms of assessment, self-evaluation and the specificity with which students can discuss their process and the stylistic choices they made in recording their narration are valued over the formal elements of the traditional literary analysis essay. This loosely structured, student-driven format accommodates undergraduates with varying levels of academic experience and preparation. This latter point is especially critical in the context of the public, open-enrolment university where Nadeau teaches and is in keeping with her embrace of audiobooks as a means of making her classes more accessible for non-traditional and neurodiverse students. Building on the accessibility aims that animate this project, Nadeau intends to encourage future sections of students to contribute their recordings to Librivox's Weekly or Fortnightly Poetry project. As a volunteer-run, public domain project, Librivox provides a necessary counter to the increasingly commercial audiobooks industry and thus ensures future students will have access to free audio editions of Victorian literature. Her complete assignment and overview are part of a cluster of 'Beyond the Essay' assignments published on *Undisciplining the Victorian Classroom*.[45]

Recitation Triptych

Kate Nesbit's three-part 'Recitation Triptych' project, like Ashley Nadeau's, asks students to practise performing close textual analysis through reading aloud. The project takes inspiration from the central claim of Catherine Robson's *Heart Beats* (2012): that the body of an individual reading a poem in the twenty-first century is different from the body of an individual reading that

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[45] Ashley Nadeau, 'Audio Encounters with Victorian Poetry', *Undisciplining the Victorian Classroom* (2025) https://undiscipliningvc.org/html/assignments/audio_encounters.html. [accessed 15 April 2025].

same poem in the middle of the nineteenth.[46] Students are asked to complete three tasks for this project. Firstly, an oral performance of two excerpts from our course texts, unified around a common theme of the student's choosing. Secondly, an 'historical context' essay that asks students to imagine they are performing this passage in the year it was published and consider how larger cultural trends, historical events, and contemporaneous texts would influence its interpretation. And finally, a creative nonfiction essay in which students reflect on the experience of reciting these pieces now, in their national and regional context, as themselves.

By pairing this assignment with readings excerpted from Dwight Conquergood's article on 'Rethinking Elocution' and Joshua St. Pierre's *Cheap Talk: Disability and the Politics of Communication*, the assignment also asks students to examine elocution's long-standing investments in ableist notions of comportment as well as classed and racialised Standard English.[47] The troubling aspects of elocution's history inform this assignment's assessment. The grades and feedback centre on interpretive intent rather than metrics related to the so-called 'quality' of a student's delivery, posture, or confidence. In their required 'performance notes' as well as their creative essays, students offer up summaries of this 'interpretive intent' and, in doing so, put forward analyses of Victorian literature that are deeply personal, richer, and more nuanced because of it. Students have recited excerpts from Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850) and George Bernard Shaw's *Candida* (1898) to critically examine their own family's mandates of religious obedience; from *Mansfield Park* (1814) and *Oliver Twist* (1837-9) to narrate their experiences of homecoming; from Gerard Manley Hopkins and Egbert Martin on experiences of affect that transcend language. Nesbit has always been struck by how these students teach her to see these texts in new ways (ways, one might add, that ChatGPT would never anticipate). And Nesbit has noticed that, through memorisation and recitation, students learn to attend to the details of language and sound more thoroughly than they would if simply instructed to close-read a passage.

Though this assignment can work well anywhere, the project carries unique resonances where Nesbit teaches in rural Iowa. The state has a particularly rich

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[46] Catherine Robson, *Heart Beats: Everyday Life and the Memorized Poem* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

[47] Dwight Conquergood, 'Rethinking Elocution: The Trope of the Talking Book and other Figures of Speech', *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 20.4 (2000), 325-241; Joshua St. Pierre, *Cheap Talk: Disability and the Politics of Communication* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2022).

history of nineteenth-century elocution and literary performance, as Marian Wilson Kimber has chronicled in her book *The Elocutionists*.[48] Delsarte performances, oratorical contests, and elocutionary concerts were popular across the country in the late nineteenth century, but especially so in Iowa. This old obsession has, in a way, lived on through the enduring centrality of speech and speech clubs in Iowa high schools. 'Speech' is a required class for all Iowans, and Speech Team is an enormously popular extra-curricular activity. For many of Nesbit's students, the task of literary performance is a familiar and perhaps nostalgic one, and a task rooted in local history. By combining performance, historicism and reading history, and strategic presentism, this assignment asks students to consider how historical moments, their bodies, and their modes of reading influence a text's interpretation.

Infographic

Doreen Thierauf's infographic assignment invites students to create a digital poster illustrating a social problem or development from one of the course texts, combined with a formal presentation of that poster to the class. Thierauf designed the assignment for her upper-level Victorian novel course at a predominantly minority-serving institution in rural North Carolina. Students design the infographic to provide their audience with a succinct visual representation of their research. It is guided by a thesis that may be either implicit in the infographic's design or explicitly labelled – though it must be stated directly when the student presents the infographic to the class. Ideally, students' infographics teach the rest of the class to view a text in a new light, and Thierauf explains to students that they should consider it a pitch for a researched insight.

Students may detail the individual moments of a coming-of-age story, map characters' travel or movements, or design a constellation of character relationships. In Spring 2024, Thierauf's students created infographics, for example, on the 'Phases' of Tess's social fall – a reverse coming-of age plot – in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) which was depicted using the anchoring image of a downward-facing funnel. Another student visualised the complicated exchange of blood, money, and knowledge among the cast of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) which ultimately leads to the birth of Mina and Jonathan Harker's son, rendered as a complex bubble chart with various color-coded lines

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[48] Marian Wilson Kimber, *The Elocutionists: Women, Music, and the Spoken Word* (Urbana Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

and annotations. A third student tracked the physical movements of the cast of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) between the novel's two estates, leading them to the realisation that the Grange serves as a space that catalyses social friction, while Wuthering Heights operates as a space for that friction's explosive denouement.

Students may use a mix of keywords, short phrases, or sentences to help the viewer understand the infographic's point, though longer paragraphs are explicitly discouraged. As the class prepares for this assignment, Thierauf dedicates instruction time to visiting websites such as Canva, Easel.ly, Piktochart, and Knightlab's Timeline, which offer easy-to-adapt templates. Some students may opt to design their infographic from scratch, but, even then, extant templates provide models from which they can draw inspiration. The goal of this assignment is to both educate and visually entertain readers in a relatively short amount of time and to defend an idea without notes to an audience of peers. This task requires familiarity with the text, close-reading, analysis, and the ability to synthesise a great amount of information and relay it to an audience in a visually interesting and approachable way.

Concluding with Hope

Where we end, then, is really where we started – with the death of the standard academic essay. Yet, we hope to have arrived at a different stage of grieving: not with the sense that the humanities are dying or that literary studies and Victorian studies are doomed to disappear, but instead with a sense of acceptance and a willingness to embrace new models for teaching and learning. Instead of worrying about generative AI, we would rather take risks in the classroom to better facilitate learning. We would rather focus on the generative potential of failure as a pedagogical approach rooted in the play and potential that Victorians attached to literary exercises.

As we stated above, this moment requires a collective response. Our working conditions are our students' learning conditions. The student with whom we began this article is cynical about their education because the people who run academia are cynical about education. Seybold reminds us that the 'online-ification, EdTech, . . . and the digital university are actively hostile to the humanities'.[49] We will not necessarily stop assigning take-home writing

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[49] Matt Seybold, 'EdTech, AI, & The Unbundling of Research & Teaching: *Criticism LTD*, Episode #13', *American Vandal Podcast* (2 November 2023)

assignments, as others have done, because that would mean 'accepting the deskilling of our labour that ChatGPT already portends': if we do not teach writing, we 'agree to being deskilled even before the university has forced it on us'.[50] What we will start doing, however, is reimagining what that writing looks like: notes for leading a class session, creative work, exhibit introductions and captions, scripts for narration, historical context analyses and creative nonfiction pieces, infographics, and other forms that place content above form. The great thing about writing, especially writing about literature, is that it is ambiguous and adaptable, like humans. While we were trained to expect our students to write with 'abstract, philosophical, and multisyllabic vocabularies' which approximates white-standardised English, this is not a necessary feature of academic writing.[51] And now, AI has perfected it anyway. As Kynard suggests, non-standardised languages and forms are far more difficult for generative AI to approximate, and that is where instructors can focus their efforts – creating assignments that students care about doing.

As we hope this article has shown, the death of the essay as an assessment genre encourages us to think more creatively about what students actually need to learn and how we can better engage them in showing us how they learned it. Over the past two years, we have encountered think pieces and institutional tools that encourage us to embrace generative AI in the classroom. But perhaps, paradoxically, one of the best opportunities posed by something like ChatGPT lies not in our use of the technology, but rather the embodied, whimsical, and exploratory ways we find to dispense with it.

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https://marktwainstudies.com/unbundling [accessed 15 April 2025].
[50] Seybold, 'EdTech'.
[51] Owens, p. 85.

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Re-inventing the Schoolmaster:
Teacher Training in Early 19th-century London

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Abstract

This paper explores a piece of the puzzle that is central to the emergence of state education in the British Empire. Between 1810-1840, the British and Foreign School Society and the Anglican National Society both founded central teacher training schools in London. Both the National Society (NS) and the British and Foreign School Society (BFSS) were run by non-state actors who believed in the importance of religious education, the necessity of providing education to England's poor, and in the importance of preventing their rival from controlling education. Even though the monitorial system sought to mechanize and circumvent the role of the schoolmaster, in Britain pedagogical training and the professionalization developed precisely out of this moment. What happened between about 1810 and 1840 was nothing less than the invention of the modern British schoolteacher.

'Proper teachers cannot be expected to spring up like mushrooms' wrote Joseph Lancaster in his 1805 pamphlet, *A letter addressed to John Foster esq,* 'completely formed in a night, and well qualified for this most arduous undertaking'.[1] In the pamphlet, Lancaster laid out his plan for a new system of education for Ireland's poor children, perhaps appealing to John Foster because of his control, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, over Ireland's budget. Ensuring a supply of good teachers was 'the first object' since the schoolmaster was 'an office on which the national morals and the fate of empires depend'.[2] Lancaster's programme was ambitious, and conservative educationalists like Sarah Trimmer balked at his desire to promulgate his system across the empire, warning against the possibility of him 'render[ing] a project *permanent*'.[3] Trimmer's assessment

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[1] Joseph Lancaster, *A Letter to John Foster, Esq., Chancellor of the Exchequer for Ireland, on the Best Means of Educating and Employing the Poor, in That Country* (London: Printed and sold by Darton and Harvey, 1805).

[2] Lancaster.

[3] Sarah Trimmer, *A Comparative View of the New Plan of Education Promulgated by Mr Joseph Lancaster*, n.d.

was shrewd and over the following decades this is precisely what Lancaster's supporters and competitors aimed to do.

In the first decades of the nineteenth century, reformers of all stripes positioned education as central to the changing realities arising out of Britain's rapidly expanding, industrial empire. Increased access to education was seen as simultaneously dangerous and miraculous, capable of both inciting revolutions and, in Britain's counter-revolutionary moment, preventing them by transforming pupils into grateful, industrious subjects. The reformers working on education projects across the British Empire competed with one another for state resources and control over an imagined centralised system they sought to build. Long before the passing of the 1870 Education Act that often serves as a starting point for historians of national education the fight to shape British imperial education coalesced in the 1810s around schoolmasters and schoolmistresses.

From 1810-40, the schoolmaster underwent a major transformation from an individual whose professional career was tied to a personal reputation to an accredited, trained professional representing a broader organisation. Why was the schoolmaster transformed? Why did accreditation supersede personal reputation as the measure of a good teacher? Fundamental to this transformation was the institutionalisation of teacher training, a shift which occurred across and connected imperial locales. This paper focuses on Britain's first teacher training institutions, which were born in London out of the competing efforts of the Anglican National Society (NS) and the Dissenting British and Foreign School Society (BFSS). By centring the schoolmaster-in-training, these societies aimed to entrench their religious and political visions for national and imperial education at the most local level. Both societies quickly came to see teacher training as the mechanism for achieving their desire to centralise their operations, enforce ideological compliance, and minimise expenditures. They converged on teacher training despite espousing radically different confessional commitments, with the NS advocating for strict adherence to Anglicanism, and the BFSS, a broadly non-denominational Protestantism.[4] In doing so, they identified and constructed the modern schoolmaster as the ideal agent of imperial policies and ideologies.

The first teacher training institutions developed out of the competition of private actors motivated by religious differences. Both the NS and BFSS were

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[4] Anglicanism itself was in a moment of evolution and fragmentation but this is not the focus of this chapter, Anglican supporters of the National Society were also motivated by these internal pressures to push for a singular vision of religious doctrine and practice.

run by non-state actors who believed in the importance of religious education, the necessity of providing education to England's poor, and in the importance of preventing their rival from controlling education. Both operated on a monitorial model, designed to maintain order in a school while dramatically increasing the number of pupils. These two societies developed competing educational networks in which teachers, trained at their very similar training institutions, became the centres of their respective spheres of influence. In both cases, centralised teacher training was a way to circumvent the role of the independent schoolmaster. Though the rigid, mechanical monitorial system, which portrayed the schoolmaster as essentially a factory foreman, might seem antithetical to pedagogical ideals, this was the precise moment from which pedagogical training in Britain developed. Understanding the teacher-training model developed by this competition thus requires tracing the concurrent development of these societies from the last decades of the 18th century onwards.

Unlike the founders of these societies, whose colourful lives have received no shortage of scholarly attention, there has been no monograph in the last 50 years to focus on teacher training at these institutions, and none that has taken an imperial scope in the overall project.[5] Recently, work focused explicitly on colonial education has described these central schools to contextualise the monitorial moment in America, Canada, Australia, and India.[6] While much previous scholarship has been limited by a focus on the printed reports of these

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[5] John Lawson and Harold Silver, *A Social History of Education in England* (London: Routledge, 2013); Carl F. Kaestle, *Joseph Lancaster and the Monitorial School Movement: A Documentary History*, Classics in Education, no. 47 (New York: Teachers College Press, 1973); Mora Dickson, *Teacher Extraordinary: Joseph Lancaster, 1778-1838* (Sussex, England: Book Guild, 1986).

[6] For more see, Rebecca Swartz, *Education and Empire: Children, Race and Humanitarianism in the British Settler Colonies, 1833-1880*, Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019); Jana Tschurenev, *Empire, Civil Society, and the Beginnings of Colonial Education in India* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Helen May, *Empire Education and Indigenous Childhoods: Nineteenth-Century Missionary Infant Schools in Three British Colonies*, Ashgate Studies in Childhood, 1700 to the Present (Farnham, Surrey, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014); Gary McCulloch, 'Empires and Education: The British Empire', in *International Handbook of Comparative Education*, ed. Robert Cowen and Andreas M. Kazamias (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2009), 169–79; Lawson and Silver, *A Social History of Education in England*.

Swartz, working with case studies from western Australia, the Cape Colony, Natal, and the West Indies, argues convincingly that education reflected the constant dual goal in the colonies to provide a labour force and to civilise.

societies, the manuscript records reveal both a depth of imperial engagement and internal contestation.[7] A thorough engagement with the manuscript records of both the BFSS and the NS reveals details about the training institutions' operations from their inception, and the correspondence of key individuals helps differentiate the goals and priorities of the two societies. In particular, the local debates within these sources, connected to the broader narratives in pamphlets, newspapers, and parliamentary records, are essential for articulating the multi-scoped imperial process shaping teacher training in this period. Attention, both to the broader manuscript record and the imperial scale, reveals that discussions around state supported education centred on concerns about imperial subjects and broad societal shifts rather than narrowly national questions.

Though still focused on a later state-led development, Chris Bischof's work on the teaching profession in Britain has argued convincingly for the central role of teachers as imperial state agents both at home and abroad, beginning in 1846.[8] Bischof's work is a notable exception to the strong tendency in teaching and state education literature to begin accounts with the 1870 Education Act. The overwhelming focus on this landmark legislation, which mandated universal elementary education and represents a monumental increase in schooling provision, obscures the earlier developments that centered on training and funding teachers. My work takes on the earlier period and the origins of arguments for imperial education standards and the professionalisation of

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[7] My work has been enriched by the scholarship of George Bartle, the longtime archivist of the British and Foreign School Society archive at Brunel University, and now by the work of Inge Dornan at the same institution. Dornan's work highlights the importance of the BFSS Borough Road College in the expansion of elementary education in the West Indies, though it does not address the role of the National Society or of the shift in pedagogy occasioned by their institutions. Inge Dornan, '"Book Don't Feed Our Children": Nonconformist Missionaries and the British and Foreign School Society in the Development of Elementary Education in the British West Indies before and after Emancipation', *Slavery & Abolition* 40, no. 1 (2 January 2019): 109–29; Inge Dornan, 'Conversion and Curriculum: Nonconformist Missionaries and the British and Foreign School Society in the British West Indies, Africa and India, 1800–50', *Studies in Church History* 55 (June 2019): 410–25. G.F. Bartle, *A History of Borough Road College* (Kettering, Northamptonshire: Dalkieth Place Limited, 1976).

[8] Christopher Bischof, *Teaching Britain: Elementary Teachers and the State of the Everyday, 1846-1906* (Oxford University Press, 2019). Bischof has highlighted the importance of the earlier 1846 Minutes of the Committee of Council on Education in prompting reforms in teacher-training not only in England but in Scotland as well, recognising the earlier period as one of flux and experimentation.

teachers. The earlier non-state-led education initiatives have been seen as separate from national education when, in fact, they served as its blueprint.

When the BFSS and the NS founded their central schools, they relied on the fame and personal reputations of their respective pedagogical partners, Lancaster and Andrew Bell. Both these men were, and remain, imposing names in education largely due to their competing claims to inventing the monitorial school system.[9] Both Lancaster and Bell argued that their system was the cheapest, simplest, and most replicable method of imparting elementary education. They also both exerted an outsized influence on the initial development of teacher training institutions. While some scholars have pointed to the pedagogical differences in their respective publications, but looking at the rules, timetables, and descriptions of the two central schools suggests that in practice, the systems operated similarly.

Bell was an Anglican reverend who took over the Madras male military asylum between 1789-96. He transformed it into a school on his own version of a monitorial system and used it as the case study for his educational treatise when he returned to England in 1797. The Madras school was neither an importation of an English school on Indian soil nor a genuine adaptation of any indigenous pedagogical practices and was instead a system designed by Bell to maintain his authority over the school. The asylum's students were children of white soldiers and Indian mothers. Bell aimed explicitly to separate the children in his school from their mothers' influence. The monitorial system Bell designed was also meant to reduce the cost and influence of Indian assistant teachers who previously taught at the asylum alongside the schoolmaster.[10] In 1797, after returning to England, Bell published an account of his school and methods, hoping to gain wealthy patrons and potential employers. Bell's manual *An Experiment in Education* was not recognised for its genius until after Lancaster established his albeit 'imperfectly copied' monitorial school 'clogged with many extraneous devices'.[11]

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[9] François Jacquet-Francillon, *Naissances de l'école du peuple: 1815-1870* (Editions de l'Atelier, 1995), 117. Charles Démia, a 17th century French priest and educationalist, was already using "officers" and "prefects" in his schools for poor children. He also published treatises on his method.

[10] Rev. Andrew Bell, *An Experiment in Education, Made at the Male Asylum of Madras. Suggesting a System by Which a School Or Family May Teach Itself Under the Superintendance of the Master Or Parent. By the Reverend Dr. Andrew Bell, ...* (Cadell and Davies; and W. Creech, Edinburgh, 1797).

[11] Bell.

Lancaster had begun a school out of his father's attic in the 1790s. He moved to the eponymous Borough Road school after his propensity to freely admit children who could not pay fees quickly expanded the school roster beyond the attic's capacity. With hundreds of students in attendance, Lancaster began to train a few of his students as monitors to assist him and, in 1803, he published his method for teaching hundreds of students under one roof and one schoolmaster. Lancaster was constantly fundraising for his school and proselytising his method, which was commonly referred to as either the Lancastrian or British system.[12] In his 1803 *Improvements in Education,* Lancaster had referenced Bell's earlier guide in passing but claimed to have developed his method independently. According to Andrew Bell, it was following the success of Lancaster's treatise, that Bell was called upon by the Church of England to set up a 'complete specimen of the new system of education in its original simplicity and beauty'.[13] Ultimately, each treatise was popular enough to go through numerous editions and expansions over the following decades. Since various monitorial schools were based on a multitude of these texts as well as various syntheses there was no superlative model, but the central schools run by both Lancaster and Bell were set up in largely the same way.

The schoolmaster, who could oversee 1000 students at a time, ensured the proper management and functioning of the giant, open-floor plan schoolroom. In sub-divided sections of the school, smaller classes were taught by monitors not much older than their students. Joseph Lancaster wrote that all students could be divided into two categories: those who could read a given lesson and those who could not.[14] If a student could read the lesson, he could teach that lesson to others. Each lesson was conducted by students reciting their answers one after another in a prescribed order until the lesson was complete. If a student made an error, the next one would have to correct him, and so on until that portion of the lesson was corrected. In the frontispiece of Lancaster's book, a young boy is shown

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[12] Adam Laats, *Mr. Lancaster's System* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024).

[13] Rev. Andrew Bell, 'Rev. Andrew Bell to Robert Banks Jenkinson, Lord Liverpool. Memorandum on Dr.Bell's Madras System', 1816, Add MS 38564 ff.162, British Library.

[14] Joseph Lancaster, *The Lancasterian System of Education, with Improvements* (Published for the author, and sold only at the Lancasterian Institute, 1821); Joseph Lancaster, 'Pamphlet. New and Singular Improvement in the Mode of Tuition for Youth' (c 1833), BFSS/1/5/1/2/1/1/2, Brunel University Library; Joseph Lancaster (Founder of the Lancasterian System of Education.), *Instructions for Forming and Conducting a Society for the Education of the Children of the Labouring Classes of the People, According to the General Principles of the Lancasterian ... Plan ... Second Edition, with ... Additions*, 1810.

simultaneously examining the slates of multiple boys. The slates read 'Long Live the King'.
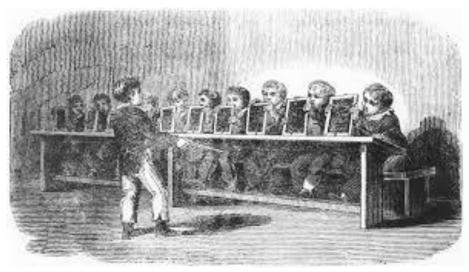

Figure 1: Frontispiece, Joseph Lancaster. *The British System of Education: Being a Complete Epitome of the Improvements and Inventions Practised at the Royal Free Schools, Borough-Road, Southwark*. London, Longman & Co, 1810.

Students were motivated by an elaborate system of merits and demerits, and progress was constantly assessed by inspections and competition, where 'every boy is placed next to one who can do as well or better than himself: his business is to excel him […] if the boy who wears number 12 excels the boy wearing who wears number 11, he takes his place'.[15] The top student in each class received a merit ticket, a visible mark of honour one could wear like a medal. The girls' classes functioned in much the same way, aside from the fact that the girls spent about half of their days practising needlework. Notices and records of the examinations held at London central schools on Bell and Lancaster's systems point to analogous curricula, initially largely focused on reading, writing, and arithmetic. As the schools developed, the examinations demonstrated a wider breadth of education, predominantly for the older boys. In 1827, with Lord John Russell presiding, the advertisement promised that students would:

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[15] Joseph Lancaster, *Improvements in Education, As It Respects the Industrious Classes of the Community*, 1st ed. (London: Darton and Harvey, 1803).

Write from dictation, then some boys will show progress in maths, geometry, then geography, grammar, then the reading class questioned in scripture. Then the girls will exhibit their needlework, and the best writers their work, and then questioned on duties as servants, their knowledge of needlework and exercised in arithmetical tables, and then will read and be questioned on the holy scriptures.[16]

Both educators also stressed the importance of educating future teachers in their monitorial method at the central school. Lancaster stressed that teachers needed 'a knowledge of the theory of the system; secondly, a social, firm, kind manner of acting upon it, including the operation of their own good principles and character; thirdly a *practical acquaintance* with the system'.[17] Stressing the importance of teaching experience, Lancaster asked 'Do men learn to be good mechanics, designers, engineers, or chemists, by *mere* theory, or six weeks observation?'[18]

When establishing schools in England and especially the central school at which teachers were trained, Bell employed the same focus on repetition, competition between pupils, and attempts to employ social pressure as an alternative to corporal punishment. Subsequent publications of the two education treatises brought them closer and contemporary guides to setting up the schools use elements from each, differing only in the approach to religious instruction.[19] In subsequent publications outlining his system, Bell also began referring to his school assistants as 'monitors' and stressed 'emulation' of peers and monitors as a goal for students. Thus, while Frances Ferguson has made the argument that Bell's system fostered a stronger focus on the child as an individual, this difference was quickly eclipsed in practice.[20] In their detailed analysis of the

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[16] British and Foreign School Society, 'Public Examination Notice 10/4/1827' (n.d.), BFSS/2/10, Brunel University Library.

[17] Lancaster, *The Lancasterian System of Education, with Improvements*.

[18] Lancaster.

[19] W. Buckwell, *A Small Manual ... to Assist Plain Country School Masters and Mistresses to Understand and to Adopt Dr. Bell's System of Instruction*, 1820; Nathaniel John Hollingsworth, Andrew Bell, and Joseph Lancaster, *An Address to the Public, in Recommendation of the Madras System of Education, as Invented and Practised by the Rev. Dr. Bell* (London: Printed by Law and Gilbert, 1812).

[20] Frances Ferguson, 'The Social Organization of Schools (around 1800)', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 56, no. 4 (2016): 823–43.

Kennington National School, Pamela and Harold Silver describe the school as functioning exactly like a Lancastrian monitorial school during this period.[21]

The distinction between the two societies' methods, then, was of concern to the founders' reputations, but not the motivation for the opposition of the BFSS and the NS. More than any procedural difference, the central divide between the two school models was their religious focus. Lancaster was a Quaker and insisted on the use of the Bible 'without note or comment' in his school. He argued that in this way no children would be excluded by insult to their peculiar Christian creeds.[22] The promoters and main funders of the Lancastrian system spanned a wide spectrum of dissenting beliefs which necessitated compromise in the religious instruction they promoted. Pragmatically, they believed that only a broadly Christian organisation would successfully attract poor children on a sufficient scale. Bell was an ordained Anglican minister who firmly advocated for the necessity of the schoolmaster elaborating on the principles of the established church as central to the educational project. He was supported explicitly by the Church of England, and though the NS founded on his system did not explicitly limit attendance to children of Anglican parents, they did maintain the importance of the catechism and attendance at an Anglican service on Sundays.[23]

Within the classroom, religious instruction in both systems was characterised by a call and response style of questioning. For example, the teacher or monitor would ask a question from the approved question book and the students would recite the appropriate answer. Lancaster based his scriptural

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[21] Pamela Silver and Harold Silver, *The Education of the Poor: The History of the National School 1824-1974* (London: Routledge, 2007).

[22] 'no successful attempt can be made for the education of the poor unless schools should be open to the children of parents belonging to all religious persuasions and the plan of instruction be conducted upon such principles as may ensure that cooperation and union of professors of every Christian communion.' Committee of the Royal Lancastrian Institution, 'Minute Book 1811-1813' (28 May 1813), BFSS/1/1/1/1/3, Brunel University Library.

[23] 'That the committee are anxious to call the attention of the general committee to that last article, and particularly to that part of it, which requires instruction in our excellent liturgy and catechism and a consequent attendance on divine service on the lords day, as it is the unanimous and decided opinion of the members of the corresponding committee and they feel it their duty most strongly to declare that opinion, that if these instructions and this attendance be not absolutely required, the society will avowedly and directly abandon the great principles and ends on which the society is constituted.' 'National Society, 'Corresponding Committee Minutes Vol. 1' (9 January 1812), 13, NS/2/2/7/1, Lambeth Palace Library.

lessons on John Freame's *Scripture-Instruction* which posed questions such as 'What did the Prophet Isaiah say, concerning the coming of Christ?'. These were answered with a direct scriptural quotation, in this case Isaiah 9:6: 'Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given'[24] Frederic Iremonger's text, written for NS, includes questions such as 'Whom did God raise up from time to time? What did the prophets foretell?'. Students would respond 'Prophets foretold the coming of the messiahs. Isaiah was one of the most eminent of these prophets'.[25] These answers paraphrased Scripture rather than quoting directly and conformed to Anglican doctrine. On the other hand, Freame's text aimed explicitly to exclude anything that could be opposed on doctrinal grounds. While we cannot know to what extent individual teachers deviated from these guidelines, and thus how truly divergent the religious instruction in the schools proved, inspectors and visitors' testimonials demonstrate that students often memorised the answers without any awareness of the meanings of the sentences they recited.[26] While this was not the ideal level of religious engagement sought by educationalists, this method meant that the schoolmaster's adherence to the system and to the lessons particularly important. In either case, students needed to memorise the appropriate doctrine. The societies had to ensure they could guarantee schoolmasters' compliance.

A strong religious positionality, whether strictly Anglican or strictly non-denominational or dissenting was important because faith drove the bulk of educational funding. Philanthropists with a wide range of religious beliefs participated in a range of shared charitable projects and education was an increasingly popular area of charitable work. However, education funding was still generally demarcated along religious lines.[27] In the case of Lancaster, the BFSS was founded when some wealthy dissenters, William Allen, William Corston, and Joseph Fox, decided to join together to support Lancaster's

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[24] John Freame, *Scripture-Instruction: Digested Into Several Sections, by Way of Question and Answer. In Order to Promite Piety and Virtue, and Discourage Vice and Immorality. With a Preface Relating to Education* (Assigns of J. Sowle, 1713).Joseph Lancaster, *The British System of Education: Being a Complete Epitome of the Improvements and Inventions Practised at the Royal Free Schools*, 1810, 14.

[25] Frederic Iremonger, *Questions for the Different Elementary Books Used in the National Schools*, 1833.

[26] National Society, 'March 3rd 1830, School Committee of the National Society, Vol. 5' (17 December 1824), 3, NS/2/2/2/1/5, Lambeth Palace Library.

[27] Elissa S. Itzkin, 'Bentham's Chrestomathia: Utilitarian Legacy to English Education', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 39, no. 2 (1978): 303–16.

education system in the 'full conviction of the incalculable benefits which not only this country but the civilised world' could derive from its expansion. They did so to save Lancaster's school society from bankruptcy as he was over £6000 in debt at the time. Their broad mission statement demonstrated their varied philanthropic interest and the need to attract a big tent of potential donors formed 'for the purpose of affording education, procuring employment, and as far as possible to furnish clothing to the children of the poorer subjects of King George III, and also to diffuse the providential discovery of vaccine inoculation'.[28] The stated initial purpose of the society reveals that founders' attitudes about the ultimate goals of their philanthropy. Many of the original founders of the BFSS were Quakers and funding was largely driven by religious networks. Within that, however, educationalists were also broadly social reformers interested in tackling the problem of urban poverty through providing food and clothing to children and public health measures like inoculations. The school was a space that allowed for an intersection of these goals. The committee solicited subscriptions and controlled the funds while Lancaster had 'full liberty' over the superintendence of education in all schools 'except where expenses are to be incurred'.[29]

Meanwhile, under the patronage of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Bell organised schools on his system first at the parochial schools of Whitechapel and Lambeth and then at the Royal Military Asylum. In 1811, top Anglican officials and various noble benefactors founded the NS explicitly 'founded on the idea of making the national religion the foundation of national education'.[30] Lancaster's London school had been established first and though several schools on each model were being set up, according to the Mayor, 'Mr. Lancaster's system greatly prevail[ed]'.[31] The Society believed that Lancaster's schools would 'alienate the minds of the people from it [the established church] and [would] prove fatal to the church and to the state itself'.[32] If the NS prevailed instead, they believed there would be 'no occasion for new schemes, or new machines, or new influence'.[33] Bell's personal fame and reputation rivaled Lancaster's and he had received the

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[28] Committee of the Royal Lancastrian Institution, 'Minute Book Vol.1' (1808), 22 January 1808, BFSS/1/1/1/1/1, Brunel University Library.

[29] Committee of the Royal Lancastrian Institution, 'Minute Book Vol.1'.

[30] National Society, 'General Committee Minute Book Vol.1' (1815 1812), NS/2/2/1/1/1, Lambeth Palace Library.

[31] National Society, 54–56.

[32] National Society, 'General Committee Minute Book Vol.1'.

[33] National Society, 'Committee of Enquiry and Correspondence' (1838), NS/2/2/8/1, Lambeth Palace Library.

approval of important pedagogues and intellectuals such as Trimmer and Samuel Coleridge.[34] The growth of Lancaster's school and the formation of the BFSS around it had quickly been identified as a threat to Anglican educationalists. The NS was therefore, in large part, reactionary. Bell was the answer to Lancaster's success and once begun it grew even more rapidly.

As the system spread, the rivalry between the BFSS and the NS grew which stood to benefit both parties. The BFSS was pleased to quote at length a letter from Halifax in 1812 stating that though a school on Bell's system had been opened, the inhabitants had resolved to abandon it and establish one on 'more liberal principles', particularly with regards to mandated church attendance.[35] While a novelty in Halifax, across England both societies sought to affiliate schools anywhere their rivals were present. In 1831, John Hull, a BFSS school inspector, reported that in the country, the national schools were 'beggarly, and detested by both parents and children'.[36] Writing to Henry Dunn, the BFSS secretary, Hull reported that a parson in Mill End had taken Bibles away from students who had left the national school and gone to theirs, but that attendance continued to increase.[37] The two societies also competed in the press, through public lectures, by courting wealthy benefactors, and by establishing rival schools.

In 1814, the BFSS proposed a plan to unite the national and Lancastrian schools in small towns or places with limited funds and suggested this to the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Royal Free School at Canterbury was struggling to compete with the Canterbury Diocesan School, which was affiliated with the NS. The BFSS applied to the Archbishop via his Highness the Duke of Kent, requesting that Catholic and Dissenting students be admitted into the school but not made to recite the catechism. The Archbishop refused. In their annual report, the BFSS quoted the NS's claim to accept 'children of all denominations of Christians' in support of which 'Society churchmen and Sectaries' contributed

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[34] Satya S. Pachori, 'Dr. Andrew Bell and Coleridge's Lectures on Education', *The Journal of General Education* 35, no. 1 (1983): 26–37; Ferguson, 'The Social Organization of Schools (around 1800)'.

[35] Committee of the Royal Lancastrian Institution, 'Minute Book Vol.2' (1812), 257, BFSS/1/1/1/1/2, Brunel University Library.

[36] 'John Hull to Henry Dunn, Agents' and Inspectors' Correspondence' (Hillingdon, 1 July 1831), BFSS/1/1/7/4, Brunel University Library.

[37] 'John Hull to Henry Dunn, Agents' and Inspectors' Correspondence'.

donations.[38] This was a clear-cut fundraising strategy and the BFSS argued that there was a need for 'an Institution which provides schools for all'.[39]

In financial terms, the two societies were not on equal footing. The prominent funders on the dissenting side in the BFSS were outspent fairly easily by the contributions of the Prince Regent, the Queen, the Duke of York, more than twenty bishops, the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, and so forth.[40] In their 1818 report, the NS reported a total income of £10738 and an equivalent expenditure, of which £450 was spent on payments to training masters and £2600 on grants to affiliated schools.[41] The BFSS reported an income of £2535, of which £270 was spent on board and clothing for the training masters and over £40 on grants of books and lessons. None was spent on affiliated schools.[42] Ultimately, this meant that the NS was able to affiliate or help institute a much higher number of schools across England.

However, the competition between the societies extended well beyond English borders. From the outset, both Bell and Lancaster entertained global ambitions for their systems. Bell's original school was the male asylum in Madras and he wrote in his first *Experiment on Education* treatise: 'It is the grand aim of this seminary to instill into these children every principle fitting for good subjects, good men, good Christians; …in such habits as may render them most useful to their patrons and benefactors.' In publishing the treatise, he suggested the extension of this influence to other such subjects across the empire.[43] Lancaster's own promotional materials for his lectures and speaking tours advertised that 'His

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[38] *Report of the Committee to the General Meeting of The British and Foreign School Society, November 1814* (The Royal Free School, London: Longman and co., 1815), 24.

[39] *Report of the Committee to the General Meeting of The British and Foreign School Society, November 1814*, 27.

[40] National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church, *Annual Report of the National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church* (Printed at the Free-School, Gower's Walk, Whitechapel, 1818). In 1818, the Queen donated £650, and Oxford and Cambridge donated £1300 a piece.

[41] National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church.

[42] *Report of the British and Foreign School Society to the General Meeting, July 2, 1818, with an Appendix.* (Royal Free School, Borough Road: Longman and co., 1818).

[43] Bell, *An Experiment in Education, Made at the Male Asylum of Madras. Suggesting a System by Which a School Or Family May Teach Itself Under the Superintendance of the Master Or Parent. By the Reverend Dr. Andrew Bell, ...*

Object and desire is, and has always been, EDUCATION for THE WHOLE HUMAN RACE, as general as the dew, or the light of Heaven'.[44]

Both took the publicity dimension of their work very seriously by hosting and corresponding with diplomats, nobles, and educationalists from the Russian Empire to Haiti. Both were engaged in the nineteenth century equivalent of building their brand. The BFSS was quick to point out that while the NS limited its operations to England and Wales, their system could be expanded to Scotland, Ireland, and abroad.[45] Patrick Ressler describes both societies as engaged in pedagogical marketing and acting as 'educational franchisers'.[46] The society's brand was best represented by the schoolmaster and their credentials from the society's central school. As the central schools' numbers grew, the schoolmasters and schoolmistresses became the representatives of the system beyond the schools' doors, not only as exemplary products of the monitorial system and recruitment tools for potential students and donors, but also as information nodes connecting local communities back to London.

Once the central schools began to train schoolmasters, both societies received requests to send them across the world, from Quebec to the Cape Colony to Bombay to Russia.[47] The breadth of imperial activities at these metropolitan central schools were ambitious; they allowed missionaries to train at their schools, they sent schoolmasters and school supplies abroad, and they boasted about their wide reach in their annual reports. Even their domestic work served this larger imperial purpose. John Hull remarked that 'If Englishmen were well educated, they would emigrate and spread civilisation and improvement over the world'.[48] The two societies also accepted a few students from the colonies to be trained at their schools. Between 1813 and 1815, the Society of Saint Patrick, which was hosting Irish boys studying to be schoolmasters at Borough Road, also

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[44] Lancaster, 'Pamphlet. New and Singular Improvement in the Mode of Tuition for Youth'

[45] *Report of the Committee to the General Meeting of The British and Foreign School Society, November 1814.*

[46] Patrick Ressler, 'Marketing Pedagogy: Nonprofit Marketing and the Diffusion of Monitorial Teaching in the Nineteenth Century', *Paedagogica Historica* 49, no. 3 (1 June 2013): 297–313.

[47] Further requests to both societies include Newfoundland, Montreal, St. Helena, Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad, the Kingdom of Haiti, Guatemala, Venezuela, Mauritius, New South Wales, New Zealand, Madras, Ceylon, Sweden, Denmark, and Ireland.

[48] 'John Hull to Salter, Agents' and Inspectors' Correspondence' (Gloster Coffee House, Hillingdon, 17 July 1827), BFSS/1/1/7/4, Brunel University Library.

boarded four boys from the African institution in Sierra Leone.[49] At the same time, the Church Missionary Society was training their missionaries at Baldwin Gardens before they also left for Sierra Leone.[50] Later, in 1816, Bell remarked that 'Few have ever lived to see the works of their hands flourish and spread to the same degree, with so well grounded a promise of their speedy extension to the utmost boundaries of the habitable world'.[51]

At the centre of these apparently magnificent changes were the teachers who were trained in the central schools to subsequently transform their local populations. This belief was shared by both societies and, in each case, highlighted the importance of teacher training. Each claimed they could receive a pupil from rural England, Ireland, or Jamaica and after attending the school they would be transformed into model English subjects. In 1819, a young man returned 'to his native country of Africa', likely the Cape Colony or Sierra Leone, after spending two and a half months at the NS school. In that time, it had bestowed upon him 'an excellent character'.[52] In some cases, the extent of the imperial connections was ephemeral and tenuous. For example, a missionary might train for a few weeks and leave. Or, a teacher might be sent out to a posting and return prematurely. Additionally, as was often the case in the colonial context, a teacher might be sent out but ultimately die within months or even prior to arrival.[53] However, in some cases, as with the BFSS in Ireland, the connections were deep, long lasting, and significant. Lancaster had a particular interest in Irish education. He travelled to Ireland to give popular lectures on education and raised subscriptions for Lancastrian schools in Ireland. He took on young Irish boys and trained them to be schoolmasters at a boarding house in Tooting until the BFSS forced him to surrender all his students to the Borough Road college and boarding house. He also sent John Veveers, one of his earliest students, to the Kildare Place Society in Dublin, an educational charity for the poor.[54] Veveers went on to become the Society's school inspector and exercised influence over the

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[49] Committee of the Royal Lancastrian Institution, 'Minute Book Vol.2', 425.

[50] National Society, 'Register of Masters (No. 2)' (1846 1843), NS/7/6/1/3/1, Lambeth Palace Library.

[51] Bell, 'Rev. Andrew Bell to Robert Banks Jenkinson, Lord Liverpool. Memorandum on Dr. Bell's Madras System', 1816.

[52] National Society, 'School Committee [Minute] Book' (24 April 1818), 128, NS/2/2/2/1/3, Lambeth Palace Library.

[53] 'Letter from Thomas Jesty to Pratt: 27 March 1819: Freetown' (1819), CMS/B/OMS/C A1 E7A/18, Church Mission Society Archive.

[54] Committee of the Royal Lancastrian Institution, 'Minute Book Vol.2', 182.

development of Ireland's national education system, the first in the British Empire.

  While the two founders of the societies were hugely important for soliciting initial donations, and for establishing an authoritative claim to pedagogical innovation, both societies quickly distanced the founders from the day-to-day activities in the schools. Bell and Lancaster were initially given full power to examine and approve candidates but eventually spent significant time away from their school. This duty was quickly and permanently delegated to the local headmasters: Mr. Johnson at Baldwin Gardens and Mr. Pickton at Borough Road.[55] Lancaster's ongoing financial troubles precipitated his separation from the BFSS as did accusations of physical abuse against some of his pupils. This was particularly damning since one of the core principles of the Lancastrian system was a move away from corporal punishment. Initially, Lancaster tried to maintain a separate school and boarding house at Tooting, but ultimately the committee required Lancaster to close both and refused to readmit the students until he cancelled the personal indentures he held with each of the boys. By 1814, following his falling out with the committee, Lancaster had been fully removed from the organisation, which was subsequently renamed.[56] After Lancaster was removed the committee was given 'paramount power' over the institution and 'undivided authority' over each person affiliated with the BFSS.[57]

  For his part, Bell maintained a much longer connection to the NS although he was often away on lecture tours and was not involved in the school's day-to-day activities. Instead, decisions for the school were made by the school committee and later communicated to Bell for his knowledge, rather than approval.[58] In both cases, control over the schools and pedagogical authority shifted quickly from the personal influence of Bell and Lancaster to the societies.

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[55] Committee of the Royal Lancastrian Institution, 'Annual Report, Minutes Vol. 2' (1812), BFSS/1/1/1/1/2, Brunel University Library.

[56] Committee of the Royal Lancastrian Institution, 'Minutes at a Meeting with His Royal Highness the Duke of Kent, Minutes Vol.2' (13 August 1813), BFSS/1/1/1/1/2, Brunel University Library.

[57] Committee of the Royal Lancastrian Institution, 'Minute Book Vol.2', 425.

[58] National Society, 'The School Committee of the National Society Minutes Vol. 1' (24 January 1812), NS/2/2/2/1/1, Lambeth Palace Library; National Society, 'August 9th 1816 Meeting, School Committee of the National Society, Minutes Vol. 2' (27 October 1815), NS/2/2/2/1/2, Lambeth Palace Library; National Society, '27th Feb 1828, School Committee of the National Society, Vol. 5' (17 December 1824), NS/2/2/2/1/5, Lambeth Palace Library.

In the first decade of operation, both institutions greatly expanded. As they took on control of the central schools, the general and school committees simultaneously grew their outward reach. Teachers proved central to each organisation's expansion. Both societies were trying to grow their influence by bringing as many schools as possible under their banner. The structure of the BFSS did not extend beyond its committee and the Borough Road school. While it corresponded with schools all over the world, it could not directly govern or oversee them. And although the NS was better connected by virtue of their affiliation with the Anglican diocese, technically they existed as an independent organisation and as such, did not have the ability to directly oversee individual schools. Instead, both societies outlined what conformity entailed. For the BFSS, it published a manual for how to set up a Lancastrian school. Central to its message was the use of the Bible without note or comment. It counted those correspondents professing to follow the system as affiliated with them.[59] The NS published their criteria such as not teaching any texts not published by the SPCK and counted on their list those schools who sent them their conforming rules and regulations along with a desire to affiliate.[60] In exchange, schools were promised support, potential funding, and access to schoolmasters or to training for their existing schoolmasters. Paradoxically, the BFSS also hoped to use affiliated local education societies to raise funds for the central body. Even with a much higher level of funding, the NS faced significant financial challenges and neither society was able to take on funding the hundreds of new schools that were built. Though they were constantly turning down requests for financial support, and depended on local funding for school construction, the societies could continue to exert control through the supply of schoolmasters and schoolmistresses.

Ultimately, both societies turned to their schoolmasters as their eyes, ears, and enforcers. BFSS trained teachers might be hired by a school and subsequently adjust it to make it conform to the society's rules. For example, by removing the church catechism as a school text and allowing attendance at a dissenting chapel on Sundays.[61] In 1815, the NS resolved that all training masters sent out on temporary assignments to schools were required to present written reports on

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[59] National Society, 'Corresponding Committee Minutes Vol. 1'; Committee of the Royal Lancastrian Institution, 'Minute Book Vol.2'.

[60] National Society, 'Corresponding Committee Minutes Vol. 1'.

[61] Committee of the Royal Lancastrian Institution, 'Saunders to Henry Dunn', 1833, BFSS/1/1/1/1/2, Brunel University Library.

those schools upon their return.[62] A few years later, the reports became mandatory for the schoolmasters and mistresses wishing to receive their pay and the reports became standardised by requiring details on pupils' church attendance.

In addition to schoolmasters' reports, both the BFSS and the NS also made use of school inspectors. In the case of the NS, inspectors were recommended as early as 1813. They were described as 'persons duly qualified to examine the mode in which [the schools] are conducted and the degree of perfection of the madras system practiced'.[63] Thus, the inspectors had to be members of the NS's committee or else trained at the central institution. This was the situation at the BFSS as well, where the first inspector, appointed in the mid-1810s, was a volunteer member of the committee. Subsequent inspectors were trained schoolmasters. The BFSS inspectors travelled not only to ensure schools were following the Lancastrian system, but also to encourage, fundraise, establish new schools, give public lectures on the merits of the system, and to take over and correct schools they found in bad shape. However, inspectors had to be paid for their extensive travels and would have been perceived as intrusive or an outside imposition on the local community. Schoolmasters were often sent from their local community to train in London and then returned home to teach. This allowed both societies to extend their influence without appearing to override local authorities and local school committees.[64]

The NS maintained their network of teachers by controlling their professional reputations and their teaching appointments. The general committee was quick to dismiss teachers or to unaffiliate schools who arranged their appointments separately. In 1837, the committee reiterated that any personal communications between managers of schools with masters and mistresses in training were strictly prohibited and 'all overtures…be made through the medium of the committee only'.[65] They also did not allow any of their schoolmasters to take on additional employment. For example, Thomas Mumford was dismissed for charging students in exchange for providing additional instruction in

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[62] National Society, 'Dec 1st 1815 Meeting, School Committee of the National Society, Minutes Vol.2' (27 October 1815), NS/2/2/2/1/2, Lambeth Palace Library.

[63] National Society, 'March 26th 1813 Meeting, The School Committee of the National Society Minutes Vol. 1' (24 January 1812), NS/2/2/2/1/1, Lambeth Palace Library.

[64] National Society, 26.

[65] National Society, '13th April 1837 Meeting, The School Committee of the National Society Minutes Vol. 6' (15 January 1835), NS/2/2/2/1/8, Lambeth Palace Library.

arithmetic.[66] Once sent out to their posts, teachers were expected to remain there unless called back, to avoid the displeasure of the committee, and the possible removal from the teaching list, which controlled all appointments within the national system.[67] Once removed from the list, candidates could not be readmitted, even, as in one instance, with the support of the Archdeacon of Cambridge.[68]

The NS also took a further step in exerting control over the teaching profession. From its inception, the NS contributed to the Schoolmasters Society, a benevolent society for schoolmasters. Working with the society, which requested their patronage, the NS agreed to provide pecuniary aid to the society if they changed their name to 'the society of schoolmasters upon the Madras system, under the patronage and protection of the national system'.[69] This meant that schoolmasters working under the BFSS system had to either set up their own societies or forfeit the security for themselves in old age or for their families in case of their death.

In many ways, the purpose of cultivating a new, modern class of schoolmasters lay in this network and in the oversight and continuous influence the societies could exercise through their teachers. Lancaster argued that schoolmasters were not mushrooms springing up out of nowhere, but, in fact, they were somewhat like mushrooms in the sense that they were spread out over vast distances, connected by a network invisible to the naked eye, and yet powerfully shaping their ecosystem. Unlike the rhizomatic networks of fungi, schoolmasters were closely tied into the central nucleus of their respective societies. The ideal schoolmaster attracted students, maintained a positive relationship with the local population, and most importantly, sent back regular communications to London. Based on teacher's manuals published by Bell, Lancaster, the BFSS, the NS, and various syntheses of their systems, the schoolmaster had more in common with a manager than a pedagogue. In 1806, Patrick Colquhoun, a Scottish merchant, statistician, and founder of the Thames police, wrote his own education treatise based on Bell's system. In it, he wrote that 'the province of the master or mistress is to direct the whole machine in all its parts…it is their business to see that others

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[66] National Society, 'School Committee Minute Book Vol. 4' (June 1821), 169, NS/2/2/2/1/4, Lambeth Palace Library.

[67] National Society, '13th April 1837 Meeting, The School Committee of the National Society Minutes Vol. 6', 192.

[68] National Society, 'School Committee Minute Book Vol. 4', 215.

[69] National Society, 'Corresponding Committee Minutes Vol. 1'.

work, rather than work themselves'.[70] In 1818, the committee of the NS drew up a precise list of rules for the schoolmistress which included not attending to individuals, but rather to 'look over the whole collectively' and see that her assistants 'understand and do their duty'.[71]

Both the BFSS and the NS prescribed rigid models for which books schoolmasters could use, how the school day should be organised, and even how attendance should be recorded. These rigid models were an intentional departure from the earlier model of an independent schoolmaster. While schoolmasters in parish and charity schools required a license from their minister, volunteer Sunday schoolmasters could teach as they wished and day schoolmasters could charge and teach according to their skills and the demand for their services. In her critique of the Lancastrian system, Trimmer saw the schoolmaster as following the description in James Talbots' *The Christian School-master,* someone who confirmed *'with himself* whether he is duly qualified for it' (emphasis mine). The schoolmistress was meant to be inspired by works such as Talbot's to understand her duties and could study independently from a variety of books designed to instruct her. Lancaster, as we saw in the opening quotation, believed that schoolmistresses and masters should instead be trained and officially qualified according to the specific plan he had outlined. Much like how many of Lancaster's initial schoolmasters-in-training were personally indentured as his apprentices, Trimmer suggested training schoolmasters on either Talbot's plan or Bell's version of the monitorial system and then apprenticing them to more experienced schoolmasters. Following this, Trimmer suggested the student might "engage himself as an assistant" before, at a proper age, having weighed the importance of his charge he would 'submit to the examination of the parochial minister and the trustees of the school' and 'pledge himself to the constitution in church and state'.[72] Trimmer acknowledged that the system she described had not proven sufficient. She saw the mechanical aspects of Lancaster's system as a benefit but wanted to see them enshrined within a school structure where the

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[70] Patrick Colquhoun, *A New and Appropriate System of Education for the Labouring People: Elucidated and Explained, According to the Plan Which Has Been Established for the Religious and Moral Instruction of Male and Female Children, Admitted Into the Free School, No. 19, Orchard Street, in the City of Westminster* (Savage and Easingwood, 1806).

[71] National Society, 'June 19th, 1818 Meeting. School Committee Minute Book' (24 April 1818), NS/2/2/2/1/3, Lambeth Palace Library.

[72] Trimmer, *A Comparative View of the New Plan of Education Promulgated by Mr Joseph Lancaster*.

schoolmaster remained under the authority of the minister. Lancaster had redesigned the instruction in his school but followed a conservative apprenticeship model not far from what Trimmer described. The transition to committee control over the central school also involved a shift in the authority of qualifying teachers.

Trimmer's attempt to integrate monitorial education into her vision of the ideal schoolmistress demonstrates how the schoolteacher embodied the central promise and contradiction of monitorial schooling. Mechanical education itself was not a problem. Trimmer argued that the '*mechanical part* of Mr. L's plan must be approved by all who are advocates for the instruction of the rising generation of the labouring people'. Both Lancaster and Bell described their systems as operating like steam engines, conveying efficiency and progress, and not the inevitability of unthinking rote-learning the analogy may conjure for the modern reader. Cheap, replicable education was a goal shared by reformers across religious and political divides. Monitorial education did receive these criticisms, but it was not a foregone conclusion, and the pedagogical training goals espoused by its founders were much more ambitious.

Lancaster described the training schoolmasters should receive as follows.

> The best information of the various modes of tuition practised in the lower or superior seminaries, as they relate to the simple objects of the proposed institution, should be gleaned from every field. The best authors should be read, and remarks made by the instructor and students; lectures should be frequently read on education, or subjects connected with it; the students should be required to answer questions unprepared, and viva voce; the simple answers to which should naturally be the echo of the lecture; by this means accustoming the youth to exercise their attention on the subject before them…when the young men are in training for this important employment, they should have an ample knowledge of its theory, and at all events be taught actually to reduce it to practice; to understand the reason of every operation and have it nature explained while practicing it.[73]

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[73] Lancaster, *A Letter to John Foster, Esq., Chancellor of the Exchequer for Ireland, on the Best Means of Educating and Employing the Poor, in That Country*. Trimmer was once again astute when she remarked that 'the simplicity of this plan vanishes out of sight, when such a comprehensive preparation is brought forward'.

When the societies initially took charge of the central schools, training mainly consisted of serving as monitors in the central schools. In both cases, candidates for admission were required to present testimonials to their good moral and religious conduct from their ministers or preachers.[74] There were many similarities between the institutions' concern for the moral virtue of their candidates. In both cases, the candidates were eventually required to reside at their respective boarding houses and required the committee's permission which was, at times, withheld to live elsewhere. The committee could keep an eye on their students and reprimand them for immoral behaviour outside of school. This was the case when multiple candidates at the NS, male and female, were reprimanded for attending a water party followed by a dance.[75] Another student was removed following a report of a 'want of sobriety'.[76] In many cases, schoolmasters were questioned, reprimanded, and suspended from the school following reports of violence and corporal punishment in their classes.[77] In another instance, Mary Jones Pirce was removed from the candidates for schoolmistress due to being 'impudent and violent in her conduct and language'.[78]

Though no detailed records of the early entrance examinations survive, in both societies, they also included some assessment of academic ability. The NS records mention several instances when candidates were turned away because they were insufficiently proficient. They followed these rejections with letters to their diocese noting that the school was designed to train schoolmasters, not to instruct them in reading and writing. In the case of Mary Nixon who was admitted to the NS school in 1819, her poor orthography led to her expulsion.[79] The BFSS also noted multiple candidates whose applications were discouraged although they did not specify their specific criteria or reasoning.[80]

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[74] National Society, 'The School Committee of the National Society Minutes Vol. 1'.

[75] National Society, 'August 9th 1816 Meeting, School Committee of the National Society, Minutes Vol. 2'.

[76] National Society, '11th April 1839 Meeting, School Committee of the National Society, Vol. 5' (15 January 1835), 35, NS/2/2/2/1/8, Lambeth Palace Library.

[77] National Society, '11th April 1839 Meeting, School Committee of the National Society, Vol. 5'.

[78] National Society, '15th June 1827 Meeting, School Committee Minute Book Vol. 4' (June 1821), NS/2/2/2/1/4, Lambeth Palace Library.

[79] National Society, 'Jan 15th 1819 Meeting, School Committee Minute Book' (24 April 1818), NS/2/2/2/1/3, Lambeth Palace Library.

[80] British and Foreign School Society, 'General Minutes Commencing October 1830' (1835 1830), BFSS/1/1/1/1/5, Brunel University Library.

Surviving evidence of the candidate's proficiency dates to 1840. Initially, the entries were very brief.[81] The NS recorded the candidate's abilities upon entering and leaving the school in straightforward terms. Ann Hogg attended the Baldwin Gardens school at aged 22 between February and April 1840. Although she initially '[wrote] rather badly, [read] tolerably' and '[spelled] incorrectly', on leaving the school she '[wrote] rather better than at first, her reading not much improved', and still '[spelled] incorrectly'. Masters in training received slightly more detailed entries. For example, Henry Grumbold, aged 27, was described as 'reads well, writes a fair hand, spells correctly, scriptural history fair, liturgy pretty fair, doctrine – sound but not intelligent, arithmetic- proportion, composition moderate, misc- a little grammar – general intelligence fair, previous occupation – a teacher – has been above one month in training and has conducted himself in such a manner as to warrant any recommending his being promoted to master qualifying for a situation'.

These entries do not demonstrate a dramatic transformation in the students' abilities before they were qualified as schoolmasters. Despite the, ultimately, modest gains in academic achievement, over the first decades of their establishment the moral and academic standards at both institutions were elaborated and expanded. Missionary societies continued to send students to their schools in preparation for their mission, meaning that this was a desirable option and conferred some level of legitimacy despite the lacklustre results.[82] Ambitious educational goals were tempered by the circumstances of the students themselves, the high demand for teachers, and the expenses associated with the central schools. Students in each of the schools varied widely in age, work experience, and geographic origin. Schoolmasters sent to train from the country varied widely in ability and the previous occupations of other candidates were hugely diverse. They included a former Catholic priest, servant, joiner, policeman, gardener, and confectioner.[83] Schoolmasters in training also ranged in age from as young as 17 to as old as 45. On top of the difficulty of training schoolmasters with divergent experiences, the constant demand for schoolmasters meant that there was considerable pressure on the central institutions to train and send out candidates quickly. This meant tenures at the school tended to be as short as possible. Finally,

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[81] National Society, 'Register: Mistresses from Schools in Union to Learn the System (Vol. I)' (1850 1840), NS/7/6/1/2/1, Lambeth Palace Library. National Society, 'Register of Masters (No. 2)'.

[82] Dornan, '"Book Don't Feed Our Children"'.

[83] National Society, 'Register of Masters (No. 2)'.

the teaching institutions were expensive. In addition to the higher salaries required for the head schoolmaster and mistress, both societies paid or subsidised lodging for their students. The NS also paid salaries to their highest level of schoolmasters in training. By 1821, the BFSS had trained over 225 schoolmasters and 130 schoolmistresses.[84] Though my count is based on the available NS records, which are less precise, they certainly trained a greater number than the BFSS, sending out about 100 teachers per year by 1830. The output at the BFSS school also increased in this period, but it is likely that the NS trained upwards of twice the number of teachers.

Despite the many obstacles, specific academic requirements were gradually elaborated. In 1816, every master in training at Baldwin Gardens rotated 2-3 times through each class in the school, spending no fewer than 3 full days in each.[85] In 1821, at the request of the school committee, Bell created a proposal explicitly focused on the training of the masters, suggesting certain classes be set aside for that explicit purpose, focusing on phonics and the alphabet, spelling and reading, and more advanced tracts.[86] The following year, the candidates had to advance through 3 newly created tiers to be considered fully trained: probation, candidates for situations, and masters on the pay list. A decade later, the NS ordered the schoolmasters to begin training and studying 3 evenings a week to prepare for Mr. Johnson's examinations on Saturdays.[87] Finally in 1841, the NS further clarified that before moving off the probationary list, all masters and mistresses had to receive a certificate from Mr. Coleridge regarding their general proficiency, and Mr. Moody regarding their "proficiency in the art of teaching."[88] This second certificate, focused on pedagogy, was among the first of its kind in Britain.[89] Despite the consistent requests for teachers from affiliated schools, these certificates were not guaranteed and multiple students were told

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[84] National Society.

[85] National Society, 'August 9th 1816 Meeting, School Committee of the National Society, Minutes Vol. 2'.

[86] National Society, 'July 20th 1821 Meeting, School Committee Minute Book Vol. 4' (June 1821), NS/2/2/2/1/4, Lambeth Palace Library.

[87] National Society, '20th Sept 1833, School Committee of the National Society, Vol. 5' (3 December 1824), NS/2/2/2/1/5, Lambeth Palace Library.

[88] National Society, '13th May 1841 Meeting, The School Committee of the National Society' (1843 1840), NS/2/2/2/1/10, Brunel University Library.

[89] There is no direct corollary for the BFSS. I'm working to track down the founders' papers and the missionaries that trained there and will also look at their later records to see if there are any notes on what was retained and what the school looked like before.

that they could not be recommended for a situation and asked to leave the school.[90]

Scholars have argued that the government's involvement in education in Britain occurred so late because of the dominant position of these societies. However, the influence of this period on the state's involvement has not been fully explored. While the monitorial moment ended, its influence, and that of the BFSS and the NS, persisted. In Britain and the British Empire, state-run education was mapped onto the existing foundations built by these groups. Their reach in the arena of teacher training was already evident in the first decades of the twentieth century.

The evolution of the schoolmaster across the British Empire was initiated and fostered by the competition between these central schools and by their roles as the interlocutors between the central institutions and the hundreds of schools that received their teachers. In their attempts to control the religious character of national and imperial education, both societies identified teachers as the most effective instrument for achieving these goals. The creation of state-run education was an imperial problem from the outset, shaped by the ambitions of the BFSS and the NS, and initially implemented in teacher training institutes. Their networks of teachers survived well into the era of national education, and in this critical way the British Empire inherited the education landscape private reformers built.

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[90] National Society, '23rd November 1827 Meeting, School Committee of the National Society, Vol. 5' (17 December 1824), NS/2/2/2/1/5, Lambeth Palace Library.

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The Moralist Critic and the Student Activist: A Reconsideration

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Abstract

A prominent right-wing truism holds that there is something 'Victorian' about the aesthetic judgment of rising generations of the left; that, in the words of Coddling of the American Mind *co-author Greg Lukianoff, campus activists echo 'the thinking of the old Victorian censors.' Without accepting these terms, I suggest that resistance to this discourse should spur Victorianists to reconsider certain habitual scholarly dismissals made on uncomfortably parallel grounds. For those of us who take seriously contemporary activists' critiques, what might it mean to take seriously the Victorian moral criticism to which those critiques are persistently compared? In a cultural moment of hyper-alertness to what's problematic about art, might we be able to better appreciate the conceptual work of certain much-maligned nineteenth-century strategies of aesthetic evaluation? Through presentist, methodologically-oriented readings of Lady Eastlake's 1848 infamous attack on* Jane Eyre *in the* Quarterly Review *and F.R. Leavis's* The Great Tradition*, I argue that a "moralist" method links nineteenth-century critics, scholarly Victorianists, and cultural activists, and that scholarly repression of this moralism opens the field up to right-wing cooptation and reactionary thought.*

A prominent right-wing truism of the twenty-first century culture wars holds that there is something *Victorian* about the alleged 'woke moralism', 'political correctness', and 'hypersensitivity' of rising generations of activists. The rhetorical move has become a commonplace, with headlines blaring that 'the Woke are the new Victorians' or that 'the office romance has fallen victim to a new Victorianism'; Bari Weiss proclaims in *The New York Times* that '"Believe women" only works as a rule of thumb when all women are good. That myth falls flat outside Victorian England.'[1] Victorianism, to these writers, connotes rigidity,

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[1] Ed West, 'Why the Woke are the new Victorians', *Wrong Side of History*, 30 November 2021, https://edwest.substack.com/p/why-the-woke-are-the-new-victorians [accessed 13 March 2025]; Phoebe Maltz Bovy, 'The office romance has fallen victim to a new Victorianism', *The Globe and Mail*, 14 February 2023, https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-the-office-romance-has-fallen-victim-to-a-new-victorianism/ [accessed 13 March 2025]; Bari Weiss, 'Asia Argento Proves, Once Again, That Women Are Human Beings', *The New*

prudishness, naïveté, and most of all a kind of hectoring, moralistic censoriousness. *Coddling of the American Mind* co-author Greg Lukianoff sums up the charge, purporting that campus activists 'are echoing, in rationale and substance, the thinking of the old Victorian censors [of] the nineteenth century.'[2] The substance of these charges, if not always their language, gets rehearsed well beyond the activist right, particularly around questions of art and aesthetics. So esteemed a commentator as Wesley Morris complains that 'culture is being evaluated for its moral correctness more than for its quality'; Marxist critic Ben Davis declares in the pages of *Jacobin* that leftist cultural analysis 'overcoded with moralism' has fostered the '"virtue signaling" critique' and rendered progressive aesthetics 'more and more hollowed out.'[3]

An understandable, but misguided, impulse for many academics is to respond to all this as though it were really about us. To 'well, actually' about what Victorians were 'really like' is to miss the point; to purvey bromides about when and how and to what extent so-called woke moralism is justified only muddies the intellectual waters further while corroborating the right-wing framing of the question. Tacitly or openly, scholars tend to validate the idea that moralism is prima facie dubious, even and especially when working to show that, despite their moralism, activists (or novels) are also doing something more valuable. Yet if, as Ian Buchanan proposes, moral criticism is simply 'a tendency' to 'judge literary works according to moral rather than formal principles,' such dismissals rely on a highly artificial circumscription of the category of the 'moral'.[4] Many scholars, anxious about students tossing old books onto the ash heap of history, have fallen into the right's trap by equating a variety of aesthetic judgment—moral criticism—with a rejection of literary study as an activity. The truth, it seems to me, is the reverse: students rejecting a canonical author on political grounds are

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York Times, 21 August 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/21/opinion/ asia-argento-avital-ronell-weinstein.html [accessed 13 March 2025].

[2] Quoted in Elizabeth Nolan Brown, '4 Ways Neo-Victorianism Reared Its Ugly Head in 2014', *Reason*, 30 December 2014, https://reason.com/2014/12/30/neo-victorianism-in-2014/ [accessed 13 March 2025].

[3] Wesley Morris, 'The Morality Wars', *The New York Times Magazine*. 3 October 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/10/03/magazine/morality-social-justice-art-entertainment.html [accessed 13 March 2025]; Ben Koditschek, 'The Relationship Between Art and Politics is Shifting: An Interview with Ben Davis', *Jacobin*, 27 June, 2022, https://jacobin.com/2022/06/art-politics-nft-museum-worker-unions-cultural-appropriation [accessed 13 March 2025].

[4] Ian Buchanan, *A Dictionary of Critical Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 326.

participating in the very kind of humanistic inquiry that our shared enemies wish to dismantle.

Moreover, they are doing so in a fashion less distant from that of professional critics than some would like to admit. When critics point to a text's political potentiality, ways of imagining, promotion of ideology, extractive logics, and so forth, they are making a judgment of, in the strict sense, 'political correctness'—indeed, a moral judgment. Clearly, different conclusions can be drawn from such judgments, and one should neither expect nor desire a student activist and a scholar of literature to take identical lessons from the ideological rejection of a given text. But an overzealous conceptual distinction between critique and condemnation elides the real slippage between their respective implications. (The novel dropped from the syllabus, after all, is dropped whether you are expanding the canon or cancelling the classics.) Critical moralism should not be understood as a strictly delineated interpretive technique; rather, it is a 'tendency', a habit of assessing art in reference to its potential salutary or damaging effects on readers and culture. The prevalence of this style of analysis is obfuscated by the extent to which accusations of moralism tend to be applied only to ethical (or political) claims from which critics desire distance. As Sara Ahmed observes, 'The words "moralism" and "puritanism" are constantly being mobilized in anti-feminist writings […] because they allow a critique of power to be reframed (and dismissed) as an imposition of moral norms.'[5] Yet simultaneously, defences of the humanities persistently foreground moral claims about ethical engagement, improved citizenship, interpersonal insight, etc. Indeed, these claims themselves are highly aligned with mainstream Victorian defences of literature. We might, then, pose the question: why, given the prominence of moral claims in our own professional practices, does the reputation of moral criticism remain so poor?

Recent defences of critical judgment have tended to rigidly reject any whiff of moralism. Michael Clune, for example, explicitly contrasts 'the practice of literary judgment' with 'an equally venerable way of seeing literary study as a form of *moral* education', one that treats literature as a kind of ethical spoonful of sugar to help the medicine of 'positive moral attitudes' go down.[6] Clune objects, reasonably enough, to the idea that literature professors carry any

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[5] Sara Ahmed, 'Against Students', *The New Inquiry*, 29 June 2015, https://thenewinquiry.com/against-students/ [accessed 13 March 2025].

[6] Michael Clune, *A Defense of Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 186.

peculiar moral expertise credentialing such an exercise; he further asserts that such a project of moral education comes into conflict with 'the very openness to values that is a hallmark of expert aesthetic judgment'.[7] To the extent that the classroom is a laboratory of aesthetic judgment, Clune insists, it is perforce resistant to the possibility of externally-motivated censoriousness. Such a characterisation aligns with what John Guillory identifies as the 'moral/judicial' rationale for literary study, one that attributes to the literature classroom a kind of civilising mission, whether it be enacted through didactic modelling or suspicious unmasking of textual ideology. Guillory rightly identifies such a model as 'ubiquitous', whether in forms of demystifying ideological critique assessing 'the complicity of literary texts in social effects that can be adversely judged' or through a 'postcritical' emphasis on initial reader response that 'risks authorizing a regression to the baseline of readers' intuitive moral judgments'.[8] Without dismissing either of these methodological approaches out of hand, Guillory criticises their shared implicit conflation of 'the moral *contents* of a literary work with its moral *effects*'.[9]

This is not, however, the primary way moralist critics themselves have typically understood their methodological premises. And it isn't quite the procedure of most curricular activists either; I would suggest, instead, that they follow in a long line of interpreters whose implicit conflation works in the opposite direction. Moralist aesthetics do not presuppose that an immoral book, judged by some a priori standard, will inevitably have adverse social effects, but rather that the probable moral or social effects of a given work are an interpretive crux for evaluating textual morality. Rohan Maitzen has shown that Victorian critical moralism was not categorically prescriptive; rather, Victorians 'debated the merits of novels as if these books were part of their living world, not part of a separate aesthetic realm'.[10] Many of these critics, Maitzen explains, follow a protocol that is not really so distant from Clune's exhortation that 'artistic judgment requires that we place our existing values in suspension'.[11] It demands,

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[7] Ibid, 187.

[8] John Guillory, *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), xv, 357, 358.

[9] Ibid, 358.

[10] Rohan Amanda Maitzen, '"The Soul of Art": Understanding Victorian Ethical Criticism', *ESC: English Studies in Canada* 31.2–3 (June/September 2005): 151–85, (157).

[11] Ibid, 182.

though, a subsequent step: a weighing of the accuracy, applicability, and implications of textual values vis a vis the moral world of the reader.

Contemporary curricular activism may be more 'Victorian' in Maitzen's sense than in Lukianoff's, but in either case, the analogy should be sufficient to raise a further question. For those of us who take seriously contemporary activists' critiques of canonical aesthetics, what might it mean today to take seriously the Victorian moral criticism to which those critiques are persistently compared? In a cultural moment of hyper-alertness to what's problematic about art, might we be able to better recognise the conceptual work of certain much-maligned nineteenth-century strategies of aesthetic evaluation? This essay will take up two infamous works of Victorian(ist) moral criticism, written a century apart: Elizabeth Rigby, Lady Eastlake's 1848 attack on *Jane Eyre* in the *Quarterly Review* and F.R. Leavis's 1948 polemic *The Great Tradition*. Each text has, in its own context, become a byword for a kind of aesthetic thick-headedness both elitist and moralising, what Aldous Huxley once characterised (in relation to Leavis) as 'one-track moralistic literarism'.[12] Revisiting these texts steeled against the instinct to equate moralism with aesthetic incompetence, new questions arise around political judgment, committed art, and the submerged family resemblance between earlier critical practices and our own. Literary studies has not sorted out its own sense of the relationship between activist judgment and aesthetic education.

One reason for this is our reluctance to engage with elements of moralist method that already link Victorian critics, contemporary Victorianists, and cultural activists. In the first part of this paper, I will read Rigby's discussion of *Jane Eyre* alongside twenty-first century treatments of that novel to suggest that our methods and Rigby's are not always as far apart as they seem and, indeed, that the discipline's often sneering rejection of Victorian moral criticism enables an obfuscation of the moralism of our own methodological practices. I will then discuss activist arguments about curriculum and canon in relation to Leavis, proposing that some scholarly discomfort with activist arguments reflects the distortive nature of prevalent denialism about our own procedures of textual selection, a denialism of which the general disavowal of Leavis is emblematic. One cost of repression is persistent unease: a collective posture of unease places us in a position of bad faith with regard to curricular activism. In other words— to stake my own political-moral claim here—scholarly repression of our own

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[12] Aldous Huxley, *Literature and Science* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 1.

methodological moralism has opened the field up to right-wing cooptation and to reactionary patterns in our own thought.

I'll begin with Elizabeth Rigby's notorious 'Vanity Fair—and Jane Eyre', perhaps the most widely cited of all nineteenth-century 'wrong reviews'. Rigby's classism, conservativism, and rigid Christianity led her to a judgment of Brontë's novel that seems 'laughably extreme', 'vicious', and 'heterosexist'.[13] When modern scholars have defended Rigby as a critic, it has mostly been through an inversion of her politics: claiming that, like the Lukácsian Balzac, she was canny enough to recognise Jane's violation of codes of gender, or the novel's status as 'pre-eminently an anti-Christian composition', or Brontë's 'tone of mind and thought which has overthrown authority and violated every code human and divine abroad and fostered Chartism and rebellion at home', but erred in considering these negative features.[14] I don't dispute that Rigby's politics are in many ways noxious, including as they appear in the review, nor do I disagree that elements of Brontë's novel pose a radical challenge to those politics. But I think it's a mistake to reduce Rigby to either a punching bag or a symptomatic primary text, because her concerns about *Jane Eyre* (though not her conclusions) are very like our own.

Rigby convicts Brontë of 'chief and foremost that highest moral offence a novel writer can commit, that of making an unworthy character interesting in the eyes of the reader' (502). She continues: 'Mr. Rochester is a man who deliberately and secretly seeks to violate the laws of both God and man, and yet we will be bound half our lady readers are enchanted with him for a model of generosity and honour' (502–3). Rigby characterises Rochester's treatment of Jane as an abuse of power: 'he talks to her at one time imperiously as to a servant, and at another recklessly as to man' (501)…'Jane becomes attached to her

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[13] Patsy Stoneman, *Jane Eyre on Stage, 1848–1898* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007), 16; John G. Peters, 'Inside and Outside: *Jane Eyre* and Marginalization Through Labeling', *Studies in the Novel* 28.1 (1996): 57–75, 69; Claire O'Callaghan, '"He is rather peculiar perhaps": Reading Mr Rochester's Coarseness Queerly', *Brontë Studies* 44.1 (2019): 123–135, 124.

[14] Elizabeth Rigby, Lady Eastlake [Anon.], 'Vanity Fair—and Jane Eyre', *Littell's Living Age* 17 (March 1849): 497–611, 506. Reprinted from *Quarterly Review*. Further references are cited parenthetically in the text. See, for respective examples of these critical responses, Kathleen Vejvoda, 'Idolatry in Jane Eyre', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 31.1 (2003): 241–261; Susan Fraiman, *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993); and Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

"master", as Pamela-like she calls him' (502)...'it is easy to see that […] all concerning [Miss Ingram] is only a stratagem to try Jane's character and affection upon the most approved Griselda precedent' (502). She foregrounds his gaslighting—'He is captious and Turk-like—she is one day his confidant, another his unnoticed dependent' (501–2)—his maltreatment of Bertha Mason, 'whom now, in his self-constituted code of morality, he had thought it his right, and even his duty, to supersede by a more agreeable companion' (502), and his misconduct as an employer—'He pours into her ears disgraceful tales […] which any man with common respect for a woman, and that a mere girl of eighteen, would have spared her' (501).

This characterisation, mutatis mutandis, can be meaningfully aligned with both popular and scholarly critiques of *Jane Eyre* in the twenty-first century. When the feminist journalist Erin Blakemore describes Rochester as 'boorish and brutal[, engaging] his 18-year-old employee in work talk that is the 19th-century version of #METOO employment investigation fodder [by] conducting a master class in negging [and] mess[ing] with her mind by disguising himself as a Roma fortune teller', she echoes Rigby almost directly.[15] But it is the shared question, rather than shared conclusions, that I want to emphasise here. The interpretive crux of whether the novel's hero is morally acceptable, and the subsequent question of whether the novel itself shares in the reviewer's judgment, is taken for granted. This shared investment is one basis for the 'anti-woke' right's allegations of Victorianism, and a defence of the activist aesthetics of the contemporary left is undermined by the impulse to dismiss a critic like Rigby.

Indeed, contemporary scholarly treatments of *Jane Eyre* have often centred these same questions. Jessica Cox's analysis of Rochester through Jane Monckton-Smith's model of domestic abuse suggests that Brontë's narrative links readers with Jane as victims of a violent epistemological manipulation; so too does Talia Schaffer's more favourable feminist reading of the novel's conclusion, which links Rochester's 'constant sexual predation' to the 'reform' enabled by disability, humanising, but by no means dispensing with, a moral-critical framework of poetic justice.[16] Even in the case of Rigby's much-criticised

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[15] Erin Blakemore, 'Sorry, but *Jane Eyre* Isn't the Romance You Want It to Be', *JSTOR Daily*. 27 February 2019 https://daily.jstor.org/sorry-but-jane-eyre-isnt-the-perfect-romance-you-want-it-to-be/ [accessed 13 March 2025].

[16] Jessica Cox, '"I'll try violence": Patterns of Domestic Abuse in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847)', *Women's Writing* 29.3 (2022): 323–45; Talia Schaffer, *Romance's Rival: Familiar Marriage in Victorian Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 33.

characterisation of Jane's own role within *Jane Eyre*'s dynamic of abuse, it is worth acknowledging that the problem of Jane's complicity has motivated much of the best recent writing on the novel. The questions Rigby's review takes most seriously from a methodological perspective—how much the novel wants readers to like certain characters, the kinds of responsibility they bear, and the possibility of identification with them—remain key problems of interpretation for the novel.

For example, Rigby complains that Jane 'is made one thing in the eyes of her imaginary companions, and another in that of the actual reader' (503); the 'great and crying mischief of the book' is its apparent celebration of 'an unregenerate and undisciplined spirit' whose 'principle and self-control' merely make her 'liable to dazzle the eye too much for it to observe the inefficient and unsound foundation on which it rests' (505). I want to juxtapose this argument with two recent critiques of the novel, one from a scholarly and the other from a popular venue. Andrea Kaston Tange writes that, though it may feel 'uncomfortable to like Jane somewhat less, especially if we have spent long years thinking of Jane as ourselves [...] it is necessary,' because 'a feminist reading of *Jane Eyre* today must necessarily be a postcolonial one'.[17] Essayist and fiction writer Tyrese Coleman narrates a similar, though starker, disidentification from Jane: 'To call this book feminist is to forget about me, that I am a reader too, that I am a woman too. That according to Brontë, I am a savage [...] I don't have to read a book like *Jane Eyre* that makes me feel shame for relating more to the demonic, nonwhite villain than the actual heroine.'[18] In the face of this salutary alignment between scholarly and activist judgments, the methodological dismissal of a writer like Rigby cannot be sustained. There are striking superficial similarities across the centuries: Rigby declares that 'a little more, and we should have flung the book aside' (504) much as Coleman 'want[s] to throw this book

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[17] Andrea Kaston Tange, 'Identifying as a Reader: On *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë', in Jane Tompkins and Annette R. Federico, eds., *My Victorian Novel*, pp. 35–53 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2020), 47, 46. See also Doreen Thierauf, 'Cancel Jane? *Jane Eyre*, Romance, and the Lure of White Feminism', *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* 19.3 (Winter, 2023), which concludes that *Jane Eyre* might continue to be taught for reasons of cultural genealogy despite the insufficiency of its 'affective power' to 'countermand its vindication of white colonial liberalism' (20).

[18] Tyrese L. Coleman, 'Reading Jane Eyre While Black', *Literary Hub*, 28 August 2017. https://lithub.com/reading-jane-eyre-while-black/ [accessed 13 March 2025].

across the room'.[19] But it is the emphasis on the ethics of narrative valorisation and condemnation that is more significant here. Rigby's 'actual reader' must be the moral test of the novel's aesthetic merit: if 'making an unworthy character interesting' is one high offense, to devalue by attempting to dazzle real-world readers is another.

Moreover, Rigby's treatment of *Jane Eyre* joins both activists and (many) scholars in recognizing authorial identity as a significant credential in the evaluation of its characterisations. Joanne Wilkes has emphasised that Rigby, reviewing for the Tory *Quarterly*, lodges a *partisan* critique, attacking Brontë in part 'because of a perceived political tendency in [her] work'; Rigby's speculations on Currer Bell's personal and political identities are inextricable from her evaluation of the moral character of *Jane Eyre*.[20] For Wesley Morris, the difference between the political aesthetic of the 1990s and today is the 'blindingly monolithic' identitarian thrust of the latter, which assesses art based not only on its implicit textual politics but especially on the biographical identity of its creator. But Rigby, like many curricular activists, assumes a constitutive relationship between political and biographical identity. More English professors, I suspect, will be tempted by Morris's logic than by Lukianoff's, but few would contest that, say, Charlotte Brontë's whiteness is a relevant factor in estimating her characterisation of Bertha Mason. It is no retreat into authorial intention to situate textual circulation within a sociopolitical nexus. On the contrary, what should be emphasised here is the presumption of a (mild) standpoint epistemology that grounds *any* evaluative aesthetic.

Debates around the feminism of Brontë's novel, scholarly or popular, are certainly overdetermined by the fact of Brontë's gender. We ought, then, to see as suspect any categorical dismissal of Rigby's speculations about that fact. One can only imagine the effort scholars would undergo to determine it, in a counterfactual where Currer Bell had never been unmasked (consider the vigour of research into the identity of the author of the 1808 anonymous novel *The Woman of Colour*, for example). It is tempting to reject out of hand a claim from the anti-feminist Rigby that 'some of the most vigorous and forcible writing in the English language would lose all its charm with a woman's name pre-fixed to

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[19] Kaston Tange is circuitously drawn to the same image, remembering being 'horrified by the dual abuse of books and Jane as [John Reed] threw the heavy *Bewick's* volume at her head' (38).

[20] Joanne Wilkes, 'Reviewing' in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Women's Writing*, ed. Linda Peterson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 236–50, 238.

it'. Yet, for how many of us would *Jane Eyre* be compromised if it had been written by a man?[21] Neither Rigby's conclusion that the novel was so written nor her rationale therefor earns her much credit, but we should resist the assumption that the inquiry itself reflects a wrongheaded reading strategy.

On the contrary, Rigby's investment in evaluating authorial credibility is inextricable from the third, least-discussed part of her review: the discussion of the Governesses Benevolent Institution Report for 1847. For Rigby, Brontë's version of the 'governess plot' that links *Jane Eyre* with *Vanity Fair* is problematic most of all because 'this work must be far from beneficial to that class of ladies whose cause it affects to advocate' (507). Rigby's analysis of the governess question relies on a charity-based conception of activism, and her critique of governesses' mistreatment, as Mary Poovey has persuasively shown, is both reliant on a classist fantasy of female innocence and designed to obviate and sabotage any possibility of class solidarity.[22] For my purposes, however, the key point is Rigby's insistence on the real social effects of what she considers negative representation, negative not in the sense of unidealised—earlier in the review, Rigby praises the characterisation of Thackeray's Becky Sharp—but insofar as her narrative valorisation, when combined with her 'unladylike' qualities and implicit sexual knowingness, undermines the case for governesses as a kind of special class with 'no equals, and therefore [no] sympathy' (507). Becky Sharp simply represents a bad and wicked governess; Jane Eyre, for Rigby, misrepresents what a worthy governess looks like in ways that undercut the fundraising strategies of institutions like the Governesses' Benevolent Institution. This is a striking form of strategic presentism, as it were: a moralist aesthetic grounded in political consequentialism. This is not, in Morris's terms, the prioritisation of 'moral correctness over quality'; it is a qualitative aesthetic judgment rooted in moral criteria. Rigby's moral criteria are not ours, but her method is less distant from prevalent modern interpretive modes than many are ready to acknowledge.

The discursive coherency of the right's rather disparate critiques of activist 'Victorianism' relies, mostly implicitly but quite consistently, on its

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[21] Elizabeth Rigby, Lady Eastlake, 'Lady Travellers', *Quarterly Review* 76 (1844): 98–136. On the thorny interplay between Rigby's anonymity and Brontë's, see Julie Sheldon, '"In her own *métier*": the *Quarterly* review of *Jane Eyre*', *Women's History Review* 18:5 (2009): 835–47.

[22] See Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

gendered subtext, and accusations of aesthetic illiteracy have long been part and parcel of gendered dismissals of activism. The figure of the 'social justice warrior', always implicitly female, lacks the aesthetic objectivity to assess art well, a failing that also accounts for her own aesthetic vulgarity and results, at bottom, from an oversensitivity to the threat of sexual violence: the 'hypersensitive feminist—fearful, disillusioned, and adamantly anti-male—bears a strong resemblance to the dainty, sheltered, chaste Victorian lady'.[23] This misogynistic critique of social activism, ironically, is itself a familiar Victorian trope: think of Henry James's 'dirty' Miss Birdseye, with her self-involved 'humanity zeal', or of Dickens's Mrs. Jellyby, with her disgusting house and her laughable 'telescopic' philanthropy.[24] These characters, whom their authors present as culturally representative, are in essence condemned as 'Victorian' in something like Lukianoff's sense. Few scholars today would openly embrace these kinds of condemnations, but the field's readiness to embrace the allegation of moralistic vulgarity, even toward a conservative critic like Rigby, reflects an uncomfortable truth: even the most aesthetically minded models of contemporary literary criticism systematically traffic, openly or covertly, in longstanding modes of moral evaluation.

Curricular activism has revived debates around texts like *Jane Eyre* in a manner fundamentally aligned with Rigby's questions. Most scholars know better (or should) than to dismiss activist critiques as censorship or naïveté, but many continue to take them personally. Certainly, scholars and activists will not always agree, but the putative gap between the two is widened by the false sense that activist aesthetics and critical judgment minimally overlap. While I do not believe that all criticism is or should be moral in nature, I do want to suggest that the critical readiness to dismiss a figure like Rigby is grounded in widespread disciplinary denialism about the moralism of our own political and aesthetic

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[23] The quotation is from publisher-provided copy for Rene Denfeld, *The New Victorians: A Young Woman's Challenge to the Old Feminist Order* (New York: Warner Books, 1999), Google Books Overview at https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_New_Victorians/g0xZenCvYcoC?hl=en&gbpv=0&kptab=overview [accessed on 18 August 2025].
On the physical implications of the SJW slur, see Adrienne L. Massanari and Shira Chess, 'Attack of the 50-foot social justice warrior: the discursive construction of SJW memes as the monstrous feminine', *Feminist Media Studies* 18.4 (2018): 525–42.

[24] Henry James, *The Bostonians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 24, 23; Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 53.

judgment. One consequence of this is a tendency to analyse activist calls for curricular change through reactionary framings like 'cancel culture', rather than as part of ongoing processes of canon formation. So, a declaration like Coleman's—'I don't have to read a book like *Jane Eyre*'—is falsely equated with a categorical claim that *Jane Eyre* should not be read. Indifference, even disgust, is not a call for a book ban. Rather, it reflects a coherent, if unsystematic, response to the dilemma elegantly sketched by Harold Bloom in *The Western Canon*: 'There is only so much time, and time must have a stop, while there is more to read than there ever was before' and so, 'we must choose'.[25]

Although most scholars today resist Bloom's sometimes tautological concepts of literary merit, aesthetic considerations (alongside others) continue to shape curricula and research programs. Activist critiques, meanwhile, are habitually characterised as indifferent to so-called literary quality. And if the scholarly mainstream rejects either pole of this supposed spectrum, the underlying premise that qualitative and ideological evaluations exist in tension remains quite routine. Thinking more carefully about moral criticism and its legacies in contemporary canon critique helps dismantle this premise, one that can box even personally left-leaning literary critics into a reactionary posture. To do so, I now turn to a text disclaimed by all camps: F.R. Leavis's infamous, influential opus *The Great Tradition*. 'Today there remain', writes Simon During, 'more or less, no active Leavisites', and if the democratising thrust of the concept of 'practical criticism' and the social-democratic value set out of which Leavis operated are recognised by historians of criticism, he remains, at any rate for most Anglo-American critics, an avatar of literary snobbery.[26]

With this dynamic in mind, I want to emphasise a basic fact about *The Great Tradition* that can feel discordant in today's ideological environment: that its elitism and its moralism, far from being in tension, are conceptually

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[25] Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994), 30–1.

[26] Simon During, 'When Literary Criticism Mattered', in *The Values of Literary Studies: Critical Institutions, Scholarly Agendas*, ed. Rónán McDonald, pp. 120–36 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 122. On the complexities of the practical politics of historical Leavisitism, see also Joseph North, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017) and Paul Andrew Woolridge, 'Leavis and Trilling: A Common Pursuit', *Prose Studies* 41.3 (2020): 273–95. On the philosophical underpinnings of Leavis's textual elitism specifically, see Emily Steinlight, *Populating the Novel: Literary Form and the Politics of Surplus Life* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

inextricable. Leavis is quite explicit that the great writers 'are all distinguished by a vital capacity for experience, a kind of reverent openness before life, and a marked moral intensity'.[27] Without Jane Austen's 'intense moral preoccupation she wouldn't have been a great novelist' (7); George Eliot's 'moral seriousness […] qualified her for a kind of influence that neither Flaubert nor the admired Turgenev could have' (15); Henry James 'has a moral fineness so far beyond the perception of his critics that they can accuse him of the opposite' (157); Joseph Conrad's art is defined by 'the relation between moral idealism and "material interests"' (191). Writing about *Emma*, Leavis declares that 'it can be appreciated only in terms of the moral preoccupations that characterise the novelist's peculiar interest in life. Those who suppose it to be an "aesthetic matter", a beauty of "composition" that is combined, miraculously, with "truth to life", can give no adequate reason for the view that *Emma* is a great novel, and no intelligent account of its perfection of form' (8). Such a claim is at clear odds with Bloom's injunction that the purpose of canon is 'to set a standard of measurement that is anything but political or moral'; indeed, it is much closer to the views of Victorian moral critics like Eastlake or Margaret Oliphant.[28]

In this light, it is worth revisiting the *Great Tradition*'s notorious, bald opening sentence. 'The great English novelists are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad—to stop for the moment at that comparatively safe point in history' (1). The claim is most remarked today for the preposterous narrowness of Leavis's canon (and indeed, over the course of the book, he goes on to exclude large portions of the work of even these writers). And although the lingering influence of the list's aesthetic values should be fairly obvious, it can feel like a parody of the kinds of high canonicity that have come under decades of scrutiny. Fair enough—but at the same time, it is worth noticing something surprising about Leavis's list. To define the great English novelists in 1948 with two novelists who are women and two who are not originally English was by no means an obvious choice to make. Nor is it a coincidental one: Leavis emphasises repeatedly that the aesthetic force of these writers is connected to their ability 'to

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[27] F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (New York: New York University Press, 1967), 9. Further references are cited parenthetically in the text.

[28] Bloom, 35. On Oliphant's critical moralism, see Barbara Onslow, '"Humble Comments for the Ignorant": Margaret Oliphant's Criticism of Art and Society', *Victorian Periodicals Review* 31.1 (Spring, 1998): 55–74. Q.D. Leavis's substantial effort to recover Oliphant's reputation can be productively understood in relation to this resemblance (and in contrast to her avowedly anti-elitist critique of Virginia Woolf).

see from the outside, and critically place, the life around [them]' (132). The connection Leavis draws between this authorial 'outsideness' (190) and moral force is familiar, but it is not an idea that remains strongly associated with defences of canonicity. It should be.

The moralism of Leavisite thought has provoked persistent criticism over the years, from Lionel Trilling's accusation that Leavis 'assimilat[es] a social antagonism into his general critical sensibility' to Guy Cook's more recent, explicitly curricular, argument that though Leavis's 'particular values may have waned, and in many quarters even been replaced with their opposites, yet his overriding idea remains never too far away, that only improving texts should be taught, and others dismissed out of hand.'[29] Setting aside whether these are entirely accurate characterisations of Leavis, notice the interpretive premise the two claims share: that the act of canon formation (at least for Leavis) operationalises political and moral values, rather than attempting to disguise or avoid them. Leavis's 'gambit', writes Elisa Tamarkin, is 'to keep certain works alive and in the game when there are too many contenders'.[30] It is appropriate, I think, to connect such a gambit to Tyrese Coleman's declaration of independence from *Jane Eyre*: 'I now have the privilege and option to choose books I don't have to try so hard to find myself in'.

Leavis, obviously, is not proposing that only his four 'great' authors are worthy of reading. Rather, his is a curricular incitement, a statement of priority rooted in a specific (socially antagonist!) conception of literary quality. 'Moral force' is not a litmus test for censorship, but an aesthetic criterion, and this basic methodological premise links Leavis backwards to the Victorian moralists and forward to today's left-wing curricular activists. Unsurprisingly, then, Leavis was often condemned, in familiar terms, as a 'sour Puritan'.[31] For Trilling, Leavis's moral judgments, like those of *The Quarterly Review*, thinly disguise a partisan agenda, declaring that 'the failure to be explicit about even the disproportionately small social issue of Bloomsbury […] works to distort his perception'.[32] But if

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[29] Lionel Trilling, 'Dr. Leavis and the Moral Tradition' in *A Gathering of Fugitives*, pp. 101–106, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 106; Guy Cook, '#Ledatoo: The morality of *Leda and the Swan* in teaching stylistics', *Language and Literature* 30.2 (2021): 127–46, 140.

[30] Elisa Tamarkin, 'Critical Enough', *American Literary History* 34.1 (Spring, 2022): 342–53, 349.

[31] Tom Paulin, 'Faculty at War', *London Review of Books* 4.11, 17 June 1982. https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v04/n11/tom-paulin/faculty-at-war [accessed 13 March 2025].

[32] Trilling, 106.

we locate Leavis within a longer tradition of moralist aesthetics, this supposed disguise can be better understood as an epistemological judgment.

In this sense, we might say, contrary to During's bon mot, that we are all Leavisites now. 'Expanding the canon' will always be a conceptual, rather than a practical, ambition without a corresponding expansion of the academic semester. Every text we assign as teachers, analyse as scholars, or publish as editors is at the expense of an infinity of possible alternatives. And the bases on which many of us make those choices are often overtly and even proudly politicised. Those politics can be rooted in goals of representation, or 'undisciplining', or of ideological exposure, or of legislative compliance, but they can also be rooted in aesthetic or historical judgments about what constitutes major or powerful literature. These judgments are not necessarily moral in nature—but, in a sometimes subterranean way, they are so far more often than is typically admitted.

The denial of this scholarly moralism creates an artificial but significant wedge that benefits right-wing attacks on higher education and on leftist activism alike. When a leading scholar like Rita Felski declares, however tongue-in-cheek, that 'the nay-saying critic all too easily brings to mind the finger-wagging moralist, the thin-lipped schoolmarm, the Victorian patriarch', she presupposes a difference in kind between her own 'positive vision for humanistic thought' grounded in 'social and ethical commitments' and the moralism she condemns.[33] This distinction is echoed by Matthew Carey Salyer in more openly politicised terms: 'uncovering the "problematic" is just Victorian moral criticism gussied up as progressive critique'.[34] The accusation that activist aesthetics are Victorian and moralistic is itself a reason to revisit Victorian moralism. But doing so requires a revaluation of moralism's role in literary study. Critical moralism is enormously widespread but almost invariably disavowed. This disavowal makes it too easy to insist, often on superficial grounds, that student activists are engaging with literature in ways that have nothing to do with our own. Language like that invoked by Felski reminds us that the rejection (and, often, the mere designation) of moralism is a stylistic preference as much as anything else.[35] When we do it,

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[33] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 130, 186.

[34] Matthew Carey Salyer, 'Bye, "Delilah": The Welsh Rugby Union's Tom Jones Ban', *Forbes*. 17 February 2023, https://www.forbes.com/sites/mattsalyer/2023/02/17/bye-delilah-the-welsh-rugby-unions-tom-jones-ban/ [accessed 13 March 2025].

[35] It is worth noting that, despite the stereotype, the rejection of aesthetically disagreeable forms of 'overt didacticism' (165) was a defining position of Victorian moral criticism (Maitzen).

it's 'a positive vision for humanistic thought' or 'progressive critique'; when they do it, it's Victorian moralism. And when politicians declare that 'woke moralism' has turned our colleges and universities into indoctrination factories, they are taking advantage of this discursive schism. Too many of us have already granted the reactionary premise that the true scholar wags no fingers.

Conversely, one benefit of laying bare our scholarly moralism is the continuity it reveals between literary criticism and activist ideas around reading and teaching. Ahmed notes that 'when students are being critical of what we are doing, when they contest what is being taught, they can be treated and dismissed as acting like customers'. Such dismissals are harder to sustain if students' curricular demands are understood as a mode of participation in the process of collective moral and aesthetic judgment that forms both syllabus and canon. Recognising the shared nature of this process enables a more collaborative sense of each task. Most of this article was drafted before the 2023 surge in campus Gaza protests, and elements of my focus reflect an evidently earlier moment in the practice and perception of student activism. But the accusation that students framing moral demands are thereby circumventing scholarly inquiry has, clearly, taken on a yet greater urgency. I believe that acknowledging the moralism of presiding forms of scholarly inquiry should help us see that it is often precisely in those moral framings that students are acting most like scholars.

The relation between aesthetic and moral judgment is a central question of literary studies, and, as the case of *Jane Eyre* illuminates, it is a question that remains unanswered. Continuities between nineteenth- and twenty-first-century ways of asking the question, in academic and popular contexts alike, reveal an opportunity to revise our critical practices in response to our own activist commitments. But to take up this opportunity requires a dislodgment, perhaps a slightly embarrassing one, of certain entrenched narratives of methodological progress. The enunciated rejection of moralism has allowed scholars to frame our own moral claims as though they were something other than moral claims. The dismissal of figures like Rigby and Leavis has a whiff of scapegoating about it, a ritual purgation of a kind of critical method we don't like to acknowledge in ourselves. Perhaps it's time for a little self-love.

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BOOK REVIEW

Education in Nineteenth-Century British Literature: Exclusion as Innovation by
Sheila Cordner (Routledge, 2016) 172 pp., hardback, $190.00

Reviewed by William R. Bowden
(*University of Rhode Island*)

Sheila Cordner's perceptive analysis of nineteenth-century British literary outsiders centers on the idea that an engaged imagination begets sensible, self-directed judgment. Formidable figures, like Jane Austen, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Thomas Hardy, and George Gissing, whose exclusion from universities distanced them from their counterparts, are read alongside watershed Acts of Parliament to disclose how the consensus on education that prevailed among Britain's ruling classes in the early and mid-nineteenth century encountered swift opposition in a group of novelists whose intellectual fervor enlivened the resistance against standardized learning. Spanning five meticulous chapters and a brief coda, *Education in Nineteenth Century British Literature* (2016) provides remarkable insights into the controversies surrounding formal education and the subsequent efforts to promote national literacy across social classes in Victorian England. Building on foundational scholarship regarding the effects of mass literacy on the reading public – such as the works of Jonathan Rose, Patrick Brantlinger, and Kate Flint – Cordner's project underscores the influence of key historical events in shaping the evolution of British literature and, in particular, higher education.

Throughout the book, Cordner's approach is inherently pedagogical, blending literary and historical analysis to evoke a sense of experiential learning – a phenomenon she identifies as central to the novels she studies. Each chapter highlights the role of dialogue as a tool for nurturing students' self-discovery, contrasting it with the superficial knowledge often lauded by established institutions. *Education in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* begins by exploring the intricacies of Victorian educational discourse. Chapter one examines the dominant rhetorical influences shaping both popular and elite educational systems of the century. It illustrates how the repetitive nature of institutional learning for privileged men often hindered educational opportunities for women and the working classes. Through a blend of historiography outlining

the conformist cultures of Oxbridge and references to Parliamentary legislation, Cordner connects these currents in nineteenth-century thought and politics with the ironic perspectives of writers who strove to dismantle authoritative educational models.

The impulse to indoctrinate, or, better yet, 'train' a mind through a series of inherited axioms, had a steep and protracted history, as Cordner systematically shows. This impulse came to a head in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, precisely at a time when a sudden yet pervasive desire to 'educate' women and the working classes began to foment. Discerned apprehensively by some and deemed of the utmost necessity by others, individuals from unexpected corners of Victorian society – most notably, the vociferous Thomas Carlyle – were skeptical of measures adopted by influential seats of learning that relied exclusively or heavily on students' preparation for exams. As early as 1829, we learn that figures cut from a similar cloth as Carlyle would lament the abolition of earlier styles of instruction that flourished in previous epochs, consisting of a degree of fluidity and innovation which was not discernable even in the faintest traces of the mechanistic, industrialized pedagogy that came to dominance around the first quarter of the century. To a greater extent than Carlyle, however, the writers whose work Cordner examines cultivated extraordinary means of circumventing the mind-numbing conditions of prescribed learning across gendered and class divides. In Cordner's view, they aimed to achieve this by ensuring that such resources were abundantly available within their satirical narratives.

Consider the case of Jane Austen. In Chapter Two, Cordner elaborates on Austen's early ventures into historical nonfiction, otherwise known as her 'juvenilia', as well as her mature novels. These works encourage self-directed learning, allowing readers to form their own judgments about the protagonists' or heroines' exuberant circumstances. Such introspection, although adversarial to dominant strains of pedagogy for women at the time, could, in fact, lead to forms of intellectual freedom marked by one's refusal to conform intellectually. Unlike the Bertram sisters in *Mansfield Park*, for instance, who passively acquire knowledge in line with close relatives' notion of a 'socially successful marriage', characters embodying Austen's philosophy of self-directed learning, such as Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* and Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*, actively carve out space for purposeful action and thought. Drawing from these and numerous other examples found in Austen's fiction, Cordner argues that

embracing the satirical structure of an Austen novel enables readers to set aside learned preconceptions. This, in turn, opens the door to fresh understandings of 'truth', 'meaning', or 'self' – a process Austen fittingly describes as 'scrambling'.

In Chapter three, Cordner revisits the question of exploratory self-study through Elizabeth Barrett Browning's concept of 'headlong reading' (p. 46). This form of embodied knowledge prompts readers to consider literature's capacity to liberate us from entrenched academic traditions. In Barrett Browning's spasmodic poem of 1856, *Aurora Leigh*, the titular speaker implores interlocutors to discover meaning in the soul-stirrings evoked by the poem's imagery of biophysical processes such as breathing and pulsating. Aligning partially with the Romantic ideals of self-education articulated by Wordsworth and Rousseau, Aurora's approach demands complete immersion in a text or one's surroundings. More explicitly, Barrett Browning's headlong reading promoted experiential modes of teaching and learning – as witnessed in the advocacy work of Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon and Clara Collet – involving tactile encounters with the material world that fostered deeper intellectual and empathic commitments (pp. 45-46).

In a particularly stimulating section titled 'Book Learning and Belatedness,' Cordner contrasts this with the rigid education system at Oxbridge, where male students often struggle to break free from past intellectual traditions. For instance, Aurora's cousin Rodney, educated at Oxbridge, 'lives by diagrams, / And crosses out the spontaneities / Of all his individual, personal life / With formal universals' (quoted in Cordner, p. 47). In contrast, Aurora and the working-class Marian avoid this sense of unoriginality, opting instead for vibrant self-education in their pursuit of experiential learning. It's unsurprising that Barrett Browning's innovative novel-poem found explicit reference in the advocacy of Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon and Clara Collet, who raised awareness of discriminatory policies against women in the workforce and academia. While acknowledging the practical limits of their idealism – specifically, applying literary principles to the public sphere – Cordner persuasively argues for the adoption of Barrett Browning's experiential methods by passionate teachers, both then and now.

Chapter four considers Hardy's dark comedy, *Jude the Obscure* (1895), arguing that the novel accentuates the voice of the working-class protagonist, Jude Fawley. His deprivation and exclusion from established scenes of learning shape his view of education as 'an essential part of the human experience'

(Cordner, p. 59). Much like Marian in Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, Jude experiments with unorthodox strategies to acquire practical wisdom for everyday life; these strategies also serve as a means of creative self-expression. Nevertheless, when individuals *like* Jude enter the academy, their creativity and independence of mind are markedly susceptible to classist doctrines, operating as tacit guidelines for survival in such unforgiving environments. It's interesting that Hardy chose to write about this subject at the tail end of the nineteenth century when education reform had already swept the nation. Cordner explains, 'By the time Hardy was writing, the Education Act of 1870 had paved the way to more widespread elementary education for the masses'. Consequently, 'The working classes could pursue higher education at schools such as the Working Men's College or through university extension' (p. 59). What's unusual about Hardy's critique, then, in comparison to other writers discussed in this study, is the extensive attention devoted to the solipsistic experience of an under-resourced figure whose life – partially based on Hardy's own – allegorizes the consequences of nearly a century's worth of misguided educational reform.

From this perspective, Jude epitomizes a familiar archetype from nineteenth-century literature, popularized by Dickens: the grossly underprivileged yet aspiring young man. However, in Cordner's account, Jude stands apart. He diverges notably from his contemporaries, particularly those who, through impeccable timing and success in mastering rote memorization for examinations, secured a university education – whether at the newly formed Working Men's and Women's colleges or through university extensions at Oxford and Cambridge. Jude's circumstances therefore hold a distinct, albeit negative, value, as they allow us to witness (and lament) the reality that despite the century's 'progress' in literacy and widespread education for the masses, many students found themselves left behind, their 'unbounded curiosity' stifled by the entrenched legacies of elite education (pp. 59-60).

The book's concluding chapter elaborates on how George Gissing's long-neglected body of work advances a dialectical, nondualistic perspective on the educational debates that bookended the nineteenth century. Cordner maintains that 'Gissing's work … departs from the emphasis on the binary between those who can easily be identified as insiders of educational institutions and those who are clearly outsiders' (p. 83). As a de facto insider whose knack for institutional learning belied his middling social status, Gissing's trajectory as a scholarship student produced vibrant source materials that later inspired his unique vision of

higher education, both in Britain and eventually the United States. His work stands apart from that of Austen, Barrett-Browning, and Hardy, not solely because of the era in which he wrote – on the cusp of the twentieth century – but more importantly, due to his idiosyncratic use of parodic gestures and juxtaposition, which offered a fresh perspective on progressive and egalitarian education in the new millennium.

Relics of earlier teaching methods, like Mrs. Ormonde's rural classroom depicted in *Thyrza* (1887), are juxtaposed with the idealist curriculum of Oxbridge-educated Egremont. The latter must undergo a process of unlearning to connect with students from lower social classes, whose prior experience doesn't align with his outdated procedures. Cordner argues that Gissing's ironic style, characterized by a recurring schism between working-class and upper-middle-class characters, underscores the peculiar sociological experience engendered by Britain's 'democratization of education' in the nineteenth century (p. 82). This experience involves nontraditional, alienated intellectuals caught between two worlds and striving to participate in the customs of their born-affluent counterparts. Cordner points to 'accidental' encounters with literature as a primary vessel for such mingling across social classes – a condition that becomes possible to envision with Gissing as the poet laureate of such communal imaginings (p. 94).

If there are any limitations to this study, they are discernible in the coda on Virginia Woolf. This section lacks a thorough analysis of Woolf's educational background and social milieu, as well as her pacifist-feminist project. While Cordner's conclusion is effective as a critique of Bloomsbury-style decadence, it deviates from the theoretical core of her monograph, which traces literary resistance to stifling academic conditions of the nineteenth century. This shift in critical attention may be necessary to demonstrate how resistance to prescribed educational models in Britain waned in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, coinciding with increased accessibility for previously marginalized students. Ultimately, this study offers invaluable resources for varied audiences: undergraduates seeking context for authors, graduate students writing on education in the nineteenth century, and educators sensitive to the demands of an increasingly diverse global student body. Reflecting on Cordner's contribution highlights its growing significance not only to Victorian studies but also to the relatively young field of Critical University Studies, which raises awareness of

inequities plaguing contemporary universities. Such research would benefit immensely from examining the tradition delineated by Cordner.

BOOK REVIEW

Pasts at Play: Childhood Encounters with History in British Culture, 1750-1914 edited by Rachel Bryant Davies and Barbara Gribling
(Manchester University Press, 2020) 258 pp., hardback, $85.00

Reviewed by Rosemond Thomas Cates
(*The University of Texas at Dallas*)

In *Pasts at Play*, Rachel Bryant Davies and Barbara Gribling have compiled essays examining how British children in the long nineteenth century encountered 'diverse, juxtaposed pasts' (p. 7). While this book deals with how children learned in the long nineteenth century, it is focused less on pedagogy than on the emphasis on a certain codified body of knowledge that was either expected as a prerequisite of understanding or was being strategically marketed to children. The burgeoning children's market created literary, ludic, and experiential encounters with history and heritage that prioritised a shared national past while shaping citizens of the future.

Davies and Gribler acquaint their readers with the term 'multiple pasts,' their foundational understanding of the '[simultaneity]' of pasts 'experienced in different ways and through different media' (p. 6). The book's multidisciplinary approach is evident in the compelling introduction that introduces the subject and its relevance by examining the 'New Game of Universal History and Chronology' (1814) by John Wallis, which exhibits not only the 'multiple pasts' of British heritage but also the prior knowledge required to interpret and interact with those pasts (p. 6). Additionally, Wallis's game displays the turn in commercial practices as children are recognised as consumers. This game serves as an excellent introductory example as it highlights three focal points of the book as a whole: 'consumerism, knowledge, and interaction' (p. 10).

The editors have assembled nine essays that examine the 'contemporary fascination with universal history…mythical, legendary and religious traditions' and 'world history' steeped in British nationalism (p. 1). The chronological arrangement is helpful to the reader in understanding the cultural norms and situational nuances of play, education, and commercial practice as well as the rise of new media and experiential platforms with which to encounter them. In chapter one, Melanie Keene looks at Noah's Ark playsets as having both 'intrinsic

spiritual heft' and the potential for '[conjuring] a multi-layered series of pasts' (p. 25). This set, along with 'the doll's house, rocking-horse, [and] spinning-top', would have been found in any Victorian nursery and often were kept as 'intergenerational heirlooms' (p. 25, 30). Keene lists the ways that the playset might be played with, including ways that have nothing to do with the biblical story. This chapter is ideal for furthering the reader's understanding of 'multiple pasts' in that the Noah's Ark playsets 'demonstrated how such objects' and the narratives that inform our understanding of them 'simultaneously…[invoke] actual, mythological, moral and personal pasts' (p. 43).

In the second chapter, Virgina Zimmerman investigates how domesticated, familiar language opens the mysteries of ancient Egypt, a popular subject in Victorian England. By looking at visitor's pamphlets for The British Museum, the author shows how prior knowledge was demanded of children to understand that which was foreign. The Egyptian exhibit at The Crystal Palace, for example, offered a familiarity and connection to the present that transcended time and space, 'domesticating the ancient past' (p. 54). While experiential exhibits offered full immersion, accessing Egypt at home was possible through literature, allowing children to travel to exotic places in their imagination. This literature '[frames]' Egyptian adventures 'with a domestic setting and a Christian, English morality,' that functions as a safe, familiar space to experience the exotic—which eventually '[serves] to confirm the familiar' (p. 57). The 'packaged' past is always subordinated to the present and is furthermore entwined in the safest version of the present – the home (p. 57).

Part II, 'Classical Pasts', addresses the revivification of ancient tales through recategorization. Helen Lovatt explores how the Argonaut Myth moved into children's curriculum in the 1800s as a result of Charles Kingsley's *The Heroes* (1856), an adaptation that sticks closely to the *Orphic Argonautica*. Differing greatly from Hawthorne's *Tanglewood Tales* (1853) and William Morris's *The Life and Death of Jason* (1867), Kingsley's version has important implications for how the story is read in years to come as he shaped what episodes were included, steered certain 'attitudes of masculinity', and used '"plain Greek spelling"' (p. 74-75). Overall, Kingsley 'sanitises' the Argonaut myth for the young reader by removing or editing scenes that are overly grotesque or sexual (p. 78). Though he emphasises the competitive games in the Argonaut myth, moral character for Kingsley supersedes fun, adventure, and learning, a move that

allows his version to 'recuperate Jason…without alienating his young readers' (p. 89).

Chapter four, an investigation of *The Boy's Own Paper* by Rachel Bryant Davies, focuses on the way '"puzzle mania"' was utilised for pedagogical (but fun!) purposes in popular children's publications (p. 97). What makes these papers interesting is the way the readers interacted not only with the puzzles themselves, but also with the creators: often offering up their own riddles, anagrams, and puzzles. The rigor and difficulty of the puzzles juxtaposed with the humorous wordplay and anachronisms illuminate 'the delightful paradox', allowing for fun and '[commiseration]' (p. 115). A second interesting detail is how these papers offered a more democratised, affordable option for 'working class children' while still demanding 'extensive and detailed classical knowledge' (p. 100-101). Davies' engaging chapter shows that playfulness and pedagogy intertwined in these entertaining papers.

Part III, 'Medieval and early modern pasts', begins with Stephen Basdeo's study of Robin Hood and Wat Tyler tales in the penny periodicals. Basdeo emphasises the discrepancy between the reception of the reader and the intended effects of 'respectable reading matter' (p. 137). Basdeo shows that both tales had political implications. While Robin Hood was adopted by conservatives, Wat Tyler's tale proved more difficult to commandeer because he was a 'ruffian'. Wat Tyler, therefore, was cleaned up a bit for the child reader. Though used for conservative aims, reviewers from the time still saw these stories as 'subversive', viewing them as a 'scapegoat for late Victorian fears surrounding the rise of juvenile crime' (p. 135).

Rosemary Mitchell's chapter looks at the way the Victorians extolled historical women as models for young ladies. While many women were exemplars, two Stuart women, Henrietta Maria, wife of Charles I, and Rachel Russell, wife of William Russell, proved less than perfect. A problematic figure, Henrietta Maria was viewed as 'too French, too Catholic, and too prone to absolutism' (p. 144). Russell, meanwhile, was praised as a model wife and mother. Mitchell concludes that we can learn more about the historical moment in which these women lived than we can about them as individuals by how they were perceived then—and in how those judgments were passed on in the Victorian period. This is made evident by how the representations of Henrietta Maria and Rachel Russell were 'internalised by the young consumer' (p. 158).

Part IV, 'Revived Pasts,' begins with M.O. Grenby's look at children's tour books as a form of 'heritage education', that links 'historical data to physical space' (p. 184). Looking at more than seventy publications, Grenby argues that these tour books functioned 'less as a guidebook for actual travellers and more as an exercise in nation-building', with each historical site depicted 'as part of a coherent national whole' whose existence is part of a continued national heritage (p. 171, 181). Thus a 'collective national identity' is formed (p. 187). These guidebooks coincide with a newly realised children's educative market, making them extremely popular. The guidebooks offered 'democratization' in that the intended audience for such guidebooks were those that might never travel to such places, 'debarred by distance, class and perhaps gender' (p. 181).

In chapter eight, Barbara Gribling looks at British history games. The market for games was a thriving one in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. While such games 'became a hallmark of elite and middle-class British education', they could also be found in seedier ranks, such as the London Female Penitentiary because studying the historical subjects of such games was thought to encourage good character and citizenship (p. 194, 197). These games allowed the player to experiment with multiple pasts and, in some cases, create new outcomes of familiar historical situations. Like other chapters, this one notes that a great amount of prior knowledge may have been needed to win.

The final chapter by Ellie Reid focuses on the 1909 Stepney Children's Pageant. This pageant, coordinated by playwright Louis N. Parker and 370 committee members, had over 600 children involved in its production. Notably, 'the organisers attempted to create equal opportunities for boys and girls', as well as opportunities across lines of class and faith (p. 225, 229). 'Educative value' was found in the socialization, memorization, observation, and the 'construction and design of beautiful objects', such as props and costumes (p. 225). Notably, this chapter marks one of the few instances in which material edited for children was not sanitised, 'but laid bare', 'with a rounded picture, detailing their subjects' shortcomings as well as their virtues' (p. 232-234). Parker indicated that the pageant represented 'right teaching of right patriotism: to love our home, to love our street, to love our city, and to love our country' (p. 236).

Pasts at Play not only shows how children encountered multiple pasts, but also how those pasts were presented to them, making this collection a valuable tool with which to examine social mores and pedagogical practices during the long nineteenth century. Children during this period encountered a past informed

by their present, using familiarity to deescalate the threat of the foreign. While their games and playthings came with rules, scripts, and metatexts imbued with national rhetoric, their imaginations expanded them, allowing for new ways to encounter – and even reinvent – the past.

BOOK REVIEW

Social Identity and Literary Form in the Victorian Novel: Race, Gender, and Class and the Uses of Genre by Jill Franks (McFarland, 2022) 280 pp., paperback, $29.95

Reviewed by Lydia Ezell
(*Georgia State University*)

In the Preface of *Social Identity and Literary Form in the Victorian Novel*, Jill Franks traces how she developed her recorded lectures and course outlines from during Covid to book chapters. As established in the subtitle of the text, she narrows the focus to race, gender, class, and genre from her broad course summary about Victorian literature. Each of the chapters draws in other concerns like empire, psychoanalysis, biography, historical, and neo-Victorian context to address the intersecting systems of inequality during this period. By limiting jargon and defining introductory theories, Franks writes in an accessible way to create a foundational understanding of Victorian literature. Envisioning teachers using this as a textbook in their courses or as inspiration for their own lectures, her primary goal is pedagogical. A standard textbook, *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Literary Culture*, provides one of the most thorough discussions of Victorian concerns ranging from politics, gender, empire, religion, science to aesthetics and art. While engaging with similar concepts, Franks offers an alternative textbook option that is more approachable for students as it doesn't overwhelm with information but provides thorough context and introduction to main ideas and key concepts.

Franks clarifies her audience in the Preface as Victorian professors and teachers, undergraduate students, academics, non-academics, and people who love Victorian literature. The research for her chapters emerges out of 30 years of teaching literature, and she relies heavily on the second edition of Susie Steinbach's *Understanding the Victorians* to provide historical context and supplemental readings for her courses. Franks does not desire to write traditional academic essays, but 'to teach the novels, while also introducing undergraduate students to concepts in literary history and criticism, as this may be their first encounter with the texts'

(6). She does not include many secondary sources, but rather focuses on close readings, textual evidence, and personal interpretation, providing examples of how students may engage with the novels. *Social Identity* lacks a thorough bibliography, which would have been helpful to include, especially for instructors trying to shape their own lectures and courses. Therefore, it is better suited for pedagogical uses than for seasoned scholars who already have more advanced knowledge of the theories and texts discussed. Other texts about Victorian literature and pedagogy emphasize the teacher's role as planner and guide, including *Teaching Victorian Literature in the Twenty-First Century: A Guide to Pedagogy* and *Teaching Nineteenth-Century Fiction*. These texts provide sample syllabi and suggestions for teachers as they craft courses. Franks targets the teachers and the students, instead of just the teachers.

Following the Preface and Introduction, the structure of *Social Identity* includes 11 sections, each focused on a particular novel. The sections are arranged in chronological order based on the date the novel was published to demonstrate the development of popular genres and shifting ideologies. Each section contains multiple chapters to address the varying topics mentioned in the subtitle. Every chapter begins with a discussion question, then a synopsis of the text, followed by an analysis involving detailed theories and close readings. The discussion questions encourage student thought; however, several of the discussion questions include a yes or no question beginning with 'does' that could limit student's responses. Franks includes a works cited list at the end of each chapter instead of at the end of the entire text to show students a clearer example of what their papers will look like. *Social identity* contains no afterword, which would have been helpful for final concluding thoughts and to connect all of the main ideas; it ends abruptly after specific analysis of one text and fails to broaden back out. The two appendices provide a comprehensive and helpful list of additional discussion questions and a glossary of relevant historical and theoretical terms.

The Introduction provides historical context for the Victorian period and the questions of race, gender, class, and genre during this period to prepare the reader for the further chapters. Relying heavily on the canon of novels often chosen for Victorian courses, Franks includes the novels *Wuthering Heights, Jane Eyre, Vanity Fair, North and South, A Tale of Two Cities, Great Expectations, Middlemarch, Far from the Madding Crowd, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and

The Odd Women. Three chapters explicitly address genre, and she mentions genre in other chapters in connection to the other main topics. Her effective explanations of genre include metafiction in *Vanity Fair* (Ch. 6), allegory in *A Tale of Two Cities* (Ch. 10), and the novel of ideas in *The Odd Women* (Ch. 27). Franks includes three examples of the Neo-Victorian genre: *Wide Sargasso Sea* (*Jane Eyre*, Ch. 4), *Jack Maggs* (*Great Expectations*, Ch. 13), and *Mary Reilly* (*The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Ch. 24). This genre involves retelling canonical Victorian texts from the viewpoint of minor characters through which Franks provides more direct insight into analysis of the concerns present in the texts, such as gender, race, colonialism, imperialism, and sexual violence.

The exploration of gender in the Victorian period begins with *Wuthering Heights* (Ch. 2), moves to *North and South* (Ch. 7), *Middlemarch* (Ch. 16 & 17), *Far from the Madding Crowd* (Ch. 20 & 22), *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (Ch. 26), and ends with *The Odd Women* (Ch. 27 & 28). In these chapters, she provides relevant accounts of the history of women's rights, the bias of the law providing men more freedom, the separate spheres ideology, and the Angel in the House, drawing on Gilbert and Gubar's major scholarly contribution, *Madwoman in the Attic*. Specifically, in Chapter 7, Franks examines *North and South*'s Margaret as fulfilling the expected roles in the home associated with both males and females all while maintaining the semblance of separate spheres ideology and masculine authority. In a different vein, in Chapter 17, Franks provides a character analysis of the busybody, Mrs. Cadwallader, from *Middlemarch*. In this analysis, Mrs. Cadwallader's sarcasm emerges as a product of the separate spheres ideology as she strives to gain power through gossip and manipulation; however, she does not provide a threat to the social structure because others see her as a means of entertainment. Franks's explanations also include appropriate overlapping concerns, drawing in psychoanalysis (Ch. 2), character analysis (Ch. 17), biography of the author (Ch. 22), religion (Ch. 26), genre (Ch. 27), and class (Ch. 28). These chapters include a valuable array of examples regarding the expectations and limitations for women during this period and examples of how these novels demonstrate ways women could be independent while operating in this society.

As an extension of the discussion of gender, Franks develops five chapters detailing the effect of class during this period: *Wuthering Heights* (Ch. 1), *North and South* (Ch. 8), *Middlemarch* (Ch. 18), *Far from the Madding Crowd* (Ch. 21), and

Tess of the D'Urbervilles (Ch. 25). These chapters begin by demonstrating the complexities of switching classes due to the belief that moral differences existed between classes. Franks then moves into demonstrating that forming relationships with people from different classes can destabilize, not necessarily destroy, the expected systems. In Chapter 21, she explains how the minor characters in *Far from the Madding Crowd* depicted as rural serve as the foil for the Gabriel or as additional humor as the use of dialect had become more popular during this time. Her analysis of class provides a useful discussion of the function of class in the Victorian period in a way that students can grasp the nuances of a power structure that they don't experience in modern culture.

The discussion of race covers a smaller range of texts than the previous two topics as only three chapters focus on it: *Jane Eyre* (Ch. 3), *Vanity Fair* (Ch. 5), and *Great Expectations* (Ch. 15). In relation to *Jane Eyre*, Franks explains how the Victorians would have connected skin color with biology and morality (Ch. 3). By cataloging the references to skin color in this novel, she places the different characters in categories of whiteness and darkness based on the descriptions and defines their moral characteristics in relation to this description. She places Maria Temple, Diana Rivers, Rosamond Oliver, and St. John Rivers in the whiteness category and Edward Rochester, Blanche Ingram, and Bertha Mason in the darkness category. By doing this, she critiques the Victorian idea of colorism that connects skin color to morality. When explaining *Vanity Fair*, she uses psychoanalysis to gracefully observe the different types of racism during the period against Black Caribbeans, Arabs, Jews, Irish, and French (Ch. 5). Her conversation about race confronts the uncomfortable reality of Victorian texts directly instead of ignoring it or glossing over it. She defines casual racism during the period and relates the conversation of race to our current conversations, providing a warning that modern discussions can easily overwhelm the relevance to Victorian texts. Focusing on the historical context helps to have relevant conversations, while maintaining focus on the actual texts. Given the title of Franks's book, I expected a diverse range of texts included in the volume; however, the major novels discussed were all written by the White English middle-class and were standard canonized novels. Including works by authors from different backgrounds and races would have enhanced and strengthened the conversation Franks begins.

While *Social Identity* mainly focuses on the topics included in the title, six chapters significantly extend outside of these in a way that still fits the scope of the work. Chapters 9 and 11 focus heavily on the historical context of *A Tale of Two Cities* regarding the tensions between the French and the English, while also exposing the violent and unjust legal systems. Chapters 12 and 23 (*Great Expectations* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*) rely almost exclusively on Freudian psychoanalysis to conduct individual character studies of Pip's guilt and Jekyll's sexual repression. Chapter 14 examines the religious connotations of the specific image of fire in *Great Expectations*, and Chapter 19 provides a form of speculation regarding epidemic in *Middlemarch*.

Overall, *Social Identity and Literary Form in the Victorian Novel* provides helpful essays to begin having conversations about Victorian literature, specifically in a classroom context.

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BOOK REVIEW

Gilded Youth: Privilege, Rebellion and the British Public School by James Brooke-Smith (Reaktion, 2019) 296 pp., hardback, £25

Reviewed by Emily McConkey
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James Brooke-Smith's *Gilded Youth: Privilege, Rebellion and the British Public School* tells an engaging narrative history of the British public school from the eighteenth century to today. Foregrounding the influence of the public school's Victorian incarnation on British identity, the book pays special attention to the endless struggle endured by public schoolboys between conformity and rebellion.

Brooke-Smith employs Erving Goffman's concept of the 'total institution' (p. 79) to explore how the Victorian public school became an elite-producing factory for the industrial age. Schools sought to mould the characters of its students through severe regulations, strict routine, and overpowering psychological conditions. The Gothic-style architecture, the ritualistic disciplinary flogging, the inexorable hierarchies, and the code of emotional reserve compounded the sensorial and psychological influence of the institution on its 'inmates'. Social, political, and cultural changes beyond the schoolyard gates added emphases on organized sports, physical discipline, and national pride.

Still, each generation of students found ways to 'signal their dissent and express their individuality' (p. 81). Modes of dissent included not only trivial after-hours bantering in the dormitory and derailing class discussion, but also illicit sexual behaviour and outré intellectual activity. Students cultivated a shadow system of dissent beneath public schools' furiously conventional veneer. In this way, public schools shaped not only conformist students who joined elite institutions as adults, but also dissenters who pioneered upper-class countercultures. Brooke-Smith highlights schoolboy riots, athlete-aesthete culture clashes, leftist politics, escapism through pop culture, and the perennial foil of institutional conservatism as formative experiences for the budding *avant-garde*. Rebellion transformed public schools – and through them, pedagogical culture generally – in unexpected ways. Brooke-

Smith explains widespread academic adoption of middle-class morality as a reaction to aristocratic libertarianism and violent student uprisings at pre-Victorian public schools. Reports of sexual deviancy at these hallowed institutions ignited moral panics. Schoolmasters invented increasingly sophisticated surveillance systems to police their charges.

Public schools were not all suppression and sedition. Legendary schoolmaster Thomas Arnold's idealist Christian project of moral development and social consciousness drove elite-led reform for a generation. The warmer experience of these schools proved literarily fecund in its own right, producing an entire 'public school' genre. Queen Victoria and countless of her student-subjects around the globe imbibed Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's Schooldays* daily. That novel's heir, J.K Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, enjoys even wider and more intense popularity today. For generations, these books engendered nostalgia for public school culture even among those who could never afford the tuition.

On the other hand, peculiar public-school rites drove a proliferation of other literary innovations and readership trends as well. Humorously meaningless translations produced from rote Latin exercises inspired Lewis Carroll's 'nonsense literature'. (Tutors 'did not mind if […] pupils wrote nonsense, so long as it was elegant and metrically accurate nonsense' [p. 115].) Nineteenth-century demand for flagellation pornography arose from the long-term psychological impact of public-school corporal punishment. The 'critical' public-school memoir genre of the twentieth century complicated the trope of nostalgia in typical public-school narratives with anger. Brooke-Smith's analyses of these dissenting literary offshoots of the public school provide a fuller picture of the impact of the total institution and its structural forces. They also reflect Brooke-Smith's own irreverence toward the institution. For instance, whereas Christopher Stray opened his monograph *Classics Transformed* (2006) lamenting the recent neglect of classics in British curricula, Brooke-Smith builds on Stray's analysis by focusing on the absurdities of classical learning and treating its recent decline as inevitable.

Still, public schools survived substantial criticism over the twentieth century. Brooke-Smith argues they did so through an evolution in form of elitism: from aristocracy to meritocracy. Top-tier facilities and extracurriculars intended to give competitive advantages in university admissions replaced the classics-and-character model. Yet old signals of privilege remain. Public schools promote their 'perfect

marriage of modernity and tradition' (p. 241) with glossy promotional brochures showing off Victorian architecture and landscapes. Far from skewering these aristocratic bastions, popular culture generally continues to indulge nostalgia for public schools. ITV's acclaimed 1981 adaptation of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* and, of course, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books perhaps best convey the hagiographic pop vision of the public school. As Brooke-Smith writes, 'In spite of its elite demographics, the public school is an iconic space of Englishness that has informed the attitudes and ideals of countless generations of young people, both within and beyond its imposing stone walls' (p. 11).

Brooke-Smith reckons throughout the book with how to write about the psychological severity of the Victorian public school without blurring historical inquiry with twenty-first-century values. He occasionally shifts genres to address this challenge. Moving between analysis and memoir, he incorporates anecdotes from his own experience as a public-school rebel and readily concedes his biases toward an institution that shaped him. This gesture provides transparency as well as an innovative approach to academic writing.

At times, however, the author's main argument risks quashing nuanced readings of the primary sources. Brooke-Smith's interpretation of *Tom Brown's Schooldays,* for example, portrays it as a 'thinly veiled sermon' (p. 65) championing Arnoldian values, Muscular Christianity, and the Victorian public-school ethos. This serves Brooke-Smith's larger point that public school offered a crucial vehicle for the dissemination of public-school values. But it perhaps overlooks the novel's subtle critique of the public school. As Elizabeth Gargano wrote in 2008, 'though often portrayed by later readers as an example of mindless school boosterism, Thomas Hughes' *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857) in fact offers a much more mixed portrait of school life than is generally allowed' (p. 3). Brooke-Smith offers two defenses for his tendency to a 'one-sided' approach. First, he remains convinced of the ills of the public school's legacy. Second, he seeks to capture 'the sheer intensity of feeling that the public school experience has generated over the years' (p. 258). Fair enough. While a friendlier vision of the public school may be sought elsewhere, Brooke-Smith's monograph models an experimental mode of academic writing for those grappling between professional objectivity and personal stake.

Gilded Youth offers a gripping, thought-provoking history of the British public school. It also provides a richly useful model for academic writing and

teaching. Beyond the captivating style and format, Brooke-Smith's book models a mode of writing that acknowledges his own position and explores ways to reckon with an institution that remains shaped by its thorny past.

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BOOK REVIEW

Reading Bodies in Victorian Fiction: Associationism, Empathy and Literary Authority by Peter J. Katz (Edinburgh University Press, 2022) 256 pp., paperback, $24.95

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When Nancy meets her demise in *Oliver Twist* at the hands of Bill Sikes, or when Tess passes away in desolation in Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, readers might clutch their chest in horror or audibly gasp in response. In *Reading Bodies in Victorian Fiction: Associationism, Empathy and Literary Authority*, Peter J. Katz interrogates the complexities of these reactions: how do audiences both read *and* respond to nineteenth-century literature? Does reading make readers better people? What kind of literature initiates feelings of empathy? Katz explains that the Victorian authors Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Walter Besant, and Mary Elizabeth Braddon experiment with the phenomenology of the reading body, an entity which is intrinsically bound with a contemporaneous turn to affect theory in literary studies. Mid-century Victorian authors such as these intertwine the mechanisms of the reading process and bodily ethics. Understanding the empathetic intent of nineteenth-century fictions, he argues, is possible through the philosophical theory of Associationism. Katz reads Dickens, Collins, Besant, and Braddon as Associationists. He 'offers a culturally contextualised methodology to understand how Victorians imagined what happened in their bodies as they read' (p. 3).

By the end of the nineteenth century, Katz notes, literacy rates in Britain would reach over ninety percent (p. 42), and this highly literate populace changed the production and subsequent emotional reception of literature. Alongside an engaging overview of empathy as it connects to the discipline of English, Katz engages with the relevant philosophical and critical perspectives, from Deleuze and Guattari and Eve Kosofsky Sedwick to Rita Felski in *Limits of Critique*, though he carefully delimits his association with any of them. Katz then establishes his engagement with a 'Victorian philosophy of fiction in which literary value depends

on a text's capacity to cultivate empathy through feeling' (p. 2). While sympathy requires imagination, he argues, empathy is a subconscious and embodied element of the reading experience.

In the introduction, Katz provides an ontological summary of past and present epistemology on 'empathy-building' (p. 18). Katz uses Mudie's Circulating Library as a useful case study, a mid-Victorian book-lending institution which redefined the reading public's relationships with books. For those foraying into teaching affect and embodiment in Victorian novels, Katz presents Mudie's as a pedagogically accessible place to start. To curate an appealing selection of titles, Mudie's cultivated an exceptional sense of reading authority, one which created a divisive moral ambiguity:

> the populists on the one side rallied around the validity of common thinking, common sentiment, common readers. Mudie and his allies on the other raised the banner of the shepherding literary class, the intellectual elite, the need for curators and scholars (p. 9).

Katz proposes a more holistic, all-encompassing approach to understanding the 'common reader', who was accused of 'being too emotional and too embodied. But novelists and thinkers at the forefront of popular literature argued that emotion and embodiment are in fact the keys to good literature and good reading' (p. 14). By the mid-1800s, the moral effects of literature were a well-known aspect of popular novels, and Katz argues that many 'authors set up sensational, uncritical, materially bound reactions to stimuli as the primary path to empathetic self-abnegation' (p. 16). In other words, the mid-Victorian novel exercised its powers beyond the realm of repression and temperance; readers were encouraged to feel without bounds.

In Chapter One, 'Feeling Bodies: Associationism and the Anti-Metaphorics of Materiality', Katz focuses on the Associationists – David Hume, Joseph Priestley, Dugald Stewart, Alexander Bain – and, oddly, Isaac Newton, who he uses to introduce his theoretical framework. Associationists, Katz illumes, 'overturned the idea that memories, imaginations and living bodies cannot elicit physical change in other bodies, because they understood that language is in fact a mediator, a physical force that, like gravity between atoms, bridges the gap between bodies' (p. 29). Language is an interceding embodiment of feeling, and for the authors that Katz

examines, demystifying the principality of human experience begins and ends with the material form of the book. Though Katz introduces a bewildering variety of names and concepts in this introductory chapter, the argument is neatly and linearly presented, with helpful subtitles which concisely summarize forthcoming approaches.

The second and third chapters apply Katz's framework by reading Charles Dickens' 'The Hospital Patient' (1837) and *Great Expectations* (1861) as repositories of empathetic sensation. Both works are grounded in the experience of reading 'textual bodies' (p. 81), as well as metaphoric and symbolic forms of embodiment. Katz's reading of Pip Pirrup and the serial form provides an innovative perspective on a well-loved character, one which encourages new pedagogical pathways:

> [Pip's] repeated misreadings of others' intentions teach readers not to jump to conclusions, and not to read for codes and linearity, but instead to embrace embodied reading. And this admonition is bound up in the serial form, for the novel uses its form to reinforce this practice emotionally (p. 21).

Katz's ideas handily apply to in-classroom discussions of *Great Expectations*: one might encourage students to imagine the affectual impact on Dickens' audience as they anticipated the next instalment. Further, Katz emboldens his readers to view mid-Victorian novelists like Dickens as both novelists and *teachers*. They teach their audience how to respond to their works.

Chapter Four, titled 'Plastic Bodies: The Scientist, Vital Mechanics and Ethical Habits of Character in Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*', assesses the mechanisms and materialism of reading bodies. Similar to Dickens' use of the serial form to create anticipation in readerly bodies, Collins teaches his readers to read evidence – a mechanical requirement in a detective novel – alongside the reading of differing, often marginal bodies. Though the reader and other characters might try to solve the mystery, Katz argues that Ezra Jennings is the novel's 'most intensely embodied self' (p. 129). Katz briefly engages with some facets of queer and disability studies, though more elaboration would be a welcome addition to the study. As he articulates, *The Moonstone* narrates the experience of embodiment,

but there is a dark side to this celebration: the bodies that are allowed to be bodies procure materiality at the expense of other bodies. White, male characters vampirically transfuse vitality from the female, queer and non-white bodies around them. (p. 120)

Many of the chapter's subsections focus on characters in the margins. As Katz explains, 'successful readers in *The Moonstone* read at the expense of bodies sacrificed in the margins of the text. Most of these bodies never find a voice' (p. 22). The following chapter is well-placed, as it provides an interesting answer to voiceless female embodiment, and further, how the reading public might respond to this invocation.

Titled 'Represented Bodies: The Lawyer, Conclusions and Circumstantial Evidence in *Lady Audley's Secret*', Chapter Five intersects Victorian science on the reading process with the Associationist qualities of the sensation novel. Reading mid-Victorian forms of embodiment, Katz expresses, becomes more complex with the emphasis on the female body in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's novel: 'there is nothing virtuous about self-renunciation if female bodies exist only to be read and discarded to the margins. Flattened science that reads bodies for their use-value offers only self-annihilation, not empathy' (p. 161). However, Katz resists a feminist re-reading of the text through the lens of empathy. Instead, he notes that 'while it is tempting to read the novel as pure rejection of patriarchy, as revelling in the redemptive power of small moments of resistance, to do so effaces the violence of self-annihilation' (p. 161). Acknowledging self-annihilation in *Lady Audley's Secret*, in Katz's terms, means interrogating what he calls a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (p. 188), one which dismisses the impact of reading experiences of 'pain', or the ability to 'sit with the pain and let it exist' (p. 188). Intriguingly, Katz also briefly engages with Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's celebrated reading of *Lady Audley's Secret* and concludes that it 'resists literary authority' and 'champions acknowledgment' (p. 163), and this tension between suffering and subversive bodies continues into the final chapter on Walter Besant's *Children of Gibeon*.

Beyond his case studies of Victorian novels, Katz unravels a 'history of disciplinary knowledge: the way literary studies has decided what questions it should ask, and what kind of knowledge can answer those questions' (p. 2). This exploration of literary authority provides a vigorous structural and theoretical framework, one

which comes in and out of focus throughout the entirety of the study. Though Katz focuses on mid-Victorian novels, he also provides avenues toward incorporating theories of embodiment into broader pedagogical practice: he notes that reading is an 'ethical pedagogy, a way to improve oneself and one's interactions with others' (p. 41). For readers, scholars, and teachers of Victorian fiction, Katz' book offers a fascinating study of how mid-Victorian novelists taught their publics how to read and respond to their literary works. In turn, *Reading Bodies in Victorian Fiction* teaches twenty-first-century readers how to not only engage with literature both within and without the nineteenth-century, but also how to create a new pedagogy of ethics, one which 'train[s]' bodies 'for encounters in the lived world' (p. 151).