

46 Economics, the market, and Victorian culture

Jill Rappoport

Both the economics of everyday life and economic theory changed dramatically during the nineteenth century. The vast inequalities of the Industrial Revolution produced class-consciousness and slum reforms as well as a retail and rail infrastructure designed to support the unprecedented consumerism of the expanding middle classes. Everything from soap to movements for workers' and women's suffrage connected the Victorians to an expanding, global marketplace and—depending on the perspective of the commentator—to its taints or triumphs. Critics bemoaned the worship of the cash nexus or celebrated Britain's industry and innovation; theorists shifted their focus from political economy's labor theory of value to neoclassical economics' consumption-based approach; and ordinary men and women bought, sold, gifted, stole, toiled, invested, speculated, faced or fashioned exploitative practices, fought for property rights, and sought forms of stable value. "Economics, the market, and Victorian culture" is thus fertile but extremely wide-ranging ground. This brief essay explores the intersection of Victorian economics and literature by narrowing its focus to three of the most prevalent topics of critical debate: how literature *makes* money, how literature is *about* money, and how literature is (or is not) *like* money.¹

In the first category—how literature *makes* money—books are, at least in part, a matter of business, objects of labor, not just love. Here, Romantic ideals of inspired authorship collide with Anthony Trollope's late-century discussion of "literary labourers" who should be able to produce 250 words of a novel every fifteen minutes (1883: 236, 237). When Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* reflects that "it would be a much better thing to be a bookseller" than a book-writer, his comment prompts the laughing promise that "We won't make an author of you, while there's an honest trade to be learnt, or brick-making to turn to" (1836–37: 103), but the humorous exchange also makes a serious point by defining literature as a valuable material product, one that employed a range of publishers, printers, book-sellers, distributors, and readers, rather than simply manifesting an individual, writerly vision.²

Looking at this larger literary market, publication histories detail the monetary significance of publication format for booksellers, writers, editors, and audiences. Whether a work appeared in monthly numbers, in weekly periodicals, or in volumes better suited for distribution in circulating libraries shaped its composition and competition, its sales and advertising revenue. The study of authors' contracts and correspondence reveals who benefited, and to what degree, from these decisions. They show, for example, that certain canonical authors received astonishing figures for highly anticipated works: £6,000 for Charles Dickens's initial sale of *Our Mutual Friend*, £7,000 for George Eliot's *Romola*. They also provide details about then-popular women—including Felicia Hemans and Charlotte Riddell—who supported not only themselves but their families with income from their literary work (Feldman

1999: *passim*; Henry 2013: 194n4). Some of this work, then, is recovery, with important implications for studies of gender and class. Some of it springs from more recent critical interest in the overlap of law and literature, which has shown how Dickens fought literary piracy by advocating for expanded copyright protections while Eliot combatted fraudulent claims of authorship and unauthorized sequels to her books.

As critics such as Andrew H. Miller (1995) and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra (2011) have suggested, Victorian authors' awareness of their books as commodities shaped those books in many ways. Along these lines, scholars have been interested in the many ways that literature is *about* money or markets. Economics appears in literature's interests in visibility and display, circulation, and exchange; as an explicit theme or plot point (people making, losing, spending, or marrying money); or in the language used for purposes of characterization. In Anthony Trollope's *The Eustace Diamonds*, for instance, descriptions of one heroine as a "treasure" and of the other as "metal [that] did not ring true," one as "real stone" and one as "paste," draw analogies between the women and wealth circulating within the novel, revealing some of the many ways that the nineteenth-century marriage plot depends upon money, not just love (Trollope 1873: I: 23; I: 21; II: 230; Michie 2011).

More than simply excavating how literature documents its period's financial circumstances, the scholarly approach that Mark Osteen and Martha Woodmansee have dubbed "new" economic criticism "recognize[s] the reciprocity between social systems and individuals" (Osteen and Woodmansee 1999: 20). Such scholarship—still invested in determining how literature is *about* money—has pushed on how literature both shaped and was shaped by discourses of economic change: reports on the conditions of industrial laborers and urban slums, workers' movements, factory acts; debates over "surplus" women, divorce, and married women's property; the advent of department stores and modern consumerism; stock bubbles, bank failures, the emergence of limited liability; and literary-specific economics, such as changes in copyright law. New economic criticism's historical bent has also encouraged us to conceive of markets and exchange in broader ways: Victorianists have recently explored economies of information as well as money, markets that traded in flesh (slavery, prostitution, marriage) as well as objects, and the way that gift practices operated alongside the capitalist mechanisms of buying and selling.

Two of this section's extracts, from Jeff Nunokawa's *The Afterlife of Property* (1994) and Catherine Gallagher's *The Body Economic* (2006), model just such historically engaged approaches to the question of how literature is about economics. Nunokawa's showcases one way in which traditional and alternative economic systems shed light on each other, by showing how the Victorian novel responded to the "vicissitudes" of the market in its rendering of gender. Though he grounds his chapter in theoretical and historical understandings of property acquisition, display, and ownership, his project's energy gathers less around specific nineteenth-century capitalist activity than in the loss such activity entails and the efforts literature makes to deny that loss. In Nunokawa's longer work, property becomes figuratively embodied in Dickensian women, such as *Little Dorrit's* eponymous heroine and *Dombey and Son's* Florence, whose feminized value seems more secure than the financial fortunes that fluctuate so wildly in those novels. Despite real women's increasing economic rights during the period, these female characters seem to offer husbands their only lasting estate, putting a serious spin on Jane Austen's observation "that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife" (1813: 3). For Nunokawa, "a Victorian construction of femininity is enlisted . . . as the site for the exercise of proprietorial prerogative" (Nunokawa 1994: 98). In his chapter on Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, excerpted in this volume, a villain's "ongoing

psychological mastery" over a guilt-ridden wife and an intimidated mistress makes up for his "limited prerogative of ownership" (Nunokawa 1994: 92). In other words, men thwarted in their desire to own absolutely—men for whom possession is limited, temporary, and terminated—exert power over women instead.

By exploring the psychological and gendered displacement of monetary relationships into forms of value that are at least ideologically more fixed, Nunokawa suggests one way to historicize the interconnections between literature and economics. In the second extract, Gallagher offers another by exploring how both nineteenth-century political economists and their literary counterpoints negotiated the meaning of value itself. Distinguishing between the Malthusian "bioeconomics" of "populations, the food supply, modes of production and exchange, and their impact on life forms generally" and what she describes as "Benthamite somaeconomics" or "the emotional and sensual feelings that are both causes and consequences of economic exertions," Gallagher understands Victorian political economy as organicist, as "concentrating on Man in nature, and on natural, corporeal Man" (Gallagher 2006: 3, 4, 3, 4). Showing how the definitions of wealth articulated by Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* and political economists are rooted in "bodily well-being," she argues that, for the novel, this value can only be accessed "from some vantage point outside the body," making male characters' "apparent death" or "the possibility of embodied life in a state of suspended animation" key to "the essence and value of life" (Gallagher 2006: 87, 95 [Chapter 44: 383]).

In her longer chapter on *Our Mutual Friend*, Gallagher, like Nunokawa, turns to gender as an important lens for understanding both nineteenth-century economics and male economic subjectivity. If Nunokawa sees domestic ideology as a way to combat anxieties over masculine property ownership, however, Gallagher shows the reverse, as men's activity becomes the solution to threatened femininity: "Men are knocked out, drowned, dried out, stored up, and finally reanimated . . . so that women need not undergo any such self-alienation" (Gallagher 2006: 116). Thus in Gallagher's reading of Dickens's novel, John Harmon creates value by "prevent[ing] the heroine Bella's reduction of herself to a commodity" (Gallagher 2006: 95 [Chapter 44: 383]). The alchemy that transforms this mercenary woman into "the true golden gold" of the novel accords with Nunokawa's sense of stable value as always gendered, but for Gallagher this figurative gold is the novelist's alternative to a very real danger that women can be owned and exchanged.

The value of *Our Mutual Friend*'s Bella Wilfer is as much a question of genre as of gender, according to the third extract.³ In *Genres of the Credit Economy*, Mary Poovey argues that as fiction and financial prose separated from each other and competed for authority in the nineteenth century, metaphor allows literary authors to "put . . . money in its proper place" (Poovey 2008: 382, also 383 [Chapter 45: 391]). Literature transmits and perpetuates its own sense of value in part by ensuring that its engagement with the world of contemporary finance supersedes straight reference to "serve an aesthetic role" (Poovey 2008: 376 [Chapter 45: 387]). Unlike Gallagher and Nunokawa, who focus on ways in which literature resembles money, finding analogies between "storytelling [. . . and] economic value" or between "ownership and . . . narrative," Poovey's commitment is to the distinction between economic and literary forms (Gallagher 2006: 97 [Chapter 44: 385]; Nunokawa 1994: 87 [Chapter 43: 376]). Poovey's book thus shows, in a historicized, literary, and economically nuanced way, how literature is (but really and increasingly is *not*) like money or the writing that developed to describe and explain it.

Poovey situates her argument about genre against the kind of new historicism practiced by Gallagher and Nunokawa, attacking the claim that literary interpretation "can generate *historical evidence*" (Poovey 2008: 344). Instead, she advocates a form of "historical description"

which will focus on a text's historical "function" rather than its "meaning," arguing that this strategy "might enable modern scholars to see that projecting ourselves into the past—or subsuming the past into our present—as we do every time we extrapolate a universal subject from our own reading experience, does not yield or amount to evidence for an argument about the past" (Poovey 2008: 351–52).⁴

Despite the strong case she makes for the recovery of "the material and generic conditions that made composition of particular texts possible, and on . . . the function to which texts were put by past readers" (Poovey 2008: 345), I am not convinced that the best, and most responsible literary historicism, new or otherwise, is mere projection, nor have I found that this version of historical description necessarily eliminates the blinders imposed by our present critical stance. For instance, in attempting to locate the "situations or events that were *occasions* for writing and that *encouraged* publications of a certain kind," Poovey acknowledges that this "admittedly involves . . . speculation on my part" (Poovey 2008: 357). Or, to take a different example, in this excerpt's argument about Eliot's *Silas Marner*, Poovey extrapolates that "the feature that reviewers praised in her work—her ability to create 'real poor people'—was the same quality that led so many ordinary readers to appreciate (and buy) her works: her ability to create characters so real that they seemed like virtual friends" (Poovey 2008: 378 [Chapter 45: 388]). Yet it doesn't follow that either the educated, middle-class reviewers or ordinary readers she describes would have known much about "real poor people" (described by one of the reviews she quotes as "poor, paltry, stupid, wretched, well-nigh despicable") or that the realism of poverty itself would make a reader feel any form of "virtual friend[ship]" with the poor, however accurately depicted (Poovey 2008: 377 [Chapter 45: 388]). What variants of new historicism might add to historical description, then, beyond the recognition of "class biases" at the back of these judgments (Poovey 2008: 378 [Chapter 45: 388]) is a more thorough investigation of such comments—an effort to understand the specific assumptions that lead to a reviewer's equation of being poor with being "despicable," or the stakes of presenting poverty as entailing "stupid[ity]."

Without giving up on the analysis of meaning, that is, we can work to understand the history that "hide[s] interpretively as a reality effect," as Elaine Freedgood puts it (Freedgood 2006: 35). "Thing" theory, which pushes background objects to the front in order to read their social histories, is one strategy for doing so (Freedgood 2006: 51). In this vein, Freedgood demonstrates how the mahogany furniture in Charlotte Brontë's 1847 *Jane Eyre* "symbolizes, naturalizes, domesticates, and internalizes the violent histories of deforestation, slavery, and the ecologically and socially devastating cultivation of cash crops in Madeira and Jamaica" (Freedgood 2006: 35). Without recourse to the modern reader—indeed, delivering information the modern reader is unlikely to know, but that was "still all *too* present" for the period—Freedgood insists on "a moment of forestalling allegory, and of taking things literally," a project that is in certain respects opposed to Poovey's focus on the development of literary aesthetics, but one that allows us to see a text's historical *engagements*, rather than making causal arguments about the text's creation, reception, or function (Freedgood 2006: 35, 36).

Together, the works by Poovey, Gallagher, and Nunokawa excerpted in this volume contribute to the field of economic literary criticism by weighing in on value and the terms of its possession. They also leave room for expanding those categories. Along these lines, Freedgood is useful to me here for two additional reasons: she takes a female character's economic subjectivity seriously but also describes that character's selfhood as "permeable, able to open up to exchange with others" (Freedgood 2006: 46). Both emphases—on women's economic agency and on intersubjective exchange—are important to one of the turns that

I see economic criticism taking, and that I'd like to gesture toward now with my own brief reading of *Our Mutual Friend*.

Notoriously "willed away, like a horse, or a dog, or a bird" or "a dozen of spoons," Bella Wilfer epitomizes the economic dispossession and objectification of middle-class women that has concerned Victorianists, in various ways, for decades (Dickens 1864–65: 377, 37). Born to a clerk who can barely make ends meet, she will not inherit wealth, but with few options for earning money respectably, she must marry into it. Prior to her engagement, both Harmons and their friends make her an object to toy with and then traffic in and, once married, she loses any economic agency she might have possessed as a single woman under the common law doctrine of coverture (Shanley 1989: 8–9; cf. Rutterford 2013: 133–41). Characterized by plump elbows, curls, and cheeks, Bella embodies her value visibly and materially, rather than suspending her vital energy in the manner that, according to Gallagher, profits the author and his male heroes. When she becomes the "true golden gold," it is less as a result of her own worth than her husband's "triumph" (759; Schor 1999: 184–85; Shuman 1995: 159).

Such gendered dispossession was ideologically important to a culture alarmed both by its own acquisitiveness and by market instabilities (Michie 2011: 7–9; Poovey 1995: 160–61). Property is far from secure in the novel; Dickens rails against the speculation and ungrounded social power that lead to financial fluctuations. Unlike Harmon's dust mounds, which can be scavenged or dispersed, Bella's value is—at least in theory, for Nunokawa—long lasting, offering men the fiction of "safe estate" (Nunokawa 1994: 10, 13, 7), allowing Rokesmith to confidently claim Bella as "mine" (606). Yet this gendered dispossession was something of a fiction itself. The uncertainty of commercial instruments may present the most explicit threat to male possession in *Our Mutual Friend*, but the novel also demonstrates an awareness that women could have more than symbolic relations to gold; most of its female characters find remunerative occupations (at factories, dust mounds, needlework, pawn shops, public houses, and schools). The novel was published a decade after the first attempted Parliamentary petition for married women's property rights but several years before the legislation that finally began to grant them (Shanley 1989: 32–34). It appeared at a time when women's increasing demands for property rights were seen as threatening men's claims to ownership, making gender a key category for stoking fantasies about stable or enduring possession. The fiction that a woman can be willed away to become a man's most reliable treasure thus compensated both for the precariousness of other property rights, as Nunokawa suggests, and for the cultural reality that women were increasingly exerting their own economic will. Though women feature primarily as objects of value within the excerpted works of Nunokawa, Gallagher, and Poovey, other scholarship has begun to show the many forms that women's economic practices took, both in life and in literature, detailing their activities in traditional and alternative markets, and exploring not only the legal restrictions on their economic roles but the creative ways in which they maneuvered around them (Psomiades 1999; E. Rappaport 2000; Michie 2011; J. Rappoport 2012; Dalley and Rappoport 2013).

If most critics of *Our Mutual Friend*, stressing women's dispossession, have seen the elder John Harmon's will as problematic for its attempt to traffic in women, it strikes me as also important to read it as a failure of willed property: it doesn't actually express Harmon's final desires. His second will leaves almost everything to the Crown (493), while his third (and last) leaves everything to a former servant (787), who generously but also rebelliously defies those last wishes even when they are publicly known. Despite the significance of texts to discussions of literature and economics, the will has remained largely absent as a document from the cluster of ideas about writing and value. Gallagher suggests that Harmon's legacy

is revalued both “by its attachment to a worthy body” and “by its sustained suspension” (Gallagher 2006: 94 [Chapter 44: 383]). Yet the old miser’s words repeatedly fail him. In this sense, the novel’s testamentary vision fits Poovey’s account of how financial instruments and literary writing diverge in Victorian fiction. Harmon’s will doesn’t work. Unlike the literary texts that (for Gallagher) appear to function as repositories of vital power for authors such as Dickens (Gallagher 2006: 115), or (for Nunokawa) to provide a safer arena for ownership, this text gets away from its author.

Among the many reasons for this testamentary failure is the novel’s repeated questioning of whether a deceased man has any right to direct his estate. Waterman Gaffer Hexam, defending his own corpse-robbing practices, raises this question early: “Has a dead man any use for money? . . . How can money be a corpse’s? Can a corpse own it, want it, spend it . . . ?” (4). While Gallagher uses this passage as her point of departure for understanding nineteenth-century definitions of value (Gallagher 2006: 86 [Chapter 44: 379]), I find it a useful place for considering the conditions under which the novel *does* allow a corpse to own, want, and spend money. To a certain extent, that is, definitions of possession and value depend upon the circumstances of ownership and exchange. Even though a “dead man” may fail to “own [. . . or] spend” money in *Our Mutual Friend*, a dead woman proves better able to do so.

But not on her own. In addition to revisiting gender in the novel, then, this is a place where we might revisit the individualist logic that characterizes most economic criticism. Recent scholarship has begun to consider not merely the competitive individual producers, consumers, and owners that neoclassical economics described, but also larger, dynamic communities of circulation, possession, and exchange that include collaboration and more intersubjective economic activity (Bigelow 2013). In Nunokawa’s rendering of a capitalist marketplace, sharing property necessitates its loss (Nunokawa 1994: 44–49), but my own work suggests that some Victorians understood ownership differently; in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford*, for instance, I argue that “the only way to ‘have’ something is to share it” (Rappoport 2012: 80). Along these lines, *Our Mutual Friend* ultimately offers, in place of old Harmon’s solitary, secretive, and finally futile attempts to direct money after his death, a testamentary team that works more successfully.

Betty Higden’s story thus offers a useful counterpoint to that of Harmon and Bella Wilfer.⁵ The great-grandmother of an orphan who dies before he can be adopted as a surrogate John Harmon, this deserving, working-class woman is the mouthpiece for Dickens’s decades-old bitterness against the New Poor Law of 1834. She lives in fear of the workhouse and finally dies trying to earn a living rather than succumb to pauperism or patronage. Before departing with her basket of wares, however, she agrees to carry a note from her well-to-do, would-be benefactors (389), and her last words guide Lizzie Hexam to read it and learn her final wishes: to contact her friends and to use the money sewn into her clothing to pay for her burial (511). Unlike Old Harmon’s directives, these wishes are “fulfilled” (515).

What allows Betty’s will, but not Harmon’s, to be fulfilled is partly a function of character and poetic justice, of course, but in a novel so driven by testamentary trouble, I think that there’s something more at stake in the way that the material decisions of Betty, but not Harmon, are permitted to matter after death. Despite the novel’s earlier refusal to allow a single, secretive “corpse” to claim or direct the use of money, it offers here a model for collaborative directives that will do just that. Rokesmith and the Boffins anticipate the setting which might require documentation of Betty’s desires, while an oral exchange between women—Betty’s deathbed message to Lizzie—directs attention to the document she carries and allows Lizzie to confirm “solemnly” and “[f]aithfully” (513) that she will fulfill Betty’s wishes.

To some degree, this is the novelist's fantasy of a single reader-recipient—a unified audience—who is intent on carrying out an author's wishes and who does so both by attending to the written word and by reading its larger spirit. Lizzie's execution of Betty's will requires her newly acquired literacy, which allows her to read the document and write to Betty's friends, but it also requires the longstanding, sympathetic vision that allows her to engage with and understand Betty, who by that point can barely speak. Although Gallagher has suggested that Dickens's ideal reader will blindly "wait and trust . . . very much like the reformed Bella Wilfer at the novel's end" (Gallagher 2006: 114, 115),⁶ Lizzie's interaction with Betty suggests another, more active model for receptive readership than that of wifely submission. "[E]arnest" intent on "understand[ing]" (512), and sympathetic to the meaning it will strive to learn, this is an audience who will also *act*, quickly and bravely, to ensure that a "last request [is] religiously observed" (516).

From another standpoint, this episode highlights some remarkably collaborative economic action, by women as well as men, protecting Betty's monetary decisions through the solemn and faithful description and then execution of her will.⁷ Betty and Lizzie together suggest that Victorian novelists such as Dickens were imagining women as more than merely objects of men's will; nineteenth-century women's economic agency is not simply our twentieth- or twenty-first-century discovery. It is telling, though, that Betty and Lizzie, rather than Bella, demonstrate this point. Betty and Lizzie are working-class characters who possess little money and—as a widow and an orphaned single woman, respectively—earn their own livings without needing "a penny" (515) of additional support. Posing no private threat to husbands or fathers, their small-scale economic agency seems just as unlikely to disturb larger economic operations: Betty's insistence on her own grave will not shut down the workhouse, and Lizzie's execution of Betty's desires doesn't even make her late to her job at the mill (517). When the first Married Women's Property Act was passed in 1870, it focused similarly on working-class women, protecting their earnings and small inheritances from disreputable husbands, but doing little to protect women of Bella Wilfer's rank (Shanley 1989: 74; Ablow "One Flesh"). When we look exclusively at the middle-class women threatened by commodification or the fiction of being someone's "safe estate" in the novel, we miss the characters whose plot lines offer a different story about gender, class, and economics.

Yet this story develops that earlier plot, too. Lizzie Hexam is the daughter of Gaffer, the corpse-robbing waterman who first raised the question of whether or not a dead man could own, want, or spend money. After his death, she strives to make "Any compensation—restitution" for his thefts (227). In her ability to help another poor woman direct her own burial, she offers a model distinct from her father's in every way. The money found on Betty's body is used as she intended; Lizzie's aid to her quietly rebuts Gaffer's assertion that "money [cannot] be a corpse's" (4). This economic action, which thus bears significantly on the novel's larger discourses, comes into focus when we expand our understanding of ownership beyond the bounds of competitive individualism and when we grant to nineteenth-century fiction some of the interest in gender and class that we take up ourselves as economic critics of literature.

Notes

1 See also Osteen and Woodmansee 1999, 3–50 and Poovey 2008, 10–14.

2 See "Print Culture" in this volume.

3 In *Making a Social Body*, Mary Poovey argues that *Our Mutual Friend* aligns women with representation itself (Poovey 1995: 170).

- 4 Poovey credits Ian Hunter's formulation of "historical description" as a starting point for her method, but distinguishes between their emphases and methods (Poovey 2008: 344–5).
- 5 For another approach to Betty Higden and economics, see Schaffer 2011.
- 6 Rachel Ablow (2007: 19) reverses the gender but also suggests a marital model for novel-reading.
- 7 Though women did serve as executors of wills, Mr. Boffin would have been unusual in appointing his wife as "sole executrix" (93). See Green 2009: 140–45.

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