The Literary Marketplace of the Circulating Library, 1830-1930

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A Dissertation presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English

University of Virginia
December, 2017

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Introduction

In many of the scholarly works on the circulating library that I have read, the author is compelled at some point to mention Richard Brinsley Sheridan's play *The Rivals* (1775).[1] I do so myself in the first chapter of this dissertation. It's easy to see why: the appearance of the circulating library within the play as both plot point and target of imminently quotable derision goes a long way towards illustrating the cultural baggage of an institution that fascinated and frightened its contemporary readers. In the play, the circulating library user appears in the form of Lydia Languish, a romance-obsessed heiress whose preoccupation with replicating the types of love affairs she reads in her circulating library novels drives much of the play's comedic plot. Standing in opposition to the corruption of the circulating library is Sir Anthony Absolute, Lydia's soon-to-be father-in-law, who, after observing Lydia's maid bringing her books, utters the play's most famous line:

> Madam, a circulating library in a town is, as an ever-green tree, of diabolical knowledge!—It blossoms through the year!—And depend on it, Mrs. Malaprop, that they who are fond of handling the leaves, will long for the fruit at last. (27)

This line usefully situates the circulating library at the center of a persistent anxiety about the dangers of reading: that reading has the potential to poison the mind with forbidden knowledge, that activities once read about will inevitably be sought. This anxiety about

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[1] See for example: Griest, 10; Brantlinger, 1; Altick, 64; Flint 27. It is from *The Rivals* that Devendra Varma gets the title for the monograph on eighteenth-century circulating libraries *The Evergreen Tree of Diabolical Knowledge* (Washington, D. C., Consortium Press, 1972)

reading is not exclusively tied to gender, but it often is—particularly in the case of the circulating library, whose readers (despite evidence to the contrary)[2] were nearly always figured as only or predominantly women. Within the play, Lydia does not in fact reap the fruits of her over-indulgence in circulating library literature: she ends with a respectable marriage. But the endurance of Sir Anthony's condemnation of the circulating library as a path to certain ruin indicates that he has had the last word after all.

The Rivals first saw performance and publication in 1775, and it documents a distinctly eighteenth-century moment of circulating library history. The play is set in Bath, the tourist town where the first circulating libraries emerged in the 1740s. The twenty or so novels named in the play so absolutely capture their particular cultural moment of sentimental literature that many later critics assumed Sheridan had invented most of them as exemplars of a class of literature, rather than drawing upon actual published novels.[3] The ascendency of the gothic novel, a genre particularly associated with circulating libraries, female readers, and dissipation, was just around the corner. Sir Anthony's words are very much steeped in the dynamics of their time.

Nevertheless, *The Rivals* is often quoted by scholars of the nineteenth-century circulating library, for the particular arguments against the institution it describes are in

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[2] See, for example, Paul Kaufman "In Defense of Fair Readers," in *Libraries and Their Users* (London: Library Association, 1969): 223-228; Kaufman uses the evidence of extant registers from circulating and subscription libraries to analyze the gender breakdown of circulating library readers and concludes that most were men. He speculates about whether or not some male subscribers may represent family units (e.g. a father might subscribe so that his wife and daughters could rent books), but concludes that even were this the case, letters and diaries support a conclusion that men made up at least an equal portion of subscribers.

[3] For a full description of the novels referenced in *The Rivals* see George Henry Nettleton, "The Books of Lydia Languish's Circulating Library" in *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 5:4 (1905), 492–500.

many ways still applicable. Though the novel would shed many of its unsavory associations as writers like Austen, Dickens, Gaskell, Thackeray, and Trollope domesticated the form for middle-class audiences, the association between novel-reading and feminine dissolution ensured that the circulating library would perennially find itself the center of debates about the propriety of women reading for pleasure. Unaffiliated with church or school, uncoupled from societies, philanthropists, communities, or clubs, the commercial circulating library served readers at their own individual pleasure. It was thus a magnet for fears about the danger and folly of pursuing pleasure, especially for those whose right to self-gratification was already contested—women and the working classes.

I had hoped that I would find a nineteenth-century text that would rival Sheridan's *The Rivals* by offering a take on the circulating library during the age of mass production that would prove as resonant as the evergreen tree of diabolical knowledge. The closest I have found is Wilkie Collins's 1862 novel *No Name*. The novel follows the fortunes of two sisters, Norah and Magdalen, who find themselves disinherited when an untimely accident uncovers that their parents were not married at the time of their conception. Magdalen, the younger sister, then embarks on a series of bizarre schemes to swindle her way to her rightful inheritance. Her skill at deception is traceable in the novel to an early scene where she participates in a parlor theatrical version of Sheridan's *The Rivals*, acting a double role as Julia and, interestingly, Lucy—Lydia Languish's maid, who spends the play fetching circulating library books. Like Lydia, Magdalen soon finds herself swept away from the safety of her predictable marriage plot. Unlike Lydia, who orchestrates a romantic affair that mirrors the sentimental plots of the novels she reads, Magdalen's machinations cycle through sensational plot after sensational plot. Each convoluted set

piece forms its own novel in miniature, one that could stand alone on a circulating library shelf, with Magdalen as both villain and heroine occupying a distinct identity in each iteration.

The title of the novel thus refers to Magdalen's status as illegitimate child, but also her slippery subjectivity as she transforms herself from one character to the next. I'd like to also suggest that *No Name* might refer to what Collins titled the "Unknown Public" in an article he wrote for Dickens's *Household Words* in 1858. Explicitly contrasted with the "the members of book-clubs and circulating libraries, and the purchasers and borrowers of newspapers and reviews" (217), the unknown public has reading tastes and appetites that are amorphous and unpredictable, catered to by the penny-press but defined by their very indefinability:

> The known reading public—the minority already referred to—are easily discovered and classified. There is the religious public, with booksellers and literature of its own, which includes reviews and newspapers as well as books. There is the public which reads for information, and devotes itself to Histories, Biographies, Essays, Treatises, Voyages and Travels. There is the public which reads for amusement, and patronises the Circulating Libraries and the railway book-stalls. There is, lastly, the public which reads nothing but newspapers. We all know where to lay our hands on the people who represent these various classes. We see the books they like on their tables. We meet them out at dinner, and hear them talk of their favourite authors. We know, if we are at all conversant with literary matters, even the very districts of London in which certain classes of people live who are to be depended upon beforehand as the picked readers for

> certain kinds of books. But what do we know of the enormous outlawed majority—of the lost literary tribes—of the prodigious, the overwhelming three millions? Absolutely nothing. (218)

This mass reading public threatened stable reading genres and interrupted established patterns of reading that, as we see Collins outline, mapped onto specific sites of reading, from the circulating library to the railway platform to the very districts of London in which certain classes of people live. In the unknown public, we see a fundamental inability to resolve into one singular stable class as a mirror for the way that the plot of *No Name* cannot seem to settle and instead shuffles restlessly from one shocking scenario to the next.

The opening of *No Name* with a performance of *The Rivals* highlights the transitional state of the circulating library during the nineteenth century. Implicit in the allusion to the play is a reification of the circulating library as instigator of feminine misfortune through reading; but the novel also suggests the ways that the circulating library itself can function as a gatekeeper of reading practice: it makes the unknown reader knowable. Suspect because of its connection to popular entertainment, commercial practice, and feminine pleasure, the circulating library of the nineteenth century nevertheless fulfilled a vital role in mediating a publishing market that offered print in a bewildering variety of publications for an ever-growing mass audience of readers. My project in this dissertation is to follow the development of the circulating library in the age of industrial book manufacture, with attention to its readers, real and imagined, named and unnamed. I explore the impact of gender and class on perceptions of the circulating library, both for its contemporary audience and in subsequent scholarly

analysis. In doing so, I uncover the interconnectedness of book rental with a variety of reading and publishing practices, and its continued influence on literary study to this day.

II. Formulating the Circulating Library

It is useful to begin with definitions, particularly as the term "circulating library" turns out to be quite a slippery one, both in scholarship on the subject and in contemporary references to libraries and subscribers. Writing about the state of British libraries up to 1825, K. A. Manley identifies three interrelated library services in use:

> …commercial circulating libraries, usually run by a bookseller; private (or proprietary) subscription libraries where readers bought shares in a collection of books maintained as a permanent library; and book clubs, where the books were usually sold off each year. What connects these three types of book provision is that they provided a lending service of books for a fee in an age when the free public library service of today was completely undreamt of. (107)

All three of these services began in the eighteenth century as ways to solve a very pressing problem in the buying and selling of books: there were increasingly more literate individuals with leisure time to read than there were affordable books to supply their reading habit. As Manley notes, the circulating library of the eighteenth century was tied nearly directly to booksellers, some within substantial establishments like William Lane, John Bell, and Thomas Hookham (Manley 107), and many more as ad hoc side businesses for small-scale booksellers who also functioned as stationers, bookbinders, milliners, printsellers, or even peddlers of medicinal remedies. For many commercial circulating libraries of the eighteenth century, the lending of books for a fee was merely

one service among many, designed to leverage book stock in order to make a greater profit.

The 1820s and 30s proved to be a pivotal time for books, their makers and sellers. Though a period of economic downturn, it was also a time of innovation in bookmaking technologies. Those two decades saw the commercial implementation, at scale, of industrial processes such as machine-made paper manufacture, stereo and electrotyping, case binding of books in cloth, and power platen presses. These new industrial processes replaced a production model of bookmaking that had existed, with minimal variation, since the earliest years of Western printing in the fifteenth century. Thus, from the perspective of manufacture, a book printed in 1810 may have more in common with a book printed in 1610 than one printed only a few decades later in 1840.[4] As the nineteenth century wore on, new developments in book production technologies continued to emerge and influence commercial manufacture: photochemical processes, lithography, the rotary press, monotype and linotype machines that combined typesetting and typefounding, among other technologies.

The industrial revolution also changed the way that books were distributed. The first steam locomotive appeared in Great Britain in the 1820s. By the 1840s, railway expansion was in the midst of a boom, replacing transport by horse-drawn wagons and coaches. Fast and reliable distribution networks enabled wholesaling of books (Raven 332). The railways were particularly crucial to the spread of newspapers and journals, in allowing daily periodicals wide distribution outside of London, but they were also central to the development of markets for cheap printing (Raven 332). If industrial technology

[4] For more on the technological advancements of the early nineteenth century, see James Raven, *The Business of Books* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007): 321-326.

enabled publishers to more efficiently and cheaply produce larger editions of books, the railway lines ensured that audiences could be reached for those books, no matter where in the United Kingdom they happened to be.

The nineteenth century also saw the beginning of the free library movement and the establishment of government-funded public libraries with the Public Library Act of 1850. Though the provisions of the Act meant that the growth of public libraries was slow in the first years following 1850, by 1886 more than 566 public libraries had been opened in municipalities across Great Britain (Black, "The people's university" 27). For the duration of the nineteenth century, public libraries could not provide the sort of market for publishers that circulating libraries had and continued to do, but they nevertheless represented a new site for readership, one (rhetorically, at least) divorced from commercial concerns. The architects of the free public library movement explicitly tied their library advocacy to democratic principles, and in doing so reconceptualized libraries as sites of secular self-improvement.

New technologies, expanding markets, and increased opportunities to acquire reading material went hand in hand with soaring literacy rates. Industrialization swelled the populations of cities, as workers moved away from rural towns to urban centers, where literacy was more common. At the same time, social and political factors, such as the Sunday School movement, provided new opportunities for elementary education for the working classes (Altick 141). 1870 would see the passage of the Forster Act, a major education bill that established the government's responsibility to provide public education to all citizens (Altick 171). Throughout the century, literacy rates climbed, creating new audiences with new appetites. Simultaneously, the middle classes began to

enjoy increased leisure time, and leisure activities grew increasingly central to modern life. Middle-class women, in particular, benefitted from increased leisure opportunities. The reading public of the nineteenth and early twentieth century was thus larger than it had been in the eighteenth century, and represented a broader cross-section of the total population.

With these developments in mind, we might expect to find circulating libraries of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries vested with less importance than their eighteenth-century counterparts. In a book market characterized by variety and choice, we might expect a slow decline of commercial book rental as a necessary feature in connecting books with readers. And yet, despite rapidly changing economic circumstances in publishing markets, circulating libraries persisted—and, indeed, consolidated their cultural and commercial relevance. Untangling how and why circulating libraries experienced increasing relevance throughout the nineteenth century, and well into the twentieth, is the subject of this dissertation. What influence, if any, did circulating libraries exert over publishers, authors, and readers? What value did readers assign to places of book rental? How did the existence of public libraries and the free library movement change the circulating library? What was the relationship between circulating libraries and the new reading public?

III. The Circulating Library in Scholarship

The centrality of circulating libraries to the study of the nineteenth-century book has long been acknowledged. In historical accounts of the trade, the circulating library appears due to its role as a bridge between the high price of books and the purchasing power of individual buyers. In this accounting, symbiotic arrangements between

publishers and circulating libraries ensured reliable income to both parties. An early and important account of the economic importance of the circulating library appears in Richard Altick's foundational study *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public* (1957). Though this title underscores the centrality of readers, Altick's interest is less in the affective responses of particular readers and instead in identifying and outlining how readers as a group interacted with publishing markets and emerged from particular social phenomena. Altick writes of nineteenth-century book pricing that "circulating libraries bought large quantities of newly published books; the publishers charged prices established in the inflationary 1820s (and gave the libraries big discounts). The publishers found it more profitable to supply, say, five hundred copies of a new book to a few reliable customers…. the libraries flourished" (295). Echoes of Altick's account of circulating libraries can be found in nearly every scholarly work that touches on circulating libraries, readership, authorship, or publishing in the nineteenth century, in large part because the historical frame he presents for interpreting relationships among these interrelated activities has never been fully superseded. In his introduction to the 1998 reissue of the book by Ohio University Press, Jonathan Rose goes so far as to credit Altick with "inventing a new academic discipline" (x). More recently, excerpts from *The English Common Reader* form a chapter in David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery's *Book History Reader* (2006)—a testament to the enduring popularity of Altick's history.

Aside from Altick, the single most influential work on the circulating library in the nineteenth century is Guinevere Griest's *Mudie's Circulating Library and the Victorian Novel* (1970). To date the only monograph entirely devoted to the nineteenth

century circulating library, Griest is cited frequently with the authority of documentary evidence.[5] A fuller account of Mudie's Circulating Library, and Griest's outline of its history, can be found in chapter one of this dissertation, but it is worth noting here Griest's profound influence on scholarly understanding of the relationship between publishers and circulating libraries beyond Mudie's. From Griest emerges the narrative of Mudie's as a metonym for the circulating library, and for the doubling-down on Altick's identification of the circulating library as a necessary financial intermediary between publisher and reader.

According to this model of publication, publishers relied on large purchases by a few libraries rather than direct sales to many individual buyers, thus the significance of the circulating library was its role in facilitating the distribution of books, particularly fiction. To put it another way, "The destination of a book was not a personal library… not individual possession, but borrowing" (Griest 78). This shift in power, from individual consumer to corporate body, is said to have had a profound effect on authorship throughout the century, encouraging publishers to adhere to the three-volume novel formula, but also making possible the steady and consistent profit margins necessary to cement authors as a professional class (Griest 11-12). Publishers needed the buying power of the circulating library to ensure a purchaser for new books; authors needed the circulating library to establish an audience for their works. Thus, though authors and

[5] For example, Griest is the source for many of the statements about circulating libraries in Sutherland's *Victorian Novelists and Publishers* (1976), Flint's *The Woman Reader* (1993), Brantlinger's *The Reading Lesson* (1998), and Price's *How To Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain* (2012). Her influence is even more pervasive when you take into account how frequently these four works are themselves cited as authorities on nineteenth-century book markets.

publishers complained about the tyranny of the circulating libraries, both benefitted from the system.

There is a neat and appealing simplicity to this narrative that has contributed to its proliferation over the years, though there have been some counter-narratives. Terry Lovell offers a slightly different account in *Consuming Fiction* (1987):

> Novels were, and remained for some time, a rather odd type of commodity. Commodities vary greatly in the length of their useful life. At one extreme they include perishables which must be consumed immediately upon purchase if their use-value to the purchaser is to be realized. At the other extreme, such status conferring goods as precious jewels retain their use-value almost indefinitely and can be used again and again.
>
> Novels in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were paradoxical commodities in that their usefulness was incommensurate with their durability and their cost. Novels then, as now, are in the main read only once. Novel-readers in the last quarter of the eighteenth century did not wish to be novel-owners. A novel was not considered to be an appropriate addition to the private book collection in the bourgeois home. Even as late as the middle of the nineteenth century, Dickens was looked at askance by George Henry Lewes because his library contained little else besides fiction. With few exceptions such as novels by Fielding and Richardson, they had no ongoing use-value as status-conferring objects once they had been read, and their immediate use-value as entertainment extracted (50).

In this formulation, book borrowing is a by-product of the nature of fiction, implied and embedded in its identification as 'novel,' i.e. novelty. In Lovell's view, it is the reader's investment of value in the book as consumable commodity object that necessitates circulating libraries. Despite its permanence as an object, as a commodity the value of the novel is in the consumption of its intangible qualities: the pleasure of the act of reading, for example. Once read, the novel itself may be disposed of, without the need to retain the book itself because it confers little status on its reader. Lovell is writing about the circulating library at a time just before the era covered in this dissertation: the latter half of the eighteenth century through about 1830, the era of gothic fiction and Minerva Press. Nevertheless, as she notes, the paradoxical nature of the novel can be traced from Dickens to the present day, only circumvented if and when a particular novelist achieves enough prestige to elevate his or her works to the level of conferring status.

If Altick's *Common Reader* has given rise to certain narratives about the relationship between library and market, it has also served as a touchstone in studies of readership that have focused increasingly on reading as a culturally coded activity. Readership studies is a large and diffuse field; it has intersected with circulating libraries most often when the objective is to understand the external social, political, or moral pressures that shape reading habits. Within these narratives, the circulating library's function as arbiter of taste is an essential component of reconstructing how books found an audience, and how audiences found books. The association of the circulating library with novel-reading necessarily involved libraries in debates about what could or should be read, and by whom. This inflection of circulating library books with value—positive or negative, depending on the rising or falling reputation of the novel—also served to

mark readers and their habits as either good or bad, healthy or unhealthy, connoisseurs or merely consumers. Additionally, the persistent association of circulating libraries with women, especially young women, has made it a frequent subject in studies that seek to recover women readers and their practices.

The association of circulating libraries and the ill-effects of novel-reading is foregrounded in Patrick Brantlinger's *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (1998). Brantlinger opens the book with an extended reading of Sheridan's *The Rivals*, underscoring the play's portrayal of circulating libraries as spreaders of contagious degeneracy as a starting point for a chapter titled "The Poisonous Book." Brantlinger identifies the circulating library both as a site of infection, and as a potential curative, noting that "through the emergence of new publishing and circulating-library practices and institutions such as Mudie's, the novel gained widespread cultural acceptance, though not exactly aesthetic legitimacy" (2). Brantlinger thus signals a change between the anxieties of the eighteenth century with regard to reading (that readers would be led dangerously astray by novels) and the anxieties of the nineteenth century:

> While novelists often express opinions common to anti-novel discourse—novel-reading is addictive or seductive, it is a frivolous waste of time, novels are mere commodities to be bought and consumed like any other perishable good, and so forth—a major factor underlying the inscription of anti-novel attitudes within novels is the radical uncertainty all novelists share about how the reading public will interpret or misinterpret, use or abuse, the products of their imaginations (3).

In other words, Brantlinger is interested in the anxiety of authors, whose readers are no longer a discernible group of identifiable educated men and women, but rather a "huge, largely anonymous, ever-increasing readership" (3). Brantlinger's other important contribution is his recognition that the three-volume novel, a staple of the circulating library, was not the sole vehicle for fiction during the second half of the nineteenth century. Brantlinger acknowledges the rise of the "'cheap literature' industry, catering mainly to the burgeoning working-class readership in the major urban centers" (12). Brantlinger connects the emerging cheap literature with the new respectability of the circulating library, arguing that the expensive three-volume format gained middle-class legitimacy once penny fiction established itself as the inheritor of gothic fiction's alarming tendency towards the shocking and salacious.

Brantlinger provides an important update to Altick's narrative of mass literacy, and is particularly helpful in establishing and outlining anxieties about mass literacy across multiple genres of the nineteenth-century novel, but his primary focus is to locate that anxiety within the structure of the novel. Additionally, though he astutely notes the different inflections of proliferating book genres, from railway novels and penny dreadfuls to serialized fiction and triple-deckers, his primary focus is not on the book as material object, or as manufactured object. Though Brantlinger's reconception of mass literacy has important implications for an understanding of the circulating library, his actual references to circulating libraries do not significantly challenge the dominant narrative offered by Griest, but merely repeat it.

Feminist scholarship on readership is a rich source both for uncovering the history of the circulating library and for discovering its valences. For many contemporaries, there

was no distinction between the circulating library novel reader and the woman reader: they were assumed to be one and the same. As Lovell notes, "those who attacked the novel as poor literature, as well as those who drew attention to its moral dangers, were alike influenced by the belief that the novel was in some sense a feminine form, one particularly adapted to women's interests both as writers and readers" (9). This same formula could be applied to the circulating library, an institution continually linked to the specificities of women's reading habits.

Untangling those habits is at the heart of Kate Flint's *The Woman Reader: 1837-1914* (1993). Flint's study of readership situates itself, as she writes, at "the meeting-place of discourses of subjectivity and socialization" (43). Like Brantlinger, Flint is sensitive to the ways that reading is an activity steeped in anxiety. For women, that anxiety is one of influence: "Either the woman is improved and educated through access to approved knowledge, which builds on the innately valuable characteristics which she was presumed to retain within her own body; or reading of the forbidden leads to her downfall" (18). What is most useful about Flint's observation is her delineation of the "improving" side of the nineteenth-century belief that women were inherently more susceptible to being shaped by their reading habits. Though the circulating library posed a looming danger to women readers, who might lose themselves in the narratives of others, it could also provide a regulatory function in prescribing certain kinds of reader—and prohibiting others. This insight undergirds my own argument about how the circulating library functions in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as an institution that can sanitize and regulate women's reading. As the novel, and by extension the circulating

library, gained respectability, anxiety about circulating library literature shifted from fears of corruption to fears of censorship, both filtered through a rhetoric of feminization.

Also relevant is Flint's understanding of anxieties about women readers as both historically inflected, and also persistent, uncoupled from any one time period or literary genre. Flint finds mirrors of the so-called fiction question as far back as the 16th century (23), and sees them reflected forward into the 20th century (31-32). I find this long history of the vulnerable woman reader to be an important touchstone in considering a question that recurs throughout this dissertation: are commentators anxious about women readers because of their association with circulating libraries, or is it that the circulating library is a site of anxiety because of its association with women readers?

As critical evaluations of readers and readership have emerged, these studies have relied heavily on earlier works that established how nineteenth-century book markets functioned. However, in more recent years, new scholarship has changed our understanding of the economics of book production in the industrial era. Based in archival research, and inflected by the critical turn away from the literary canon, book historians have increasingly considered the novel, and thus the circulating library, as part of a complex stratified market with many modes of input and output. Book history and bibliography have grown enormously during the last decades of the twentieth century and first two decades of the twenty-first. Careful consideration of primary sources, including records of printers and publishers, has broadened an understanding of the history of the book in the industrial era. Because a basic understanding of economics of book production and distribution is necessary to provide context for interpreting the evidence of readership, whether through traditional literary analysis of novels (Brantlinger, Lovell)

or through examination of the records of readers (Flint), new evidence about the book trade should automatically prompt us to reconsider our theories of readers and readership.

A progenitor of trade-focused study of the nineteenth-century book is Simon Eliot, whose work on Mudie's Circulating Library, in particular, has guided my understanding of the economic realities of nineteenth-century publishing. Though Eliot's work has been highly influential in the field of book history, he is only infrequently cited by scholars who primarily study literature, much to their detriment, possibly because he has few monographic publications to his name. Nevertheless, his short but powerful *Some patterns and trends in British publishing, 1800-1919* (1994), as well as the several articles he has brought out through the journal *Publishing History*, provide a foundation for research in the field.

Alexis Weedon's *Victorian Publishing: The Economics of Book Production for a Mass Market, 1836-1916* (2003), building on Eliot's work, begins with the acknowledgement that a chief characteristic of nineteenth-century publishing is "the variety and choice of books on sale" (45). "Culturally," Weedon writes, "the market-building activities of publishers gave rise to a wider variety of titles in a greater range of prices than had been available before. This led to a shift in the reading public's notions of value attached to a text not only through its price and longevity, but also its contribution to the reputation of the imprint or series in which it appeared" (89). Weedon suggests a nineteenth-century publishing market defined by competing interests with an emergent value-system not solely tied to price. This is a very different picture from earlier narratives of nineteenth-century publishing that saw it as an extended period of relative stability bolstered by the continued dominance of the three-volume novel. Instead of a

conservative and regressive market, Weedon argues that publishers engaged in a variety of innovative and evolving strategies to package and market books. Weedon uses primarily archival documentation to track how tenuous, shifting, and unsteady the nineteenth century was for publishing.

More ambitious in scope, James Raven's *The Business of Books: Booksellers and the English Book Trade, 1450-1850* (2007) also circles around economic issues, though Raven is more concerned with manufacture. Raven emphasizes the way that technologies impacted relationships between publishers and readers:

> By the early nineteenth century, a freer, more competitive, expanding market, together with more efficient technologies and distribution systems, all provided enterprising publishers with unprecedented opportunities…. The use of cheaper raw materials and new industrial processes (notably in papermaking) lowered unit costs and hugely improved the return on invested capital. Between 1846 and 1916, the volume of publication was to quadruple while the average price of literature halved (324).

This picture of nineteenth-century publishing could not be farther from Griest's assertion that the "middle and upper-class reader… was practically forced to Mudie's doors by the combination of high prices and the absence of public libraries" (79). The price of manufacture was falling, not just for cheap literature designed for working-class readers, but for books intended for the middle- and upper-class readers of Mudie's.

Readership studies, especially those inflected by feminist and class-based analysis, provide a crucial critical framework for understanding both the development of the novel and reception history. Attention to readers can have profound implications for

literary interpretation, situating analysis of the novel within its social and cultural moment. Yet, for these theoretical frameworks to have real weight, they must be built on a solid foundation of bibliographic study. As knowledge of nineteenth- and twentieth-century book markets has evolved, our understanding of the function and reach of the circulating library has lagged behind. Given its relevance to readers and readership studies, the history of the circulating library must be re-examined.

A major project of this dissertation is to bring into conversation the theoretical frameworks of readership studies, especially those concerned with gender and class, and new economic models of nineteenth- and twentieth-century publishing markets. It has been nearly fifty years since the first publication of Griest's *Mudie's Circulating Library and the Victorian Novel.* I aim to resituate the circulating library in light of new scholarship, exploring its relationship to publishing trends and to new sites of reading such as railways and public libraries. Bringing the narrative of the circulating library into the twentieth century, I argue for a new understanding of the cultural significance of circulating libraries as shapers of readership communities.

IV. The Chapters of this Project

With this critical history in mind, this project presents the history of the circulating library between 1830 and 1930, re-evaluating its role as purveyor of literature during a time of rapid change. The circulating library between 1830 and 1930 is bookended by major shifts in the literary marketplace. Thus reframed, a history of the circulating library allows for a greater ability to understand the function of book rental for novel readers. As anxieties about class are displaced onto anxieties about gender, and vice versa, the circulating library emerges as an essential location for debates about the

relationships between readers and books, authors and publisher, art and commerce, literature and reception.

In the first chapter, I revisit the history of Mudie's Select Circulating Library. Founded in 1842, Mudie's library gained ascendency as the largest circulating library in England just as the novel began to attain middle-class respectability. Exceptional for its low subscription cost, but with pretensions of exclusivity, Mudie's attempted to distance the circulating library from its eighteenth-century associations with frivolous reading, social and moral degeneracy, and women readers, with varying degrees of success. Mudie's reliance on the concept of selection, apparent in the very name of the establishment, was at odds with the ambitions of the library to stock extensively and comprehensively. Moreover, though Mudie hoped to decouple the circulating library from its association with novel-reading, he was ultimately unsuccessful. Mudie's attempts at rebranding the circulating library instead lead to its association with censorship and prudery.

This chapter also revisits the economic considerations of the three-volume novel, long associated with the circulating library, and especially with Mudie's. In light of new scholarship, I challenge the notion that Mudie upheld the publishing format of three-volume novel in opposition to publishers, and that he, along with W. H. Smith, caused its demise at the close of the nineteenth century. I argue that Mudie continued to prop up the three-volume novel format largely at the behest of publishers, who benefitted most from the endurance of the circulating library system. This insight has implications for the critical history of the novel, in particular the persistent notion that the conservatism of the

nineteenth-century triple-decker was caused by circulating libraries and the women who frequented their shelves.

Much of the history of Mudie's is distorted by the very public spat between Mudie and novelist George Moore, whose novel *Modern Love* Mudie had refused to circulate. Moore's hyperbolic attack on Mudie revives the twin specters of gender and class that Mudie had attempted to distance his library from. The controversy with Moore has often been accepted as documentary evidence of Mudie's power over the press and tendency to censorship. In this chapter, I offer a more skeptical reading of Moore's claims in light of the economic realities of the circulating library. Among other things, Moore's central claim that circulating library literature is less valuable because it appeals to women readers deserves to be challenged, as does his assertion that Mudie's status as a tradesman disqualified him from judging literary merit. Unpacking Moore's argument reveals the way that gender biases in historical interpretations of the circulating library have distorted scholarship about publishing, women readers, and authorship.

The second chapter approaches the nineteenth-century circulating library from the perspective of Mudie's closest competitor: W. H. Smith. In part because of the legacy of Griest's monograph on Mudie, the circulating library of W. H. Smith has been largely understudied, despite its rather large share of the market. One notable exception is book historian Stephen Colclough, who between 2003 and 2009 published a series of six articles based on his research in the publisher's archives of W. H. Smith and Co. at the University of Reading.[6] These six articles provide an important sketch of many of

[6] See: Colclough, Stephen: "'A Larger Outlay Than Any Return': The Library of W. H. Smith & Son, 1860-1873." *Publishing History*, 54 (2003): 67-93; "'Purifying the Sources of Amusement and Information'? The Railway Book-Stalls of W. H. Smith & Son, 1855-

Smith's business concerns and models, and have been influential to my understanding of the W. H. Smith as a publisher and distributor of books. But Colclough's primary focus is not on the rental aspect of Smith's railway stalls. He does not dwell on a consideration of Smith's circulating library model as a contrast with that of Mudie.

Unlike Mudie's, which functioned solely as a site for book rental, W. H. Smith's circulating library operated as part of his larger business enterprise, which began with newspaper distribution, expanded to railway station book stalls, and incorporated publishing and advertising ventures as well. Diverse in his business interests, Smith experienced a different set of challenges in defining the audience and market for his circulating library. The railway station platform emerged during the nineteenth century as a completely new location for the acquisition of books by rental and purchase, a place where travelers from indiscriminate class backgrounds mixed in relative anonymity. As a site of reading, the railway station platform was thus vulnerable to the threats of mass readership, but also the threat of the masses as individuals.

Key to this chapter is the anxiety surrounding emerging concepts of modernity, tied to rail travel. In connecting by rapid and reliable transport disparate parts of Great

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1860." *Publishing History*, 56 (2004): 27-51; "Station to Station: The LNWR and the Emergence of the Railway Bookstall, 1840-1875," in Hinks, John (ed. and introd.), Armstrong, Catherine (ed.), *Printing Places: Locations of Book Production & Distribution Since 1500*, London, England, British Library, (2005): 169-184; "J. Sheridan Le Fanu and the 'Select Library of Fiction': Evidence from Four Previously Unpublished Letters." *Publishing History*, 60 (2006): 5-19; "'No Such Bookselling has ever before taken Place in this Country': Propaganda and the Wartime Distribution Practices of W. H. Smith & Son," in Hammond, Mary (ed. and introd.), Towheed, Shafquat (ed. and introd.), *Publishing in the First World War: Essays in Book History* (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 27-45; "'The Retail Newsagents of Lancashire ARE ON STRIKE': The Dispute between the Lancashire Retail Newsagents and the 'Northern Wholesalers', February-September 1914," in Hinks, John (ed. and introd.), Armstrong, Catherine (ed.), Day, Matthew (ed.), *Periodicals and Publishers: The Newspaper and Journal Trade 1750-1914* (London, England: British Library, 2009) 223-244.

Britain, rail travel reshaped British culture by altering how goods and services were distributed across the country, expanding and enabling leisure and tourist travel, and creating a new class of traveler: the daily commuter. More so than perhaps any other single invention, the steam locomotive was the supreme embodiment of the triumph of modern technology and engineering, representing the height of industrialization. It was thus the locus of national pride in modern ingenuity, as well as a lightning rod for fears about the dangers of modernity.

Unlike Mudie, who embraced a rhetoric of selectivity as a way of distancing the circulating library from the baggage of the past, Smith capitalized on the positive associations with modernity, branding his bookstall empire as an agent of progressive and optimistic change. This rhetorical stance allowed Smith to participate in the emerging genres of cheap literature, notably the yellowback railway novel. It also circumvented many of the gendered associations that continued to follow circulating library literature throughout the century. The history of W. H. Smith thus provides a necessary counter-narrative to that of Mudie, especially given Smith's continued success well into the twentieth century and up to the present day.

In scholarship about library history, narratives of the circulating library have commonly been separated from narratives of the free public library movement. The circulating library is sometimes seen as a precursor to the public library, despite the fact that commercial circulating libraries and free public libraries coexisted from 1850 until well into the twentieth century. In my third chapter, I present the history of the public library movement as a history running in parallel, and indeed overlapping, with that of the circulating library. Though public libraries emerged from a desire to educate working

class readers and create a knowledgeable, democratic citizenry, fiction soon found its way onto the public library shelf, opening the public library up to many of the same anxieties and criticisms as the commercial circulating library. The inclusion of fiction in public libraries, debated contemporarily under the banner the Great Fiction Question, brought to the surface questions about the value and place of literature as entertainment. Seen as a betrayal of its educational and philanthropic mission, fiction's corruption of the public library ushered in anxieties about female readers.

Unlike the circulating library, the architects of the free public library imagined their readers as primarily male and working class, yet the actual readership of public libraries was mixed, leading to concerns about women usurping masculine reading spaces. Popular fiction also made its way onto public library shelves. The perception of novel reading as both feminine and useless opened public libraries up to criticism as a waste of public good. This sense of the feminization of public libraries was exacerbated by the movement of women into positions as librarians and library clerks within the newly created free public libraries. While novel-reading was criticized as a frivolous and feminine pastime unsuited to the purpose and mission of the public library, women increasingly found their way into public libraries as employees, attracted by the supposed suitability of the work of librarianship to women's employment.

I contextualize these developments within the economic realities of the Public Library Act of 1850 and its successors, which allocated insufficient funds from the rates paid by taxpayers to meet the needs of the public library. Reliant on philanthropy to function, public libraries engaged in a variety of strategies to cut costs, including the hiring of women as a strategic decision, since women commanded lower wages than their

male counterparts. It also resulted in some public libraries operating subscription library services to generate revenue, further blurring the lines between the free public library and the commercial circulating library. This legacy of chronic underfunding has haunted the public library system to this day, and has direct relevance to current debates about the role of government in supporting libraries, particularly in times of economic downturn.

The final chapter considers the continued relevance of commercial circulating libraries in the early twentieth century by exploring the history of Boots Booklovers' Library, a circulating library operated out of Boots Cash Chemist shops. Beginning in 1899, and enjoying its greatest years of success during the interwar years (1918-1939), the popularity of Boots as a purveyor of middle-brow novels to middle-class readers points to a continued cultural significance for circulating libraries long past the death of the three-volume format that it sustained during the nineteenth century. With its many branches across Britain, Boots continued to provide the ready market for new books, especially new novels, that had made circulating libraries an important economic factor in book distribution in the nineteenth century, despite the ever-lower price of new novels during that time.

Central to this chapter is an understanding of the increasing stratification of the book market during the early years of the twentieth century and the increase in varieties of genre fiction. Romance novels, science fiction, westerns, detective stories, and so on all evolved into distinct publishing genres during this time, and Boots played a vital role in connecting readers to genre fiction. In aligning itself with the middlebrow, Boots embraced women readers, and in fact did much to attract and appeal to women readers in the design and layout of its shops, modeled on domestic interiors. Like public libraries,

Boots readily employed women as library clerks, training them to provide personalized service that would remind customers of the comforts of home.

These strategies are similar to, yet very different from, those of Boots's nineteenth-century counterparts, especially Mudie, in figuring itself as a selective club that would guide readers through the ever-expanding market of new books. If circulating libraries began in the eighteenth century as an economic expedient to connect readers to books they could not afford to buy outright, by the time of Boots the function of the circulating library had completed its shift to the role of cultural mediator, a check on the rapid expansion of the print market that created stability for both readers and publishers at a time of significant change. This role of the circulating library as tastemaker that began with Mudie sees its fullest expression in Boots Booklovers' Library. Boots's appeal to middle-class women, figured as matrons of domestic comfort rather than vulnerable girls, finally shifts reading from an activity of potential degeneracy to one of respectable banality. That Boots took pains to cater to the tastes and sensibility of women readers has implications for an understanding of the ways that modernist literature, in seeking to separate itself from the commercially successful middlebrow novel, participates in a gendered hierarchy of literary value. The history of Boots is indicative of an emerging binary where safe, feminine reading of commercially-successful genre fiction contrasts with modernist literature that eschews marketability and morality in its quest for originality.

V. Conclusion

As is often the case when one studies a subject deeply, once I began to look for circulating libraries I seemed to find them everywhere: casually mentioned by authors as

disparate as Wilkie Collins, Vernon Lee, and Evelyn Waugh; derisively referred to in the pages of literary journals in anonymous essays; advertised in daily and weekly newspapers alongside notices of sailing ships and new publications. What all these scattered references have in common is that they presuppose a shared understanding of what a circulating library is and what it does. The more I read, the fuzzier my own understanding turned out to be. Why had such a system for renting books evolved? What power did it possess and what influence did it exert? Why had it lasted so long during a time of rapid social, technological, and literary change? Why were women readers so central to its mythic proportions?

This project, in exploring facets of library history that illuminate the circulating library in its historical context, is my attempt at a gloss. I aim to provide a more capacious picture of book rental in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in order to illuminate the complex ways that circulating libraries interacted with readers and markets. In doing so, I trace evolving concepts of gender, class, and literary value, which recur again and again as controlling narratives for the importance of circulating libraries. The concepts are closely related to the development and evolution of the novel, and their recurrence in the history of the circulating library points to a shared history.

Chapter 1:
Reserving the Right of Selection: Mudie's Select Circulating Library and Literature

Circulating libraries were commercial establishments that allowed readers to pay a yearly subscription fee for the privilege of renting books. The first circulating libraries sprang up as off-shoots of bookshops in the 1740s. Almost from their inception, circulating libraries were associated with frivolity and, at worst, degeneracy. Early circulating libraries clustered around cities like Bath and Brighton, sites of pleasure and leisure, and circulating libraries quickly became associated with novel-reading (especially low-brow novels), and certain kinds of readers—primarily young unmarried women, and, in moments of particularly extreme handwringing, young unmarried working women. Examples of writers and critics denigrating the circulating library in the eighteenth century abound; for example, Hazlitt's accusation of the invidiousness of the circulating library blames the flighty tastes of millinery shop girls for choosing the fruits of the salacious Minerva press over the presumably more edifying works of Sir Walter Scott (Hazlitt 250).

Despite their association with frivolous reading, circulating libraries provided an important function for readers during a time when literacy was expanding rapidly but book prices and production remained relatively steady. New readers could access books through circulating libraries at lower rates than were possible when purchasing them new. Moreover, many circulating libraries supplied specialty stock to reading societies, philanthropic organizations, men's and women's clubs, and other organizations,

facilitating the social aspects of reading. Writers like Jane Austen and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who grew up accessing books through circulating libraries, credited circulating libraries with their own self-education, even as they censured other library subscribers for their indiscriminate reading practices.[7]

By the time Mudie's Select Circulating Library first appeared in 1842, circulating libraries had been in operation in England for almost a century. They were a widespread and firmly established feature of the nineteenth-century book trade. Mudie's rapid success has somewhat obscured the fact that Mudie's virtual monopoly on the circulating library system in the latter half of the nineteenth century was by no means a foregone conclusion when it first appeared. However, Mudie's arrival in 1842 did coincide with shifts in both the technologies of book production and developments in the novel that may have smoothed the way for his eventual dominance. Mechanization and industrial processes in book production that had been invented between 1780 and 1810 were by 1840 fully incorporated into commercial book production. Gothic fiction and historical romances, which had comprised the principal stock of popular novels in the early years of the nineteenth century, no longer represented the forefront of fiction. Novelists, including

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[7] Coleridge in particular vacillates wildly on the uses of circulating libraries. His footnote in *Biographia Literaria*, "as to the devotees of the circulating libraries, I dare not compliment their pass-time, or rather kill-time, with the name of reading," is often quoted, but likewise his period of activity at a lending library on King Street in the 1780s is generally cited as a watershed time in the history of his youth and development as a writer. Austen is more equivocal; she references her circulating library reading often in letters, but emphasizes that taste is necessary to distinguish good reading from bad. This point of view is mirrored by the fates of her heroines: Catherine Morland is led astray by her uncritical reading of Gothic romance while Fanny Price is fortified by her devotion to biography and poetry—both are subscribers to circulating libraries. For more on Austen and circulating libraries, see Lee Erickson, "The Economy of Novel Reading: Jane Austen and the Circulating Library," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 30.4 (Autumn, 1990): 573-590.

juggernauts like Dickens, Thackeray, Bulwer-Lytton, Frances Trollope, and James Fenimore Cooper, were all publishing by 1842, signaling the ascendency of the Victorian novel. New modes of production and new models of fiction may have primed readers for a new kind of circulating library: one that could keep up with the fast production of new books and could market itself as the equal to the firmly middle-class domestic novel.

For literary scholars interested in the nineteenth-century book in England, Mudie's dominates the current understanding of how circulating libraries functioned as sites for book acquisition. Generalizations about nineteenth-century circulating libraries are frequently inferred from Guinevere Griest's *Mudie's Circulating Library and the Victorian Novel* (1970). Griest's book, necessarily focused on the exceptionalism of Mudie amongst other circulating library models, remains the only book-length scholarly work to treat the subject of circulating libraries during the later nineteenth century.[8] Griest's central thesis is that Mudie's, and other libraries, "maintained in the nineteenth century a reading public that borrowed, but did not buy, original editions of novels" (Griest 1). Indeed, as Griest suggests, by the mid-nineteenth century, circulating libraries had become the largest purchasers of new books, particularly novels. As Simon Eliot has shown, the average cost of a new novel from the 1820s was 31s 6d, higher than the average weekly wage throughout the century. "All but the most affluent or extravagant readers thus borrowed the three-decker novel," (Eliot "Some Material Facts in Literary Culture," 43). For this reason, circulating libraries are thought to have exerted a great deal of control over the publishing industry. As a circulating library, Mudie's outstripped

[8] There are several book-length scholarly works on eighteenth-century circulating libraries, but few pursue the subject much past 1800. Between 1800 and 1830, changes in book technologies altered the landscape of British publishing, and therefore the relationship between circulating libraries and the book trade.

its closest competitor, W.H. Smith & Co., to such an extent that "Mudie's" gained almost a synonymy with the idea of a circulating library.

However, while certainly of central importance to the nineteenth-century book trade, circulating libraries (including Mudie's) existed in tandem with a variety of book distribution models. In other words, a complete understanding of the importance of Mudie's must be coupled with an understanding that the reading public did more than buy and rent original editions of novels. Moreover, as I will discuss, the relationship between publishers and circulating libraries was always one of mutual symbiosis, rather than outright dependence. Caught between the interests of publishers, the self-interest of authors, and the needs of readers, Mudie's history illuminates key components of the complex and evolving nature of writers and readers during a time of rapid change in the world of books.

Circulating libraries, and other subscription services that cheapened the price of books, heightened fears about the cultural signification of reading. In this context, we might assume that the act of lowering a subscription rate to make books "accessible to all" would have repercussions beyond merely the economic. Mudie's subscription model allowed him rapid ascendency during the 1840s and 50s, but also necessitated a retroactive rebranding that emphasized selectiveness in order to distance Mudie's from undesirable readers and undesirable books. In revisiting the history of Mudie's Select Circulating Library, then, I am interested in two primary lines of inquiry: what were the rhetorical strategies used both by Mudie and by his competitors and detractors to define the ideal reader of circulating library books? And, importantly, how did the economic structure of the mid-nineteenth century book trade underpin this rhetoric?

In answering both questions, I confront the often gendered nature of rhetoric surrounding book rental. As I have observed, from the eighteenth century forward, the relationship between circulating libraries with novel reading created an association with women readers. Mudie's Select Circulating Library was no different, its readers figured popularly as young girls whose insatiable appetite for novels was inevitably a cause for alarm. As Mudie sought to select his readers and disassociate himself with undesirable reading, his process of selection came to be seen as an emasculation of literary artistry. At the same time, the economic changes in the book market during the second half of the nineteenth century put pressure on Mudie's business model. Mudie was successful in marketing his circulating library as a respectable middle-class institution, but found himself caught between authors and publishers in debates about the distribution of novels.

II. Selected Readers

The March 11, 1843, issue of *The Athenaeum*, Britain's leading literary magazine—especially for literary reviews—during the Victorian era, contains what may be the first advertisement for Mudie's Select Circulating Library:

> Mudie's Select Library, 28, Upper King-street, Bloomsbury-square. Terms of Subscription, 6s. A Quarter. This Library is intended to furnish the Works of our Standard Authors, and the best recent Publications in History, Religion, Philosophy, and General Literature, at a charge which will render them accessible to all. Every new Work of interest is added as soon as published. Also the English and American Reviews, the Monthly Magazines, &c. A few Reviews and

> Magazines to be disposed of, when done with, at half price. Newspapers regularly supplied. Stationery of every description. (226)

Mudie's advertisement follows the standard form of a circulating library ad, but differs in several important features. The most striking feature, and the one most commented on by Mudie's contemporaries and by subsequent scholars, is the low price of a Mudie's subscription. At six shillings per quarter, Mudie's first advertisement is not quite as low as the "guinea a year" subscription rate that would make his library famous, but still vastly cheaper than the rates advertised by his competitors in the same issue: 6 guineas at Bull's, 4 guineas at Churton's, and 3 guineas at Saunders and Otley's (*Athenaeum*, 226). Also significant is Mudie's stated goal of rendering publications "accessible to all." Notably absent from Mudie's advertisement are references to family subscriptions or book societies, all of which appear prominently in the advertisements of Bull's, Churton's, and Saunders and Otley's. Mudie's advertisement is addressed to the individual reader, licensed by Mudie's low rate of entry to select books for his reading pleasure.

From the very first page of any given issue, advertisements for circulating libraries appear prominently in *The Athenaeum*, as do ads for a variety of services and goods designed to connect readers to physical volumes. The placement and prominence of these advertisements emphasize the importance of the book trade to nineteenth-century readers. While the second page of any given *Athenaeum* issue might include ads with titles of newly published books, the first page typically limits itself to advertisements that deal with the physical and economic concerns of how and where readers might acquire books: booksellers, circulating libraries, auctions, and offers of second hand sale

dominate the first page. For example, the first page of the March 4, 1843 *Athenaeum* contains advertisements of the terms of subscription for three circulating libraries, news of a consignment of rare books from Spain, an auction of Theological and Classical texts on Fleet Street, and an offer of sale for a collection of stereotype plates for a biographical dictionary.

The confluence of these advertisements reminds us how complex and diverse markets for books were in the mid-nineteenth century. We tend to think of books as the texts they carry, and to think of their histories as dates of publication and re-issue, assigning a fixed sum to our idea of a book's worth (and by extension, potential audience). But nineteenth-century books led sordid lives. They could be bought, sold, sold again, rented, shared, repurposed, or loaned; with the increased use of stereotype plates, the tools of reproducing books could even be got wholesale and old texts given new life encased in the cloth of a new publisher's binding. Books traded hands from publisher to reader, and from reader to bookseller; libraries stocked their shelves at auction houses, and country houses rented books alongside furnishings and pianofortes.

But did the sordid lives of books reflect on the sordid lives of their purchasers and purveyor? Books have long held associations of education, refinement, and power for those who can afford to purchase them and peruse their contents. A luxury commodity, books function as a class marker, marking owners and readers as a privileged group. However much they signify wealth and learning, though, cheap books destabilize easy correlations between readership and the upper classes. From crude chapbooks to farmer's almanacs, certain books identify certain readers as still outsiders, despite their access to print. Moreover, the afterlives of books—their ability to be traded, to go down market—

cause anxiety about what kinds of readers may have access to books. Sites of book rental, such as subscription libraries, book clubs, and commercial circulating libraries, embody this paradox inherent in books because they both cheapened the cost of reading and marked readers as part of a selective group.

Mudie's opened its doors in 1842, and gained success through two basic strategies: it undercut its competition by offering an incredibly low basic subscription rate of a guinea a year, and it maintained by far the largest stock—both in number of copies of individual works and number of works. Charles Mudie, the proprietor, worked fairly hard to disentangle his circulating library from the more unsavory associations with lewd or shocking fiction lending libraries had come to represent in the eighteenth century. In many advertisements and in his catalogs, Mudie specifies that "novels of objectionable character or inferior ability, are almost invariably excluded." Even the title of his business, Mudie's Select Circulating Library, was meant to reflect an air of exclusivity—for both the class of readers serviced and the type of books offered. Writing in 1860, Mudie affirmed that he "always reserved the right of selection. The title under which my library was established nearly twenty years ago implies this:--the public know it, and subscribe accordingly and increasingly. They are evidently willing to have a barrier of some kind between themselves and the lower floods of literature" (451). Rather than a conduit for contamination, Mudie instead figures his library as a kind of prophylactic. Mudie promotes himself as paradoxically provided access to the greatest number of books, but also for providing subscribers with selective access, insulation from the wrong sorts of books. Mudie himself is thus gatekeeper and tastemaker. To be a subscriber at Mudie's is to identify yourself as part of a selective group.

Within this selection process, novels of "objectionable character" and "inferior ability" become synonymous—that is, there's a blurring happening where the unobjectionable nature of the content of the book attests to its literary superiority—and I really want to take the word superior as meaning "above," as in, not part of the lower floods. The select nature of Mudie's Library is always a bit at odds with a circulating library's inherent premise of comprehensiveness and novelty. Mudie's catalogs and advertisement promise to stock *all* of the newest books, but these quantitative claims bump up against qualifying claims—all the newest, *best* books. Thus, Mudie frequently affirms his allegiance to the commercial drive to provide what readers most desire with statements that reiterate moral concerns: he writes "In my business I profess to judge books only from a commercial standpoint, though it is ever my object to circulate good books and not bad books" (451).

I would argue that from Mudie's perspective, a book could *be* good—of unobjectionable character, superior ability—but could also *do* good. To be in the company of good books puts one in the company of good readers, who, like the books they read, will be of unobjectionable character and superior ability. Mudie's accounts of the origins of the business, like this one from *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1884, reflect this:

> Mr. Mudie when a lad was an omnivorous reader, his special favourites being works of history, travel, and philosophy. 'In 1840 the circulating libraries were doing a flourishing trade. But dingy places they were, and the trash they supplied was well suited to the tastes of the Lydia Languishes and Lady Slattern Loungers of the day. Seldom could I get a book that I wished for, and I was fain to buy what I wanted. The idea suddenly struck me that many other young men were in similar

> case with myself....' He then placed his collection… in the window of a small shop in Bloomsbury-square… and called his establishment 'Mudie's Select Library.' Mr. Mudie had before this made a few friends who moved in literary circles, and one by one they spread the knowledge of the good work that he was doing. (11)

Lydia Languish and Lady Slattern Lounger are both well-known characters from the eighteenth century stage, and I don't think it's an accident that Mudie contrasts those two names—both evocative of stagnation and torpor—with flourishing trade—implying that dingy trade flourishes at the expense of intellectual industry. Moreover, it's clear that to be in the company of the circulating library is to be in the company of Languishes and Loungers, not "young men" like Mudie. I also think it's telling that Mudie's literary pedigree is in the masculine fields of history, travel, and philosophy, but not the more feminized genre of fiction. Fiction was what Mudie's was most heavily associated with in the public mind, and I think we're meant to understand that Mudie's own disinterest in fiction is what makes his literary taste reliable, and what allows him to move in literary circles.

Despite Mudie's self-stylings, the circulating library never lost its association with fiction and circulating library fiction never quite escaped its association with female readers. Mudie's Library was not seen as a gathering place of "young men" of literary circles, but as a feminized space where literature was infantilized by the demands of girl readers. Mudie is referred to in the press fairly frequently as a Mrs. Grundy, and on several occasions authors took to the press to publically lament their frustration with the moral tone of Mudie's purchasing patterns. The idea of selection, too, came under

ridicule, as Mudie's books were not associated with taste-making and cultural refinement but with the pedestrian and bland. In 1858, Mudie's refusal to stock two new works by authors he had previously favored—George Meredith's *Ordeal of Richard Feveral* and Charles Reade's *Cream*—led to a series of articles in the *Critic* and the *Literary Gazette* about the potential for the emasculation of literature due to Mudie's perceived prudery. Mudie was either at the mercy of "the British Matron" or was becoming one himself, allowing the right of selection to overcome the promise of comprehension indicated in his vast catalog of books.

In response, Mudie wrote an open letter in the *Athenaeum* in 1860 defending his practices:

> My present concern is to vindicate the principle on which I act in the choice of books. There must evidently be some reservation, for reasons purely commercial. No library could provide space for all the books that might be written, and as bad and stupid novels soon die and are worthless after death—no vaults could be found capacious enough to give them decent burial. The heavy cost of such unremunerative stock would also be greater than any purse could bear. The moral reasons are of course more important, and are equally obvious. (Mudie 451)

Commercial concern and literary pretension have a vexed relationship, one that is particularly at play in the book, which represents both an intellectual/artistic work as well as a commercial product that can be bought and sold. This duality in the nature of books underscores why Mudie's literary aspirations are entangled with business concerns, and also why they ultimately failed to shield him from criticism. Though Mudie's self-mythologizing had initially figured him as part of a selective literary coterie, his

subsequent public statements, like the one above, often dwell on commercial concerns. This led to the perception that Mudie pandered to his readers, who, because popularly understood to be young women, rendered him a kind of tradesman-governess whose idea of selection was more informed by propriety than by literary taste.

Minor objections to Mudie's selecting continued to bubble up in the ensuing decades, but wholesale attacks against Mudie did not resume until 1883, precipitated by an article by novelist George Moore to the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Moore was unhappy that Mudie's had stocked only 50 copies of his novel *A Modern Lover*, and blamed Mudie (referred to throughout as Mr. X—) for the poor sales of the book, which had received some favorable reviews in the periodical press. He recounts confronting Mudie about the decision, only to be told that two ladies from the country had objected to a scene on moral grounds. "After that," says Mudie, "I naturally refused to circulate your book, unless any customer said he wanted particularly to read Mr. Moore's novel" (quoted in Moore *Literature at Nurse* 30). In the ensuing back and forth, Mudie repeatedly asserts he can "accept no opinion but my customers," while Moore disparages Mudie's customers as merely "two ladies in the country" (31). The thrust of Moore's argument is that the business concerns of Mudie seem to have trumped the mechanism of literary criticism: "At the head, therefore, of English literature, sits a tradesman," Moore writes, "who considers himself qualified to decide the most delicate artistic questions that may be raised…" (28).

Despite his rejection of trade as a criterion for deciding artistic merit, it is a business solution that Moore suggests as a remedy to the supposed monopoly of the circulating library: publish first editions of novels in a single volume. During the

nineteenth century, it was typical for the first edition of a novel to be published in expensive multi-volume installments—often three volumes, referred to colloquially as a triple-decker. The price of a new novel in multiple volumes was high, and the profit margin for publishers generous. Any subsequent editions would typically come out as 'cheap' versions in one volume, at a lower cost and with a smaller profit margin. The reasons for this arrangement are in fact complex. Circulating libraries were widely regarded as the primary advocate of the triple-decker form because their inflated price insured readers in search of new novels would be compelled to borrow rather than buy them,[9] but it is also true that publishers benefitted from the assurance that circulating libraries would provide a ready market for new books, ensuring greater profits. The circulating library was the primary purchaser of multi-volume novels (Eliot "Bookselling by the backdoor" 148). If, for whatever reason, a novel was not purchased heavily by circulating libraries it would find insufficient purchasers among individual readers.

Moore's accusations against Mudie are based on these assumptions: since Mudie had not purchased a sufficient number of books from the first edition, and since the book was not circulated,[10] it failed to attract enough readers to warrant a second edition. According to the rules of his contract, if the book did not sell a sufficient number of copies to earn back its printing costs, Moore would owe his publishers money, not the

[9] It was also thought that circulating libraries preferred multi-volume novels because the volumes could be circulated to multiple readers at a time.

[10] Books in stock in the library were listed in Mudie's printed catalogs; books that were deemed unsuitable might be kept in stock in small quantities but omitted from the printed catalog. This meant that library patrons would not necessarily know if a book was actually available. They could still ask for it from the clerk, but would have no number or reference ready to identify it.

other way around (Coustillas 16).[11] Moore's suggestion that novelists publish in single-volume is, in his mind, a way to cut out the middle-man. If first editions were issued in the cheap single-volume format, individual readers would be able to afford to buy first editions new, obviating the need for circulating libraries—and thus for selectors, like Mudie.

Interestingly, Moore reports in his article that Mudie warned him against attempting to publish a single-volume edition, saying "you will find it difficult to persuade a publisher to issue your book in any other form than in three volumes" (31). Moore assumes that Mudie is being self-congratulatory, glorying in his hold over publishers. In fact, as I have suggested, this was at the time a frank statement of fact: it was in the interest of publishers to publish triple-deckers because they could assume a ready market. In 1883, there was not yet a compelling reason for publishers to abandon the certain, steady profit margin of the triple-decker. Within the scene of this exchange, Moore misinterprets Mudie's advice through the lens of literary criticism when in fact Mudie is consistent in responding with the concerns of business.

That Mudie himself might have been amenable, by the 1880s, to publishing in single-volume is clear from the *Pall Mall Gazette*'s fluff piece "A Visit to Mudie's," published in 1884, which ends with an ominous anecdote about "nice and lively" novels: "no one can deny that the supply exceeds the demand. Cartloads of them are turned into the libraries and into the book-shops every week, forming in a few months a vast heap of

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[11] Coustillas writes that in fact Moore did owe his publisher a sum of 40 pounds for the unsold copies of *A Modern Lover*, but was miraculously saved from having to pay it because the warehouse where the unsold copies were being stored burned down and the publisher was able to recuperate the loss of the stock through an insurance claim. For more on the eighteenth century roots of publishing under this financial model, see Raven 315-17.

rubbish," the article laments, "Novels, in spite of the tons he is compelled to take, do not pay Mr. Mudie" ("A Visit to Mudie's" 11). Echoing Moore, Mudie is said to state:

> The evil would at least be lessened if the three volumes could be compressed into one…. Anyone who takes up three volumes of a novel, on looking at its big type, the broad margins, the wide spaces, the thick paper, and the gorgeous cover, will see for himself that it is the paper-maker, the printer, the ink manufacturer, the binder, and last, but not least, the publisher, who support the system. (qtd. in "A Visit to Mudies" 11)

This seeming turnaround in Mudie's stance towards single volume novels in 1884 is by no means surprising. Remember that early as 1860, Mudie had referenced the specter of unremunerative stock and prospect of finding sufficient burial ground for the corpses of uncirculated books. At that point in time, Mudie had been on the cusp of a financial crisis brought about by the failure of three-volume novels to earn back their principle. Despite changes in book production, first editions of two- and three-volume novels remained expensive, even at the reduced rate offered to circulating libraries. Eliot writes that in the nineteenth century,[12] the book market was divided into a three-tier system: low (priced 3s 6d and below), medium (3s 7d to 10s), and high (over 10s) (Eliot "Some patterns and trends" 39). In general, the proportion of books in each category fluctuated over the course of the century: by 1835, the number of medium-priced books was on the rise, while the number of high-priced books declined; around 1855, the

[12] Eliot's sources for his figures are an amalgamation of statistics compiled from the British Museum copyright receipt books, *Annual Reports of the British Museum*, and trade journals such as *Bent's Monthly Literary Advertiser* and *The Publishers' Circular.*

emphasis shifted from medium-priced books to low-priced books, with low-priced books accounting for 60% of the total market (Eliot "Some patterns and trends" 40).

Mudie's stocked a range of books beyond just first editions of novels, but new novels were the backbone of the business. In his 1860 defense in the *Athenaeum,* Mudie records purchasing 391,033 books between 1858 and 1859, 165,455 of those novels—or just about 42%, making fiction by far the largest single category of new book purchases for the library. The cost of three-volume new novels was artificially inflated, always occupying the high-price tier of the publishing market, thus even though overall Mudie purchased many books that were not novels, buying quantities of new novels was necessarily an expensive endeavor. Keeping up to date on the newest novels, and ensuring he stayed ahead of competitors in numbers of copies purchased, necessitated a gargantuan outlay of money on these expensive volumes.[13]

The trouble with this formulation is that it was increasingly difficult to make money from a circulating library model so reliant on the three-volume novel. During the eighteenth century, when circulating libraries first emerged, the time between a first and second edition of a novel was predictably protracted—usually at least a year. A book that had first appeared in multiple volumes would not be undercut by a cheaper, one-volume second edition for some time, and had time to circulate widely and earn back its costs. But as the nineteenth century perfected industrial processes for printing books, publishers were increasingly able to shorten the time between a book's first appearance as a triple-

[13] I do not have sufficient evidence about publishing patterns for new poetry to speculate on whether or not this genre also experienced the level of artificial inflation that new novels did during this time. My sense is that new poetry, especially from major or popular poets, was commonly issued in a high or medium price bracket, with subsequent editions issued at a lower price, but I have not been able to engage in systematic study to confirm this.

decker and its later, cheaper publication as a single volume novel. Simon Eliot has calculated that to earn back only costs, a triple-decker novel would need to be in constant circulation, that is continually on loan, for no less than nine months ("Bookselling by the backdoor" 145). By the 1870's, in cases of very popular books, publishers might release a cheap second edition in as little as six months. To break even, circulating libraries had to sell off stock at a considerable discount, often very quickly after its initial purchase—if buyers could be found.

Though Mudie's had been very successful in crowding out competitors in the 1840s and 50s, by 1860 the cost of stocking new books outstripped the income from new subscribers. Additionally, Mudie's construction of an opulent storefront at New Oxford Street mired him with a not inconsiderable amount of debt. Stories began to bubble up about a vast catacomb underneath Oxford Street where miles of uncirculated novels sat dusty and dead on shelves, waiting indefinitely for a reader who would never come. Three of the largest publishing firms--Hurst & Blackett, Murray, and Smith, Elder—joined together in secret to bolster and bail out Mudie from the worst of his debts; they were loathe to let Mudie's go under because he owed them so much money. The group soon expanded to include Longmans and Blackwoods, then others. In 1864, after a series of unsuccessful attempts to lure investment capital or reach agreements about seizing Mudie's profits, it was decided that Mudie's would convert to a Limited Liability Company. The vast majority of Mudie's debts were paid in shares of the company, with publishing firms making up a significant portion of shareholders (Finkelstein 23-25).

The real significance of these events is to explain the persistence of Mudie's insistence on multi-volume novels so far into the century. It's true that Mudie preferred

multi-volume novels, because individual volumes could be let out to different readers at the same time, but financially they were expensive to keep in stock. Without the intervention of publishers in the early 1860s, Mudie's would certainly have folded, and with it the largest market for multi-volume novels. However, publishers also preferred multi-volume novels because they could charge more for them—even at the discounted rate offered to libraries, multi-volume novels made significant profit, and this more than anything seems to be the reason they persisted in relying on the format, and on Mudie's. From a user perspective, Mudie's remained largely unchanged after converting to a Limited Liability Company—neither the service nor the goods offered altered—but from a business perspective Mudie's essentially existed as a wholesaling operation for first editions controlled by publishers. While Moore figures Mudie as an overly powerful tyrant who controls publishers through his arbitrary stocking decisions, the reality was that Mudie's business was literally controlled by publishers.

I think it's important to have this in mind as it puts pressure on two sorts of counterintuitive notions about nineteenth century printing: on the one hand there is just an explosion of print—not just more books and faster, but all kinds of print work: journals, magazines, newspapers, posters & advertisements—and on the other hand the triple-decker novel, which remained expensive enough to prohibit most readers from purchasing it new. The explosion of print grew somewhat organically out of the demands of a literate public with a range of socio-economic means coupled with technological advances that allowed printers to provide readers with material at multiple price points. The latter is representative of artificial price fixing perpetuated by the publishing industry and indulged by readers because of the expediencies of the circulating library. Put

another way: by the mid-nineteenth century, circulating libraries no longer existed because novels were expensive; on the contrary, novels remained expensive because circulating libraries continued to exist. The intervention of publishing firms in 1864 served to artificially insulate Mudie's from the eclectic nature of the nineteenth-century book trade.

III. Circulating Morals

These facts cast a new light on the initial exchange between Mudie and Moore in the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Even as Moore chafed against what he saw as an oppressive commercial regime perpetuated by Mudie, Mudie himself may have been chafing under the continued reliance on triple-decker novels at the insistence of publishers who saw no reason to alter a formula guaranteed to ensure profit. Moore, in his haste to defend the artistic merit of his novels, exhibits only a limited and narrow view of the economics of book publishing and distribution; that is, he fails to interpret correctly the role of publishers in maintaining the circulating library system and its attendant conservative attitudes towards polite fiction.

The economics of book publishing likewise made their way into the reader responses that followed the publication of Moore's first article in 1883. Some readers wrote to the *Pall Mall Gazette* in support of Moore's attack on Mudie and some wrote to refute his claims, but on both sides the question of the viability of the circulating library model came to the fore. Even if books could be got cheaper, the expedience of renting rather than buying is heralded a positive thing: "I question if many of us would care to encumber our bookshelves with what of that kind a guinea a year would purchase after publication in the 'cheapest' form," writes one reader, who sneeringly bites back against

Moore's dismissal of Mudie as a tradesman by saying that Moore "may or may not be a genius, but is unquestionably a trader" (J.W. 2). Several readers called attention to Moore's ulterior motives in publishing the article in the first place: it served as a free advertisement for his new novel *A Mummer's Wife*, published by Henry Vizetelly in a one-volume edition for 6s.

Moore responded to readers and Mudie alike with a scathing pamphlet titled *Literature at Nurse, or Circulating Morals* in 1885. Mudie was no longer Mr. X but appeared by name, his Select Library characterized as a "nursery" where "literature is now rocked to an ignoble rest in the motherly arms of the librarian" (Moore 18). Moore's attack centers on two rhetorical fronts: calling into question Mudie's masculinity ("It is, however, certain that you are popularly believed to be an old woman") and calling repeated attention to Mudie's status as a businessman. Moore's assault draws on rhetoric already associated with circulating libraries, but is distinct in its relentless confusion of commerce and gender dysfunction:

> …it is no less my right to point out to the public that the character for strength, virility, and purpose, which our literature has always held, the old literary tradition coming down to us through a long line of glorious ancestors, is being gradually obliterated to suit the commercial views of a narrow-minded tradesman…. That of which he approves is fed with gold; that from which he turns the breast dies like a vagrant's child; while in and out of his voluminous skirts run a motley and monstrous progeny, a callow, a whining, a puking brood of bastard bantlings, a race of Aztecs that disgrace the intelligence of the English nation. Into this nursery none can enter except in baby clothes; and the task of

> discriminating between a divided skirt and a pair of trousers is performed by the librarian. (Moore 18)

In Moore's dystopian library nursery scene, class status, racial purity, gender distinctions, and (masculine) moral virtue are all at risk when commercial interest trumps artistic expression. Again Moore echoes long-standing attacks on circulating libraries, especially in the suggestion that libraries manufacture sexual deviance. His continued attacks on Mudie's masculinity, pitching Mudie into the role of a monstrous hermaphrodite, go a step further, implying an anarchic dissolution of gender roles is the natural result of unnatural literature. The appeal to proper Englishness (as opposed to Mudie's "race of Aztecs") is perhaps an effort to reassert Moore's own place as a purveyor of English values; a proponent of literary naturalism, Moore heavily borrowed from French writers like Émile Zola, and suffered the resulting association with foreignness and, perhaps, impropriety.

Moore's opening salvos against Mudie are a confused cacophony of overlapping attacks, but the heart of Moore's attack in the pamphlet involves the juxtaposition of scenes from *A Mummer's Wife* and scenes from novels culled from Mudie's catalogs. Moore reprints salacious passages from a variety of minor sensation novels, including *Nadine* by Mrs. Campbell Praed, *A Romance of the Nineteenth Century* by W.H. Mallock, and *Foxglove Manor* by Robert Buchanon. Maudlin and salacious, the passages highlight key differences between the dour tragedies of naturalism and the giddy calamities of sensation fiction. In the pages of sensation fiction, heights of ecstasy are matched by equally ecstatic tragic ends; heroines who indulge their carnal sides in the first two volumes of their triple-decker adventure will find themselves inevitably

chastised by the third act. Though in broad strokes naturalist fiction may also use plot as a tool to chasten the wicked, its level of realism opens it to charges of bringing art too close to life. This is the primary objection towards naturalism over sensation: the banality of the former makes it appear coarse, while the obvious artificiality of the latter paints it as fanciful rather than forceful. Thus, the device of isolating passages of sensation fiction serves to underscore just how much they get away with.

The real success of Moore's strategy is how effectively his point of view has been handed down to posterity as a wholly accurate critique of Mudie's and, indeed, of the state of novels in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Griest devotes an entire chapter to the subject of library censorship, quoting Moore frequently as evidence that Mudie "accepted the young girl standard for the novels he circulated" (155). In his preface to a facsimile edition of Moore's pamphlet, published by the Harvester Press in 1976, Pierre Coustillas refers to Moore's pamphlet as "a spirited attack" on an "idiosyncratic system," and judges Moore's characterization of Mudie as not altogether unfair (10). More recently, Troy Bassett has written that Moore "rightly recognized the part the libraries played in controlling the distribution of literature, and thus he believed censorship could be effectively removed by eliminating the library system" (73).

A more equivocal evaluation is Lewis Roberts, whose critique of the commodification of the triple-decker takes seriously the issues of labor and class inherent in attacks on Mudie and the circulating library system. Roberts correctly identifies Moore as preoccupied by "the economic power of Mudie's Library [which he saw] as at odds with English literature itself" (11). The power of Roberts's analysis is his understanding of books as commodified products. He writes that the "three-volume novel was a very

specialized commodity, not simply a product to be sold in a capitalist market, but an object whose value was determined solely through its relations to the circulating library system" (1). All three interpretations, though, fail to engage with the very obviously gendered nature of Moore's attack. Even Roberts fails to make a connection between the commodification of books and the invocation of women's bodies (always already commodified) as sites of instability and distress in Moore's discourse. From its title, Moore's pamphlet identifies itself as concerned with gendered bodies, and with the gendering of books. Any reading that doesn't address this aspect of the text tacitly endorses Moore's overt assertion that literature is at its most doggerel and vapid when it is most feminized.

The conflation of feminine bodies and feminized books is hardly contained only in Moore, however. Even when the circulating library appears in a positive light, its method of exchange is noted as gendered: "Flirtation is a circulating library," writes Nathanial Parker Willis, describing a lover from whom he "parted as easily as a reader and a book…. We seldom ask twice for the same volume, and I gave up Kate to the next reader, feeling no property even in the marks I had made in her perusal" (33) In this, as in other references to the circulating library, the reader's encounter with the book is cast as sexualized, the book itself standing in for the feminized body. Thus, when Roberts writes that, "books are things which are constantly in circulation, always being exchanged, always potentially exchangeable" (7), we must put this in conversation with how, rhetorically, circulating libraries traffic in gender as much as in literary authority; indeed, that literary authority itself is often couched in gendered terms. Flint notes that the highly gendered nature of Moore's argument had lasting effects on judgments of fiction,

creating a "schoolgirl standard" for evaluating the appropriateness of literature (144). She goes on to note how the idea of the woman reader shaped discourse surrounding the suitability of novels: "many of the assumptions concerning [fiction's] suitability to present domestic scenes, or their sentimentalism, or their tender sympathy, drew on, and reinforced, precisely the same sets of assumptions that fed into archetypes of the woman reader…" (147).

Flint's analysis also suggests that the imagined girl readers of the circulating library are distinct from imagined readers in general:

> "… relative silence concerning the gender of the reader may be taken as indicative of the fact that the dominant critical standard was tacitly assumed to be male, and hence the reader, except when it was convenient to invoke a woman because of the rhetorical resonances connected with her reading practices, was habitually thought to be male as well." (147)

Moore invokes the woman reader precisely to undermine the idea that Mudie's judgment of his novel represents a dominant critical standard—this is clear in his careful assertion that the novel received favorable reviews from leading literary journals (Moore *Literature at Nurse* 29). Moore's critique of Mudie is based on the supposition that sensation fiction is inherently less valuable than his own naturalist genre because sensation fiction appealed to women readers. He insists that Mudie's decisions to circulate sensation fiction, but not naturalist fiction, constitutes a type of artistic censorship. To accept this narrative, we must also accept two underlying assumptions: that women's pleasure in reading sensation fiction is indicative of literary worthlessness

and that Mudie's decisions about what to circulate and not circulate were based solely on his own judgment with no external factors.

I would suggest that we re-evaluate the success of Moore's rhetorical strategies by its reuse only a few years later under similar, but different, circumstances. The tactic Moore adopts in defending his novels as no more or less obscene than any three-decker housed in Mudie's vaults was soon appropriated by his publisher, Vizetelly, who in 1888 had been prosecuted for obscene libel for publishing translations of Emile Zola's novels in England. Like Moore, Vizetelly printed cherry-picked passages from works deemed unobjectionable in order to expose the hypocrisy of censorship, printing a book titled *Extracts Principally from English Classics: Showing That the Legal Suppression of M. Zola's Novels Would Logically Involve the Bowdlerizing of Some of the Greatest Works in English Literature*. His language, too, echoes Moore's, and highlights just how linked were ideas of price and distribution with allegations of obscenity:

> I beg leave… to ask you if in the event of M. Zola's novels being pronounced 'obscene libels,' publishers will be allowed to continue issuing in their present form the plays of Shakespeaker, Beaumont and Fletcher, Massinger and other old dramatists, and the works of Defoe, Dryden, Swift, Prior, Sterne, Fielding, Smollett, and a score of writers…. I admit that the majority of the works above referred to were written many years ago, still they are largely reprinted at the present day—at times in *Editions de luxe* at a guinea per volume, and at others in People's Editions, priced as low as sixpence,--so that while at the period they were written their circulation was comparatively small, of late years it has increased almost a hundredfold. (1)

Unlike Moore, Vizetelly chooses racy passages from high rather than low culture—similarly drawing comparison between the text he wishes to publicize and an apparently unobjectionable one. But while Moore focuses on proving his fiction less outrageous by contrast with sensational novels, Vizetelly implies Zola ranks alongside the greats of English literature by using the likes of Shakespeare and Dryden as his test case. Vizetelly also shows his more business-oriented perspective in recognizing that the primary objection to Zola rested not with the contents of his works but ultimately with the court's perception of their cheapness and abundance—and therefore with their intended audience. His reference to "People's Editions" encodes a genre of printing (the series book, e.g. Chandos Classics, Cassell's National Library) but also hints that obscenity occurs when literature goes popular.[14] Mass production meant objectionable books would be read by the masses, whose lack of education made them easily misled by bad books. This echoes back to Mudie's actions in "censoring" Moore: Mudie did not actually ban Moore's novel, he merely refused to circulate it. In other words, the existence of an objectionable text is one thing—the circulation of that text (and to whom) another entirely.

Also like Moore, Vizetelly connects fears of the masses with issues of gender. He writes that:

> …mouthpieces in both Houses of Parliament have gulled the Legislature with cock and bull sensational stories of their being ten houses in a single London street where young girls are accommodated with private rooms and supplied with

[14] Similar arguments have been made about Thomas Paine's prosecution for seditious libel after the publication of *Rights of Man* (1791); Paine's decision to price the pamphlet low so that it could be read by poorer tradesmen, as well as estimates of the number of copies printed, contributed to the government's decision to make him stand trial.

> indecent books for perusal, and about editions upon editions of Zola's novels having been seized by the Berlin police… (2)

His line alluding to "ten houses in a single London street" hints at brothels and prostitution, but is also almost certainly a reference to the circulating libraries. Like the scene of the nursery invoked by Moore, where young girls fondle and finger indecent books like dolls, Vizetelly implies that the reading rooms of circulating libraries provide an illicit space for sexual awakening. This is made even more plain several paragraphs later when Vizetelly explicitly blames "'the young person of fifteen,' who has the works of all Mr. Mudie's novelists to feast upon" (2) for the current state of censorship. It is an interesting shift, for it refocuses the blame for circulating potentially indecent texts from the publisher to the circulating library—implying, in other words, that the existence of such works in print would not be a problem were it not for the libraries that enable their circulation.

Vizetelly's defense, however strident, was not ultimately effective. He was fined £100 in 1888 and a further £200 in 1889 for publishing English-language translations of Zola, and imprisoned for three months. However, his defense of Zola as perhaps "unclean" but possessing "great power as a novelist," in portraying "life as it really exists" is strongly copied by later writers attempting to distinguish Art from obscenity. The actual prosecution of Vizetelly for obscene libel should be rightly understood as indicating that whatever Mudie's personal feelings towards naturalist fiction, or indeed any genre that might scandalize young women, there could be very real consequences to circulating objectionable fiction. Mudie, who styled himself as a selector, may have had a justifiable fear of prosecution should he fail to select properly good books. The sexual

implications of both Moore and Vizetelly, which echo the language of dangerous novel reading in the eighteenth century, underscore how vulnerable circulating libraries still were to imputations of impropriety.

Both Moore and Vizetelly present Mudie's circulating library as a place of contradictions: nursery and brothel, the circulating library artificially shields its female readers from reality by refusing to circulate realist fiction but also exposes them prematurely to carnality through its distribution of sensation fiction. Mudie is both a purveyor of obscenity and an agent of censorship, but always an acknowledged force on the literary fortunes of the novels he did and did not advertise in his library catalogs.

V. Conclusion

Circulating libraries evolved to fulfill a much-needed role, connecting readers and books to bridge the gap between an expanding, literate middle class and the price of new books. By the mid-nineteenth century, changes in publishing and reading markets made space for a more consolidated circulating library model and in this climate, Mudie's Select Circulating Library became the most successful and largest library for the majority of the Victorian era. Mudie's low subscription rate attracted new readers, but also necessitated a rebranding for his library, recasting the circulating library as a defender of middle class morality.

Mudie attempted to elevate the circulating library, to gentrify it, by appearing selective and exclusive. Mudie's overreliance on the expensive, three-volume novel is connected to his selectivity, his exclusiveness. In his catalogs, Mudie's specifies that "cheap reprints, serials, costly books of plates, works of merely professional or local interest," will be excluded. In singling out these formats of books and favoring the three-

volume novel, Mudie stakes a claim not just about what kinds of books it will stock but what kinds of readers it will service, and those readers are decidedly middle class. But, in staking this claim, Mudie's made himself overly reliant on the triple-decker format, ultimately leading to the consolidation of Mudie's Library into a Limited Liability Company, controlled by publishers.

Moreover, the moralizing aspect of Mudie's branding opened him up to accusations of censorship. Authors and publishers whose interests were not served by the circulating library revived arguments against circulating libraries that had dogged book rental from the eighteenth century, founded on gendered language that equated censorship with misplaced mothering prudery and highlighted the potential dangers of young girls reading. While in the eighteenth century, the danger of reading was often figured as one of feminine downfall as the girl reader was introduced to illicit knowledge by the circulating library, in Mudie we see this rhetoric shift. The young girl reader is now dangerous because of the effect of her reading habits on literature itself. Rather than being corrupted by reading, her reading corrupts the literary landscape.

Chapter 2:
"Equally Miscellaneous": Railway Bookstalls and the Circulating Library of W. H. Smith

Mudie's greatest competitor during the second half of the nineteenth century was W. H. Smith & Co. Originally a newspaper distributor, Smith expanded his business over the course of the nineteenth century to include bookselling, advertising, and the operation of a circulating library. Smith engaged in a wide variety of publishing activities, including a cooperative venture with publisher Chatto and Windus to bring out single volume novels. The book rental aspect of the business was thus always in conversation with a variety of other business interests. Unlike Mudie, Smith was never reliant on the three-volume novel for his business model to work. However, like Mudie, Smith grappled with branding his bookselling and renting enterprise as respectable and middle-class.

Smith's circulating library business was connected to his railway bookstalls. The railway station platform provided an ideal location for buying and selling books, newspapers, and other reading material. Aileen Fyfe has noted how rapidly reading became associated with rail travel in the 1830s and 40s, so that "railway bookstall was one of the most visible ways in which cheap print came to the attention of the educated middle classes in the late 1840s and 1850s" (136). Cheap print had long been in production, but its new visibility, hastened by modern modes of transportation, brought it prominently into the public eye:

> … the railway carriage transformed reading into a public activity, thus enabling travelers to learn far more about the reading habits of their fellow citizens than

> ever before. And railway journeys offered a reason why the middle classes might themselves become purchasers of (certain sorts of) cheap literature, rather than regarding it as something intended for the lower classes. (Fyfe 137).

Fyfe and others have noted that railway station platforms were an important, and new, site of class mixing. Though ticket holders might be sorted into first, second, and third class when they boarded, on the liminal space of the station platform they all stood together. Within the space of the bookstall as well, cheap print and more costly fare stood side by side.

Beginning in 1848, Smith had a monopoly on running bookstalls from railway stations across Great Britain. These stalls sold a miscellany of wares, many of them cheap periodicals and penny fiction, and from almost the moment of their inception carried an association with moral degeneracy. Capitalizing on the respectability Mudie had brought to circulating libraries with his 'Select Circulating Library,' Smith used book rental as one of many methods to shore up the image of the railway bookstall. Though operated intentionally at a loss (Griest 34), Smith's circulating library functioned as a "marketing tool" designed to associate his stalls with "the careful selection of texts for a family audience" (Colclough "Station to Station" 181). Resituated in the context of the railway stall, the circulating library became part of Smith's highly regulated bookstall franchise, and the circulating library gained respectability through its connection to order and modernity.

In this chapter, I will explore the history of the W.H. Smith & Co. bookstalls, considering how Smith's business model aided his success and also provided a rhetorical strategy that allayed fears of potentially scandalous materials being distributed through

railway stations. As rail travel was expanding, literary genres were in transition, and cheap print continued to proliferate. Unlike Mudie, who relied on an appeal to middle-class morality to gain respectability for his circulating library, Smith embraced a rhetoric of modernity, using reassuring notions of uniformity and regularity to stand in for quality, and in doing so was able to embrace changes in publishing, capitalizing on the full breadth of the nineteenth-century book trade.

II. A New Class of Literature

The Importance of Being Earnest (1895) is a play about rail travel. Aside from its central plot point—the revelation of Jack Worthing's true identity years after he was mistakenly left in a coat room at the Victoria train station—every other major advance in action occurs because of rail travel: Algernon's sudden appearance as Ernest in Hertfordshire, Jack's early arrival home to morn for the sudden death of his profligate fictional brother, Gwendolen's surprise visit to her new fiancé, and Lady Bracknell's hasty pursuit by freight. Algernon's practice of "Bunburying" might well have occurred in the days when travel from town to country required cart, coach, or carriage, but the unraveling of his and Jack's secret identities is undoubtedly sped by the expedient of the rail. In what is perhaps the play's most Wildean twist, what allows the play to conform to the Aristotelian Unities of classical antiquity is the extremely modern convenience of rail travel.

And *The Importance of Being Earnest* is unquestionably a modern play; it conceives of itself that way, asserting the principles of modernity in its many *bon mots.* Characters in particular draw attention to modernity's relationship to literature. "It is absurd," Algernon tells us in Act 1, "to have a hard-and-fast rule about what one should

read and shouldn't. More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read" (10). A few lines later, he goes on to say, "The truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility" (15). Algernon's quips follow an interesting line of logic: if literature represents modern life, and literature is by its nature fictitious artifice, then modernity too must be comprised of lies, falsehoods, and half-truths.

Wilde's characterization of modernity as artful sophistry is at odds with his use of rail travel as a connective thread in the play. Railways and steam engines were popularly associated with the triumph of science, industry, and order. Rail lines did more than just speed the movement of people and goods (and plot twists) from one corner of the country to the other, they also imposed regularity onto modern life through predictable and rigid schedules. As early as 1845, commentators on the expansion of the rails touted regularity as the great virtue bestowed upon modern life by rail travel:

> A traveller being in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, may very safely order by post a dinner for the next day at Mr. Wynn's excellent hotel in Falmouth at a certain number of minutes before or after any particular hour; and start with the assurance that, though he will have to go over some four hundred and sixty miles… he will be nearly sure of finding himself seated at a table just as the Falmouth cook is dishing up the pilchards. ("Railway Literature" 178)

While Wilde uses the rail travel to emphasize the unpredictability of modern life as characters, conveyed by trains, unexpectedly appear throughout the play, descriptions like the above praise rail travel for its reliability. Traveller, post, and pilchards are all delivered to their proper place by the promise of the railway time-table, which breaks the

world down to "the hour, nay… the precise minute" ("Railway Literature" 178) of arrivals and departures. Depending on your point of view, this degree of regulation could be seen as a vice or a virtue, as a controlling or even dehumanizing force sapping the modern world of happenstance or as itself a kind of harmony: "Composed as a railway train is of mechanical details, and connected as it is with utilitarian maxims and doings, it possesses, we believe, some of the element of poetry" ("Railway Literature" 179).

Wilde's play is a useful barometer for understanding the intersection of literature and rail travel at the close of the nineteenth century, both because of the play's interest in rail travel as a plot device, but also because literature and literary merit are important thematic tropes throughout the play. The women of the play create literary productions that blur the lines between fiction and non-fiction, or fancy and fact. Gwendolen and Cecily both keep diaries, and both compare their diaries to novels. Gwendolen writes her diary to provide "something sensational to read in the train" (100), a reference to the literary genre of the sensation novel as well as the print genre of the railway novel. Cecily characterizes her diary as "simply a very young girl's record of her own thoughts and impressions, and consequently meant for publication" (Wilde 85). Gwendolen and Cecily both refer to their diaries for confirmation of facts even as they acknowledge the diaries to be constructs of fancy. Cecily's inventive autobiography even extends to fictitious correspondence, where her imagined engagement with Earnest plays out as an ideal passion that might be copied from one of "the more expensive monthly magazines" (26).

If Gwendolen and Cecily's flagrantly fictional autobiography helps to constitute modernity in the play, though, it is Miss Prism's misplaced manuscript of a three-volume novel that provides a foil. When Prism disapproves of Cecily's diary-keeping on the

grounds that memory should supply the place of a written record, Cecily draws a distinction between her record and memory, which "usually chronicles the things that have never happened, and couldn't possibly have happened. I believe that Memory is responsible for nearly all the three-volume novels that Mudie sends us" (58). The distinction Cecily draws between her diary and a three-volume novel—notably, not one apparently selected by either her or Miss Prism, but one that has been sent by Mudie—seems flimsy. What difference is there between a diary that records invented events and a novel that chronicles events that have been invented? Prism provides a definition: "The good end happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means" (58) For Cecily and Gwendolen, of course, this neat formulation is turned on its head: they desire Ernest because he is believed to be wicked. Cecily, in particular, derides the sentimental happy ending as depressing and unfair—the latter presumably because rewarding the good at the expense of the wicked runs counter to realism.

There is much metaphoric freight in Prism's three-volume novel of "more than usually revolting sentimentality" (143) misplaced in a railway station. When the *Importance of Being Earnest* premiered on the stage in 1895, the three-volume novel was rapidly on the decline. Its earning potential had been severely undercut by the practice of publishers releasing cheap editions with increasing rapidity. In 1894, Charles Mudie, with the support of other proprietors of circulating libraries, issued a circular to publishers informing them that they would pay no more the 4s per volume for works of fiction and requesting that cheap editions be held back from publication for at lease twelve months from a novel's first appearance as a triple-decker (Griest 171). W.H. Smith, Mudie's chief competitor, followed suit, though his own memorandum hints at the underlying

differences between Mudie, whose only commercial concern was the operation of the circulating library, and W.H. Smith, whose library was only one facet of a larger bookstall monopoly that included bookselling, newspaper distribution, and rental of advertising space among its many concerns. Smith is sure to note that public demand is at root in the desire for novels in three volumes, not library demand. Moreover, the request for a twelve-month period before the appearance of a cheap edition is couched in terms of resale value for circulating volumes, not so that the volumes have time to earn back their principle through circulation:

> Most of the novels are ephemeral in their interest, and the few with an enduring character are published in cheap editions so soon after the first issue that the market we formerly had for the disposal of the surplus stock in sets is almost lost. You may conceive that this state of matters very seriously reduces the commercial value of a subscription library. We are, therefore, compelled to consider what means can be taken to improve this branch of our business. (qtd. in Griest 172)

Though neither Mudie nor Smith specifically requested the end of the three-volume novel, the circular's effect was to push publishers away from the triple-decker publication scheme. The profit margin on 4s per volume was too low, and the twelve month delay too protracted; almost immediately, publishers moved towards single-volume publication for first editions of new novels. The drop off was dramatic; in 1894, 194 of 382 new novels were published in two or three volumes. By 1900, only six years later, and one year after Wilde's play first appeared in print, there were none.[15]

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[15] Figures from Troy Bassett, "At the Circulating Library: A Database of Victorian Fiction, 1837-1901," < http://www.victorianresearch.org/atcl/> (retrieved 1/10/16). Griest gives slightly different figures: 184 in 1894 and only 4 in 1897; however, her figures are

Smith's apparent ambivalence about the fate of the three-volume novel—and, indeed, about the continued commercial value of his subscription library service—is characteristic. Despite his reputation (or repudiation, as the case may be) as a tradesman, Mudie's history was one of financial uncertainty and near failure. By contrast, Smith was a consummate business man whose control of the railway station bookstalls cleverly incorporated the diverse nature of nineteenth-century print culture into a successful model of book distribution.

As outlined in the previous chapter, though the three-volume novel began its life as a perhaps disreputable purveyor of scandal and licentiousness, by the end of the century, efforts by Mudie and others had resulted in its association with outmoded prudery. It appears thus in Wilde's play, linked to the unfashionable governess Miss Prism, who spends her days enforcing a regimen of dull Political Economy and German lessons. The railway station, on the other hand, still holds the thrill of scandal, a place that "might serve to conceal a social indiscretion," and "could hardly be regarded as an assured basis for a recognized position in good society" (38). Perhaps not, though the play suggests it may be an assured basis for recognition in a modern society, where "good" and "bad" as moral categories matter less than artful expression.

For many, the locomotive engine represented the pinnacle of modern invention and innovation. Rail travel, perpetually expanding during the course of the nineteenth century, facilitated the movement of people and goods across Britain. It also facilitated the circulation of texts, providing new locations for the purchase and rental of books through the bookstalls operated on station platforms. From 1848, these bookstalls were

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drawn from Joseph Shaylor, "The Issue of Fiction," *Publishers' Circular* XCIII (October 15, 1910), who gives no sources for his figures.

under the sole operation of W.H. Smith & Co., whose interest in bookstalls initially grew out of the firm's interest in maintaining monopoly on newspaper distribution into the counties from London. Orderly and uniform, Smith's stalls were seen as a natural complement to the bustling modernity of the railway station.

However, modernity also instilled anxieties. The railway station was a site of class mixing and troubling anonymity, a place where populations of indiscriminate origin gathered. In connecting disparate locations with speed, railway stations spurred fears that disparate peoples would also be speedily connected. Literature entering into the stations was thus automatically suspect: as railway stations enabled the intermingling of different classes, so was the literature of the rail a mix of low and high-brow entertainment. Writing of nascent railway literature in 1845, Chambers's Edinburgh Journal characterizes it as nothing more than "repertories of general facts and stray witticisms, illustrated by wood engravings" ("Railway Literature" 178), a description that neatly encodes a set of assumptions about the kinds of books to be found at railway station stalls, both in terms of contents and production. These "brilliant and rather coquettish" books would be regulated by W.H. Smith, whose imposition of order and uniformity was credited with clearing out all that was "doubtful or improper" in railway literature ("Railways and Literature" 149).

III. Marvelously Organized

W.H. Smith & Co. first emerged in 1816, operating as newsagents. Between 1816 and 1827, the firm saw explosive growth, due mainly to the efforts of the younger son, William Henry, who expanded the firm's regional distribution; his particular innovation

was to send daily papers out of London using the morning mail coaches rather than waiting for the night mail coaches, as had previously been the custom. As a result, papers distributed through Smith's arrived in the country the same day they were published (C. Wilson 60). This ingenuity on the part of the firm allowed them to expand their market far outside of London to truly national distribution.

When rail travel supplanted horse-drawn coaches as the primary method of delivering mail, Smith developed relationships with the new railway companies, but was reluctant to move away from newspaper distribution into other areas of the book trade. His son, however, also named W.H. Smith, pushed for greater involvement in emerging book markets related to rail travel. Smith the younger joined the firm as a partner in 1846, and the company was renamed W.H. Smith & Co. Two years later, in 1848, he began a series of contracts with the new rail companies that gave W.H. Smith & Co. exclusive rights to operate bookstalls at railway stations. The bookstall contracts guaranteed Smith the right to do three things: to sell books and newspapers at rail stations, to act as leasing agents for advertising space on station platforms, and to establish a circulating library through the bookstall storefronts (C. Wilson 112).

This tripartite structure—selling books and newspapers, leasing advertising spaces, and establishing circulating libraries—is an essential aspect of the success of W.H. Smith & Co. as a publisher and distributer of books. Each aspect of Smith's model required collaboration and cooperation with other publishers and business interests, and in this way mirrors the larger history of nineteenth-century publishing. Alexis Weedon has convincingly shown that, in part as a response to an increase in tariffs and other restrictions on the trade, publishers increasingly entered into cooperative agreements for

mutual gain in the latter half of the nineteenth century. These cooperative agreements provided protection against fluctuating book prices, which had characterized the market in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries due to undercutting by booksellers (Weedon 52). Publishers protected the high cost demanded for new novels in three volumes, but also took advantage of new formats to extend the audience for novels. Eliot writes that in the later nineteenth century, a successful novel might be issued first as a triple-decker, second as a one-volume hardback at "one-tenth the price," a third edition as a railway novel at half the price of the second edition, and again as a paperback at 6d "just one 1/63rd of the price of its first edition" (Eliot "Some Material Factors in Literary Culture" 47).

The business model of W. H. Smith was primed to take advantage of novels in all these formats. A first edition could circulate through its circulating libraries while subsequent cheaper editions were available for sale. Thus, W.H. Smith offers an important counterpoint to Mudie's model of circulating library, which was singularly focused on book rental. Smith's business model was not one of specialization or isolation; he engaged with the whole of the print trades. In studying Smith as a circulating library, therefore, it is important to keep in mind that though Mudie far outstripped Smith in book rental, Smith's diversified business allowed him to attract readers through multiple avenues.

Though from the first contract in 1848, Smith's railway contracts included language establishing a circulating library run through the bookstalls, Smith did not open the circulating library portion of the bookstalls until 1862, more than ten years later (C. Wilson 355). The reason for this long delay has never been fully explained, and it's

particularly perplexing given how meticulous Smith was in stipulating rental privileges. Why did Smith wait so long to begin lending books from his railway bookstalls when the language of his contracts indicates he intended to do so from the first? What prompted the change in 1862?

There are a lot of probable answers to these questions. It may be that Smith never intended to operate a circulating library at all, but merely wanted to prevent anyone else from establishing rival stalls that might draw business away from his stalls. The establishment of a lending arm to the bookstall business may have been merely a tactic to draw in new readers—a supplement, that is, to the real business of selling. There is some evidence that Smith approached Charles Mudie around 1858 with a plan to run Mudie's Select Circulating Library satellites from Smith's bookstalls—that is, a joint venture using Mudie's name and stock but operated by W. H. Smith & Co (C. Wilson 355). It's unclear when and why this plan was rejected, but its failure seems to have catalyzed Smith to expand into the business of book rental. Almost from the beginning, Smith ran his circulating library at a loss (C. Wilson 366)—something he seems to have anticipated in the business model. Smith was not as reliant as Mudie on multi-volume novels, but did purchase and stock them for rental, but it's worth noting that Smith was in a much better position to unload stock than Mudie.

Another possible reason for the delay between Smith's acquisition of rental rights and the establishment of his circulating library may have been a fear of the associations of circulating library literature. As explored in the previous chapter, literature disseminated through rental had long been seen as suspect, purveyors of library literature had to engage in active branding to mark themselves and their wares as acceptable and

morally upright. That Smith saw the value of branding may have been one motivator in his desire to attach his name to that of Mudie's Select Circulating Library. Mudie's well-known name might have leant the railway stalls the hard-won middle-class respectability that Mudie had already achieved by the late 1850s.

Smith must also have been aware of the uphill battle that respectability represented, as railway literature already struggled against imputations of propriety even without association with rental. In 1848, at the time of Smith's first contract, railway literature had, much like circulating library literature, come to be synonymous with low-brow entertainment—probably immoral, definitely frivolous, and possibly dangerous. These fears were partly related to costs, as cheapness is often equated with degeneracy and the potential for corruption. Stephen Colclough writes that "much of what we know about bookstalls in the late 1840s and early 50s has been derived from a small number of articles published in contemporary magazines and newspapers which constructed an image of the pre-Smith's bookstall as the source of 'cheap' books or 'improper' fiction" ("Station to Station" 169). Few records of stock at pre-Smith bookstalls exists, but these contemporary accounts immediately associate the railway bookstall with cheap and immoral literature.

This rapid association of railway bookstalls with cheapness and immorality may have been in part because they offered readers access to books unmediated by a clerk. In a railway bookstall, books were arranged for readers to openly browse, unlike at contemporary bookstores or libraries where stocks were kept on high shelves or in back rooms and had to be retrieved by an employee. Colclough writes that:

> Of course, books were publicly displayed in the street long before the introduction of stalls to the railways in the 1840s… but there was something fundamentally different about the railway bookstall; it was there to be browsed, to occupy the time spent waiting for a connection or a late running train, to sell its texts that were designed to be ephemeral, that were to last the journey. Its advertisements and the cries of the newsboys patrolling the platform were intended to encourage impulse buying. By the 1850s the novels that it stocked were excitingly packaged, cheap and small and complete in one volume. (*Consuming Texts* 171).

Reading is always figured at its most dangerous when it is at its most ephemeral. The railway bookstall combined this suspect instant gratification with the sensual pleasure of perusal. As Colclough notes, the browseable nature of the stall quickly led to the development of new types of packaging intended to distinguish railway literature from other publishing genres. Chief among these is the yellowback railway edition. Cheaply bound in paper-covered straw boards, yellowbacks featured printed covers with wood-cut illustrations, often of sensational scenes drawn from the novel itself. The bright yellow borders and four-color pictorial covers were visually appealing.

The gaudiness of railway bookstall books, intended to appeal to the eye of the reader, also became a source of moral scrutiny on the part of critics. Descriptions of railway literature often mingle complaints about the appearance and construction of books with complaints about their contents: “By the help of a gaudy binding and alluring title works of a trivial, not to say corrupting, character got into circulation” (“Railways and Literature” 149). The destruction of literary taste and morals happens because the “type and paper… small type, worn to bluntness” (“Railways and Literature” 149)

threatened to blind the reading traveler's eyesight as well as his or her moral insight. Added to this, though, were the fears particularly associated with railways—fears of modernity. From their earliest successes, the railways were both a symbol of British industrial triumph and a suspect and dangerous enterprise with unseen and unknowable consequences. Reports of line expansions often vacillate between laudatory statistics of speed and distances now achievable by the steam engine and morbid citations of deaths incurred during the construction of the line.

The speed of rail travel fired the imagination, and fueled speculation of how railways could be deployed to carry information alongside goods and people. Consider, for example, this poem from the 1831 *Literary Gazette*, occasioned by the suggestion that the Liverpool and Manchester line, the first to fully employ steam engines, might be adapted to carry "articulated sounds"—or telephony by way of tin can telephone:

> Oh, news of wonder! news of joy,
> To gossips through the nation!
> 'Twill Rumour's hundred tongues employ,
> And cause a great sensation.
>
> Scandal was wont to travel post;
> But she'll disdain that stale way,
> When she shall hear her vot'ries boast
> Of railing by the railway.
>
> Think how delightful, thus to send
> The *on-dit* of the minute
> To some dear sympathizing friend,
> Who'll take an interest in it!
>
> Who, should this novel plan proceed,
> May, in her turn, convey it
> To ears attent, on Thames or Tweed,
> As quick as she can say it.
>
> Grave folk, indeed, who value fame,
> May dread this rare invention:

I care not: be it theirs to blame,
While I go on to mention

How lovers, doom'd by fate to part,
May thus hold sweet communion,
Pour forth each feeling of the heart,
Or plan a private union.

No need of writing—*billets-douz*
Will go quite out of fashion,
When tubes, that sound the gossip's news
Shall breathe the lover's passion.

No letters passing! Pause and think,
Ye rulers of the nation,
How low the revenue might sink
Through such a defalcation!

Yet ways and means might be devised
The due supplies to handle:
Yes! Ministers might be advised
To lay a tax on scandal! (Carey 267)

The poem reduces the optimistic potential of telephonic communication to merely the spread of gossip and scandal, echoing sentiments by many that rapidity would only result in the quicker dissemination of corruption and vice. The poem's wordplay draws attention to the movement of "scandal" through the more rapid transportation of people by means of rail travel as well, hinted at in the sixth stanza's "private union" between lovers. It also cleverly draws attention to the potential impact of transporting texts. The second stanza anticipates the changeover from mail distribution through post carriages towards the more regular and speedy delivery by rail—a factor in W.H. Smith's initial commercial success in newspaper distribution. The second-to-last stanza further implicates newspapers as disseminators of scandal and gossip by alluding to rising costs of letter delivery, at an all time high in 1831, but also to the Stamp Duty, a tax on paper goods that included newspapers and other periodicals. Furthermore, punning use of

words that reference traffic in fiction (novel, sensation) draws attention to the potential of the railway to increase the avenues for scandal. Bodies, words, and texts are worryingly blurred together, as any or all might be conveyed on railways, and all might harbor scandal.

If fear of modernity was in part the cause of railway literature's association with scandal, we might assume that Smith's attempts at branding would rely on appeals to conservatism and tradition. However, as Mudie shows, over-reliance on conservatism and respectability politics can lead to accusations of stagnation and prudery. Instead, Smith engaged in an active campaign to distance his bookstalls from the taint of scandal through meticulous oversight of bookstalls, employing a rhetoric of regularity and uniformity designed to shore up the firm's respectable image. In other words, Smith embraced modernity, emphasizing aspects of industrial practice that could appeal to the progressive, optimistic side of Victorian culture. Smith figures himself as sweeping away the corruption of the past and ushering in literature that is regulated and predictable: just like the railways themselves.

The success of Smith's campaign can be seen fairly clearly in an article "Literature of the Rail," published in the *Times* in 1851, just about three years after Smith's first contract with Euston station.[16] The article begins with an extended meditation on the failures of modern education before inveighing against the degenerate nature of railway literature. The article singles out railway literature as being, by nature,

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[16] "Literature of the Rail" was reprinted as a pamphlet by John Murray a few weeks after its appearance in the *Times*, and portions of it were quoted in publications throughout the 1860s. For an account of its reprintings, see Stephen Colclough, "Station to Station: The LNWR and the Emergence of the Railway Bookstall, 1840-1875" in *Printing Places: Locations of Book Production and Distribution since 1500* (London: Oak Knoll and The British Library, 2005), 169-184.

more invidious than other kinds of reading, for "persons who apparently would be ashamed to be found reading certain works at home have asked for publications of the worst character at the railway book stall" ("Literature of the Rail" 7). Rail travel, the article concludes, is dangerous not solely because of the "unmitigated rubbish" sold at stalls, but also because the space of the railway station offered a certain anonymity—both for the purchasing of immoral books, but also for reading them, away from personal and professional life. Moreover, the commuting traveler, a relatively recent invention, would have repeated access to the cheap and plentiful offerings of the railway stall. "Were all the buyers daily travellers?" the article speculates, "did they daily make these precious acquisitions? If so, it was a dismal speculation to think how many journeys it would take to destroy forever a literary taste that might have been perfectly healthy when it paid for its day-ticket" ("Literature of the Rail 7).

This poisonous "stuff whose deleterious effects 20 doctors would not be sufficient to eradicate" is summarily swept away, however, once the author moves north, to the LNW line where Smith's bookstalls indicate a "wholesome change." The change is attributed not just to the sweeping away of a "miscellaneous collection of publications of the lowest possible character," but also of the prior vendors, described as "equally miscellaneous" ("Literature of the Rail" 7). I believe this jab at bookstall vendors to be an allusion to a story, widely circulated, that purported that before Smith began to acquire exclusive contracts with railway companies, bookstalls were frequently run by former rail workers who had been injured while working and were therefore given license to run bookstalls as a kind of pension from the rail company. Death and disability were associated with railways almost from the beginning. The labor of building rail lines was

dangerous, and new lines cut across rural areas where inhabitants were frequently struck by trains as they crossed tracks or walked along them.

The specter of those disabled by their encounter with railway trains becomes in newspaper accounts an opportunity to laud Smith's uniformity and moral fortitude. While newspapers denigrated the pernicious influence of trashy literature peddled by individuals identified by their poverty, their marginalized status, and their disability, they praised Smith, reasserting a narrative of modern convenience and advancement by drawing attention to the regularity of Smith's stalls.

The story is codified in the first biography of W.H. Smith, Herbert Maxwell's 1893 *The Life and Times of W.H. Smith*: "There were bookstalls even then. They were kept perhaps by a one-armed or wooden-legged porter, to whom the privilege had been granted as part compensation for injuries sustained in the service; or by some decrepit, superannuated servant of the company; by the widow of some official who had been killed on the line" (52). Maxwell also repeats the apparent link between the variousness of the wares at bookstalls and the vendors themselves: "Newspapers and novels were ranged in amicable jumble with beer-bottles, sandwiches, and jars of sweets. No regulations controlled the privilege of selling on railway platforms, and miscellaneous vendors pushed their humble trade at their own pleasure. Dealers furnished their stalls with literature of indiscriminate character" (53). *Publishers' Circular*, echoing this same narrative in their August 18, 1906 issue, identifies the first railway stall proprietors as "a crippled servant or a married servant" who probably had no knowledge "practical or theoretical" of business (202). The story is also offered, largely unchanged from

Maxwell's account, by Charles Wilson in his 1985 history of the Smith firm *First with the News* (101).

This before and after scenario is misleading. In fact, the stock of books and periodicals available in railway bookstalls after the advent of WH Smith remained largely the same. Though under the uniform banner of a single proprietor, Smith's stalls offered nearly identical stock as the stalls he supplanted (Colclough, "Purifying" 31). Though little information is available about specific titles of books sold at Smith's stalls, records indicate the main genres of print available, which included daily newspapers, weekly periodicals, single-volume novels published for the middle-market, and railway editions priced for the lower market, as well as second-hand books withdrawn from the circulating library (Colclough "Station to Station" 178-179). Colclough reports that Smith engaged in selling strategies to bring his wares more uniformly under the umbrella of Smith's stalls. For example, news boys who circulated throughout the station platform selling daily papers were prohibited from identifying specific papers by name, and instead were instructed to cry "London or morning papers" (Colclough "Station to Station" 177).

As just one example, the *Times* article reserves its greatest ire for the sight of "two young ladies and a boy," who "were amusing themselves and alarming us by a devotion to a trashy French novel, most cruelly and sacrilegiously misplaced. A volume of *Eugene Sue* was in the hands of each. The cover of the books was light green, and we remembered to have seen a huge heap of such covers as we hastily passed the bookstall at the station on our way to the carriage" ("Literature of the Rail" 7). The reference is almost certainly to French novelist Eugene Sue's *The Commander of Malta*, published by Simms & McIntyre in 1846 for their Parlour Library series of railway novels. Parlour

Library books featured distinctive glazed green pictorial covers and are considered to be a precursor to the yellowback, a single-volume format for railway fiction that Smith not only distributed, but in fact championed, promoted, and published through agreements with Chatto & Windus and later Chapman & Hall.

Additionally, there is no conclusive evidence to support this notion that railway companies were in the habit of using bookstalls as a sort of pension for disabled employees, yet the narrative is shockingly persistent.[17] These phantasmic workers serve as ciphers for an imagined literature—the disabled body of the bookseller stands in for and attests to the diseased nature of the literature of the rail. There is a very palpable fear of modernity operative in these passages. These imagined disabled bookstall vendors are products of rail travel, their bodies proof of the very real physical dangers of machinery and progress. Their implied stories underscore the literary dangers encountered by the commuter traveler who while thumbing his or her poorly translated Eugene Sue falls victim to the machinery of cheap print and the anonymity of the train station—both figured here as causing bodily sickness.

Smith's bookstalls, in replacing the suspect disabled worker with a uniform system of interchangeable, educated clerks is presumed to also sweep away the miscellany of contaminated books. Moreover, Smith's system of bookstalls offered the reassurance of oversight—if railway customers were at risk to engage in dangerous reading away from the prying eyes of loved ones, the clerks of Smith's bookstalls were subject to surveillance: "There are inspectors who visit the railway stalls, and form a shrewd idea as to the business doing at them, and the amount of stock which should be

[17] Colclough writes that in some cases Smith retained the booksellers he displaced as clerks for his own stalls see "Station to Station" 176.

placed at the disposal of the local official. He is supplied with a stock-in-trade to begin with, and a regular account is kept with him in a separate book" ("How We Get Our Newspapers" 308). Bookkeeping, inspection, and accounting were in fact crucial features of the emerging mass-market booktrade, as the roles of bookseller and publisher became more and more distinct (Weedon 62).

The 1875 *All the Year Round* article from which this account of Smith's oversight is drawn was written to detail the functions of the Arundel Street warehouse that served as a headquarters, distribution center, printing house, and general hub for the various activities of the W.H. Smith firm. The article is extremely useful for understanding just how vast the concerns of the firm were, and how integrated into the whole of print culture. Consider, for example, this description of the office supplying the circulating libraries:

> The records of the library department are kept with equal care by an elaborate system of checks, and tallies, and wonderful book-keeping, carried out by another detachment of clerks. Confusion between the bookselling and library departments is prevented by differently-colored labels and an entirely separate set of books—yellow-backed these, with every man's library account set forth in them, as well as the state of the books when returned to the central office. In snug rooms, at the top of the house, are sub-departments and sub-sections... While I have been strolling through labyrinths of books, and looking at the marvelously organized machinery by which they are distributed, the newspaper men have been engaged in making out their lists of orders for the evening papers… ("How We Get Our Newspapers" 308).

This is not the anxiety of modernity but its opposite—delight in the triumphs of progress and utility, brimming over with excitement at the pleasure of the well-oiled machine: wonderful book-keeping, marvelous machinery, elaborate systems, sub-departments and sub-sections. Order and regularity authorize the variousness of the firm's activities. By way of contrast with Mudie's, this systematic approach did not rely on the personal tastes or moral discernment of Smith himself. It wasn't necessarily exclusive either—Smith embraced cheap formats, reprints, serials, periodicals, etc. Instead of exclusion, the system offers the reassurance of order, framing the bookstall as a place where every component has a purpose.

IV. Conclusion

In the 1894 negotiation between Mudie, Smith, and publishing houses over the fate of the three-volume novel, the two axes of debate were the format of novel publication and the timeline for its reprinting. As Simon Eliot has noted, these concerns in the realm of literary production seem out of step with the rest of the booktrade, which had already embraced cheaper formats and publication at multiple price points for a stratified reading market. Circulating libraries, particularly Mudie's, had ensured a market for three-volume novels that insulated literature from trends that had fully saturated the book market since at least 1870.

The bookstalls of W.H. Smith, though, had already offered variety in their stock, catering to a stratified market by subsuming the rental aspect of its enterprise within the commercial trade of periodicals, newspapers, and railway fiction. In the wake of the three-volume novel, W.H. Smith's collaborator in yellow-back fiction, the publisher Chatto and Windus, was among those who appealed to the Society of Authors to induce

them to join publishers in offering fiction in a variety of markets. Alexis Weedon writes that publisher Andrew Chatto:

> …sought to persuade authors popular within the old circulating-library system to adapt to the new publishing environment, and to make the most of their material…. Professional writers who lived at the limit of their earnings began to market the text rather than the book, collecting their journal and newspaper articles into volumes for republication, and rewriting novels serialized in the periodical press for the different formats available. (Weedon 143)

Weedon's argument about a continued divergence between the concept of text and concept of book implies that in a pre-industrial market, text and book were more closely aligned. This seems to me to be a dubious claim, but it does point at ways that more diverse markets in the latter half of the nineteenth century amplify and augment the fracturing of texts. It also points to the shifting relationships between authors, publishers, and distributors of books at the turn of the century.

Smith lost exclusive rights to railway bookstalls in 1905, but was able to open new storefronts in key locations near rail lines (C. Wilson 195). Despite losing their exclusive contract, the firm continued to associate itself with locations of travel, up to the present day where 768 of the firm's 1,300 storefronts are designated as travel outlets ("Our Stores"). Expanded beyond railway stations, these travel outlets include airports, motorway service areas, and hospitals.

Chapter 3:
'They prefer girls': Public Libraries and Circulating Fiction

> "It has taken much more to build up Britain than the most marvelously successful industry, backed by all that power of the purse which flows thence…. The more of well-furnished Free Libraries we open, the wider shall we spread the conviction, in the minds of those who really profit by their contents, that it is not in unity, but in great diversity of aim, pursuit, enterprise, and power, that the true basis of our national greatness will continue to be laid, as in bygone times."
> -Edward Edwards, *Free Town Libraries* (1869)

> "What kind of a problem is a library? It's clear that for many people it is not a problem at all, only a kind of obsolescence. At the extreme pole of this view is the technocrat's total faith: with every book in the world online, what need could there be for the physical reality? This kind of argument thinks of the library as a function rather than a plurality of individual spaces."
> -Zadie Smith "Northwest London Blues," *New York Review of Books* (2012)

The above quotations encapsulate the hope and despair that often characterize discussions of public libraries in England. As extensions of the government, public libraries can represent an outpouring of altruism and progressive, humanist faith indicative of a healthy democracy. Conversely, the paucity of resources, chronic underfunding, and mismanagement of public libraries can be seen as reflective of the

failures of government to live up to the expectations of an intellectually starved populace. The author of the first quotation, Edward Edwards, was a key architect of the British Public Library system. Along with William Ewart, Edwards articulated the purpose and scope of the public library system as part of the parliamentary Select Committee, whose 1849 report directly led to the establishment of the Public Library Act of 1850.

The second quotation comes from the bookend of library history. Penned by British author Zadie Smith in 2012 in response to a plan to close and demolish the Willesden Green Public Library Centre, replacing the structure with a bank of luxury flats and a reduced library structure. Smith's words form part of an essay titled "The North West London Blues" from the *New York Review of Books*. Smith's essay arrived at a moment of particular crisis in the history of public libraries in the UK. Starting around 2010, increasingly stringent budget cuts in local councils across the United Kingdom had led to the closure of hundreds of public libraries. Additional cuts forced remaining libraries to reduce hours and staff, eliminate services, convert to entirely volunteer labor, and curtail spending on acquisitions. These austerity measures signaled, to Smith, a sharp change in Britain's political and cultural landscape. She writes that "the state is not what it once was. It is complicit in this new, shared global reality in which states deregulate to privatize gain and re-regulate to nationalize loss"—a loss that Smith defines as "having one's own history so suddenly and abruptly made unreal."

Smith's dismay and disillusionment with the state stems from her understanding of the space of the public library as ideologically pure, a place where capitalism falls away as the "the urge to conserve and the desire to improve… [are] easily and naturally united." Smith defines the library as "an indoor public space in which you do not have to

buy anything in order to stay," echoing the earliest taxonomy of public libraries as "free" libraries (as opposed to commercial subscription or circulating libraries). Like many commentators on library closure, Smith appeals to a common sense of emotional connection to a reading past.

Activism around library closures has relied on rhetorical strategies used to define the utility and function of libraries in order to justify continued government expenditure. Groups of readers, especially in rural and underserved communities, have launched campaigns to raise awareness and raise funds, staged protests, and created communities of dissent to call attention to library closures.[18] The narratives that have emerged evoke personal and public sentiment, memory and history, tradition and values. These nostalgic narratives of libraries as community centers necessarily involve some degree of romanticization, an appeal to a time in Britain's past when reading and printed books held central places in the lives of citizens—when books were freely and abundantly available to all readers.

But the idea of the public library as free, or further as inherently anti-capitalist (Smith goes on to say libraries "[teach] a system of values beyond the fiscal") is at odds with the public library's history as a tool of regulating working class readers to make them better citizens, and better laborers. Indeed, proponents of public libraries in the nineteenth century represented libraries as an investment in the emerging economy of an industrialized England. In the *Report of the Select Committee on Public Libraries,* which directly lead to the Free Public Libraries Act of 1850, the committee is direct in its hope that the establishment of public libraries would improve the reading habits of working

[18] See, for example: [http://www.voicesforthelibrary.org.uk/]

class laborers who frequented coffee shops (vii), and in doing so improve their contribution to society. The committee offers the example of a community library where reading has already improved the population, one "frequented by about 100 constantly-varying readers, of a class approaching to mendicancy, who, though violent and ill-conducted at first, soon acquire perfect habits of order, and learn to take a pleasure in reading" (vii). These habits of order, the committee hoped, would also serve to regulate workers in factory towns:

> "It is to be hoped that the proprietors of our large manufactories may see the expediency of creating or promoting the formulation of Libraries among their working-people. Such Libraries have been shown to exist at the factory of Lowell, and in other factories of the United States, with the best possible results. The responsibility, as well as the interest, of the master is concerned in the question" (xii).

In Smith's essay, this tension between capitalistic investment and civic altruism is never quite resolved. Books have an inescapable status as commodity object—tellingly, it is not the memory of checking out books from the public library, or consulting them in the reference room, that first sparks Smith's nostalgia, but her memories of purchases made at the book shop located inside the library center. Public service and commerce are not so divorced, even within the space of the public library.

Industry and commerce are likewise woven into Edward Edwards's altruistic words. In his view, minds profit from the expansion of the public library system, which is designed not to unify (e.g. level) class distinctions, but improve diversity of enterprise. Edwards's words set up an interesting system of values that at the surface seem related to

Smith's concerns. But while Smith's article is a swan song for a perceived fading of the Democratic Socialist state, Edward writes at a moment when capitalism sought to shore itself up from criticism. Uniting both Smith and Edward is a conservative historicism, the conviction that libraries hold the key for accessing a national greatness located in "bygone times." In this chapter, I argue that the history of the public library is in fact deeply interwoven with fiscal values. Chronically underfunded from the beginning, free public libraries struggled to articulate their purpose as repositories of knowledge and institutions of learning while simultaneously drawing on commercial strategies to make ends meet.

Public libraries first emerged in the U.K. after the passage of the Public Libraries Act of 1850. This legislation followed on the heels of the Museums Act of 1845, which granted town councils the authority to establish taxpayer-supported free museums and which had been, in some municipalities, broadly interpreted to include the creation of reading rooms for public use (Kelly 10). Both pieces of legislation grew from a moment of paternalistic pride in British culture and industry. The late 1840s and early 1850s were boom years, marked by signal achievements in industrial advancement (such as the expansion of railway lines), and the flowering of Victorian literature and arts (Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, Dickens's *David Copperfield*, Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, and Wordsworth's *Prelude* were all published in the three-year period between 1847 and 1850). The Great Exhibition of 1851 brought all this together: a celebration of industrial progress, domestic design, and artisanal preeminence. In this context, the creation of museums and libraries at mid-century signaled a desire to create spaces that reflected Britain's cultural dominance. In the *Report from the Select*

Committee on Public Libraries of 1849, this strain of reasoning is reflected in the constant comparison of British libraries to their European counterparts: "[Public libraries] have long existed on the Continent. It can scarcely be doubted that their existence has been fraught with advantage to the literature and to the general character of the countries in which they have been founded" (*Report from the Select committee on public libraries* iii).

A related factor was the changing nature of Britain's workforce. The emerging rhythms of industrial labor created new patterns of marking time as a function of the clock, rather than the natural rhythms of daylight and seasonal change. Leisure time emerged as a concept, and as the nineteenth century progressed, new laws safeguarded leisure as a legislative right, while also expanding the democratic process to include greater participation drawn from the working classes (Munford 5).[19] As discussed in previous chapters, these working class citizens were also becoming readers at higher rates than ever before. At mid-century, these factors meant a larger pool of potential readers with time and resources to read. As voting rights expanded, the leisure habits of these potential readers became a source of anxiety: what kinds of books would these readers access? How would their choices of reading material influence their political and cultural affiliations? Was there a way to cheaply entertain, educate, and inculcate moral values in this emerging class of readers? Agitators for public libraries saw themselves largely as social reformers, providing laborers with education and benign entertainment that would rival public houses; opponents saw public libraries as potential breeding grounds for

[19] See also: Robert Snape, "Libraries for leisure time," *The Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland, v. 3, 1850-2000*, Alistair Black and Peter Hoare, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 40-55.

indolence and discontent (Kelly 26-30). In the parliamentary debates leading up to the passage of the Act, Members of Parliament traded anecdotes of educated workers able to produce "30 per cent more work" than their uneducated counterparts with an opposition who warned that the additional taxation combined with access to cheap newspapers other objectionable reading matter would lead to "unhealthy agitation."[20]

Just as the mid-century period was a flowering of British letters, so too was it a time when competing philosophies for managing labor reached a pinnacle. 1848, the so-called year of Revolutions, had seen popular revolt reach across Europe, threatening monarchical power. Though no revolution occurred in Great Britain, the specter of revolutionary sentiment had a profound effect on British politics throughout the Victorian period. 1848 also saw the publication of Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* and John Stewart Mill's *Principles of Political Economy.* Even Owenism, then waning in influence, managed to eke out a final articulation of its cooperative model of socialism with *Revolution in the Mind and Practice of the Human Race* in 1849. Each of these emerging political philosophies presented distinct strategies for how to assuage the anxieties surrounding industrial labor and its relation to the state. Central to all of them, though, is the notion that the state had a duty to intervene between private enterprise and laboring citizens.

II. The Cheapest Police

These motivating factors behind the Public Libraries Act of 1850 are familiar, as they are closely related to factors influencing the growth and commercial success of circulating libraries during virtually the same period. As we have seen, the first

[20] See Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd Ser., vol CIX (1850) col. 838-851

commercial circulating libraries date to the mid-eighteenth century, though the consolidated, large circulating libraries, Mudie and Smith, both date from the mid-nineteenth century, rising to prominence alongside the evolving public library movement. In 1850, Mudie's had been in business a mere six years; Smith's first railway contract occurred in 1848, and his circulating library branch did not appear at bookstalls until the 1860s. The demand for circulating libraries stayed steady, or increased, during the second half of the nineteenth-century, and was shaped by many of the same factors that shaped the Public Libraries movement.

There is a seeming contradiction in the continued power and presence of circulating libraries after the 1850 act. The emergence of free public libraries in 1850 might be expected to have caused a rapid decline in the fortunes of circulating libraries, since patrons would no longer need to subscribe to access new books—they could get them for "free" at the public library. If circulating libraries existed solely to defray the cost of book purchasing, public libraries would have represented a real challenge to the business of book rental. However, as discussed in previous chapters, the relationship between circulating libraries and the price of new books was much less straightforward than some accounts have suggested; the prohibitive cost of new books, at least in the latter half of the nineteenth century, was partially the result of cooperative agreements between publishers and circulating libraries whose symbiotic relationship ensured a steady market for new publications.

Additionally, public libraries and circulating libraries were seen as sites for very different sorts of reading and very different sorts of readers. Among the primary functions of public libraries was educational improvement, especially for working class

readers aspiring to trade. Light reading of popular fiction and poetry drove the economic model of the commercial circulating library, but was not considered central to the development of collections in early public libraries. Within the first wave of municipalities to take advantage of the act, more than half were centered in industrialized cities such as Liverpool (1852), Manchester (1852), and Birmingham (1861), where concerns about workers, especially factory workers, spurred civic action for library founding (Kelly 23). Though in practice, leisure reading was eventually incorporated into the public library, as will be discussed, this perceived split between the function of public libraries as existing primarily for the improvement of working class readers and the function of circulating libraries as sources of popular entertainment for the middle class meant that they were not seen as competitive or mutually exclusive enterprises.

Most importantly, though, the specific provisions of the 1850 legislation made the growth of public libraries in the years immediately following the implementation of the act extremely lethargic. The 1850 act established the right of town councils to establish public libraries, but was extremely limited in its scope, especially with regard to avenues for generating revenue. Underfunded, public libraries could not provide the steady market for new books that circulating libraries already dominated. Public libraries would eventually provide a market for new books, but during the nineteenth century their purchasing power was so limited that many public libraries relied on gifts-in-kind or purchase of second-hand books from auction as their primary source of book stocks (Munford 84). The provisions of the act were so poor that many towns were reluctant to open public libraries at all.

Though considered a legislative success by library advocates, the Act was extremely conservative in its parameters, lacking many basic provisions that might have ensured a quicker spread of rate-supported libraries. The Act provided mayors of municipalities in England and Wales with more than 10,000 in population the right to petition a vote among local rate-payers to establish a public library. The vote needed to obtain a two-thirds majority to pass; if the majority was not reached, the municipal borough would be barred from voting again for two years. This provision discouraged municipalities from calling for a vote unless they could afford to campaign extensively beforehand. This arduous campaigning for buy-in grew directly from debates, prior to the passage of the Act, objecting to the very concept of a rate-supported library, and indeed it seems to have had the effect of dampening interest in launching libraries in some areas.

Were a two-thirds majority to be reached, the Act authorized town councils to engage in a variety of activities relevant to the founding of free public libraries: they could rent or purchase property, as well as maintain, refurbish, or construct buildings; they could outfit those buildings with fixtures and furniture, light them and heat them; they could hire librarians, clerks, and other public servants to staff them; they could acquire books and other library materials. All of these aims were to be accomplished through the levying of a tax rate not exceeding one half-penny on the pound.

This rate could not accommodate the expenditures necessary to successfully launch a working library—the acquisition of books alone far exceeded the revenue generated from the half-penny tax. The surest expedient to shoring up revenue shortages was to rely on philanthropy, particularly with regard to book stock, though donated buildings and cash gifts were also common. Reliance on philanthropy seems, indeed, to

have been anticipated and perhaps even encouraged by the architects of the Act. In his history of public libraries, which also serves as a guide to opening and operating a public library, Greenwood advises that even before adopting the Act committees should court planned gifts: “Promises for such a fund as this become infectious, and, either in the form of so much cash or so many books, they aid most materially in forwarding the movement” (Greenwood 376). W.A. Munford includes an entire chapter on library benefaction, and writes that benefaction was so central to public library development that it progressed through distinct phases (38).

The half-penny rate was clearly insufficient, and in 1855, a second act was passed amending the rate to one penny on the pound. The 1855 act expanded and solidified council authority for purchasing library materials, including books, newspapers, maps, and other collections. The population threshold for townships wishing to adopt the act was lowered to 5,000, and the specific regulations on polling the township simplified. Still, despite these amendments, growth of public libraries remained sluggish, and those libraries that did open struggled to balance the need to maintain a library building, pay staff, and provide ample reading material. Stocking the libraries was a serious burden, not just the matter of how to acquire sufficient stock on low budgets, but also what to stock and who should select it and how it should be paid for.

Early opponents of the 1850 and 1855 acts were especially critical of the idea of tax money being used to purchase books, particularly books for leisure reading. Many Members of Parliament paid lip service to the idea of supporting establishing libraries but balked at the idea of spending money on “food for the mind” when “food for the body was what was now most wanted for the people” (Greenwood 62). There was no

guarantee, they argued, that the act would not lead to higher wage earners suffering excessive taxation in order to provide working class readers with "libraries… filled with novels and the worst description of literature, or… mere receptacles of newspapers" (Greenwood 63). Newspapers stirred up significant opposition, and were nearly left out of the 1855 act out of fear that they would cause libraries to "degenerate into a mere political club" (Greenwood 63), fomenting public dissent. Those on the side of establishing the act contended that, in the end, the library would pay for itself as a public good, providing "the cheapest police that could possibly be established" (Greenwood 63). Working class readers would self-educate themselves out of crimes and misdemeanors, they suggested, becoming more docile when provided with an outlet for intellectual and moral improvement.

III. No Pillows at All

A neat solution to the problem of supplying fiction and funding the library was to operate public libraries, at least in part, as subscription libraries (Kelly 37). Several libraries enacted policies by which the lending arm of the library operated through subscription service requiring a fee while a free public reading room—primarily of reference texts—fulfilled the basic requirements of the legislation, if not the spirit of the Act (Kelly 37). In this combined model, library patrons were sorted into distinct classes: general readers who paid nothing and could use the library building, access books in the reading room, and attend public lectures and subscription readers who paid an annual or monthly fee for borrowing privileges. The revenue generated by subscription was folded into the cost of purchasing new works for the circulating library, generally fiction, and

the library was, it was hoped, freed of the moral dilemma of using public funds for private pleasure (Edwards 166).

Libraries set up on this model were in the minority, overall—Munford identifies nine in operation under partial subscription models in 1886, of a number of 125 (38)—but their existence points to the lack of sharp boundaries between different sites of reading during this time, as the idea of what a public library could or should be was as yet undetermined. The existence of the subscription model also underscores the links between commercial circulating and subscription libraries and early public libraries. The most notorious library built on this model was the library at Bolton, which evolved a unique three-tiered system of subscription:

> The regulation as to the subscribing members stated that the subscription of the 'first-class' members should 'be expended in the purchase of books and periodical literature, which shall circulate among the subscribers only, for twelve months next after purchase, and shall then be transferred to, and become the property of, the Town Council, and be added to the Public Library, provided that each subscriber shall be allowed the privilege of taking out, for perusal at home… one volume from the books of that portion of the library known as the Reference Library….' At the same library the subscriptions of the 'second-class,' or half-sovereign members, were directed to be expended in the purchase of new publications in the arts and sciences… and the right of reading them was confined to the members of this class for a period of six months from the time of purchase, after which the books merged into the Free Public Library. (Briscoe 20)

The third-class of subscribers paid no fee at all (other than whatever they contributed as part of their taxation) and had no special privileges, and were obliged to wait six months for new books to come out of restricted circulation and into general use. J. P. Briscoe, the librarian for the Bolton library, expressed dissatisfaction with the scheme, not only for its worrisome sorting of library patrons "exactly on the principle which gives a first-class railway traveller very soft cushions… the second-class traveler very hard cushions… the third-class traveller no cushions at all" (20). With its explicit hierarchy, the Bolton subscription model reproduced class markers, and shut third-class readers out of literary conversations founded on topicality, novelty, or current events, since they were obliged to wait the longest time before accessing new titles. Further, it reproduced the idea of certain classes of readers as being given a service gratis, though of course tax revenue was still the primary source of income for the library.

Another objection to the scheme at Bolton was that it tended to exacerbate, rather than alleviate, the fiction problem. Briscoe argued that the revenue generated from subscribers reduced the incentive for support from the town council for acquisitions, so that the primary source of new books came from the subscription library, which was nearly all fiction. Non-fiction and reference could not be prioritized under the scheme, and the whole of the library became unbalanced: "of course that class of reading is catered for, and consequently a great quantity of this literature finds its way in, in the shape of three-volume novels, into the Reference Library as well as the Lending Library, with only a small proportion of literature of a healthy and substantial character" (21).

Briscoe's opposition to the system built on earlier objections raised by Edward Edwards in his 1869 book *Free Town Libraries*. Edwards's dissatisfaction with the

scheme at Bolton permeates his otherwise statistical account of the early years of the Bolton library. He laments that though "a considerable increase of Readers in the sections of 'Biography,' 'Topography,' 'Voyages and Travels,' and 'Sciences and Arts," can be tracked through circulation figures, nevertheless "the reading of Novels still… amounted to almost one-half of the entire reading" (158)[21]. Moreover, Edwards argued that the subscription service drew readership away from the free consulting, reference, and lending departments, leading to depressed issue statistics that resulted in decreased support from the town council. Though Bolton received additional revenue, as well as book stocks, from the subscription service, the town council only garnered a half-penny rate for the library's use, even after the 1855 act authorized a full penny rate.

Greenwood also discusses the practice of hybrid models, though he was optimistic that the practice would peter out naturally:

> The question of subscription rooms and subscription libraries conducted in connection with Public Library work may be left for the present. The time will come when these will find no place in Public Library work. The desire for outlying townships amalgamating with large centres is spreading, so that an increased ratable value will come about, and the book wants of those at present outside the boundaries of municipalities possessing Public Libraries will be met. (365)

If a library could not find a means of generating revenue outside the penny rate, their lack of purchasing power meant libraries were obliged to make do with stocks procured through donation. Greenwood alludes to the dangers of accepting donations to

[21] Edwards figures are drawn from the *Bolton Free Library, Fifth Report* (1858)

the detriment of conscious collection development, writing that "every library should reserve the right of rejecting anything coming as a gift which may be deemed unsuitable" (403). Indeed, donors seemed to unload mostly light fiction onto libraries, and many libraries thus opened with a large stock of novels (Snape 42), and only increased the number as years went by and more donations arrived. Ephemeral literature, the kind most at odds with the vision of libraries as institutions of education and moral improvement, was the most likely to be surplused by philanthropic readers eager to rid their home shelves of books no longer wanted.

For these reasons, and many others, though proponents and opponents of public libraries had expressed unease at the idea of popular fiction circulating through the engine of the public library, popular fiction did indeed continue to circulate. Robert Snape estimates that in the 1870s, popular fiction accounted for 55% to 80% of library loans (42). During these same years, disputation of the practice became more galvanized, referred to as the Great Fiction Question. Public libraries, detractors said, had not, as had been promised, become sites of self-improvement and virtuous auto-didacticism. Instead, libraries were sites of leisure reading, not unlike their commercial brethren. As happened with circulating libraries, the inclusion of fiction in public library stocks increased perception of public libraries as feminized spaces with regard to the reading habits and gender of its patrons: novel-reading was associated with young, middle-class women.

Gender is absent from the debates and parliamentary discussions leading up to the library act of 1850, likely because the assumed gender of library readers is implicitly male. However, by the 1870s, gender emerges as a topic of intense debate because of the focus on fiction reading. In the rhetoric of the Great Fiction Question, young women

readers are figured as usurping the rightful place of (male) working class readers. Take for example the essay by J.T. Kay, Librarian of the Owens College Library in Manchester, railing against the inclusion of novels in public libraries as an unnecessary burden on taxpayers for what he identifies as a luxury item for private consumption. "Is it wise or necessary," he writes, "to place so much light literature in the hands of the people?—to find in these days of cheap literature and high wages, novels, presumably for the working man to read, free, or at the expense of the rate-payers?" (43). Kay's wording is intended to draw attention to the chasm between the intended patrons of public libraries—male working class readers—and the reality of leisure reading. He becomes more explicit as he continues:

> I say *presumably for the working man to read:* but that the working man or poorer classes are readers of novels or require novels is less true than that librarians as a class are readers of or require novels. Mudie's principle customers are not working men, nor are the users of our Athenaeums, Porticos, and other centres of relaxation. The honest physical labourer has too practical a bias to love novel reading. (43)

Kay's explicit mention of Mudie codes the lover of novels as a female reader, while the allusion to centers of relaxation further identifies novel readers as middle class (though not implicitly female). Novel readers are not, in Kay's formulation, working men, but ladies of leisure. Subsequent excoriations of novel reading in public libraries proliferated, even as novels themselves proliferated. The debate persisted into the early

twentieth century, prompting James Duff Brown,[22] Librarian at Islington, to write an article "In Defence of Emma Jane," in 1908, defending the practice of supplying novels. Brown complains of the moralizing tone in banning certain kinds of novels from libraries, writing that "the 'moral' novel is difficult to define, but one may assume it will be one which ends with a marriage or a death rather than with a birth!" (161). These "obstetrical novels," Brown notes, are curiously deemed immoral over and above novels which depict religious heresy, financial indiscretions, "or which libel public institutions—like municipal libraries" (161). Brown's argument is pragmatic, if not particularly flattering, with regard to female readers:

> The great majority of Public Library novel-readers are women, and it is impossible to get many of them to read authors like Turgenev, Balzac, Scott, Thackeray, Cooper and others of even a lower literary standard. They want novels of every-day life, written for women by women, in which the story completely overshadows style, educational intention, and even conventional morality…. The day has not yet come when the shop-girl who can read is going to be fobbed off with Sidney's *Arcadia*… when she wants and can only understand writers like Carey, Wood, Emma Jane Worboise… (165).

Brown is an interesting counterpoint to Kay, in that his imaginary novel reader is a working shop-girl, not a lounger at a subscription library, but they are both equally dismissive of the intellectual capabilities of women. Brown does make a distinction

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[22] Brown is remembered now as the librarian who introduced open-access, browseable stacks in public library design. Fiction reading, especially of objectionably low popular genres, was not unrelated; opponents of open-access argued that if readers were not obliged to ask for books by title from a clerk, the lack of oversight would lead to indiscriminate reading. See Snape, 46.

between different classes of novel reading, but is in fact in agreement with Kay on impracticality being inherent in literature.

IV. Libraries for Women, Women for Libraries

Women readers were largely unanticipated in the initial plans for public libraries, and several libraries, including at Cambridge and Manchester, scrambled after the fact to designate special reading rooms for women's use (Munford 100). In the case of Manchester's Campfield library, it was suggested that women should be encouraged to use the circulating function of the library only, so that books could be consulted at home and not distract from their domestic duties (Munford 101). These arrangements underscore that women readers were not initially considered central to the purpose of the public library, their concerns auxiliary. In this context, Brown's assertion that "this particular class of reader must be catered for" indicates a shift in attitude at the turn of the century, as public libraries lost their strict adherence to social engineering and began to recast themselves as social centers.

Kay's other assertion, that "librarians as a class are readers of or require novels" is also subtly gendered, as the time period during which the Great Fiction Question began to reach saturation coincided with rising feminization of librarianship as a profession, a trend that continues up to the present day. Women entered into library work during the 1870s primarily as library clerks, serving typically under a male chief librarian,[23] though there were women who served as chief librarians as well, notably Mrs. Eliot at Hawick, from 1879 to 1894 (McCain 544). The feminization of librarianship happened predominantly in public libraries, while academic institutions, and older non-commercial

[23] This, too, is a trend that continues to the present day, with men overrepresented in senior library positions despite being the overwhelming minority of librarians overall.

libraries such as the British Museum Reading Room, continued to be staffed by male librarians and clerks (McCain 545).

How and why public libraries became sites of women's employment is a matter of debate; Julia Taylor McCain notes that the function of public libraries as a leisure facility contributed to feminization, as libraries became sites of extended domesticity. "These new libraries were homely places, and librarianship acquired an element of housekeeping," she writes, "Women were able to consolidate their position… imbuing libraries with a domestic atmosphere" (545). More recently, Sterling Joseph Coleman has argued that the economic conditions created by the Public Libraries Acts of 1850 and 1855 "made the profession conducive to female entry and eventual feminization" (91). From the beginning, low salaries had been an economization forced upon libraries by the insufficiency of the penny rate. In general, as professions undergo feminization, they begin to experience a decline in salaries and compensation, but Coleman argues that in the case of librarianship it was the fact of low wages that caused library councils to advocate for female librarians and to promote librarianship as a "clean, safe, and socially respectable" labor for women. Thus, libraries were more likely to hire women because, unlike men, women were unlikely to be dissatisfied with low wages, and indeed were never expected to command higher wages.

Coleman's point is supported by the Manchester article in the 1879 report, which explicitly calls out low wages as a deterrent to male library assistants remaining in the profession and outlines how the library advertised specifically for female library assistants as a potentially more stable alternative. Male assistants, the article notes, left their posts frequently in search of higher paying employment, often following a lengthy

period of training to the particularities of library work. This constant turnover in assistants was considered disruptive to the work of the library. By contrast, among the female library assistants "few of them have left, except from such causes as bad health or being about to marry" (Baker 33). Baker advises that,

> There are qualities in which the female assistants are scarcely equal to male ones, and the librarians like to have one youth at their command: he is better for any rough work there may be, such as opening and shutting windows, going errands, also in reaching books from the higher shelves, and perhaps in case of disorder in the reading-rooms, though this is of very infrequent occurrence; but for attendance on readers and applicants for books, they prefer girls. (33)

Girls, too, preferred libraries. Library work was appealing to women because of its respectability as a profession, and its relatively light workload compared to other professions open to them. Many of those other professions were also subject to overcrowding, or their nature had changed due to increased industrial manufacture—for example, dressmaking as a profession declined as the clothing industry became more mechanized after the introduction of sewing machines (Coleman 96). Though library wages were low, other professions for women boasted even lower wages. The Manchester article notes that the first women it employed were initially hired on at a six shilling a week rate, and that the upper limit of their pay was eighteen shillings a week (Baker 33).

The role of women in shaping public libraries, both as users and as library staff, has not always been foregrounded in scholarship on library history. In a retrospective of his own work, historian Paul Sturges writes that omissions have sometimes been the fault

of the amateurish nature of some public library history. He also places the blame on a tendency of scholars to overlook how arguments about what libraries ought to be for implied gender even when it was not explicitly vocalized. He writes:

> … quite large numbers of public libraries [were] directly involved with the provision of classes on technical subjects, at a time when the chief demand of users was for fiction. The association with technical education followed naturally from the rhetoric of social improvement and carried with it an aura of professional respectability…. At the same time, faced with the insatiable demand of users for fiction, and light, entertaining fiction at that, some librarians felt that their libraries were being diverted from the role of improving society…. Implicit in what they said and did, but not drawn out by the articles, was the sense that libraries were for men: men who worked in factories and offices and men whose role in society was economically significant at macro and micro levels. (11)

Sturges identifies two ways that women have been left out of library history: by their contemporaries, who actively worked to distance public libraries from the types of reading practices associated with women readers, and by subsequent histories, which have accepted at face value the formulation of public libraries as spaces for social improvement of male working class readers. Of course, though women were scapegoated as consumers of fiction, men read fiction too—and though the imagined working class reader was almost invariably male, working class women were readers too. The Great Fiction Question was thus a question not only about the value of reading as an act of individual improvement, but also a question about what sorts of readers should be improved.

V. Conclusion

The passage of the Public Libraries Act of 1850 signaled a triumphant moment for Britain's investment in reading and literacy as central to a democratic society, but its poor provision for funding led to slow adoption of the act. Early proponents heavily emphasized the public library's function as a tool for improving workers, providing rational recreation that would make them better citizens in an increasingly industrialized society. However, economic factors and reader demand led to an influx of novels onto the shelves of public libraries, to the dismay of many who felt that fiction was inappropriate in the context of a government-funded institution. The prevalence of novels in public libraries became known as the "Great Fiction Question," at its heart a debate about the function of the public library and what types of readers it should serve: working class readers, often implied to be male, or fiction readers, often implied to be female. These gender-charged debates about library readers coincided with a feminization of library staff, also largely the result of economic factors.

Leisure reading was to remain a secondary function of public libraries, at least in the eyes of the government and administrators, as they moved into the twentieth century. The Public Libraries Act of 1919 extended library service into rural areas and also eliminated the 'penny rate' that had obstructed rapid library development during the nineteenth century. In extending library service into the counties, the 1919 Act vested Education Departments with the running of libraries, furthering the idea of the library as a space of improvement (Snape 51). Libraries were to aid in the national effort to increase adult literacy for the working classes.

Ernest Baker, in his 1922 history of the public library, devotes a section to answering the question “What is a Library Service?” His answer is a neat echo of Zadie Smith, writing 90 years later: “Libraries, like the books they house and distribute, have multiplex reasons for their existence. Their highest aim, like that of education itself, is to promote the mental and spiritual life of the community; they are humanist foundations” (74). In Baker’s view, the harmony of library departments (lending library, reference library, and technical library) balanced to create not just perfect institutions, but perfect readers, perfect citizens, and perfect democracy.

Chapter 4:
Reading Publics: Boots Booklovers' Library and the Circulating Library in the 20th Century

In her landmark study of readership, *Fiction and the Reading Public*, Q. D. Leavis begins by wondering how to reconcile an era in which "not only everyone can read, but it is safe to add every one does read" (3), with the relatively flat market for books. Book buying had not increased with the pace of literacy. Leavis asserts that the answer lay in the circulating library, for "the bulk of the public does not buy many books but borrows or hires them, in the former case from the not very satisfactory municipal or endowed libraries, and in the latter from subscription libraries of various kinds" (4).

When Leavis's study first appeared in print in 1932, Mudie's Select Circulating Library, the great leviathan of Victorian circulating libraries, was on the verge of collapse. It would close its doors forever in 1937. Despite the imminent demise of Mudie's, Leavis reminds us that the circulating library remained a vital factor in the book market during the first half of the twentieth century. While Mudie's waned, Boots Booklovers Library, a circulating library service operated through Boots Cash Chemists beginning in 1899, was at the apex of its popularity.

Leavis's borrowers-not-buyers formulation echoes the reading public as defined by Guinevere Griest in *Mudie's Circulating Library and the Victorian Novel* as "a reading public that borrowed, but did not buy, original editions of novels" (1). Griest argues that the circulating library, embodied by Mudie's, existed because of the specific economic conditions caused by the three-volume novel, that it exerted significant influence over publishing and literature during the years when three-volume novels

enjoyed market saturation, and that it ceased to have cultural impact when the expensive three-volume novel stopped being a dominant form for novel publication. Yet the success of Boot's Booklovers Library suggests not only that circulating libraries continued to exist years past the demise of the three-volume novel, but that they in fact flourished after the turn of the century. As the three-volume novel rapidly declined as a dominant publishing form, circulating libraries evolved to fulfil a new role in connecting readers to texts. In the new publishing economy of the twentieth century, prices of new novels continued to fall, and circulating libraries continued to play a vital role in book distribution and readership.

In this chapter, I consider Boots Booklovers Library as a continuation of nineteenth-century circulating library as embodied by Mudie's and Smith's. Patterned on the circulating models perfected by Mudie and Smith, Boots accompanied the novel as it transitioned from the expensive triple-decker to the cheaper single volume format. No longer associated with scandal, the circulating library had by the start of the twentieth century instead become an institution associated with middle-class respectability. No longer functioning as primarily a way to make book-reading cheaper, circulating libraries instead served readers by helping them to navigate a large and various market of new fiction. Modeled on domestic comforts and intimate friendship, the Boots Booklovers' Library helped convert the anonymous reading public into a community of readers.

Griest's emphatic alignment of the circulating library with the three-volume novel has had the effect of erecting a critical barrier between histories of the nineteenth-century circulating library (often taken as synonymous with Mudie's) and evaluations of the marketplace of twentieth-century fiction. Scholars of the nineteenth century have tended

to accept Griest's claim that circulating libraries only held significant cultural sway as a result of economic conditions created by the three-volume novel.[24] Likewise, histories of reading have often underestimated the circulating library in the twentieth century, both as a social space for communities of readers and as an economic feature of the book market, shaping book reception.

However, emerging recent scholarship has begun to re-evaluate the role of the circulating library after 1896, when Mudie, Smith, and other circulating library proprietors stopped supporting three-volume novel publication. This recent work challenges the notion that book buying or the public libraries supplanted the circulating library in the twentieth century, at least with regard to popular fiction. These scholars have re-evaluated the role that economic factors played in determining whether individuals would be readers or borrowers, instead emphasizing the social function of circulating library membership for middle class readers. Nicola Wilson writes that borrowing persisted "despite the proliferation of cheap series in the market and the wide availability of books at three shillings and six pence," or less ("Boots Book-lovers' Library and the Novel" 427). In other words, though many more readers could afford to buy new books than had previously been the case, commercial book rental persisted.

While economic factors drive book markets, readership communities also play a large role in shaping book production and distribution. Though mass production continued to drive down the cost of new books, the circulating library remained an important site of book consumption because it continued to provide a social dimension to reading that appealed especially to middle-class readers. Circulating libraries, like Smith

[24] See Griest, xi. Griest frequently cites the date 1894, the year of the demise of the three-volume novel, as the de facto end of the circulating library's power.

and Boots, both of which flourished well to mid-century, guided tastes and cultivated communities. For Boots Booklover's Library, the position of tastemaker was an explicit business model, integrated into the design of their stores, the organization of their printed catalogs, and the training of their librarians.

In this chapter, I will explore the history and influence of Boots Booklover's Library on British readership in the first half of the twentieth century. Like Mudie before it, Boots marketed its circulating library as an exclusive and selective club. Boots embraced its middleclass readership and catered to their tastes. In doing so, Boots provided a steady market for emerging genre fiction, which it promoted as a method of predicting and satisfying the expectations of subscribers. As the market for fiction continued its trend of stratification, with new fiction published at multiple price points, Boots provided an important conduit for middlebrow fiction. Steady, unpretentious, and predictable, middlebrow fiction enjoyed wide popularity during the first half of the twentieth century, and had a profound effect on notions of literary fiction, then nascent.

II. An Ordinary Woman

Though she recognized the importance of book borrowing on British readership, Leavis was unsparing in her excoriation of circulating libraries, which she saw as perniciously debasing literature to capture a mass audience:

> …no one who has made a point of frequenting London and provincial branches of the book-clubs for the past few years can avoid concluding that the book-borrowing public has acquired the reading habit while somehow failing to exercise any critical intelligence about its reading. It is significant that the proportion of fiction to non-fiction borrowed is overwhelmingly great, that

> women rather than men change the books (that is, determine the family reading), and that many subscribers call daily to change their novels. This, along with the information… that many take out two or three novels by Edgar Wallace a week, and the only other books they borrow are 'Sapper's' or other 'thrillers,' suggests that the reading habit is now often a form of the drug habit. (7)

In Leavis's eyes, reading was more receptive than active. "Even in the great subscription libraries," she writes, "the client is as passive (8). Her choice of the metaphor of drug addiction, one she returns to several times in the text, implies that readers were motivated only by the compulsion to change one book for another, but the books themselves were interchangeable, indistinguishable except by generic descriptor: Sapper,[25] thriller. This depiction of readers as hapless victims shaped by the circulating library is tracked by Nicola Humble in her study of the feminine middlebrow novel. Humble notes the frequency with which fictional depictions of circulating libraries "repeatedly focus on the power of librarians to force books on readers," who display a "lack of knowledge or taste" (43) in the literature they receive. Instead of being challenged by the novels that they read, Leavis's reading public is instead caught in a loop of gratification, where the pleasure of predictability outweighs any intellectual delight.

Though in some ways Leavis's comments on the frivolity of circulating library fiction have the familiar echo of rhetoric surrounding circulating libraries during the

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[25] The penname of Herman Cyril McNeile, who wrote popular war novels and thrillers. Edgar Wallace was famous for his crime novels and somewhat less so for his science fiction. It is interesting that Leavis singles out genres associated primarily with male readership, yet repeats the assumption that circulating library readers are primarily women.

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the passivity she attributes to readers marks a change in the perceived relationship between library and reader. While a certain desultory lassitude characterized some depictions of circulating library readers of previous centuries (recall Sheridan's Lydia Languish), fears of circulating library fiction commonly involved action rather than inaction. The reading of fiction was supposed to spur impressionable readers into imprudence, not lull them into a state of apathy. In Leavis's conception, reading's danger is its banality, not its scandal. If reading is a drug habit, Leavis posits it as a narcotic effect, dulling the senses.

The banality of the circulating library is crucial to the characterization of what is perhaps the most famous fictitious Boots reader: Noel Coward's Laura Jesson, brought to the screen by Celia Johnson in David Lean's 1945 film *Brief Encounter*. Jesson is a typical British housewife, whose weekly routine includes a train ride to the next town over where she does her family's shopping, goes to the cinema, and changes her library book at Boots. Unlike the stereotypical nineteenth-century library reader, Jesson is middle-aged and married. Her library reading figures initially as a background detail, like the schlocky films she watches at the theatre, or the characters she observes in the refreshment room at the train station. Her neatly ordered life is thrown into disarray when she meets and falls for a married doctor, but ultimately she rejects the indulgence of an affair, instead choosing to stay with her husband and children.

What makes Laura Jesson distinct from fictional portrayals of circulating library readers of the nineteenth century is that her reading is not figured as a factor in her extra-marital affair. Indeed, her weekly visit to Boots forms part of the placid routine that defines and reinforces her middle-class morality. Jesson's voice-over narration

emphasizes her incredulity over finding herself victim to strong passions. She insists that she is "perfectly ordinary." She does not identify with the heroines of the novels she reads—in fact, there is only one scene where Jesson indulges in fantasy, though it is strikingly non-narrative, a series of images suggesting the exotic locations and luxurious trappings of romance without the engine of plot. It is the routine of her life that interrupts this brief indulgence, turning the fantasy into a stand of willows outside the railway station where she makes her weekly excursion.

Jesson is not led astray by habitual reading. Instead it is the disruption of her routine that leads to social danger. That Boots represents a kind of moral bulwark is underscored when Jesson's lover, Alec, persuades her to miss her train home one evening. Unmoored from the respectability of routine, Jesson wanders the high street of now-closed shops, smoking. A police officer, whose veiled hostility hints that he may have assumed her to be a prostitute, asks her to leave. The library features in this narrative moment as Jesson's alibi. Jesson tells her husband she is aiding the Boots librarian nurse a sick relative as an excuse for her unexpected absence.

Jesson is in many ways an ideal depiction of Boots's ideal customer: Boots sought to serve a middle-class clientele and to represent the mid-point of the book market. Leavis writes that while upper class readers favored Mudie's and the Times Book Club,[26] and newsagents or two-penny libraries (operated out of department stores such as Woolworth) served working-class readers, Boots was the overwhelming choice of the growing middle class (14). Fiction in public libraries remained a contested issue, as did the class implications of public library membership—though there is clear evidence that

[26] Book clubs functioned differently than circulating libraries, but were often grouped together by contemporary commentators.

public libraries were used by middle-class readers, especially in the country, they retained an association with working class readers through the second World War.[27]

III. Advantages of Membership

Boots augmented its middle-class appeal through its library design. The library section of Boots was typically located at the back of the store or on an upper floor, requiring patrons to walk through the pharmacy to get to the library, but keeping the space of the library prominent within the larger store. The space of the library was dressed to resemble a private home, a style referred to as the country house style. Sally Dugan writes of how these domestic trappings harmonized with strategic architectural designs for the Boots buildings (160-161). Boots incorporated custom features drawn from local surroundings, often alluding to the history of the borough in the same way municipal structures might. Thus, Boots libraries blended the intimacy of a private home with the camaraderie of civic pride—strategies that served to obscure the commercial nature of the library and its establishment.

The sense of Boots's commercial library functioning as a domestic interior was further advanced by the introduction of open browsing. Unlike most contemporary circulating libraries, bookstores, and public libraries, where readers were obliged consult with a clerk to retrieve books they wished to have, Boots libraries featured openly

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[27] Nickianne Moody records that in oral histories, Boots subscribers "expressed the attitude that public libraries were thought unsuitable places for young girls (or in some instances young boys), for ladies generally, or for fiction. Two women who were undergraduates in the 1930s said that they used Boots to supply them with material to study during vacations because the only alternative was the Mechanics Institute Library, which their parents did not consider suitable," from "Fashionable Design and Good Service: The Spinster Librarians at Boots Booklovers Library," in *Gendering Library History*, Evelyn Kerslake and Nickianne Moody, eds., (Liverpool: Liverpool Johns Moores University Association for Research in Popular Fictions, 2000): 137.

browseable shelving, in imitation of home libraries. Boots use of open shelving is distinct from other models of book browsing because the use of domestic-style interiors softened the commercial aspect of book rental. In railway stalls, for example, open browsing was connected to the public location of the bookstall, and, as discussed in a previous chapter, the grouping together of different kinds of publications increased the awareness of books as marketed commodities. Boots's open shelving created the illusion readers were already in possession of the books in the library, as in a private home. Though Boots continued to produce printed catalogs, and readers were still encouraged to draw up lists, the use of browseable shelving helped create a sense of exclusivity and privacy. The illusion was further maintained through personalized touches; for example, library clerks (mostly female) were instructed to bring flowers from their own gardens to decorate the space of the library (Moody "Readers and Reading Patterns" 183).

In the 1903 Boots catalog, an image of the open shelving at the Holburn branch is prominently displayed as the catalog's frontispiece. The image is framed so that the clerk's desk is not in view; indeed, there is nothing in the image to suggest the interior of a shop at all. Two round tables are dressed with a haphazard assortment of miscellaneous volumes. The attractive, arts-and-crafts style chairs, decorative wallpaper, and chandelier all contribute to the impression that the scene is of a private study, rather than a commercial establishment. The image is explained in the preface:

> The frontispiece shows one of the new London depots, and is typical of the way in which a number of the new branches are fitted. All true book-lovers find great pleasure in handling clean books, and this pleasure is intensified if the volumes

are house in quiet and comfortably furnished rooms, such as the ones depicted. (vii)

The remark about the cleanliness of the Boots stock is repeated again in the catalog, under the section "Advantages of Membership": "worn or soiled books are at once withdrawn from circulation and replaced with new copies" (Boot x). That customers would have been concerned about the cleanliness of circulating books may have been an allusion to the wide-spread fear that contagious diseases could contracted from public library books. Newspapers in England and America reported public library readers who allegedly contracted scarlet fever, small pox, and other virulent illnesses after handling public library books. Though investigations failed to corroborate these claims (L. Stanley Jast, writing in 1901, declared happily that "the merry microbe is not literary"[28]), they persisted to such an extent that many public libraries invested in decontamination cabinets for books, which dispensed a mist of formaldehyde to disinfect volumes.[29] Thus, the emphasis on the cleanliness of Boots's volumes makes a subtle class distinction between their imagined clientele and that of public libraries. Clean, proper, and domesticated, the Boots' Booklovers Library dressed itself in the attire of its intended readers, middle-class women.

Though there were variations between branches, the consistent design of Boots libraries created reliability and continuity for readers. Dugan compares the Boots aesthetic to the print genre of the library series, writing that it was "the interior design equivalent of Oxford University Press's World's Classics and Joseph Dent's Everyman's

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[28] See: "'Infected' Books," *Library World* v. III (London: Library Supply, 1901): 146.
[29] See Alistair Black, "The Library as Clinic: A Foucauldian Interpretation of Brisith Public Library Attitudes to Social and Physical Disease, ca. 1850-1950," *Libraries & Culture* 40:3 (Summer, 2005): 416-434.

Library" (Dugan 161). Like the library series, too, inclusion in Boots catalogs implied a standard level of taste and quality for fiction. Boots marked its books with special ivorine (a plastic made to resemble ivory) membership tokens, and offered custom cloth cases, details that further marked its books as uniform and luxurious, in much the same way that the elaborate publisher's bindings used for series books created an attractive and uniform standard for all books in the series.

In launching its library service, Boots hoped to raise the profile of the clientele who frequented the pharmacy portion of its business (Humble 37). Like its predecessor, Mudie's Select Circulating Library, Boots capitalized on the cultural value of reading in order to distance itself from potentially undesirable associations with affordability. There is much to be said about the influence of Mudie on Boots. Boots sought to imitate Mudie's model, updated and tweaked for a twentieth-century clientele. Moreover, Boots's connection to Mudie's encompassed more than just imitation. The revolving bookstands that constituted Boots first toe in the water of operating lending libraries were in fact stocked with the second-hand cast offs from Mudie's (Moody "Fashionable Design and Good Service" 135). The first chief librarian for Boots, Mercher Stretch, was also of Mudie's extraction. Boots borrowed figuratively and literally from the foundation built by Mudie during the nineteenth century.

The Boots model was also importantly linked to that of W. H. Smith, whose railway stall circulating libraries continued to flourish during the interwar years when Boots was also booming, and who Boots thought of as their main competitor. Like Smith, the Boots customer was thought of as a traveller or commuter who might visit different branches. Thus, like Smith, Boots incorporated the advantage of returning volumes at

multiple branch locations in their membership model. Also like Smith, Boots saw the circulating library as a loss leader, a service offered with the understanding that the business will lose money on it in order to attract customers who might spend money on other goods and services. The library's primary function in the establishment was to encourage patronage at Boots pharmacy, not to turn a profit in its own right. Boots hoped to create a sense of consistency that would inspire brand loyalty, encouraging consumers to use Boots no matter where they encountered each branch. Boots saw the library business as an important strategy for increasing traffic in stores and promoting the pharmacy, but never intended to turn a profit from selling memberships.

Like Mudie and Smith, the print catalogs issued by Boots shaped subscribers' expectations, and defined the literary aspirations of the library. Under the first chief librarian for Boots, catalogs included summaries of select works of fiction, intended to guide and develop readers' tastes. The summaries were in fact excerpts from Ernest Baker's popular and much-reprinted *A Guide to Modern Fiction* (1903). Baker was keenly interested in libraries as devices of social engineering, writing in his guide to Public Librarianship that "the most important and fundamental of the library arts is that of book selection, which is best defined, not as choosing the best books, but as choosing the right, the appropriate books. The student of librarianship is taught literary history so that he may be a safe and discriminating selector of books" (E. Baker 228). Baker's emphasis on discrimination, safety, and rightness are resonant qualities for understanding the rapidly evolving values of Boots Booklovers Library. But while Baker's guide was an attempt to elevate taste (Baker refers to light fiction as "mental dissipation" (231) and had a particular bias against women writers and books written for a primarily female

audience) (Dugan 137), Boots service model was ultimately not concerned with challenging readers preferences, but rather indulging their sense of discerning their own interests, even while guiding their selections. Baker's summaries were dropped by 1912, but their inclusion, especially in the earlier years of Boots's operation, point to the library's desire to cultivate reader taste.

Guiding and developing reader taste was built into the Boots customer service model. Boots was known for its rigorous training of library clerks, which included literary courses, lessons on the publishing industry, and knowledge of bestsellers from the past twenty years. It also included a mandatory "relief" period where librarians from one branch were temporarily stationed at remote branches in order to gain broader customer service experience and ensure uniform service across all branches (Moody "Fashionable Design and Good Service" 139).[30] Under the direction of Boots most renowned chief librarian, Freddie Richardson, the branch librarians (mostly female) were trained to offer selection advice to patrons in store. Under Richardson, training for the branch librarians was thorough, and included a reading requirement. Librarians were encouraged to get to know their patrons, and their patron's tastes (Moody "Fashionable Design and Good Service" 140). Though the omission of reviews in catalogs and the use of open shelving gave the impression of patron self-determination, in reality, Boots staff were instructed to actively guide and coach patrons towards particular selections.

This aspect of Boots librarianship is foregrounded in the oral histories of former Boots staff, conducted by Nickianne Moody. Moody describes the practices of book recommendation:

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[30] Moody also notes that the relief work helped to patch labor shortages caused by the company's policy of barring female employees from work after marriage.

> Library staff were instructed never to let a subscriber leave the shop without a new book. A library list was compiled by each subscriber and kept by the librarians who were required to familiarize themselves with their reader's tastes and specific requests. Books were kept to one side for readers… ordered for them and the lists were used if a librarian had to deal with a subscriber who was unfamiliar to them. Synopses of new books, the *Times Literary Supplement*, the requirement to read and discuss certain categories with other staff, and the red label system were all there to ensure that librarians could accommodate subscribers. ("Fashionable Design and Good Service" 140).[31]

Richardson supplemented formal training with Boots's in house publication *The Bee*. Aimed at the library clerk, *The Bee* oriented staff to the book stock and its organization and dispensed advice for how to promote fiction by genre. The primary goal was to encourage readers to frequently change their books, to give them a reason to return to the shop. Genre was an important aspect of shaping reader selection, as it was the primary guide by which librarians were to predict the possible tastes of their clientele. Richardson described readers' tastes in terms of genre:

> I like a rattling good yarn—possible or impossible of reality in life—I like a good blood and thunder adventure yarn among impossible nationalities in Wellsian imaginations—I can tolerate an occasional sob-story of the worst type—I like

[31] The red label system referred to books that might be of objectionable character. Like Mudie's practice of reserving some titles from the printed catalog, requiring readers to ask for it specially at the counter, this was a way of providing soft censorship of works that might offend moral sensibilities. Red label books were kept at the counter, not on the open browse shelves, and librarians were discouraged from recommending them to patrons.

> travel and occasional biography—I like an occasional journey into psychic wonderlands… (qtd. in Moody "Readers and Reading Patterns" 181)

This emphasis on genre followed reorganization of the print catalogs under a new system where novels were divided into an increasing number of sub-genre categories, such as mysteries, detective fiction, and romances. This reorganization of the circulating library catalog represented a shift in how readers experienced fiction reading, and reflected larger trends in publishing. Though nineteenth-century fiction can be divided into sub-genres, these genres were rarely explicitly listed in printed catalogs. Within a Mudie catalog, the category of fiction implied a genre unto itself. For Boots, the sub-genres of fiction shaped how librarians (and publishers) envisioned their clientele.

IV. A Community of Recommendation

It is this formulation of the librarian as a solicitous taste-maker that so rankled Leavis, who saw the reliance on genre as a diminution of literature into merely gratification. The explicit sorting of fiction into sub-genres also had the effect of exacerbating gendered categorizations of literature. In general, Boots retained the association with female readership that circulating libraries had always had, but there emerged a new understanding that certain novels (detective stories, mysteries, westerns, science fiction, et c.) were primarily appealing to male readers, and certain other novels (romance, family stories) appealed to women. Janice Radway has written of genre literature as a phenomenon of publishing markets, rather than literary taste, defining the features of genre literature as "standard reliance on a recipe that dictates the essential ingredients to be included in each new version of the form. It therefore permits an editor to direct and control book creation in highly specific ways" (*Reading the Romance* 29).

She goes on to say that it is "*also* characterized by consistent appeal to a regular audience" (*Reading the Romance* 29). Radway has described these genres as distinct and separate, never overlapping: "The print universe appears as a series of discontinuous, discrete, noncongruent worlds. Those worlds bring together readers with particular needs and demands and writers with special forms of expertise capable of addressing both" (*A Feeling For Books* 274).

The importance of Boots in promoting these literary genres, which emerged first as a result of increasing market stratification, is important to understanding the history of the novel in the twentieth-century, after the demise of the triple-decker. Failure to account for the ongoing relationship between circulating libraries, publishers, and readers in promoting and distributing new fiction can lead to misleading analysis of the development of the novel. For example, critic Paul Delany summarizes the shift from the three-volume to single-volume novel thus:

> After 1896, novels would be one-third or less of the old guinea-and-a-half, and the cost of publication would be amortized over many single buyers, instead of from bulk purchases by a handful of libraries. Novelists would now depend for their success on thousands of individual buying decisions. This created a more direct relationship between producer and buyer; but buyers would be seeking books tailored to their specific interests, instead of the one-size-fits-all of the Mudie's system…. Initially, the breakdown of the three-decker system made the market for fiction more disorderly, but it was soon re-structured into a number of stable genres, replacing the single dominating form of the three-decker. The

> market now offered a value-free choice between modes of fiction, such as the psychological as opposed to the documentary novel. (105-106)

While Delany is right to highlight the importance of market stratification on literary genre, his implication that this stratification occurred only because of the demise of three-decker novel is misleading. Arguably, literary markets have always been stratified in some fashion. Moreover the roots of the specific kind of stratification to which he refers were firmly in place since at least the 1850s, within genres such as historical fiction and sensation fiction. Despite ample data about the retail prices of books during the nineteenth century, the frequency of steep trade discounts and the increasing number of cheap editions in the latter half of the century make it difficult to estimate exactly how barred the average reader would have been from book purchase. Conversely, the Net Book Agreement of 1890, an agreement between publishers and booksellers to fix the prices at which books were sold, had the effect of raising the retail price of books until the First World War (Weedon 54).

Also dubious is his claim that new publishing genres were considered all of equal value, and his choice of example is an indicator of why he has arrived at this conclusion. Psychological and documentary novels both savor of masculine genres, not the feminized genres most closely associated with circulating library fiction. Both literary genres and publishing genres carry relative value, affecting how they are produced, distributed, and used within a market. Considering the fate of the novel in the twentieth century without including the continuation of the circulating library distorts the ways in which genre functioned as a tool in book distribution.

The shift Delany identifies from the singular taste of Mudie to the multiplicity of tastes of individual reader/purchasers is also suspect, as is the idea that genre fiction catered to individual tastes rather than to (real or imaginary) classes of readers. In Richardson's advice to library clerks, literary tastes can be predicted because they fall into predictable categories marked by genre. Genre is thus not a sign of the book market shifting to reflect a rejection of the circulating library model, but a continuation of the ways that circulating libraries served as an intermediary between publisher and reader.

Recent work by Nicola Wilson has highlighted the continued buying power of Boots and Smith in the first half of the twentieth century: "Advance subscription orders and sales to commercial libraries like Boots," she writes, "represented a key part of Chatto's distribution network and were understood to signify the tastes of the general reader and the wider book world" (436). Wilson uses the novelist James Hanley as a case study of how authors and publishers communicated and adapted to the perceived tastes of library readers, and how circulating library reception could shape the reputation and sales of authors. Wilson's work demonstrates the remarkable continuity of circulating libraries in the book market; just as they did in the nineteenth century, libraries maintained a sizeable enough share of the book market to make them a valuable barometer of readerly taste.

Delany, and other critics, dismissal of the circulating library is at odds with contemporary writers like Leavis, who understood its cultural significance, even if they saw it as having a negative influence on literature as an artform. Where Delany and Leavis coincide, however, is in the acknowledgment of an increased divide between middlebrow genre fiction and literary fiction, exemplified by an emerging modernist

ethos beginning with writers such as Henry James and Joseph Conrad and continued by writers like Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and John Cowper Powys. Delany writes that "Modernism… proclaimed itself a root-and-branch enemy of the literary marketplace" (123). Earlier novelists, like Dickens, Trollope, and Thackeray acknowledged their productions as part of a marketplace, without seeing success within the marketplace as incompatible with their position as artists. As Modernism emerged at the close of the nineteenth century, though, commercial success and artistic excellence were increasingly seen as opposing poles. For a novel to be successful in the context of a circulating library audience was to cede artistic merit to marketability.

This shift in literary valuation is apparent in George Moore's pamphlet against Mudie and circulating library fiction, *Literature at Nurse*. In a previous chapter, I offered a reading of Mudie's pamphlet as indicative of Mudie's failure to elevate circulating library literature above its reputation as cheap and trashy popular entertainment, dangerous especially to impressionable female readers. Moore contrasts racy passages in sensation fiction culled from Mudie's stock with scenes from his own blacklisted novel to prove that circulating library fiction was actually more scandalous.

Another angle from which to view Moore's polemic is to see it as highlighting the divide between the style and substance of commercially successful novels and the increasingly avant garde productions of modernism. Moore anticipates objections to "high brow" novels of the twentieth century, whose contents were deemed objectionable not only for their inclusion of sexual or mature themes, but also because their experimental style was so distinct from the comforting middlebrow fiction that filled circulating library shelves. That Moore represents part of a vanguard, a literary trajectory

distinct from circulating library fiction, is evident in that Q. D. Leavis includes him in her list of a "body of English novelists determined to write novels which should be works of art" (Leavis 168), for the first time in history, she notes. Moore's repeated epithet for Mudie, the tradesman, neatly ties together this system of value.

As discussed in a previous chapter, Moore's pamphlet against Mudie is heavily gendered, its argument aligning Art, with a capital A, with commercial disinterest and manly intellectualism, rather than the feminized popularity of the circulating library.[32] Gender continued to shape perceptions of the circulating library into the twentieth century. Library readers were still imagined to be primarily women, and library fiction continued to be shaped by the supposed tastes, and distastes, of women readers. And, as with the public library, employment in circulating libraries was increasingly a feminized profession. For these reasons, Boots Booklovers Library represents an important site of women's community and reading. Much of the recent scholarship on Boots Booklovers Library has focused on this aspect of the library, highlighting how dismissal of circulating library history in the twentieth century obscures the power of women readers in shaping fiction.

Though Boots' chief librarians were all male, their overwhelmingly female staff engaged in ongoing, reciprocal relationships with the Boots clientele. Boots librarians were encouraged by their training to develop intimate relationships with readers in order to understand their tastes. In this way, reading in the context of the circulating library was "a communal activity, particularly for women. Books are read on the recommendation of others; they are enjoyed partly because of a cult status produced by other readers 'in the

[32] For more on the link between femininity and popular culture see Andreas Huyssens, *Mass Culture as Woman: Modernisms Other* (Indiana University Press, 1986)

know'" (Wilson 46). This community of recommendation has an ephemeral quality that is difficult to measure in any quantifiable way. Yet it is related to other contemporary trends, such as the increasing importance of book reviews and book clubs in promoting fiction.[33] Reader preference, though imagined as a matter of individual taste, was a community activity.

V. Conclusion

In the first half of the twentieth century, technological changes that occurred in commercial book production during the nineteenth century were firmly established. These technological changes had a profound effect on the structure and stratification of the book market. Industrialization transformed not only the manner of book production, but also the relationships among literary genres. Writing about the effect of this shift on poetry, Lee Erickson notes that "technological changes propelled the expansion of the publishing industry and forced a reordering of the relationships among literary forms" (19). This reordering happened as new forms competed with traditional publishing structures: serialized fiction, the railway novel, the magazine. Through the mechanism of the circulating library, publishers had been able to artificially sustain the novel in its conservative, three-volume format for most of the century, but yielded to pressure as the nineteenth century came to a close.

Despite these economic realities, circulating libraries persisted. No longer necessary to maintain artificially inflated book prices, libraries like Boots Booklovers Library instead served the valuable function of tastemakers. While the explosion of mass publication might have created a chaotic environment where readers' indiscriminate

[33] Leavis devotes an entire chapter to this in *Fiction and the Reading Public:* pp. 19-32.

consumption had an anarchic effect on the publishing industry, instead the mechanism of the circulating library imposed order. Boots actively promoted new fiction genres as a way of capturing reader preference. In doing so, Boots Booklovers Library had a profound effect on the development of the novel in the first half of the twentieth century.

Crucial to its position as tastemaker was Boots library design, which created a sense of domestic harmony, private selection, and middle class refinement. Despite its identity as a commercial library, Boots maintained an aura of personal service and community. With close to 400 branches across the British Isles during the height of its popularity in the interwar years, Boots Booklovers Library was an essential part of the British cultural consciousness, exemplifying the solidity of middleclass values, its ubiquity canonized in Sir John Betjeman's poem "In Westminster Abbey":

> Think of what our Nation stands for,
> Books from Boots' and country lanes,
> Free speech, free passes, class distinction,
> Democracy and proper drains. (19-22)

Unlike its predecessors, Boots escaped association with anxieties about working class readership. Instead, it became part of the fortification of an orderly and stratified society, a necessary institution for the reinforcement of middle-class values.

Though no longer feared as a purveyor of scandalous fictions, Boots's connection to middlebrow literature, and to middle-class female readers, made it a target of frustrations with light literature and genre fiction. Read for pleasure or entertainment, and not for improvement, the popular literature provided in circulating libraries was seen as increasingly separate from the novel as an artform. It is this very aspect of the circulating

library that has contributed to its marginalization in histories of reading, as pleasure, especially women's pleasure, has long been an elusive topic within the larger field of literary history. As Nickianne Moody notes in her oral history survey of Boots librarians and subscribers, readers often expressed guilt about the time devoted to reading, revealing "the difficulty of studying pleasure where enjoyment cannot be understood as straightforward and is often associated with anxiety" ("Readers and Reading Patterns" 176).

Along with the public library, Boots Booklovers Library was a crucial site of book distribution, where readers accessed books as part of a community. Though the public library maintained a fraught relationship with fiction because of its association with moral improvement, Boots was able to embrace and promote fiction, creating a safe space for women to explore fictional worlds. Boots experienced its greatest success during the interwar years. It would cease its library service in 1967, surpassed, finally, by public libraries, then in their greatest years of expansion.

Coda:

Extant Circulating and Subscription Libraries in the U.K.

The Oxford English Dictionary's word of the year for 2013 was "selfie," defined as "a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website." The selfie has sparked many debates about subjects like cultural narcissism, women's self-expression, and the decline of professional photography. It also inspired a spin-off concept: "the shelfie." On December 16, 2013, as part of a slew of articles laying to rest a year of introspective internet journalism navel-gazing, *The Guardian* ran a short piece calling for readers to submit "shelfies": photos of their bookshelves stocked with books, with or without themselves in the frame. A book is not a face, and aside from the cheeky rhyme of self and shelf there is nothing really to link the act of self-photography with the more mundane task of snapshotting a row of battered Penguin classics. This begs the question of how exactly *The Guardian* means for us to connect the shelfie, especially the shelfie that does not include the figure of the photographer, with the selfie. By connecting the framed bookshelf with the inward-gazing self, are they suggesting that the intellectual content implied by a row of books is synonymous with self? "What's more telling than a bookshelf?" The Guardian writes, suggesting just that.

The Guardian's equation of the selfie and the shelfie quickly inspired online debates about the potential ramifications of substituting one for the other—bodies of books for actual bodies. In particular, xoJane, a gawker-style entertainment and lifestyle blog, picked up the debate in an article titled "Is the 'Shelfie' just Intellectual Wankery?"

penned by S.E. Smith.[34] As the title suggests, the article derides the 'shelfie' as a form of self-conscious consumerist posturing. At best, Smith characterizes the shelfie as just "another book club," and at worst a "form of social coding and class signaling." She writes, "Just owning books in and of itself is a telling social marker, and the number of books you own is another one. The bookshelfie and shelfie alike are ways not just to geek out with fellow book fiends, but also to send a signal about your cultural, social, and class position. Owning large quantities of books, being familiar with them, frequently referring to them, working in an industry where books are valued, these are all markers of upper middle class status, reflecting education, purchasing power, and social privilege."

Smith's comments about the class implications of book ownership are neither new nor unique, yet reactions to her article have been most vigorous when attacking this position. Readers who self-identify as working class responded by questioning assumptions about how and at what price books are purchased ("Books can be bought second-hand, inexpensively. They can be got at thrift stores"), as well as assumptions about the utility of physical books in a life of reduced possessions ("Books are re-usable and storable"), and their intersection with the realities of working class life ("…they give us something to do on the bus. For those of us who do ride or who have ridden a lot of buses. They are, in terms of dollars per hour, *the* cheapest way to educate, solace, or entertain yourself"). Comments like these draw attention to the ways that Smith's desire to frame book ownership as a class marker is itself a kind of class posturing, a top-down claim about what books represent in the lives of others. As one reader angrily writes, "Trying to re-frame the act of building a personal library as shameful posturing for the

[34] See: [http://www.xojane.com/issues/is-the-shelfie-just-intellectual-wankery]

rich and privileged is **bullshit**. It's anti-intellectual concern trolling predicated on the flabbergasting notion that the poor don't have an interest in books or what they represent."

As I consider the legacy of book rental in the twenty-first century, I find this debate about the shelfie useful in illustrating some of the most basic and pervasive issues in defining what books represent as cultural objects. There is a tension between what books may seem to represent—learning, privilege, education—what they may actually be used for—pleasure, entertainment. There is also a tension between assumptions about the book as an object—new books are expensive, heavy, may take up limited space—and realities of the book as a technology—relatively stable and durable, books can be exchanged, rented, borrow, re-read, re-distributed, or simply stored for later use, they have no expiration date. Inherent in all of this is the status of the user, the reader; when we make assumptions about how books are consumed and why they are consumed, we necessarily make assumptions about the identities of readers.

These tensions are nowhere more present than in the history of the commercial circulating library. More than a bridge between the private libraries of the past and the public libraries of today, circulating libraries played an important role not just in connecting readers to texts, but in helping to define notions of readership, class, and gender during a transitional time in the history of printing. The circulating library model actively shaped the publishing and distribution of books, from the three-volume novel to the railway platform, on the shelves of the public library and in the homey interior of the chemist's shop. Its persistence well into the twentieth century, long after the ascendency of the public library, points to its centrality to reading culture and community.

Though commercial circulating libraries largely shuttered their doors in the late 1960s, around the same time that municipal libraries entered a period of their greatest expansion, a handful of private subscription libraries persist in the U.K. to the present day. In 1989, more than 25 extant subscription libraries banded together to form the Independent Libraries Association to "further the conservation, restoration and public awareness of… independently funded subscription libraries founded between 1768 and 1841 at a time when there were no public libraries and no university libraries outside Cambridge, Dublin, Edinburgh and Oxford" (Independent Library Association). The organization has 34 partner institutions across the U.K.[35]

I learned of the ILA in part because of my own shelfies: my personal instagram account, riddled with snapshots of old books, attracted the attention of the Library of Innerpeffray, an ILA member. Like many subscription libraries still operational in the 21st century, the Library of Innerpeffray has extremely active social media accounts where library books and library buildings feature prominently as part of a subscription library rebranding. The banner of the ILA website, for example, pairs sumptuous images of elaborate stained glass windows and leather-bound volumes on sturdy wooden shelves with the promise that independent libraries are no longer "niche or elitist" but instead are doorways to "fact and fiction, literary culture and heritage, study, leisure pursuits and information, shared interests, common goals, inspiration and ideas, hospitality, companionship, conviviality and refreshments." Literary culture and heritage are the chief among these goals, and rare books and historic structures are the most common entry points for every member institution.

[35] See: [https://www.independentlibraries.co.uk/]

Readers are largely absent from the ILA website, their presence only implied by photographs of rows upon rows of books on (the splash page includes 17 photographs of rooms filled with bookshelves, all but two of them unpopulated). Yet the history of the circulating library in the nineteenth century should suggest that this absence of readers is not truly a lacunae: they are everywhere in the books that have remained. Each of these libraries, with more than two million books collectively, represents a legacy of readership, community, and commercial enterprise.

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